Dante's Philosophical Canon (*Inferno* 4.130-44)

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Immediately after his encounter with the poets of the "bella scola" Dante, accompanied by his fellow sages, moves towards and enters the noble castle. Therein, seated on a vantage point high above a "meadow of green flowering plants," ("in prato di fresca verdura" [*Inf.* 4.111] Dante beholds the souls of the great-hearted ones ("li spiriti magni" [*Inf.* 4.119]) of antiquity who are arranged in groups. Celebrated first (*Inf.* 4.121-29) are those who achieved fame by lives of action, second (*Inf.* 4.130-44), those distinguished for their thought. Of special interest to us at the present is the second group for it represents Dante's canon of philosophical sources:

Poi ch'innalzai un poco più le ciglia,
vidi 'l maestro di color che sanno
seder tra filosofica famiglia.
Tutti lo miran, tutti onor li fanno:
quivi vid'io Socrate e Platone,
che 'nnanzi a li altri più presso li stanno;
Democrito che 'l mondo a caso pone,
Diogenès, Anassagora e Tale,
Empedoclès, Eraclito e Zenone;
e vidi il buon accoglitor del quale,
Diascoride dico; e vidi Orfeo,
Tulio e Lino e Seneca morale;
Euclide geomètra e Tolomeo
Ipocràte, Avicenna e Galieno,
Averois che 'l gran commento feo.

[When I had raised my eyes a little higher,
I saw the master of the men who know,
seated in philosophic family.
There all look up to him, all do him honor:
there I beheld Socrates and Plato,
closest to him, in front of all the rest;
Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance,
Diogenes, Empedocles, and Zeno,

and Thales, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus:
 I saw the good collector of medicinals,
 I mean Dioscorides; and I saw Orpheus,
 and Tully, Linus, moral Seneca;
 and Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
 Hippocrates and Galen, Avicenna,
 Averroës, of the great Commentary.] *Inf.* 4.130-44

Leaving aside those whose special talents lay in the applied and physical sciences, especially medicine, we are left with the following philosophers: Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Democritus, Diogenes, Empedocles, Zeno, Thales, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, Cicero, Seneca, Avicenna and Averroës. Not all of these philosophers, however, are of equal importance to Dante's thought, and, as we shall presently see, the main sources of influence lie with the first and the last four above named thinkers.

Philosophically, Dante was influenced by Aristotle more than by any other philosopher. On the one hand, this is hardly surprising given that Dante's life occurred immediately after and during the period in which much of the wisdom of ancient Greece, especially that of Aristotle, reappeared anew through the intermediary influence of Arabic translations and confronted western Latin philosophy (cf. Nardi 166 ff.). On the other hand, what is surprising is both the depth and breadth of Dante's familiarity with Aristotle, an intellectual achievement described by Moore (94) as "astonishing." There seems to be few Aristotelian works with which Dante was unfamiliar (the *Poetics*, as Moore, 93, notes, seems to be an important exception) and Aristotle is quoted repeatedly throughout Dante's works as a philosophical authority who ranks supreme (cf. Placella and Simonelli). He is, as Dante says prosaically, "il maestro de li filosofi" (*Conv.* 4.8.15) or, according to the poetic depiction of *Inferno* 4.131, "il maestro di color che sanno" and his philosophical influence on Dante and his literary output reigns supreme. In fact, taking all of his writings together, Dante quotes or refers to Aristotle's works more than any other authoritative text save the Bible, and in the *Commedia* Aristotle is only surpassed by the Bible, Virgil and Ovid (cf. Moore's tables, 321 ff.).

