



Theology, Faith, Universities: From Specialization to Specification in Theology

Philip Neri Reese OP

Abstract

The issue of hyper-specialization within the various academic fields has often been raised in the context of recent discussions concerning the purpose or end of the modern university. Theology, one such field in which continual specialization seems prevalent, is further complicated by questions regarding the relationship between faith and the scientific character of theology, as well as the role of the university with regard to that relationship. Though seemingly diverse, a resolution to both of these questions may be found by giving an account of how the sciences, like theology, are specified. It is the purpose of the present article to explore the classical Thomistic position on this subject, and to apply its principles to the case of theology. It is shown that the specification of a science can be understood in terms of both the “formal object which” is known in a given science and the “formal object under which” it is known. The former can provide a correct starting point for managing the multiplicity of “sub-fields” and various specializations within the science of theology, while the latter can help to answer the question of the interrelation between faith and theology as a science in a university setting.

Keywords

Thomism, science, theology, “formal object which”, “formal object under which”

I. Introduction

The question of the role and purpose of the modern university has been a topic of renewed scholarly interest in recent years. To give a quick sample: Pope Benedict XVI in his Regensburg Address, Benedict Ashley, O.P. in *The Way toward Wisdom*, Alasdair MacIntyre in both *God, Philosophy, Universities* and a lecture printed in *New Blackfriars*, and Reinhard Hüter, in an article entitled “God, the

University, and the Missing Link – Wisdom,” have all raised serious questions on precisely this issue.¹ Within this larger discussion of the purpose of the university, the increasing specialization of the disciplines has been a point of major concern. As new sub-fields continue to emerge, the point of specifying unity within a given discipline is increasingly obscured. But if this source of intra-disciplinary unity is forgotten, how will it be possible to determine the relationship between the disciplines so as to form a cohesive curriculum? If the formation of such a curriculum is central to achieving the purpose of the university,² it is clear that consideration of the internal unity of the academic disciplines has a central place within the larger discussion.

Although any discipline could be chosen as an example, theology provides a complicated, and so apt, case study. Exactly what the sub-fields within theology are and how they are to be divided varies greatly from department to department. Typically the list will include “systematic” or “dogmatic” theology, “moral theology,” “pastoral theology,” “spiritual theology,” and “fundamental theology,”³ but it is not unusual to find courses in sub-fields as diverse as “sacramental theology,” “feminist theology,” “biblical theology,” “historical theology,” and “environmental theology.” The interrelation between such sub-fields is not readily apparent.

Making matters more complicated, one might also raise questions regarding the relationship, if any, between faith and the academic study of theology. Can the presence or absence of faith change the nature of theology as an academic discipline? Does this relationship, if it exists, bear any consequences that would be of concern to a university considered precisely as a university?

I would like to suggest that an adequate response to such questions might be found by turning our attention, not to the issue of *specialization*, but to that of *specification*. It is suggested that by

¹ The text of the Pope’s lecture can be found online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html; Benedict Ashley, O.P., *The Way toward Wisdom* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009), and ‘The Very Idea of a University: Aristotle, Newman and Us’, *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010); Reinhard Hütter, ‘God, The University, and the Missing Link – Wisdom: Reflections on Two Untimely Books’, *The Thomist* 73 (2009). For a thought-provoking treatment of the unity of theology, published subsequent to the writing of the present article and taking a slightly different approach, see Reinhard Hütter, ‘Theological Faith Enlightening Sacred Theology: Renewing Theology by Recovering Its Unity as Sacra Doctrina’, *The Thomist* 74 (2010).

² Reinhard Hütter, in his above-cited article, sees both Ashley and MacIntyre in fundamental agreement that the purpose of the university is the teaching of universal knowledge, though he draws out the different nuances of their positions. Hütter himself explicitly emphasizes that this teaching of universal knowledge is the pursuit of wisdom.

³ Joseph A. DiNoia, O.P., ‘The Practice of Catholic Theology’, in Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, James Buckley, and R. Trent Pomplun, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 247–49.

understanding what specifies a given science – in the Thomistic sense of both “specifies” and “science” – we can arrive at a coherent understanding of the relationship between a science and its sub-fields. Moreover, this line of inquiry can also reveal the connection between faith and theology, and so provide the basis for answering the difficult question of what role, if any, the university has *vis-a-vis* this relationship.

