

Cosmology and Political Order in Dante

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Abstract Dante's cosmology as outlined in the *Commedia* reflects the hierarchical structure of his political philosophy: the Holy Roman Emperor, as heir to the Roman tradition, should serve as a world-ruler, while honoring the Pope and ruling in accordance with law. This is a consequence of the manner in which his political vision is tied to his concept of humanity's place in the cosmos: the need to actualize its potential and for the soul to return to God. The extent to which Dante bases his views on biblical exegesis and the reception of the Roman intellectual tradition is examined against the background of political events in Italy. Ultimately, Dante raises doubts about the extent to which the cosmos is divinely ordered in pointing to the fate of the unbaptized virtuous, such as Virgil, but suggests that our lifespan is too short to perceive the gradual unfolding of divine justice.

Keywords Dante Alighieri; cosmology; Pope; Holy Roman Emperor; medieval political philosophy; classical reception; Guelph; Ghibelline

1 Introduction

For Dante, cosmology and political order are necessarily intertwined. The structure of the cosmos, with God as Emperor, reflects Dante's political vision of a unitary empire which aims at maximizing human potential in this life as a preparation for the next. Dante's political views are outlined primarily in *Monarchia*, which was banned by the Catholic Church in 1564 and only removed from the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1881, along with the sixth canto of each cantica of the *Divine Comedy* with some supplementary remarks in *Convivio*. In each cantica, the respective canto deals with progressively larger political structures: Florence in *Inferno* VI, Italy is treated in *Purgatorio* VI, and finally the Roman Empire in *Paradiso* VI. In this manner, Dante does not merely flag the relationship between cosmos and political order generally, but



Figure 1 Dante holds the *Commedia* with Hell, the mountain of Purgatory, Paradise, and the city of Florence in the background, as depicted in *La commedia illumina Firenze* (*The Comedy Illuminating Florence*) by Domenico di Michelino on the west wall of Florence Cathedral (1465).

more specifically stresses that the political chaos of each level, Florence, Italy, and the Empire as a whole, are related to one another and presented as the natural consequence of unnatural greed. In this manner, political chaos is portrayed both as a perversion of human nature, as well as an inversion of natural cosmic order.

Before turning to the central points of Dante's political philosophy, it will be useful to examine some key features of Dante's cosmology. Firstly, while purgatory and hell can be envisaged as realms to be understood theologically, Dante goes to great lengths to depict them as geographical locations (see di Michelino's interpretation, **Fig. 1**). The mountain of Purgatory is formed from the earth removed to create the pit of hell and Dante explicitly flags its location in the southern hemisphere. Hell is a funnel located under Jerusalem at the center of the northern hemisphere at the furthest remove from God's light (see the depiction by the German-based Italian artist Giuseppe Blasotta, **Fig. 2**). Dante's heaven is based upon the astronomy of his day, subdivided into the spheres mainly of the various planets: the spheres of the moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, the sphere of the Fixed Stars, and the *Primum*



Figure 2 A contemporary visualization of Hell depicted in Giuseppe Blasotta's *Aus Dantes Inferno*, oil pastel and acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm, Heidelberg (2006).

Mobile. It could be argued, as Tavoni does, that in contrast to the physicality of the journey through hell and purgatory, the journey through *Paradiso* is to be understood instead in terms of a series of states of consciousness.¹ Yet, even if the journey in *Paradiso* lacks the physicality of those in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, right up to the level of the

1 Tavoni 2015, 85. Tavoni's argument (2015, 84) is based on the lines "io, che al divino da l'umano / a l'eterno dal tempo era venuto," "I who came to the divine from the human, to eternity from time" (*Par.* XXXI.37–38). Translations from *Commedia* are from Allen Mandelbaum's poetic translation (slightly modified on occasion). All other translations are my own.

Primum Mobile the heavens are represented as physical (with the Empyrean beyond it depicted as beyond both time and space). In this manner, Dante's description of heaven can still be seen as a cosmology, even if the pilgrim's journey can be viewed in figurative terms as the natural striving of the soul towards God.²

Just as Dante envisages a hierarchical cosmology within the framework of which the soul strives towards perfection, his political philosophy posits a hierarchical structure in which the human race can advance towards its actualization. Dante tends to present his own political views as natural and cosmic and portrays the political aspirations of those whose opinions oppose his as unnatural and anticomic. This stance could be dismissed as simply a rhetorical one, but for Dante it goes beyond that, since his political views are also an attempt to reflect a unitary cosmic structure, which allows humanity to achieve perfection.

Dante advocates for a world-ruler, an Emperor, who is the heir of the Roman imperial tradition and Roman law, whom he, in contrast to several of his hierocratic contemporaries, claims receives his power directly from God and not via the mediation of the Pope. Dante's political philosophy can be fairly described as utopian; he offers little in the way of concrete suggestions for how his political vision should be achieved or regulated once it has been implemented. We are assured that the Emperor will not abuse his power, because his territory is only bounded by the ocean, unlike the Kings of Castile and Aragon, whose jurisdiction extends only as far as the neighboring state (*Mon.* I.xi.12); there is therefore nothing which he could covet or which could arouse his jealousy (*Mon.* I.xiii.7; cf. *Conv.* IV.iv.4). He is, in fact, the servant of all of humanity (*Mon.* I.xii.12). Just as laws exist to serve a political community, rather than it being the case that a political community exists on account of the laws, the people do not exist for the sake of the king, but the king for the sake of the people.³ The Emperor is the ideal arbiter between the competing agendas of lesser princes, since he has both the authority to enforce his decisions and since he would have nothing to gain by acting unjustly: "possessing everything and there being nothing more left to desire, he would restrict the kings within the frontiers of their kingdoms, so that there might be peace between them" (*Conv.* IV.iv.4).⁴ "The world is ordered for the

2 I distinguish between Dante the author and Dante's literary persona, the pilgrim, in the *Commedia* and note that the pilgrim's entire journey is presented as a dream vision.

