

DANTE'S DEADLY SINS

MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN HELL

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CONTENTS

About the Author	x
Preface	xii
The Rationale	xii
The Origin	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	1
The Historical Context	1
The Life of Dante	3
Later Writings	8
The <i>Commedia</i>	12
Dante's Death	14
Aims of this Book	15
Dante as Moral Philosopher	17
1 <i>Inferno</i>	19
Dante's Mission	19
The Journey Begins	20
Vestibule (Ante-Hell): The Indecisive Neutrals	21
Upper Hell: Sins of Unrestrained Desire (the Wolf)	23
River Styx, Walls of the City of Dis	28
Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Violence (the Lion)	30
Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Fraud (the Leopard)	34
Dante's Existential Lessons in Hell	46
2 <i>Purgatorio</i>	48
Purgatory in a Nutshell	48
The Journey Continues	50

	Ante-Purgatory: Late Repentants	50
	Gate of Purgatory	56
	The First Three Terraces: Misdirected Love	57
	The Fourth Terrace: Deficient Love of the Good	62
	The Final Three Terraces: Excessive Love of Secondary Goods	64
	Dante's Existential Lessons in Purgatory	71
3	The Notion of Desert and the Law of <i>Contrapasso</i>	73
	The Notion of Desert	73
	The <i>Contrapasso</i>	81
	The Problem of Proportionality	87
	First Case Study: Francesca	90
	Second Case Study: Brutus and Cassius	92
	Third Case Study: Epicurus	99
	Dante's Moral Conception	102
4	Paradoxes and Puzzles: Virgil and Cato	104
	The Paradox of Virgil	105
	Summary of the Paradox of Virgil	111
	The Strange Case of Cato	116
	"The Perfect Stoic"	117
	Dante's Decision	120
	Dante and Conflict	123
5	The Seven Deadly Sins	124
	Historical Background	124
	<i>Superbia</i> (Pride)	127
	<i>Invidia</i> (Envy)	129
	<i>Ira</i> (Wrath)	133
	<i>Acedia</i> (Sloth)	137
	<i>Avaritia</i> (Avarice)	138
	<i>Gula</i> (Gluttony)	139
	<i>Luxuria</i> (Lust)	140
	The Antidote: Righteous Love	142
	The Bridge to Salvation	148
6	Dante's Existential Moral Lessons	149
	Dante and Existentialism	149
	Jean-Paul Sartre and Hell	150

Contents

ix

Dante's Ten Existential Lessons	157
Individualism and Community	176
Personal Strategies	179
Bibliography	185
Index	193

INTRODUCTION

The Historical Context

Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 in Florence. His mother died when Dante was a child. His father remarried and died when Dante was about 18 years old. The Alighieri family was noble in terms of titles, lineage, and tradition. For example, Dante's great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguیدا, was knighted by Emperor Conrad III. However, by the time of Dante's arrival, the family's fortunes had regressed.

The Alighieri family was politically identified with the *guelfo* (Guelf party), who were composed of artisans and lesser nobility, and aligned with the papacy. Their major opponents were the *ghibellino* (Ghibelline party), composed of feudal aristocrats aligned with the Holy Roman emperor. As time and events proceeded, these compositions and alignments were less distinguishable. Local loyalties, rivalries, and private maneuvering loomed larger than party platforms and traditional ideologies.

In 1244 the Florentine Ghibellines invited the leaders of the seven major guilds to join the city councils. (Guilds were voluntary, self-defining institutions authorized to receive dues from members, establish and monitor professional and business activities, supervise contracts members entered into with outside agencies, and discipline members for violations of professional ethics.) This overture was innovative in that the rival parties had previously been composed only of nobles and aristocrats. The pilot program was soon abandoned, but the seeds of popular political involvement had been sown.

In 1250, taking advantage of the ongoing aristocratic feuds, the *popolo* (common people) seized control of Florence at the battle of Figline. A new General Council was established that permitted the *popolo* to exclude Guelfs and Ghibellines alike from the most important political offices. The rule *prima popolo* (“the common folk before all else”) survived for a decade. However, in 1260, the Sienese and Florentine Ghibellines, led by Farinata degli Uberti and aided by forces supplied by King Manfred of Sicily, soundly defeated the Florentine Guelfs and their allies at Montaperti. (Dante recalls this disaster in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*.) Striving for neutrality, the *popolo* sought a peaceful resolution. Two years earlier the Ghibellines had tried to seize power from the *popolo*. That plot, combined with the humiliating loss to the Sienese Ghibellines – “The deceitful, despicable, vainglorious Sienese, for goodness sake!” – served to harden the resolve of the *popolo* and to drive it toward the Guelfs.