Dante, of course, did not know Aristotle in the original Greek, but, as he himself tells us in the *Convivio* (2.14.7), used two Latin translations of Aristotle which he calls the "new" and the "old." Moore (307-18) traces the latter to the Arabic-into-Latin versions of Aristotle and the former to the Greek-into-Latin versions of Aristotle's works, now known as the "Antiqua Translatio." Armed with these translations Dante immersed himself completely in the Stagirite's works. In the *Commedia* the resultant influence of Aristotle on Dante is everywhere to be seen. Four examples will suffice. First is the distinction between sins of incontinence ("incontinenza") and sins of vicious habit ("malizia") which Dante makes in *Inferno* 11.82 and which he bases on the

same distinction in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (7.1.1145a) as he himself expressly admits in *Inferno* 11.80. Second is the odd collocation by Dante in the punishment of certain categories of sinners such as the suicides and the spendthrifts in *Inferno* 11.43-44 and the sodomites and the usurers in *Inferno* 11.49-51 which is to be traced to the influence of Aristotle (cf. *Nic. Eth.* 4.1.120a and *Phys.* 2.2. [194a21]). Third is Dante's awareness of the good for humankind of society (represented by the speech of Charles Martell in *Paradiso* 8.115-20), an awareness voiced by Aristotle in the *Politics* (1.1.2 as expressly acknowledged in *Paradiso* 8.120). Lastly, there is the long speech of Statius on the development of the embryo which occupies most of *Purgatorio* 25 and which mirrors Aristotle's theory of the same in his *Generation of Animals*. Not only is the vocabulary derivative but the entire presentation is closely modeled on Aristotelian ideas such as the underlying argument of the four digestions, the initial development of the soul which is similar to vegetative and animal life, and the importance of the heart for the life of the embryo.

Therefore front and center in Dante's philosophical thought stands Aristotle who as "magister sapientium" (*De. vulg. eloq.* 2.10.1) is "degnissimo di fede e d'obbedienza" (*Conv.* 4.6.7). Interestingly enough, this close relationship between Aristotle and Dante has served as the touchstone for dantean philosophical studies of the twentieth century. For the belief, held in the earlier part of the century and most notably associated with the scholars Cornoldi and Busnelli, which posited that Dante was in essence a Thomist and therefore also an Aristotelian, came under heavy fire in the mid-century by such scholars as Bruno Nardi. Nardi tried to situate Dante within a much more dynamic world of thought than the simple catchphrase "Thomist" or "Aristotelian" implied and sought to unravel the complex series of philosophical thought patterns at work in Dante's output. His important conclusion was that Dante's ideas are a mixture of neo-Platonic, Averroistic, Avicennistic elements so that they cannot be possibly traced to the sole influence of one particular source, Aristotle, or otherwise. Dante for Nardi, therefore, was essentially a neo-Platonist whose philosophical world is highly eclectic. More recently however, the pendulum has started to swing in reverse. For, as Kenelm Foster points out, although there is not much to be said for calling Dante a Thomist/Aristotelian, and although there are clear signs of neo-Platonic influence in Dante's thought, nevertheless, Aristotle is not to be forgotten. As he concludes, Dante's world when "analysed philosophically [...] turns out to be a rather uneasy synthesis of Neoplatonist and Aristotelian elements" (57). And most recently in an engaging study of Dante and Christian Aristotelianism Patrick Boyde has explored the processes of "creation" and "generation" as Dante knew them and shows how Dante has fused them in his theory of human embryology. In this endeavor Boyde emphasizes the primary importance of Aristotle who is not only regarded as "the master of human life," precisely because he had shown us the goal of our exist-

ence" (294) but who also is responsible for driving Dante in his last years to elaborate the two ends, the earthly and the heavenly, and hence, the two natures of humans which are the consequences of mankind's two efficient causes, generation and creation, the former supplied by Aristotle, the latter by Christianity (294-95). Therefore, although neo-Platonic influences are everywhere to be seen in Dante (cf. below), they in no way downplay the pivotal importance that Aristotle played in Dante's conception of the universe and of humankind's place in it.

