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Comments on Dante's Conception of Value¹

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is arguably one of the greatest figures in Western culture. A separate discipline, Dantist Studies, is concerned with exploring the different layers of his art. Without wishing to place myself among the scholars of this discipline, I would like to offer a few thoughts, mainly of an ethical nature, on the relationship of Dante's works to the Renaissance.

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1. Introduction

In the case of *Dante's* oeuvre, politics, morality, philosophy and art are closely linked, and these elements are bound together by the poet's relationship with the Christian religion. As far as politics is concerned, it is well known that *Dante* also took an active part in public life (and believed that politics could only be conducted on a moral basis), he opposed the papacy, was prior of Florence for a time, but was exiled from the city after the Black Guelphs came to power. *Dante* attached great importance to morality in human life: he advocated the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. He combined Christian morality with Greek (*Platonic, Aristotelian*) ethics. His understanding of the function of philosophy was that philosophy was primarily for the layman and should help everyone to live a life worthy of human dignity. Of all the philosophical disciplines, ethics is the one that best fulfills this function, and therefore moral philosophy must be considered to play a more important role than even metaphysics (see the discussion of the division of the disciplines in *Convivio*). There has been and still is a great debate among Dantist scholars as to whether *Dante* can be considered a philosopher or not. Some argue that *Dante* is a great artist, but a rather dilettante philosopher (*Croce* or *Vossler* have expressed this opinion). Others point out that *Dante* is a lay philosopher with a considerable philosophical education, and that the *Divine Comedy (Commedia)* can be read as a philosophical text (this position is taken by *Gentile, Gilson, János Kelemen*).² *Dante's* thought is made up of many elements and has been influenced by many philosophers: in addition to the works of the great Christian theorists (*St. Augustine, St. Thomas*), he also draws on ancient philosophy (*Plato, Aristotle, Cicero*), and he has been intellectually influenced by Arab thinkers (especially *Averroes*), and *Siger of Brabant*, a great figure of Latin Averroism, should be mentioned in this context. As regards *Dante's* relationship to art, I would refer to the remark made

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² KELEMEN, *The Philosopher Dante* 19–36, 80–89.

by Lajos Fülep in connection with the Divine Comedy: “*In Dante, it is impossible to separate religious and artistic experience and development*”.³ In the poet’s conception, art has a moral and even a political function (there are specific political references in the *Divine Comedy*). *Dante* transforms philosophical-ethical-political content into poetry through allegory.⁴

2. Dante and the Renaissance

In any case, we must address the question of whether or not *Dante* can be considered a forerunner of the Renaissance. The volume of studies edited by Tibor Kardos, published in 1966, is entitled *Dante between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. This is another indication of the long-held view (linked to a particular conception of history) that *Dante* should be understood as a precursor of the Renaissance. In the view of contemporary scholars, as János Kelemen points out, *Dante*’s work represents a synthesis of the Middle Ages.⁵ His philosophy and outlook are resolutely medieval, but there are also many features in *Dante*’s art that transcend the zeitgeist and would become dominant in the Renaissance. We might even call them “*Renaissance elements*”. It is important to point out that *Dante* was writing at a time when medieval ideals were beginning to fade. This period is a time of crisis in several respects: moral crisis and socio-political crisis (the crisis of the papacy and the empire). *Dante*’s political views are expressed primarily in *The Autocracy*, but the need for moral renewal is also one of the fundamental aims of the Divine Comedy.

The Renaissance is, to use Ágnes Heller’s definition, an era of “*rediscovery*” of man.⁶ Renaissance humanism emphasizes equality between people and exalts the human individual, recognizing the greatness of human life. *Dante*’s conception of values is essentially medieval, informed by Christian morality and *Platonic-Aristotelian* ethics – as has already been discussed – but there are also some elements in this respect that would become fundamental in the Renaissance. Among these, we should certainly mention the specific conception of dignity and nobility, the glorification of love, the emphasis on the importance of friendship, and the role of creation and knowledge. Of these, I would refer in particular to his ideas on human dignity and nobility.

3. Cicero on human dignity

Dante often refers to *Cicero*, who first used the term *dignitas* in the sense of the universal dignity of all men. The term was originally used in ancient Rome to designate excellences, persons of distinction, officials. The superiority of a person with dignity (*dignitas*) was universally acknowledged, and authority (*auctoritas*), majesty (*maiestas*) and humanity (*humanitas*) were concepts associated with *dignitas*. In his works on the theory of the state (*De oratore*, *De re publica*, *De officiis*), *Cicero* differs from *Plato* and *Aristotle* on a very important point: he writes about the equality and dignity of all men. Every man possesses from birth the divine wisdom which governs the cosmos as an immutable and eternal law, the innate capacity of every man to recognize the right and to act

³ FÜLEP, The „Divina Commedia”.