In February 1266, the popular guilds and the Guelfs rose up against the Ghibellines. In central and southern Italy the Ghibelline power was crushed by the victory of Charles of Anjou, brother of King Louis IX of France, over the forces of King Manfred of Sicily. The decisive battle of Benevento ended with the death of Manfred. His body was entombed on the battlefield under a huge pile of stones. Later the pope unearthed Manfred’s remains and cast them out of papal territory. (Dante recounts these events in the third canto of the *Purgatorio*.) Among numerous other titles, Charles assumed the post of *podestà* (chief magistrate) of Florence for twelve years. During his reign, Charles politically marginalized the *popolo*.

Accordingly, in 1266, the Guelfs took control of Florence and ushered in almost thirty years of relative peace (punctuated by occasional drama) and of economic prosperity spurred by thriving banking and manufacturing industries. Despite the aftermath of Benevento, the Ghibellines remained formidable and were especially prominent in Siena and Pisa, traditional rivals of Florence. In 1280, annoyed by the French power brokers, Pope Nicholas III sent his nephew, Cardinal Malabranca, to Florence. (In the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*, Dante condemns Nicholas with the other simonists to the eighth circle of Hell.) The next year, 50 Guelfs and 50 Ghibellines publicly joined hands and pledged to maintain the peace and to deepen it: pleasant theatre but ineffective politics. Groups of Guelfs and Ghibellines still managed to continue plots, schemes, and minor revolts.

In 1282 the famous Sicilian Vespers – in which Sicilians expelled the French forces of Charles from the island – emboldened Florentine Ghibellines to curry the support of the lower guilds, as the Guelfs courted

the seven major guilds. The result of this maneuvering favored the *popolo*, because government was controlled by the guilds, which elected from among their ranks six priors who ruled for two-month terms. Along with the General Council and the *podestà*, these officials ruled the city. However, the *magnati* (nobles) soon insinuated themselves into dominating positions within the guilds and oversaw the election of priors.

The Life of Dante

Meanwhile Dante enjoyed a pleasant family life and an apparently solid education. He probably studied in Franciscan elementary schools and in that order's schools of philosophy. Dante also probably studied with the renowned scholar and statesman Brunetto Latini, who energized Dante's thirst for knowledge. (The pilgrim meets Brunetto in the fifteenth canto of the *Inferno*, where the great writer is consigned with the other sodomites to the seventh circle of Hell.) Dante attributed to Brunetto several crucial dimensions of his education: that riches and lineage are poor substitutes for individual achievement and virtuous living; that effective rhetoric, robust ethical thinking, and progressive government are connected; that teaching and learning have critical practical effects; and that human beings are finite, but can attain a measure of earthly immortality through spiritual nobility and the creation of enduring works. The notion that the most distinguished human beings would earn enduring glory through the ongoing celebration of their achievements and good deeds on earth was deeply influential in ancient Rome. The Romans were convinced that, whether one was a senator and philosopher, like Cicero, or a militarist and powerful statesman, like Julius Caesar, grand achievement on behalf of the community earned one a glorious legacy, which defined earthly immortality. Brunetto learned this from assiduously studying the writings of Cicero; and he passed on the lessons to Dante. Dante would come to view the wisdom of the leader of a healthy, universal commonwealth as the greatest guide to attaining earthly happiness, in analogy to how the word of God is the supreme guide to attaining eternal bliss in Paradise.

In 1287 Dante traveled to the prestigious University of Bologna, to study rhetoric and the techniques of style. Dante was drawn to poetry, art, learning, and the nature of love. His friendship with Guido Cavalcanti, an aristocratic poet, animated his early verse writing. The two focused on images of inner human perfection and the nature of love. When he was

about eighteen Dante married Gemma di Manetto Donati. The pairing had been arranged by Dante's father at least six years earlier. The couple spawned two sons and a daughter (and, possibly, a fourth child).

A greater influence on Dante's life and work was his connection to Beatrice ("Bice") Portinari. She was a Florentine woman of remarkable beauty and goodness. Dante first met her when he was 9, and he was immediately *colpito dal fulmine* ("struck by lightning"). She remained the love of his life, at least in his fantasies. They met again later; they often greeted each other in the street, but apparently had no serious personal contact. Their shadow relationship was an example of quaint, courtly love. As years passed, Dante placed Beatrice on higher and higher pedestals, fantasizing her as the ideal of human perfection in virtue, beauty, and grace. Indeed the youthful Dante took Beatrice to be God's gift to humanity. Dante's idealization of Beatrice brightly supports the proposition that the most powerful erogenous zone is the human brain.

To fulfill his military service, at the age of 24, Dante enlisted in the cavalry. In 1289 he took part in the battle of Campaldino, where Florence and its Guelf allies defeated the forces of the town of Arezzo. The victory gave rise to reformation of the Florentine constitution. Later that year, Dante participated in the successful siege of the Pisan fortress of Caprona. (Both events are chronicled in Dante's *Commedia*: the pilgrim meets Buonconte da Montefeltro, who bravely died at Campaldino, in the fifth canto of the *Purgatorio*; in the twenty-first canto of the *Inferno* he recalls the surrender of the fortress of Caprona.)

