

Aristotle in Dante's Paradise

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ARISTOTLE IN DANTE'S PARADISE

Marguerite BOURBEAU

RÉSUMÉ. — Au chant de l'*Inferno*, Dante, par la voix de Virgile, explique la structure morale de l'Enfer, qu'il base explicitement sur l'Éthique à Nicomaque d'Aristote, mais nulle part dans le *Paradiso*, il ne dévoile de la même manière son principe d'organisation. Le but de cet article, qui a d'abord été présenté sous forme de conférence à "the Villanova Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies" à Philadelphie, en septembre dernier, est de suggérer que ce principe pourrait être la conception aristotélicienne de la *philia*, telle que comprise par les commentateurs du treizième siècle, et en particulier, par Thomas d'Aquin.

SUMMARY. — In Canto XI of the *Inferno*, Dante, through Virgil, explains the moral structure of Hell, which he bases explicitly on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, but nowhere does he state in the same way the principle of organization of the *Paradiso*. The aim of this paper, which was read at the "Villanova Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies" in Philadelphia, last September, is to propose the Aristotelian conception of *philia*, as understood by thirteenth-century interpreters, especially Thomas Aquinas, as a key to the understanding of Dante's *Paradiso*.

Dante's readers might accept readily enough that the principle of organization for the *Inferno* is based on Aristotle's *Ethics*, as it is expressly stated in Canto XI. But nowhere does Dante present in the same manner what this principle might be for the *Paradiso*; the consequence being that commentators have been debating and arguing over the matter for centuries. All sorts of theories have been proposed, of which a good sample is presented by Alexandre Masseron in the introduction to his translation of the *Paradiso*¹. For each one, he finds serious objections, whether the interpretation is based on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the Eight Beatitudes or the sciences of the Trivium and Quadrivium, or again, on the distinction between active and contemplative life. He also finds difficulties with the interpretation based on three theological virtues and four cardinal virtues, adding with a touch of humor that this

1. Alexandre MASSERON, *La Divine Comédie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1950, pp. 599-602.

system has known various degrees of success as each virtue find itself in a different heaven, according to the commentator one looks at.

One would seem very bold indeed to suggest another interpretation when so many have tried and failed, but it is precisely because of this failure that one is encouraged to keep looking. Therefore, I would like to put forward an idea that has not yet appeared in the vast literature on Dante, and that is, the possible influence of Aristotle. Of course, I realize that nothing short of a thesis would suffice to present and defend this idea and, therefore, to pretend to settle the question within a few pages would be sheer foolishness on my part. Consequently, my intention in this article is simply to introduce the idea that Dante took up the Aristotelian notion of friendship as the basis for the whole structure of his paradise but, and I would like to stress the *but*, in doing so transforms it under the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas. This transformation is by no means a minor one; it is a radical transformation with far-reaching implications. Nevertheless, it is the transformation of a principle which strictly belongs to Aristotle. In this way, even if the Philosopher is not seated among the blessed in the white Celestial Rose, he would still be in Dante's paradise.

At the beginning of his *Politics*, Aristotle says:

As in other departments of science, so in politics, the compound should always be resolved into the simple elements or least parts of the whole. (...) He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else will obtain the clearest view of them².

This advice is taken up by Dante. In the same way that the *Inferno* represents the progressive disintegration of the human personality and community, down to its final stage in the City of ice, in the same way, the *Paradiso* illustrates its progressive unification, up to its perfection in the Celestial Rose. Dante, in the company of Beatrice, begins by seeing the heavenly souls distributed in the first seven spheres before seeing them together, first in the Heaven of the Fixed Stars and then, in the Empyrean. But in reality, these souls have no other home than the Celestial Rose where they all dwell together, as Beatrice explains in reference to the spirits of the Moon:

They're shown thee here, not that they here reside,
Alloted to this sphere; their heavenly mansion,
Being least exalted, is thus signified.
This way of speech best suits your apprehension,
Which knows but to receive reports from sense
And fit them for the intellect's attention³.

(IV, 37-42)

“This way of speech best suits your apprehension, / Which knows but to receive reports from sense / And fit them for the intellect's attention.” For Dante, as for

2. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, I, 1252 a 8. Here and in subsequent quotations from Aristotle, the English translation is taken from: *The Works of Aristotle*, translated into English under the editorship of J.A. Smith, W.D. Ross (Oxford 1908 sqq.).