At this point, it should be noted that the present article is not theological, but philosophical in nature. As will become apparent, the arguments that follow concern points of philosophical distinction, and draw conclusions from the application of these distinctions to theology in the context of the university. One might say that the present article is *materially* theological, but *formally* philosophical.

As such, the goal of this article is to present the coherence of the Thomistic teaching on the specification of the sciences and to exhibit how its principles can be applied to the science of theology with implications for the previously mentioned contemporary questions. This will be done through the lens of the Dominican “school” of Thomistic commentary, which emphasizes both the internal unity of St. Thomas’ texts and the need to follow the logic of his principles beyond what is explicitly contained therein.⁴ To this end, a tripartite distinction regarding the “object” of a science will be explored. This distinction will then be applied to theology in order to clarify precisely what the object of theological science is, as well as what role faith (including both the *fides qua* and the *fides quae*)⁵ might play in attaining it. Finally, these results will open a path to answering the questions raised regarding how sub-fields within theology can be understood and how a university might conceive of its role with regards to the relationship between faith and theology.

II. The Thomistic Notion of “Science”

It should be pointed out that a shift in language occurred in the introduction above. While the first three paragraphs spoke of academic “disciplines,” the last two used the term “science.” This shift in language is necessary for the accurate application of Thomistic principles to our contemporary problems, and so it is important to clarify how the word “science” is being used. In addition to facilitating

⁴ A wonderful summary of this approach is given by Francis Wade, S.J. in John of Saint Thomas, *Outlines of Formal Logic* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1955), p. 3. It is important to acknowledge that this philosophical “hermeneutic of continuity” adopted by classical Thomism differs in significant respects from the historical hermeneutic found in many of the contemporary schools of Thomism.

⁵ For a brief and clear summary of this distinction, see Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 15–18.

the application of Thomistic principles, this shift can also provide a clarity that is lacking in the currently ambiguous use of the term “discipline.” In today’s usage, the word “science” typically refers to the experimental sciences such as biology or physics. For Aristotle and St. Thomas, *scientia*, or “science” is certain knowledge through causes, which is acquired by demonstration from true principles or premises.⁶ Thus, *science* in the Thomistic sense need not exclude certain fields that would be labeled “humanities” in most modern universities. Rather than being formally distinguished from the humanities, science in a Thomistic sense is to be distinguished first from *dialectics*, which reasons from probable premises to probable conclusions, and then from *sophistics*, which has the appearance of reason, but leads neither to probable nor to true conclusions.⁷ Thus, to the extent that a discipline in a modern university claims to demonstrate its conclusions on the basis of true premises, it has a claim to scientific status in the Thomistic sense of the word. Furthermore, this usage seems to conform to our contemporary way of speaking. We seem to praise the experimental sciences precisely because we think that they really do give us true conclusions, proven from true premises. Thus, the *scientia* of St. Thomas and the “sciences” of the modern universities, though certainly different in concept, are by no means mutually exclusive.

Each Thomistic science, then, will be like a chain of true reasoning, wherein (almost) every proposition is a link that is connected on either end by way of demonstration: to a previous proposition as conclusion to premise, and to a further proposition as premise to conclusion. As Aquinas says, “the conclusions and demonstrations of one science are co-ordinate, and one flows from another.”⁸ However, this can neither proceed in one direction *ad infinitum*, nor form a circle. Premises have to start somewhere, and this somewhere is with indemonstrable first principles derived from sense experience. Thus, our knowledge begins, not with “subjects” in the modern sense, but with “objects” in the classical sense. From different objects will arise different sciences with correspondingly different first principles. This is the root of the Thomistic dictum that “a science is specified by its object.”

⁶ In English, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, trans. Richard Berquist (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 2007), pp. 18–19.

⁷ *Ibid.*; *Prooemium*, pp. 2–3.

⁸ English translation from *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981). The quote is from the *Prima Secundae*, question 54, article 4, response to objection 3, and all further citations will be in the following format: *ST I-II.54.4.ad.3*.