Grouped next to Aristotle, but possessing far less philosophical significance for Dante's thought, are Socrates and Plato, the precursor and the founder of the Academy, respectively. Socrates (cf. Delhaye), of course, was the teacher of Plato as Dante was well aware, but he seems to be afforded his privileged place in Limbo (next to Aristotle and in front of all the rest) because, as Dante remarks in the *Convivio* (3.14.8), he is representative of those who have subjugated all other human pleasures to the pursuit of ideas. But this singular honor aside, Socrates is treated in brief and fragmentary manner in Dante's works, being seen merely as the precursor or as the one who inaugurated that search for moral truth which was perfected and found its fullest expression in the genius of Aristotle (cf. *Conv.* 4.6.15) who is regarded by Dante as "maestro e duca de la ragione umana" (*Conv.* 4.6.8). Socrates is thus cast into the shadows by Dante, who notes that Socrates, "because of the absence of affirmative statements in his philosophy" (*Conv.* 4.6.14) did not even leave his name to his followers. In similar manner, Plato is treated by Dante most summarily (cf. Cristiani; Moore 156-64). He is noted in the *Convivio* as the friend of Aristotle and as the founder of the Academy (*Conv.* 3.14.8 and 4.6.14). And in two other passages of the same work Dante relies on more legendary evidence to add that Plato was the son of a king (*Conv.* 3.14.8) and that his life span of eighty years is a perfect embodiment of the natural existence of human beings (*Conv.* 4.24.6). But of Plato's works Dante, like his contemporaries, seems to have had limited knowledge, relying almost exclusively on a Latin translation and commentary of the *Timaeus* by Chalcidius of the late fifth century. Moreover, with respect to this work Dante seems to be decidedly negative in the *Commedia*. For in *Purgatorio* 4.1-16 Dante attacks the "error" (*Purg.* 4.5) of Plato whom Dante held in the *Timaeus* to believe in the plurality of souls, a belief refuted by Aristotle in the *De anima* 3.9. Furthermore, in *Paradiso* 4.22 ff. the pilgrim's seeing the souls of Piccarda and Costanza within the moon raises a doubt whether the belief expressed by Plato in the *Timaeus* that the creator of the universe had assigned the souls to stars and that they, at death, returned to their originating star, might be true. This belief is then vehemently attacked by Beatrice who points out that all souls, in reality, inhabit the Empyrean and that they appear to Dante in the different spheres only to demonstrate for his mortal eyes the degrees of their beatitude. Beatrice, in fact, intensifies her attack on

this Platonic doctrine by calling it "insidious" (*Par.* 4.27) precisely because it suggests an overpowering influence of the stars on human actions and therefore threatens the critical dantean doctrine of free will (cf. *Purg.* 16.67-81). Thus, while allowing himself the use of a Platonic construct to stage the appearance of souls throughout the heavens, Dante resolutely denies the underlying doctrine. Dante, in fact, seems almost anti-Platonic in the *Commedia* and there is none of the celebration of Platonic ideas for their affinity with Christianity, a belief particularly dear to Augustine (cf. *De. civ. dei* 8.5.8 and 10).

For Dante, however, as for medieval culture in general, Platonism was not limited to Plato proper, but was an odd combination of many elements including Aristotelian, Platonic, neo-Platonic, Averroistic and Avicennistic ideas (cf. Nardi; Gilson). For Dante's times can be defined in a single word: a meeting place, not only between eastern and western philosophy, but also between ancients and moderns and between these and everything that lay between. Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Porphyry, Augustine, Avicenna, Averroes, all of these are subsumed under the banner heading of Platonism, all were available to Dante either directly or through various intermediaries and all contributed to the shaping of his thought. Many ideas in Dante are thus not direct borrowings from Plato but from neo-Platonic elements, as Nardi has argued, ideas such as the role of the angels in the formation of the sublunary world (cf. Nardi 245-50), human nature as a creation to restore the ruin of the fallen angels (250-53), and creation of the sensible world (253-62). Moreover, the influence of the last two philosophers listed in *Inferno* 4, namely, the Arabs Avicenna and Averroes, appears to have been substantial, as Nardi (209 ff.) and others have shown (cf. Gilson 257 ff.; Giacon; Vasoli). Thus, Dante's view (*Conv.* 4.21) of the soul's three resident things or virtues ("la virtù formativa," "la virtù celestiale," and "la virtù del motore del cielo") and, especially, his treatment of the role of "la virtù celestiale" (the influence of the heavenly bodies) as the active principle in the soul's passage from potency to act, offers not only clear references to Aristotle and neo-Platonism but also to Avicenna and Averroes (cf. Nardi 209-223). Moreover, Dante's doubt expressed in the *Convivio* (4.1.8) whether the primal matter of the elements was contained within God, a doubt which lingers into the *Commedia* (cf. *Par.* 29.22-24), reflects the view held by Avicenna in his *Metaphysics* (*Summa theologiae* 1, q. 15, a. 3, ad. 3; cf. Nardi 248-53) while Dante's theory of a possible intellect, unique and separated for humankind, is directly inspired by Averroes as he expressly tells us in the *De Monarchia* (1.3.9). The Arabs, therefore, represent for Dante the new or modern learning (signified by their placement which occurs last in the list and parallels the placement of the contemporary Saladin in the preceding list of great-hearted individuals of action) at its best and they contribute in a major way to Dante's philosophical thought. In sum, Dante's Platonism includes a broad spectrum of philosophical thought which results from a synthesis of many disparate ele-

