

Dante's Philosophical Hierarchy

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ARISTOTLE famously remarked that “a lover of myth . . . is in a sense a philosopher, for a myth is composed of wonders.”¹ These myths, however, including the myths of Christianity, may lead to tensions with other aspects of one's philosophy. Dante was one philosopher who faced such tensions, embodying the familiar struggle of the medieval Christian: the Aristotelian system that he accepts as a man of reason is not fully compatible with the Christianity that he espouses as a man of faith. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante describes Aristotle as “the master of men who know”² because Dante believes that nature had revealed its greatest secrets to Aristotle. Chief among these is that happiness, which is the purpose of man's existence, is realized through contemplation.³ However, neither the object nor the subject of Aristotelian contemplation is consistent with Dante's Christian beliefs. For Aristotle the object of contemplation is a God that neither assures providence nor practices divine justice.

¹ *Metaphysics* 982b18–19.

² *Inferno* IV, 131.

³ Boyd 294.

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Accordingly, the object of contemplation that Aristotle posits is at odds with Christian belief. The gulf between Aristotle's philosophy and Christian belief deepens as Aristotle conceives of the subject of contemplation as a unity of soul and body that renders the soul mortal, whereas Christians conceive of the subject as an immortal soul.

Dante's ambivalence towards the Aristotelian system leads him to a reconceptualization of the place of philosophy within a Christian framework. The *Divine Comedy* is intended to guide its readers from a "state of misery . . . to a state of bliss" by indicating the dual ends of man and explaining how these ends can be met.⁴ Dante conceives of man as a dualistic creature whose body is temporal and whose soul is eternal. Thus, Dante posits two ends for man: an earthly end and a heavenly end. While the earthly end is centered on philosophy and the perfection of man's natural virtues, the heavenly end absorbs philosophy into the specifically Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Even though the heavenly end incorporates philosophy, the enjoyment of God's beatitude cannot be reached through philosophy alone. Indeed, Dante sees a danger in Aristotelian metaphysics and all philosophic activity that takes place in the absence of revelation: because reason cannot see its own limits, philosophy trespasses into the realm of revelation by being unable to recognize the finitude of man and the boundlessness of God. Consequently, Dante reshuffles the Aristotelian hierarchy of sciences. On the one hand, Dante rejects Aristotelian metaphysics because its inadequate account of God and the soul leads the philosopher astray of his heavenly end. Having rejected Aristotelian metaphysics, the highest science for Aristotle, Dante elevates the virtues formulated by Aristotelian ethics, which are compatible with Christianity, to the summit of the philosophical hierarchy. On the other hand, Dante subordinates every branch of philosophy to the Christian notion of contemplation of the revealed eternal end.

This essay explains how the dual ends of man that Dante posits prompt him to rearrange Aristotle's hierarchy of the sciences. Accordingly, the first section will present Dante's treatment of the

⁴ "Letter to Can Grande della Scalla."

dangers of pagan philosophy, which uses reason without the guidance of revelation. The second discusses Dante's conception of the proper relationship between reason and revelation. The third explains Dante's dualism in relation to the ends of man. The fourth explains the relation between contemplation and action in Dante's revised philosophical hierarchy.

I. Pagan Philosophy and the Danger of Reason Unaided by Faith

*"those who increase knowledge increase sorrow."*⁵

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that a life of contemplation, that has no end other than contemplation itself, would be a life of perfect happiness.⁶ While practical activities are undertaken for the sake of a further end, contemplation is done for its own sake, and is therefore best. As the intellect is the highest and most divine part of man and is devoted to the highest objects, so its activity, contemplation, must be the highest and most divine of man's activities. However, Aristotle then explains that a life of unending contemplation "would be too high for man"⁷ because only a non-physical divine being can contemplate endlessly. In contrast, human contemplation requires leisure and is interrupted by fatigue, hunger, and thirst.⁸ For Aristotle, man is able to participate in the divine activity of contemplation only to the limited extent that he himself is godlike.