III. Distinguishing the “Object”

If a science is specified by its object, does each object specify a different science? A computer, a cough drop, and God are all potential objects of knowledge. Is there a different “science” that knows each one? Furthermore, it seems like a single science can deal with a multitude of different objects. God is certainly a different object from His creation, but doesn’t theology study both? To answer such questions, we might consider a three-fold distinction made by classical Thomists regarding the “object.” They distinguish, first, the *material object*, second, the *formal object which* is known, and, third, the *formal object under which* it is known.⁹

The “material object” (*objectum materiale*) is the most straightforward of the three. This object refers to the thing (or entity) that is known. At this moment, the material object of my act of sight is my computer, and the material object of my act of taste is a cough drop. As a thing or entity, the computer includes more than what can be seen, just as there is more to the cough drop than what can be tasted. The taste of an object is one thing, the appearance of it is another, and the classical Thomists refer to these as different “formalities” or “aspects.” Thus, a single material object, like a cough drop, since it can be both seen and tasted, contains within itself a number of different formalities. Of these different formalities contained in a single material object, only one will be known by the power of taste or sight respectively. As with the senses, so too with the sciences. This opens the door to having the same material object studied by a number of different sciences; thus, it cannot be the *material* object that specifies a science.

This makes necessary the distinction of the “formal object which” (*objectum formale quod*) is known.¹⁰ Taken in this sense, “object” refers to the one specific aspect according to which a given science studies all of its various material objects. Let us take the science of physics as an example. While there is certainly more to man than what physics can say about him, physics does study a real aspect

⁹ While this distinction is not explicitly made by Saint Thomas, its seed can be found in his treatment of the distinction between the “material object” and the “formal object” found in the corpus of *ST* I.1.3 and in the importance placed on divine revelation *vis-a-vis* theology as a science in *ST* I.1.7. ad.2. The tripartite distinction is given a full, explicit, and clear exposition in Joannis a Sancto Thoma, O.P., *Ars Logica*, ed. P. Beato Reiser, O.S.B (Torino: Marietti, 1820), p. 260. The quote is from book 2, question 1, article 3, and all further citations will be in the following format: *AL* II.1.3, p. 260. An English translation of most of the second book of the *Ars Logica* can be found in *The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas*, trans. Yves Simon, John Glanville, G. Donald Hollenhorst (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

¹⁰ This “formal object” discussed by St. Thomas in the corpus of *ST* I.1.3 is to be identified with the *ratio formalis quae* of John of Saint Thomas in *AL* II.27.1, p. 819.

of what it means to be man, insofar as it knows man as a subject of motion. Where the material object contains a number of different formalities within its single entity, the *formal object which* is known in this science (motion) can be found in a myriad of material objects. We can consider not only man, but also computers and cough drops insofar as they are subjects of motion. Thus, the same *formal object which* is known can bring together a diversity of material objects. This *formal object which* is known is what specifies a science.¹¹ Physics is the science which knows things insofar as they are mobile, and it is a specific or unique science precisely because it is the only science with this particular *formal object which*.

In accounting for the specification of the sciences, it is tempting to make this the end of the inquiry. It certainly seems as if nothing more needs to be done. The distinction between the *material object* and the *formal object which* is known in a given science has successfully identified the latter as that which provides for the unity and specificity of each science. But a further question can be raised. What makes it possible for us to know this *formal object which* is known? In order to provide an answer, classical Thomism has also distinguished the “formal object under which” (*objectum formale quo*) something is known.¹² We have already seen that the *material object* contains within itself a multitude of formalities, and that only one of these is the *formal object which* is known by a given science. But if this is the principle formality of each science, there are other formalities that remain significant, insofar as they “actualize” a potential *formal object which* is known. The formality that accounts for the movement from a merely potential *formal object which* to an actual *formal object which* is the *formal object under which*. Going one step further, we can recognize two such formalities, one having its foundation in the object, the other being contributed by the subject.¹³ Thus we can speak of an “objective” *formal object under which* (this accounts for the know-ability of the object) and a “subjective” *formal object under which* (this accounts for *our* ability to know the object).

Since this last distinction (and sub-distinction) is far from obvious, an example inspired by John of Saint Thomas (1589 – 1664) will help both to clarify this *formal object under which* and also to illustrate how these three distinctions of the word “object” come together to form a seamless whole.¹⁴ Imagine looking at a stained-glass window

¹¹ For a helpful comparison, see *ST* I.77.3.

