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**The Aporetic Ground of Revelation's
Authority in the *Divine Comedy* and
Dante's Demarcation and Defense of
Philosophical Authority¹**

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Nothing could be clearer for the interpreter of Dante's writings than his concern for defending the independence of secular political authority against ecclesiastical encroachments. In *Purgatorio* 16, very near to the literal center of the entire *Commedia*, Dante's pilgrim begs a Lombard, Marco, to point out the cause of the world having become "tutto deserto d'ogne virtute ... e di malizia gravido e coverto" ("totally deserted of any virtues ... gravid with and covered with malice," 58-60).² To this Marco responds that the fault lies not in the heavens, not in that "greater power and better nature" ("maggior forza e ... miglior natura," 79) to which humans are subject, for:

"Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto
libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia
per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto." (*Purgatorio* 16.70-73)

[“If it were so, in you would be destroyed free will, and it would not be justice to have joy for good and mourning for evil.”]

Rather, Marco explains,

"Ben puoi veder che la mala condotta
è la cagion che 'l mondo ha fatto reo,
e non natura che 'n voi sia corrotta.
Soleva Roma, che 'l buon mondo feo,
due soli aver, che l'una e l'altra strada
facean vedere, e del mondo e di Deo.
L'un l'altro ha spento, ed è giunta la spada
col pastorale, e l'un con l'altro insieme
per viva forza mal convien che vada

però che, giunti, l'un l'altro non teme.” (103-105)

[“You can well see that bad leadership is the cause that has made the world rotten, and not nature that in you is corrupt. Rome, which made the good world, used to have two suns that made visible the one road and the other, of the world and of God. The one has extinguished the other, and the sword is joined to the shepherd’s staff, and entirely forcing the one together with the other goes badly, for, joined, the one does not fear the other.”]

Although Marco’s insistence on the importance of the independence of the sword from the staff could not be clearer, in articulating this view, Marco’s speech draws upon an understanding of human nature that is made more explicit in the *Monarchia*. Here, in the last chapter of his most important and sustained discussion of political philosophy, Dante reveals the fundamental philosophy underpinning his thought in all of its other manifestations—religious, political, poetic, etc.—when he states that the human being, “solus inter omnia entia in duo ultima ordinetur, quorum alterum sit finis eius prout corruptibilis est, alterum vero prout incorruptibilis” (3.16.6) [alone among all beings is ordered [by] two ultimate goals, one of them being his goal as a corruptible being, the other his goal as an incorruptible being;., *my emendation*].³ Indeed, this principle grounds what Dante calls an “ostensive proof” of the independence of temporal and spiritual authorities:

Duos igitur fines providentia illa inenarrabilis homini proposuit intendendos: beatitudinem scilicet huius vite, que, in operatione proprie virtutis consistit et per terrestrem paradisum figuratur; et beatitudinem vite eterne, que consistit in fruitione divini aspectus ad quam propria virtus ascendere non potest, nisi lumine divino adiuta, que per paradisum celestem intelligi datur. . . . Nam ad primam per phylosophica documenta venimus, dummodo illa sequamur secundum virtutes morales et intellectuales operando; ad secundam vero per documenta spiritualia que humanam rationem transcendunt, dummodo illa sequamur secundum virtutes theologicas operando, fidem spem scilicet et karitatem. . . . Propter quod opus fuit homini duplici directivo secundum duplicem finem: scilicet summo Pontifice, qui secundum revelata humanum genus perduceret ad vitam eternam, et Imperatore, qui secundum phylosophica documenta genus humanum ad temporalem felicitatem dirigeret. (3.16.7-10)

