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MacIntyre, Dante and Modernity

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John Haldane suggests two fresh ways in which modern scholars might engage with medieval thinkers.[1] Where the goal of historical research is to understand 'medieval thinkers, just as one might figures and ideas from other periods of the history of philosophy', one may transcend the potential closure of history through comparative or practising research.[2] The goal of comparative research is to explore parallels between 'medieval and contemporary theories [. . .] in the hope of illuminating both sides of the comparison'; the goal of practising research is to 'carry on philosophising in the general tradition of the scholastics'.[3] In this comparative (and rather experimental) article, I first explore the important role which Alasdair MacIntyre assigns to Dante in his influential account of modern ethical theory and practice, an account which includes the provocative assertion that 'moral enquiry can only extend itself by drawing upon Aquinas and upon Dante'.[4] I critique two major claims which MacIntyre makes about Dante, and argue that Dante will not fit into the philosophical-historical genealogy which MacIntyre's project outlines. In the second part, I attempt a comparison in the opposite direction. Instead of trying to draw out from Dante's work what might be useful in supporting a contemporary philosophical standpoint (such as MacIntyre's), I explore what might happen if we were to ask Dante to read us moderns. Leaving aside the incalculable historical, cultural and aesthetic value of Dante's poem, may it speak philosophically only to those with essentially Christian-Aristotelian commitments? Or is there, in addition, a place in Dante's poem for a philosophical attitude that might approximate to the secular materialism

[1] John Haldane, 'Current Engagements', in P. J. Fitzpatrick and John Haldane, 'Medieval philosophy in later thought'. in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by A. S. McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 300–27 (pp. 316–24).

[2] *Ibid*., pp. 321–22.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 321. However, Haldane calls for a 'synthesis [of these approaches] analogous to that achieved by the medievals themselves', a synthesis made possible, he suggests, by considering the way that the medievals combined more effectively 'the scientific and sapiential dimensions of philosophy' (p. 324).

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006; first published 1990), p. 80.

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characteristic of modernity? I suggest that Dante's nuanced treatment of Epicureanism may offer just such a prophetic analogue.[5]

A Modern Philosopher and a Medieval Poet

MacIntyre's use of Dante, which he does not himself fully develop, is at first sight appealing: here is a highly influential and much-cited philosopher offering to Dante scholars a pivotal role for their medieval protagonist in modern ethical debate and practice.[6] MacIntyre makes two substantive claims for the potential importance of Dante for his own philosophical project: first, that Dante's *Commedia* shows in narrative practice what MacIntyre calls 'the traditional version of moral enquiry'; secondly, that the narrative inclusiveness of Dante's *Commedia* allows for, and therefore defeats, rival and divergent versions of moral enquiry within its dominant tradition-based narrative.

MacIntyre champions Dante as 'the philosopher par excellence of the practical life'. He claims that a modern recuperation of traditional Aristotelian moral enquiry requires some recourse to Dante.[7] In his view, to understand Aristotelian ethics is to understand the social context which made possible the exercise and celebration of the Aristotelian virtues. In a modernity in which such a social context has been eroded, we should read, alongside St Thomas Aquinas (as the foremost neo-Aristotelian philosopher), Dante who, through his narrative poetry, may show us what this ethical theory involves in narrative practice:

> In moral enquiry we are always concerned with the question: what *type* of enacted narrative would be the embodiment, in the actions and transactions of actual social life, of this particular theory? For until we have answered this question about a moral theory we do not know what that theory in fact amounts to; we do not as yet understand it adequately. And in our moral lives we are each engaged in enacting our own narrative, so revealing implicitly, and sometimes

[5] In his genealogy of secularization, Charles Taylor suggests that an 'exclusive humanism was undoubtedly available [. . .] in Epicureanism' but he explicitly excludes such a worldview as 'virtually impossible' before 1500 (let alone in 1300!) See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 27; pp. 374–76.

[6] Alasdair MacIntyre directly cites Dante at the following places: *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2006; first published 1981), pp. 176; 243; *Three Rival Versions*, pp. 61; 80–1; 142–5; 147; 164; 197; 203. The only other reflection on MacIntyre's treatment of Dante, as far as I am aware, is found in Robin Kirkpatrick and George Corbett, '"E lascia pur grattar . . . " Language, Narrative and Ethics in the *Commedia*', in *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet*, ed. by Zygmunt G. Barański and Martin McLaughlin (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), pp. 56–71.

[7] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, p. 80.

