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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 38, Number 1, April 2014, pp. 110-127
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/phl.2014.0006](https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2014.0006)



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DANTE'S *PARADISO*: NO HUMAN BEINGS ALLOWED

“But when you meet her again,” he observed, “in Heaven, you, too, will be changed. You will see her spiritualized, with spiritual eyes.”¹

Abstract. That there is a balance between reason and faith in Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not news. Still, an exploration of this balance is worth additional attention. Among other things, one discovers that Dante, following Thomas Aquinas, rejects the classical Greek ideal of happiness as reasoning with excellence. In addition and more important, one discovers that what Dante requires in order for human beings to be happy leads to this surprising conclusion: the set of happy human beings in Dante's heaven is empty.

I

DANTE IS NOT A philosopher, although George Santayana sees him as one among a very few philosophical poets.² The *Divine Comedy* deals in *terza rima* with issues that are philosophically urgent, including the relation between reasoning well and happiness.³

And as one of the few great epics in Western literature, the *Comedy* offers its readers the pleasures of world-class poetry, fabulous beasts from classical literature, good people and sinners from Dante's Italy, and the prolongation in verse of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa contra Gentiles*. In some ways, Dante's epic reflects its time and problems in his beloved Florence, but philosophically it depends more on Aquinas than it does on the writings of Dante's philosophical

contemporaries. In this respect, Dante looks backward rather than forward. Dante borrows all that he can from Aquinas's *Summae*, but goes beyond them in the *Paradiso*.

An attempt to extract philosophical messages from poetry requires to some extent treating a poem as something different from what it is. A poet should not be described as producing doctrine unless he tells the reader that this is what he is doing, and Dante tells his readers nothing of the kind.

Part of what emerges from this essay is simply a reminder that Dante read extensively and employed a variety of resources. He read Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Eclogues*. He read the Bible. He understood the writings of the church fathers. He knew the principal works of Augustine and Aquinas. From these sources and from his talent as a poet for the ages, he crafted a personal epic that addresses the goal and problems of happiness. More important is that Dante, like Aquinas, is unaware that Paradise has no room for human beings, especially those who are saved and elected to eternal life.

This essay raises the question about the *Comedy* that Plato includes in the *Symposium*, *Philebus*, and *Republic*, that Aristotle tries to answer in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that Boethius takes up in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and that Aquinas writes about in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: can a *human* being be happy?

We begin this discussion by saying something about Dante's status in the tradition of thinkers who explore the value of reason and faith in a life well lived. The topic has a long history, but where Dante's attitudes are concerned, something more is worth considering.

For Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, one cannot be happy without reasoning excellently.⁴ For Boethius, writing the *Consolation of Philosophy* during the first quarter of the sixth century, a life of reason is so potent that even in someone's darkest hours, reasoning excellently provides the happiness that nearly all human beings value as an end.⁵ A detailed repetition of Aquinas's attitude toward reasoning and happiness is unnecessary, but keeping the following points in view is helpful before turning to Dante: (a) Aquinas's highest good demands the unending contemplation of God; (b) without redemptive grace, no one can contemplate God in the manner that provides happiness; therefore, (c) whatever the value of human reason, it cannot alone make a man or woman happy in the highest degree.⁶

II

What roles do reason and faith play in Dante's search, as a pilgrim in the *Comedy*, for elusive happiness? An Augustinian answer is that reason serves faith but that reason absent faith is barren in fulfilling the quest for supreme happiness.⁷ Familiar evidence for this interpretation is that Virgil (70–19 BCE), Dante's choice as a personification of reason, guides Dante throughout the entire *Inferno* and through almost thirty cantos of the *Purgatorio*.⁸ Why does Dante require Virgil's help? Why at the conclusion of the *Inferno* does he identify Virgil as his teacher, master, and guide (“*tu duca, tu segnore e tu maestro*”)?

To answer these questions, one does not need to look far beyond the opening tercet of the *Inferno*. Dante has strayed from the “straight road” (“*la diretta via*”), the narrow path of probity and virtue, and finds himself in the “dark wood” (“*selva oscura*”). Burdened by his sense of sin, aimlessly drifting through life, he realizes that he must find the light or live in despair;⁹ however, he has been unable to find that light on his own.

