

PRIORITY OF THE INTELLECT IN THE PARADISO

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MIDST the fancy, poetic imagery and symbolism with which Dante clothes his ideas in the *Paradiso*, one strong and central fact stands out with remarkable clearness and depth—his thought on the nature of heavenly beatitude in which he upholds the priority of the intellect over the will.

Throughout the whole *Divine Comedy* this idea is evident; however it is in the *Paradiso* particularly that the insistence on the priority of the intellect is most unmistakably brought out, because the question on the essence of heavenly beatitude is the crucible wherein is tested the strength of any theory on this point. There are innumerable passages which specifically treat of the genesis of beatitude and in one of them this note of intellectual supremacy is portrayed.

We from the greatest body
Have issued to the heaven that is pure light;
Light intellectual replete with love,
Love of good replete with ecstasy,
Ecstasy that transcendeth every sweetness.¹

As is usual with Dante his presentation of such a problem is in reality the decking out in splendid verse the doctrine of St. Thomas. The Thomistic doctrine on this point is clear, “. . . beatitude is the attainment of the ultimate end. This attainment however does not consist in the act of the will. . . . It is therefore necessary that there be some other act than that of the will by which the end is made present to the will. . . . And so the essence of beatitude consists in an act of the intellect.”²

There is however another theory concerning the manner by which man attains to beatitude. According to Scotus and the Franciscan tradition the will is the governing factor in attaining beatitude; for “the will commanding the intellect is the superior cause of its act. The intellect if it is a cause of volition is a cause subservient to the will.”³

¹ Par. 30, 38-42. Longfellow's Translation.

² *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 3, a. 3.

³ *Scotus*, IV *Sent.*, Dist. XLIX, q. 4.

Dante's admiration for St. Thomas and his love for the Franciscans whose Tertiary habit he wore would not permit him to inject into the *Commedia* anything acrimoniously controversial. The two opinions he does not regard as antagonistic but as supplementary and in a remarkable and ingenious display of symbolism reconciles in poetic fancy, if not in fact, the two doctrines. To him knowledge and love could be regarded as cause and effect and in such a sense one is necessary to the other, and one always produces the other. There are two ways of attaining happiness and derive their importance and dignity only from their object. Like two roads to the same goal, they have a meaning and use only with reference to a destination.

Yet for Dante, the Franciscan opinion was not in conformity with his plan for the Divine Comedy,

And thou shouldst know that they all have delight
As much as their own vision penetrates
The Truth, in which all intellects find rest.
From this it may be seen how blessedness
Is founded in the faculty which sees,
And not in that which loves, and follows next.*

It has become traditional to regard the Dominicans as coldly rational and the Franciscans as flaming with charity. From the very foundation of both Orders this view has prevailed; it is not entirely owing to the Intellectualism of St. Thomas nor the Voluntarism of Scotus, rather the character and attitude of the founders themselves served to a great extent in shaping this course. Dante speaking of St. Dominic calls him "the Splendor of Cherubic light." The Cherubim in medieval theology signified Wisdom. Dante places St. Dominic in the place of the fixed stars, the home of the Cherubim who shine with the knowledge of God. The nine angelic orders are called mirrors and they receive and transmit the Eternal Light. St. Dominic placed in the abode of the Cherubim reflects on the world the light of God as sent to him from the mirrors of the Cherubim. It was the duty of Dominic and his followers to give to the world this light, and the Dominicans adhering to the ideas and ideals of their founder have achieved renown as theologians and philosophers whose greatest concern has ever been the guarding and transmitting the doctrine of the Church in a scientific, logical and rational manner.

Of St. Francis, Dante says he was "Seraphic in his ardor." Now Seraphim signify ardent love and their place is that nearest to God. The ninth heaven is occupied by those noted for burning char-

* Par. 28, 106-111.

ity and in placing St. Francis there Dante through symbolism describes the character of the Franciscan Order. Their manner of reaching God is through the heart rather than through the head, and if in the course of time this approach crystallized into a theological system whose dominant note was the supremacy of the will, it never obscured the fundamental fact that St. Francis was a mystic, and his order's chief claim to glory rests on its unswerving fidelity to charity.

Dante's conception, then, of the two schools of thought is not of two mutually exclusive systems, nor even of antagonistic theories. Rather he conceives them as supplementary, and mutually dependent—as the perfection of two distinct methods of approach to God. His illustration of this point is extremely interesting and fairly glows with that sublime imagery he evokes when describing his visions of the Paradiso.

Dante, praising God for his arrival in the Heaven of the Sun, the abode of the theologians, finds himself with Beatrice entirely surrounded by a circle of twelve starry lights of such brilliance that they shine out strongly and clearly against the dazzling background of the sun. St. Thomas names to Dante his companions and pronounces a great eulogy on St. Francis. On his falling silent, a second circle appears, also of twelve lights, outside the first and the friend of Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, becomes the spokesman and pronounces a eulogy on St. Dominic. After a discourse by Solomon on the resurrection of the body, a third circle appears, far behind the two already present; it is like a horizon clearing and a new substance appears in it like the stars and is of such dazzling brightness that Dante is forced to exclaim,

“O very sparkling of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

The symbolism here employed is very simple and to that fact in large measure may be attributed its clarity and meaning. The two types of theology are made to stand out in clear outline. The fact that St. Thomas Aquinas is the leading exponent of the inner circle signifies, as commentators point out, the Dominican type of theology, the type that has its beginning in the intellect. The outer circle which is headed by St. Bonaventure is regarded as the Franciscan type, the type stimulated with a greater infusion of mysticism and dependence on the instincts of the heart rather than on the cold arguments of the intellect. The two thoughts are not repugnant nor contradictory, for Dante points out that both are necessary and harmonious.

⁵ Par. 14-76.

In the first circle St. Thomas appears first and that circle represents Knowledge, for knowledge comes before love. Thomas turns not to his own master, St. Dominic, but to St. Francis the Seraphic lover since it is knowledge that brings forth love. St. Bonaventure, the spokesman for the second circle, which is Love, in turn gives a eulogy on St. Dominic the Splendor of Cherubic light since love brought forth by knowledge brings forth a greater deepening of knowledge. According to Aquinas, Bonaventure could not appear first to praise St. Dominic, for love is incapable of bringing forth knowledge until love is first stimulated by knowledge.

Thou shouldst know that they all have delight
As much as their own vision penetrates
The Truth, in which all intellect finds rest.⁶

There is a harmonious relation between the two circles. When the second circle appears outside the first, motion is started by the inner circle of knowledge which sets in motion the second circle of love.

And one to have its rays within the other
And both to whirl themselves in such a manner,
That one should go forward, and the other backward.⁷

The inner circle of knowledge headed by Aquinas sets in motion the second circle of love, for in the Thomistic view love springs from knowledge. It seems that Dante himself is taking part in the controversy that knowledge is the source of love. Yet he shows that the two circles work harmoniously and that for the operation of the second the first must set it in motion. It was Dante's own conviction that the intellect was prior to the will, but he did not make the mistake of discounting the force and value of the will. Though it is first necessary to know before one can love, yet the unceasing craving of the whole human composite is not to be satisfied through satisfaction of the intellect alone. Unrest and search is not only the result of the mind being unsatisfied with an incomplete account of truth, the incessant desire of the will for an adequate object also plays a tremendous part, and the consummation of man's happiness in heaven will not only consist in the sight of the Divine Essence but also in the submerging of the will in that vast ocean of Charity we call God.

⁶ Par. 28, 106-108.

⁷ Par. 13, 16-18.