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> also explicitly, the not always coherent theoretical stance presupposed by that enactment.[8]

Dante exemplifies, for MacIntyre, what is missing in a modern ethical discourse 'blind to the complementary character of narrative and theory both in moral enquiry and in the moral life itself'.[9]

MacIntyre, however, goes further still: he contends that Dante's work and philosophical procedure may provide a non-theoretical way out of the 'moral incommensurability' which is the characteristic feature of contemporary ethical debate:

> So the encyclopaedic, the genealogical, and the Thomistic tradition-constituted standpoints confront one another not only as rival moral theories but also as projects for constructing rival forms of moral narrative. Is there any way in which one of these rivals might prevail over the others? One possible answer was supplied by Dante: that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.[10]

MacIntyre leaves this claim hanging, however, as he writes that 'we cannot hope even to pose the question of how Dante's standard might be fruitfully applied without first elaborating an adequately full account of the Thomistic understanding of moral enquiry'.[11] Let us, though, briefly consider it here. The first part of MacIntyre's claim seems, although contentious, straightforward: that Dante's master-narrative, the *Commedia*, includes within it rival moral theories under the aspect of rival moral narratives. It is less easy to grasp the second part of his claim. He writes that the poem does not just include these rival moral narratives ('their stories') within it as 'episodes within its story', but it tells 'the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes'. The thrust of the claim as a whole, nonetheless, is clear. MacIntyre's idea is that the master moral narrative of Dante's poem includes within it rival moral theories (constructed as rival moral narratives). In so doing, it may be seen to 'prevail over the others', asserting its own superiority and claim on the reader's assent.

MacIntyre's second major claim about Dante's poem must be understood within his vision of the history of philosophy. In MacIntyre's simplified schema, the contemporary melange and heterodoxy of moral claims arises out of one historical conjunction: the Enlightenment's rejection of the moral teleology intrinsic to the Aristotelian ethical tradition. In the 'tradition' project, whose greatest protagonist is Aristotle, virtues guide man from 'man-as-he-happens-to-be'

[8] *Ibid*., p. 80.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 80.
[10] *Ibid*., pp. 80–1.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 81.

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to 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos*'. The Enlightenment project, however, rationally defends virtues only in relation to 'man-as-he-happens-to-be'. Rationalists, such as Kant, justify morality and produce the evaluative concepts of 'rights' in relation to the dictates of instrumental reason. Utilitarians, such as Bentham and Mill, set up a new social teleology, the happiness of the greatest number, producing the contemporary normative values of 'utility' and 'equity'. But, deriving from different ethical foundations and criteria, these evaluative conclusions will always be incommensurable:

> [. . .] when claims involving rights are matched against claims appealing to utility or when either or both are matched against claims based on some traditional concept of justice, it is not surprising that there is no rational way of deciding which type of claim is to be given priority.[12]

The consequence is relativism and emotivism: with no accepted ethical standard, all moral arguments are, as Nietzsche espoused, nothing but (more or less concealed) expressions of individual preference.

Denying to traditional reason an ontological privilege, MacIntyre seeks nevertheless to steer moral debate out of relativism and to advocate 'traditional' ethics through his emphasis on narrative form and on sociological praxis. MacIntyre is surely correct to demand that a moral philosopher account for the practical manifestation of an ethical theory. As ethics is a practical subject, in the sense that it manifests itself in human actions, so a moral theory must be more than a series of propositions – it must be 'true to life'.[13] As Martha Nussbaum's parallel literary defence of broadly Aristotelian ethics highlights, if a moral theory cannot be conceived in the particular of human lives (and thus shown in historical or fictional narratives) how may it be justified as a *human* moral theory at all?[14] MacIntyre is similarly right to emphasise the importance, in Aristotelian ethics,

[12] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 70.

[13] MacIntyre's contribution to the rehabilitation of Aristotelian ethics within the academy is inestimable, but this should not sideline his achievement in translating into modern terminology, and with popular every-day examples, some key practical features of the landscape of contemporary moral philosophy and of a teleological understanding of virtues.

[14] For Martha Nussbaum's championing of Aristotelian ethics through a literary perspective, see *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; first published 1986). For her specific interest in Dante, see, for example, her chapter on Dante in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 557–590. Nussbaum has distanced herself, however, from what she considers the 'antireason' and 'antitheory' of MacIntyre: 'in commending novels as cultivators of [. . .] an Aristotelian perception, I insisted that they would only yield ethical insight if read in connection with the systematic study of ethical theory' ('Preface to a revised edition', in Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, p. xxvii).

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of a well-governed social context and normative social roles for the efficacious schooling in and flourishing of virtue.

MacIntyre's exaggerated emphases on narrative and sociology, however, lead to major problems in any comparative analysis with Dante. MacIntyre relativises historically the Thomistic-Aristotelian philosophy he avowedly champions into an ever-evolving tradition in which rival ethical views may be, more or less successfully, accommodated over time.[15] MacIntyre's analysis of the papal encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* (1992) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998) is symptomatic of his procedural insistence on the relativisation of natural reason within a particular moral community.[16] Although it is true that, in his later works, MacIntyre retracts his earlier repudiation of 'metaphysical biology', even his more recent work insists on a vindication of traditional ethics in terms of a comparative critique of rival theories.[17] Drawing upon the empirical evidence of professional and lay intractable disagreement in ethics, MacIntyre does not consider sustainable the view that the precepts of natural law might be rationally binding in the same way as, for example, proofs in mathematics such that only ignorance would lead to error.[18] MacIntyre's standpoint is,

[15] MacIntyre defines his own mature philosophical standpoint – 'I write now with the intentions and commitments of a Thomistic Aristotelian' – in Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy, Selected Essays*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. xi. For a useful survey and discussion of some key corroborating criticisms of MacIntyre's project, and a bibliography, see Thomas D. D'Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 403–34; 434–52.