Dante's problems are numerous, as they usually are for those who suffer a mid-life crisis, a lapse in faith, anxiety, and depression.¹⁰ As he tries to escape the dark wood by racing up a sunlit hill, a metaphor for some attempt to overcome his distress and begin to seek a cure, he finds that the relief he desires is not at hand (“How to Read Dante,” p. 342). His message, unless one believes there is no message in the *Comedy*, is transparent: acknowledging one's shortcomings is the painful first step. Jeffrey Burton Russell writes of Dante's mission: “Right at the outset the poet declares his primary intent to be moral allegory. But the allegory is intensely personal. When the poet describes the pilgrim as so lost that he is more or less dead, he is describing, without hyperbole, the poignant sense of his own moral state.”¹¹

But even an auspicious beginning is not going to provide comfort or happiness. Dante's persistent frustration brings us back to Virgil, the instantiation of enlightenment but not of the *illumination* that is necessary for acquiring authentic happiness.¹² With reason as his guide, with the preliminary recognition that prospects for salvation and consequent happiness are improved with attention to reason, the poet Dante can map the road that the pilgrim Dante travels as he makes his way through the *Comedy* (“How to Read Dante,” p. 343).

Why is Dante unable to discover any shortcut to salvation? On John Ciardi's interpretation, “Salvation must grow out of understanding, total understanding can follow only from total experience, and experience

must be won by the laborious discipline of shaping one's absolute attention. *The object is to achieve God, and Dante's God exists in no state of child-like innocence: He is total knowledge and only those who have truly experienced knowledge can begin to approach him*" ("How to Read Dante," p. 343). Virgil, emblematic of human reason working at its highest registers, spells out the depths of Dante's worldliness and the specific flaws in his search for the happiness that eludes him. He commands the wayward traveler's complete attention.

Because Dante's journey is first and foremost that of a troubled Christian, reason is subaltern to faith. After all, Virgil is summoned from Limbo by Beatrice, the emblem of Dante's faith and election, and his assignment is temporary; it ends late in *Purgatorio*, canto XXX. Harold Bloom characterizes Beatrice (personifying faith), not Virgil, as Dante's "most spectacular invention," and this remark, keeping in mind the fabulous cast of characters assembled in the *Comedy*, is compelling, especially given what Bloom adds: "No single personage in Shakespeare, not even the charismatic Hamlet or the godlike Lear, matches Beatrice as an exuberantly daring invention."¹³

Although the character of Beatrice may be unmatched in other literature, there is nothing surprising about the ordering of reason to faith in the *Comedy* and in the philosophical writings of the late Middle Ages.¹⁴ For Dante, reasoning takes one only so far where the hope and aim of every man and woman is genuine, durable happiness. Thinking well is not enough to make Dante happy and to emancipate him from the distresses of life. Only a vision of God can complete his task. He cannot experience this vision until the last canto of the *Paradiso*. And before he reaches it, he has to navigate the complex divisions of the *Paradiso* just as he did in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

But reasoning is otiose in heaven, and in the closing stages of his pilgrimage, St. Bernard takes over from Beatrice, saying that Beatrice has done her job and that he has been sent to assist Dante in the culminating states of his ascent. Beatrice withdraws in favor of the saint. St. Bernard tells Dante that the vision of Virgin Mary is the final step before the effulgent, beatific vision that ends his taxing voyage of discovery. In language that anticipates a vision of God in the supernatural light of the Empyrean heaven, Dante writes:

I saw there, smiling at this song and sport,
 She whose beauty entered like a bliss
 Into the eyes of all that sainted court.

And even could my speech match my conception,
 Yet I would not dare make the least attempt
 To draw her delectation and perfection. (*Paradiso*, canto
 XXXI, 133–38)¹⁵

Because human speech is limited by the boundaries of human reason and experience, Dante cannot begin to express what he sees as he gazes at the enthroned Virgin.

Again, despite the limitations of reason, Dante is enough of a rationalist that he will not deny reason a prominent place in the *Comedy*. Evidence from classical mythology certifies the instrumental value of reasoning well, but not the value of human reasoning as an end in itself. Excellent reasoning for Dante is not some activity that one might identify with happiness. In the *Inferno*, assorted beasts—Charon in canto III, Minos in canto V, and Plutus in canto VII—try to impede Virgil and Dante’s progress through hell. Virgil rebuffs them, but the poet Dante manages to show, by using such beasts, that the power of unaided reason to guide the soul is always challenged and frequently overcome by appetites, passions, and wayward desires. These destructive appetites are the beasts that plague men and women at every turn. They threaten a person’s capacity to appeal to reason as his or her highest natural capacity.