[Ineffable providence has thus set before us two goals to aim at: i.e., happiness [*beatitudo*] in this life, which consists in the exercise of our own powers and is figured in the earthly paradise; and happiness [*beatitudo*] in the eternal life, which consists in

the enjoyment of the vision of God (to which our own powers cannot raise us except with the help of God's light). . . . We attain the first through the teachings of philosophy, provided that we follow them putting into practice the moral and intellectual virtues; whereas we attain the second through spiritual teachings, which transcend human reason, provided that we follow them putting into practice the theological virtues, i.e., faith, hope, and charity. . . . It is for this reason that man had need of two guides corresponding to his twofold goal: that is to say the supreme Pontiff, to lead mankind to eternal life in conformity with revealed truth, and the emperor, to guide mankind to temporal happiness [*felicitas*] in conformity with the teachings of philosophy.]⁴

So, in short, the *Monarchia* offers a philosophy of human nature espousing three main principles. First, there are two distinct and ultimate *teloi* of human action, one is directed to a temporal and earthly beatitude; the other is directed to an eternal and spiritual beatitude. Second, achieving happiness insofar as is possible for us in our temporal existence, depends upon following the independent guidance of a universal, secular monarch in conformity with the teachings of philosophy. Third, eternal happiness (salvation) depends upon God's grace, but must also be pursued by attending to the guidance of spiritual teachings that transcend human reason and help us cultivate the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

Given that the passages cited above from both the *Monarchia* and the *Commedia* support the reading that Dante's utmost political concern lies in defending temporal political authority against ecclesiastical encroachment, it is tempting to assume that Dante would also refuse to subordinate the earthly goal of human nature, to which we are guided by philosophy, to the spiritual goal, to which we are guided by revelation. And, at first glance, there are passages in the *Commedia* that would appear to justify this assumption. For instance, in *Paradiso*, when John the Apostle asks what authority compelled his will to aim at the Good, Dante's pilgrim appears to confer equal standing to philosophical arguments and the authority of revelation:

E io: "Per filosofici argomenti
e per autorità che quinci scende
cotale amor convien che in me si 'mprenti." (*Paradiso* 26.25-27)

[And I said: "Philosophical arguments and the authority that descends from here must imprint in me such a love."]

However, when we turn to Dante's *Convivio*, we find that, with respect to the earthly end of human action, Dante describes the possible effect of the love of Lady Philosophy as a secondary happiness subordinate to a primary happiness:

Poi quando dico: "Sua bieltà piove fiammelle di foco," discendo
ad un altro piacere di Paradiso, cioè della felicità seconda

a questa prima, la quale della sua biltade procede. (3.15.11)⁵

[Then when it [the second *canzone*] says: “Her beauty rains down little flames of fire,” it descends to another joy of Paradise, namely to the happiness secondary to the primary happiness, which derives from her beauty.]

While these passages seem to suggest an inconsistency in Dante’s attitude towards the relationship between philosophy and revelation, I believe that Dante’s understanding of the relationship between revelatory authority and philosophical authority is, in fact, remarkably consistent throughout his post-exile writings. Moreover, and more to the point of this specific paper, I hope to show that the most significant feature of Dante’s understanding of the relationship between these two authorities can best be understood by examining the ways in which his attempts to construct a linkage between them stands on the aporetic ground of revelation’s derivation of its own authority from that of philosophy.

In order to see how the attempt to construct this linkage works, however, we must begin by examining why the relationship between the authorities of philosophy and revelation involves different considerations than are involved in Dante’s subordination of earthly beatitude to spiritual beatitude. With respect to the relationship between our two beatitudes, one reason Dante offers for the necessity of the subordination of earthly beatitude to spiritual beatitude, is that our intellect is severely limited with respect to our natural capacity to know the essences of the separated substances.⁶ For instance, just before the passage from *Convivio* 3.15 cited above, Dante writes

Poi, quando si dice: “Elle soverchian lo nostro intelletto,” escuso me di ciò, che poco parlar posso di quelle per la loro soperchianza. Dove è da sapere che in alcuno modo queste cose nostro intelletto abbagliano, in quanto certe cose [si] affermano essere, che lo ’ntelletto nostro guardare non può, cioè Dio e la eternitate e la prima materia: che certissimamente si veggiono e con tutta fede si credono essere, e pur quello che sono intender noi non potemo, se non cose negando si può apressare alla sua conoscenza, e non altrimenti. (3.15.6)

[Then when it [the second *canzone*] says: “They overwhelm our intellect,” I excuse myself by saying that I can say little about these things because of their transcendency. Here we must observe that in a certain way these things dazzle our intellect, insofar as certain things are affirmed to exist which our intellect cannot perceive (namely God, eternity, and primal matter), things which most certainly are known to exist and are with full faith believed to exist. But given the nature of their essence we cannot

understand them: only by negative reasoning can we approach an understanding of these things, and not otherwise.]