[16] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'How can we learn what *Veritatis Splendor* has to teach?', in *The Thomist*, 58 (1994), pp. 171–95; Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Truth as a good: a reflection on *Fides et Ratio*', in MacIntyre, *Tasks of Philosophy*, I, pp. 197–215.

[17] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999), p. x: 'I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible'. See also *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law. Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), pp. 1–52 and pp. 313–51. MacIntyre concludes the essay opening the volume (to which the other essays are responses) with the statement: 'The best defence of natural law will consist in radical philosophical, moral, and cultural critques of rival standpoints' (p. 52).

[18] Although MacIntyre acknowledges the objection to his standpoint ('might not its effect be to promote moral skepticism, to undermine belief in *any* moral standard?'), he considers this inevitable if we are to engage credibly with modern thinkers. As he puts it 'if the precepts of natural law are indeed precepts established by reason, we should expect to find agreement in assenting to them among rational agents. But this is not what we find [. . .] Many intelligent, perceptive, and insightful agents either reject what Catholics take to be particular precepts of the natural law or accept them only in some very different version, or, more radically still, reject the very conception of a natural law. And these disagreements seem to be intractable' (*Intractable Disputes*, pp. 1–2). For a perspective sympathetic to MacIntyre's project but insistent on the rational basis of the Arisotelian-Thomist tradition, see, for example, Clifford G. Kossel, 'Natural Law and Human Law', in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. by Stephen J. Pope (Washington: Georgetown University

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nonetheless, alien to Dante for whom a correct understanding of human nature, a universal and timeless criterion, ontologically justifies moral values. As Dante's eulogy of the pagan philosophers suggests, the most important claim of traditional philosophy is that it is *semper eadem*, for all men and for all times. With regard to Aristotelian ethics, Dante exclaims: 'Qui ab Aristotile felicitatem ostensam reostendere conaretur?'[19] The suggestion, then, that the task of each generation of philosophers is to remould an ethical theory such that it takes into account rival theories in an ever-evolving tradition would not, I think, have occurred to him.

Beyond this narrative-genealogical bias, MacIntyre tends to imply that social context is not just a conduit for, but the origin of, moral value *in se*. MacIntyre presents the 'tradition-version-of-moral-enquiry' as arising from particular social structures and enterprises which lent evaluative value to certain human strengths and capabilities.[20] For Dante, however, social organisation is optimal when it serves as an effective conduit to human nature; a deficient society, in which false values reign, subjects and inhibits the natural potential of its citizens. Where MacIntyre characteristically proceeds, at the level of rhetoric, to ask 'Whose Justice? Which Rationality', for Dante 'rationality' refers to a thing – an intellectual faculty that human beings possess just as they possess the sensual faculty of sight.[21] The word 'rationality' may be in need of etymological or epistemological clarification, but the thing 'rationality', for Dante, is ontologically grounded and does not require, as for MacIntyre, locating within a particular historical or sociological tradition.

It is difficult for MacIntyre to evade the accusation of working within the assumptions of the relativism he ostensibly attacks: MacIntyre's 'so-described particularism, his denial that a rationally

Press, 2002), pp. 167–93: 'Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out the disarray in many post-Enlightenment moral philosophies and the breakdown of traditions. But beyond appealing to an older tradition (Aristotelian-Thomist), one must show that this tradition has a sounder basis and can deal with the issues raised by modern moral philosophy and by life in large and diverse communities. This can be done only by returning in some way to human nature, not necessarily as antecedently known by speculative science, but as revealed in our natural knowledge of our natural inclinations. But this knowledge can, and for better understanding should, be related to the speculative knowledge of human nature and to the universal teleology of the universe and divine providence' (p. 178).

[19] Dante, *Monarchia*, I.i. 4.

[20] The influence of MacIntyre's early Marxism on the structure of this aspect of his thought is emphasised by D'Andrea who usefully highlights, in this context, MacIntyre's 1995 Introduction to the reissuing of *Marxism and Christianity*. MacIntyre's 'rational ideology' is a 'successfully vindicated overall philosophical conception [. . .] or in MacIntyre's words, "philosophy as a form of social practice embedded in and reflective upon other forms of social practice"' (D'Andrea, p. 407). See also D'Andrea, pp. 87–122.

[21] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

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justifiable moral theory can speak to, and be persuasive for, any rational person beyond the bounds of the moral community of whose practice it is the theory'.[22] Thomas D. D'Andrea has suggested, nonetheless, that the attack on MacIntyre's relativism is 'often enough inspired by a failure to distinguish what he says about rational moral persuasion from what he says about moral truth'.[23] In this view, MacIntyre is not aiming for 'moral truth' but for an account of morality which is persuasive: the 'appropriate goal [. . .] for MacIntyre is to have a good measure of rational confidence that one's ethical beliefs and general moral outlook are true'.[24] This displacement of 'persuasion' for 'truth', however, only reinforces the relativity of the moral position. Indeed, D'Andrea proceeds to characterise MacIntyre's ethical project by just the same historical and social contingency.[25]

For Dante, by contrast, there are three principal schools of philosophy – the Peripatetics, the Stoics, and the Epicureans – but his view of the ethical teaching of these schools stresses similarity rather than difference. The motives, or final goals, of the three schools may have been very different: the peripatetics placed 'happiness' as the highest good, the stoics 'virtue', the Epicureans 'pleasure' (understood narrowly as *ataraxia*, a tranquillity of the soul free from pain). And yet, for Dante, each school nonetheless – in seeking its respective goal – taught and trained its disciples in virtue defined communally, in a nutshell, as the ordering of human action in accordance with reason. There is no room for moral relativism in Dante's work because the criterion of natural ethics – reason – is not itself in question, as it is in modern ethics.