In this regard, the differences and similarities between Dante and Plato are patent. For Plato, the rational, well-ordered soul in the *Republic* secures the just man or woman. This much is fine as far as it goes, but even for Plato, it does not go far enough. He crafts myths about happiness of a high and enduring order. Dante does not deal in myths as substitutes for facts. He is certain that unspeakable happiness (*beatitudo perfecta*) exists and is inseparable from the beatific vision itself. The aim of his travels is to discover and, if possible, to enjoy the rarified bliss that Christianity promises to emancipated sinners. In this respect, Dante is no different from any other Christian pilgrim. Bunyan’s Pilgrim is a Calvinist, and he too strives for the “glorious joy” that no “tongue or pen” can possibly describe.¹⁶

More telling, the rebellious angels (malignant beings who in an act of hubris challenged God’s supreme authority), try to prevent the poets’ passage into deeper hell. Virgil alone is unable to deal with the potent evil that stands between Dante and eventual happiness. He appeals for the aid of an unnamed angel whose power Dante describes in the *Inferno*:

He cleared the polluted air before his face
 And only in his annoyance did he seem tired.
 I knew assuredly he was sent to us
 From Heaven, and I turned my head to regard
 The master—who signaled that I should be mute
 And bow before him. Ah, to me he appeared
 So full of high disdain! He went to the gate
 And opened it by means of a little wand,
 And there was no resistance.¹⁷

III

In reading and interpreting passages such as the one above, it is not sufficient to notice that reason is limited and is explicitly second to faith. Dante also knows that investing too heavily in reason can lead to damnation, the absolute and unbearable antithesis of happiness. Evidence of Dante's worry is easy to find. The virtuous pagans we meet in the *Inferno*, canto IV—including Aristotle, “the master of those who know” (“*l maestro di color che sanno*”)—are notoriously confined forever in dark Limbo. Roman poets of the Republican and early Imperial period (among them Ovid and Virgil), and twelfth-century Muslim philosophers are also relegated to Limbo, the most benign region of hell, but hell nonetheless. Why must this punishment be their fate?

Dante's critics often object that such punishment is too harsh and that he is unjust to place in Limbo those great men and women who have wronged no one. In some cases, their only failure, if it is appropriately called “failure,” is to have lived before they could become Christians, but this condition is an accident of birth. For others (Avicenna and Averroës), the great error was to follow Mohammed rather than Christ. Why are they forever denied the fruits of their virtue? The correct reply is that this fate is what dogma and doctrine demand. In short, the *Inferno* is extraordinary as literature but is not theologically daring. An eternity in Limbo is the best that Dante's Christianity offers to unbaptized children and to virtuous, heterodoxical adults.

Dorothy Sayers interprets Dante's decision to place these shades in the Limbo of lost souls as a recognition that the great pagans and patriarchs settled for a life of virtue and sought nothing more: “Here . . . the souls ‘have what they chose’; they enjoy that kind of after-life which they themselves imagined for the virtuous dead; their failure lay

in not imagining better . . . The *allegory* is clear: it is the weakness of Humanism to fall short in the imagination of ecstasy; at its best it is noble, reasonable, and cold, and however optimistic about a balanced happiness in this world, pessimistic about a rapturous eternity.”¹⁸

Erich Auerbach, describing all those who are confined to Limbo and deeper hell, writes, “They have forfeited the vision of God participated in to various degrees by all beings on earth, in Purgatory, and in Paradise; and with it they have lost all hope; they know the past and the future in the passing of time on earth and hence the hopeless futility of their personal existence, which they have retained without the prospect of its finally flowing into the divine community.”¹⁹

After every explanation and interpretation is advanced, Dante’s decision to imprison in hell an assortment of human beings who never had the opportunity to embrace the Christian faith, and whose only “sin” is to rely on the solvency of reason, remains unsettling. But poetic license has its limits. The Augustinian sacrament of baptism is firm and fixed. Without incurring the charge of heresy, Dante has no other choice in determining what to do about virtuous souls who are lost based on when they were born or because they embraced a religion different from the only true faith.²⁰

In the most famous and touching episode of the entire *Comedy*, Paolo and Francesca are, despite a reader’s sympathies, severely punished for their adulterous affair (*Inferno*, canto V). The message is transparent: compassion for this couple does not make them less sinful. In his moving description of illicit love, Dante is to his religion what strict-constructionist judges are to the Constitution. The seventh commandment brooks no exceptions. This appealing pair is guilty of infidelity, and because of a moral lapse, they are in hell, eternally tormented together in darkness and “combating and contrary blasts of wind.”