¹² See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The One God* (St. Louis: Herder, 1943), pp. 57–59. John of Saint Thomas’ preferred term is *ratio formalis sub qua*.

¹³ *AL* II.1.3, p. 260.

¹⁴ In *AL* II.27.1, p. 819, John of Saint Thomas uses the example, not of stained glass, but of seeing a wall. Hopefully we do not lose too much clarity by slightly modifying the example.

of St. Thomas Aquinas. The *material object* is the window itself. Made of metal, wood, and glass, it could be big or small, heavy or light, clean or dirty. However, when asked “what we see” when we look at it, we do not mention the window’s height, weight, or cleanliness. Rather, we say that we see an image of St. Thomas, and this is like the *formal object which* is known. But without light coming into the church from behind the window, it will be impossible to actually see this image. Mere interior lighting is not enough. Without light pouring in from behind, the colors of the stained-glass window will not appear and the image itself will not be visible. Moreover, it is also necessary that we who are in the church actually be looking at the window. The light from outside, then, is the “objective” *formal object under which* the image of the saint is rendered visible, while our act of vision is the “subjective” *formal object under which*.¹⁵ In this example, then, the window, the light, the seeing, and the image illustrate the *material object*, the “objective” *formal object under which*, the “subjective” *formal object under which*, and the *formal object which*, respectively. If an account of the specification of the sciences stops short of discussing the *formal object under which*, it will be unable to account for why the *formal object which* is known is actually knowable as opposed to just potentially knowable. The two principles are correlative and must work together.¹⁶ Without the *formal object under which*, we will, like our unlit window or closed eyes, remain in the dark.

IV. Theology: A Case Study

Equipped with this tripartite distinction of the object, it is now possible to apply these principles to the particular case of the specification of theology as a science. As even a cursory glance through the table of contents of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* will prove, there are a myriad of diverse material objects studied by theology.¹⁷ The first question, then, is what is the *formal object which* is known by theology that can unify God, angels, man, nature, grace, Christ, the sacraments, and heaven into a single coherent science? What formal object could these diverse material objects have in common, and how can limited human beings come to know it?

Saint Thomas gives the answer quickly and concisely in the corpus of his reply to question one, article seven, of the *Prima Pars*. He says, “in sacred science, all things are treated of under the aspect of God;

¹⁵ *AL* II. 1.3, p. 260.

¹⁶ See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The One God* (St. Louis: Herder, 1943), p. 58.

¹⁷ See *ST* I.1.3.ad 1&2.

either because they are God Himself; or because they refer to God as their beginning and end.”¹⁸ The unifying principle that brings all the many things studied by theologians together into one science, the *formal object which* is known, is God. But since God is also one of the *material* objects of theology listed above, we must be more specific: the *formal object which* is known by theology is *God as God*.¹⁹ Unaided human reason can know God insofar as He is creator, but it cannot know His Deity. It can know God insofar as He is the first mover, but it cannot know him as He is in Himself. It can know God as the final end of creation, but it cannot know God as the First Truth who reveals Himself to man.

This unique *formal object which* is what distinguishes theology as a science from all human sciences. In theology, we study God as God, and all that He has made insofar as it is related to Him as God. While the metaphysician might study God as simple, the theologian studies Him not only as simple, but also as Triune. While the physicist might study God as unmoved mover, the theologian also studies Him as Incarnate Word. And where both the metaphysician and the physicist study the world in its created nature, the theologian also studies that world as brimming with vestiges of God.

But if this *formal object which* theology knows truly exceeds our human powers, how can we claim that it is a science, yielding certain conclusions from true premises? If the very *formal object which* is supposedly known lies beyond our knowing powers, where do we get the certain first principles that are necessary for the beginning of science? Such questions are perfect illustrations of why any account of the specification of the sciences that leaves out consideration of the *formal object under which* will necessarily be inadequate. We must account for what makes this *formal object which* something that is actually knowable, and we must account for this on the part of both the object known and the subject that knows. It is not enough to explain what a science knows; we must also explain how such knowledge is possible.