It is highly implausible, therefore, that Dante could have countenanced MacIntyre's substitute for reason, the 'historical imagination':

> [. . .] is there then a single history of the world within which all other stories find their place and from which the significance of each subordinate story derives? Dante's affirmative answer embodies a challenge to his future readers: tell me your story and I will show you that it only becomes intelligible within the framework provided by the *Commedia.*[26]

[22] D'Andrea, p. 403.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 404.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 404. D'Andrea compares this to Bernard Williams' strategy, and the goal of 'a rationally credible moral outlook' (p. 405)

[25] '[MacIntyre] has always rejected the Cartesian-style portrayal about how its claims to universality are justifiable: they are justifiable, he holds, not by intuitable, self-justifying moral principles, but by dialectically discovered and hypothetico-deductively corroborated such principles [. . .] the process of reflective dialectical discovery of first principles is crucially affected by one's prior moral habits and prior moral instruction in a nurturing and sustaining moral community' (*Ibid*., p. 404).

[26] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, pp. 144–45.

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Dante's narrative does not, as MacIntyre suggests, include within it rival versions of moral enquiry. MacIntyre's sweeping pronouncement about 'Dante's affirmative answer' ignores, furthermore, the distinctions between natural and Christian ethics in the *Commedia*. The framework of the *Commedia*, after all, is Christian – it depicts the three realms of the Christian afterlife! Although, arguably, the moral structure of the *Inferno* may be understood principally in terms of natural law and the ethics of Aristotle (a reason-bound moral landscape), the *Purgatory* and *Paradiso* are emphatically revelation-bound moral landscapes. MacIntyre's recourse to the *Commedia* as a whole to resolve philosophical considerations, therefore, is interpretatively unsustainable.

MacIntyre's appeal to the master narrative of Dante's *Commedia* may suggest, nonetheless, an implicit recourse to a Christian framework as a non-philosophical way out of the relativism of his philosophical position.[27] It is, therefore, revealing that MacIntyre's rhetoric is expanded by John Milbank with regard not to Dante's *Commedia* but to theology 'as a metadiscourse' and that Graham Ward, without any reference to MacIntyre, should have characterised Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* as, indeed, a 'contemporary *Commedia*'.[28] Milbank, who 'in contrast to most critiques of MacIntyre, [does] not find him sufficiently relativistic or historicist', starts from MacIntyre's premise, that 'one must place oneself within a "narrative", or the accepted and ever-to-be-repeated "plot formation" of a particular society'.[29] He then extrapolates from MacIntyre's further position – that one version of moral enquiry may prevail over another because it includes, within its master narrative, its rivals – to apply to Christianity as the true master narrative or 'metadiscourse'. This leads to Milbank's extraordinary claim that someone might assent to his genealogy of Christianity as, simply, the best story available: a rival moral view 'cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated,

[27] In an earlier work, MacIntyre appeals to a Christian framework in the context of 'different forms of moral vocabulary' (anticipating rival versions of moral enquiry): 'The distressing fact about our own society is that we are in just this situation: the effective and honest use of moral predicates does presuppose a shared moral vocabulary in an established moral community, but we do not as a whole community share a single moral vocabulary' (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1967), pp. 51–52). See also *Ibid*., p. 75: 'The inability of men to discard Christianity is part of their inability to provide any post-Christian means of understanding their situation in the world'.

[28] See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) and Graham Ward, 'John Milbank's Divina Commedia', in *New Blackfriars* (June 1992), vol. 73, pp. 311–18 (p. 311).

[29] Milbank, p. 327; p. 339.

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if we can *persuade* people – for reasons of "literary taste" – that Christianity offers a better story'.[30]

Dante will not play the role which MacIntyre's own philosophical-historical project assigns for him. Dante does not provide an 'affirmative answer', and certainly not in philosophical terms, to MacIntyre's desire for a 'single history of the world' which will reconcile divergent versions of philosophical enquiry. Dante's *Commedia* does not open a way out of what is, for MacIntyre, the philosophical incommensurability of modernity. Nor do appeals to Dante's *Commedia* as a model for a theological-historical 'metanarrative' fare any better. All this notwithstanding, there is, I would argue, another way in which Dante's *Commedia* presents 'a challenge to his future readers' and in which his poem confronts head on a philosophical view which would entirely undermine the very principle on which it is based. Moreover, this view – which Dante singles out as the heresy *par excellence* in his poem – is particularly striking as it underlies, arguably, a characteristic philosophical attitude of secular modernity.

