Anyone attempting to investigate Bonaventure’s philosophical method faces an immediate difficulty, namely, that Bonaventure was a Christian theologian: he taught theology at the University of Paris and most of his writings are theological in genre and purpose. Even his work that treats the widest range of philosophical issues, The Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, is itself a theological text. These indisputable facts might seem to preclude the possibility of reading Bonaventure as anything other than a theologian. Nevertheless, even though Bonaventure was a theologian by training and profession, we can find considerable philosophy in the midst of his theological writings. In this regard, it is accurate to say that he is, at least, a philosophical theologian, that is, someone who draws extensively from philosophical sources and engages in philosophical argumentation.

Bonaventure is explicit that, while philosophy relies on reason, theology relies on “authorities,” above all, the highest authority, the word of God. Yet, while engaged in theology, Bonaventure is consistently careful to distinguish arguments from reason and arguments from faith. We can see this careful distinction between arguments from philosophy and those from theology at work even on as central a question as whether God exists. Of course, sacred scripture affirms the existence of God, but Bonaventure argues that we can know that God exists apart from the authority of the Bible. Even if someone has never encountered the Christian Bible, it is possible to know that God exists.

Furthermore, Bonaventure does not merely present the philosophical opinions of others in his work; he himself philosophizes, that is, he consistently analyzes and assesses arguments based on reason concerning the perennial questions of the philosophers.

---

Even while engaging in theology, Bonaventure strictly observes what we can call philosophy’s “integrity”: it is a distinct discipline with its own method of argumentation and its own principles. It is precisely this careful methodological distinction that allows someone who would go looking for philosophy in the writings of medieval theologians to separate out their philosophy without significantly distorting it. Indeed, Bonaventure belongs to a theological tradition that is distinguished precisely by at least two elements: its strict observance of the distinction between philosophy and theology, and its insistence that philosophy is essential to the theological task. This theological tradition that scrupulously observes the distinction between philosophy and theology, while also making extensive use of the former, is scholasticism.

In Bonaventure’s view, any consideration of the proper way to practice philosophy also has to consider its relation to the possibility of a science of God’s special revelation, i.e., theology (or “sacred scripture,” to use Bonaventure’s frequent term for this concept). For if there is evidence of a divine revelation, then reason’s search for wisdom is necessarily propaedeutic to God’s own revelation, which would constitute naturally the apex of this quest. While Bonaventure maintains the view that philosophy is a discipline with its own integrity, he thinks that it is ultimately heteronomous, in that it must recognize its own intrinsic limits and that it is only one step in the larger journey of the mind to wisdom. Bonaventure distinguishes in order to unite: he explicitly maps out the whole range of human knowledge, and while carefully distinguishing philosophy from theology, tries to argue that all the arts and sciences can lead the mind back to God. Philosophy emerges as one step in the mind’s larger journey to wisdom itself and to God.

This heteronomous view of philosophy poses a crucial question for the modern reader: whether it is possible to subordinate philosophy to a putatively higher discipline without violating its integrity. Admittedly, the modern answer to the question of the possibility of philosophy being subordinated without loss of integrity has been unambiguously no. Modernity has insisted that the integrity of philosophy requires what we could call unconditional (or absolute) autonomy, i.e., independence, or even separation, from any ruling discipline or body of knowledge. This autonomy is unconditional, in that it affirms that even if there were a divine revelation, this body of knowledge ought not to serve as an extrinsic norm for philosophy.

In other words, the religious beliefs of the philosopher ought not to be normative for the philosophical endeavor. Modern philosophers have