For the Christian, Aristotle's view contains the following difficulty: Aristotle believes that contemplation can make man happy in this life, but for the Christian happiness is impossible as long as one remains isolated from God, the source of all happiness. Christians conceive of true happiness as the soul's eternal unity with God. For Dante, one achieves such a union by practicing the Christian virtues in this life so that one may be graced with complete and eternal happiness in the next.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:18 (New Revised Standard Edition).

⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b2-6.

⁷ *Ibid.* 1177b26.

⁸ *Ibid.* 1177b20-32.

Limbo is Dante's attack on ancient humanism. Aristotle and his fellow virtuous pagans are in limbo, the first circle of hell, neither for committing sin nor for living before the revelation, but for accepting that happiness could be attained in a life of isolation from God. For Dante, the condition of the soul in the afterlife is a reflection of the soul's condition in life. The souls of the virtuous pagans are rewarded for their virtue but punished for their lack of imagination and hope. The virtuous pagans live in the state of natural bliss that they imagined in their earthly life. Nevertheless they sigh sadly as they consider their eternal separation from the God on whom all happiness depends. Virgil sorrowfully expresses the essence of limbo: "cut off from hope, we live on in desire."⁹ For Dante, ancient humanism was deficient because of its inability to transcend the limits of reason.

Dante's myth of Ulysses reveals a second deficiency of ancient humanism. Whereas Aristotle was unable to transcend the limits of reason, Ulysses was unable to recognize the limits of reason. Ulysses spends eternity in the eighth circle of hell consumed by flame as a punishment for fraudulently counseling others to participate in the ambush of the Trojan Horse.¹⁰ However, the myth that Ulysses tells indicates that he is not punished for counseling others to deceive, but rather for his reckless pursuit of knowledge.¹¹

Ulysses explains that after his return home he was overcome by the "burning wish / to know the world and have experience / of all man's vices, of all human worth."¹² He abandons his family and persuades his followers to sail beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the geographical limit of man, into the Southern Hemisphere, which was thought to be entirely water. Ulysses encourages his men to continue, saying:

. . . do not deny / yourself experience of what there is beyond /
behind the sun, in the world they call unpeopled. / Consider

⁹ *Inferno* IV, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 58–59.

¹¹ Borges 23.

¹² *Inferno* XXVI, 97–99.

what you came from: you are Greeks! / You were not born to live
like mindless brutes / but to follow paths of excellence and
knowledge.¹³

After five months Ulysses and his men reach Mount Purgatory, which they cannot scale because they lack divine grace. The winds then envelop the ship and the sea closes over all the men. Whereas Aristotle is punished for being happy in the absence of God, that is, for not hoping for something greater, Ulysses is tormented eternally for having too much hope and seeking its realization in a sinful manner.

I believe that Ulysses is punished for using his intelligence to encourage other men to seek the realization of both their temporal and eternal ends within this life. Ulysses is not content with leisure, wealth, kingship, and family, but desires the knowledge and the experience that lie beyond the limits of this life. Because of his dissatisfaction with the world that God willed, his fate forces him to realize that God's will determines reality.¹⁴ Ulysses is the example of reason ignoring its limitation and infringing on the supreme end, the realm of God. As Ulysses is discontent with his life of privilege he seeks a transcendent satisfaction of his desires and curiosities. Thus, Ulysses, unlike Aristotle, is able to hope against hope for transcendence in this life. Unfortunately, by using this hope as an entitlement to trespass and encouraging others to do the same, he condemns himself to eternal misery, thereby forfeiting the very end he tried to seize prematurely. Without the guidance of revelation, reason's pursuit of eternal bliss brings eternal misery.

Scholars suggest that there are autobiographical components in Dante's myth of Ulysses. Borges believes that Dante identified with Ulysses because the *Divine Comedy* infringes on God's limits by attempting to reveal the "indecipherable providence of God."¹⁵ Thus, Dante may even believe that he deserved a fate similar to Ulysses. Dante explains in the *Convivio*, his most philosophic work, that he had

¹³ *Inferno* XXVI, 115–20.

¹⁴ Collins 97.

