CHAPTER 3

Dante's Theological Purgatory
Earthly Happiness and Eternal Beatitude

This chapter presents Dante's *Purgatorio* as a penitential journey guided by Christian ethics towards God. In the first part, I counter a divergent reading, proposed most powerfully in recent scholarship by John A. Scott's monograph *Dante's Political Purgatory*.[1] According to Scott, the summit of Dante's Purgatory represents 'that very same Earthly Paradise, which for Dante reflected the happiness attainable through Justice and the teachings of philosophy'.[2] I argue that this now-dominant interpretation represents a false turning in Dante scholarship and propose, instead, that Dante represents the 'beatitudo huius vitae' delineated in the *Monarchia* through the limbo of the virtuous pagans in *Inferno* IV. As a corrective to the dominant 'political' reading, in the second part of this chapter, I explore how Dante forged his vision of Purgatory through two areas of distinctively Christian theory and practice that had risen to particular prominence in the thirteenth century: the newly crystallised doctrine of Purgatory and the tradition of the seven capital vices (or deadly sins) in penitential ethics.[3] In the third part, I argue that the region embodies an explicit reorientation from natural to supernatural ethics, from pagan to Christian *exempla*, and from this world to the heavenly

[1] Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory*. Scott provides an invaluable account of the political background to Dante's Purgatory as well as many interpretative insights on specific passages of the *Purgatorio* (although, interestingly in this regard, he devotes as many chapters to Ante-Purgatory as to Purgatory proper). Nonetheless, this chapter seeks to refute Scott's central contention and overarching argument that Dante's Purgatory represents an ethical journey guided by 'justice and the teachings of philosophy' towards the '*beatitudo huius vitae*' (p. 189). For the influence of this widely held view, see Nicola Fosca, gloss to *Purg*. XXVII, 103–8.

[2] Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory*, p. 189. My purpose in presenting afresh a 'theological Purgatory' is not, of course, to negate the importance of politics or philosophical teaching in Dante's Purgatory, but rather to argue that the ethical structure and characteristics of the region are, nonetheless, distinctively Christian.

[3] For a caveat to the more familiar phrase, see Boyde, *Human Vices*, p. 151: 'the Seven Capital Vices . . . their popular appellation – the Seven Deadly Sins – is wrong in everything but the number!'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

city. Thus, this chapter presents afresh a 'theological Purgatory', a moral pilgrimage guided by distinctively Christian ethics towards the *beatitudo vitae aeternae*.[4]

Two Contenders for the *Beatitudo Huius Vitae*: The Earthly Paradise in Purgatory and the Limbo of the Virtuous Pagans

According to the dualistic theory articulated in Dante's *Monarchia*, man has two ethical journeys in this life: a journey to a secular happiness achievable by following the teachings of the philosophers and the natural virtues (the domain of the Holy Roman Empire and temporal power) and a journey to an eternal beatitude achievable by following the teachings of Divine revelation and the theological virtues (the domain of the Church and spiritual power).[5] Until recently, as documented in Chapter 2, scholars classified the *Monarchia* as a minor work and considered its dualistic theory to represent a temporary stage in Dante's intellectual development, to be left behind by the time he wrote his major work, the *Commedia*. The new philological evidence, dating the *Monarchia* to Dante's intellectual maturity when most of the *Commedia* was already written, has opened up a revision of this dominant critical approach, with its tendency to view the relationship between Dante's prose works and the *Commedia* in terms of authorial palinode.[6]

At this important interpretative juncture, I believe that Dante criticism has taken a wrong turn. Scholars who have tried to read the *Commedia* in light of Dante's dualism have typically equated the secular happiness – the *paradisus terrestris* delineated in the *Monarchia* – with the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Mount Purgatory. Thus John A. Scott correctly observes that 'all too often, Dante's poem has been regarded exclusively as a spiritual ascent to God, thus ignoring the totality of the poet's message, which is bent on leading humanity to both its goals, the one set firmly in this world (Virgil/Emperor → Earthly Paradise) and the other providing

[4] This chapter thereby builds on my argument in Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, pp. 147–73, and begins to deliver what I envisaged in the book's conclusion: 'A new dualistic reading of Purgatory would therefore reappraise the region in terms of the complex tradition of the seven vices in Christian moral psychology' (p. 178).

[5] Dante, *Monarchia*, III, xvi, 7–9.

[6] Albert Russell Ascoli, in *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), has sought to challenge this dominant 'evolutionary interpretation of Dante's literary career and intellectual biography, usually with the *Commedia* as ideal telos' (p. 276) and to prepare for a reading of the poem 'beyond the palinode' (p. 274).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

salvation and eternal beatitude'.[7] However, he then jumps to what is, in my view, the wrong conclusion: 'the answers, obvious as they are, need to be stated: yes, the Earthly Paradise is indeed to be found there, situated above Purgatory proper, and it is Virgil, the Aristotelianized poet of imperial Rome, who guides Dante there'.[8] On this reading, the summit of Dante's Purgatory represents not spiritual beatitude but rather secular, Earthly happiness: 'that very same Earthly Paradise, which for Dante reflected the happiness attainable through Justice and the teachings of philosophy'.[9]

As Nicola Fosca points out, a reading which equates the secular goal of Dante's *Monarchia* with the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory is held by 'molti dantisti' and sustained by the authoritative Bosco-Reggio and Chiavacci Leonardi commentaries. He concludes, not unreasonably, that the *Monarchia* has had, thus far, a negative influence on interpreters of the *Commedia*.[10] Scott's own argument draws in particular on the thesis of Charles S. Singleton, an influential earlier twentieth-century proponent of a similar dualistic reading. Like Scott, Singleton argues that Dante-character, on reaching the summit of Mount Purgatory, attains only the 'rule of reason over the lower parts of the soul, of which Aristotle and Plato spoke'.[11] Singleton also similarly maps the scheme of the *Monarchia* onto the Mount of Purgatory: 'For in the poem is not Eden the first goal, and does Virgil not guide to Eden by the natural light of the philosophers? . . . is not the celestial paradise the end to which Beatrice leads, as the light of grace and revelation . . .? So that here too, in respect to the second goal, treatise and poem would seem to agree.'[12] Nonetheless Singleton recognises a flaw in such simple mapping: in the poem, unlike in the treatise, the first path is clearly subordinated to the second and leads to Beatrice.[13] Singleton is thereby constrained to present two Edens. In the Earthly Paradise, Leah and Rachel initially represent the active and contemplative aspects of a happiness attainable through natural philosophy (and the guidance of Virgil). They are then transfigured on the arrival of Beatrice: 'Virgil leads to a justice which the philosophers had discerned and he leads no further. Then beyond the stream, with Beatrice, come the four virtues

[7] Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory*, p. 9. [8] Ibid., p. 64. [9] Ibid., p. 189.