In 1290 Beatrice died. This event only deepened Dante's idealized love for her. He followed his mourning by compiling numerous poems – some written in her honor, all inspired by her – added commentaries, and called the collection *Vita nuova* (*New Life*). Dante both recounts and reflects upon his experiences in this celebrated work. The relationship between love and reason is a recurring theme. Dante recalls how he became the servant of love when, as a 9-year-old, he saw 8-year-old Beatrice dressed in red. A servant of love? From the perspective of a jaded contemporary adult, with due deference to Beatrice's youthful comeliness and the intoxicating power of scarlet, to think that a 9-year-old boy could have had even an inkling of the nature of romantic love is beyond preposterousness. But Dante was apparently a child of rare sensitivity and unparalleled imagination.

Upon seeing Beatrice again nine years later, his passion deepened. This second encounter is followed by a dream in which the god of love announces his power over Dante. (Shades of Francesca in *Inferno*, canto

five!) Throughout the *Vita nuova*, the celebration of Beatrice as a gift of the divine is pervasive. In the final chapter Dante confesses his own inadequacy in dealing with these topics: the sentimentality of Dante the lover contrasts with the unfathomable perfection of Beatrice the beloved. The beloved inspires the author to attend to his own spiritual transformation. Philosophy offers great consolation, but cannot replace the author's love of Beatrice: The glories of this world cannot supplant a divine gift (especially when the distorting lens of retrospective falsification is in play).

The death of Beatrice led Dante to immerse himself in philosophy in order to deepen his understanding of the nature of human beings, of their prospects for perfection, and of the connection between love and spiritual redemption. He intellectually devoured the works of Boethius, Cicero, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and numerous Christian theologians.

Among the ancient poets, those highlighted in the fourth canto of the *Inferno* – Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan – were great influences upon Dante. However, Virgil, the master of the *Aeneid*, stands above all others. Dante was enamored of the age of Augustus, and Virgil represented the pinnacle of human reason, expressed aesthetically through poetry.

In 1293 the effects of the wars against Arezzo and Pisa beleaguered Florence. Officials had mismanaged the city's finances and political corruption had become embarrassing, even by Florence's low bar of governmental propriety. A prosperous merchant with noble lineage and deep sympathies for the *popolo* emerged. Giano della Bella promised reform and, unlike the vast majority of those espousing such platforms, he delivered. Through the political process, Giano shepherded ordinances that (a) excluded from the priorate all those who did not exercise a trade or a profession within a guild; and (b) established a new post, charged with controlling the behavior of the *magnati*.

As is well known, zealous reform can turn easily to wholesale political oppression. Soon any member of the *magnati* who had killed a member of the *popolo* was automatically sentenced to death, forfeited all property claims, and had his home razed. Leeway for mercy and consideration of extenuating circumstances were dismissed. Later Giano successfully urged another series of provisions, which stripped the *magnati* of important political rights. He concocted a list of 150 families, whose members he dubbed *magnati*. As such, these unfortunate clansmen were excluded from holding prominent political offices. Moreover, each designated member of the *magnati* was forced to swear an oath of obedience and to offer security, in the form of 2,000, lire that he would maintain the peace. Of course, we

are not born into the world with “member of the *magnati*” or “*popolo*” etched in our chests. Giano affixed the labels to families and individuals on the basis of their socio-economic station, their relationship to his own political designs, and their perceived usefulness to Florence. Speaking practically, not all nobles could be so easily manipulated (for example Giano did not disturb the Medici family, who were *über-magnati*).

Newton taught us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So, too, with the good intentions and deranged avidity of Giano della Bella. Led by Giano’s growing cast of enemies, a political backlash arose: Giano was forced into exile under the wrongful accusation that he had violated his own ordinances and had supported one of the *magnati*, Corso Donati (whom Dante consigns to the terrace of gluttony in the twenty-fourth canto of *Purgatorio*); amendments that softened or invalidated Giano’s ordinances were enacted; and the *magnati* were allowed to regain all political rights by merely enrolling in a guild (as opposed to actually practicing a craft or profession).

In the mid-1290s Dante entered public service. He first became a member of the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries. In the wise old days of the thirteenth century, the study of medicine required a solid grounding in philosophy. Dante’s choice of this guild was based on his conviction that true nobility flows from philosophical insight and moral understanding (“Until doctors are philosophers or philosophers are doctors...”). After securing the *bona fides* of guild affiliation, Dante became a member of the People’s Council of the Commune of Florence, served on the council for the election of city priors, and also served on the Council of the Hundred, which oversaw financial and paramount civic concerns.