3 By contrast, obeying the law is an act of freedom: "observantia quarum, si laeta, si libera, non tantum non servitus esse probatur, quin immo, perspicaciter intuenti, liquet ut est ipsa summa libertas," "the observance of these (laws), if joyful, if free, is not only demonstrated not to be slavery, but rather to the one who observes acutely, it is clear that this is the highest liberty itself," *Epistola* VI.5.

4 "tutto possedendo e più desiderare non possendo, li regi tegna contenti ne li termini de li regni, sì che pace intra loro sia."

best when justice is most effective in it" (*Mon.* I.xi.1)⁵ and since, Dante claims, justice is strongest under a monarchical form of government, monarchy is necessary for the world to be ordered in the best possible manner (*Mon.* I.xi.2).

Nevertheless, the Emperor's authority is not absolute. Even if the Emperor is not subject to the authority of the Pope, he should still honor him as a father:

And the truth about this last question should not be taken in such a strict manner that the Roman Prince is not subject to the Roman Pontiff in a certain manner, since this mortal happiness is ordered towards immortal happiness in a certain way. Therefore, Caesar ought to show reverence towards Peter just as a first-born son to his father, in order that he, irradiated by the light of fatherly grace, may more effectively illuminate the orb of the earth, over which he has been placed in authority by Him alone, who is the helmsman of all spiritual and temporal things. (*Mon.* III.xv.17–18)⁶

Dante also envisages that the Emperor will rule in accordance with law, that local laws will continue to exist in the areas ruled by minor princes, and that freedom of thought will still be permitted, illustrated by his rejection of Frederick II's views on nobility at *Conv.* IV.iii.7.⁷ Nor are rulers more significant than poets: "Do not its servants [i.e. writers, the servants of the Italian vernacular] exceed in fame kings, marquises, counts and magnates?" (*DVE* I.17.5).⁸

Dante's decision to treat the relationship between imperial and papal power, between temporal and spiritual authority, is, of course, not particularly unique. The status of the Roman Emperor had been dealt with by Engelbert of Admont in *De ortu et fine Romani Imperii* (*On the Origin and End of the Roman Empire*, 1312/13), where the Abbot argues for the unity of empire and church. Aegidius Romanus' (Giles of Rome's) *De Ecclesiastica Potestate* (*On Ecclesiastical Power*) defends papal authority, not only over secular rulers, but over the entirety of human life. For Aegidius, even property rights were subject to the Pope. As he notes: "The Church is more lord of your possessions than you are yourself."⁹ *De Ecclesiastica Potestate* formed the theoretical basis for Pope

5 "mundus optime dispositus est cum iustitia in eo potissima est."

6 "Que quidem veritas ultime questionis non sic stricte recipienda est, ut romanus Princeps in aliquo romano Pontifici non subiaceat, cum mortalis ista felicitas quodammodo ad inmortalem felicitatem ordinetur. Illa igitur reverentia Cesar utatur ad Petrum qua primogenitus filius debet uti ad patrem: ut luce paterne gratie illustratus virtuosius orbem terre irradiet, cui ab Illo solo prefectus est, qui est omnium spiritualium et temporalium gubernator."

7 The irony, as discussed below, is that the views attributed by Dante to Frederick II are actually those of Aristotle, so that Dante's argument is not valid.

8 "Nonne domestici sui reges, marchiones, comites et magnates quoslibet fama vincunt?"

9 "Magis itaque erit ecclesia domina possessionis tue, quam tu ipse" (*De Ecclesiastica Potestate* 2.7, p. 74). Cf. Canning 1996, 143.

Boniface VIII's Bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), which asserted the superiority of the Pope over the Emperor even in temporal affairs.¹⁰ The Bull attempts to illustrate that deviation from the authority of the Pope is unnatural, in much the same way that Dante attempts to claim for resistance to imperial authority. "Therefore, there is a single body of the one and only Church, and a single head, not two heads, like a monster."¹¹

The Pope's authority is not subject to any human institution:

Therefore, if the earthly power commits an error, it will be judged by the spiritual power, but if the lesser spiritual power commits an error it will be judged by its superior; if the highest spiritual power commits an error, it is not possible for it to be judged by men, but only by God.¹²

The claims advanced by Boniface were subsequently retracted by his successor, Clement V, in *Meruit* in 1306 with regard to the French king.¹³ Boniface, of course, was Dante's archenemy, the man whom he blamed for his exile from Florence, since he was at Rome negotiating with the Pope on behalf of the White Guelphs, when the *podestà* of Florence announced his banishment from the city (1302).¹⁴

Dante moves against strict Catholic orthodoxy in placing the excommunicated on two terraces in purgatory (rather than in hell). Dante's eschatology again supports his later pro-Imperial stance, in defiance of the Papacy, when the pilgrim meets Manfred, the natural son of Emperor Frederick II, who had been excommunicated by Pope Clement IV for political reasons.¹⁵ Manfred, in Dante's portrayal at least, had died repentant, and he requests that the pilgrim inform his daughter, Constance, that he is not in hell. Reynolds contends that since Constance died in 1302, Dante is actually addressing the Papacy here, although this is not so clear given that Constance was alive at the time of the *Comedy's* dramatic date (Easter 1300).

10 For a more balanced treatment of the issue, see *Quaestio in utramque partem (Both Sides of the Question)*, 1303) or Jean Quidort's *De regia potestate et papali (On Royal and Papal Power)*, 1302/3). Cf. Canning 1996, 141–145.