A Medieval Poet and Modernity

Having passed through the circles of upper hell where incontinent sin (lust, gluttony, avarice and prodigality, anger) is punished, Dante and Virgil enter the City of Dis where malice (deliberate evil) is punished. They are immediately confronted by a huge graveyard of burning open tombs: these are, Dante learns, the tombs of the heretics of all different sects. Dante and Virgil then enter, by a secret path,

[30] Milbank, p. 330. For an anthology which questions the genealogy upon which Milbank's position is based, see *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). Graham Ward, however, uses the *Commedia* as an apology for Milbank's methodological procedure and for the historical inaccuracies of his genealogy: 'Analyses of individual secular thinkers and schools of thought only become meaningful within the movement of the whole book [...] Each analysis is subservient to this grand narrative. Because of this there emerges an element of distortion' (Ward, p. 311). Ward appears to suggest that just as one might distinguish, say, the Statius of the *Commedia* (whom Dante presents as a secret convert to Christianity) from the Statius of history and yet still recognise the useful function of Dante's Statius within the overarching narrative of the poem, so Milbank's 'Aquinas' might serve a productive function in his metanarrative even though he may bear little resemblance to the Aquinas of history. See, John Marenbon 'Aquinas, Radical Orthodoxy and the Importance of Truth', in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 49–63: 'The Aquinas of Radical Orthodoxy is a fine monument to the arbitrary power of postmodern hermeneutics: a totem, erected by Milbank and Pickstock for their own ideological purposes, which has almost nothing to do with the Aquinas of history' (p. 63).

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that part of this burning graveyard where 'Epicurus and his disciples who make the soul die with the body' reside.[31]

The presence of Epicurus and his sect is deeply surprising. Kenelm Foster asks 'Why then Epicurus? Why the special stress, implied in the poet's deliberately choosing to cross the circle of heresy at precisely *that* point, on the evil of denying the soul's survival of bodily death?'[32] There were, after all, far more obvious 'Christian' heresies such as the denial of Christ's human or divine nature or forms of body-soul dualism (Manichaeism or Albigensianism). And yet, the whole canto of the heretics (*Inferno* X) is devoted to one heresy of pagan origin: the denial of the soul's survival of bodily death. Dante's emphasis on Epicureanism is certainly surprising, but it is also prophetic. Had Dante chosen to focus on, say, Arianism, his modern secular reader could have read the passage with the detached curiosity of an historian of Christianity or antiquarian. But Dante's emphasis on Epicureanism does embody, in MacIntyre's terms, 'a challenge to his future readers'. If the great *summa* of Dante's poem, like the great gothic cathedrals of his time, may appear wonderful but alien (as it did to the critic I.A. Richards), does not the twenty-first-century reader nonetheless discover a strange kinship with the views of the Epicureans therein represented?[33] For, *prima facie* at least, an outlook concerned only with this life is, also, a dominant feature of secular modernity. What, then, does Dante mean by Epicureanism and how might his account provide a parallel with philosophical attitudes underlying modernity?[34]

The first perplexing thing for a modern reader is that Dante's Epicurus is presented as a heretic at all. Surely only a baptised Christian

[31] *Inferno*, X. 14–15: 'hanno da questa parte con Epicuro / tutti i suoi seguaci che l'anima col corpo morta fanno'.

[32] Kenelm Foster, *The Two Dantes and Other Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 11.

[33] Robin Kirkpatrick cites I. A. Richards' impassioned perplexity 'in the face of a work which he admits to be a masterpiece: "Minds that accept, totally or in part, the concepts of the cosmos set forth in the *Commedia* and minds that reject them totally, how can they sufficiently read alike a poem so unified and precise. [. . .] how can a poem so dependent on such principles be read by those who think them among the most pernicious aberrations that men have suffered?"'. See Kirkpatrick, *Difficult and Dead Poetry*, pp. 1–2; see also I. A. Richards, *Beyond* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974), pp. 107–8.

[34] The prominence given to Epicurus by Dante has led to a number of articles within Dante studies. For a bibliography, see George Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus: A Dualistic Vision of Secular and Spiritual Fulfilment* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), p. 4, n. 1. The more general reception of Epicurus in the medieval period has been under treated by medievalists and historians of philosophy. For example, Howard Jones, documenting the history of Epicureanism, tellingly entitles the medieval chapter 'Medieval Interlude' (Howard Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition* (London: Routledge,1989), pp.117–41). Two recent exceptions, however, are John Marenbon's important study 'The Hellenistic Schools and Thinking about Pagan Philosophy in the Middle Ages' (Basel: Schwabe, 2013) and Aurélien Robert's article, 'Épicure et les épicuriens au Moyen Âge', in *Micrologus* xxi (2013), pp. 3–46.