But Florence was a center of political intrigue, treachery, and instability. Serenity, peace, and good will toward fellow creatures were unwelcome intrusions into the established traditions and collective character of Florentines. For the greater part of the thirteenth century the Guelfs and the Ghibellines had jockeyed for power. The temporary victors unleashed stern reprisals upon the vanquished. Constant conspiracies, political schemes, and unsteady alliances defined Florentine social life. The Guelfs were in control by 1266 and ruled relatively peacefully for three decades.

But never underestimate the thirteenth-century Florentine zest for political drama. By 1300 the Guelfs, beset by intramural feuding, split into two contentious sects: the *guelfi neri* (Black Guelfs) and the *guelfi bianchi* (White Guelfs). The traditionalist Blacks were led by prosperous bankers, whose influence spread over Europe. Most important among these were

the members of the Donati family. They were committed to Florentine imperialism, achieved through alliance with the papacy, as an avenue to their own – and by extension Florence’s – economic well-being. The Whites, who were more sympathetic to certain Ghibelline aspirations, were led by prosperous bankers, merchants, and traders. Most prominent among these were the members of the Cerchi family. They were committed to European peace and Florentine republican independence, as required to facilitate trade. In general, the *guelfo neri* were comprised of older families with aristocratic lineage, while the *guelfo bianchi* included families that had only recently acquired wealth and a privileged social position.

The Cerchi were wealthy but of undistinguished lineage. Their public displays of wealth were a microcosm of the zeal for material goods that infected Florence. The Donati (one of whom was Dante’s wife, Gemma) allied themselves with papal bankers. However, Dante, despite his aversion to the dispositions and mindset of the Cerchi family, would find himself in league with the *guelfo bianchi*.

Dante was fervently championing Florentine independence. He was constantly at odds with Pope Boniface VIII, who favored the Black Guelfs because he needed the continuing financial support of the bankers and aspired to place the entire region of Tuscany under the aegis of the church. Indeed, Boniface was steadfastly committed to advancing the interests of his family and the influence of the church. Characteristically, the crafty pope hoped to turn the political instability of Florence to his practical advantage. He pledged religious and political security to all who identified with and aided his imperial aspirations. In 1300 the pope’s intrigues were resisted on numerous occasions by six priors (magistrates) of Florence, including Dante. Boniface played his trump card: He excommunicated those who opposed his designs. Dante was given a pass only because his term of service would soon end. (Dante would depict Boniface as a major villain of his times and consign him, in the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*, to the eighth circle of Hell, as a simonist.)

In 1301 Pope Boniface ratcheted up the pressure. He called upon the military forces of Charles of Valois, brother of the king of France, to aid his scheme of controlling Sicily and to defeating his political opposition in Florence. As the army of Charles neared Florence, Dante was one of three envoys sent to outline the treacheries of the Black Guelfs and to plead with the pope to alter his policies. After preliminary discussions, two of the Florentine envoys were excused; only Dante was detained. Meanwhile Charles marched into Florence. The Black Guelfs took their cue to revolt

and gained control of the city. Shortly thereafter, the new power brokers fined Dante *in absentia* and sentenced him to two years of exile from Florence and permanent ineligibility to public office. The basis of that sentence was a series of fabricated charges. Dante was declared guilty of everything, from taking bribes to embezzlement and to disturbing the peace (and most crimes in between). Attributing his political demise to the connivance of the pope, Dante seethed with anger.

Keenly aware that the fix was in, Dante did not bother to answer the scandalous charges levied against him by his political enemies. Nor did he bother to remit his fine. In 1302 an additional sentence was imposed: if Dante returned to Florence, he would be burned alive at the stake. Dante did not immediately renounce hope. He plotted with other Florentine exiles, most of whom were White Guelfs, to return to their native city. But the conspiracy failed. To the best available historical knowledge, although Dante made sporadic attempts to regain favor, he would never again enter the beloved city of his birth.

Politically disenfranchised, Dante wandered about Italy, accepting temporary refuge that flowed from the tender mercies of numerous prominent families. At various times he graced, among other locales, Verona, the University of Bologna, Padua, Lunigiana, Casentino, and Ravenna. His political experiences honed his appreciation of community, both religious and political. Heresy destroyed the fabric of religious communities; while factionalism shattered political communities. (Dante highlights these themes in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*.)

Later Writings

Between 1304 and 1308 Dante began the *Convivio*, a treatise designed to celebrate his love for his second mistress, philosophy. This work extols learning and the proper use of reason as prerequisites for attaining virtue and God. In the *Convivio* Dante sketches four dimensions of writing: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. If a story or a poem is literally true, then it should be understood as an allegory of theology. If a story or poem is not literally true, then it should be understood as an allegory of poetry. The moral dimension is instructive; although not necessarily spelled out, events in a story or poem should be interpreted, much like biblical parables or Aesop's fables, as containing a message for living well. The anagogical dimension points to eternal, spiritual truths.

