

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-37009-7 - Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy

Patrick Boyde

Excerpt

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PART ONE

Coming to terms with Aristotle

CHAPTER ONE

The prestige and unity of the Aristotelian corpus

'The Master of those who know'

The first line of the *Comedy* tells us that the events to be narrated took place when the narrator was 'in the middle of the journey of our life'. The words are usually interpreted (with a certain amount of circularity in the reasoning) to yield the very precise sense that it was 1300, when Dante was in his thirty-fifth year. But it is equally possible, and highly desirable, to understand the phrase less narrowly as meaning 'in our middle age', that is, in the second of the three ages of man, which, in Dante's view, extends from the twenty-fifth to the forty-fifth year of a normal human life span.¹

There are several linked advantages in this more flexible formulation. It helps us to see that the protagonist is portrayed with critical detachment by the author of the poem, who writes from the superior vantage point of full maturity gained in the *third* age. It prepares us to recognise that Dante-the-author depicts his earlier, wayward self as a typical representative of that time of life, as someone who manifests both the weaknesses and the 'signs' of innate goodness which theory would lead one to expect in a well-endowed man during his middle years. Taken together, these considerations remind us that Dante-the-pilgrim is a character in a work of fiction: he is partly drawn from life, partly a free creation and partly modelled on a type.

If we want to discover what the *historical* Dante was really like in the crucial years of his second age, at a time when his work gives clear indications that he was approaching some kind of crisis, we must turn to the *Convivio*, and especially to the fourth and last book,

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probably written in 1307 or 1308, when Dante was not much over forty.

Few sections of that book could be more revealing than chapters xi–xiii, which develop and amplify an argument which he had formulated in just five lines of verse in the poem to which the book is a commentary. The central chapter (xii) is very well known, because it is there for the first time that Dante explicitly uses the image of the ‘journey’ of human life. And it will be instructive to quote the opening of his extended simile, since it can reasonably be interpreted as evidence of the creative or ‘philomythical’ Dante growing impatient with his self-imposed role as commentator and teacher:

Imagine a traveller who is taking a road along which he has never been before. Every time he sees a house in the distance, he believes it to be the inn; and each time he finds he was wrong, he extends the same belief to the next house. And so he goes on from house to house until he does come to the inn. The soul is like this traveller. It has never been on the strange journey of this life before [*nel nuovo e mai non fatto cammino di questa vita*]. As soon as it sets out, it turns its eyes towards the supreme good, which constitutes its goal; and every time it sees something that seems to embody some good, it believes it has found that goal.

At first, its judgement is defective because it lacks experience and instruction. So it believes that small objects of little value are large and valuable, and it begins by desiring them. This is why we see small boys long for an apple above all things, and then, when they are a little more advanced, set their hearts on a pet bird. From this they go on to desire a fine suit of clothes, then a horse, then a woman. Next they aspire to a modest fortune, then to a larger one, then to a still bigger one. And this happens because the soul never finds what it is looking for in any of these objects, but believes that it will find its heart's desire further on.

(*Con.* iv, xii, 15–16)

The chief interest of these three chapters, however, with their sustained attack on the pursuit of riches, and their celebration of the quest for knowledge, lies in what they reveal about Dante the thinker and philosopher in his second age. And we could sum this up by saying that he is still under the spell of Aristotle.

Aristotle was the inventor of the syllogism, which is used in the strictly logical passages. Aristotle figures prominently among the authorities (indeed, if we include the previous chapter in our count, he is quoted more frequently than any other source in this section, since there are six references to his works, as against five to the Bible

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and five to Boethius). Lastly, it was from Aristotle that Dante derived his most important new argument, namely, that human beings *can* achieve a perfect human happiness in *this* life, because the 'natural' desire for certain knowledge (in which this happiness consists) *can* be satisfied, notwithstanding the limitations of our intellect. Nor is this composite debt in any way surprising, since Aristotle had been described in the first eight chapters of the same fourth book of the *Convivio* as 'the master of human reason', the 'guide of human life' and the 'master of the philosophers'. In fact, Dante is nowhere more representative of his time than in the reverence he felt for the man whom everyone called '*the* Philosopher'.