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could be a heretic?[35] Authoritative theologians, such as Augustine and Aquinas, had considered that heresy may involve error with regard to the goal of life and not only errors with regard explicitly to the revealed dogmas of Christian faith.[36] Nonetheless, the point was that these errors (even if pagan in origin) were held obstinately against the authority of church teaching. By classing Epicurus as a heretic, Dante seems to suggest that Epicurus trespassed against not ecclesial but philosophical authority. Thus, although Democritus held the same atomistic view of the human soul as Epicurus, he is classed by Dante not as a heretic but as a virtuous pagan.[37] Epicurus is a heretic, in other words, not simply because he shared with Democritus a mistaken atomistic view of the human soul, but because he persevered in it even after Aristotle (*the* authority in philosophy: 'il maestro di color che sanno') had set forth and confuted Democritus in *De Anima*.[38] Epicurus' heresy involves a philosophical error and an affront to the philosophical authority of Aristotle. To deviate from Aristotle in philosophy is, for Dante it seems, a form of philosophical heresy!

It seems correct, therefore, to affirm that the followers of Epicurus in *Inferno* X are not 'heretics' in the conventional sense (as those who hold some of the truths of the Christian faith but deny others) but, rather, unbelievers who, for philosophical reasons, deny the revealed truths of faith *tout court*. After all, Epicurean mortalism is entirely incompatible with Christian faith and, indeed, with the literal and moral ground of the *Commedia*. The poem's literal subject is the state of human souls after death while, for the Epicureans, there is no afterlife. The moral subject is man who may elect good or evil in this life and will thereby be rewarded or punished by God for the eternity of the next life. The Epicurean canto, which is set in a graveyard, is clearly intended as a *memento mori*. Ironically, however,

[35] The Epicureans are, Kenelm Foster concludes, 'not even, theologically speaking, heretics at all but unbelievers; for in strict theology a heretic is still a sort of Christian' (Foster, *The Two Dantes*, p. 11).

[36] Thus, according to Aquinas who explicitly cites the Stoics and the Epicureans in his example, he who errs as to the goal of life ('finis vitae humanae'), just as he who errs with regard to the Christian faith, is a heretic: 'Si vero erraret circa ea quae sunt ad finem vitae humane, semper est haereticus. Et dico finem vitae humanae, quia apud antiquos erant sectae ponentes diversum finem, ut patet de Stoicis et Epicureis' (Aquinas, *Super Epistolam Beati Pauli ad Titum lectura*, cap. 3, l. 2). Augustine similarly cites the Epicurean and Stoic schools as heresies: see Augustine, *Contra Cresconium grammaticum donatistam*, I. 12. 15 and *Epistola*, LXXXV. 10.

[37] Dante, *Inferno*, IV. 136: 'Democrito che 'l mondo a caso pone'.

[38] Dante, *Inferno*, IV. 131. For a summary of other interpretative approaches to the problem of Dante's contrasting treatment of Epicurus (a heretic in *Inferno*, X) and Democritus (a virtuous pagan in *Inferno*, IV), see Valerio Lucchesi, 'Epicurus and Democritus: The Ciceronian Foundations of Dante's Judgement', *Italian Studies*, 42 (1987), pp. 1–19 (pp. 14–19).

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it was precisely the fear of death and of God's final judgement from which Epicurean philosophy sought to liberate mankind. As Edward Moore suggests, Dante refers 'not so much to what we understand by "heresy" as to open and professed infidelity, and this particularly in its aspect of Materialism'.[39]

This brings us to the second thing which may surprise modern readers about Dante's Epicurus and his followers in the circle of the heretics. One might think that Epicurus is being held up by Dante as the heretic *par excellence* because he pursued and encouraged a life of pleasure. If Epicurus the sensual hedonist is being condemned, modern secular readers – if just reasonably abstemious – might think themselves off the hook! But this is not the case. The materialist who, unrestrained by the moral influence of religion, lives a bestial life of the senses is given a place in Dante's *Inferno* but he does not merit the epithet (or rather epitaph) 'Epicurean'. Indeed Dante polemically corrects the false, but widespread, medieval view of Epicurus as little better than a pig enslaved to the senses (the *porcus de grege Epicuri*), a figure he caricatures in the glutton Ciacco (*Inferno* VI).[40] Dante's treatment, by contrast, reflects a more sophisticated strand of the medieval reception which, although condemning Epicurus' natural philosophy, nonetheless understood Epicurus to have taught virtue in moral philosophy.[41] The mantra 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die' is foolish – and should not be attributed to any philosophical school – because such a life is, to use Dante's metaphors, a living death, a sleep, or an animal life. Man is, uniquely, a *rational* animal and, therefore, he only lives as a man insofar as he lives in accordance with reason. The Epicurean secular life – based upon a conviction of man's mortality – does not imply, therefore, depraved sensuality.

Dante uses the appellation 'Epicurean' to refer, in a general way, to all those who live in accordance with the teachings of moral philosophy but who, due to an intellectual conviction of mortalism, reject Christian faith.[42] Thus, the followers of Epicurus depicted in

[39] Edward Moore, *Studies in Dante, Second series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 178.

[40] See Simone Marchesi '"Epicuri de grege porcus": Ciacco, Epicurus and Isidore of Seville', *Dante Studies*, 117 (1999), pp. 117–31. For a development of this thesis, see Corbett, *Dante and Epicurus*, pp. 27–33. Corbett underlines that Dante, despite setting up this unmistakable parallel, at no point labels Ciacco as an Epicurean: 'Ciacco is a *porcus* (he is the personality-type defined by Isidore) but he emphatically is not, for Dante, 'de grege Epicuri' (p. 32).

