

Dante and Aquinas

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Fitzgerald Hall of Engineering 356

Background to Week One: Introductory

How can Dante and Aquinas be read in the third millennium? The Comedy presents the great drama of human life in Christian terms; in the great poem we follow a pilgrim who begins by recognizing that at the age of 35—“nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”—he is lost, in a dark wood, unable to find his way. Under the guidance first of Virgil and later of Beatrice he will confront the great option of salvation first through the damned who have definitively failed, then in the saved who yet must purge their souls of the remaining taint of sin, and finally in the blessed in heaven. It is his story and the suggestion is that it is ours as well. But who are we?

Dante scholarship has become increasingly, though certainly not entirely, a task carried on by those who accept the current secularized condition of the academy. The assumption is that ‘we’ can no longer be part of the we Dante has in mind. So how then read the poem? The task becomes, as even so helpful a scholar as John Freccero describes it, to make the Comedy “accessible to any reader, without theological presupposition.” (“The Significance of Terza Rima,” in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, p. 259). On the presupposition that the reader does not share Dante’s religious beliefs, some such effort is necessary on penalty of ignoring the Comedy altogether—and nobody wants to do that. So we commit ourselves to the poem but not to the message.

This would be analogous to the way in which we might read Homer or Lucretius or Virgil. A reading of any of these must take into account the beliefs of the author which animate what he wrote, but we as readers, non-pagans, would preserve our distance from those beliefs. Our appreciation would be, let’s say, aesthetic. Some suspension of our disbelief may occur—after all Homer and the others have things to say which seem to float free of the beliefs we do not share—but finally we are engaged in a spectator sport. When we occupy the viewpoint of the author, we do so aesthetically and not existentially, so to say. Clearly Dante too can be read in this way, and by and large now is. But, as Freccero’s remark, taken with dogged literalness, suggests, this way is apparently considered the only possible way nowadays.

But there is another possible presupposition, and that is that the reader believes as Dante did. Then, across the centuries, a third millennium Christian attends to the poetic reflections of a medieval believer and, beyond the pleasures of structure and poetics, of the glorious language of the poem, *cor ad cor loquitur*.

A similar issue arises in the case of St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas, as we shall see, is a character in the Comedy, located in the Circle of the Sun in the *Paradiso*, in heaven before his actual canonization. But prior to that, and presupposed by it, he was a historical figure whose lifetime (1225-1274)

Dante's (1265-1321) slightly overlapped. Thomas was a philosopher as well as a theologian—we will want to discuss what that distinction means—and his *magnum opus* is the *Summa theologiae*, an unfinished work, in which he set out to present the essentials of the Christian faith in an order other than the chronological order of Scripture, reflecting on its contents, relating elements of it to one another. Was this just a scholarly task he undertook, one that might just as easily have been undertaken by a non-believer? We will see that for Thomas the theology he is putting before us can only be undertaken by accepting as true what God has revealed to us, in Scripture, in Christ. And the point of doing theology is not to engage in a head trip, a neutral review of what believers believe, but a reflection on those beliefs that will enable the reader better to live the Christian life.

As in the case of Dante, nowadays many study the writings of Thomas, the ST, who do not share the religious beliefs of the author. And, as in Dante studies, such scholarship has its rewards. There is no doubt that such existentially neutral and *wertfrei* research is both possible and productive. But surely it would be excessive to make it the only legitimate approach. For one thing, the Church continues to cite the writings of Thomas as having present relevance. To whom? To the faithful. This suggests that there is another, and more empathetic way of reading the ST.

We could generalize the problem by distinguishing what might be called historical readings of an author, a philosopher, from well a philosophical reading. You could devote yourself to the study of Nietzsche, or Kant, or Spinoza, and over time what you have to say about these authors would cast great light on their texts. What you would be after is as clear an understanding of what the author meant, what he considered the grounds for the positions he takes. But you yourself are not signing onto those positions or arguments as your own. You preserve a scholarly distance. You might even say, à la Freccero, that no one nowadays could possibly hold what Nietzsche or Kant or Spinoza held. Scholarship thus becomes a spectator sport.

But there are Nietzscheans and Kantians and Spinozoists who sign on to their author, who think that what he has to say, in part, in large part, is—true. A philosophical school, we might say, is made up of those who not only can clarify what the author says and why, but who also maintain that what he says has continuing relevance for us.

Consider, for example, the way in which we might read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle himself had things to say about the proper reader of his text. The NE aims to clarify the good life, what will make as what we are meant to be, and it makes great demands on our minds. But, says Aristotle, to leave it at that is to miss the whole point of the exercise. The proper reader of the NE is one who wants to live the good life, wants to be what he is meant to be, and finds precious help in the text for fulfilling those tasks. Any thing short of that is an abortive reading.

Well, of course, a scholar can dwell on the passages in which Aristotle says these things, analyze them, clarify them, point out what for Aristotle were the bases for his claims—and still remain at a distance from the stated aim of the

work. But this does not mean that what I am calling the abortive reading is impossible. Far from it. But it hovers over the text and does not engage it beyond the level of an intellectual grasp, an historical reading. Such a scholar is in no wise committed to the truth of what Aristotle says.