11 "Igitur Ecclesiae unius et unice unum corpus, unum caput, non duo capita quasi monstrum" (§3).

12 "Ergo si deviat terrena potestas, iudicabitur a potestate spirituali, sed si deviat spiritualis minor a suo superiori: si vero suprema, a solo Deo, non ab homine poterit iudicari" (§7).

13 Canning 1996, 139–140.

14 Dante famously placed Boniface VIII in the eighth circle of hell (*Inf.* XIX), even though the Pope was alive at the dramatic date of the poem, suggesting a deterministic view of the cosmos.

15 Pope Clement IV favored Charles of Anjou, son of King Louis VIII of France, as ruler of Sicily, rather than the (naturally) pro-imperial Manfred. Manfred was also alleged to have murdered several of his relatives, but the excommunication weighs more heavily in Dante's presentation since even though Manfred was honorably interred by his opponent Charles, the Pope had subsequently ordered that his body be dug up and his remains be strewn along the course of La Verde river. Cf. Reynolds 2006, 256 and Dante's positive treatment of Manfred (as a literary figure) at *DVE* I.12.

Dante's political views, however, are influenced less by the political reality of his own day—there was no properly functioning Emperor during his lifetime—and based more upon his own reading of history and cosmology, buffered up with biblical quotations. At *Monarchia* III, in arguing for the ideal relationship between Pope and Emperor, Dante only makes two arguments from history. The first is at *Mon.* III.x on the Donation of Constantine and the second at *Mon.* III.x.18–20 on the relationship between certain Popes and Emperors such as Pope Adrian and Charlemagne, which is really just a series of historical references drawn upon to support his views against the Donation of Constantine, rather than an argument in its own right.¹⁶ The bulk of the arguments (*Mon.* III.iv–ix) consist of a series of biblical exegeses (three passages from the Old Testament and three from the New).¹⁷ Even the cosmological argument based on the relationship of the sun and the moon with which Dante commences the series at *Mon.* III.iv is essentially a biblical exegesis of *Gen.* 1,16.

Dante also relies on the stars to stress his understanding of cosmic order. The four stars that the pilgrim sees when meeting Cato (*Purg.* I.37–39) represent the cardinal virtues known even to the ancients (justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude), while at *Purg.* VIII.85–93 the three stars now observed represent theological graces (faith, hope, and love). The juxtaposition between the two constellations is placed in sharp focus when Virgil points out that the three stars have replaced the four seen earlier, but he is unable to comment further. As a pagan, the cardinal virtues lie within Virgil's grasp, particularly justice, which Dante repeatedly presents as a specifically Roman virtue, but not the theological graces, knowledge of which can only be attained by means of Christian faith. Again, Dante's ordering of the cosmos points to a strict hierarchy between the sort of virtue based on law and justice, which is represented by the traditions inherited from Rome by the Emperor and which is of value in ensuring happiness in this life,¹⁸ and Christian grace, which prepares us to attain happiness in the next one.

Dante's political philosophy is clearly influenced by his own experience as a White Guelph in exile from Florence and his hope for a strong Emperor who could bring an end to the chaos—both caused and illustrated by the Guelph–Ghibelline factionalism—in northern Italy. The only suitable ruler to end this strife in Dante's day was Henry VII (Henry of Luxembourg), who wished to restore political exiles

16 The relationship between Pope Leo VIII and Emperor Otto I is also referenced at *Mon.* III.x.20.

17 From the Old Testament: the two great lights (*Gen.* 1,16; *Mon.* III.iv), the precedence of Levi, ancestor of priests, over Judah, ancestor of kings, (*Gen.* 29,34; *Mon.* III.v), and whether Saul owes his kingship to Samuel or not (1 *Kings* 10,1; 15,23; *Mon.* III.vi). From the New Testament: the three Kings give gold and frankincense to Christ as a symbol of his role as both God and king (*Mt.* 2,11; *Mon.* III.vii), Peter's power to bind and loose in both earth and heaven (*Mt.* 16,19; *Mon.* III.viii), and the two swords as a symbol of both temporal and spiritual power (*Lk.* 22,28; *Mon.* III.ix).

18 Cf. *Conv.* IV.iv.1.

(such as Dante) to their native cities and who, reportedly, would not even allow the terms Guelph and Ghibelline to be used in front of him.¹⁹ Political order for Dante is reflected in the very structure of the cosmos. Given Dante's acceptance and repeated employment of the Roman equation of the world (*orbis*) with the city (*urbs*) of Rome, such an equation readily lends itself to his political understanding. Dante's interest in cosmology is illustrated by numerous references throughout the *Divine Comedy*, with frequent allusions to the motions of the sun or moon as a means of indicating quite precisely the passage of time in the course of the pilgrim's journey. For example, there are frequent references to the sun's rays during the course of the journey through Antepurgatory, the excursus on the position of the sun in the southern hemisphere at *Purg.* IV.55–84,²⁰ or Virgil's reference to the position of the moon at *Inf.* XXIX.10.