Although Dante originally conceived the *Convivio* as containing fourteen books, he completed only four. The first book holds out the vernacular as a suitable mode of expressing philosophical truths, not merely poetical ones. The second book explains the four dimensions of writing. The third book explores the meaning of love, while the fourth book extols philosophy as the pursuit of truth.

During this period, Dante underwent a political conversion. Prior to this time he had endorsed the Augustinian and mainstream Guelf doctrine that the Roman Empire was based only on might, not on moral right. At this point Dante reassessed that position. He embraced the Ghibelline orthodoxy that the Roman Empire was grounded in justice, and even willed by God. Whether his conviction that only universal peace, constructed by a single ruler, could ensure human flourishing generated Dante's political conversion to the imperialist doctrine is unclear. Causation may run in the opposite direction. Another factor contributing to Dante's imperialistic turn was his rediscovery of Virgil, whom he read as glorifying, in the *Aeneid*, the Roman Empire and its destiny of world domination. Dante first signals his embrace of imperialism in the fourth book of his *Convivio*. The message that divine providence facilitated the rule of the Roman Empire became a trademark in Dante's later works.

Dante also composed a Latin treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* – a scholarly analysis of the Italian vernacular. He concludes that only exalted subjects – such as love, virtue, and war – are worthy of such a glorious language. The date of composition is disputed. Some believed that Dante wrote this treatise in his old age; others date it around 1303 and 1304.

In 1310 Pope Clement V summoned Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg and his forces. Henry stormed into Italy with plans to reunite church and state and to establish order and stability. To put it mildly, his enterprise was controversial. By this time convinced that strong secular, imperial guidance was required in Italy, Dante welcomed the overture. However, most Florentines were opposed to the militaristic venture. Despite some early success, the invasion floundered because of the scope of the opposition and Pope Clement's weakness and vacillation. (Dante disparages Clement as a bobo of King Philip IV of France and relegates him to the eighth circle of Hell, with other simonists, in the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*.) In 1313 Henry died near Siena – and so did Dante's last best hope of returning to Florence honorably and triumphantly.

The date of another composition, *De monarchia*, is also unclear. While several arguments have been advanced, the most likely possibility is that

De monarchia was written around 1312, in honor of Henry VII's invasion of Italy. Dante argued that a secular monarchy is required for international welfare. Only a single *imperium* ("power"), with dominion over everyone, can ensure world peace. A universal community, grounded in a secure peace, is required to maximize human potential for perfection, happiness, and spiritual transformation. Dante celebrates the Roman imperial age, whose authority flowed directly from God and not from the imprimatur of a pope. The empire flourished prior to the existence of Christian religious institutions. God endows human beings with two natural goals: happiness on earth and eternal bliss in the afterlife. Philosophy, human understanding, and exercising the moral and intellectual virtues nurture earthly happiness; while theology and spiritual learning, along with exercising faith, hope, and love, foster our ultimate end.

In the *De monarchia*, Dante's ideal of a divinely endorsed, universal monarchy under a single emperor would stymie papal officious intermeddling in politics, which Dante considered the main obstacle to peace and human flourishing. Civil discord, animated by avarice for worldly goods and most strikingly illustrated in Florence, prevented citizens from realizing their highest ends. For Dante, the only way to eliminate such avarice was to imagine a universal monarch who had nothing left to covet. Moreover, such a ruler would serve as a court of final appeal in any disagreements in his realm. Accordingly, human flourishing requires universal peace, which can be realized only through a divinely inspired universal monarch based in Rome. Dante championed the unification of Italy as a distinct nation, but he would not stop there. Only the expansion of Italy – and the presumed loss of much of its distinctiveness – could augur the universal monarchy that constituted Dante's ideal.

In sum, Dante describes a human ideal – a unitary temporal order in which the emperor fulfills the role that the pope assumes in the church – as the universal earthly community ensuring mankind's ultimate goal. The perfection of human intellect, which is required for maximizing the good, can be attained only by the entire species, not by a single person. We then understand why Dante bristles so violently at human sins that jeopardize temporal and religious communities: such transgressions set back the entire human race. A universal human community under a single emperor is required for peace; world peace is required for the human species to attain its highest knowledge; and attaining the highest knowledge is required for earthly and eternal fulfillment. Extending principles set forth by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Averroes, Dante concludes that a single leader is required in a

political community. He is of the view that such a leader, and peace, existed only once in all human history: during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Moreover, the fact that Jesus Christ was born under the Roman Empire confirms the divine imprimatur of the latter.