And in the *Commedia*, Dante repeatedly insists that human beings are incapable of knowing or judging as God does. For instance, the images of both Thomas Aquinas in *Paradiso* 13 and the Eagle of divine justice in cantos 19 and 20, tell us that no created intellect is capable of knowing in the way that God does and that, consequently, judgments that would require such a knowledge are illicit for human beings.⁷ Similarly, Peter Damian also tells us in *Paradiso* 21 that no created intellect—not even the highest among the ranks of the angels—is capable of perceiving the entirety of God's providential plan for the world. In short, metaphysical speculation is not in and of itself the *path* to either spiritual or earthly beatitude; rather, if metaphysical speculation amounts to anything at all, it is made licit only on the condition that one has already achieved salvation. Thus it would seem that Étienne Gilson was right to point out that “the thesis which Dante here maintains is quite extraordinary for the Middle Ages. Taken literally, it amounts to the maintenance of the primacy of ethics over metaphysics.”⁸ Moreover, even when we acknowledge that the pilgrim is often depicted as receiving (presumably by means of sensation or imagination) a direct and unmediated revelatory insight into the essences or *quiddities* of things that are beyond the legitimate scope of our speculative capacity, these depictions also tend to suggest a general subordination of our earthly beatitude to spiritual beatitude.

However, when we turn to passages (especially in the *Commedia*) in which Dante confronts the relationship, not between the two ends of all human action, but between the authorities of philosophy and revelation with respect to practical guidance towards these ends, a different consideration emerges. For instance, in *Purgatorio* 22, Dante, through his images of the Roman poet Statius (whom, contrary to any historical evidence, Dante represents as having secretly converted to Christianity because of a revelation received by reading Virgil's fourth Eclogue), suggests that, because of the providential ordering of human history, even a pagan poet like Virgil can guide others to Christianity:

Ed elli a lui: “Tu prima m’invïasti
verso Parnaso a ber ne le sue grotte,
e prima appresso Dio m’alluminasti.
Facesti come quei che va di notte,
che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova,
ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte,
quando dicesti: ‘Secol si rinova;
torna giustizia e primo tempo umano,
e progenie scende da ciel nova.’
Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano.” (64-73)

[And he [Statius] to him [Virgil]: “You first sent me to Parnassus

to drink from its caves, and you first illuminated my way to God. You did as one who goes at night, who carries the lamp behind and does not benefit from it, but teaches the people who follow when you said: 'The age turns new; justice returns and the first human time, and a new progeny descends from heaven.' Through you I was a poet, through you a Christian."}]

Indeed, this passage introduces the perplexing view that Virgil's poetry has a greater capacity to guide others to Christianity than that of Statius, for even though Virgil is a pagan and lacks the faith that would be necessary for salvation, unlike Statius, his own ethical perfection (see *Inferno* 4.34-42) frees his own poetic imagination from any need of purgation. Or put differently, only on the condition that Virgil himself is represented as ethically perfect, can Dante also ground the claim that Virgil's poetry is properly revelatory. Thus, on the one hand, Virgil's ethical perfection provides him with a revelatory authority that exceeds that of Statius (at least in terms of the practical effects of their poetry); on the other hand, it appears that Statius' spiritual awareness and recognition of the call to redemption allows him, as a penitent reader of divine signs rather than as a model of earthly, poetic *auctoritas*, a kind of authority that Virgil expresses but cannot himself recognize.⁹ But what is not addressed explicitly in this canto is the question of how is it that by reading Virgil, the inferior poet, Statius, had been able in his earthly state to draw upon the revelatory authority that the superior poet does not. The representations Dante offers us do not seem to make sense, or at least what they theoretically disclose calls for scrutiny.