The reflection of cosmic order in political structures is also a natural framework within medieval political thought, illustrated by the famous image of the sun and moon to represent the relationship between spiritual and temporal power. The sun represents the Pope and the moon the Emperor, who has no power of his own, according to pro-papal political theorists, but merely reflects the power of the Pope, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun. The image is treated at length by Dante at *Mon.* III.iv. Dante's arguments against imperial dependence on the Pope rest on the claim that the moon has some light of its own and that since the heavenly bodies were created on the fourth day, and Man only on the sixth, they cannot have been intended as an allegorical example for humanity to follow. Dante's refutation relies on biblical authority and he does not dispute the validity of basing arguments of political philosophy on cosmology, since he repeatedly relies upon this technique himself. At *Purg.* XVI.106–108, rather than present the relationship in terms of sun and moon with the obvious hierarchy that this implies, imperial and ecclesiastical authority are presented in terms of Rome's two suns:

For Rome, which made the world good, used to have
two suns; and they made visible two paths—
the world's path and the pathway that is God's.²¹

Their relationship is presented in terms of a continuous attempt to eclipse each other (*Purg.* XVI.109–112), although the pilgrim's interlocutor here, Marco Lombardo, lays the blame primarily on the Church (*Purg.* XVI.127–129).

19 Reynolds 2006, 234.

20 Cf. *Purg.* IV.15–16; 118–120.

21 "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."

Such cosmological imagery is particularly prominent in Dante's second letter to the Florentines (March 31, 1311), in protest against the Florentine alliance with King Robert of Naples against Henry of Luxembourg (Emperor Henry VII), whom Dante regarded as the legitimate Emperor. In November 1310, Florence had begun repairing its walls and, in February 1311, incited Cremona to revolt.²² In a similar image to the *Monarchia's* presentation of papal and imperial power in terms of the sun and moon, Dante accuses the Florentines of attempting to create a second moon and a second sun (*Epistola* VI.2).²³ By doing this, they transgress both human and divine law (*Epistola* VI.2) and reject the sun of peace (*Epistola* V.1; cf. *Epistola* VII.2), a reference to Henry VII. The political act of the Florentines becomes then, for Dante, an act against the correct cosmological ordering of the world. The attempt to set up a rival to the heavenly bodies is equated with attempting to set up a second Holy See. The Florentine act will result in an apocalyptic divine retribution:

your city, weakened by a long period of lamentation, shall finally be handed over into the hands of foreigners, after the greater part has been destroyed either in death or in captivity and the few that shall suffer exile shall perceive this catastrophe with tears. (*Epistola* VI.4)²⁴

In attempting to set up a second sun, Florence reveals her incapacity to remain within natural boundaries. This feature is emphasized in Dante's criticism of the city at *Inferno* VI, where she is presented as a glutton: a city "so full of envy that its sack is already overflowing" (*Inf.* VI.49–50).²⁵ The unnaturalness of the Florentine resistance (for Dante) is reinforced by his comparison of his native city to the Hydra (with rebellious Cremona and Brescia as the heads which sprout once one has been cut off; *Epistola* VII.6). Henry VII is portrayed as a contemporary Heracles.

At *Epistola* VII.7, Florence is even compared to Myrrha, who committed incest with her father, Cinyras. The Florence of Dante's day is negatively contrasted with the idealized Florence described by his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguیدا (*Par.* XV). The Florence of old is idealized and feminized by Cacciaguیدا as "sober and chaste" (*sobria e pudica*, *Par.* XV.99). The Florence of his time was "pure down to the level of the lowest artisan" (*pura vediesi ne l'ultimo artista*, *Par.* XVI.51), but became corrupted, according to Cacciaguیدا, by the newcomers from rural areas of Tuscany (*Par.* XVI.

22 Cf. Reynolds 2006, 236.

23 Dante does this by means of mythological allusion, but his meaning is clear.

24 "urbem diutino moerore confectam in manus alienorum tradi finaliter, plurima vestri parte seu nece seu captivitate deperdita, perpersuri exilium pauci cum flectu cernetis."

25 "piena d'invidia sì che già trabocca il sacco."

49–51; 67).²⁶ It is regrettable that Dante often simply resorts to the question of blood-line for explaining the motivations of those he disagrees with politically. The Lombards are presented as Scandinavians (Dante's letter to the Princes of Italy, *Epistola* V.4) and therefore in Dante's world-view barbarians who rebel against the Emperor and who need to be reminded that they also have Trojan/Roman ancestry.²⁷

The manner of Dante's attack on the Florentines is reminiscent of another unnatural and sinful act that he somehow manages to lay at the door of those he feels are responsible for his exile: the building of the Tower of Babel. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia* II, the speakers of the Italian vernacular are presented as being morally superior to those who speak Latin. Since they are descended from the workers on the Tower of Babel, they naturally bear less responsibility for the alienation from God that this project represents, than the elite, whose descendants use Latin and who are therefore the clergy and the professional classes that Dante blames for his troubles. While the Florentines commit unnatural acts against the very ordering of the cosmos, Dante, by means of his poetry, is capable of committing the very same act, i.e. approaching, and even entering the heavens, as he does in the *Commedia*. However, this act is not unnatural since it takes place with divine approval and therefore is not a rejection of God's providential ordering of the cosmos. Florence forms a counterpoint to Rome: in contrast to the inherent virtue of the Romans, the Florentines are noted for their vice. Dante inverts the usual epic *topos* of alluding to the fame of one's native city, "Be joyous, Florence, you are great indeed, for over sea and land you beat your wings; through every part of Hell your name extends" (*Inf.* XXVI.1–3).²⁸ Indeed Dante encounters the souls of numerous illustrious Florentines in the course of his journey throughout hell, such as the Ghibelline Farinata degli Uberti at *Inf.* X, Iacopo Rusticucci at *Inf.* XVI, or, most significantly of all, Mosca dei Lamberti at *Inf.* XXVIII, whom Dante blames for sowing the seeds that ultimately led to civil strife in Florence (*Inf.* XXVIII.108). The five thieves Dante encounters are all Florentines (*Inf.* XXVI.4–6).