Dante here implicitly confronts a paramount concern of political philosophers: the condition of scarcity. Some philosophers take this condition to be unavoidable and conjure an allegedly self-sufficient republic as the localized antidote. Machiavelli would agree that material scarcity is ineliminable, but he concluded that the world was thus an international, zero-sum battleground where military and political excellence was crucial for national flourishing. Marx would argue to the contrary – that, once communist relations of production were unleashed in an advanced technological nation, a condition of material abundance would emerge and economic scarcity would evaporate. Dante argues that the condition of material scarcity fosters greed, which sparks conflict. The world cannot eliminate scarcity as such, but by installing a benevolent emperor, who possesses all authority and material goods, we eliminate greed because he has nothing left to covet. The motivation for war withers away because the contestants for resources have been reduced to one. Lacking the incentive for greed, the emperor evinces only sentiments of charity and compassion. The result is universal peace. Yes, the emperor may be influenced, and more importantly, blessed by a worthy pope; but God vests the sovereign's authority directly.

Accordingly, human beings reach their final earthly end by learning and by adhering to philosophical teachings regarding the intellectual and moral virtues that thrive under conditions of universal peace and justice. We attain our final supernatural end by learning and adhering to spiritual teachings and by performing deeds that flow from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Strikingly, the separation of church from temporal authority assumes the separation of theology from philosophy. As Etienne Gilson remarks,

[Dante] understood, with a profundity of thought for which he must be commended, that one cannot entirely withdraw the temporal world from the jurisdiction of the spiritual world without entirely withdrawing philosophy from the jurisdiction of theology [...] if philosophic reason, by which the Emperor is guided, were to remain in the smallest degree subject to the authority of the theologians, the pope would through their agency recover the authority over the Emperor which it is desired [by Dante] to take from him. By the very fact that he controlled reason, he would control the will that is guided by reason.¹

The *Commedia*

With Henry's death, Dante's fantasy of a benevolent universal monarchy evaporated. Sadly, the church would seemingly control Italian politics thereafter. Dante composed his masterpiece, the *Commedia*, over several years. The first of the three volumes composing the *Commedia*, the *Inferno*, was completed in 1314. The third volume, *Paradiso*, was still being refined in the year of Dante's death, 1321. Widely regarded as one of the greatest literary works composed in the Italian language and one of the great books of world literature, the *Commedia* was dubbed "*Divina*" by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (*Short Treatise in Praise of Dante*).

Dante set forth his reasons for writing the *Commedia* in a letter to Cangrande della Scala, a noble Veronese patron of the poet. Dante called his work a "comedy" because, like tragedies, it begins in adversity, but, unlike tragedies, it ends happily. Dante the pilgrim starts out in Hell, rises through Purgatory, and ends in Paradise. Dante's purpose in writing was practical and redemptive: "to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness."²²

Roughly, the *Commedia* guides human beings to earthly happiness and eternal bliss. Although humanity has been led astray by the wrongful examples set by false spiritual leaders – Dante is unsparing in his criticisms of the popes of his day – redemption is possible once spiritual powers relinquish their aspirations for temporal authority.

The work consists of 100 canti, divided into three sections or volumes: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. The *Inferno* contains 34 canti, including an introductory canto, while the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* contain 33 canti each. The theme is the journey of Dante the pilgrim as he becomes educated in the nature of sin and in the potential for human perfectibility and ascends to a beatific vision. He is guided by the great poet Virgil in the first stages of his transformation, but requires divine grace – in the form of his beloved Beatrice – and loving contemplation – in the form of St. Bernard – to reach paradise. Spiritual transformation requires humility, education, right will, and divine grace. The pilgrim starts from ignorance and wrongful dispositions. He ends in knowledge and virtuous dispositions, while basking in divine grace and in the theological virtues.

Dante makes clear in his letter to Cangrande that the *Commedia* embodies several meanings:

the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical [...] And although these mystical meanings are called by various names [such as moral or anagogical], they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different from the literal or historical.³

The journey of Dante the pilgrim is the trek that every person seeking earthly happiness and eternal salvation must undertake. Along the way, the pilgrim participates in the sins of the reprobates he meets and identifies with their temptations and shortcomings. The pilgrim is aware that he is especially susceptible to the sins of pride and lust. Most important is the law of divine retribution, the *contrapasso*: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they willed through their choices and actions.

For Dante, the condition of the individual's soul at death determines his or her station in the afterlife. If we die reconciled to God – by repenting our transgressions – we will not be eternally damned. Of course, the earlier we repent and return to a righteous path, the less punishment we will suffer in the afterlife. But even late repentants are spared the horrors of Hell. In Hell sinners are consigned to sectors, together with those who committed similar moral transgressions. They have forfeited all hope and cannot escape their torment. In Purgatory sinners are sorted by the dispositions that triggered their sins, and their suffering defines their rehabilitation. They serve penance as a means to self-transformation. They are taught the virtuous dispositions that are the corrective to the wrongful inclinations they exhibited on earth. Accordingly, the punishments of Hell are strictly retributive, while the penances of Purgatory are both retributive and remedial.