Even more serious punishments await everyone who relies on reason to the detriment of faith. Etienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, anticipated a problem when he initiated and oversaw the drafting of the Condemnation of 1277. He and his council feared the threat that pagan understanding and free thinking posed to the articles of Catholic orthodoxy.²¹ And Dante’s defiant heretics, locked forever in the burning tombs of the *Inferno* (canto X) suffer far greater torments than the punishments of the pagans or of Paolo and Francesca. These secularists doubted God’s existence and denied the immortality of the soul. They wrongly believed that the solvency of unaided reason, properly heeded,

enabled them to escape perturbations of the mind. Dante asks Virgil about these freethinkers:

He answered, "bearing the bodies that they had,
All shall be closed. Here Epicurus lies
With all his followers, who call the soul dead
When the flesh dies."²²

This expression of Epicureanism was no inconsequential anomaly in fourteenth-century Florence.²³ But what does its prevalence tell us about Dante's approach to reason and to faith? And what does this tell us about prospects for attaining happiness?

That there was both excitement and concern over twelfth- and thirteenth-century Latin translations of ancient Greek philosophy is familiar to every historian of medieval philosophy.²⁴ Aquinas could synthesize pagan reason and Christian faith, but others, perhaps influenced by Aristotle's naturalism or by Epicurus's letters and *testimonia*, went beyond the reconciliation between what Aristotle knew and what Christians believed. They, like Dante's heretics, defended classical wisdom and rejected out of hand the articles of faith. So, at least in Dante's account, Florentine followers of the Epicureans believed that the highest good, which for them was the moderate enjoyment of pleasures and freedom from pain, is available to rationally restrained human beings. No consistent Epicurean, whether pagan or medieval, could accept the notion that happiness derives from an indescribable relation to God.²⁵ For them, either there is no God or the gods have no interest in the happiness or suffering of human beings.

A too-zealous rationalist might unsettle the delicate balance between reason and faith, which was attained by the great "synthesis" in Aquinas's *Summae*. Although Aquinas believes that a person is obligated to reason well, he never hints that the richness of pagan learning can overrule the revealed doctrines and promises of Christianity. What is true of Aquinas is also true of Dante. But others, including some of Dante's friends, allowed their intoxication with pagan knowledge to destroy their faith (*Inferno*, canto X, 63).

What more does one say about the relation between reason and faith in Dante? Precision in this matter is hard to come by, and the overall architecture of the *Comedy* is only modestly helpful. Must one assume, for example, that to employ one's reason excellently is a necessary condition for salvation? If the answer for Dante is yes, we have to wonder

what becomes of someone such as Erasmus's untutored, unreflective "fool for Christ," who, perhaps because of his pious ignorance, leads a virtuous and relatively spotless life.²⁶

But we can make too much of the "fool for Christ," at least in reading and trying to interpret the *Comedy*. What about the summons to Virgil, a summons that is indispensable to the trajectory of the *Comedy*? Diminishing the role of reasoning in Dante satisfies misologists and other critics of reason, but that price is too high. No one can doubt the potency of reason throughout more than half of the *Comedy*, and anyone who wishes to diminish the appreciation of the place of pagan learning badly misinterprets the epic.

In trying to get at the sources for Dante's sometimes puzzling fusion of reason, faith, and grace, Allen Mandelbaum's appendix to his translation of the *Inferno* is worth considering. Reminding us that Dante knew about the assorted intellectual developments in Paris, the center for philosophical study in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mandelbaum writes that he may "have been tempted by Aristotelian currents that saw human reason—independent of faith and grace—as having sufficient force to find God; or even by more radical Aristotelian tendencies, which saw human reason as a self-sufficient means of attaining happiness—in essence, a declaration of philosophy's complete independence from theology."²⁷ But Dante does not give in to that temptation, and faith trumps instrumental reasoning in acquiring the happiness that he seeks.