⁴ KELEMEN, The Philosopher Dante 58–73.

⁵ KELEMEN, The Philosopher Dante 77–79.

⁶ HELLER, The Renaissance Man.

accordingly. Cicero, in his *De officiis* (*On Moral Duties*), writes: “Indeed, if we will only bear in mind what excellence and dignity belong to human nature, we shall understand how base it is to give one’s self up to luxury, and to live voluptuously and wantonly, and how honorable it is to live frugally, chastely, circumspectly, soberly. But it is to be borne in mind that we are endowed by nature as it were with two characters, one of which is common to us with other men, inasmuch as we all partake of reason, and of the traits which raise us above the brutes, from which all that is right and becoming is derived, and from which we seek the method of ascertaining our duty; while the other is that which is assigned to each of us individually.”⁷ Cicero emphasizes that by nature all men are similar to God, that is, all men have equal dignity, and therefore all men deserve equal respect. The idea of universal human dignity is thus expressed in Cicero’s texts.⁸ Everyone has the potential to become divine, but whether this is the case depends on the individual (a life of virtues is necessary).

4. The concept of nobility in the *Convivio*

Dante, in his *Convivio*, refers to the *De officiis* as a reference to the need for everyone to come to the aid of everyone, simply because they are human (“So now we can say here that as true friendship among men exists when each person loves the other in full measure”).⁹ He points out that the human race must be what its ancestor, Adam, was: “Therefore if Adam himself was noble, we are all noble, and if he was base, we are all base, which eradicates any distinction between these conditions and so eradicates the conditions themselves. This means that from what has been said above it follows That each of us is noble or each base.”¹⁰ Dante also sees nobility as a class part of all men, but in fact it is only a possibility, because true nobility is based on virtue and knowledge.¹¹ Dante defines virtue on the basis of the Aristotelian conception of virtue. For Aristotle, virtue equals the mean, the person who acts in this way avoids the two manifestations of spiritual evil, excess and deficiency.¹² Similarly, virtue is characterized by the pursuit of the mean, which can be “strength”, “moderation”, “generosity”, “gentleness”, “meekness”, “gentleness”, “striving for justice”. Dante writes: “that as the noble nature in adolescence shows itself obedient, pleasant and full of shame, adorning its own person, so in maturity it is strong, self-restrained, loving, courteous, and honest”.¹³ The true noble man is imbued with “*pietas*”, love.

Knowledge is necessary for nobility, and the poet, referring to Aristotle, states that all men desire knowledge: “As the Philosopher says at the beginning of the First Philosophy, all men by nature desire to know. The reason for this can be and is that each thing, impelled by a force provided by its own nature, inclines towards its own perfection. Since knowledge is the ultimate perfection of our soul, in which resides our ultimate happiness, we are all therefore by nature subject to a desire for it.”¹⁴ Philosophy is the most worthy quality of man. The confusion in Florence and the Italian cities is caused by a lack of justice and reason. Dante stresses the importance of activating the passive intellect, of a dynamic conception of the virtues: for him, reason and action are inseparable.¹⁵ It is well known that the Greeks understood virtue in

⁷ CICERO, *De officiis* (*On Moral Duties*) 67.

⁸ ADAMIK, *The Concept of Human Dignity in Cicero*; BARCSI, *The Philosophy of Human Dignity*.

⁹ DANTE, *The Convivio*, Book Three, Chapter 11.

¹⁰ DANTE, *The Convivio*, Book Four, Chapter 15.

¹¹ KARDOS, *Dante’s Humanism between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* 46.

¹² ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹³ DANTE, *The Convivio*, Book Four, Chapter 26.

¹⁴ DANTE, *The Convivio*, Book One, Chapter 1.

¹⁵ KARDOS, *Dante’s Humanism between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* 53.

relation to the community, the polis (*Aristotle* also links individual and communal happiness). According to *Tibor Kardos*, the concept of civilitas in the poet's work, in addition to meaning participation in the community of the family, the city, the state, also refers to the universal civilitas of the human non-universal, which means the enlivenment of culture through the activation of human abilities and virtues.¹⁶

It is important to point out that *Dante's* theory of nobility bears a remarkable resemblance to the concept of dignity as expounded by the leading Renaissance philosopher *Pico della Mirandola* in his 1485 work. *Pico* sees man's divinity as manifested in human self-creation, giving a new meaning to the concept of creation: the supreme creator is *God*, through him man exists, but becoming divine is only a possibility, it is up to man to make use of this possibility, to create himself. For *Pico*, the possibility of "self-creation" is given to all men, and therefore men are equal, but it is not certain that all will become divine. "We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."¹⁷

So there are very interesting similarities between *Cicero's*, *Dante's* and *Pico della Mirandola's* concept of dignity. All men are equal in the possibility of becoming divine (in this sense, all have dignity, all are noble), but not all are capable of achieving it. In the narrow sense, dignity or nobility is not based on birthright or wealth, but on the actions of a man who is knowledgeable, who thinks and who lives according to the virtues. In fact, *Dante's* masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, can be interpreted as *Dante* himself, the knowledgeable artist-man, adhering to his moral principles, walking the path to divinity: from hell to paradise, to participation in divine Love (according to this view, it is Love that makes man truly divine).