[10] See Nicola Fosca, gloss to *Purg.* XXVII, 103–8: 'Pare proprio che il trattato politico abbia esercitato un'influenza negativa sugli esegeti della *Commedia*.'

[11] Charles S. Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 65–66.

[12] Ibid., pp. 265–66.

[13] See also, however, Scott's nuancing of Singleton's position, in Scott, *Dante's Political Poetry*, n. 10, p. 257.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

which are the true perfection of the active life, that is, true justice. A Leah who is a *perfected* Leah thus comes with Beatrice. And so it must be with contemplation.'[14] Awkward interpretative complications thereby appear in what – at first – might seem an 'obvious' reading.

Dualistic readings which equate the Earthly Paradise of Purgatory with the secular happiness delineated in the *Monarchia* have also led to some interpretations entirely at odds with the commentary and critical traditions. Thus Peter Armour's reinterpretation of the griffin (traditionally identified as a figure for Christ) as the 'supreme temporal guide of mankind on earth . . . the Empire alone, the Empire of Rome' is underpinned by his conviction that the Earthly Paradise in Purgatory depicts 'the first of mankind's two God-given goals – that happiness in this life which, as every reader of Dante knows, is not in his opinion in any way within the sphere of competence of the Church'.[15] John A. Scott, in similar vein, berates the *Enciclopedia Dantesca* which 'still reports that "*All the commentators, both ancient and modern, are agreed in recognizing Jesus Christ in the griffin*"'.[16] But Scott's motive for a different interpretation is similarly underpinned by his identification of the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory with Dante's secular goal: 'It would surely have been strange if, in that very same Earthly Paradise, which for Dante reflected the happiness attainable through Justice and the teachings of philosophy, the poet had placed no signifier of the imperial office and its divinely appointed mission to guide the human race, *humana civitas*, to the *beatitudo huius vitae*.'[17] For it is not at all strange if the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory is *not* the 'very same Earthly Paradise' depicted in the *Monarchia*. Far from being obvious, Scott's dualistic reading requires an interpretation at odds both with the wider medieval context and with the commentary tradition of the *Purgatorio*.[18]

As I suggested in Chapter 2, there is another way to read the poem in dualistic terms which does not entail such revision of traditional

[14] Ibid., p. 134.

[15] Peter Armour, *Dante's Griffin and the History of the World: A Study of the Earthly Paradise (Purgatorio, cantos XXIX–XXXIII)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 69–70; p. 67.

[16] Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory*, pp. 188–89.

[17] Ibid., p. 189.

[18] With regard to the medieval context, Scott revealingly claims that 'no one before Dante had thought of setting up a figural link between the happiness attainable through good government . . . and the Earthly Paradise lost through original sin . . . Dante does not hesitate to subvert the myth of Eden [which was] seized upon and transformed by Dante's political vision . . . it became a "political" goal accessible in this life to the whole of humanity' (Scott, *Dante's Political Poetry*, pp. 66–67). With regard to the commentary tradition on Dante's Earthly Paradise Scott observes that 'All too often, the pageant described in *Purgatorio* XXIX has been seen solely as a representation of Holy Writ and a static vision of the ideal church' (p. 187).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

interpretations of Purgatory. I would argue that Dante's *Commedia* is indeed underpinned by his dualistic theory, but that Dante represents man's secular goal not in the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory but rather in his theologically original Limbo of the virtuous pagans (*Inf.* IV, 67–151). In the *Monarchia*, Dante depicts man's path to his temporal goal as directed by philosophical teachings which are to be put into practice through the moral and intellectual virtues ('per phylosophica documenta venimus, dummodo illa sequamur secundum virtutes morales et intellectuales operando'; *Mon.* III, xv, 8). The early commentators of *Inferno* IV unanimously interpret the seven walls encircling the noble castle of Dante's Limbo allegorically to represent philosophical teaching (most commonly the seven liberal arts) by which the rational soul liberates itself from the sensual appetite.[19] The seven walls of the Limbo of the virtuous pagans parallel and counter-balance, therefore, the seven terraces of Purgatory. Dante-character then encounters, within a beautiful landscape which directly alludes to Virgil's Elysian fields, exemplars of the moral and intellectual virtues. The first noble pagan named is Electra, the mythical founder of Troy and the root of the Trojan and Roman race which, for Dante, historically instantiates the true flower of moral virtue.[20] Amongst the 'spiriti magni' of the 'filosofica famiglia', Aristotle – *the* philosopher and the exemplar of human intellectual perfection – holds reign: 'il maestro di color che sanno' (*Inf.* IV, 119–32). Dante thereby represents the happiness of this life ('beatitudinem scilicet huius vite') which consists in man's natural perfection in its active and contemplative aspects, the operation of the moral and intellectual virtues ('virtutes morales et intellectuales operando'; *Mon.* III, xv, 7).[21]

[19] See Jacopo Alighieri, gloss to *Inf.* IV, 106–8: 'le sette mura le sette liberali arti significano, le quali di necessità essere convengono circostante al filosofo e poetico intelletto'. See also Graziolo Bambaglioli, gloss to *Inf.* IV, 106–7: 'pro castro illo intelligit ipsam scientiam et genus scientiae, per istos VII muros, intelligit VII artes scientias liberales'. Although later commentators have suggested other readings, the consensus view of his first readers is that Dante allegorically represents the pathway of philosophy.