26 "Sempre la confusion de le persone/ principio fu del mal de la cittade, / come del vostro il cibo che s'appone" (*Par.* XVI.67–69). "The mingling of the populations led to evil in the city, even as food piled on food destroys the body's health."

27 Against this one must set Dante's desire for a divine justice that applies equally to all of humanity, the apparent lack of which troubles the pilgrim at *Par.* XIX.

28 "Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se' sì grande / che per mare e per terra batti l'ali, / e per lo 'nferno tuo nome si spande!"

2 Law, Cosmos and Empire

This relationship between stasis and the element of an unnatural and uncontained gluttony in Florence is projected by Dante onto a larger stage at *Purg.* VI, where it is the Italians who are said to gnaw upon one another (*si rode, Purg.* VI.83). The chaos of the peninsula is thematized by Dante: “Squalid [Italy], search round your shores and then look inland—see if any part of you delights in peace” (*Purg.* VI.85–87).²⁹

However, the situation in Italy cannot be aided by laws alone, when a series of Emperors have neglected her:

What use was there in a Justinian’s mending your bridle, when the saddle’s empty? Indeed, were there no reins, your shame were less (*Purg.* VI.88–90).³⁰

Even God, addressed by Dante in the guise of his Roman counterpart Jupiter, appears to have abandoned Italy, “the garden of the Empire” (*giardin de lo ’mperio, Purg.* VI.103–105; 118–120). Dante presents Roman law as an example of divine Providence and God’s beneficence towards humanity, elevating it in the direction of divine law. Dante references it even in areas of endeavor not subject to its authority, such as which language to write a philosophical commentary in (*Conv.* I.x.3, referencing Justinian’s *Dig.* I.4.2).³¹ Even if Dante does not have any historical figure in mind as his idealized world-ruler, the nearest possibility we find is Justinian, viewed favorably by Dante due to his codification of Roman law (*Corpus Juris Civilis*, 529–534). He presents Justinian’s corpus as part of the great inheritance bequeathed by the Romans to all of humanity. By contrast, Florentine law is unstable and lacks moral authority: “How often, in the time you can remember, have you changed laws and coinage, offices and customs, and revised your citizens!” (*Purg.* VI.145–147).³²

The importance of Roman law is illustrated repeatedly by Dante as Christ is born during the reign of Augustus since this is a period of universal peace. He is crucified by Pilate in accordance with Roman law to pay back the debt incurred by Adam.³³ Since

29 “Cerca, misera, intorno da le prode / le tue marine, e poi ti guarda in seno, / s’alcuna parte in te di pace gode.”

30 “Che val perché ti racconciasse il freno / Iustiniàno, se la sella è vòta? / Sanz’ esso fora la vergogna meno.”

31 It should be noted, though, that the *Digest* was cited by other non-legal works. For example, Aquinas cites it at (*ST I–II* q.97 a.2 co), although there, unlike in the case of Dante’s *Convivio*, it is cited in a legal context (Valterza 2018, 195).

32 “Quante volte, del tempo che rimembre, / legge, moneta, officio e costume/ hai tu mutato e rinovate membre!”

33 The debt to God has to be paid back by an infinite being, but since the initial debt is owed by a finite being, it must be paid back by both a god and a man, hence it can only be paid back by Christ.

the Roman Empire was established by right, according to Dante, Pontius Pilate has jurisdiction over Christ so that the sentence which he passes is a judicial execution, rather than a murder. Christ's crucifixion, in turn, is avenged in Dante's reconstruction of history with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under Titus in 70 CE: "Now marvel here at what I show to you with Titus—afterward—it [the eagle on his standard] hurried toward avenging vengeance for the ancient sin" (*Par.* VI.91–93).³⁴ The result is that Dante manages to present the Romans, rather than the Jews, as the chosen people and one must note at this point that, though a Florentine, Dante himself claimed Roman ancestry.³⁵ Political philosophy for Dante becomes a cosmological process since the entirety of human history can only be understood as the unfolding of the divine plan and can only be judged according to this perspective. A classic example of this is the criticism of both Guelphs and Ghibellines uttered by Justinian from heaven (*Par.* VI.103–108). The Guelphs oppose the providential symbol of the Roman eagle, while the Ghibellines appropriate it for their own nefarious purposes. Dante attacks both factions.

In the *Convivio*, Dante expresses his belief that the ordering of the universe is providential:

By divine measure the world is ordered in such a manner that once the heaven of the sun has reached the end of its revolution and returned to a certain point, that ball on which we live will have received on each part of itself just as much light and darkness. O Ineffable Wisdom who ordered things in such a manner, how poor is our mind to comprehend You! And you for whose utility and pleasure I write, in what blindness do you live, not raising your eyes to such matters, keeping them fixed in the mud of your stupidity! (*Conv.* III.v.21–22)³⁶

This belief in the relationship between divine providence and cosmology is also outlined in *Paradiso*:

34 "Or qui r'ammira in ciò ch'io ti replico: / poscia con Tito a far vendetta corse / de la vendetta del peccato antico."

35 Although Dante departs from Augustine's interpretation of history in his view that the Empire was established by right rather than by force (*Mon.* II.i), he is not the first medieval political thinker to develop "the myth of Rome." Elements of this can be found in Remigio de' Girolami's *De bono communi* (*On the Common Good*). Dante most probably encountered de' Girolami at Santa Maria Novella in Florence.

36 "per lo divino provvedimento lo mondo è sì ordinato che, volta la spera del sole e tornata ad uno punto, questa palla dove noi siamo in ciascuna parte di sé riceve tanto tempo di luce quanto di tenebre. O ineffabile sapienza che così ordinasti, quanto è povera la nostra mente a te comprendere! E voi a cui utilitate e diletto io scrivo, in quanta cechitade vivete, non levando li occhi suso a queste cose, tenendoli fissi nel fango de la vostra stoltezza!"