5. The structure of the Divine Comedy

I would like to conclude with a few comments on the *Divine Comedy* from the point of view of the value problem. In the *Divine Comedy*, medieval characteristics predominate: for example, the theme of the work, its depiction of the afterlife, its world view, its world view (the Ptolemaic world view: the Earth is the center of the universe, intersected by a sacral Master Cylinder), the numerology are all typically medieval. As well as the values of the work, since the *Commedia* is dominated by the emphasis on sin and the sinfulness of man. The classification of Hell refers to *Aristotle's* conception of the three main sources of sin as intemperance (*incontinentia*, from circle II to circle IV: the sinners of love, the gluttons, the misers and the prodigals), savagery (*feritas*, circles V and VII: the angry

¹⁶ KARDOS, *Dante's Humanism between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* 53–54.

¹⁷ PICO, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

and the spiteful, and the violent in three rings: those who commit violence against their fellow men, against themselves and against *God*, that is, murderers, suicides and blasphemers), and finally, deceit (*malitia*, circle VIII, circles V and VII: the murderers, the suicides and the blasphemers). Circle VIII: the deceivers who are not trusted in the ten circles, Circle IX: the traitors, i.e. the deceivers who are trusted in 4 sub-circles and the heretics who are not included in the above-mentioned concepts, as well as the indifferent and the unbaptised of the first circle¹⁸. It should be noted that while the defining element of the Christian concept of virtue and sin – on which *Dante* bases his work – is that morally good and bad actions (or life) will have afterlife consequences, *Aristotle* obviously did not speak of virtues and vices in this sense, but in terms of good and bad actions for individual and communal happiness. The *Aristotelian* division is therefore only a framework, and *Dante* defines the individual sins and their degree of seriousness on the basis of the Christian conception.

In Purgatory there is atonement, not punishment, the souls are cleansed of the cardinal sins. Paradise consists of 9 heavens, the 10th is the empyreum. In the first and second trine the *Platonic* virtues are represented: in the first trine the virtue of temperance (*temperantia*), in the second trine the Sun is the heaven of wisdom (*prudentia*), Mars is the heaven of courage (*fortitudo*), *Jupiter* is the heaven of justice (*justitia*). The third trinity is dominated by the Christian theological virtues: faith, hope and love.¹⁹ The poem culminates in the vision of *God*, in which *God* appears as Love itself: “Here force failed my high fantasy; but my desire and will were moved already – like a wheel revolving uniformly – by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”²⁰

If we look for Renaissance elements in the work, we can refer to *Dante*’s conception of love (he is lost in the dense forest of life because of love disappointment, he exalts his love *Beatrice*, he feels for the lovers who sin, see the story of *Paolo* and *Francesca*); the Creator, the Artist, walks through the afterlife and undergoes character development; *Dante* places his work next to the Bible, which is an expression of artistic self-awareness.²¹ In this context, *György Lukács* notes that the *Commedia* is a work in transition between the epopeia and the novel.²²

In closing, I will quote *Lajos Fülep*’s reflection on the relationship between man and *God*, inspired by the *Divine Comedy*: “*God* demands of man that he should constantly surpass himself, that he should constantly lose himself and not look back on himself, that he should constantly strive for greater ‘universality’. And man need not fear: for the most general being is also the most real, and therefore the most personal. (...) And personality attains its goal, becomes complete, when it becomes identical with absolute generality, as *Dante* in the final vision. The human being is placed behind the phenomenal world, but does not dissolve: in paradise, in the realm of the most complete identity, everyone has his own self. Everyone is identical with *God* and yet everyone is different from him. This is *God*’s greatest miracle, which cannot be expressed logically, but only experienced mystically.”²³

¹⁸ BÁN, The Structure of the Divine Comedy 108–109.

¹⁹ BÁN, The Structure of the Divine Comedy 110–111.

²⁰ DANTE, Divine Comedy, Paradiso 33. 142–145.

²¹ KELEMEN, The Philosopher Dante.

²² LUKÁCS, The Epopeia and the Novel.

²³ FÜLEP, The „Divina Commedia”.

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