IV

Mandelbaum's remarks are suggestive, but they are also speculative and should be tempered by keeping in mind a very different conception of knowledge, namely the knowledge or illumination that comes only through divine intercession and election. This special knowledge, as we learn from Aquinas, is what makes possible the eternal happiness and peace which, as St. Paul puts it, "passes all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). Charles Williams writes about Dante's knowledge at this level and about its appearance in the *Comedy*: "Indeed the entire work of Dante, so inter-relevant as it is, is a description of the *great act of knowledge*, in which Dante himself is the Knower, and God is the Known, and Beatrice is the Knowing . . . Her eyes are his knowing . . ." ²⁸

If Dante was ever tempted by purely secular conduits to happiness, he clearly overcame his temptation as a character in the *Comedy*. This much is clear in the *Purgatorio*, canto III, 37–45, where we find an

unambiguous statement of his concern for those who invest too generously in the promise of human reason as a source for happiness. In a powerful rebuke, Virgil tells Dante to forbear trying to *understand* the mysteries that grace alone can equip him to grasp:²⁹

Be satisfied with the *quia* of cause unknown,
 O humankind! for could you have seen All,
 Mary need not have suffered to bear a son.
 You saw how some yearn endlessly in vain:
 such as would, else, have surely had their wish,
 but have, instead, its hunger as their pain.
 “I speak of Aristotle and Plato,” he said.
 “—O them and many more.” And here he paused,
 and sorrowing and silent, bowed his head.

And in the *Purgatorio*, canto VI, 28–48, Dante wonders how human prayers, intended to speed souls through Purgatory, can possibly affect God’s eternally fixed decrees. Virgil’s answer harkens back to Boethius on the difference between human knowledge at its most formidable and divine knowledge that is entirely different in kind from knowledge that the wisest human beings possess.³⁰ Still, it is Beatrice, not Virgil, who addresses Dante’s bewilderment:

But save all questions of such consequence
 till you meet her who will become your lamp
 between truth and mere intelligence.
 Do you understand me? I mean Beatrice.
 She will appear above here, at the summit
 of this same mountain smiling in her bliss.

Leo Spitzer says of Beatrice: “she is not an angel, but the blessed soul of a human being that, just as it influenced Dante’s life on earth, is called to perform for Dante in the course of his pilgrimage services of which she alone is capable.”³¹

If any uncertainty about the relation between reason and faith remains, what Dante says in the *Purgatorio*, cantos XVI and XVIII, helps to eliminate it. Dante and the character Marco Lombardo, about whom we know virtually nothing, review the nagging problem of free will and determinism. Dante, like many other thinkers before and after him, asks how we can be free and responsible if, as he maintains, we are determined environmentally (by the stars and planets) to act and to choose as we do.

Again, this problem is related to Boethius's attempt in the *Consolation of Philosophy* to reconcile God's foreknowledge and human free will. Dante and Lombardo's discussion does not lead to a solution. Their problem is not solved; it is postponed. In fact, Dante's failed attempt to deal with the problem is not too different from John Locke's waffling effort to deal with freedom and determinism in the fourth edition of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, (book 2, chapter 21).³² So major philosophers, no less than a gifted poet, are sometimes better at generating puzzles than at solving them.

Not until Dante reaches Paradise and is led by Beatrice through the various heavens can he *see*, not grasp through reasoning, how free will and determinism are compatible. In advance of that ineffable stage in his journey, he approaches the summit of Mount Purgatory, where he is poised, but still unable, to move beyond human reason and knowledge. When Dante is transformed and enters the Empyrean, he will *know* what no earthbound mortal can know. He will grasp immediately how free choice, human responsibility, and determinism are compatible.