[20] See Virgil, *Aeneid* VIII, 134–37, in *Virgil*, ed. and trans. by H. Rushton Fairclough, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), II, 2–367 (p. 68), and *Monarchia*, II, iii, 11–17. See also Benvenuto, gloss to *Inf.* IV, 121: 'ipsa [Electra] fuit radix nobilissimae plantae, scilicet trojani et romani generis; ideo autor, volens commendare nobilitatem utriusque gentis, incipit ab ista tamquam ab antiquo principio nobilitatis'.

[21] Although it might initially seem peculiar that Dante should locate in Hell an image of secular happiness, we should remember first, that the virtuous pagans occupy a luminous, open and verdant plain at Hell's summit ('in prato di fresca verdura'; *Inf.* IV, 111) and, second, that their only suffering – the loss of union with God – is shared by unbelievers in this life who may also attain a limited secular felicity. For a full development of the argument equating the secular happiness

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

In the past, scholars have tended to start from the *Commedia* and then either, like Nardi, fail to see any trace of the dualism of the *Monarchia* or, like Scott, project Dante's dualistic theory of two ethical goals onto the – apparently obvious – two endpoints of Dante-character's journey: the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory and Paradise itself. By contrast, if we consider Dante-poet – fully committed to a dualistic vision of man's two ethical goals (as the later dating of the *Monarchia* confirms) – setting out to write the *Commedia*, we can easily imagine him confronting a stark paradox: how to represent a secular, this-worldly goal in a poem which depicts an other-worldly afterlife? In this light, Dante's innovative creation of the region of the virtuous pagans becomes clearly understandable. Regardless of their literal destiny and apparently unjustified deprivation of beatitude (the focus of most scholarly work on this area of Limbo), the virtuous pagans serve, for Dante, an urgent allegorical purpose because they respond precisely to this critical exigency: the virtuous pagan represents secular human flourishing in a poem which literally depicts the afterlife.

Political readings of Purgatory in terms of philosophical principles have been motivated, at least in part, by the attempt to map Dante's dualistic theory onto the eschatology of the *Commedia*. Even on their own terms, such dualistic readings – where the secular goal of Dante's *Monarchia* is equated with the Earthly Paradise at the summit of Purgatory – seem forced into internal contradictions and to yield some rather peculiar, or at least untraditional, interpretations. This is not the case with my alternative dualistic reading, in which Dante's Limbo of the virtuous pagans figuratively embodies this-worldly, ethical flourishing (the temporal goal of the *Monarchia*). My interpretation has two distinct advantages. First, it enables us to read the poem as informed by Dante's dualistic vision. Particularly in light of the recent philological evidence, the thesis of a radical shift in Dante's intellectual trajectory away from a dualistic ethical outlook seems unsustainable now. Consequently, we need to account in some way for the doctrine of two ethical goals (so prominent in the *Monarchia*) in the *Commedia*. Second, this alternative dualistic interpretation also defends more traditional readings of Purgatory. The interpretation of Dante's Limbo of the virtuous pagans, at the rim of Hell, as depicting Dante's this-worldly goal frees Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise from a forced, overly secular interpretation.

delineated in the *Monarchia* with the figure of the virtuous pagan in the *Commedia*, see Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, pp. 122–46.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

Thus far, we have removed one key obstacle to reading Purgatory in terms of Christian ethics: by providing an alternative location (the Limbo of the virtuous pagans) for Dante's this-worldly goal, I have shown how one can read the poem as informed by Dante's dualistic theory without reading the ethics of Purgatory as narrowly philosophical. In the second part of this chapter, I provide a re-examination of the immediate context of and inspiration for the genesis of Dante's Purgatory. In this way, I show how the moral and doctrinal context of the region's ethics is distinctively Christian and cannot be viewed within the frame of philosophical principles.

The Genesis of Dante's Purgatory

Le Goff claimed that 'Dante more than anyone else made Purgatory the intermediate region of the other world'.[22] An overemphasis on the originality of Dante's vision of Purgatory, however, may initially obscure its interpretation. After all, if we imagined that Dante invented his depiction of Purgatory in isolation, his structuring of it according to philosophical principles could be understood as consistent with the region's audacious novelty as a whole. There is, of course, clear evidence of originality. Some argue that, before Dante, the doctrine of Purgatory was relatively new, and, in Jeffrey Schnapp's words, 'little more than a theologian's abstraction'.[23] By contrast, Dante gave Purgatory a precise geographical location – in the southern hemisphere at the antipodes of Jerusalem. Moreover, he drew a completely new image of what this eschatological region of Purgatory might be like: not simply a monochrome corporeal fire, but a mountain divided into different regions with different punishments.[24] However, his work also contains much content which per se is not original at all. If we were to recast the moral framework and much of

[22] See Jacques Le Goff, 'The Poetic Triumph: The *Divina Commedia*', in Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 334–55 (p. 346). For the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[23] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Introduction to *Purgatorio*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 91–106 (p. 92).

[24] Alessandro Scafi's study, *Mapping Paradise: A History of Heaven on Earth* (London: British Library, 2006), gives an excellent account of the geography and cartography of Purgatory before and after Dante. Even with regard to his eschatological landscaping, Scafi notably emphasises that Dante's originality lies more in the manner of his material's elaboration than in the material itself: 'the poem voiced the geographical and cosmographical knowledge of his age, even though Dante elaborated it in a strikingly original manner' (p. 182).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

the doctrinal material of Dante's Purgatory into another medieval genre – viewing it not as a vision of the afterlife realm of Purgatory, but as a treatise on Christian ethics, a homiletic handbook or an allegorical moral journey set in this life – it would appear much more familiar. That is, there are clearly discernible contexts which Dante uses in constructing the moral and doctrinal content of Purgatory. I shall examine two of these contexts in turn: the newly crystallised doctrine of Purgatory and the well-established resources of the tradition of the seven capital vices in medieval Christian ethics.