The rediscovery of Aristotle

Aristotle's reputation had not always stood so high. Before the middle of the twelfth century his fame in the Latin West rested on two short introductions to the science of logic (although it has to be said that these had been of crucial importance for the new breed of dialecticians who laid the foundations of the scholastic method in the monastic and then in the cathedral 'schools' of northern France). But in the hundred or so years between the death of Peter Lombard in the early 1160s and the death of Aquinas in 1274 – the years in which the University of Paris became the most important intellectual centre in Western Europe – he had climbed slowly but inexorably to a position of absolute supremacy. By the latter year, virtually all his works had been translated and re-translated, 'commentated' and 're-commentated', attacked and defended, re-attacked and re-defended. A Parisian Master of Arts in the 1280s or 1290s was in a position to know what Aristotle had actually said and what he really meant in some of his more cryptic utterances. He could hold an informed opinion (although not an uncontroversial one) concerning the truth of certain propositions which seemed to run counter to Christian belief. And he could and did deploy Aristotelian concepts, terminology and methods in his own questions and disputations. Back in the 1150s his course would have been limited to works relevant to the seven Liberal Arts; in the 1250s the curriculum of the Arts Faculty in Paris is known to have consisted almost exclusively of 'bookes (...) of Aristotle and his philosophie'.²

Obviously, one cannot do justice to a hundred years of complex

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development in a single paragraph, nor condense that paragraph into a single phrase. There is, nevertheless, more than a grain of truth in the textbook cliché that forms the title of part one. The history of philosophy and theology in the first part of the thirteenth century had been one of 'coming to terms with Aristotle' in the most pregnant sense of that expression. And this is why any serious reader of Dante must sooner or later 'come to terms' with Aristotle in the more limited sense of acquiring at least a nodding acquaintance with the essential concepts and terminology of his philosophy.

Aristotelian moral science: one among three, or three in one?

The known writings of Aristotle may be divided into three main groups: (a) an inquiry into the meaning of knowledge itself, that is, 'true' or 'demonstrable' knowledge (*scientia*); (b) knowledge about the universe (*scientia naturalis*); (c) knowledge about man considered as a being distinguished from the rest of the universe by his capacity for knowledge and by his capacity to initiate or control action in accordance with his knowledge (*scientia moralis*). At the risk of oversimplification, one might say that his writings were devoted to truth, nature and human nature. And Dante clearly had these distinct groups in mind when he described Aristotle, in different places and contexts, as (a) 'the master of those who *know*', (b) 'the glorious philosopher to whom *Nature* had revealed her secrets more than to any other man', and (c) 'the master of our life', who 'showed the purpose and goal of *human living*'.³

My last book drew extensively on the texts dealing with the science of nature. The present volume, by contrast, is affected more strongly by the gravitational pull of works in the third group, especially by the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereinafter known simply as the *Ethics*).

Now, it is important to acknowledge that the *Ethics* may be studied without constant reference to Aristotle's other writings. It is not a difficult or pronouncedly theoretical work. The approach is for the most part commonsensical and down to earth, and there are many real life examples to illustrate the general points. Aristotle addresses himself to mature men who are assumed to have wide experience of the world and 'sound judgement'; and he often concludes that the adages and rules of thumb enshrining the practical wisdom of this

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class of reader are at least tolerably well founded from the point of view of the professional philosopher. He is generally cautious and undogmatic; and he does not lose sight of the principle, enunciated near the beginning of the work, that one cannot demand the same degree of exactitude in the study of human affairs that one may reasonably expect from the theorems of geometry. Many of the issues he defined are still at the centre of ethical debate, even though the terminology has changed; and however much individual members of the legal profession or members of the general public might disagree in theory about the definition of such matters as 'personal responsibility', the 'age of consent' or the 'admissibility of circumstantial evidence', it is clear from the decisions reached in the law courts of the free world that, in practice, judges and jurors find themselves very much in agreement with the content and spirit of Aristotle's work.⁴