But by far the most celebrated evidence that human reason, absent faith and grace, cannot end Dante's search for happiness is in the *Purgatorio*, cantos XXVII–XXX, which first anticipate and then describe Virgil's disappearance. In these cantos, no question remains that Dante can be happy only through supernatural intervention. Dante recognizes what is essential to happiness only when he transcends the limitations of finite reasoning. In this respect Dante and the Renaissance humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola agree. Because human beings, unlike animals, seek felicity that is beyond their nature, "*the human condition, unless it boasts of some other privilege [eternal felicity], seems the least happy of all.*"³³

Virgil has done all that he can do and all that he was called upon to do. He must depart. The relevant lines are worth quoting for their orthodoxy and for their sensitivity. Dante announces:

The instant I was smitten by the force,
 which had already once transfixed my soul
 before my boyhood years had run their course,
 I turned left with the same assured belief
 that makes a child run to its mother's arms
 when it is frightened or has come to grief,
 to say to Virgil: "There is not within me
 one drop of blood unstirred. I recognize
 the tokens of the ancient flame." But he,

he had taken his light from us. He had gone,
 Virgil had gone . . .
 “Dante, do not weep yet, though Virgil goes.
 Do not weep yet, for soon another wound
 shall make you weep far hotter tears than those!”
 (*Purgatorio*, canto XXX, 40–57)

These rhymed triplets are a poetic device for separating the ties of reason and faith.

V

The “argument,” which is not strictly an argument, of the *Paradiso* (prefigured in the Earthly Paradise of the *Purgatorio*, canto XXXI) is familiar to Catholics who know the rudiments of their faith: human beings secure the happiness that they desire only in heaven and only by having confessed and renounced their sins. Authentic happiness is available to those purged sinners who ascend to the realm of inexpressible wisdom that human reason can neither conceive nor obtain.³⁴

We are now in position to ask where Dante and Aquinas agree and differ. Like Aquinas, Dante espouses a contemplative ideal of happiness, namely, full enjoyment of that noetic vision to which the pilgrim moves steadily with the assistance of Beatrice, the Virgin Mary, and St. Bernard. Santayana says, “*It is the ineffable vision of God, the beatific vision, that alone can make us happy* and be the reason and the end of our loves and our pilgrimages.”³⁵ Briefly and miraculously, Dante sees God just as the permanent residents of heaven see him. This revelation is what we find in *Paradiso* (canto XXXI, 109–11, and canto XXXII, 1–3). The conspicuous difference between Dante and Aquinas is that Dante experiences a temporary, mystical vision of God before his eventual earthly death. No such possibility exists for Aquinas, who quotes Exodus 33:20 and I Corinthians 13:12 for clinching evidence that no living man or woman can be completely happy because no one can know God in this life.³⁶

On the other hand, Dante’s inexpressible vision takes him from the Starry Heaven and the *Primum Mobile* to the brilliant light of the Empyrean. In order to reach these lofty heights, Dante is transformed, albeit tentatively, so that he can do what Aquinas could not do, namely, enjoy the indescribable bliss that for Aquinas no merely human being—no matter how wise, reflective, and religious—can conceivably enjoy:

Light of the intellect, which is love unending;
 love of the true good, which is wholly bliss;
 bliss beyond bliss, all other joys transcending . . .
 The Love that keeps this Heaven ever the same
 greets all who enter with such salutation,
 and thus prepares the candle for His flame.
 No sooner had these few words penetrated
 my hearing than I felt my powers increase
 beyond themselves; transcended and elated,
 My eyes were lit with such new-given sight
 that they were fit to look without distress
 on any radiance, however bright.
 (*Paradiso*, canto XXX, 40–2, 52–60)

Dante's vision in the *Paradiso* is anticipated as a literary device in his *La Vita Nuova*, in which he describes his first glimpse of Beatrice as a nine-year-old: "*Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi.*" ("Here is a god stronger than me, who comes to dominate me.") Now, in heaven, the commanding figure of Beatrice, no longer the child of Dante's love-struck fancies, directs Dante to a vision of the one true God.

For Dante, as for Aquinas, unless a human being is transformed, that is, to be made supernatural, he or she cannot eternally contemplate God and thereby arrive at the goal of true happiness. This story line is at the center of the *Paradiso* (canto XXXI), and it is almost too obvious to state. After all, Dante's epic journey is a rendering of the manner in which he, a newly reformed sinner, is briefly made more than a man and is thereby adapted to enjoy happiness and the elimination of all desire.

