Good, Evil, Love and Humility
in Dante's *Commedia Divina*

Course: Evil in Thought & Literature
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1. *How and in what terms can Dante's perspective on evil in his* Commedia *be sketched out? How is this question related to finding the right proportions and measure?*

Privatio Boni and Free Will

'Noi siam venuti al loco ov'i't'ho detto
che tu vedrai le genti dolorose
c'hanno perduto il ben de l'intelletto'.

'We now have come where, as I have said, you'll see
in suffering the souls of those who've lost
the good that intellect desires to win.' (Virgil to Dante in *Inferno* III, 16-18)

For Dante, as for Aristotle and Plato[1], human beings by nature seek the good. Natural love, therefore, is always good. Rational love (mind-love) though, can be focused on the wrong objects and therefore cause evil. Or, if focused on the good, it can still err in finding the right measures. Evil, for Dante, is having either too much, or too little of the good. Evil itself therefore is always rooted in love, albeit love for the wrong objects, or too much or too little love. For Dante evil doesn't have his own essence, which makes sense, because if it would, God could be blamed for having created evil! God is good;

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[1] The opening line of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics:* 'Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; (…)'. For Plato, compare *Meno, 77d,e.* Since Plato's work, as opposed to Aristotle's, wasn't yet translated into Latin, Dante was probably only familiar with Cicero's translation of Plato's *Timaeus.* However, Dante's thinking shows strong resemblances with Plato's philosophy. This is not surprising: Plato was Aristotle's teacher, and Platonism also played an important role for one of Dante's main influences, Augustine.

therefore evil must be the absence of good, the *privatio boni*[2]. It's a deviation of the love that's naturally drawn to the good. Good and Evil, for Dante, are inextricably linked and love is the mainspring. The seven sins, for Dante, are all perverted forms of love: an excessive form (Lust, Gluttony, Greed), deficient form (Sloth) or malicious form (Envy, Pride, Wrath).

Also for Augustine (354-430 A.D.), one of Dante's main influences, the direction of love is crucial. If we direct our love solely towards physical objects, we deceive ourselves in thinking that that physical object is in itself good, whereas the only reason why it's good is because God created it. Only God is intrinsically good, so if we love physical objects, we should, *through* those objects, still direct our love to God (Enright: 2007).

But in order to deviate from the good, we humans have to be able to make our own decisions. God didn't just give us this natural love that is always drawn to the good. The crucial point is that God also equipped us with *free will.* It's our ability to decide that can cause our love's path to go astray. Thus, Virgil talking to Dante:

'Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate

pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto

movesse seco di neccesitate

Se così fosse; in voi fora distrutto

libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia

per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto.'

'You, living there, derive the cause of all

straight from the stars alone, as if, alone,

these made all move in mere necessity.

Yet were that so, in you would be destroyed

the freedom of your will – and justice fail

in giving good its joy and grief its ill.' (*Purgatorio* XVI, 67-72)

Freedom of the will is very important, not only in Christian thought as an answer to the question of how there can be evil in a world ruled by a truly good God, but also specifically to Dante: for him, harm caused by deceit is far worse than harm caused by force; in *Inferno* the treacherous are in a much lower part of hell than the (physical)

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[2] Augustine: *Confessions*, translations from Rex Warner, Henry Chadwick, and newadvent.org/fathers '(…), because I did not yet know that evil was nothing but a privation of good (that, indeed, it has no being)'. See also Augustine's *Enchiridion,* Chapter 11: 'What is called Evil in the Universe is but the absence of Good'.

violators. This is not surprising: whereas physical violence, even if it's executed out of free will, can be stimulated by emotion or passion, treachery, on the other hand, is always an act of *consciously* putting someone on the wrong path and violating an established bond of trust and love (*Inferno*, XI).