ments. It is precisely this synthesis which confers on Dante's work its twin characteristics of the vibrant and dynamic interlocking of ideas and of the seemingly intellectually impenetrable world that such an interlocking provides.

Next to Aristotle, it is Cicero who exercises the greatest influence on Dante's philosophical thought (cf. Moore 258-73; Ronconi). Surprisingly, it is not as a supreme orator but as a philosopher that Cicero is retrieved and presented by Dante. Of Cicero's rhetorical works Dante seems scarcely aware (cf. Moore 258 ff.) and Cicero is explicitly absent from the catalogue of writers listed by Dante in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (2.6.7) as being masters of the high prosaic style ("qui usi sunt altissimas prosas"). Cicero's philosophical works, however, are quoted extensively in Dante's works, more than half of the Ciceronian citations coming from the *De officiis* or the *De senectute*, after which rank in importance the *De amicitia* and *De finibus* (cf. Moore 258). Dante has a special affection for Cicero, referring to him in *Inferno* 4 and elsewhere as "Tully," and in the *Convivio* (2.12.3) Dante lays bare the formative influence that Cicero played in his philosophical growth for it was a reading of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* coupled with Cicero's *De amicitia* that consoled Dante after Beatrice's death and that led him to the study of philosophy. It was thus the influence of this work that caused Dante eventually to imagine philosophy as "una donna gentile," a lady of compassion and a great thing (*Conv.* 2.12.6). Moreover, it was also from this work that Dante borrowed his understanding of love as a meeting of equally virtuous souls and as an end in itself (cf. De Robertis 21 ff. and 93 ff.) and used that understanding to fashion his Christian understanding of caritas, expressed both in the *Vita nuova* (18) and the *Commedia* (*Inf.* 2.72) as a turning towards the beloved in an act of selflessness, an act which is transhumanizing and which confers ultimate meaning and joy on one's life (cf. Ronconi 992).

In the *Commedia* Cicero's influence is in evidence on a number of fronts, although he is never expressly acknowledged. First among these is Dante's distinction between sins of violence and sins of fraud (*Inf.* 11.22 ff.) which accords closely with Cicero's similar distinction between the same vices in the *De officiis* (cf. Moore 259). In addition, while there is no actual quotation, Dante's depiction in *Purgatorio* 19.22 of the Sirens as having turned Ulysses aside, may be due to his reading of Cicero's *De officiis* 5.18.49, where Cicero implies that Ulysses had been trapped by the Sirens and traces this entrapment to a desire for knowledge, a fact in perfect conformity with Dante's depiction of Ulysses in *Inferno* 26.97-99 and 112-20. Finally, Dante was not only influenced by the general tone of Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* (which he probably knew through Macrobius' commentary, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*) and its mid-life vision but he also probably used it as one of the models for the Cacciaguida episode which spans the central cantos of the *Paradiso*. For, as

Guy Raffa (121 ff.) has argued, Dante displays in the episode a subtle pattern of numerical echoes of the *Somnium Scipionis* whereby Scipio the Elder's prophecy to his grandson that he will be called upon to defend the state "when his life has completed seven solar revolutions eight times" is picked up by Dante (most interested in the product of the two numbers, namely, 56) and used by him not only to stage the location and the length of the Cacciaguida encounter (the fifth sphere and five hundred and fifty lines), but also to date his principal character of Cacciaguida who lived fifty-six years, the same age at which Scipio the Elder prophesies his grandson's tragic fate in the *Somnium*.