Gazing on His Son with the Love that one and the other eternally breathe,
 the primal ineffable Good created all that revolves through mind and space
 with an order so perfect that no one can contemplate it without sensing
 Him. (*Par.* X.1–6)³⁷

It is the Emperor Constantine who inadvertently attempts to reject divine Providence. Constantine's acts are unnatural, since via his Donation,³⁸ he is responsible for the enrichment of the Church. For Dante, it was contrary to the nature of the imperial role for the Emperor to gift away parts of the Empire, just as it was contrary for the Church to possess property (*Mon.* III.x), in light of Christ's injunction to his disciples at *Matthew* 10,9–10: "Provide neither gold nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey." As Dante notes, "However, after that prohibition, I was unable to discover that the Church was granted permission for the possession of gold and of silver" (*Mon.* III.x.14).³⁹ Dante criticizes the Church of his own day via St. Peter's lament that the clergy have become "rapacious wolves" (*lupi rapaci*) clothed like shepherds (*Par.* XXVII.55–56) or Christ's regret that the Church resembles a badly laden vessel (*Purg.* XXXII.127–129).

While Dante views Constantine highly, even placing his soul in the eyebrow of the eagle of justice at *Paradiso* XX, his Donation represents the beginning of the Church's lust for power and material possessions, which ultimately resulted in Dante's own exile from Florence. At *Paradiso* VI, Justinian presents Constantine's eastwards movement of the imperial capital from Rome to Byzantium, as against the nature of the cosmos since it is contrary to the westerly movement of the sun: "After Constantine had turned the Eagle counter to heaven's course" (*Par.* VI.1–2).⁴⁰ Constantine's decision also reverses the westward journey of Aeneas from Troy to pave the way for the eventual foundation of Rome, which Dante presents as playing a providential role in human history and as necessary for both the spread of Christianity, as well as the salvation of humanity. For Constantine, as in the case of the Florentines, a political act contrary to Dante's views is presented as an anticomic act, since it represents a rejection of God's providential ordering of the universe. Since Dante's criticism of the anticomic nature of Constantine's actions is placed in the mouth of the establisher of Roman law, Justinian, it acquires even greater cogency.

37 "Guardando nel suo Figlio con l'Amore / che l'uno e l'altro eternalmente spira, / lo primo e ineffabile Valore quanto per mente e per loco si gira / con tant' ordine fé, ch'esser non puote / senza gustar di lui chi ciò rimira."

38 Dante, like the majority of his contemporaries, regarded the documents testifying to the Donation as genuine and so does not dispute it on these grounds.

39 "ad possessionem tamen auri et argenti licentiam Ecclesiam post prohibitionem illam invenire non potui."

40 "Poscia che Constantin l'aquila volse contr' al corse del ciel."

As a result of Dante's negative view of Constantine's acts, he reinterprets history to portray Trajan, rather than Constantine, as the first Christian Emperor. Since the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent under Trajan, it is clear that he is a positive figure for Dante. Similarly, Cato, as one who sacrificed himself for the Roman Republic, is located by Dante in Purgatory, despite his suicide and his status as an unbaptized pagan.⁴¹ Trajan, of course, can be presented as Christian, contrary to historical fact, due to the medieval tale that Pope Gregory the Great prayed for him, being so moved by a scene depicted on Trajan's column in which the Emperor interrupts his journey in order to render justice to a widow whose son has just been murdered.⁴² Justice, as Dante repeatedly presents it, is a typically Roman virtue. As a result of the Pope's prayers, Trajan was resurrected and able to receive the sacrament of baptism since he had displayed Christian virtue, resulting in his soul dwelling in the eyebrow of the eagle of justice along with the soul of Constantine.⁴³

Dante's criticism of Constantine's Donation and his favorable treatment of Justinian reveal his stress on the separation of papal and imperial realms as a necessity for both political and eschatological order. It also presents his ideal of an Emperor who rules by means of philosophically based law and whose authority embraces the sphere not only of political, but also of social, order:

For in the art of imperial government there are certain regulatory areas which are pure arts, as is the case of the laws concerning matrimony, slavery, the military, concerning succession in office and in all of these matters we are subject to the Emperor without any doubts or any concerns. (*Conv.* IV.ix.14)⁴⁴

Such laws are not a burden, since if we direct our conduct on the basis of wisdom and understanding, we shall automatically ensure that we live in accordance with the law. The virtuous should take delight in it (*Conv.* IV.xxvi.14).⁴⁵ Despite this claim and in spite of Dante's glorification of Roman law, the tradition inherited by the Emperor, in quasi-divine terms, there are numerous limits to imperial authority:

41 *Purg.* I.71–72; cf. *Conv.* IV.xxviii.15.

42 "il cui valore mosse Gregorio e la sua gran vittoria," "he whose worth had urged on Gregory to his great victory," *Purg.* X.74–75.

43 "colui che più al becco mi s'accosta / la vedovella consolò del figlio," "he who is nearest to my beak is one who comforted the widow for her son" (*Par.* XX.44–45; cf. *Par.* XX. 109–117).

44 "ne l'arte imperiale; ché regole sono in quella che sono pure arti, sì come sono le leggi de' matrimonii, de li servi, de le milizie, de li successori in dignitate, e di queste in tutto siamo a lo Imperadore subietti, senza dubbio e sospetto alcuno."