Dante offers a glimpse of an answer to this problem a few cantos earlier, in *Purgatorio* 17, where, speaking as a narrator, he claims:

O imaginativa che ne rube
talvolta sì di fuor, ch'om non s'accorge
perché dintorno suonin mille tube,
chi move te, se 'l senso non ti porge?
Moveti lume che nel ciel s'informa,
per sé o per voler che giù lo scorge. (13-18)

[O imagination, that sometimes so steals us from the outside that we do not hear although a thousand trumpets sound around us, who moves you if sense gives you nothing? A light moves you that is formed in the heavens, by itself or by a will that sends it down.]

This narration seems to suggest that, on the assumption that our earthly beatitude is subordinate in value to our spiritual beatitude, the authority of philosophical guidance must also be subordinate to that of revelatory imagination. Viewed from this perspective, the purpose of the *Commedia* would be to inspire correct belief (or to articulate a theology), and it would also appear to be the case that Dante believes

that the tool most appropriate for this purpose would not be philosophy but poetic representation. Accordingly, the *Commedia's* images of the souls of the damned and saved alike would seem to be offered in order to produce in Dante's readers a revelation of "quella fede che vince ogne errore" (*Inferno* 4.48) ["that faith that vanquishes every error"]. And yet, while this reading suggests that the relationship between philosophy and revelation proceeds directly from the subordination of earthly happiness to spiritual beatitude, were we to ascertain what revelation means—to distinguish true revelation from fraudulent revelation—what would be the theoretical basis of our distinction? In other words, what is the nature of revelation and what distinguishes the author of the *Commedia* (the one who writes what seems to be a prophetic poem but who can also see the light that the poem contains) from the author of the *Aeneid* (an author who writes a prophetic poem but who nevertheless fails to see the light that the poem contains)?

If we shift our attention to how Dante positions himself as author of the *Commedia* in relationship to both Statius and Virgil, the episode with Statius tells us that, intrinsically, Dante's poetry and Virgil's reveal the same truth despite the fact that Dante's poetry, unlike Virgil's, is also capable of extrinsically marking its intrinsic truth. And yet these extrinsic markers of Dante's understanding of how revelatory experience operates disclose an *aporia* at the heart of what would otherwise constitute the ground for the subordination of philosophical to revelatory authority. This perplexing structure of subordination—different from and more complicated than the reasons offered for the subordination of temporal to spiritual ends of human action—becomes pressing when we turn our attention, for instance, to Dante's introduction of Geryon, a representation of the very nature of fraud, at the end of *Inferno* 16:

Sempre a quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna
de' l'uom chiuder le labbra fin ch'el puote,
però che sanza colpa fa vergogna;
ma qui tacer nol posso; e per le note
di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro,
s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,
ch'i' vidi per quell' aere grosso e scuro
venir notando una figura in suso,
maravigliosa ad ogne cor sicuro... (124-132)

[Always to that truth that has the face of mendacity a man should close his lips as long as he can, for without guilt it makes him ashamed, but here I cannot keep silent, and by the notes of this comedy, reader, I swear to you, so that they may not fail to be marked for long favor, that I saw through that thick and dark air come swimming up a figure, awesome to the most confident heart...]

Here, near the center of the *Inferno*, Dante tells us that the veracity of the extrinsic signification must be called into question: he should be ashamed, he tells us, to tell us a truth that bears the face of falsehood, but since the theoretical insight that he is disclosing to us is presupposed as exceeding the proper scope of natural reason, only this kind of “non falso errore” (*Purgatorio* 15.117) is capable of revealing and transmitting the insight. In other words, Dante suggests that he wants us to imagine that he saw what he is describing so that we will then believe the poem’s intrinsic referent, and that furthermore, the intrinsic referents for all of the images of the *Commedia* are their spiritual analogs. Consequently, the veracity of each representation is guaranteed not by its correspondence with what is literally signified, but by its allegorical referent.