3. “Qui si mostraro, non perché sortita / sia questa sfera lor, ma per far segno / de la celestial c'ha men salita. / Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno, / però che solo da sensato apprende / ciò che fa poscia d'intelleto degno.” — Here and in subsequent references I am quoting from the English translation of Dorothy Sayers (Harmondsworth 1949).

Aristotle, the way of knowing is radically different for the human intellect as compared to the divine intellect. God knows himself directly in his own essence, but this is not so far the human mind which, in the beginning, is empty. In Aristotle's words, "what it thinks must be in it just as characters may be said to be on a writing-tablet on which as yet nothing actually stands written"⁴. Therefore, man's intellectual life depends on an object which is external to him. In the consideration of this external object, the mind becomes actual; only then, can it reflect on itself and know itself.

This way of knowing is particular to man because human nature is not simple. Because it is not simple and because it is always in motion⁵, not only is man incapable of possessing the Good immediately, but he is also incapable of perceiving it in its unity. The Good takes on for him a multiplicity of forms, every one of them being necessarily incomplete as it reflects only one of its numerous facets. In consequence, man can only know the Good under its finite aspect, that is, through the diversity and distinctions of the temporal world.

Yet the world in its distinctions tends towards unity. The desire for the Good does not only belong to man, it is common to the whole of nature. "And for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim"⁶, says Aristotle in the opening words of the *Ethics*, thus underlining the universal character of this desire, principle of all motion. Dante does the same in the first canto of the *Paradiso*:

Wherefore to divers havens all these move
O'er the great sea of being, all borne on
By instinct given, to every on enough.
'Tis this that draws the fire up to the moon,
The mover this, in hearts of mortal things,
This that binds up the earth and makes it one.
Yea, and this bow's discharge by no means wings
Irrational creatures only ti their goal,
but those endowed with loves and reasonings⁷.

(I, 112-120)

By its very nature, the desire for the Good implies at one and the same time the distinctions between the subject which desires and the object of its desire, and the unity towards which the subject tends. Man, too, looks for this unity but he cannot attain it unless he proceeds from all the distinctions, of which every single one must therefore have its "raison d'être" and its place in the order of things.

Consequently, the City is not a collection of jumbled elements gathered by chance. On the contrary, the City possesses a fundamental coherence and unity which manifest themselves in plurality. All its elements are complementary and all together, they form the most beautiful harmony. Since the Good can be perceived by the human mind

4. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III, 429 b 31.

5. Cf. Id., *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1154 b 20.

6. *Ibid.*, I, 1094 a 2.

7. "Onde si muovono a diversi porti / per lo gran mar de l'essere, e ciascuna / con istinto a lei dato che la porti. / Questi ne porta il foco inver' la luna; / questi ne' cor mortali è permotore; / questi la terra in sé stringe e aduna; / né pur le creature che son fore / d'intelligenza quest' arco saetta, / ma quelle c'hanno intelletto e amore."

only through the unfolding of all its finite forms — and only this mode of divisions and distinctions — it is solely through the City, taken in its entirety, in the diversity of all its complementary elements, that the unity and simplicity of the Good become manifest. Thus, the City is not simply a preparation for the contemplative life, as it might appear at first glance in reading Aristotle, but, and this is of great importance, the City is the substance itself of the contemplation.

It follows that every man has a place of his own within the City. Furthermore, even though the philosopher might occupy a special place on account of his contemplative activity, which reveals the essential character of the City, i.e. its unity in plurality and also, its role in the expression and limitation of the divine Good, no other activity can be removed on the ground that it is less elevated.

Hence, the necessity of human relationships and consequently, of friendship, the basis of all human communities. For, according to Aristotle, “in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too; at least men address as friends fellow-voyagers and fellow-soldiers, and so too those associated with them in any other kind of community”⁸.

In a general way then, every human relationship is a kind of friendship. The relationship between the shoemaker and his client, who in exchange for his shoes pays him in proportion to his worth, is a form of friendship⁹. The relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, host and guests, between brothers, comrades, fellow-voyagers, citizens, are all forms of friendship¹⁰.