Dante is temporarily transformed or transmuted in order that he may see God while he is still among the quick. He is made divine, but only for an instant, so that he can behold the divine essence. He recalls that he was made unspeakably happy and knows, having passed through Purgatory to Paradise, that he will be happy again and that his happiness will be unending. This happiness will endure throughout eternity, because his next journey to heaven will be his last and will be much more than a visit. But like any good mystic, Dante cannot find words to describe what he experienced and enjoyed in his vision:

Like a geometer wholly dedicated
 to squaring the circle, but who cannot find,
 think as he may, the principle indicated—
 so did I study the supernal face.

I yearned to know just how our image merges
 into that circle, and how it there finds place;
 but mine were not the wings for such a flight.
 Yet, as I wished, the truth I wished for came
 cleaving my mind in a great flash of light.³⁷

(*Paradiso*, canto XXXIII, 133–46)

If happiness for Dante were possible at the level that satisfies Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (as discharging one's capacity to reason excellently), the *Paradiso* would be supernumerary, speculative baggage in the *Comedy*. That the *Paradiso* is far from ornamental and that it is the culmination of the epic does not discount the value of merely human reason and knowledge in the poem or in the life of a Christian. To believe otherwise is, once more, to diminish Virgil's role and the summons that brings him to Dante's rescue. One can securely claim that without valuing reason, Dante could not have crafted the epic in the way that he did. Virgil would have had no role and rational self-discovery would not have developed in the bowels of the *Inferno*.

VI

The overriding point should be clear: human knowledge can chart a course and enlarge the soul, but it will not take us to our destination, which is the happiness that only transmuted beings can possess. As Christian Moevs puts it, "the *Comedy* ultimately falls under moral or ethical philosophy, because its ultimate aim, even when it treats speculative matters, is not speculation, but action (namely, *to lead human beings to happiness*)."³⁸

Dante does not have to argue for the doctrines that shape the *Comedy*. Scientists and mathematicians, not poets, try to validate or to demonstrate what they affirm. He declares in ninety-nine cantos that happiness comes only to those who renounce their sins and who (raised by God through transformative grace) slough off their human natures. Stripped to its marrow, the greatest of all Christian poems affirms that the unsanctified rationalist cannot be happy, even if she thinks that she is happy or that in time she will become happy. Dante realizes that the best of classical thought falls short of its promise.

The consequence is clear: a human being qua human has as little chance to be authentically happy in Dante's *Comedy* as he does in Aquinas's *Summae*. So unless one understands "happiness" exclusively

as pre- and non-Christians understand something like Aristotelian contemplation (*theōria*), the conclusion that applies to Dante's *Comedy* is the same conclusion that Aquinas—perhaps unknowingly—reaches: the phrase “a completely happy *human*” denotes nothing. The set of such beings is empty. Beings who are saved and who sit eternally at the right hand of God are not human at all. They are deified beings who were for a brief time human.

Once more, the steps leading to this conclusion are not surprising: fallen men and women, insofar as they are sinners, have no justifiable claim to happiness. The wages of their sins are not only death but unhappiness here and now. The poet is patently morose until his namesake reaches Paradise. Like others who see life as a “vale of tears,” he does not say that human beings are, even in an inferior degree, happy in this life. In whatever direction or to whatever location Dante turns his literary talents, he finds malefactors who prey upon their victims. Lustful, gluttonous, profligate, concupiscent humans are at base miserable whether they live in Florence, Rome, Pisa, or Padua. Even those who are accepted into purgatory suffer under the great weight of one or more of the seven deadly sins. In the final analysis, happiness simply does not fit into Dante's world—that is, into the world below his tiered heaven.

The present unhappiness of sinners is nothing compared to the torments that await them in hell, and even redeemed sinners must undergo onerous rituals of purgation that painfully, almost unbearably, postpone their eventual passage to heaven. Only through God's irresistible, freely transmitted influence are human beings transformed or regenerated. Without this miraculous gift, the taint and stain of their too-human nature is never cleansed. Good works and a moral character are the primary effects of grace, but they are not its cause.

This transformation is essential, not accidental, to the only kind of happiness that Dante envisions. After joining him in the company of Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard, and after being allowed to witness his joyful encounter with the Virgin Mary, the reader sees that Dante is finally prepared to let down his guard and characterize unending happiness. Purged sinners, who enjoy unmediated knowledge of God, are transcendently happy, but their happiness is incommensurate with their former humanity. Again, we can, if we wish, call them “men” and “women,” but as participants in the beatific vision they are not human. If redeemed sinners are transformed into beings outfitted to see God, how can they be human? If there is no good answer, and there is no

answer in anywhere in the *Comedy*, then for this great poet the conclusion stands: happiness and humanness are mutually exclusive.