A similar strategy seems to me to be at work in Dante’s emphasis in *Paradiso* 33 on his failure to capture in words and in memory his pilgrim’s exalted vision of the Trinity. These passages in the final canto of the *Commedia* rely on the inverse of the tactic at work in the passage introducing Geryon. Whereas in the former example the poetic representation is accomplished through a non-false error, in *Paradiso* 33 the strategy seems to be to reinforce the illusion that the pilgrim saw what he saw precisely by insisting that the vision could never have been represented and can no longer even be recalled by the author with clarity. But these passages also therefore compel the same conclusion: that the veracity of the *Commedia* is rooted in its capacity to represent something that is simultaneously acknowledged as beyond the limits of representation. What is different from the introduction of Geryon is only that, in this case, the poetry provides a successful representation of its allegorical referent by explaining the way in which the explicitly identified sensory referents would necessarily be beyond the limits of intellectual comprehension, not to mention veridical representation.

Still these claims about Dante’s tactical deployment of poetic representation are not, I believe, to be read merely as confirmation for the familiar conclusion that Dante is endorsing a mystical theology that trumps every claim of natural reason to be able to guide us to our respective beatitudes. In fact, I maintain that reading the *Commedia* in this way neglects an important insight that is demanded by the poem’s disclosure of the aporetic structure of revelation’s claim to authority, namely that the internal logic of appeals to revelatory authority in no way undermines or supersedes the authority of natural reason but, rather, relies on it. First, because, as the episode with Statius shows, the internal logic of revelation requires that philosophy’s guidance also refer to the same intrinsic truth that the poetic representation does, Dante compels us to recognize philosophy’s legitimate authority not only as self-sufficient for guiding us to our earthly beatitude but also as a path that opens onto the revelatory experience that might secure a spiritual beatitude. Consequently, in the pilgrim’s response in *Paradiso* 26 to John the Apostle’s question concerning what has turned the pilgrim’s will to the Good (cited above), we see that there is a sense in which the relationship between the author-

ity of philosophical arguments and revelatory experience cannot be one in which philosophy remains simply subordinate to revelation, even if, as I implied above, Dante does not, in fact, place these authorities on equal standing. Put differently, what Virgil, for instance, would be capable of recognizing is not merely consonant with what authentic revelatory experience would reveal; rather, the authority of the revelatory intention of Virgil's poetry (which Virgil is nevertheless unable to see) is sufficiently, albeit aporetically, grounded in nothing other than Virgil's recognition of the authority of natural reason.

Thus, it appears that two incompatible claims subtend Dante's understanding of the relationship between philosophical and revelatory authorities. On the one hand, it is clear that Dante's own point of view is that Virgil's recognition of the authority of natural reason depends upon the fact that natural reason is itself authoritative only because it allows human beings an intellectual access to the love that governs the created world, and, in this sense—that is, from the perspective of the source and terminus of natural desire (see esp. *Purgatorio* 17)—Dante must, of course, insist upon the subordination of natural reason to revelation. On the other hand, if Virgil's authority can indeed disclose a revelatory path to spiritual happiness—even of a path of which Virgil is himself unaware—then revelation's capacity to guide human action depends not upon a mystical insight that descends to the imagination from above but is, rather, sufficiently grounded in natural reason's employment of earthly experience to light a path or paths to both earthly and spiritual beatitudes.

It is for this reason, I think, that, in the *Convivio*, when Dante explicitly addresses the question of the way in which the beauty of Lady Philosophy relates not merely to the secondary happiness associated with moral perfection but also to the primary happiness of Paradise, he has already anticipated the *Commedia's* perplexing understanding of the relationship between philosophy and revelation.