These bonds between humans are crucial to Dante; we are interdependent and therefore need these bonds in order to communicate and collaborate. To violate them is a sin, not so much against God, but against *humanity*. God is omnipotent and omniscient, but within God's plan, we humans can still *choose* our actions, and therefore are *responsible* for them. Determination for Dante therefore is compatible with free will. Ulysses, devising the strategy of the Trojan horse and thus deceiving the Trojans, deceiving Achilles and stealing from Troy the Palladium, is an example of someone who abuses his intellectual capacities and violates human bonds of trust and love. Therefore, Dante has assigned him a place in the lowest circles of hell (*Inferno, XXVI*).

Slaves of Lust

For Dante, it's of crucial importance that one find the right measures in order to be a morally good person. Ulysses represents the lack of measure, the problem of never getting enough. He can't get enough experience; when he's finally home he can't wait to go out again and experience more of life, and of 'the vices and virtues of mankind' (*Inferno* XXVI, 99*),* which will eventually lead to his death. We have to find constraints, in order to actually free ourselves from our own excessive passions. If we don't do this, we become mere slaves of our passions and appetites.[3] It's this *inactivity* that Dante condemns as being evil; those people who refuse to free themselves from their appetites will end up in hell**.** The story about Francesca da Rimini in Canto 5 of *Inferno* indicates this very clearly: Francesca, while reading the love-story of Lancelot, committed the sin of adultery, and claims that not she, but Love was the only cause of her sin. The

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[3] Plato already emphasized the importance of measure (*metron*). In the *Philebus,* he talks about a man who is chasing young boys, without any kind of measure. His pleasure is impure, it has no limits, can only be more or less, without a measure (*Philebus* 52c,d, 45d). Plato says that we ought to find a balance between the limited or the One (*peras*), and the unlimited (*to apeiron)* or the many. Ideally we humans find a combination of the unlimited, bound by the One, thus creating something that has a measure (*metron*). If we fall into sheer unlimitedness, there is no quality, no substance (*ousia),* only the endless quantity of more or less. In order for a definite amount, with quality, to come into being, we have to apply a measure (*metron)* to the unlimited (26d). Socrates and Protarchos are discussing whether pleasure or reason should get the first prize in living a good life. They come to the conclusion that neither of them can by it self be good. What's needed and what's crucial to combine pleasure with reason is measure (*metron).* Therefore measure gets the first prize (66a). So also love, if not bound by a limit, can only be *more or less, too much, too little,* with no constraint, no measure, and thus can have evil consequences. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (2:6) makes a distinction between excess (too much), defect (too little) and the intermediate (middle). Virtue always aims at the intermediate. However, some deeds, like murder or adultery, don't have these distinctions and are intrinsically wrong.

protagonist[4] Dante feels sorry for her (116-117,140-141), but this shouldn't confuse us with regard to the poet Dante's moral point of view: Dante assigned her a place in hell, emphasizing that her sin was not so much physical love itself, but her refusal to use reason to free herself from her sinful passion.[5] She was condemned for carnal sin, and thus became one of those sinners who 'made reason bow to their instinctual bent' (*Inferno* V, 39). To say it in the words of Augustine, she became a 'slave of lust'.[6]

Love in itself can never be evil, only love's *direction* and *measure* can be, and *we* are the ones who choose this measure and direction. Excessive love is by definition evil. The protagonist Dante himself, in his love for Beatrice, exceeds the right measures of love. As Dante's guide, Virgil[7], is the mediator between Dante and Beatrice, Beatrice is the mediator between Dante and the divine; she represents love and grace. Just after Dante, with the help of Beatrice, has been cleansed of his sins in the river of Lethe, he keeps staring at her. Her 'second beauty', meaning her physical beauty, overwhelms him: 'my eyes were walled in by/indifference to all else'. This indifference prompts the virtue-nymphs to correct him: 'Far too fixedly!' (*Purgatorio* XXXII, 4-5, 9 and XXXI, 138). Dante's love here was directed towards Beatrice's physical appearance, and by lingering there too long, he lost track of love's 'correct' direction, namely the divine. Also, Dante's own confession in Canto 31 of *Purgatorio* has to do with a wrong direction of love. He indulged in love towards transient objects, mere things of 'here and now', instead of choosing eternal love for Beatrice:

> Piangendo dissi: 'Le presenti cose
> col falso lor piacer volser miei passi,
> tosto che 'l vostro viso si narcose'.