It soon becomes apparent that, in the same way that the hole of the universe is moved by a force of attraction, the City in its entirety is animated by an identical principle. It is not without reason that Aristotle, at the very outset of his books on friendship, first considers the question under its physical aspect and quotes Euripides, Heraclitus and Empedocles. Although he drops this aspect of the question, saying that the physical problems do not belong properly to a treatise on Ethics¹¹, nevertheless, he thus suggests that love is the principle of motion in all its forms. In his conclusion of the *Metaphysics*, he had already established the existence of a final cause who, in distinction from every other thing which moves by being moved, originates motion without being moved itself, in being the object of love¹².

Indeed, the characteristic of love is to move the lover towards the beloved object. However, whereas in the physical world, motion, even when it proceeds from an intrinsic principle, always depends on an external mind which directs it to its own end, in man this motion results from the knowledge of the good, object of his desire, and is voluntary. This is why it is called more precisely rational or intellectual desire. In general, human love is divided in two categories according to the object towards which it moves. This object can be a good desired for the lover himself or for another;

8. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, VIII, 1159 b 27.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, IX, 1163 b 30.

10. *Ibid.*, VIII, 1161 b 11.

11. *Ibid.*, VIII, 1155 b 7.

12. Cf. *id.*, *Metaphysics*, XII, 1072 b 4.

or else, it can be a person for whom the lover wishes the good either for the sake of the useful, the pleasant or the good itself. One speaks of friendship only if it is a person that is loved¹³. St. Thomas Aquinas maintains the same distinction, using the terms: love of concupiscence (for the object) and love of friendship (for persons).¹⁴ Moreover, Aristotle affirms the excellence of friendship considered as a virtue. He says: "Friendship seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than justice, for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy; and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality."¹⁵

Thus friendship is the most excellent of virtues and all of the other virtues find their achievement and their perfection in it. This holds true also, and above all, for the happy man. Aristotle, in repeating a current opinion, seems to dispute this statement:

It is said that those who are supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends; for they have the things that are good, and therefore being self-sufficient they need nothing further, while a friend, being another self, furnishes what a man cannot provide by his own effort; whence the saying "when fortune is kind, what need of friends?"¹⁶

However, the Philosopher answers the objection right away by giving out different reasons why the happy man needs friends. Among these reasons, he insists in particular on the fact that man contemplates virtue better in others than in himself and furthermore, that their good actions are his own. Because happiness consists in the activity of contemplation and because this human activity, unlike the divine activity, demands a distinction between the contemplating subject and the contemplated object, "the supremely happy man will need friends of this sort, since his purpose is to contemplate worthy actions and actions that are his own, and the actions of a good man who is a friend have both these qualities"¹⁷. The Philosopher also insists on the fact that a solitary life is hard; it is easier to be continuously active with, and towards friends than alone¹⁸. Hence is brought out the role of life in common in the activity of contemplation. This activity, necessarily discontinuous for man, then possesses a certain continuity and, thus, imitates the simplicity of the divine act, which is unceasing and perfect contemplation in eternal immobility. Hence, again, the necessity of the City.

Following Aristotle, Dante and St. Thomas Aquinas affirm that it is only through the intermediary of the sensible world that man is capable of rising to the knowledge of the intelligible world. St. Thomas says, in the *Summa Theologica*:

13. Cf. id., *Nic. Eth.*, VIII, 1155 b 27.

14. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I-II, Q. 26, A. 4, resp.

15. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*, V, 1155 a 22.

16. *Ibid.*, IX, 1169 b 4.

17. *Ibid.*, IX, 1170 a 5.

18. *Ibid.*

Deus enim omnibus, providet secundum quod competit eorum naturae. Est autem naturale homini ut per sensibilia ad intelligibilia veniat: quia omnis nostra cognitio a sensu initium habet¹⁹.