Lo sguardo di questa donna fu a noi così largamente ordinato, non pur per la faccia che ella ne dimostra, vedere, ma per le cose che ne tiene celate desiderare ad acquistare. Onde, sì come per lei molto di quello si vede per ragione, e per conseguente si vede poter essere, che senza lei pare maraviglia, così per lei si crede ogni miracolo in più alto intelletto pote[r] avere ragione, e per conseguente pote[r] essere. Onde la nostra buona fede ha sua origine; dal[la] quale viene la speranza, ch'è 'l proveduto desiderare; e per quella nasce l'operazione della caritate. Per le quali tre virtudi si sale a filosofare a quelle Atene celestiali dove li Stoici e Peripatetici e Epicurî, per la luce della veritade eterna, in uno volere concondevolemente concorrono. (3.14.13-15; see also 3.7.15-16)

[The sight of this lady was so generously granted to us in order not only that we might see her face, which she reveals to us, but that we might desire to acquire those things *which she keeps hidden from us*. For just as because of her much is perceived by our reason, and consequently it becomes comprehensible, which without her would seem miraculous, so because of her it becomes believable that every miracle can be perceived by a superior intellect to have a reasonable cause and, consequently, to have the power to exist. *Our good faith has its origin in this, from which comes the hope that longs for things foreseen; and from this springs the activity of charity*. By these three virtues we ascend to philosophize in that celestial Athens where Stoics and Peripatetics and Epicureans, *by the light of eternal truth, join ranks in a single harmonious will.*] (emphasis added)

But what the *Convivio* makes all too clear—that the authority of revelation in fact depends upon the authority of philosophy—also reveals another, yet more interesting point, the stakes of which are raised to a new pitch in the *Commedia*. As I have already suggested above, interpreted one way, philosophy intrinsically signifies the same truth that would be revealed in any authentic mystical experience. Interpreted another way, however, this point explains why philosophy’s practical authority is defended only by imposing severe limitations on its speculative ambitions. That is, philosophy cannot lay claim to the authority that it lends to revelation. In short, even while philosophy is the grounds for the authority of revelation, it nevertheless cannot provide any authoritative justification for the faith or hope that remains both the substance of revelation and a condition of the possibility of achieving a spiritual beatitude. The representation to ourselves of what would give cause for faith or hope may be consistent with principles acquired through natural reason, but natural reason only points the way to something that remains necessarily excessive of its legitimate scope of understanding.

This thought is, to a certain extent, the crux of what I think ought to be explored at greater length than I can do in the remainder of this essay, but recapitulating my initial framing of the issue ought to help identify the scope and significance of this problem. I began by noting that Dante’s utmost political concern lies in defending the independence of secular political authority against ecclesiastical encroachments. But, this political concern is, I think, not only Dante’s utmost concern altogether, but is also the source of one way in which Dante continues to be relevant to the very canon in which he is revered as *l’altissimo poeta*. This is why it is not only important that we understand why Dante intends to defend philosophy’s authority as universally compelling, but also why it may be of some relevance to us to understand the means of this defense through the demarcation of philosophy’s proper scope to the domain of ethics. I shall therefore conclude by suggesting what I think is at stake in this demarcation and defense of philosophy’s authority.

Whether deliberately or not, Dante troubles his own authorial status in the *Commedia* and so, to a certain extent, de-authorizes what seems to be the explicit justification for interpreting the text as prophetic since, among other reasons, prophecy (unlike myth, perhaps) hardly ever tries to claim its authority as strategically as Dante does. But what I think is more philosophically interesting in this textual strategy is that by making his readers responsible for interpreting and transmitting his text, Dante effectively deauthorizes or displaces the role of belief (and hence also the role of theology) in human affairs in favor of the significance of practice and by devaluing the importance of metaphysics in favor of the importance of ethics. Understood in this way, it is not at all surprising to note that the *Commedia* frequently introduces unorthodox and sometimes even explicitly heterodox images to mobilize such a philosophical perspective.¹⁰ But with respect to the question of philosophy's authority, what this seems to suggest is that, although Dante theoretically subordinates the authority of philosophy to revelation in terms of the ultimate ends of human nature, in terms of the question of practice, he inverts this subordination.