¹⁵ Borges 23.

been consumed by a “desire to understand and know”¹⁶ through reason. The *Convivio* is an unfinished earlier work, which suggests that Dante realized that reason would be unable to lead him to his ultimate end, unity with God. For Dante, reason unaided by revelation leads to earthly knowledge at the expense of eternal happiness.

II. The Relationship of Reason and Revelation

“madness it is to hope that human minds / can ever understand the Infinite / that comprehends Three Persons in One Being . . .”¹⁷

To assess Dante’s conception of the proper relationship between reason and revelation, I will examine the relationship in the *Divine Comedy* between Virgil and Beatrice, and then briefly discuss the relationship between philosophy and revelation in the middle ages.

As the *Divine Comedy* is an allegorical work, Virgil and Beatrice have a symbolic significance that complements their earthly significance. Virgil is the symbol of what philosophy, poetry, and morality can achieve in the absence of divine grace. Virgil, like Dante, is a philosophical poet. His major work, the *Aeneid*, is an epic poem that describes the education of the Roman hero Aeneas. Virgil is also an authority on the underworld, as he led Aeneas below the earth to glimpse at his destiny. In the opening canto of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante finds himself lost in dark woods before a beautiful mountain, the ascent of which is denied by three wild beasts that symbolize the varieties of human sin. Virgil attempts to rescue Dante by leading him into the Inferno to learn the true nature of sin so that a subsequent ascent of the mountain will be possible.

As Virgil’s human wisdom is insufficient to rescue Dante from sin, Dante requires Beatrice—his earthly love and the symbol of divine grace—to lead him to salvation. But if Beatrice is capable of leading Dante to salvation, then why is Virgil required at all? The relationship between Beatrice and Virgil is crucial. Beatrice asks Virgil to help her

¹⁶ Collins 96.

¹⁷ *Purgatory* III, 34–36.

save Dante's soul. It is through Beatrice's grace and not through Virgil's human wisdom that man transcends the limits of the natural world.¹⁸ Virgil, upon Beatrice's request, can rouse Dante's soul into recognizing the nature of sin, but Virgil cannot lead Dante to salvation. However, Dante is so deeply rooted in sin that Beatrice's divine grace is unable to reach him directly. Thus, Virgil's human wisdom must lead Dante to the point where Beatrice's grace can save him. Although philosophy and divine grace are both aspects of man's salvation, the former has become an instrument of the latter. Virgil's wisdom is a means to prepare Dante's soul to receive the grace that Beatrice personifies.

For Dante there is a unity between the truths of philosophy and theology.¹⁹ Dante does not believe that the truth of philosophy could oppose the truth of revelation. To believe that two truths could oppose each other would require believing that a proposition could be true and false simultaneously, which is absurd because the "truth then would be opposed to itself, and man would be free to accept as a philosopher what he rejects as a believer."²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas was likely the authority Dante looked to when he considered the proper relationship between philosophy's reason and theology's revelation. Aquinas believed in a natural truth that human reason discovered through its own power and a "supernatural truth...which is known only through divine revelation."²¹ It was Aquinas' conclusion that human wisdom is only fully understood through the light of Christian revelation. In *Paradise*, Dante writes "that nothing save the light of truth allays / Our intellect's disquiet now I see plain— / God's truth, which holds all within its rays."²² Only the ultimate truth, knowledge and understanding of God, satisfies the mind's curiosity. Reason alone cannot discover this truth.

¹⁸ Collins 89.

¹⁹ Boyde 39.

²⁰ Fortin 140.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Paradise* IV, 124–26.

III. Dante's Dualism

*“do you not understand that we are worms, / each born to form the angelic butterfly, / that flies defenseless to the Final Judge?”*²³

The dual ends that Dante posits for man reflect two distinct periods of his thought. The Dante who wrote the *Convivio* emphasized the pursuit of happiness in this life through philosophic contemplation. The later Dante, who wrote the *Divine Comedy*, focused on the brevity of earthly life, and the importance of the eternal afterlife. I will discuss these two stages in Dante's thought in turn.