In addition to these borrowings Dante seems to have used Cicero as his meeting point with many other philosophers of the past, especially those Greeks listed in *Inferno* 4 who were little more than names to Dante and who played a minimal, if any, role in Dante's thought. Thus, the Greek Atomist Democritus in *Inferno* 4 is given the epithet "che 'l mondo a caso pone," and this evaluation whereby Democritus is said to have traced the world's origin to chance would seem to echo Cicero's mention of Democritus' theory of creation in *De natura deorum* (1.24.66). But whereas the philosophical tradition often joins Democritus with Epicurus as those who reject providence, its role in creation and the immortality of the soul, Dante expressly separates the two and places Democritus in Limbo whereas he reserves the sixth circle of Hell to house the heretical souls of Epicurus and his followers (*Inf.* 10.13-15), all of whom are condemned for their denial of the immortality of the human soul. The name of Diogenes, most likely, Diogenes the Cynic, was also probably suggested to Dante by Cicero who styled him as "durior Diogenes [...] ut Cynicus asperius" (*Tusc. disp.* 1.43.104) and who described the ancient sage as one who viewed wisdom as a dirty cloak shunned alike by riches and desire (*Tusc. disp.* 3.23.56) and who was as indifferent to death as he was to burial (*Tusc. disp.* 1.43.104). Diogenes, therefore, is a paragon of the pursuit of thought and, as such, an ideal candidate for inclusion among the other sages of Limbo. Empedocles and Heraclitus are grouped together by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (8.1.1155b) and it was either from this source or from Cicero's numerous allusions to them (cf, for Empedocles, *Academica*, 1.12.44; 2.5.14; 2.23.74; *De nat. de.* 1.12.29; 1.33.93; for Heraclitus, *Academica*, 2.37.118; *Tusc. disp.* 5.36.105; *De fin.* 2.5.15; *De nat. de.* 3.14.35) that Dante's knowledge of them was gained. Of Zeno of Citium Dante makes greater mention than his fellow Greeks, noting in the *Convivio* (4.6.9) that he was the first and most important of the ancient philosophers ("primo e prencipe"), and the founder of the Stoic school and contrasting his opinions with the true opinion of Aristotle (*Conv.* 4.22.4). He is also included by Dante as being among those who sacrificed their lives for ideas (*Conv.* 3.14.8). Zeno thus stands at the beginning of a philosophical tradition which Dante knew as "Stoic" and which he contrasts (*Conv.* 4.22.15) with the two other schools of

ancient thought, namely "Epicurean" and "Peripatetic" (beginning with Socrates and Plato and culminating in Aristotle). This Stoic tradition consists for Dante (*Conv.* 4.6.9) in a life of strict integrity "unreservedly following truth and justice, in not showing sorrow for anything or joy for anything, in not being responsive to any emotion" ("la verità e la giustizia seguire, di nulla mostrare dolore, di nulla mostrare allegrezza, di nulla passione avere sentore"). Both Dante's portrayal of Zeno and his understanding of the "Stoic" school are traceable to Cicero who describes Zeno as "inventor et princeps Stoicorum" (*Tusc. disp.* 2.42.131) and who discusses "Stoic" philosophy in many passages which present "Stoic" doctrine in a manner very similar to Dante (cf. *Academica* 2.42; *De fin.* 8.28; *De fin.* 31.71; *Tusc. disp.* 5.25.44; 4.17.37). As for Thales, Dante seems to have been unaware of his reputation, even recorded in Cicero (*Acad.* 2.37.118) as being chief among the seven ancient sages, and in the *Convivio* he omits his name as among the seven ancient wise men. However, this may be due to a false or corrupt reading of Augustine (cf. *Stabile* 513), and the fact that he is placed among a group of philosophers (Democritus to Heraclitus) who sought to find some underlying universal principle to account for creation is perfectly in accord with Cicero's overview of early philosophy at the beginning of the *Academic questions*. Anaxagoras, the friend and teacher of Euripides and Pericles, is portrayed by Cicero as being indifferent to wealth, as having surrendered his inheritance to his relatives (*Tusc. disp.* 5.39.115) and as having accepted with serenity the death of his son (*Tusc. disp.* 3.14.30). It is, undoubtedly, this picture of Anaxagoras as the champion of the contemplative life which is responsible for Dante's placement of him in Limbo.