It is also arguable that the Aristotle whom we feel we get to know in the *Ethics* is a less forbidding, less monolithic figure than the author of the *Metaphysics* or *Concerning the Heavens*. Reading the work, one comes to understand why some twentieth-century scholars have been at pains to bring out the inquisitive character of his mind, why they are inclined to view internal inconsistencies between one work and another as signs of a desirable evolution in his thought, and why they admire him as the man who kept asking questions and checking his hypotheses against the evidence, rather than as the oracle who delivered all the answers.⁵

Nevertheless, the reader of Dante must always bear in mind that the 'false' image of Aristotle, which modern scholarship has consigned to the lumber room, was precisely that of 'the Philosopher' with a capital P – the image which had been so lovingly pieced together and set on a pedestal in the course of the thirteenth century. Like so many of his near contemporaries, Dante was strongly attracted to Aristotle, not simply because he had investigated every branch of knowledge in turn, but because he seemed to offer a *unitary* vision of knowledge, nature and man.

The three groups of works were expressions of a single endeavour and formed a unified system of thought. It was not possible, so it then seemed, to acquire knowledge about 'nature' without knowing what 'knowledge' was, or without mastering the linguistic tools and the 'primary' concepts provided in the writings on logic and in what Aristotle himself called 'First Philosophy' (only later were these

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books so seductively named *Metaphysics*). Similarly, one could not understand 'human nature' unless one understood the structures, properties, powers and functions of *animal* existence, because man was seen to be – to paraphrase Dante – 'up to his neck' in the natural order.⁶

Again, one could not grasp what was distinctive about the power that differentiates man from all other existing species unless one knew enough about animals to be able to perceive how human 'reason' differs from the 'cunning' of a fox, the 'docility' of a horse or the 'imitative' ability of a monkey or parrot (in Aristotle's model of rational knowledge, concepts like these are reached and successively refined by a process of comparison and contrast). The more one studied what was distinctively human, and what was therefore good for man considered as a human being, the more inescapable seemed the conclusion that the purpose of our life, and the nature of our happiness, lay in the 'actualisation of a potential for knowing' (this is a paraphrase of a definition accepted by Dante).⁷ And so the path of investigation seemed to lead full circle through 'natural science' and 'human science' back to the original question: 'What is knowledge?'

Aristotle's commentators and disciples

The medieval commentators – from Averroes (d. 1198) in Moorish Spain to Aquinas (d. 1274) in Paris – excelled above all in interpreting Aristotle '*with* Aristotle'. They would use their understanding of the whole body of his thought to justify one translation of a difficult phrase against another, or to reject an apocryphal work as being un-Aristotelian. They filled out the lacunae in Aristotle's frequently elliptical utterances and reconstructed the 'missing stages' in what they took to be a syllogistical train of thought. Hence, when a student of Dante's generation read the *Ethics*, he found the text embedded in an extensive commentary which presented the 'moral science' in the framework of 'science' and 'natural science'.

As often as not, Dante would have encountered Aristotle's ethical thought at second hand in the lapidary fragments that were quoted by his teachers or contemporaries in the course of their own independent enquiries (typically, the quotations were used as points of departure or as proofs of an intermediate stage in the argument). As a result, Aristotle came to seem more authoritarian and technical

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than he really was. And while medieval philosophers and theologians no doubt prided themselves on conducting their investigations in a thoroughly professional – that is, Aristotelian way – they frequently turned a deaf ear to their master's warning concerning the degree of certitude which is possible in the study of human *mores*.

They also forgot that Aristotle liked to consider ethics as a branch of practical knowledge, and therefore as no different in principle from medicine. A doctor studies the workings of the human body in order to keep his patients 'well' or to restore them to good health. Similarly, the student of ethics should investigate the operations of the whole man – body and mind – in order to take the right decisions in everyday life. Even today, an ordinary non-philosopher could still read the *Ethics* for guidance on how to bring up his children so that they would achieve happiness and well-being. But he would be deterred or frustrated by the scholastics. They continued to define, distinguish and syllogise in the discussion of ethical problems exactly as they would do in solving a puzzle in formal logic. They treated feelings, obsessions and conflicts of interest and duty as if they were dealing with the interaction of impersonal physical forces. And it was precisely this approach to moral issues that was to form the principle target of attack for later opponents of scholasticism such as Petrarch and Francis Bacon.