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I am grateful to Katharine Jane Schweitzer, whose comments, scholarship, and enthusiasm drew me back to the republic of letters and to completing this essay.

1. Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (1901, repr., New York: Bantam Books, 1958), p. 95.
2. George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1910).
3. See "Rooting for the Damned," in *The Poet's Dante*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 377–78.
4. See Plato, *Apology*, 28e, *Republic*, 353d–54a; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a, 15–1098b, 10.
5. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, book 3, trans. and intro. Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Group, 2001).
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, in *Introduction to St. Thoams Aquinas*, ed. and intro. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday, 1945), chaps. 47–52.
7. See the selections from St. Augustine's *The Advantage of Believing*, in *Classical Statements on Faith and Reason*, ed. E. L. Miller (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 31, 34.
8. For Virgil as the personification of human reason and for his role in the *Comedy*, see Dorothy L. Sayers's introduction and commentary to her translation of the *Divine Comedy: Hell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 67, 82.
9. See John Ciardi's "How to Read Dante," appended to his translation of Dante's *Purgatorio* (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 339; hereafter abbreviated "How to Read Dante." I use Ciardi's translation of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* (New York: New American Library, 1957, 1961).
10. See William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Vintage, 1990), pp. 82–83.
11. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 158.
12. For a penetrating account and analysis of Virgilian rationalism, see P. Christopher Smith, "Virgil's *Destruktion* of the Stoic Rational Agent: Rehearing *Aeneid* IV after Nietzsche and Heidegger," *Epoché* 11 (Spring 2007): 449–62.
13. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), pp. 77–79.
14. See Miller, *Classical Statements on Faith and Reason*, pp. 38–69.

15. For a discussion of the nature of the Empyrean in Dante and his predecessors, the realm in which the pilgrim Dante beholds “divine being, pure intellectual light, the divine mind, love, joy and sweetness (*luce intellettuale, la mente divina, amore, letizia, dolore*),” see Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 15–35.
16. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. and intro. Roger Sharrock (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 140.
17. *The “Inferno” of Dante*, trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 91, canto IX, 76–81. Subsequent passages from the *Inferno* are from this edition.
18. Sayers, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, pp. 95–96.
19. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 168.
20. See Denise L. and John T. Carmody, *Roman Catholicism: An Introduction* (New York, Macmillan, 1990), pp. 180–83.
21. *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 540–49.
22. Pinsky, *The “Inferno” of Dante*, p. 97, canto X, 10–13.
23. For some brief remarks on Florentine Epicureanism, see Allen Mandelbaum, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: “Inferno”* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) and his notes on canto X, p. 360. Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, father of Dante’s good friend Guido Cavalcanti, is also a tormented Epicurean who pays the ultimate price for his free thinking.
24. For a review of the revival in the Middle Ages of Greek and Roman learning, see C. S. Haskins’s instructive and searching study, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957), chaps. 4, 9, and 11.
25. See *The Epicurus Reader*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 4–31.
26. Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* and far less playful *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* (1501) were intended to address and defy the scholastic rationalism that he construed as a threat to simple Christian faith.
27. Mandelbaum, *The Divine Comedy*, “Dante and His Age,” p. 321. Emphasis added. Recall what Lady Philosophy, unassisted by faith, does for Boethius when his abjection could not have been more pervasive.
28. Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice* (1961, repr., Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2005), p. 231. Emphasis added.
29. See, in this context, St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), pp. 74–75.
30. *Consolation of Philosophy*, book V, prose 5-6.
31. Bloom quotes this passage from Spitzer’s *Representative Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), in *The Western Canon*, p. 97.

32. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1700), ed. and intro. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 233–87.
33. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, “Of the Felicity which is eternal Life” (1489), trans. Douglas Carmichael, in *On the Dignity of Man: On Being and the One: Heptaplus* (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965) p. 150. Emphasis added.
34. See Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, pp. 122–23.
35. Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, p. 92. Emphasis added.
36. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, chaps. 47 and 52.
37. For a discussion of Dante’s symbolism and picture of the beatific vision, see Russell, *A History of Heaven*, pp. 18–25.
38. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy,”* p. 86. Emphasis added.