> Weeping, I said: 'Mere things of here and now
> and their false pleasures turned my steps away
> the moment that your face had hid itself'. (*Purgatorio*, XXXI)

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[4] Because Dante, as a poet, and Dante, as a protagonist, are not necessarily one and the same, I sometimes make a distinction between 'Dante the protagonist' and 'Dante the poet'.

[5] However, one might argue that, by deliberately creating a discrepancy between Dante the protagonist and Dante the poet, Dante invites his reader to morally decide for *himself*. Seen from this humanist perspective, the *Commedia* also functions as a motivation to develop the reader's moral, rational, linguistic and perceptive skills.

[6] Augustine: *Confessions*, Book VI, Chapter XV, refering to himself before his conversion! (Hereafter Augustine will be cited in text with references to book and chapter.)

[7] Virgil represents the virtue of language and Roman justice. He is placed in Limbo, the first circle of *Inferno*: this is where souls live that led virtuous lives, but weren't baptized and therefore couldn't properly honour God.

Similarly Augustine, in his *Confessions,* writes about his excessive physical love before his conversion, being a 'slave of an unbreakable habit.' (Book VI, Chapter XV**).** By directing our love towards physical, transient objects, we impede our love towards God and the eternal; therefore it's sinful. Augustine, even after his conversion, must have had a hard time fighting against his sexual temptations, in order to direct his love solely towards God. Not at any rate does he, in the *Confessions,* hide this past from his readers ('[…] and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you', (Book X, Chapter XXVII). In Canto 15 of *Paradiso*, Augustine's influence on Dante becomes quite obvious:

> Bene è che sanza termine si doglia
> chi, per amor di chosa che non duri
> etternalmente, quello amor si spoglia.

> It's only right that all know endless grief
> who, loving only things that can't endure,
> steal from themselves, eternally, true love. (*Paradiso* XV, 10-12)

Privatio Mali and Self-Sufficency

In *Paradiso,* one would think that Dante would solely discuss divine and good things; nothing could be further from the truth. When, in Canto 15, he has his great-great-grandfather talking about the good old Florence, we are presented not by all the great features that it used to have, but rather by all the bad features that it *not yet* had:

> 'Non avea catenella, non corona,
> non gonne contigiate, non cintura
> se vosse a veder più che la persona.
> Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura
> la figlia al padre ché 'l tempo e la dote
> non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura.'

'No bangles had she [Florence], nor a showy crown,

no exquisite, embroidered skirts, no sash

more meant for viewing than the person was.

As yet the birth of daughters did not bring

fear to the father: since no wedding dower

nor early marriage past the proper norm.' (*Paradiso* XV, 100-105)

So not only is evil presented as a human deviation of love for the good, here the good is presented as the absence of that evil deviation! Even in the middle (Canto 15) of such a delightful place like *Paradiso*, Dante offers us a form of the good that is not by itself good, but only because of a privation of it's opposite! This *privatio mali* is a political project: by presenting the 'good' Florence before the decline as a utopia, he all the more emphasizes the decline of Florence of his own time.

But what exactly is so evil about Florence of Dante's time? Florence has become decadent: people are showing off with money, paying huge amounts for dowries, and getting rid of any age limits for marriages. Again, evil is linked to exceeding measures and proportions, it's going 'past the proper norm' ('Norm' being the translation of *misura*, actually meaning 'measure' or 'limit'). Florence used to have this norm, when it still 'lived on in modesty, chasteness and peace' (*Paradiso*, XV, 99). Dante speaks out against the idea of infinite progress, of cities becoming bigger and bigger, wealthier and wealthier. When you lose any idea of limits or measures, it just becomes a matter of *more or less*.

