



# One With the Eternal Good: The Harmony of Faith and Reason in Dante's Quest for Truth

Dante Alighieri's masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, should not be understood as a fanciful work of fiction about a man travelling from Hell to Heaven. Rather, the intended aim of the poem is to show us how to get to Heaven; it is meant as an allegory for the epistemic and spiritual quest we all must undergo if we wish to attain beatitude. When asked what led him to salvation at the end of *The Paradiso*, Dante replies, "By the arguments of philosophy / and by authority that descends from here, / such Love has clearly stamped its seal upon me."<sup>1</sup> Dante acknowledges he has come to this place in Heaven because of the way he has brought the natural wisdom of classical philosophy into a dialectic with the supernatural wisdom of Christian Revelation. This is likewise how we are encouraged by Dante in *The Divine Comedy* to pursue Truth and hope for salvation throughout the journey of our own life.

As St. Thomas Aquinas had done only a generation before, Dante Alighieri synthesized the philosophic wisdom of pagan antiquity with the divinely inspired wisdom of the Catholic Faith by acknowledging that faith and reason were two different *modes* of ascertaining the Truth. "The truths that we confess concerning God fall under two modes", St. Thomas writes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. "Some things true of God are beyond all the competence of human reason, as that God is Three and One. Other things there are to which even human reason can attain, as the existence and unity of God, which philosophers have proved to a demonstration under the guidance of the light of natural reason."<sup>2</sup> This same dichotomy is spoken about at great length in *The Divine Comedy* and comes to be a central theme of the poem as a whole. "He is insane who dreams that he may learn / by mortal reasoning the boundless orbit / Three Persons in One Substance fill

and turn", Virgil tells Dante in *The Purgatorio*. "Be satisfied with *quia* of cause unknown, / O humankind! for could you have seen All, / Mary need not have suffered to bear a Son."<sup>3</sup> Dante insists it would be "insane" to think that we could come to a full realization of the Truth solely by our own intellect and without the aid of supernatural grace. Some things we *can* determine solely through reason, but some things, such as the Doctrine of the Trinity (which both Aquinas and Dante cite as their example of something that cannot be discovered via reason) go beyond the power of our intellect and must be revealed to us and accepted through faith.

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Dante, however, is not merely explaining this Truth to us, as St. Thomas does in *The Summa*. Rather, Dante is reappropriating these philosophical ideas and using the medium of epic poetry to not only *tell* us what is true but to *show* us mimetically *how* it is true. He does this by depicting how he utilized both faith and reason in his own epistemic and spiritual journey to God, and he demonstrates how we too may undergo this synthesis in our own quest for salvation.

Dante in *The Divine Comedy* begins by portraying these two modes of faith and reason in the figurative depictions of Virgil

and Beatrice respectively, the former representing reason and the latter representing faith. In the words of John Smyth Carroll:

With his great theological authority, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante did indeed draw a distinction between Faith and Reason. . . . For salvation it requires to be supplemented by the supernatural light of Faith; nevertheless, so far as it goes, it is right and good. The relation between the two is symbolized by Dante's two chief guides. Virgil is the natural Reason of man; but Beatrice, the symbol of Heavenly Wisdom which comes from Faith, does not disparage or condemn Virgil. On the contrary, it is she who seeks him out and gives him his commission to guide Dante to herself.<sup>4</sup>

Dante's journey to God (like Aquinas' inter-relationship between faith and reason) is a journey undertaken by synthesizing these two modes, beginning with reason (symbolized by Virgil) and completed by faith (symbolized by Beatrice, whose very name means *beatitude*).