As it is not Cicero the orator but Cicero the philosopher that influences Dante, so too it is Seneca the philosopher ("Seneca morale") and not Seneca the tragedian that is recalled by Dante in *Inferno* 4 (cf. Paratore; Verbeke). Seneca prefigures in Dante's list (*Conv.* 3.14.8) of those who have sacrificed their lives for knowledge and he, along with Numa Pompilius, is described as "illustrious" ("illustre") because of example or teaching (*De vulg. eloq.* 1.17.2). Thus, Seneca, both by virtue of his epithet of "morale" and Dante's prose references to him, stands out for the poet as an *exemplum* of those concerned with moral truth and as a continuator, in Latin, of what Dante considered to be the hallmark of Greek speculative thought, namely, the science of morality. In the *Commedia* there are only slight traces of Seneca. Seneca's description of Alexander of Pherae as "latro gentiumque vastator" ("robber and devastator of nations," *De beneficiis* 1.13.3) may argue for the latter's identification as the person intended in *Inferno* 12.107. More certain is that Seneca's description of Ulysses's voyage as "extra notum nobis orbem," ("beyond the world known to us," *Epistolae morales* 88.6) and of the hero's placement among those "sapientes laboribus et contemptores voluptatis et victores

omnium terrarum" ("who are wise for their labors, contemptuous of pleasure and victors over all the earth," *De constantia sapientis* 2.1) contributed to Dante's account of the Homeric figure. Finally, although commentators draw attention to the Virgilian influence (*Aen.* 6.470-71 and 10.693 ff.) for the admonition in *Purgatorio* 5.14-15 to the pilgrim to persevere and "stand like a sturdy tower that does not shake/its summit though the winds may blast" ("sta come torre ferma, che non crolla / già mai la cima per soffrar di venti") it may well be that this is a rendering of Seneca's "quemadmodum proiecti quidam in altum scopuli mare frangunt [...] ita sapientis animus solidus est" ("as projecting crags are not affected by the beating of the deep sea, so too the soul of the wise man is ever constant," *De constantia sapientis* 3.5).

Thus does Dante lay bare his canon of preferred philosophical *fontes* in *Inferno* 4. But by staging his encounter with them within the noble castle in Limbo Dante is also revealing not only his attitude towards pagan knowledge in general, but also, and more importantly, the difference in attitude between the author of the *Convivio* and the author of *Commedia*. For all of these philosophers, like the pagan poets before them, are condemned to a "life of hopeless longing" in Limbo and whereas Dante acknowledges, even praises, their contributions to rational thought by constructing the noble castle for them, he also locates that noble castle in Limbo, therefore, far removed from the true destiny of humankind. Thus Dante's philosophers while representing value do not represent true value for their words are not imbued with the Word of God. As a result, they are condemned precisely because they lived before the time of Christ and did not come to believe in him. It is because of this great deficiency of theirs that Dante in the *Commedia* revisits his earlier flirtation with the "donna gentile" of Philosophy of the *Convivio*. Now, everything is focused on following the true path and anything not supportive of that true path is seen to be wanting. It is precisely for this reason that Beatrice blames the pilgrim in *Purgatorio* 31.37 ff., namely, that at her death he was distracted not only by other women but also, and more insidiously, by mistress philosophy. Distraction, therefore, with anything not germane to the truth is to be shunned. Thus the poet of the *Commedia* realizes and acknowledges his earlier stumbling. Dante's attitude towards philosophy in the *Commedia*, therefore, is a revision of his earlier attitude expressed in the *Convivio* and such a revision highlights perfectly the complex relationship between both works. For more than a simple continuation of his earlier literary efforts and more than a simple *palinode*, the *Commedia* represents a total rethinking and a total reworking of previously held ideas and views, all of which are now judged by the light of faith. As a result, the pagan learning so celebrated for its own sake in the *Convivio* now is seen in the *Commedia* as leading to nothing more than a life of "fruitless longing"(cf. *Purg.* 3.40-45) on the part of those who had espoused it.

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