Now this example, of ethics or moral philosophy, has its peculiarities. We could not say exactly the same things about a reading of the *Metaphysics*. But analogous things could be said of the latter. Then a great question imposes itself. What is the point of getting as clear as possible about what a philosophical text means? Is historical, or disengaged, appreciation self-justifying? Surely the author would regard such a reading as at best partial. He might even regard it as a misreading. He did not write in order to provide scholars with a text on which they could while away their time for purposes unrelated to the purposes of the text.

One answer would be that the scholar has his own position and reasons for holding it, and that his interest in these historical figures is explained by the way in which, usually implicitly, he compares what they have to say with what he himself takes to be true. That is, a non-historical truth makes its appearance, at least in the presuppositions of the scholar, and probably peeks through even when he considers himself to be quite disengaged, bracketing his own philosophical beliefs, and being as fair as he can to what he regards as a misguided effort.

Modern philosophy, for all its variety, has a way of maintaining that previous efforts have been or are replaceable by insights which have finally been gained by us. Kant thought that all his predecessors were mistaken about the reach of the human mind, so that the metaphysics, for example, that they came up with is based on a false presupposition. Descartes before him also held that in the absence of the method he devised all previous philosophy had failed. Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, exhibits similar exhilaration about the method he has hit upon. And one could go on with instances of this, continuing to our own day, in which the past is regarded as a monument to mistaken presuppositions.

Surely this attitude would be detectable in the efforts at historical neutrality that scholarship aspires to. It may be that it is humanly impossible to attain the kind of scholarly neutrality presupposed when an author is read whose positions are diametrically opposed to the personal position of the scholar.

But surely that is preferable to the assumption that philosophical texts are simply occasions for scholarship with is forever disengaged from the aim of the texts studied. Even if such neutrality is possible the great question must be asked: what is the point of such clarity? When the scholar reflects on what he is doing, and asks why he is doing it, it would seem that he will inevitably be pulled into a kind of thinking where more than historical truth or falsity is at issue. Where his engaged philosophizing is opposed to or only minimally in tune with the philosophizing recorded in the text, he could nonetheless see the latter as a foil for the former. That is, ultimately his scholarship is at the service of first-order philosophizing.

C.S. Lewis in *De descriptione temporum*

(See too Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, an introduction to medieval and renaissance literature.)

In his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, where he had moved from Oxford, Lewis took up the periodization of history. He did so because his chair was one devoted to medieval and renaissance literature. But the one thing those who made up the Renaissance were agreed on was that the Middle Ages was a dark interlude between the classical period and wonderful them. They were going to renew, give rebirth to, the classical. And here is Lewis given a chair in medieval AND renaissance literature. Well, elsewhere and often he had rejected the renaissance self-estimate. But it is not that argument that interests me now. I refer to Lewis because, speaking to the young students before him, he invited them to consider him a dinosaur from a lost period. He suggested that there is only one great divider in our history and that it occurred between his youth and that of the students he is addressing. Lewis saw himself, not merely as a critic or historian who could say interesting things about past literature. He portrays himself as, unlike his auditors, a citizen of a lost world, the world in which the literature he loves and studies was produced.

I too am a dinosaur. The reading of Dante and Thomas I will be doing with you this semester is not an effort to apply the assumptions of modernity to such reading. It will not assume that a skeptical—even if only a procedurally skeptical—reading of these authors is the only possible one today. I shall be reading and remarking on them from the viewpoint of a believer responding to fellow believers. The faith they held is the one I hold, *deo gratias*. It would be invidious to suggest that this assumption exempts me from the care and accuracy that characterize merely aesthetic or historical readings of them. Ours may be in large part a post-Christian age and insofar as it is we are all influenced by it, usually without realizing that we are. Dominant approaches to medieval authors assume that Christian faith is no longer a serious option today. That is manifestly false, however obvious it may seem within the academy.

Among the great rewards our reading of these two authors and their masterpieces promises is the deepening and enhancement of one's faith. That is the purpose they sought, and to stop short of engaging their purposes seems to me a manifestly truncated reading of them. What I proposes is hardly radical in itself. I suggest that we become the kind of reader these two men wrote for. That they have become occasions for scholarship, disengaged scholarship, is undeniable. But that was scarcely their intention.

There are of course obstacles to our becoming such readers. However one the faith of Dante and Thomas may be with our own, they were after all men of the Middle Ages. That was a long time ago. A great deal of effort is required to occupy their vantage point. And there are many instances where our appreciation must remain on a merely aesthetic level. Perhaps the most glaring instance of this has to do with their common acceptance of a Ptolemaic, geocentric view of the cosmos. For each, earth was a fixed immovable center around which the planets turn. The structure of the *Paradiso* is unintelligible apart from this

assumption.

Allied with this assumption is another, namely that man is the point of the cosmos, its most perfect instance. The human species is a microcosm that is the *telos* of the macrocosm. Evolution may seem to underwrite this, but we would be well-advised to see a contrast rather than harmony here. We may be influenced, unbenownst to ourselves, by the notion that there is something prideful and hubristic in thus elevating the human species above all others. (I mean, of course, cosmic species—man is not the most perfect creature; indeed, as we shall see, compared to the least of the angels, he is a poor thing.)

However central earth and man are for Dante and Thomas, this centrality is hardly reductive. However much their astronomy seems to make man and earth the center, both authors will in their different ways be concerned with transcending the terrestrial. The *telos* of the Comedy is the *Paradiso* and for Thomas the happiness we seek can only be had in the beatific vision. We may be of the earth, but heaven's our destination.