Dante in *The Divine Comedy* demonstrates that classical philosophy is limited in how much it can reveal, but the wisdom of pagan antiquity is not condemned in itself; it just needs to be ordered properly. In fact, it is Beatrice herself who realizes the great value of natural reason which Virgil represents, and thus why she calls upon him to help Dante begin his quest. "O gracious Mantuan," Beatrice beseeches Virgil in *The Inferno*, "my dearest friend, and fortune's foe, has strayed / onto a friendless shore and stands beset / by such distresses that he turns afraid / from the True Way. . . . Fly to him and with your high counsel, pity, / and with whatever need be for his good / and soul's salvation, help him,



Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino's *La Disputa del Sacramento* (1511).

and solace me.”<sup>5</sup> The very narrative of Dante’s poem commences with Beatrice seeking the shade of Virgil down in Limbo, acknowledging his natural wisdom and virtue and its ability to help direct mankind toward salvation. “Will Divine / has drawn me out of the great Throat of Woe”, Virgil will also later explain in *The Purgatorio*, “to guide him on his way, and I shall lead him / far as my knowledge gives me power to go.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Virgil will be of pivotal importance in Dante’s journey back to God, but both Virgil and Beatrice admit from the outset that Virgil’s powers will only be able to take Dante so far and are not sufficient *by themselves* to bring mankind to a full understanding of the Truth.

This is why Virgil declines to answer certain questions while he is in charge of guiding Dante on the first part of his quest, especially when Dante makes inquiries pertaining specifically to the Revealed Truths of Catholic Doctrine. “As far as reason sees, / I can reply,” Virgil says to Dante. “The rest you may ask Beatrice. / The answer lies within faith’s mysteries.”<sup>7</sup> Virgil insists that the aspects of Truth which belong to the epistemological realm of supernatural faith are beyond his ability to fathom since he did not know Christ or

have access to the teachings of the Catholic Church while he was alive on earth. Therefore, while Virgil will help direct Dante to see the Truth as far as human reason may discern on its own, it is not until Beatrice takes over as Dante’s guide at the end of *The Purgatorio* that Dante will start to fully understand what he must know and believe in faith for the salvation of his soul.

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Like the difference between a man who gazes at a star with his naked eye and another who sees it through a telescope, so faith augments and supersedes the limited scope of human reason and allows you to apprehend the Truth with greater clarity.

“Simply by ourselves we cannot see this perfectly,” Dante wrote in *The Banquet*. “We do, however, see it perfectly with the eyes of faith, while with the eyes of reason we see it shadowed in obscurity.”<sup>8</sup> We cannot come to understand on our own the truths found through faith due to our distance and disunion from God. On this side of eternity, we need faith to bridge the gap between what we can discover on our own and that which we cannot fully comprehend in this mortal life, just as Dante shows us in *The Inferno* and *The Purgatorio*.

In *The Paradiso*, however, Dante will then be able to perceive the Truth with Beatrice in a way he could not while he was with Virgil. “There we shall witness what we hold in faith, / not told by reason but self-evident; / as men perceive an axiom on earth”, Beatrice says to Dante as they ascend together from the summit of Purgatory and into the Spheres of Heaven.<sup>9</sup> In the Heavenly Realm, Dante will finally be able to behold the Truth in its fullness. It had been beyond his ability to understand with reason but now will be made clear in the experience of beatitude which is told of and sought for in faith. At this point, Dante will understand these principles and will recognize the Truth as easily as a skilled math-

ematician understands the simplest theorem. In *Drink Parnassian Waters*, my own thesis on Dante's *Divine Comedy* which I completed last year, I explained this very concept:

Dante has reached this level because of Virgil, but he now must move beyond Virgil. He must move beyond understanding into the "peace of God," as St. Paul calls it, "which surpasseth all understanding," symbolized by Beatrice, who takes him from the summit of Purgatory and into the spheres of Heaven. . . . In *The Paradiso*, Dante can indeed begin to understand the things of Divine Revelation which he could not comprehend when he was with Virgil.<sup>10</sup>

This is a peace that "surpasseth all understanding", but this is not because it defies or abandons understanding and/or human reason. Rather, it is because it exceeds what our mortal vision can fathom while not in union with God. Once we arrive in Heaven, however, we *can* finally see what we believed in faith because it is revealed to us. While we had previously only seen it "shadowed in obscurity", in Dante's words, now we will be able to entirely comprehend it as we behold the Beatific Vision.

Faith, then, entails a recognition of our limitations and enables us to believe what God has revealed by Divine Inspiration but has not allowed us to experience *yet*. It is this very revelation which informs us of what it is we *will* ultimately be able to behold if we continue *in* faith. When asked "what is faith?" by the spirit of St. Peter in *The Paradiso*, Dante replies (in a quotation from the Book of Hebrews), "faith is the substance of what we hope to see / and the argument for what we have not seen".<sup>11</sup> Faith is believing in what God has declared and what God has promised. It is looking toward something that we do not fully grasp but which we believe we *will* ultimately grasp precisely because we have faith in that which has been revealed.