45 Cf. *Epistola* VI.5 cited above.

There are other laws which follow as if from nature, such as what constitutes the age at which a man can adequately attend to his affairs and, in these matters, we are not completely subject. There are many areas which appear to be related to the art of imperial government and a person who believes that imperial judgement in these matters is binding was, and still is, deceived. Just as in [defining] youth and nobility, the imperial judgement cannot force one to agree simply insofar as he is Emperor, since that which is God's is to be returned to God. (*Conv.* IV.ix.15)⁴⁶

Even if philosophy is associated with the domain of the Emperor in Dante's understanding and theology with the Pope, the Emperor cannot command obedience in the realm of philosophical thought. Dante himself (*Conv.* IV.iii.6) rejects the view that he attributes to Frederick II (but which actually stems from Aristotle, *Politics* IV.8, 1294a 21–22, an attribution which Dante himself recognizes subsequently at *Mon.* II.iii.4) that nobility is “ancestral wealth alongside splendid manners” on the grounds that Frederick has no right to command authority in such matters.⁴⁷ This is in spite of the fact that Dante generally views Frederick II favorably as the founder of the Sicilian school of poetry and as “the last Emperor of the Romans” (*Conv.* IV.iii.6).

3 Cosmology and Humanity

Dante does not simply use cosmological elements as imagery to clarify his political vision. Rather, his political vision is fundamentally tied to his notion of humanity's place within the cosmos. The ultimate striving of the soul is its return to God:

And this is the reason: that the ultimate desire for each thing and the one first given to it by nature is the return to its cause. And since God is the cause of our souls and the creator of each in his image (as it is written “Let us make Man in our image and likeness”), the soul desires to the greatest extent to return to Him. (*Conv.* IV.xii.14)⁴⁸

46 “Altre leggi sono che sono quasi seguitatrici di natura, sì come costituire l'uomo d'etade sofficiente a ministrare, e di queste non semo in tutto subietti. Altre molte sono, che paiono avere alcuna parentela con l'arte imperiale—e qui fu ingannato ed è chi crede che la sentenza imperiale sia in questa parte autentica: sì come [diffinire] giovinezza e gentilezza, sovra le quali nullo imperiale giudicio è da consentire, in quanto elli è imperadore: però, quello che è di Dio sia renduto a Dio.”

47 “antica possession d'avere con reggimenti belli” (*Conv.* IV.iii.23–24). For a full discussion, see Bemrose 2003.

48 “E la ragione è questa: che lo sommo desiderio di ciascuna cosa, e prima da la natura dato, è lo ritornare a lo suo principio. E però che Dio è principio de le nostre anime e fattore di quelle

This goal would be ideally supported by a pope who concerns himself with his proper sphere of authority and who is not primarily interested in temporal affairs (i.e. not Boniface VIII). The role of the Emperor is concerned with no less a task than actualizing the intellectual potential of the entirety of the human race:

Therefore, it is apparent that the highest potentiality of humanity itself is its intellectual potentiality or its rational power. And since that potentiality cannot be actualized at once and completely in any single individual or through any of the particular communities outlined above, it is necessary that there is a multitude in the human species, through which this entire potentiality can be actualized. (*Mon.* I.iii.7–8)⁴⁹

Actualizing this intellectual potential is achieved “in the first place by means of thought and secondarily by means of action (as an extension of thought)” (*Mon.* I.iv.1),⁵⁰ an almost divine activity, since through it humanity imitates the oneness of God. Political order, based upon justice, is a reflection of God’s will: “justice in (earthly) matters is nothing other than the image of the divine will” (*Mon.* II.ii.5).⁵¹

For Dante, there is a limit to what can be achieved by philosophical argument, illustrated by Virgil’s failed attempts to enter the City of Dis by means of a philosophical argument with the devils who guard it (*Inf.* VIII.115–116). The pilgrims can only enter the fortress when a divine messenger touches the gates with a wand. It is faith, not philosophy or reason, which allows us to completely overcome the evil represented by Dis (although Dante also indulges in a joke at the expense of the Epicureans, who are mentioned as among the inhabitants of the city).⁵² Again in Purgatory, Virgil comments that philosophers (such as Aristotle and Plato) are unable to comprehend the true nature of souls (which lies in the realm of faith, rather than of reason, *Purg.* III.37–44). As a result, despite Dante’s utopian vision of the role of the Emperor, his sphere of influence (temporal affairs, supported by philosophy) must acknowledge the primacy of that of the Pope (spiritual affairs, supported by theology), even if the Pope should not interfere in the Emperor’s domain.

simili a sé (si come è scritto: ‘Facciamo l’uomo ad imagine e similitudine nostra’), essa anima massimamente desidera di tornare a quello.”

49 “Patet igitur quod ultimum de potentia ipsius humanitatis est potentia sive virtus intellectiva. Et quia potentia ista per unum hominem seu per aliquam particularium comunitatum superius distinctarum tota simul in actum reduci non potest, necesse est multitudinem esse in humano genere, per quam quidem tota potentia hec actuetur.” Dante’s belief in a single intellect for all of humanity follows Averroes.

50 “per prius ad speculandum et secundario propter hoc ad operandum per suam extensionem.”

51 “ius in rebus nichil est aliud quam similitudo divine voluntatis.”

52 Pugliese 2005, 176.

The relationship between intellectual pursuit and humanity's goal is examined in *Inferno* XXVI in Dante's treatment of Ulysses (influenced to a greater extent by Virgil's negative portrayal in *Aeneid* II, rather than Homer's heroic one in the *Odyssey*, since Dante did not read Greek). The punishment of Ulysses, the great voyager, appears to undermine the value of exploring the cosmos. Yet Ulysses' curiosity resulted in the death of his companions. Dante's view is that human intellectual potential must be actualized, but this can only take place as a species, not at the level of individuals:

Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
 you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
 but to be followers of worth and knowledge. (*Inf.* XXVI.118–120)⁵³

Ulysses, like Nembrot, the builder of the Tower of Babel (*Inf.* XXXI.76–81), is held up as an example of someone who transgressed appropriate limits. Dante's criticism of Ulysses, then, is not a criticism of the activity of cosmology (which Dante himself can be seen as engaging in in his exploration of hell, purgatory and the heavens), but rather a criticism of indulging in idle curiosity which serves no social goal. Ulysses is ultimately not punished for his curiosity, but rather for betraying his companions.