Although the Church had given an official stamp to the doctrine of Purgatory only at the Council of Lyon in 1274, the existence of an intermediate realm, between Hell and Paradise, was well established by Dante's lifetime.[25] At a practical level, the *suffragia mortuorum* ('masses, prayers, alms and pious works by which the living assisted the souls of the dead from purgatorial pains') were integral to medieval religious life.[26] At a theoretical level, medieval theologians – citing passages from Scripture stating that sins would be tested, punished, or cancelled by fire on the day of judgement – had put the flesh and blood on the doctrine of Purgatory. Outside vision literature, however, theological description of the region remained distinctively unimaginative, depicting it as a purgatorial fire. Aquinas, for example, gives a clear rationale for Purgatory. Mortal sin turns man away from God as his ultimate end. Through repentance, sinners are 'brought back to the state of charity, whereby they cleave to God as their last end' and, freed thereby from the eternal punishment of Hell, they merit 'eternal life'.[27] Through venial sin, man does not turn away from his ultimate end but does err with regard to the means leading him to God. Although venial sin may be expiated by the fervent Divine love of particularly holy souls, the general rule is that venial sin, like mortal sin, retains the debt of temporal punishment even after due repentance.[28] The primary purpose of penance, therefore, is to repay this debt. In addition, penance has a curative purpose: the sinner must be cured from vice and made virtuous and holy. What, then, of a person who

[25] For a short introduction to the theology of Purgatory, see Robert Ombres, *Theology of Purgatory* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1978). In the book's second part, Ombres appeals to Dante's *Commedia* because it provides 'some actual, successful examples of the kind of poetic and symbolic realisations the doctrine of Purgatory can sustain' (p. 51). For a brief overview, see Peter Armour, 'Purgatory', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 728–31.

[26] Armour, 'Purgatory', p. 728. [27] Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae*, 181, in *Corpus Thomisticum*.

[28] See Aquinas, *De malo*, 7, a. 11, co., in *Corpus Thomisticum*.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

dies before being able to complete his or her penance? And what of those – all bar the most exceptional saints – who die before becoming holy and virtuous if, as Aquinas states, 'no one is admitted to the possession of eternal life unless he is free from all sin and imperfection'?[29] The afterlife region of Purgatory responds, as a theological necessity, to both these questions: it completes the debt of sin and it cleanses the soul of imperfection. Whereas the intensity of purgatorial punishment corresponds to the debt (the sinner's guilt), the length corresponds to the soul's imperfection (the 'firmness with which sin has taken root in its subject').[30] The twofold pain of Purgatory – the delay of the divine vision (*poena damni*) and the corporeal fire (*poena sensus*) – is thus spiritually necessary. Furthermore, as with earthly penance, this satisfaction is desired by the souls as their means to restore friendship with God.[31]

Dante thus inherited some key doctrinal points about Purgatory but, for its description, he inherited only a generic condition, the corporeal fire. This left him with considerable imaginative freedom to describe and structure his own depiction of Purgatory. Why, then, did he choose the

[29] Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, 182, 'In aliis autem oportet per aliquam poenam huiusmodi peccata purgari, quia ad vitam aeternam consequendam non perducitur nisi qui ab omni peccato et defectu fuerit immunis.'

[30] *Quaestio de Purgatorio,* 8, p. 521b, in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 5 vols., ed. by Institutum Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1945), V, *Supplementum tertiae partis*: 'dicendum quod acerbitas poenae proprie respondet quantitati culpae; sed diuturnitas respondet radicationi culpae in subiecto'. It is misleading to maintain that, in the traditional view, 'the idea of moral discipline is inapplicable to the afterlife' (see *Purgatorio*, ed. by Durling and Martinez, p. 10). The author of the *Supplementum* explicitly leaves scope not only for 'temporal punishment', but also for curative moral discipline so that the stain and root of vice are removed. To describe this purgatorial punishment, Aquinas nonetheless resorts to the customary 'corporeal fire', a punishment which is doubly painful: at an intellectual level because the spiritual soul recognises itself to be imprisoned within an inferior substance; and at a physical level because – through God's mysterious power – the spiritual soul, although incorporeal, actually experiences the corporeal pain of the fire (see Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, 180: 'Et hoc ipsum considerandum a spirituali substantia, quod scilicet creaturae infimae quodammodo subditur, ei est afflictivum [. . .] Inquantum vero ignis cui alligatur, corporeus est, sic verificatur quod dicitur a Gregorio, quod anima non solum videndo, sed etiam experiendo ignem patitur').

[31] *Quaestio de Purgatorio,* 3, p. 517a, in Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*: 'Dicendum quod in purgatorio erit duplex poena: una damni, inquantum scilicet retardantur a divina visione; alia sensus, secundum quod ab igne corporali punientur.' This also explains the difference in kind between infernal punishment (*poena exterminans*) and purgatorial punishment (*poena corrigens*). Whereas the punishment in Hell 'has no cleansing force' because the souls 'lack charity', the souls in Purgatory 'are adorned with charity, by which their wills are conformed to the divine will; it is owing to this charity that the punishments they suffer avail them for cleansing' (*Compendium Theologiae*, 182: 'ex cuius caritatis virtute poenae quas patiuntur, eis ad purgationem prosunt: unde in iis qui sine caritate sunt, sicut in damnatis, poenae non purgant, sed semper imperfectio peccati remanet, et ideo semper poena durat'). See also Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 7, a. 11, co.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

tradition of the seven capital vices? It seems at first glance an odd choice, as we might reasonably expect the seven vices to structure Dante's Hell. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, Dante does *not* structure Hell according to the vices: the vices of pride, envy, and sloth are not mentioned explicitly in the *Inferno*, and the other four vices (lust, gluttony, avarice, and wrath) are categorised, ostensibly in line with Aristotle's *Ethics*, as sins of incontinence, occupying just one part of Hell (and only five of thirty-four cantos). A principal reason for Dante's choice is that the tradition of the seven capital vices had come to play a dominant role in thirteenth-century Christian ethics, homilies, and confessional practices.[32] In response to the renewed emphasis on confession encouraged by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215–16), preachers found in the theory of the seven capital vices a popular and psychologically productive approach to moral evil.[33]

The scheme of the seven capital sins is both simple for a beginner and immensely rich in terms of psychological depth and complexity. The focus is not just on sins committed but, crucially, on character traits or tendencies which need to be corrected in the Christian's moral journey in this life.[34] It is natural to suppose that many Christians (Dante included) may have structured their own confessions through this morally transformative scheme.[35] Dante could draw on direct literary precedents such as Brunetto Latini's *Il Tesoretto* which, like the *Commedia*, begins in the wood of sin and closes with the author confessing the seven capital sins in causal order and admonishing his reader to do the same.[36] Widely diffused treatises on the vices were also available, such as, most significantly (as we shall explore in Chapter 4), that by the Dominican William Peraldus. Moreover, the vices and corresponding sets of virtues were central to the

[32] See, for example, Newhauser and Ridyard (eds.), *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*.