What, then, is the *formal object under which* theology is able to know God as God? If God and all his creation is equivalent to our stained-glass window, and the formality *God as God* is the image seen, what corresponds to the light pouring in from behind the window and what corresponds to our act of seeing, both of which together render the image actually visible? Saint Thomas and his Dominican commentators give a simple but profound answer: the former is revelation, the latter is faith. The infused theological virtue of faith is a supernatural light that allows our knowing powers to

¹⁸ *ST* I.1.7.

¹⁹ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The One God* (St. Louis: Herder, 1943), p.78; also see Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan, O.P.’s commentary on *ST* I.1.7, no.1.

attain an object beyond our natural capacities. By faith, we know God, not just as first cause or final end, but insofar as He who “dwells in unapproachable light” steps forward and truly reveals His inner life. As a pure gift of grace imparted by the First Truth Himself, the light of faith is more certain than the light of natural reason, and the articles of faith are more certain than the first principles of philosophy.²⁰ Faith and revelation, *fides qua* and *fides quae*, together constitute (subjectively and objectively, respectively) the *formal object under which* theology can claim its status as a science. God reveals Himself, and by the gift of infused faith we are able to take the articles of this revelation as certain and true first principles from which the science of theology proceeds.²¹

In this way, the three distinctions of the object provide a unified vision of the science of theology. Having received the gift of faith, the theologian is equipped with first principles that he knows to be absolutely true. He is then able to turn his attention to anything that exists, from the lowest organism to the highest angel, and even to God Himself, and reason about this being insofar as it is related to God as God. This reasoning will proceed by way of demonstration from the first principles supplied by faith to an ever-growing number of conclusions, each of which will draw the theologian deeper and more profoundly into the knowledge and the mystery of God. Faith in divine revelation – faith in the First Truth who speaks to us – (the subjective *formal object under which*) constitutes the articles of faith, the very content of revelation (the objective *formal object under which*), as the certain first principles for the knowledge of God as God (the *formal aspect which*) whereby God Himself, and subsequently all that He has created (the *material object*), is unified in a single science of divine wisdom.

With this comprehensive vision of theology as a science, it is now possible to answer the two questions with which this article began.

V. The Problem of Theological Sub-Fields

The first question pertains to the proliferation of sub-fields within the science of theology. Are they necessarily related to one another? Are the sub-fields that are commonly found in our universities today correctly divided? What is the principle that can determine a “correct” division of these sub-fields? In their own way, each of these questions raises a challenge to the unity and integrity of theological science,

²⁰ ST I.1.4.

²¹ For a further discussion, see the rich Appendix 6: Theology as Science in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Christian Theology*, ed. Thomas Gilby, O.P. (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964). Of particular note is the subsection “The Science of Faith,” which proceeds from nos. 21–29.

and thus calls into question the place and role of theology within the university.

The guiding principle for answering these difficulties is an appreciation of the *formal object which* is known in theology. Since the *formal object which* is the unifying and specifying aspect of the material objects that bring them all under one science, any “sub-field” will be legitimate only to the degree to which it shares the same *formal object which* is known with the science it claims to fall under. As has already been shown, the *formal object which* is known in theology is God as God. Thus, if something claims to be a sub-field of theology without considering its *material objects* according to the formality of God as God, it will be a different science, not a sub-field.

Let us consider two of the examples raised in the introduction, namely, “biblical theology” and “feminist theology.” Two possibilities for interpretation present themselves. If the words “biblical” and “feminist” are intended to designate the *material objects* of the sub-fields, no serious problems arise. In the one case, what is meant is that the Bible and its contents are being considered insofar as they are related to God as God, while in the other, it is women and issues pertaining to them that are considered as they are related to God as God. With such an approach, it is the same science of theology that is considering first one, then another group of material objects. This may bring to mind how St. Thomas proceeds in his *Summa*, which lends itself to being considered according to a series of “treatises.”