The goal of humanity's creation for Dante is likeness to God. While the Pope is entrusted with the responsibility of this goal, the Emperor is entrusted with the earthly aspect, happiness in this life. As such, it is necessary that Dante's political writing contains this cosmic dimension, since humanity actualizing the potential for which it has been created forms the bedrock of his political philosophy. Just as the cosmos is governed by a single ruler and according to a unitary law, so too should humanity have a single ruler and a single code of law in order to achieve its natural goal. Of course, such an argument is not particularly original and can be traced back to Aristotle.⁵⁴ Dante's usage of cosmology to reinforce political order is more than a mere metaphor, then. Our appetites, abilities, and even our thoughts can be affected by the heavens. The pilgrim traces his own abilities to the constellation of Gemini, Cunizza da Romano's passion to the rays of the planet Venus and the crusaders' appetite for military matters to Mars.⁵⁵ The notion that astral influences affect us is rejected by Marco Lombardo (*Purg.* XVI.61–72), but it is clear that Dante himself does not abandon the notion of a relationship between cosmology and politics, illustrated by

53 "Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti, / ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza."

54 Stocchi-Perucchio 2018, 237.

55 Boyde 1981, 281, see *Par.* VIII.143 on the foundations of temperament; on the influence of Gemini, see *Par.* XXII.112–123; on Venus' influence on lovers, see *Par.* IX.33 and 95–96; on Mars' influence on the crusaders, see *Par.* XIV–XVII and *Par.* IV.58–60.

the pilgrim's compassion for those who believed in astrology at *Inf.* XX.28.⁵⁶ Even if the heavens influence our appetites (*Purg.* XVI.73–75), Dante's vision of the world is one in which free will exists within the framework of a justly ordered cosmos.

Political structures can only be ordered in accordance with justice when the Pope and the Emperor provide the guidance required by their respective spheres of authority (*Purg.* XVI.94–114)—the two suns that light the path for humanity (rather than the sun and the moon as frequently suggested in medieval political theory). The basis for evil is, in fact, poor political order (*la mala condotta*, *Purg.* XVI.103), resulting from greed and the consequent breakdown of justice, rather than malevolent astrological influences. It is no coincidence that astrological influence is connected, though, since Dante links this with appetite, and it is our appetites which lead to the transgression of the social order.

As a coda, there is a question mark over the nature of divine justice that surfaces frequently in Dante's work. This is seen most notably in the case of virtuous pagans, such as Virgil, who are consigned to Limbo, simply for having been born in advance of Christianity. A similar situation arises with one who is born on the Indus' banks (*Par.* XIX.70–78). "Where is this justice then that would condemn him?" (*Par.* XIX.77),⁵⁷ because he does not believe in Christ, of whom he has no knowledge. How can Dante still claim, then, that the cosmos is justly ordered? Although Dante contrasts those denied access to such salvational knowledge with the sins of Christian rulers (*Par.* XIX.112–148), the eagle of justice makes it clear that the nature of divine justice is beyond the pilgrim's comprehension. Once again for Dante, there is a form of divinely ordained justice at work in the cosmos, even if our lifespan is too short to perceive it, and political order here on earth should reflect it, but often fails to.⁵⁸

4 Conclusion

Dante's usage of cosmological order to illustrate what he feels is ideal political order is, as we have seen, not particularly original. The image of the sun and moon to illustrate the relationship between imperial and papal power had already become, by his day, something of a medieval *topos*. For Dante, the cosmological elements he adopts are more than a mere metaphor. Rather, they reflect his fundamental belief in an ordered world and that ideal political order is tied to actualizing humanity's potential within

56 Dante was criticized for his views on astral determinism (as expressed at *Inf.* VII.89) by the astrologer, Cecco d'Ascoli (*Acerba* 2.1.719–736), although he was defended by Benvenuto da Imola on the basis of *Purg.* XVI.

57 "ov'è questa giustizia che 'l condanna?"


58 For a clear treatment of the key issues raised by *Paradiso* XIX, see Barolini's *Commento Baroliniano* on the canto "Injustice on the Banks of the Indus."

this cosmos, in the strictest sense of the word, as a hierarchically ordered system. What Dante brings that is unique is the totality of his cosmological vision, which embraces philosophy, theology, political theory, and history. Roman history is presented as the unfolding of God's providential plan for humanity; a claim that he attempts to reinforce both by his cosmological assertions, as well as by its particular significance for Christianity. Even if Dante's proposals are not influenced by political reality—and indeed he provides very few suggestions for how his political views could ever have been implemented—they are clearly influenced by the political upheaval which he experienced in his own life. Rome's moral and legal authority has been inherited by the Holy Roman Emperor, according to Dante. Just as Rome's special status in human history, and consequently the special status of the Emperor, is presented as both natural and providential, any opposition is portrayed as unnatural and a rejection of divinely ordained cosmic order. This is seen in Dante's treatment of Constantine, but even more emotionally in his commentary on the politics of Florence, the city which had exiled him and to which, had his views on imperial authority been adopted and had his favored Emperor Henry VII met with greater success, he might have been able to return.⁵⁹

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Figures

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59 Dante was pardoned by the city of Florence only in 2008.

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