[41] See Marenbon, *The Hellenistic Schools*, pp. 6–39 and Robert, 'Épicure et les épicuriens', pp. 3–46.

[42] For a survey of four literary fields of influence – the Roman writers, the medieval encyclopaedias, the patristic and popular traditions, and the scholastic treatment – which may have informed Dante's understanding of Epicureanism, see Corbett, *Dante and*

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Inferno X, although denying Christian faith, are all 'great-souled' nobles ('magnanimi'). In the context of an intellectual period during which neo-Aristotelian scholars sought to mediate between the order of nature and the order of grace, and between the patrimony of the pagan philosophers (principally of Aristotle) and the body of Christian revelation, Dante argued that man has two ethical goals which correspond to these two orders: a natural happiness potentially attainable in this life through the teachings of the philosophers, and an eternal beatitude attainable only through the teachings of the Christian faith. Dante's Epicurean thereby provides the theoretical framework for what we might call today 'secular man', committed to this world and the attainment of earthly felicity but unconcerned with or indifferent to religion of an afterlife.

Modern secular unbelievers, therefore, might like to seek out their distant intellectual ancestors in Dante's graveyard of the Epicureans. But they must be wary of flattering themselves by the comparison. After all, many of our secular contemporaries have rejected not only, in common with Dante's Epicureans, the immortality of the soul and the dogmas of the Christian faith but also, in contrast to the Epicureans presented in *Inferno* X, the ethics and philosophy which direct man towards a this-worldly happiness. It is only too easy to witness today the disordered pursuit of sensual gratification, from depraved excesses (the pig-Epicurean) to more sophisticated tastes (the modern day 'Epicure'). This is as much a characteristic of early twenty-first-century Western society as it appears to have been a feature of early fourteenth-century Christendom. But rather less widespread, in the early twenty-first century, is the conviction, amongst secular unbelievers, that it behoves them – *qua* human beings – to pursue, and to exhort others to pursue, the life of virtue. For, in the era of modernity – after a philosophical cataclysm which MacIntyre crudely locates in the eighteenth-century enlightenment abandonment of Aristotelianism – reason and natural ethics are themselves in question.[43]

Dante's representation of the Epicureans nonetheless presents two key challenges to a modern secular reader. First, it denies him or her the opportunity to stand entirely outside the *Commedia*, as outside

Epicurus, pp. 8–18 (with notes, pp. 33–37). Some of these sources include quite sophisticated accounts of Epicurean ethics. Dante does not seem to have been concerned, however, with the actual content of Epicurus' ethics. Rather 'Epicurean' serves as a more general tag to denote someone who pursues an ethical life but with no thought to the afterlife.

[43] In the famous opening chapter 'A Disquieting Suggestion' of *After Virtue* (1970), MacIntyre compares the modern state of philosophy with an imagined future in which, after 'a series of environmental disasters blamed by the general public on the scientists', a 'Know-Nothing' revolution successfully abolishes scientific knowledge leaving only 'fragments' of a system for future generations to revive: 'bits and pieces of theory [. . .] instruments whose use has been forgotten [. . .] very partial knowledge of each' (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 1).

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a museum of antiquities which have no bearing on modernity. Dante's emphasis on Epicureanism belies any simplistic depiction of the medieval era as an 'age of faith' in which, before the advent of modern science, people in Western Europe unanimously subscribed unquestionably to the tenets of the Christian faith. We may note, indeed, that many of the principal philosophical views of the Epicureans find their direct parallels in the standard tenets of dominant forms of modern thought: materialism; atomism; mortalism; implicit atheism; the rejection of all forms of religion; the denial of Creation and of Divine Providence; a version of ethics founded upon a prudential pleasure principle. Indeed, the mechanistic philosophy characteristic of the modern age presupposes, more or less self-consciously, premises shared with Epicurean teaching. Beyond an analogical parallel, scholars have even traced macro-intellectual genealogies from Aristotelian ontology to an Epicurean-inspired materialism, the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, and the intellectual landscape of modernity.[44] It is thus of particular interest that Dante responds to this incipient materialism, mortalism, and implicit atheism at a crucial philosophical juncture in western thought, at arguably the very height of European scholasticism and medieval Christendom.[45] Although the modern reader may have different reasons, scientific or otherwise, for holding such views, Dante's familiarity with them may challenge the unbelieving reader into a constructive dialogue with the Christian poet.

Secondly, Dante's poem presents a stringent ethical challenge to those who are convinced unbelievers. This is a challenge exemplified by a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* which builds upon Dante's presentation of the Epicureans. A group of Florentine *signori*, given to a life of pleasure, accost the Florentine poet-philosopher Guido Cavalcanti in the graveyard of St Reparata. They ask him what he will do when, following the opinion of Epicurus, he has finally proven

[44] Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008) and Catherine Wilson 'Epicureanism in early modern philosophy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, ed. by James Warren (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.266–86. Jacques Maritain, in his history of philosophy, similarly highlights the rejection of hylomorphism as the defining characteristic of mechanistic philosophy: 'mechanists – whether in their doctrine of the human soul they are materialists (Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, among the ancients, Hobbes in the seventeenth century, etc.) or spiritualists like Descartes – reduce corporeal substance to matter'. Mechanistic philosophy attempts 'to explain all things mechanically, that is to say as the result of a simple aggregation of material elements effected by local motion'. However, it is clear that – for Maritain at least – this rejection of hylomorphism and the adoption of a narrow mechanistic worldview is not altogether a good thing! See Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 102; p. 21.