Consequently, says he, it is perfectly befitting that the Holy Scriptures use bodily metaphors to express spiritual matters²⁰. Dante uses the same argument in the same order in the *Paradiso*:

This way of speech best suits your apprehension,
Which knows but to receive reports from senses
And fit them for the intellect's attention.
So Scripture stoops to your intelligence:
It talks about God's "hand" and "feet", intending
That you should draw a different inference...²¹
(IV, 40-45)

So, whether one is concerned with the natural knowledge of God, the only possible kind of knowledge in Aristotle's view, or whether it is the supernatural knowledge of God, which has become possible with the advent of Revelation, man cannot achieve it in one single movement. He has to start with the world and then, rise progressively up to the final vision of God. The city therefore, shows itself to be indispensable to the achievement of the end of human activity. This is why Dante presents, in the first seven spheres of the *Paradiso*, the differentials which constitute the City.

This is why, also, it is significant that the starting-point of the *Paradiso* is situated in the Earthly Paradise, on coming out of the waters of the river Eunoe. Etymologically, the origin of this name is found in the Greek word εὐνοια, a term used by Aristotle to designate goodwill or benevolence. Now, according to the Philosopher, benevolence is precisely the principle, the beginning of friendship (ἀρχὴ φιλίας)²². In consequence, the principle for the building of the Celestial City is nothing other than Aristotle's own principle of friendship.

However, one should notice that insofar as it is the beginning of friendship, benevolence implies a certain distance. Aristotle specifies that benevolence is not identical with friendship:

So too it is not possible for people to be friends if they have not come to feel goodwill for each other, but those who feel goodwill are not for all that friends [...]. And so one might by an extension of the term friendship say that goodwill is inactive friendship, though when it is prolonged and reaches the point of intimacy it becomes friendship...²³

This precision suggests that the road is a long one before reaching the perfection of friendship. Accordingly, the first seven spheres of the *Paradiso* represent not only the diverse elements which form the community of the blessed, but also the different

19. I, Q. 1, A.9, resp.

20. *Ibid.*

21. "Cosi parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno, / però che solo da sensato apprende / ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno. / Per questo la Scrittura condescende / a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano / attribuisce a Dio e altro intende..."

22. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nic Eth.*, IX, 1167 a 2.

23. *Ibid.*, IX, 1167 a 70.

degrees of friendship. Thus, Dante indicates clearly that, following Aristotle, he maintains the necessity of the City and that he constructs on the same basic principle. However, he submits this principle to a remarkable transformation in identifying it precisely with the friendship judged impossible by Aristotle, the friendship of man with God. From Aristotle's point of view, this friendship is impossible because of the existing inequality between the two parties. Now, the necessity of equality is evident when one considers that "if there is a great interval in respect of virtue or vice or wealth or anything else between the parties, (...) they are no longer friends, and do not even expect to be so"²⁴. He pursues: "In such cases it is not possible to define exactly up to what point friends can remain friends; for much can be taken away and friendship remain, but", he concludes, "when a party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases"²⁵.

From the human point of view, this argument is unanswerable. What the Philosopher could not know, however, is that God himself, in his benevolence, would establish this principle of equality, in carrying out the work of justice required for its foundation. Let us recall what St. Thomas says, in his *Commentary on the Ethics*, about the difference between the equality demanded by justice and the equality demanded by friendship:

Et hujus ratio est quia amicitia est quaedam unio sive societas amicorum, quae non potest esse inter multum distantes, sed oportet quod ad aequalitatem accedant, unde ad amicitiam pertinet aequalitate jam constituta ea aequaliter uti; sed in justitiam pertinet inaequalia ad aequalitatem reducere, aequalitate autem existente cessat justitiae opus; et ideo aequalitas est ultimum in justitia, sed primum in amicitia²⁶.

Hence, friendship begins where justice ends, therefore presupposing its presence.

After the fall of Adam and Eve, justice demanded atonement. But as Beatrice explains to Dante in the Heaven of Mercury²⁷, no finite act could atone for the infinite sin of pride which man had committed in his desire to become God's equal. The humiliation of the Word of God shown in the Incarnation, alone, could satisfy divine justice²⁸. Therefore, it is only through God's own benevolence that the infinite distance between human and divine nature is reduced to nothing. It is thus, and thus only, that the necessary equality for the friendship of man and God is established.

This is why the starting-point of the *Paradiso* is situated in the Earthly Paradise, on the other side of the waters of Eunoe. Symbol of the divine benevolence, the crossing of the river is at the same time the symbol of the infusion of the theological virtues. For, one should keep in mind that as Dante goes through the river, he has to drink of its water. Called by the poet the "sweets [his] heart might aye have drunk nor e'er known weariness"²⁹ this water which renews him, purifies him and prepares

24. *Ibid.*, VIII, 1158 b 32.