Florence used to have the right measures and wasn't in need of any growth: it was *self-sufficient*.[8] Dante's ideal of a city is very much linked to the idea of God: God is beyond any temporal and spatial dimensions, He therefore isn't in need of anything outside of himself. God and old Florence are *self-sufficient*, whereas Dante's Florence is constantly seeking to grow and become wealthier. In this excess Florence is showing the sin of pride and lacking the moral virtue of temperance: everyone wants to be better and wealthier than others.[9] It's not surprising that Dante keeps emphasizing the moral decline of Florence and the sins of pride and avarice: it was the ever growing wealth and

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[8] Compare Socrates' lines in Plato's *Alcibiades* (134b): 'And hence it is not he who has made himself rich that is relieved of wretchedness, but he who has made himself temperate (…) So it is not wall or warships or arsenals that cities need, Alcibiades, if they are to be happy, nor numbers, nor size, without virtue (…)
And if you are to manage the city's affairs properly and honourably, you must impart virtue to the citizens'.

[9] An example of someone who *did* show temperance was St. Francis from Assisi (1181-1226), whom Dante praises very highly in Canto 11 and 12 of *Paradiso*. Dante admires him for his 'great lowliness': St. Francis gave up his wealth and 'married' Poverty ('His bride was Poverty', 86).

consequent power of Florence that eventually led to Dante's exile in 1302.[10] This of course plays a pivotal role in his view on Florence and it's rulers. It would be interesting to know what Dante would have thought about the risky and excessive financial behaviour that led to the financial crisis in 2008. Those Wall Street bankers, who also violated established bonds of trust with their clients, thus deceiving them, would certainly not have obtained a place in Dante's *Purgatorio*, let alone *Paradiso*: once you *become* the embodiment of excess, where the sins of pride and avarice constitute your character, cleansing yourself of those sins becomes rather contradictory.

Misinterpretation of the Good

The absence of good can also be a misunderstanding or *misinterpretation* of the good. This is how Adam talks to Dante about the 'fall' in Canto 26 of *Paradiso:*

>'Or, figliuol mio, non il gustar del legno
>fu per sé la cagion di tanto essilio
>ma solomente il trapassar del segno.'

>'My dearest son, the tasting of the tree
>was not of itself the cause of banishment,
>but rather the transgression of the mark.' (*Paradiso* XXVI, 115-117)

Not so much eating the forbidden fruit, but rather transgressing the mark was a sin. Adam and Eve could do everything they wanted, albeit within certain measures: they weren't allowed excessive knowledge that eating from the Tree of Knowledge could give them. Their sin, and therefore the evil, was an excess of measures. It's good to seek and love knowledge, but within certain limits. Further on (124-142), Adam speaks about language, and mentions Nimrod, who built the tower of Babel. The story goes that, after building the tower of Babel, confusion entered human language (Genesis 11:1-9). Adam's lines suggest that his original language, given by God, had already been changed, even long before the building of Babel. Dante here emphasizes the mutability of human language, and the danger of misunderstanding that comes with it. Since we have reason

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[10] Initially, Guelphs where fighting with the Ghibellines. The Guelphs supported the Pope, whereas the Ghibellines supported the Holy Roman Emperor. After the Guelphs had defeated the Ghibellines in 1289, Florence's political power led to a split within the Guelph party: The Black Guelphs and the White Guelphs. The Black Guelphs were proponents of papal influence, whereas the White Guelphs were opposed to it, especially to the influence of Pope Boniface VIII. Supported by the Pope and Charles de Valois, the Black Guelphs gained power in 1301 and evicted the White Guelphs (Dante's party). This led to Dante's exile in 1302.

and free will, we will use language in whatever way we want. Not only after the Tower of Babel, but already from the very beginning human language is a cause for misunderstanding, and thus for evil! Deceit, for instance, the sin that we discussed earlier, is made possible by manipulating language - deliberately saying something that isn't true. By pointing out these problems of language, Dante is implying that human language will *always* fall short in capturing and communicating divine matters, thus alluding to his own incapability of describing his final vision of God in *Paradiso* XXXIII.