[45] Maritain comments that 'nothing less than age-old Christendom was singing its last song in Dante' (Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in art and poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 383.

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that God does not exist. Guido replies obliquely that the *signori* can say in their house whatever they like. Only the *signori*'s leader, Betto Bruneschelli, understands Guido's meaning. The graveyard is the house of the dead and the *signori*, pursuing a hedonistic lifestyle, are worse than dead men. While he may not believe in a life after death, Guido – living a virtuous and philosophical life – is alive *as a man* before death. Whether or not they believe in life after death, these *signori* – living the life of the senses – are, by contrast, dead *as men (rational animals)* even before their death as sentient beings. The second challenge, therefore, is to live fully the ethical life of reason, whether Christian believer or not, which is the only kind of life worthy of being called human. This is the necessary criterion, alongside being an unbeliever, to join that exclusive band of proto-*laici* who occupy the graveyard of the Epicureans in Dante's depiction of the afterlife!

At this point, a reader might reasonably object: but, of course, not all modern readers of Dante's poem are secular non-believers. Indeed, less than a hundred years ago, on the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death in 1921, Pope Benedict XV could even proclaim:

> Dante lived in an age which inherited the most glorious fruits of philosophical and theological teaching and thought, and handed them on to the succeeding ages with the imprint of the strict scholastic method [. . .] though he is separated from us by centuries, he has still the freshness of a poet of our times.[46]

Pope Benedict XV's statement undeniably reflects a tendency of his time to read Dante's *Commedia* as distilling the wisdom of the great age of scholasticism (as, more crudely, Aquinas in verse), a tendency which may elide the range of Dante's sources and the striking individuality of aspects of his own thinking.[47] It is nonetheless easy to imagine how, for someone brought up within the intellectual tradition of Thomism, Dante might have 'the freshness of a poet of our times'.[48] Dante's emphasis, meanwhile, on the relative autonomy of philosophy and theology was appealing to a catholic culture which sought a convincing response to the opposing philosophical currents

[46] Pope Benedict XV, *Encyclical Letter*, 'In Praeclara Summorum' (Rome, April 30th, 1921), par. 4 and 9.

[47] For the most recent appraisal of the Dante-Aquinas relationship, and its history in Dante scholarship, see Simon A. Gilson 'Dante and Christian Aristotelianism', in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, ed. by Claire Honess and Matthew Treherne (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 65–110.

[48] Marking the Dante sexcentenary in *New Blackfriars*, J.F. Makepeace exhibits at once the connaturality of Dante's work to an intellectual life informed by catholicism and the concomitant tendency to over-simplify Dante's thought (as, in this case, a simple mouthpiece for the 'catholic standpoint'). See J.F. Makepeace 'The Dante Sexcentenary', in *New Blackfriars* (1921), 2, pp. 92–97.

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of modernity in the philosophical tradition of the scholastics (and principally in its championing of Aquinas). There is a sense in which Dante, as a poet writing at the height of medieval scholasticism, does pass on 'the most glorious fruits of philosophical and theological teaching and thought' and, for anyone committed to this tradition, his poem is an insightful introduction (even where certain elements of his thought deviate from what would become Roman orthodoxy in Thomism).

For Dante to have the 'freshness of a poet of our times', however, for Dante to present, in MacIntyre's words, 'a challenge to his future readers', he must also speak philosophically to those who have neither Aristotelian nor Christian commitments at all. Alongside Pope Benedict XV's championing of Dante in his anniversary year, 1921 also saw the translation into English of a new catechism of the *Summa Theologiae*.[49] In the preface, Pope Benedict XV reiterates his conviction that 'the manifold honours paid by the Holy See to St Thomas Aquinas exclude for ever any doubt from the mind of Catholics with regard to his being raised up by God as the Master of Doctrine to be followed by the Church through all ages'.[50] Notably, in the catechism's presentation of Aquinas' discussion of Justice and the sin of 'irreligion', the author adds the question: 'Under what special form does the latter exist at the present day?', to which he answers 'Under the form of what may be called secularism [. . .] that system in which God is put out of one's life completely'.[51] Today, he suggests, 'there is no more pressing duty than to combat secularism by all the means in one's power'.[52] Almost a hundred years on, secularism has become ever more the attitude of 'our times'. Although the analogue is imprecise, it seems appropriate to highlight, therefore, Dante's strange but prophetic emphasis on the Epicureans.

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[49] R.P. Thomas Pègues, *Catechism of the Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Ælred Whitacre, OP (Chorley: Christian Books Today, 2009). Whitacre's preface is dated 6th December, 1921. Benedict XV's preface to the work, appended to the French and English editions, was given on 5th February, 1919.

[50] Pègues, p. v.

[51] Pègues, pp. 173–74.

[52] Pègues, p. 174.

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