[33] Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215–16), 'Omnis utriusque sexus' commands every Christian to confess his or her sins at least once a year. See Siegfried Wenzel, 'Preaching the Seven Deadly Sins', in *In the Garden of Evil: The Vices and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Richard. G. Newhauser (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005), pp. 145–69 (p. 150).

[34] To cure the vices was to cure the very roots of all sinful actions and thoughts, because vice is to sin as habit is to act. See, for example, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia 2ae 71, 2 ad 4: 'peccatum comparatur ad vitium sicut actus ad habitum'.

[35] For a recent introduction to the development of confession, see Robert Rusconi, *L'ordine dei peccati: la confessione tra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

[36] Brunetto Latini, *Il Tesoretto*, 2555–57: 'Ond'io tutto a scoverto / Al frate mi converto / Che m'a penitentiato.' In *Il Tesoretto*, Brunetto links 'accidia' especially with the failure of religious belief and practice (2695–744) while, in the *Tresor*, he substitutes 'mescreance' [disbelief] for sloth, and orders the vices and their various offshoots differently (Brunetto Latini, *Tresor*, II, 131, p. 628: 'Les criminaus pechés sonot. vii.: superbe, envie, ire, luxure, covoitise, mescreance et avarice. . . . de mescreance naissent malice et petit coraige, desesperance, peresce, desconoissance, non porvoiance, sotie et delit de mal').

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

popular Christianity of Dante's immediate cultural context, as is clear from model sermons of the time or the ethical use of the vices in visual culture.[37] For example, Alan of Lille's outline of the appropriate content (faith and morals), audience (public), and material (the use of authorities) in preaching; his emphasis on the use of examples (which make doctrine more familiar and, thereby, more efficacious); and his chapters on each of the vices and corresponding virtues in the overarching context of Christian confession and penitence provide a telling parallel with Dante's approach in the *Purgatorio*.[38]

In light of this wider context, we can readily understand why the penitential tradition of the vices appealed to Dante as he envisaged the terraces of Purgatory, but not when he organised the circles of Hell. Penance makes sense of three key doctrinal purposes of Purgatory: (1) it realigns the soul from a disordered pursuit of earthly goods to God as its ultimate end; (2) it repays the debt for sin; and (3) it frees the soul from all vice and imperfection. These purposes are equally true of the Purgatorial afterlife as of Christian penance in this life (for which an extensive literature existed).[39] Dante, therefore, projects the familiar ethical material on the seven capital vices onto the unfamiliar context of Purgatory. The result is, at a literal level, a vivid depiction of an otherwise uncharted

[37] For example, Alan of Lille gives model sermon material on each of the seven vices and on corresponding virtues in his 'Summa de arte praedicatoria'. He then uses the seven vices and corresponding virtues as the basic structure in his sermon material on confession and penitence: 'Septem ergo principalibus vitiis, septem principales virtutes sunt opponendae. Contra superbiam, humilitas; contra invidia, charitas; contra iram, patientiae longanimitas; contra acediam, mentis hilaritas; contra avaritiam, largitas; contra crapulam, sobrietas; contra luxuriam, castitas' (p. 174b [99]). The influence of Alan of Lille on Dante has tended to focus, tantalisingly, on *Anticlaudianus* and *De planctu naturae.* See, for example, the entry and bibliography in the *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, I, pp. 89–91: 'sono appunto questi scritti [il *De planctu naturae* e *L'Anticlaudianus*] che hanno maggiore interesse per gli studiosi di questioni dantesche' (p. 90). However, the influence of Alan of Lille's work on the virtues and vices could be, for a reading of Dante's Purgatory, of similar interest (although such scholarship is constrained by the fact that Alan of Lille's treatise of that name, *De virtutibus et vitiis*, remains unpublished).

[38] See Alanus de Insulis, 'Summa de arte praedicatoria', pp. 111.c. [53]–114.c [55]: 'Praedicatio est, manifesta et publica instructio morum et fidei, informationi hominum deserviens, ex rationum semita, et auctoritatum fonte proveniens . . . Infine vero, debet uti exemplis, ad probandum quod intendit, quia familiaris est doctrina exemplari.'

[39] Alan of Lille explicitly compares the suffering of earthly penitence to Purgatory as two kinds of purgatorial fire: 'Est autem duplex ignis purgatorium, unus in via scilicet poenitentia, alius post vitam scilicet purgatoria poena' (Alan de Insulis, 'Summa de arte praedicatoria', p. 174d [100]). He exhorts the sinner to the first fire (in this life) because its pain will be but a shadow of the pain otherwise experienced in the second fire of Purgatory: 'Primus enim purgatorius, quasi umbra est et pictura secundi; quia, sicut umbra et pictura materialis ignis nullum infert dolorem sed ipse ignis materialis cruciatum vel adorem infert; sic ignis poenitentiae nihil habet amaritudinis juxta secundi purgatorii comparationem. Quia, ut dicit Augustinus, poena purgatorii multo gravior est qualibet temporali' (p. 175b [100]).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

eschatological region – Purgatory – and, at an allegorical level, a representation of Dante's Christian ethics: the very guidance on an individual's journey to spiritual salvation which Dante felt the institutional Church of his time, misdirected by its grasp of temporal power, was failing to administer.

From This World to the Heavenly City

The Christian context of penance strongly suggests that Dante's Purgatory is anything but a philosophically guided journey to a temporal happiness 'of which Aristotle and Plato spoke'. Nonetheless, the fact that it is Virgil, rather than Beatrice, who guides Dante-character through Purgatory and that it is Virgil who expounds, as in the corresponding episode in Hell (*Inf.* XI), the moral structure of Purgatory (*Purg.* XVII) has led many Dante scholars to conclude that the moral doctrine he espouses is therefore philosophical.[40] Such a view had previously been strengthened by the lack of a direct source for Dante's apparently original organisation of the vices. Despite Siegfried Wenzel's intervention, which located Virgil's discourse within the context of penitential Christian ethics, the view persists that the doctrine espoused by Virgil is within the bounds of pagan thought.[41] For many reasons, however, such a view is unsustainable.

