

DANTE AND AQUINAS

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Week Two: Background

Virgil is sent to be Dante's guide out of the dark wood in which he finds himself. A pagan poet whose masterpiece is the Aeneid which tells the story of the founding of Rome by a company that has fought in the Trojan war. Thus Virgil connects his epic to that, or those (Iliad and Odyssey), of Homer, and thus gains Greek sanction so to speak for the founding of Rome. But why Virgil in the Comedy?

Virgil has been called from the first circle of Hell, Limbo, where other great pagan heroes and philosophers and poets are found. There is a purely natural happiness, one commensurate with our human nature. (The Paradiso will depict the supernatural happiness to which we have been called, and can attain with the grace of Christ—the vision of God.) Virgil as guide is a mixed case—there are times when Dante doubts that he knows where they are going; there are things he cannot grasp, because he has not the faith. So why choose him? Perhaps he matches the mess Dante is in at the outset of the poem. The natural, the truths anyone can attain, pagan or Christian, can provide a bridge to the specifically religious. Some the Father called pagan thought a *Praeparatio Evangelica*—analogous to the way in which the Old Testament prepares for and prefigures Christ. This assimilative character of the Christian mentality, its assumption that *omnia operantur pro bono*, that the supernatural builds upon and does not destroy the natural and that therefore nothing human is alien to it, may surprise. But this attitude characterizes both our authors.

Aristotle. Among the philosophers that Virgil will introduce Dante to in canto 4 of the Inferno is Aristotle. There are others, but Aristotle is described as “the master of those who know.” This suggests pride of place, something more than *primus inter pares*. We will see the role that the thought of Aristotle, direct and filtered through intervening commentators, notably the Arabic ones, Avicenna and Averroes, plays in the thought of both our authors.

But back to Virgil. Virgil is the poet of the founding of Rome, of the empire thought to survive in the Holy Roman Empire, a far less organized entity. For Dante one of the crucial problems of his time is the relationship between the emperor and the papacy, the secular and religious authorities each of which has or pretends to hold universal sway. It is often difficult to see where the line of demarcation between the two lies. Factions had formed which represent this division: the Ghibellines, who favored the emperor, the Guelfs, which favored the papacy. This murky division took on a local form in Florence, where the opposing parties were known as the Blacks and Whites. The reality of life in Italy was the struggle between, the wars between, various city states. Relief or mediation was sought sometimes from the emperor, sometimes from the pope. Dante, fatefully, was part of a delegation to the pope for help in achieving peace in Florence. He felt that he had been betrayed and in the event he was

exiled from his own city and never in his lifetime returned to it. An exile and a wanderer, who is forced to eat the bread of others and climb the stairs of others' homes, his actual life may be seen to prefigure the long quest of the Comedy. That great poem was written in exile, again and again as we move through the cantiche, we find Dante discussing Florentine affairs with the departed. Dante calls himself a Florentine by birth but not in morals, thus distancing himself from, even as he links himself to his native city. Virgil, like Aristotle, represents the heights to which man can attain even apart from grace and the supernatural order. There is another important fact, Book 6 of the Aeneid, in which pious Aeneas is granted entry to the lower world in order to see again his lost father Anchises. There is a manifest influence of that portrait of the souls of the departed and the Comedy—and there were other literary precedents as well. In short, there are multiple reasons for the choice of Virgil as Dante's guide as he pursues the path of conversion, the way out of the woods, or the dark wood, toward his eternal destiny. Virgil will accompany Dante to the upper realms of Purgatory where he will be replaced by Beatrice, who in turn in the final cantos of the Paradiso gives way to St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The role of Virgil grows gradually dimmer as the quest continues. . . . Virgil is getting progressively out of his depths, or heights. . .