Dante's earlier views about the purpose of man, as expressed in his *Convivio*, are strongly influenced by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which asserts that human happiness is achieved through contemplation. This period of Dante's thought is distinguished by “a wholehearted devotion to Aristotle, a great confidence in human reason, and a desire to find the way to human happiness in this life.”²⁴ However, at the end of the third treatise of the *Convivio*, Dante expresses reservations about the power of reason. Certain concepts, such as God, eternity, and primal matter, surpass the capability of our intellect and thus remain unknowable for the duration of earthly life.²⁵

The Dante who wrote the *Divine Comedy* continues to acknowledge the value of philosophy, but, as his accounts of Aristotle and Ulysses suggest, with a mistrust of the intellect when unaccompanied by revelation. Dante attaches great importance to the existence of sin and the consequent need for God's grace to attain happiness and knowledge. Dante's newfound emphasis on Christian doctrine is indicated by his shift from the philosophic pursuit of happiness in this life towards a “greater emphasis on the attainment of happiness in the life

²³ *Purgatory X*, 124–26.

²⁴ Boyde 31.

²⁵ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, s.v. “Dante Alighieri” (by Winthrop Wetherbee), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2001/entries/dante> (accessed June 18, 2003).

hereafter."²⁶ Whereas the highest good in the *Convivio* is a distant God to which the mind aspires, the *Divine Comedy* presents a God who dispenses the grace that makes the intellectual life fruitful.²⁷ Thus, Beatrice, the symbol of divine grace, supplants Virgil, the symbol of earthly wisdom, as Dante's guide through the earthly and heavenly paradises. However, it is important to note that grace does not displace philosophy. Rather, it absorbs philosophy, as Beatrice demonstrates through her many discourses throughout the first few cantos of *Paradise*.²⁸

Dante's shift in focus from the earthly attainment of happiness and knowledge to their heavenly attainment can be clarified by reference to his dualistic conceptions of human ends. As we have seen, Dante accepts Aristotle's account of human happiness as the contemplative life. However, he also accepts the Christian teaching that portrays the earthly life as a mere preparation for the eternal life to come, so that one could hope to save one's soul from eternal damnation only by putting one's faith in God.²⁹ How does Dante reconcile these two opposing notions without rejecting Aristotle or the Church? Dante argues that both beliefs are valid because man has two ends, each based on one of man's two natures. *De Monarchia*, Dante's work of political theory, explains that man is both generated and created. Man's physical generation results in his corruptibility and temporality. Man's creation by God provides an incorruptible and eternal soul. Thus, Dante explains in *De Monarchia* that since man is both body and soul, his existence must have two ends:

Ineffable providence has thus set before us two goals to aim at: i.e., happiness in this life, which consists in the exercise of our own powers and is figured in the earthly paradise; and happiness in the eternal life, which consists in the enjoyment of the vision

²⁶ Boyde 31.

²⁷ See note 25 above.

²⁸ *Paradise* I, II, IV, and V.

²⁹ Boyde 294.

of God (to which our own powers cannot raise us except with the help of God's light) and which is signified by the heavenly paradise.³⁰

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante presents his conception of the dual ends of man through the relationship between the earthly paradise and the heavenly paradise. The earthly paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory is attained through the practice of moral and intellectual virtues revealed by philosophy.³¹ However, Dante describes the earthly paradise as empty, which suggests that it is not the ultimate goal of human life. It is the origin of man's journey begun by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; it is a means to progress to the heavenly paradise, but not an end in itself.

The heavenly paradise is attained by spiritual teachings that transcend human reason and the practice of the theological virtues revealed by revelation: faith, hope and charity.³² This is the true end of man. It is in the heavenly paradise that man's "triple longing for the Truth, the Good, and the Cause of his Being" receive complete fulfillment.³³ Thus, when Dante beholds God, he concludes the *Divine Comedy* by stating that his will and his desire were in accordance with God's love: "My will and my desire were turned by love / The love that moves the sun and the other stars."³⁴

While Dante presents two ends for man it is clear that only one end is fully satisfactory. It is interesting to note that when Dante gazes at God he sees united in God the very items (God, eternity, and primal matter) that the *Convivio* claims earthly philosophy cannot access. For the Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, truth is unified, and there is one true end for man, the heavenly paradise. Man's earthly end is a preparation for achieving his ultimate end, in which true happiness and unrestricted knowledge are attained. The ultimacy of the heavenly end is

³⁰ *De Monarchia* III, xvi, 7-8.