First, Dante sets the entire discourse on the vices within the overarching context of the relationship of love between the Creator and His creation, between God ('l fattore') and man ('sua fattura'). As Dante highlights through the voice of Marco Lombardo in the previous canto, each soul is created in simplicity and ignorance and is thereby easily led astray by lesser goods from God (its chief good):

[40] For example, Fosca quotes Giacalone's view: 'La tecnica delle distinzioni è medievale, ma la sostanza del ragionamento e della dottrina morale è ancora aristotelica. Il Purgatorio è distinto secondo il *lumen naturale* di Virgilio' (Nicola Fosca, gloss to *Purg.* XVII, 97–102). But this is overly crude as Fosca, citing Pietrobono, emphasises: 'Per quanto concerne Virgilio, bisogna sempre tener presente che il vate latino "né accorre in aiuto di Dante di sua spontanea volontà, né adempie alla sua missione con le sue sole forze . . . Virgilio non muove, è mosso; non comanda, obbedisce"' (Fosca, gloss to *Purg.* XXVII, 103–8). That is, although Virgil tells Dante-character at the gateway to the Earthly Paradise that he has guided him through Purgatory by the power of his natural intellect ('ingegno') and his knowledge or art ('arte'), we must remember that Virgil also demonstrates clear knowledge of revealed truths including the mystery of the Incarnation (*Purg.* III, 34–45) and that reason responds to, and is led by, revelation in this canticle.

[41] See Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory*, p. 189; see also John A. Scott, 'The Moral Order of *Purgatorio*', in John A. Scott, *Understanding Dante* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2004), pp. 195–97.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia
prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla
che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
l'anima semplicetta, che sa nulla,
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
volontier torna a ciò che la trastulla.
Di picciol bene in pria sente sapore;
quivi s'inganna, e dietro ad esso corre
se guida o fren non torce suo amore.
(*Purg.* XVI, 85–93)

[From the hand of him who desires it before it
exists, like a little girl who weeps and laughs childishly,
the simple little soul comes forth, knowing nothing except that,
set in motion by a happy Maker, it gladly turns to what amuses it
Of some lesser good it first tastes the flavour; there it is deceived
and runs after it, if a guide or rein does not turn away its love.]

The ethical principle is that each soul, created by God, has an inbuilt desire to return to Him. This principle is epitomised by the opening of Augustine's *Confessions*: 'fecisti nos, Domine, ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te' [God, you made us for you, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you].[42]

Furthermore, the souls in Purgatory are explicitly directed from the earthly to the heavenly city. Indeed, as Jesus's Sermon on the Mount counterpoises our earthly life with God's kingdom (Matthew 22: 36–40), so, on Mount Purgatory, the beatitudes provide spiritual nourishment for the penitent souls and direct them to the eternal happiness in the life to come.[43] As the philosopher Ralph McInerny, commenting on Dante's use of the beatitudes, affirms:

> Jesus begins his sermon with the beatitudes. One cannot think of a more dramatic way of showing that the New Law is not the Old Law, nor is it simply a repetition of the teaching of philosophers. The beatitudes fly in the face of our natural assumptions about human life ... Far from being a

[42] The language of Augustine is even more explicitly evoked in the first words of Dante-character in *Paradiso* I: 'Già contento, *requïevi*' (*Par.* I, 97), a speech directly preceded by the latinism 'a quïetarmi' (*Par.* I, 86).

[43] For analyses of Dante's use of the beatitudes, see Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 'Le beatitudini e la struttura poetica del *Purgatorio*', *Giornale storico della letteratura Italiana* 101 (1984), 1–29; Sergio Cristaldi, 'Dalle beatitudini all'*Apocalisse*: il Nuovo Testamento nella *Commedia*', *Lettere classensi* 17 (1988), 23–57; and V. S. Benfell, '"Blessed Are They That Hunger after Justice": From Vice to Beatitude in Dante's *Purgatorio*', in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, ed. by Richard Newhauser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 185–206.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

> distillation of natural moral wisdom, the Sermon on the Mount seems to stand natural wisdom on its head.[44]

McInerny highlights the 'enormous difference' between 'morality or ethics – philosophical or natural accounts of how life should be led' and 'Christian revelation', between the broadly philosophical organisation of Dante's *Inferno* and the distinctively Christian ethics of the *Purgatorio*.[45]

This ethical reorientation from the secular to the spiritual is evident from the first two terraces which purge the gravest vices of pride and envy:

> È chi, per esser suo vicin soppresso,
> spera eccellenza, e sol per questo brama
> ch'el sia di sua grandezza in basso messo;
> è chi podere, grazia, onore e fama
> teme di perder perch'altri sormonti,
> onde s'attrista sì che 'l contrario ama.
> (*Purg.* XVII,115–20)

[There are those who hope for supremacy through their neighbour's being kept down, and only on this account desire that his greatness be brought low;
there are those who fear to lose power, favour, honour, or fame because another mounts higher, and thus are so aggrieved that they love the contrary.]

The proud pursue excellence not to magnify God like Mary but, rather, to exalt themselves and to put down their neighbour: the 'superbus' literally wants to walk above others ('nam superbire non est aliud, quam super alios velle ire').[46] The envious are saddened by the excellence of others lest it diminish their own and, instead of desiring good for their neighbour (as Mary desires that there be more wine at the Marriage of Cana), they take pleasure (spite) in their neighbour's failures and misfortune. In both cases, the end is hatred of one's neighbour.

Crucially, the root of pride and envy is the competitive pursuit of temporal goods and status. Indeed, Dante links pride and envy by listing four kinds of earthly things – power, favour or fortune, honour, and fame (*Purg.* XVII, 118) – by which people may measure themselves against others. As such temporal goods are finite, our own pursuit of them implies that our neighbour will have less (which may lead to pride – the desire to put down one's neighbour), while our neighbour's pursuit of them implies that we will have less (which may lead to envy – sadness at our neighbour's good). As Guido del Duca exclaims in the terrace of envy, 'O gente umana

[44] Ralph McInerny, *Dante and the Blessed Virgin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 49.
[45] Ibid., p. 48. [46] Benvenuto, gloss to *Purg.* XVII, 115–17.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

perché poni 'l core / là 'v' è mestier di consorte divieto?' [O human race, why do you set your heart where sharing must be forbidden?] (*Purg.* XIV, 86–87).