However, if the words “biblical” or “feminist” are intended *not* to designate the *material objects* of the sub-fields, but rather the *formal objects which* are known in these sub-field, the unity of the science of theology seems to be compromised. In such a case, “biblical theology” would be claiming to study its material objects insofar as they are related to or contained in a particular text (namely, the Bible), but not insofar as they are related to God as God. Similarly, “feminist theology” would claim to study “theological” *material objects*, such as God, the angels, or grace, precisely insofar as they bear some relation-to-woman. But in both cases, it is unclear how these “sub-fields” can be legitimately united to the science of theology. If they do not claim to share the same *formal object which* is known and which is the principle of the specification and unification of a science, it is ambiguous as to how unity might be preserved within the science of theology. Moreover, while it is certainly true that the light of faith is the necessary *formal object under which* theology operates, it is not at all apparent that faith in divine revelation is the *formal object under which* is actualized the possibility of considering things insofar as they are contained in the Bible or related to women. If the articles of faith are not taken by the light of faith as the necessary first principles of these sub-fields, there seems to be no reason to claim that they are theological, as opposed to natural, sciences.

Given these conclusions, two observations and recommendations can be made for safeguarding and for more readily manifesting the unity of theological science. The first pertains to the nature of the sub-fields. Since it is not a different *formal object which* is known that determines a sub-field in theology, it will always be misleading to approach these specialized areas of research as if they were distinct sciences within a broader science. Rather, the sub-fields of theology are appropriately marked off by being concerned with different *material objects*. To return to the metaphor of the stained-glass window, the sub-fields of theology are not, so to speak, “different images,” but rather each sub-field is one frame of stained-glass which, when all are taken together, constitute the single, unified image that is the science of theology. The sub-fields, then, are less like “sciences” and more like “treatises” within a single science.

This leads to the second observation. If each legitimate sub-field is viewed as a treatise within the science of theology, it will be possible to follow a logical order in arranging and presenting these treatises. Here again, St. Thomas’ *Summa* is a perfect exemplar. The centrality of God as the *formal object which* is known guides the material distribution of the treatises throughout the work. Since activity follows being, God is considered first in His own being and then as He is a cause. Thus, the First Part of the *Summa* treats of God both in His being and as efficient cause of all creation, the Second Part treats of God as the final cause of human action, and the Third Part treats of God as the redemptive cause of man’s salvation, which is the vision of God as He is in Himself, thus closing the circle and returning us to where we began.²² Moreover, it has rightly been observed that St. Thomas follows an Aristotelian method throughout his *Summa*, moving from the generic to the specific, not merely with regard to the arrangement of articles within a question, but also with regard to the arrangement of questions within treatises and treatises within Parts.²³ Thus, even if the trend of ever-increasing sub-fields continues, it may be possible to appropriately place each one within the over-arching order of theology. In this way, theological sub-fields can exhibit, rather than endanger, the unity of theology, and can thus contribute to the unity and the order of the university as a whole.

VI. The Relation of Faith to Theology as a Science

The final issue raised in the beginning of this article pertains to the university and the interrelation of faith and theological science. What

²² For a fuller treatment of this account, see John of Saint Thomas, *Introduction to the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Ralph McInerny (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 2004), pp. 9–11.

²³ In addition the citation given above, see James A. Weisheipl, O.P., ‘The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1’, *The Thomist* 38 (1974), pp. 64–67.

impact, if any, does faith have on the nature of theology as a science? Is this a problem strictly limited to “confessional” institutions? Is there any reason to think that the university *qua* university should give consideration to this relationship?

In answering these questions, it is not the *formal object which*, but the *formal object under which* that must play the role of guiding principle. We have seen that the *formal object under which* is the principle that actualizes the unique formality that specifies and unifies a science. If this *formal object under which* is absent, the *formal object which* is known by the science will also be absent. In the case of theology, faith in divine revelation is the *formal object under which* our limited human intellects are able to attain to a formality that far exceeds our natural powers. It is faith in revelation which allows us to know God as God, because by the light of faith we know the articles of faith – the first principles of theology – to be necessarily true, since they have been revealed by the First Truth, who cannot contradict Himself.²⁴ It is on the basis of this certain knowledge of first principles that theology can rightly claim its place as a science.