Consequently, even were we to accept the reality of salvation—which underlies the extrinsic signification of Dante's insistence on the subordination of ethical to spiritual *teloi* of human nature—then our salvation would nonetheless depend upon the separation of powers and the guidance of philosophy in order to prepare us to receive the revelation necessary for salvation. But then, by the same token, in terms of our legitimate practical concerns to achieve both temporal and spiritual beatitudes, are we not also therefore compelled to read Dante's extrinsic representations of the possibility of our salvation as subordinate fictions that "reveal" to us the authoritative status of secular political rule and the philosophical guidance that lights the path(s) to any of our actually possible beatitudes? Or, in short, even though Dante must as a consequence of the theological framework for the *Commedia* represent even "il maestro di color che sanno" ("the master of those who know," *Inferno* 4.131), as living in "duol sanza martiri" ("grief without torture," *Inferno* 4.28), at the same time, I am inclined to think that the aporetic structure of revelatory authority in the *Commedia* also allows us to conclude that it does not really matter whether the extrinsic significance of Aristotle's infernal condition is theoretically or theologically correct. Indeed, the question of the theological accuracy of the depiction of Aristotle in Limbo is hardly relevant to the question of how the text aims to produce a revelatory experience that would be relevant to securing the spiritual end posited by its theological framework. That is, the formal structure of the *Commedia* may rest upon a theological presupposition that is to some extent irrelevant to its implicit purpose, since the text's more important insights require a shift from their spiritual referents to their deliberative value—their ethical or political value as opposed to their theological or metaphysical value.¹¹

In any case, to reinforce and summarize the more limited claims offered above, I hope to have shown that, although he may have intended to suggest that

the superiority of revelation over philosophical authority derives from the superiority of spiritual over earthly ends of human action, Dante in fact shows that revelation does not derive its authority from any intellectually unmediated access to divine truth. Even in his “poema sacro” (*Paradiso* 25.1), Dante’s representations of what are offered as transcendent truths can guide human action only by being accessed through interpretive activities that always end up relying upon earthly experience mediated by human reason. Hence, the very recourse to revelation (and so, too, the assertion of its authority) turns out to depend upon philosophical insight. Only philosophy—understood as a primarily ethico-political rather than a metaphysical preoccupation—can provide the authority Dante intends to assign to revelation. Consequently, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that revelatory authority is nothing but a product—albeit a practically necessary one if humans are, as Dante suggests, ontologically oriented toward the practical importance of signifying to themselves the possibility of their own spiritual beatitude—of philosophy’s authority exceeding its own legitimate scope. In short, then, revelation’s authority as practical guide to spiritual beatitude is only aporetically grounded in philosophy’s otherwise legitimate and carefully demarcated scope of authority as practical guidance.

Notes

- 1 I would to acknowledge my special debts to my colleague Thomas Thorp for his insightful remarks on the general idea lurking within the paper and to my colleague Shannon Ambrose for her helpful and detailed comments on the turgid prose with which she was afflicted by an early draft. Additionally, I would like to thank John Casey for his comments on an early version of this paper and Scott Aikin and Amanda Holmes for posing a number of challenging questions about the thesis of the paper. Finally, I would like to thank Mickey Sweeney for her helpful suggestions for improving the readability of the essay.
- 2 References to the *Divina Commedia* follow the Edizione Nazionale sponsored by the Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan, 1966-67); this edition can be found online at both the Dartmouth and Princeton Dante Project websites. Translations are my own.
- 3 All references to the Latin are from Prue Shaw’s edition (Cambridge, UK, 1995). Unless otherwise noted, translations are also Shaw’s.
- 4 Although this quotation suggests that we might be able to distinguish spiritual beatitude under the designation “eternal life” and earthly beatitude as “felicity” or “happiness,” as far as I have been able to discern, Dante makes no consistent distinction between the terms *beatitudo* and *felicitas* when describing the two forms of happiness, though he does tend to use *beatitudo* more frequently than *felicitas* to describe either form of happiness. In this paper, I will generally refer to spiritual happiness as “primary” or “spiritual” beatitude and earthly happiness as “secondary” or “temporal” beatitude.