'Natural', 'human' and 'combined' operations

It would therefore be seriously misleading to remove the *Ethics* from the elaborate contemporary 'frame' in which it was perceived by Dante, or to clear away the areas of 'over-painting' that are to be attributed to the good intentions of thirteenth-century experts; and this is why the present book is structured in such a way that discussion of the simpler ethical issues is located – and seen to be located – within an appropriate context of non-ethical assumptions and ideas.

Actions that can be performed only by human beings – intellect-ion and voluntary acts – will not be treated in any detail until parts three and four, which may be thought of as establishing a beachhead and exploring the coastal plain of the vast territory which Dante called 'operazioni umane'.

In the four chapters forming the second part, man will be treated

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as a member of the natural order, and as the object of a purely 'natural science'. We shall examine some of the more important processes or activities that Dante described as 'operazioni naturali', by which he meant involuntary actions, such as seeing or running, which are indeed carried out by man, but which are no different in principle from those performed instinctively by the higher species of animals. (To put it in Dante's own perspective, we shall study the powers of sensation and movement, which belong to us by virtue of our common, *generated* nature, before we study the rational and volitional powers, which are directly *created* by God in each individual human being and therefore stand outside the order of nature.)⁸

The process of 'coming to terms with Aristotle', however, begins immediately in the remainder of part one, because these three brief chapters will offer a highly selective introduction to Aristotle's 'primary philosophy' and physics – an introduction which will be confined to those concepts and terms which are necessary for the understanding of Dante's psychology and ethics.

Hence, the four parts of the book may be compared to the concentric circles of a target on an army rifle-range. Working from the circumference towards the centre, the 'outer' ring of physics provides the necessary frame for the poetically named 'magpie' (devoted to natural operations) and the 'inner' (devoted to specifically human operations). Together, the 'magpie' and the 'inner' circumscribe and define the 'bullseye', which will study Dante's poetic representation of what might be called 'combined' operations, that is, actions performed by human beings which involve the exercise of both our natural and our God-given powers.

A brief course in Aristotelian physics may seem an odd way of preparing for a journey to the heart of Dante's poetry; but, as my last epigraph suggests, there is a looking-glass logic at work. We are going to 'try the plan' of walking purposefully 'in the opposite direction' from the text. Who knows? It may 'succeed beautifully'.

CHAPTER TWO

Movement and change in lifeless bodies

Nature, mobility and mutability

In ordinary English usage, 'physics' is taken to be just one branch of the 'natural sciences', but in the university Latin of Dante's time the corresponding words *physica* and *scientia naturalis* were exactly synonymous, the Latin noun *natura* being the counterpart of the Greek *physis*.

The definition of *physis* that Aristotle gives in his *Physics* was common coin by the end of the thirteenth century, but has become so unfamiliar nowadays that it may seem quite bewildering on first encounter. 'Nature', he said, 'is the origin of movement and change': *natura est principium motus et mutationis*. From this it follows – logically but still challengingly – that 'the subject matter of natural science is that which exists but does not remain in the same place or state': *subiectum Physicorum est ens mobile*.

Part of the difficulty in the second definition lies in the noun *ens* ('that which exists'); and this stumbling block may be removed by substituting the familiar word 'body' (*corpus*, plural *corpora*), which suggests something reassuringly solid and accessible to the senses. The object of study in physics can then be redefined as 'bodies in motion', or 'bodies subject to change' (*corpora mobilia*). This certainly sounds more natural in modern English, and, despite an element of tautology, there are distinct advantages in going back to this locution, provided it is borne in mind that the word 'body' may refer to something as vast and fluid as the ocean or atmosphere, or as minute and irritating as the speck of dust in the eye that we still describe as a 'foreign body'.