A sub-theme in the *Commedia* is Dante's relentless scolding of the Florentines for their gratuitous violence, unending political bickering, social instability, veneration of material goods, and self-defeating resistance to the divinely decreed rule of the Roman emperor. In his view, the papacy encouraged these maladies by setting a feckless example, pursuing self-aggrandizing policies, coveting worldly goods, and thereby betraying the spiritual order. Dante underscores his convictions about the mutual independence of philosophy from theology, of the temporal from the spiritual order, and of the empire from the church. Whenever the stewards

of one of these realms exceed the boundaries of their domain, typically out of pride and avarice, they rebel against divine authority and jeopardize the well-being of the relevant community. Moreover, the gravest human transgression is betraying a rightful leader. Such treachery intrudes gravely on divine authority and severs the bond of human community. We must be steadfastly faithful to the powers and bonds established by divine authority. In the *Commedia*, among other things, Dante reveals his deepest convictions and firmest loyalties.

In his masterpiece Dante forsakes the selfishness of Florentine striving in order to celebrate the universalism of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Dante's vision of human redemption and perfection requires that he distance himself from Florence – taken as a metaphor for various human wrongful inclinations. For Dante, allegiance to the narrow concerns of party and family at the expense of the broader values embodied by city and country had led Florentines astray. Florentines had sacrificed the cherishing of the common good to a short-sighted pursuit of material interest. For Dante, the well-being of the entirety of humankind constituted the common good, and only a divinely ordained Roman emperor could legitimately reign over this universal community. Accordingly, in the *Commedia*, Dante aspires to derive meaning and value from the degradation he experienced during his exile from his native city.

Dante the author invokes both historical and mythological figures in the pilgrim's journey from Hell to Paradise. However, as Gilson points out, “[t]he historical reality of Dante's characters may influence their interpretation only in so far as it is essential to the representative function which Dante himself assigns to them and in view of which he has chosen them.”²⁴ Moreover, the mythological figures are useful because their fictional biographies are well known and remain accessible.

Dante's Death

In 1315 Ugucione della Faggiuola, the Pisan military officer controlling Florence after his victory in the battle of Montecatini, forced the city to grant amnesty to its people in exile, on condition that they pay a fine and publicly repent. Dante refused, preferring exile to a dishonorable return to his native soil. His death sentence was reaffirmed and extended to his sons.

In the summer of 1321, the lord of Ravenna dispatched Dante to the doge of Venice to arbitrate an ongoing feud. During his return to Ravenna Dante

contracted a fever, probably malaria, and died soon thereafter. He was entombed in the church of San Pier Maggiore. Over fifty years later, in 1373, Florence was stirred from its dogmatic slumbers and formally recognized Dante's greatness. The city commissioned the great Renaissance humanist Giovanni Boccaccio to give a series of lectures on Dante at the Santo Stefano church, and these resulted in Boccaccio's final major work – an explanation and analysis of Dante's *Commedia*. On numerous occasions thereafter, Florence requested that Ravenna return Dante's remains to his native city. Justice was served: Ravenna rejected all such overtures. Fearing treachery, the Franciscans hid Dante's remains in a wall, where they were rediscovered only in 1865.

Today tourists fawn as they parade past a memorial to Dante in the basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. Built in 1828, the tomb is empty. The inscription on the front of the tomb reads *Onorate l'altissimo poeta* ("Honor the loftiest poet") – a line from the fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, where the pilgrim greets Virgil. In 2008, after due deliberation of almost seven hundred years, the city council of Florence passed a motion that nullified Dante's sentence of exile and death. However, Dante's corpse remains in Ravenna, where, we must assume, the spirit of the great poetic philosopher rests comfortably.

Aims of this Book

The purpose of this work is not to unveil a stunningly novel reading of Dante's work; nor is it even to describe and analyze the entire *Commedia*. Instead, I focus only on the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and on the philosophical issues of personal responsibility, individual moral desert, retributive justice, repentance, and the nature of virtue and vice.

Dante famously described the purpose of his *Commedia* as practical: to guide human beings out of misery and toward their appropriate earthly and eternal ends. This work takes Dante seriously and underscores the philosophical underpinnings of his mission. The work focuses on how Dante's moral philosophy underwrote his avowed purpose.

In Chapter 1 I summarize Dante's *Inferno*, while highlighting the moral assumptions that ground Dante's depictions of sinners in Hell. Crucial among these is the law of *contrapasso*: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they

willed through their choices and actions. I conclude this chapter by sketching a host of moral lessons that ground Dante's moral convictions and anticipate existential philosophical themes.

In Chapter 2 I summarize Dante's *Purgatorio*, while underscoring the distinctions he makes between denizens of Hell and residents of Purgatory. I also focus on the differences between Dante's depiction and the traditional Christian view of Purgatory. I conclude this chapter by outlining additional existential moral lessons that the pilgrim confronts in Purgatory.