Having faith in Divine Revelation, then, does not mean that we are deserting our reason, but rather taking the next reasonable step after we come to realize *by* our reason that our reason is limited. This should then prompt us to seek after that which *is* higher than ourselves and which we recognize as being worthy of our faith. "Divine Providence directs men to a higher good than human frailty can experience in the present

life", Aquinas asserts. "The mental faculties ought to be evoked and led onward to something higher than our reason can attain at present. . . . And this is the special function of the Christian religion."<sup>12</sup> Faith affirms what we already know to be true by reason but then also takes over where reason left off to lead us to the Fullness of Truth, which we look forward to in the next life as we pursue it in the present.

Once beholding the Beatific Vision, however, it will no longer be a question of either reason *or* faith. It is not a question of reason (since all Truth will now be eternally present), nor is it a question of faith (since it will no longer be something we merely *hope* to see). Rather, beatitude is a complete and direct encounter with that One and Eternal Truth in Heaven. Despite the fact that faith and reason are *two* different

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modes of pursuing Truth in this life, it is in this experience of beatitude in the next life wherein, as Dante recounts in the final canto of *The Divine Comedy*, "I could / the better bear to look, until at last / my vision was made one with the Eternal Good."<sup>13</sup> When unified with God in Heaven, we no longer have the need for this apparent dichotomy of faith and reason but will instead directly behold the Truth in its entirety.

We are shown through the mimetic genius of *The Divine Comedy* that there is no ultimate distinction between philosophical and theological wisdom. Rather, philosophy and theology *both* serve to lead Dante (and all of us) to this *One* Truth. At the end of *The Paradiso*, a Heavenly Voice commends Dante, telling him, "As human reason and Holy Writ / in harmony have urged you, keep for God / the first, most sovereign passion of your spirit."<sup>14</sup> It is this harmony in Divine Love wherein all wisdom subsists and toward which both reason

and faith aim. It is only through this harmony that Dante is finally able to secure his soul's salvation and enter Heaven.

This is the very Truth which Dante proclaims to us in *The Divine Comedy*, and it is this same epistemic and spiritual quest which Dante insists we all must undergo if we wish to attain beatitude. As we reflect upon this Great Master of poetry, philosophy, and theology, let us not merely appreciate Dante Alighieri for his literary grandeur (worthy though that is) but let us also take his theological wisdom to heart and let it transform us as we pursue Truth and desire God midway upon the journey of our own lives.

*Nathan Longacre is a graduate student studying English Literature at the University of Dallas.*

## Reference

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2. St. Thomas Aquinas, *On God and His Creatures: An Annotated Translation of the Summa Contra Gentiles*, (Westminster, MD: The Carroll Press, 1950), Book I, Chapter 3, p. 2.
3. Dante, *The Purgatorio*, (New York: John Ciardi, 1961), Canto III, lines 34–39.
4. John Smyth Carroll, *Exiles of Eternity: An Exposition of Dante's Inferno*, (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1971), p. 10–11.
5. Dante, *The Inferno*, (New York: John Ciardi, 1954), Canto II, lines 58–69.
6. Dante, *The Purgatorio*, Canto XXI, lines 30–33.
7. Dante, *Ibid.*, Canto XVIII, lines 46–48.
8. Dante, *The Banquet*, (Saratoga, CA: AMNA Libri & Co., 1989), Book II, chapter 8, p. 60.
9. Dante, *The Paradiso*, Canto II, lines 43–45.
10. Nathan Longacre, *Drink Parnassian Waters*, (Newberg, OR: Nathan Longacre, 2021), p. 44.
11. Dante, *The Paradiso*, Canto XXIV, lines 52–65; quoting from Hebrews 11:1.
12. St. Thomas Aquinas, *On God and His Creatures*, Bk. I, Ch. 5, p. 5.
13. Dante, *The Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII, lines 79–81.
14. Dante, *Ibid.*, Canto XXVI, lines 46–48.