25. *Ibid.*, VIII, 1159 a 4.

26. *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, L. VIII, C.7, × × 108-116.

27. DANTE, *Par.*, VII, 97-102.

28. Cf. *ibid.*, VII, 118-120.

29. "lo dolce ber che mai non m'avria sazio" (*Purg.*, XXXIII, 138).

him to leap up the stars³⁰, is the water of Baptism. It confers on him the three virtues of faith, hope and charity. But what is charity if not, as St. Thomas says clearly, a certain kind of friendship between man and God:

...caritas est amicitia quaedam hominis ad Deum fundata super communicationem beatitudinis aeternae³¹.

The importance of St. Thomas' definition and the novelty of his teaching should be strongly emphasized at this point. However, as it deserves far greater attention than is possible within the limits of this article, I shall only point out with G.G. Meersseman, that if St. Thomas was not the first thinker to come up with the idea of charity as friendship, he was indeed the first to propound it with such confidence, the first to develop it up to its last consequences and the first to transform it into the corner-stone of a system of supernatural Ethics³².

This friendship between man and God is based upon the communication of eternal beatitude; however, St. Thomas adds, this communication is not according to a natural good, but according to a free gift³³. One cannot insist too much on the importance of this declaration: the friendship between man and God is only possible owing to divine benevolence; it is a free gift coming from God alone. If man is raised to the level of friend of God, it is not because of his own merits nor because of his own efforts. As St. Thomas explains, the grace of God is eternal life. In consequence, charity itself exceeds the power of nature. But what exceeds the power of nature cannot be natural nor can it be acquired by natural powers because a natural effect cannot transcend its cause³⁴. Therefore, the origin of charity cannot be found in the human will. Charity is poured out in man's heart by the direct action of the Holy Ghost, who is the love of the Father and the Son, whose participation in us is created charity³⁵.

In placing the starting-point of the *Paradiso* in the Earthly Paradise, Dante clearly shows that, following Aristotle, he builds his Celestial City upon the principle of friendship. Hence the fundamentally Aristotelian character of his City. However, this principle undergoes a radical transformation when it becomes specifically the friendship declared impossible by Aristotle, the friendship of man with God. This friendship, called charity, is a free gift from God, freely received by man, and it contains all the different kinds of friendship set forth by the Philosopher in his *Ethics*: the friendship for the sake of utility, the friendship for the sake of pleasure, the friendship for the sake of the good, whether the latter is expressed in its political form, the common good, or in the activity of contemplation, thereby becoming the friendship with the Good itself. These different forms are presented by the poet in the seven spheres of the *Paradiso* and brought into full bloom in the Celestial Rose.

30. Cf. *Purg.*, XXXIII, 142-145.

31. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, Q. 24, A. 2, resp.

32. Cf. G.G. Meersseman, "Pourquoi le Lombard n'a-t-il pas conçu la charité comme amitié?" in *Miscellanea Lombardiana* (Novara 1957), p. 165 ff.

33. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, Q. 24, A. 2, resp.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

Dante did not relegate Aristotle to Hell. He gave him the place which the great Philosopher had chosen for himself. But it was not without regret. The verses that Dante puts in the mouth of the poet Statius to salute Virgil could have applied just as well his own feelings towards Aristotle:

Thou wast as one who, travelling, bears by night
 A lantern at his back, which cannot leaven
 His darkness, yet he gives his followers light³⁶.

Dante has allowed himself to be guided by this light. And this light is still shining upon him as he writes the *Paradiso*. The celestial city is erected on the very foundations laid by Aristotle and thus, solidly anchored, it rises dazzling with beauty, order and harmony. Aristotle is nowhere in the heavenly City, but his presence is felt everywhere — from the first verse of the *Paradiso*: “The Glory of Him who moves all things...” to the last verse, this being also the end of the *Divine Comedy* and the end of all of Dante's works: “The love that moved the sun and the other stars”.

36. “Facesti come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopa sé fa le persone dotte” (*Purg.* XXII, 67-69).