By contrast, spiritual goods multiply the more they are shared. Thus truth, goodness, or love do not diminish from being shared but, like a ray of light in a mirror, increase in each person (*Purg.* XV, 70–72). Freedom from the twin vices of pride and envy is only possible, therefore, when the soul is directed away from the competitive pursuit of secular attainments and instead towards God as its ultimate end. Having witnessed the proud souls punished bent over double by massive boulders, Dante exclaims:

> O superbi cristian, miseri lassi,
> che, de la vista de la mente infermi,
> fidanza avete ne' retrosi passi,
> non v'accorgete voi che noi siam vermi
> nati a formar l'angelica farfalla
> che vola a la giustizia sanza schermi?
> Di che l'animo vostro in alto galla,
> poi siete quasi antomata in difetto,
> sì come vermo in cui formazion falla?
> (*Purg.* X, 121–29)
>
> [O proud Christians, weary wretches, who, weak in mental vision, put your faith in backward steps,
> do you not perceive that we are worms born to form the angelic butterfly that flies to justice without a shield?
> Why is it that your spirit floats on high, since you are like defective insects, like worms in whom formation is lacking?]

Dante-character encounters Omberto Aldobrandesco, who took pride in the *past* (his noble ancestors); Provenzan Salvani, who took pride in the *present* (his political dominance of Siena); and Oderisi, who took pride in the *future* (his artistic glory). All this pride is short-sighted – the proud are 'weak in mental vision' – because beyond the corruptible world in time (subject to past, present, and future) is the eternal perfection of the heavenly city. As Sapia reminds Dante in the terrace of envy, she was only a pilgrim in Italy because everyone is a citizen of the true city: 'ciascuna è cittadina / d'una vera città' (*Purg.* XIII, 94–96). Christians, therefore, must not place their hope in earthly prowess and happiness (their 'backward steps').[47] Nothing by which one may puff oneself up in this life will

[47] L'Ottimo Commento, gloss to *Purg.* X, 121–29: 'La quale [superbia] fa porre loro la speme nelle potenzie mondane.'

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

avail the immortal soul (the butterfly), which must leave its corruptible body (the chrysalis) at death and return to its Creator for judgement. Christians, as pilgrims in this life, should thus fix their sight on their immortal destiny and fly to God, rather than remain defective in the pride of the flesh ('like worms in whom formation is lacking').[48]

The early commentators emphasise that Dante's invective against the 'proud Christians' underscores the fact that the realm of Purgatory (and the Christian pilgrimage of penitence in this life) is explicitly unavailable to pagans.[49] Indeed, this ethical direction would be completely alien from a pagan perspective, as its demands surpass the requirements of the natural law. When it comes to the disordered love of lesser goods (avarice, gluttony, and lust), the souls in Purgatory are not directed to a virtuous mean as in natural ethics, but rather to the supernatural ethical goals of poverty, abstinence, and chastity. Furthermore, their ultimate goal is not intellectual contemplation of the truth (the speculative perfection of Aristotelian ethics), but, through embracing the cross and suffering of Christ, the union of their souls with God in the beatific vision.

Notably, Virgil's doctrinal speech at the centre of the canticle does not give a specific explanation of the quiddity of the three vices of excess, ostensibly because it is good for Dante-character, combatting sloth, to discover it for himself.[50] This delay also allows Dante-poet, with typically caustic irony, to save the explanation of avarice for Pope Adrian V. A key point of this episode, equally for the institutional Church as for the individual Christian, is that the way to God – the corresponding virtue to avarice – is not the prudent or just distribution of temporal goods (appropriate to the secular sphere of conduct), but rather radical poverty. Poverty, to be spurned according to natural ethics, must be actively desired by those seeking the kingdom of Heaven. Pope Adrian V explains that avarice had extinguished his love for every good: his soul, fixed down on earthly things ('le cose terrene'), had been unable to taste heavenly things ('in alto'; *Purg.* XIV,

[48] Augustine, *In Evangelium Ioannis tractatus centum viginti quatuor*, I, 13: 'Omnes homines de carne nascentes, quid sunt nisi vermes? Et de vermibus [Deus] Angelos facit.'

[49] Jacopo della Lana, gloss to *Purg.* X, 121–23: 'qui esclama contra la superbia, e dice in particolare *cristiani*, imperquello che d'altra legge non va in Purgatorio, con ciò sia che altra generazione non si può salvare'; Benvenuto, gloss to *Purg.* X, 121–23: 'Unde dicit: *O superbi cristiani*, notanter dicit christiani, quia infideles ad purgatorium non veniunt'; Francesco da Buti, gloss to *Purg.* X, 121–29: 'Dice così: *O superbi cristian*; ecco che dirissa lo parlare suo pure ai cristiani: imperò che a stato di penitenzia et al purgatorio non vanno se non li cristiani.'

[50] See also *Conv.* III, v, 20: 'sì come omai, per quello che detto è, puote vedere chi ha nobile ingegno, al quale è bello un poco di fatica lasciare' [as now, based on what has been said, anyone can see who has a noble intelligence, which should be allowed to make a little effort].

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

115–23). By contrast, St Francis took Lady Poverty as his bride, opening up an ever-increasing divine love: he was, as Dante states in *Paradiso*, seraphic in love ('serafico in ardore'; *Par.* XI, 28–117 (37)).