To return to Aristotle. Aristotle was one of the three major figures in the golden age of Greek philosophy, the fourth century BC, when we have the suite of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, not just chronologically arranged. . . . Plato has given us the most influential portrait of Socrates, the interlocutor of many of the dialogues, Plato's mentor. . . indeed Plato conceals himself behind the figure of Socrates. Of course endless studies have been written asking how much of the Platonic Socrates has historical grounding. . . . Aristotle in turn was a member of the Platonic Academy, for something like 19 years, leaving to found the Lyceum only after the death of Plato. That long stretch with Plato colors everything that Aristotle wrote. He departs from many Platonic tenets, most notably the Doctrine of Ideas, but his thought remains all but unintelligible without the Platonic foil.

The fate of the thought of Plato and Aristotle in subsequent centuries of antiquity is complicated. There were rival schools, the Stoics, the Epicureans, others, and most notably there was the attempt to fuse and reconcile Plato and Aristotle, often called Neoplatonism. Political factors caused the shift of philosophical activity from Athens to Alexandria; the school of Alexandria continued into Christian times, until the famous or infamous burning of the library of Alexandria. Christian as well as pagan authors produced commentaries on the writings of Plato and, even more, on those of Aristotle. The language of philosophy continued to be Greek.

This had great importance for learning in the Christian west. St Augustine, in the early 4th century, provides us in Book 8 of *The City of God* a summary of Greek philosophy. He himself sought to adapt Plato's thought, the Ideas, to Christian theology. Later, Boethius (480-524) who may have studied in Alexandria (this is contested), or perhaps in Athens (remember that Horace and Cicero studied in Athens). . . and he conceived a vast project. He would translate

into Latin all the writings of Plato and of Aristotle and then, in commentaries (derivative from Greek commentaries) show their essential agreement. He did not get far with this project: he translated Porphyry's *Isagoge*, an introduction to the *Categories*, the *Categories*, the *Perihermeneias*, and perhaps one or two other logical writings of Aristotle.

Boethius was a member of an old Roman family; Italy was under the control of the Ostrogoths. Theodoric ruled from Ravenna but he fostered the continuation of the old Roman offices, consuls, etc. (Thus Boethius, and later his sons, served as consul.) Theodoric was an Arian. The emperor was in Constantinople, and Theodoric sought legitimacy by seeing his authority as derived from the emperor, but there was enmity and rivalry between them. Boethius fell afoul of this fear, and was accused of conspiring with the emperor against Theodoric. He was condemned to death and, in his cell in Pavia, wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a work of which there are more medieval copies than any book other than the Bible. We will see the role of the *Consolation* in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*.

We will also see the role those translations of Boethius played when medieval education, despite the barbarian invasions, continued in the monastic schools. It was there, in what we will call the Liberal Arts tradition, that Aristotle played a significant role throughout the so-called dark ages.

It was not until the end of the 12th centuries that treatises of Aristotle, long lost to the west, began to be translated into Latin, thus continuing ut ita dicam the Boethian project. First the *Nicomachean Ethics* and then a flood of others—the *Physics*, the *De anima*, the *Politics*, the *Metaphysics*, etc etc a whole library of books which effectively ended the hegemony of the liberal arts in medieval education.

Cassiodorus Senator, in his *Institutiones*, provided a curriculum for the monastery he founded at Vivarium. A layman, like Boethius, and a contemporary of B. Cassiodorus effectively established a *modus vivendi* of the secular and sacred, a complementarity of reason and faith. The 7 liberal arts were taken to be an adequate summary of secular learning, and the study of them was propaedeutic to the study of Scripture. The trivium (logic, rhetoric, grammar); quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy)

- auctores
- the Battle of the Liberal Arts

What the introduction of the integral Aristotle showed was the inadequacy of the liberal arts as the summation of human natural learning. This coincides with the founding of universities which mushroom across Europe in the 13th century.

Paris as model. The monastic and cathedral schools... flourishing in the 12th century, Paris already a mecca for scholars. The charter of the university gathers together these existing schools into a legal entity which codifies and certifies. In a way it is modeled on the guilds in which the young are apprenticed to the old and by a series of stages achieve master's status. Hence *Magister Artium*, etc.