Humility

The emphasis on finding the right measures, not wanting to be better than everybody else, and realizing our own limits, is all linked to an important message that Dante wants to convey to his readers: practice humility. We humans have to know our own limits, and not be daredevil and impatient to try to immediately reach the top. Humility is shown by Dante, not only in the way he praises his guide and teacher Virgil and all his other heroes, but also in the way the *Commedia* is constructed: before he can start climbing up *Purgatorio* and from there enter *Paradiso*, he starts by descending *Inferno*. Dante realizes that in order to ascend, one has to descent first.[11] This, by itself, is an ultimate sign of humility. It was Ulysses' mistake that he didn't show humility: by immediately wanting to reach the top he caused his own destruction.

What is at stake here is that we humans have to *find out* that we can err, that we can either love the wrong things, or *wrongfully* love the right things. This finding out is part of a learning process: as Dante the protagonist in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* keeps asking the sinners about their past, he is *learning* how one can go astray. Dante the poet wants to share his experiences with his readers, but he also asks his readers to find out *themselves*, to learn about evil in order to know the good and to find their own way to God. *Know thyself*, the Delphic maxim, of crucial importance for Socrates' line of thought, still echoes in Dante's poem. Once we know that we can all sin, we realize that we are in constant need of God's grace and therefore have to practice humility. What's crucial to Dante is that we don't deny our ability to sin, that we repent our sins and ask for God's grace. Francesca da Rimini, in *Inferno*, still doesn't recognize her sin but keeps blaming an outside force, Love, for her deeds. Therefore she doesn't even get a chance to cleanse herself of her sin.

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[11] The *Commedia* is constructed in a way that Mount Purgatory is a mirror image of *Inferno*. He places *Inferno* underneath Jerusalem, which is exactly on the opposite side of the world from Mount Purgatory. Thus, after Dante has descended to the center of the earth, in hell, where Satan resides, his descend becomes mirrored; hence his descending *Inferno,* since the world is round, turns into an ascending of Mount Purgatory.

It's God's grace that eventually (Canto 33) makes Dante's eyes resistant to see divine beauty; in the preceding Canto's Dante's eyes couldn't handle it yet. Before Dante can reach the good, he has to have knowledge and, more importantly, *experience* of evil. But, even as he reaches the highest sphere, Dante realizes that he can't really grasp the good. When he finally made it to the *Elysium* (the eternal sphere of the divine) he is confronted with a paradox: he wants to understand and communicate what is happening to him, but human memory, language and imagination can't grasp it (*Paradiso* XXX, XXXIII): they are transient, and therefore incommensurable with the eternal divine, like a geometer trying to fit squares into a circle (*Paradiso,* XXXIII, 121-145).

Dante is presenting us with a journey that we should undertake, and, as we learn from the *Commedia,* it's not an easy one. Humility doesn't preclude hard work; on the contrary, by practicing humility we realize all the more that we need to keep improving our faculties of language, perception, and rational argumentation, in order to enhance communication and avoid evil misunderstandings. Finding the right measures and practicing humility is the only way to reach salvation! But, one might ask, what measures? How much, how little? Dante doesn't provide us with an instruction manual on how to reach God. Trying to establish certainty is arrogant to him and doesn't have to do anything with humility. In the *Commedia* he keeps embracing doubt (*Paradiso IV,* 131-132: 'These [pure doubts] flourish at the foot of truth. / From height to height, they drive us to the peak'.) The only thing that he doesn't doubt is that, in order to receive God's grace, we have to *work hard.* By practicing humility and finding the right measures and directions of our love, we avoid evil and make ourselves receptive to God's grace.

> E non voglio che dubbi, ma sia certo,
> che ricever la grazia è meritorio
> secondo che l'affetto l'è aperto.

> And here I would not have you be in doubt.
> It is a merit to receive God's grace,
> in measure as hearts open up to that. (*Paradiso* XXIX, 64-66)

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