³¹ *Ibid.* III, xvi, 8.

³² *Ibid.* III, xvi, 8-9.

³³ Boyde 287.

³⁴ *Paradise* XXXIII, 144-45.

evident when Beatrice warns Dante to keep his “eyes fixed on the eternal day.”³⁵

IV. Active and Contemplative: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Christian Contemplation

*“Morality is the beauty of Philosophy.”*³⁶

In this section I will discuss Aristotle’s hierarchy of sciences, and how his metaphysics oppose Dante’s Christian beliefs. I will then elucidate how the acceptance and rejection of Aristotelian doctrine affects Dante’s own philosophical system. Last, I will provide an account of the proper relationship between the active life and contemplative life that Dante posits.

To appreciate Dante’s reordering of the relationship between metaphysics and ethics, we must first understand Aristotle’s hierarchy of sciences. For Aristotle, the different branches of science are necessarily hierarchic because the conclusions of one field depend on the conclusions of another. Aristotle argues in his *Metaphysics*³⁷ that certain scientific fields, such as ethics, are lower sciences because they presuppose the conditions of higher sciences. Metaphysics is the highest science because it is the science that all other sciences presuppose, while it does not presuppose the conclusions of any other science. It is, therefore, the only independent science. Moreover, the subject matter of metaphysics is the most universal because it includes all things that exist, including God.

However, the Aristotelian system of metaphysics is irreconcilable with the Christian notion of God. For Aristotle, metaphysics reveals an intellectual God that is impersonal and has no thought of human affairs. Aristotle’s God is a thought, whose activity is thinking about thinking.³⁸ He is not a creator, as Aristotle believes that the world is

³⁵ *Purgatory* XXX, 103.

³⁶ *Convivio* 156.

³⁷ *Metaphysics* 1003a22–32.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 1072b20–23.

eternal. This is in stark contrast to the spiritual Christian God, who created the world, administers divine justice to human souls, and is the source of grace.

Aristotle's account of the soul, expressed in his *De Anima*, is also incompatible with Dante's beliefs. For Aristotle, the soul is not a spiritual or immortal entity but merely a biological function. Aristotle sees man as a composite of a formal soul (or mind) and a material body. For Aristotle, the formal soul actualizes the material body's potential to live.³⁹ Because body and soul form a unity, the death of the material body ends the soul's actualization of the body's potential for possessing life and thereby ends the life of the soul. This view of the soul is also at odds with the Christian notion of divine justice. A soul that dies after earthly life cannot come to understand the nature of its sin through divine justice, or be compensated for earthly suffering, as the exiled Dante likely hoped.

In his dedicatory letter to Can Grande della Scalla, Dante explains that the *Divine Comedy* is not only an ethical work, but also a work in which theory is subjugated to practice:

The genus of philosophy under which we proceed here in the whole and in the part is the business of morals or ethics, since both the part and the whole are composed for practice rather than theory. But if in some place or passage things are lengthened out in the manner of theory, this is not for the purpose of theory, but of practice; for, as the Philosopher says in the second book of *Metaphysics*: "practical men theorize now and again . . ." ⁴⁰

Although Dante uses Aristotle's authority to validate his approach, such an approach is contrary to Aristotle's hierarchy because it demotes the supreme theoretical and speculative branches of science that pursue contemplation for its own sake to instruments of practical science that act to meet an end.

³⁹ Ibid. 412a22.

⁴⁰ "Letter to Can Grande della Scalla."