Chapters 1 and 2, then, are descriptive summaries of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Those who are thoroughly acquainted with Dante's work are best advised to begin their reading of this book at Chapter 3. Those who are unfamiliar with Dante's work, or who recall it only hazily, should read this book from its beginning.

In Chapter 3, having completed the summaries about Dante's sinners and their punishments, I begin the philosophical analysis of Dante's understanding of vice, personal responsibility and desert, retribution, and redemption. I state and explain the modern principle of desert and how it is related to Dante's law of *contrapasso*, and I illustrate this crucial aspect of Dante's moral theory by examining three case studies: the lustful Francesca, relegated to the second circle of Hell; the assassins of Caesar – Brutus and Cassius – whom Dante stigmatizes as two of the three greatest sinners of all time and banishes to the ninth circle of Hell; and Epicurus, the noted philosopher, whom Dante labels a heretic and dispatches to the sixth circle of Hell.

In Chapter 4 I grapple with puzzles and paradoxes within Dante's moral philosophy, as illustrated by his treatment of Virgil and Cato. As a pre-Christian pagan, Virgil seems totally blameless for not having worshipped Jesus and for not being baptized. Yet, despite his lack of culpability, Virgil is relegated to Limbo, which, for Dante (following Bonaventure), is a region of unrequited longing for the divine. Although Virgil is described as a virtuous pagan and appears to be blameless for his lack of the theological virtues, he is denied salvation eternally. Has Dante unjustly relegated Virgil to Limbo? Meanwhile, Cato seems to have three strikes against him: he is a pre-Christian pagan; he committed suicide; and he was a strident foe of Julius Caesar, whom Dante seems otherwise to admire. Yet Cato is the gatekeeper of Purgatory and, apparently, will attain Paradise at Final Judgment. What accounts for the differences in Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato? Is Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato consistent with his general moral principles?

In Chapter 5 I describe and analyze Dante's treatment of the "seven deadly sins" (or seven capital vices): pride (arrogance), envy, avarice, wrath,

lust, gluttony, and sloth. I connect Dante's treatment of these "final causes" of evil deeds with his general moral philosophy.

In Chapter 6 I illustrate how ten of the most powerful moral lessons from Dante the author – lessons taught to Dante the pilgrim during his travels through Hell and Purgatory – anticipate the normative vision of modern existentialism. While viewing Dante as a prophet of existentialism is wildly off the mark, Dante nevertheless prefigures crucial existential themes. In being related in this way, the practical dimensions of both Dante and existentialism – centered on how best to live a good, human life – glisten.

I do not address the third volume of the *Commedia*, the *Paradiso*. Dante there chronicles the rise of the human soul to unity with God. As always, the ascension of the soul defines personal transformation. The soul moves gingerly through several necessary stages of understanding until it reaches its final vision in the highest realm, the Empyrean. There redeemed souls, united with their bodies, bask in the beatific vision that defines perfection. Beatrice, the personification of Divine Wisdom, leads the pilgrim on this journey; but she cannot explicitly reveal God to him. Only profound contemplation and divine grace can complete this task. In the thirty-first canto of the *Paradiso* Beatrice withdraws and St. Bernard takes her place. St. Bernard directs the pilgrim's gaze to the Virgin Mary, who brokers the bestowal of grace required to complete the journey. The pilgrim's mind is soon illuminated by Truth; he is granted the ultimate vision; and his will joins in harmony with Divine Love. The journey has ended, the self-purification process is complete, and the poet's vivid dream is suspended.

While this work contains a few allusions to the *Paradiso*, I neither summarize the latter's canti nor analyze its importance. The themes I address center on sin, personal responsibility, and desert, retribution, redemption, the nature of the seven capital vices as depicted in the *Purgatorio* and the *Inferno*, and Dante's existential moral lessons. While uncommonly evocative and aesthetically exciting, the metaphysics and the theology of the *Paradiso* are not required for my tasks and might even distract from my message.

Dante as Moral Philosopher

Some have argued that Dante would have been an even better poet if he were not so much of a philosopher. I rejoin that Dante the author understood acutely that poetic artistry was his medium; but philosophical understanding was his message. Dante was firmly convinced that the refinement of human reason was a necessary but not sufficient condition of attaining

personal salvation. He was also certain that philosophical understanding was required for the refinement of human reason. Dante did not aspire merely to compose a brilliant poem. We must take him at his word: he hoped to show readers the path to worldly happiness and personal salvation. We must conclude that Dante would have been a less effective instructor had he not been so zealous a philosopher. Taking Dante seriously as a moral philosopher, then, may well be a small step in our own journey toward self-transformation and spiritual health.

Notes and References

1. Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 211–212.
2. Dante Alighieri, *The Letters of Dante*, trans. and ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), “Letter to Can Grande della Scala,” para. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, para. 7.
4. Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, 268.