- 5 Italian references to *Convivio* follow the Edizione Nazionale sponsored by the Società Dantesca Italiana, ed. Franca Brambilla Ageno (Florence, 1995); this edition can be found online at the Princeton Dante Project website. Unless otherwise noted, the English translation is that of Richard Lansing (New York, 1990); this translation can also be found online at the Princeton Dante Project website.
- 6 In this Dante intensifies the scope and import of Thomas Aquinas' arguments in, for instance, *Summa Theologica* I q12 and q88-89.
- 7 See also *Purgatorio* 3.37-45 for Virgil's own acknowledgment of the limitations of human reason. Interestingly, Thomas and the Eagle's statements can be read as an indictment of the literal truthfulness of the *Commedia* (these statements do not, however, constitute an indictment of the truthfulness of the poem's allegorical import) since the extrinsic condition for the possibility of the poet's representation of the souls of damned and the saved alike is that the poet *has* judged in the place of God. The import of this will confirm what will be said later in the paper concerning the aporetic ground of revelation's authority.
- 8 *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. David Moore (Glouster, MA, 1968), p. 105. Gilson's claim in this regard is rooted in his recognition—consistent with my own observations above—that, for Dante, “the intellect of the contemplative man is indeed his intellect, but it is an intellect too feeble to attain its object without the divine light of Revelation that transcends it. That is why, in Dante as in Aristotle, the contemplative life is less human than the divine, but for a reason quite different from that which forms the basis of Aristotle's thesis” (p. 138). However, while I accept Gilson's claim about the primacy of ethics in Dante's philosophical agenda, it should be noted that Gilson reaches a different conclusion than I will offer below concerning the independence of philosophy's authority from that of revelation.
- 9 Albert Russell Ascoli's recent *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge, 2009) provides a masterful analysis of Dante's appeals to and transformations of a variety of traditional understandings of “authority.” My own claims about Dante's role as an authority for his readers are much more limited, and, in this essay, I am ultimately more concerned with Dante's understanding of the nature of philosophical and revelatory authority than I am with his own poetic strategies to harness any particular form of authority.
- 10 Just one among many instances of Dante's unorthodoxy is his suggestion in *Paradiso* 32 that the blessed are divided equally between those who lived before Christ and those who lived after. As for an example of outright heterodoxy, one of Dante's more interesting claims occurs in *Inferno* 33.121-147, where Fra Alberigo explains to the pilgrim that a soul that commits a truly heinous crime may be brought to the underworld even before the death of the body (the

animating spirit of the body is replaced by a demonic one), a notion, that, were it true, would deny the opportunity of repentance to such individuals prior to their bodily death.

- 11 The author (perhaps someone other than Dante) of the letter dedicating the *Paradiso* to Cangrande della Scala explained the allegorical purpose of the *Commedia* as a whole in a way that—were it possible or even expedient to rely on the letter for confirmation—would confirm this reading were it possible or even expedient to rely on the letter for confirmation: “Genus vero phylosophie sub quo hic in toto et parte proceditur, est morale negotium, sive ethica; quia non ad speculandum, sed ad opus inventum est totum et pars. Nam si in aliquo loco vel passu pertractatur ad modum speculativi negotii, hoc non est gratia speculativi negotii, sed gratia operis” (§ 40-41) [“The branch of philosophy to which the work is subject, in the whole as in the part, is that of morals or ethics; inasmuch as the whole as well as the part was conceived, not for speculation, but with a practical object. For if in certain parts or passages the treatment is after the manner of speculative philosophy, that is not for the sake of speculation but for a practical purpose”]; the Latin reference and section number follows the *Testo critico della Societa' Dantesca Italiana*, ed. Ermenegildo Pistelli (Florence: Societa' Dantesca Italiana, 1960). This edition can be found online at the Princeton Dante Project website. The translation is from *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1966).