The implications of these points with regard to the question at hand should be clear. If faith in divine revelation – the *formal object under which* the science of theology is known – is not present, then God as God – the *formal object which* is known in theology – will be inaccessible, just as the image in the stained-glass window is inaccessible as long as light be lacking and eyes be closed. In the absence of the light of faith – the subjective *formal object under which* – the articles of faith that serve as the first principles of theology – the objective *formal object under which* – cannot be known as certain. But if the first principles are not certain, they are not the starting point of a science. At best, theology²⁵ without faith will be working from probable arguments or opinions, and thus will be reduced to a *dialectic* as opposed to a science.

This point is significant *vis-a-vis* the university *qua* university. With regard to the ordering of a curriculum, it seems important to determine whether a particular area of study is a science as opposed to a dialectic. The former yields certain and true conclusions by demonstrating from certain and true premises. Thus, it gives true knowledge about the causes of the things into which it inquires. The latter, however, proceeds by way of correct reasoning, but from premises that are likely to be true. As such, its arguments do not yield true knowledge, but probable opinions. It would seem to be

²⁴ See the first part of the *corpus* of I.1.5 for the connection between the sublimity of principles, their sources, and their certainty.

²⁵ Or at least those parts of theology connected in the order of demonstration to those articles that are not held with the certitude of faith.

a confusing state of affairs if some of the courses being taught in a faculty of theology were scientific while others were dialectical. Thus, if it is desirable to present a department or school of theology as fully scientific, it will be of concern to the university, precisely *qua* university, whether the *formal object under which* theology proceeds is present or not.

VII. Summary & Conclusion

It has been the goal of this article to make the case that contemporary discussions of the purpose of the modern university would greatly benefit from certain classical Thomistic philosophical distinctions. First, we have seen that a greater degree of clarity can be brought to the discussion of academic “disciplines” by distinguishing between *science*, *dialectics*, and *sophistics* along Aristotelian lines. From this, it follows that insofar as any discipline in a modern university claims to demonstrate true conclusions from true premises, that discipline claims to be a science and will be specified as sciences are specified: by their objects. Next, the tripartite distinction of the “object” was introduced, namely, that between the *material object*, the entity that is known in a science, the *formal object which*, or the specific aspect of the various material objects which is known in a science, and the *formal object under which*, or that formality (having both a subjective and an objective component) whereby this specific aspect is actualized. This distinction was then applied to the science of theology, which can take anything that exists as its *material object*, considers that object insofar as it is related to God as God, the *formal object which* is known in theology, and is able to study this formality on account of first principles supplied by faith in revelation, which is the *formal object under which* theology is made possible.

This distinction was shown to provide the key to answering two serious difficulties surrounding theology *vis-a-vis* its place in the modern university: the trend of ever-increasing specialization within the academic disciplines and the problematic of theology without faith. With regards to the former, attention to the *formal object which* is known in theology reveals that its sub-fields can best be understood, not as more specific sciences, but as different “treatises” within the single science of theology, and which are organized according to the *material objects* considered therein. With regards to the problem of theology without faith, attention to the *formal object under which* theology operates reveals that the degree to which absence of faith removes the certainty of theological premises is the same degree to which theology can no longer be treated as a *science*. Instead, this deficiency reduces theology to a *dialectic*, the repercussions of which are significant with respect to the interests of the university.

Thus, a strong case can be made for the fruitfulness of giving classical Thomism and its philosophical distinctions a voice in current debates. By approaching contemporary questions with a technical clarity and precision that are ultimately grounded in metaphysical principles, this tradition of Thomism is able to propose creative answers and shift the way we approach the questions themselves. On this basis we can construct – or, better, rediscover – a truly Thomistic model for understanding the academic disciplines, for guiding their integration within a curriculum, and, ultimately, for building up a true university, ordered toward wisdom.²⁶ Perhaps the answers to many of our questions regarding the modern university lie within the classical Thomistic philosophical approach that was born with, and flourished beside, the university itself.

Philip Neri Reese OP
Dominican House of Studies
487 Michigan Avenue, NE
Washington, D.C. 20017, USA
philip.neri.op@gmail.com

²⁶ In a lengthy footnote, Reinhard Hütter gives a helpful treatment of what this pursuit of wisdom will entail for the university when wisdom is understood within a Thomistic framework. See footnote 31 in Reinhard Hütter, 'God, The University, and the Missing Link – Wisdom: Reflections on Two Untimely Books', *The Thomist* 73 (2009), p. 271.