The overarching Christian ethical reorientation from natural to supernatural ethics is further emphasised in the ensuing description of gluttony. In Hell, the blind intemperance of gluttony (the failure of reason to moderate the appetite to the food necessary for a person's health) is eternally punished. In contrast, in Purgatory, the souls are directed to a completely different moral order. The goal here is not bodily health (as a constituent of human flourishing), but rather holiness ('qui si rifà santa'; *Purg.* XXVIII, 66). The weeping souls sing the verse 'Labïa mëa, Domine' of the penitential psalm *Miserere* – their lips are directed from the satisfaction of sensual appetite to the praise of God ('et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam'). The souls in Purgatory endure an enforced fast: they circle a tree whose fruits, unreachable, nonetheless let off a powerful scent, which intensifies their hunger and thirst. Their faces are so dark, hollow, and wasted that the skin is shaped by their bones; their eye sockets are like rings without gems and, framing an emaciated nose, clearly spell 'omo' [man] (*Purg.* XXIII, 22–25). This is hardly readjusting to the Aristotelian virtuous mean with regard to eating and drinking.[51] Instead, this extreme bodily fasting leads the souls – entirely over and above the order of natural ethics – to spiritual union with Christ:

> E non pur una volta, questo spazzo
> girando, si rinfresca nostra pena:
> io dico pena e dovria dir solazzo,
> ché quella voglia a li alberi ci mena
> che menò Cristo lieto a dire '*Elì*,'
> quando ne liberò con la sua vena.
> (*Purg.* XXIII, 70–75)

[51] Benfell addresses the relationship between the Aristotelian mean and the extreme demands of the supernatural law in Benfell, 'From Vice to Beatitude': 'This "moderate virtue" (or "golden mean") seems to contradict the ethics taught by Christ in the New Testament, which in many cases seem to embrace extreme notions of virtue' (p. 191). Yet Benfell, somewhat strangely, describes Purgatory in terms of a reconciliation between the Aristotelian mean and the extreme demands of the supernatural law: 'The extreme of one vice (gluttony) is purged and balanced by forcing the gluttonous over to the other extreme of complete abstinence from food, hoping thereby to create a properly temperate disposition. In addition, it is possible to view the purgative processes of all the terraces of Mount Purgatory, with their respective actions that are aimed at correcting the will, as fundamentally Aristotelian in that they are directed towards the establishment of virtuous habits' (p. 202). However, this implies that the Aristotelian mean is the goal, whereas, as Benfell concedes, famous ascetics 'are explicitly praised' (p. 202). A more natural reading is simply that, in contrast to the emphasis on the virtuous mean with regard to the sins of incontinence in Hell (an explicitly Aristotelian scheme), Purgatory enacts the call to Christian holiness which surpasses the demands of the natural law.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

> [And not just once, as we circle this space, is our pain renewed:
> I say pain, and I should say solace,
> for that desire leads us to the tree that led Christ to say 'Eli' gladly,
> when he freed us with the blood of his veins.]

Despite the extreme agony and the humiliation of the cross (according to his human nature), Christ joyfully cries 'Eli' ('My God') and submits to the Divine will because of his love for humankind (redeemed through his sacrifice). Likewise, the penitent souls intensely desire to come to the heavenly city and, as the pain (their cross) is the means to their eternal salvation, it is now – for them – solace.[52] In Dante's geographical symbolism, the penitents join themselves to Christ's cross in Purgatory at the exact antipodes of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's crucifixion. It is Christ, therefore, who provides the moral path – the *via crucis* – in Purgatory. The souls, inspired by the promise of the beatitudes and embracing their penitential suffering, are made ready for the kingdom of God. Moreover, Dante explicitly compares these souls in Purgatory to pilgrims ('i peregrin pensosi') who, in this life, must do penance of abstinence and fasting for the sake of the heavenly kingdom.[53]

In this chapter, I have argued that the interpretation of a 'political Purgatory' in terms of philosophical principles represents a false turning in twentieth-century Dante scholarship. The motivation for such a reading, at least in part, was the desire to interpret the poem through Dante's dualistic theory. Scholars who equate the secular, this-worldly goal described in the *Monarchia* with the earthly paradise at the summit of Purgatory naturally seek to equate the philosophical guidance described in the *Monarchia* with the ethics of the *Purgatorio*. The first step in my argument, therefore, has been to dispute such a dualistic reading. In itself, this is not particularly new. After all, many scholars have considered that

[52] The agon embodied in Christ's cry is a paradigmatic site, theologically, for the perfect union in Christ of the human and the divine natures. Christ's forty-day fast in the desert demonstrated that his appetite was always obedient to his reason, while his acceptance of the cross demonstrated the obedience of his human will – which would naturally recoil from death and suffering – to the divine.

[53] The early commentators, including Benvenuto, naturally compare such Purgatorial pain to the voluntary penance of those seeking to purge themselves form the vice of gluttony in this life. Benvenuto, gloss to *Purg.* XXIII, 70–75: 'et cum hoc vehementer desiderant ad patriam pervenire, et ad hoc auxilium optant ab aliis'. See also Pietro Alighieri [3], gloss to *Purg.* XXIII, 25–75: 'auctor . . . describendo penam quam dicit animas pati in Purgatorio propter peccatum gulae in fame et siti, fingit se hic nunc vidisse has umbras ita macilentas et in occulis obscuras et cavas etiam, ut dicit textus, quod forte posset reduci allegorice etiam ad illos homines qui in hoc mundo viventes in satisfationem huius vitii gulae cum abstinentiis et ieiuniis, quasi se purgando simili modo extenuati apparent'.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006

such a parallel is mistaken. In contrast to them, I have not thereby concluded that there is no evidence of Dante's dualistic theory in the *Commedia* – a conclusion that is all but untenable if, as the modern philological evidence suggests, Dante's intellectual trajectory had not radically shifted away from this theory by the time he wrote the *Commedia*. Rather, I have presented an alternative way to read the poem in dualistic terms: the Limbo of the virtuous pagans represents the journey by philosophical teaching to moral and intellectual flourishing in this life; the seven terraces of Purgatory represent the spiritual journey to eternal beatitude (*beatitudo vitae aeternae*). The immediate Christian context of Dante's depiction of Purgatory reinforces this reading. The use of the seven capital vices in thirteenth-century penitential practice served perfectly the literal and moral purpose of Dante's Purgatory: it literally describes the temporal punishment and purification of saved souls after death, and it allegorically represents the spiritual penance which all Christians should undergo on their pilgrimage to God in this life. As I have shown, the ethics of Dante's Purgatory are distinctively Christian and outside the purview of philosophical principles: the penitent souls are directed from this world to the heavenly city, from the virtuous mean to the radical demands of the supernatural law.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:30:00, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108776875.006