Having championed ethics, one expects the *Divine Comedy* to illustrate the supremacy of the active life. But the dream that Dante has in *Purgatory* indicates the supremacy of the contemplative life. The dream features two matriarchs from the Old Testament, Leah and Rachel, who married the patriarch Jacob. In Dante's third dream,⁴¹ Leah explains to him that her delight consists in the active pleasure of gathering flowers while her sister Rachel gazes before a mirror in contemplation. While Leah's active life is plentiful in good works, Rachel's contemplative life is dedicated to prayer. That Dante is not presenting the active and contemplative life as complementary, but as hierarchically ordered is evident from three considerations. First, Rachel's marriage was the one that Jacob desired. Second, Leah's marriage precedes Rachel's marriage and so can be viewed as preparatory. Third, although Rachel bears fewer children than Leah, the children she bears are Jacob's favorites. Dante's authorities, in this case Aristotle and Jesus, concur.⁴² We have seen that for Aristotle, the contemplative life is man's highest aspiration. As for revelation, Jesus' comment about Martha and Mary, the New Testament counterparts of Leah and Rachel, respectively, indicates the superiority of the contemplative life.⁴³ While Martha welcomes the traveling Jesus into her home, prepares the meal, and then serves it single-handedly, Mary sits at Jesus' feet and reflects on his words. When Martha complains to Jesus that her sister does not help her, Jesus responds that Martha is worried about superfluities while Mary is concerned with what is both necessary and best. Dante's dream demonstrates his agreement with Aristotle and Jesus that the contemplative life is better than the active life.

Although the *Divine Comedy* claims that what is best is contemplative or theoretical, Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scalla explains that the purpose of the work is ethics, a practical or active science, and that

⁴¹ *Purgatory* XXVII, 97–108.

⁴² Gilson 130.

⁴³ Gilson 131; Luke 10:41–42 (New Revised Standard Edition).

this work subordinates theory to practice. But if contemplation and theory are superior to action and practice, then why does the *Divine Comedy* subordinate the former to the latter?

I believe that this problem can be resolved by applying key features of Dante's philosophic hierarchy. Dante's work must be practical because his purpose is to "remove those living in this life from the state of misery and to lead them to the state of bliss."⁴⁴ However, as his portrayal of Aristotle and Ulysses indicates, Dante believes that theorizing about the attainment of happiness in this life without the aid of revelation denies the attainment of happiness in the hereafter. Accordingly, in the *Divine Comedy* and *De Monarchia*, Dante emphasizes man's two natures and his respective ends. Insofar as Dante is earthly and has no grace to impart, he can only achieve his purpose by illustrating the misery of sin and the practice of virtue. Thus, Dante resembles his own portrayal of Virgil because Dante is limited to putting souls in a position to receive a grace that he cannot distribute. In putting souls in such a favorable position, Dante overcomes the limitation that he sees in the virtuous pagans, who attempt to attain their earthly happiness by forfeiting eternal bliss. Dante's response to their failure shows how the two ends of man that he posits are consistent. For Dante, the practice of Christian virtue in this life is an instrument for attaining blissful contemplation in the next. It is in this temporal sense that Dante's purpose subordinates theory to practice: in order to attain the end of Christian contemplation, eternal happiness, one must first lead a practical life of Christian virtue. That Dante's purpose is practical does not imply that he loses sight of man's ultimate contemplative end. After all, he concludes each of the three canticles—the *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*—by drawing his readers' attention away from what is earthly and temporal towards the heavenly "stars."

Conclusion

Dante reorganizes and amends Aristotle's hierarchy of the sciences in order to make Aristotle's philosophy compatible with his

⁴⁴ "Letter to Can Grande della Scalla."

own Christian beliefs. For Dante, the *Divine Comedy* is an instrument of salvation because it leads its readers to recognize the limitations of reason in order to encourage them to pursue their eternal end. However, Dante shows his admiration for philosophy by not dismissing it entirely but merely altering its internal hierarchy and subordinating it to revelation in order to emphasize that the love of wisdom is not only compatible with man's true end but is subsumed within it. Indeed, for Dante, the grace that God disseminates makes philosophical fulfillment possible.

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