The arrival of Aristotle, the founding of the universities, the new mendicant orders. Thomas and Dante are both beneficiaries of these developments. As we saw, the life of Thomas is that of a Dominican who taught theology, in universities, in studia of his order. Dante, at the end of *La Vita Nuova*, pledges himself to study so that he can write of Beatrice as no woman has ever been written of before. There is reason to think that he studied with both Franciscans and Dominicans in Florence; there is even a legend that he studied in Paris. The great figures of medieval theology, not only Thomas, shape his thought; and Aristotle is clearly for him the master of those who know. The liberal arts as well as the divisions of Aristotelian philosophy mark such works as *Il Convivio*, a banquet of wisdom, an unfinished work in which, some opine, Beatrice has given way to Dame Philosophy, the great interlocutor of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Philosophy and Theology

What is philosophy? The pursuit of wisdom. What is wisdom? Such knowledge as men can attain of the divine. The culminating philosophical effort is found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

The order of learning: logic, mathematics, natural philosophy, moral philosophy, metaphysics. Thomas reconciles the liberal arts tradition with this by linking the trivium to logic and the quadrivium to mathematics.

The logic of science. The subject of the conclusion; a concatenation of arguments which share a similar distancing from matter and motion.

Speculative and practical.

Physics	Ethics
Mathematics	Economics
Metaphysics	Politics

If this is philosophy, what is theology? We notice that the culminating philosophical task, its telos, is called theologia. We will return to this. A first contrast between philosophy and (supernatural or sacred) theology is to be seen in their starting points, their principles, what counts as premises for argument. The starting points or principles of philosophy are truths available to any human thinker on the basis of standard cognitive equipment, natural capacities.

Axiomatic truths.

The principle of contradiction.

A philosophical argument is always a promissory note to the effect that what is being said can be analyzed back into truths that everybody knows independently of the formal study of philosophy. (Discovery and uncovering: implicit philosophy)

Now when we think of discussions of the Trinity or Incarnation, we notice a remarkable difference. The arguments will exhibit the common notes of argument, but the starting points are revealed truths, truths that is which can only be held to be true on the basis of trust or faith in the one revealing them.

No discussion of the Trinity, for example, pretends that one who follows the argument will thereby establish the truth of the Trinity.

Rather, on the assumption that there is a Trinity of Persons in God, the theologian explores what this means, seeks to clarify it, relates it to other revealed truths, but at the end of the day, he like your grandmother, accepts the truth of the Trinity on the basis of revelation. The articles of the faith can never be freed from that dependence on faith. That is the principal reason why sacred theology is so different from philosophy.

Preambles of Faith

There are things we know; there are things we believe. Are these simply two unrelated spheres? Remember that the culminating telos of philosophy was called theology, though given the difference between philosophical and theological discourse, it will be contrasted with the theology we find in the Summa. What is the relationship between the theology of the philosophers and the theology based on Sacred Scripture. The former makes clear that there are truths about God that can be established on the basis of what everyone knows. How do these relate to such Truths as the Trinity which, if they had not been revealed, would simply not occur to us?

What are some of the truths about God that philosophers can establish?

- That God exists.
- That God is one.
- That God is intelligent and cause of all else.
- Etc.

When Thomas calls such truths about God Preambles to the Faith (as opposed to mysteries of the Faith), what he has in mind is this.

The believer notices that implicit in or embedded in the truths of faith are precisely these naturally knowable truths. It is as if the package of revelation contains both these and the mysteries.

- one cannot deduce the mysteries from the preambles
- but one can, on this basis, formulate an argument for accepting as true what one cannot in this life comprehend as true

If some of what has been revealed (the preambles) can be known, in the strong sense, to be true, it is reasonable to hold that the others (the mysteries) are intelligible truths. This is an argument for the reasonableness of belief. We see how depended it is on the validity of philosophical theology. And we can easily see what faith will seem when such a relationship is denied.