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ARTICLE

'When I am weak…': A note on metaphysical poverty in Dante Alighieri

Andrea Aldo Robiglio

KU Leuven
Email: andrea.robiglio@kuleuven.be

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Abstract
Dante Alighieri's thought, particularly as expressed in the treatise *The Banquet*, provides a rich ground for investigating the presence of 'weak first philosophy' in late medieval thought. There is no anti-metaphysical motivation in Dante's approach; rather, he proposes a hermeneutic conception of 'metaphysics' that resonates with a 'poor' determination of it. This poverty is poised for transformation, as illustrated in a famous Pauline passage: precisely because it is poor and 'indirect,' such metaphysics opens the door to a fresh foundational understanding of human knowledge and conduct, taking as axioms the principles of the first cause as grace and of human nature as marked by original failure.

The expression '*metaphysica paupera*' sounds as unfamiliar as it is provocative

Metaphysical knowledge is typically characterized as primary and systematic, driven by a speculative ambition that seeks to uncover what lies beyond the reach of historical experience. Its goal is to establish an ultimate foundation for that experience – one not subject to the contingencies or arbitrariness of opinion. It seems, then, that a costly foundational ambition and a wealth of conceptual resources are essential conditions for any metaphysical thought.

In what sense, then, can we speak of a poor or weak metaphysics[1]?

The unusual expression invites us to explore certain aspects of premodern thought that can be linked to a tradition of 'weak thought', where two typically opposed conditions coexist: a) the foundational ambition mentioned earlier, which seeks to transcend the realm of experience to identify its 'ground', and b) a recognition of

[1]In the background of this note, one should acknowledge the influence of Gianni Vattimo's (1936-2023) analyses, which are partly focused on establishing a 'weak' notion of metaphysics. Vattimo sometimes positions aesthetics as a form of 'first philosophy'. For further exploration, see Vattimo & Rovatti (2012), as well as Vattimo (2021).

structural limits to both systematic claims and the establishment of a strong, exclusive 'narrative'.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is appropriate to sketch out, in a few words, a definition of such a 'weak thinking', one that can dictate the course of action we intend to follow in these few pages. By 'weak thinking', we refer to a rational analysis that avoids constructing a rigid 'system'. Instead, it views the exercise of philosophy as a critical, deconstructive reflection rather than a constructive one. This approach embraces the anthropological turn, acknowledging the roles of language, interpretation, and the knowing subject. It emphasizes the conditions that make human knowledge possible and seeks to justify the exercise of cognitive faculties. A significant effort is made to identify prejudices and correct the errors that stem from them before directly engaging with the objects of knowledge. In this sense, a hermeneutic element is intrinsic to this way of thinking. The hermeneutic element is explicit, albeit expressed in scholastic terminology, when a metaphysical axiom from premodern philosophy is highlighted: whatever is understood must be comprehended according to the perspective and limitations of the one who understands[2]. If it becomes clear – as it often occurs in a recognizable tradition of late medieval thought – that the recipient is constrained by severe limits that cannot be surpassed, then both the act of reception and what can be understood must be reduced, adapted, and consequently impoverished. The challenge of transcending these limitations remains, but it cannot be accomplished through the subject's own thinking or intellectual abilities; rather, it is a 'gift' bestowed without merit, through divine 'grace'.

In anticipation of our final point, and before highlighting a significant example of this way of thinking, we can assert that poor metaphysics is found among thinkers who, by assuming the religious concepts of grace and original sin, have developed their rational reflection to defend and, within those limits, justify the reasonableness of such 'hypotheses'. These principles are not demonstrated or demonstrable (as is always the case with first principles) but are instead dialectically inferred from the analysis of historical experience and its aporias.

Poverty of the human spirit

At the beginning of the 14th century, one of the most heated theological debates concerned the theme of the poverty of Christ and the Apostles, to the point of becoming the focus of a universal Church council, the Council of Vienne (1311-1312). The debate obviously concerned questions of ecclesiastical discipline with far-reaching implications for conceptions of society and civil life, but it was not without links to the fields of moral psychology and metaphysics, particularly as regards the concept of the human mind and its union with the material body[3]. While not constituting philosophical documents per se, the conciliar declarations allow us to identify in a certain spiritual tradition of the early 14th century a promising field of investigation. In these currents of religious thought, we find a reflection on the radical poverty of the human spirit, seen as the prerequisite for God's ennoblement of the human soul.

[2]On this metaphysical axiom ('*omne quod recipitur, recipitur* per modum *recipientis*'), see te Velde (1996: 22-23); Wippel (1998).

[3]On this subject, see Grossi (1972); Robiglio (2016).

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The uncreated Creator decides to take on the ignominy of human nature, at once making possible its sublime dignity: every human being thus becomes a 'possible Christ'. The freedom of the spirit (*libertas*) the summit of intelligence (*intellectualitas*) and personality (*personalitas*) is a profound motif that runs through Peter of John Olivi's *Questions* on the Second Book of the *Sentences*, his theological masterpiece dating to the end of the 13th century. Olivi's use of the term *libertas* is Pauline: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is freedom' (*ubi spiritus, ibi libertas, 2 Cor* 3:17)[4].

And here is a first landmark: the shadow of Paul, once his profile is recognized, deepens at crucial moments in the course of philosophical thought between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, extending to Martin Luther and beyond, including the ideas of the Catholic Reformers of the Baroque era[5]. First, there is the well-known verses from the Apostle's *Letter to the Philippians* (2: 5-11), which sees the divine incarnation as a process of radical impoverishment. Then there is the *Letter to the Corinthians*, which emphasizes the Lord's voluntary poverty (*2 Cor* 8: 9), while the *Epistle to the Romans* (2: 33) states an insurmountable limit for the systematic ambitions of the human reason by reaffirming the absolute supremacy of the Divinity. In the Pauline corpus, the theme of voluntary poverty is closely linked to the rejection of all intellectual 'hybris' and embrace of epistemic humility[6].

Richness of divine science

The time has now come to apply our investigation to an author who shares the aforementioned spiritual sensitivity, along with a deep engagement with the reading and meditation of the Pauline corpus. Let us take a look at a pioneering thinker, in many ways exemplary of the transition from scholastic philosophy to Renaissance thought: Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). In one of his most explicitly philosophical writings, *The Banquet*, Dante invokes Pauline authority at a crucial point in his argument.

As we know, *The Banquet*, as handed down to us by the manuscript tradition, does not correspond to the original project: it is an unfinished treatise[7]. It is not, however, an unfinished work as in the case of *De vulgari eloquentia*, which was abruptly interrupted. The interruption of *The Banquet* is visible, but at the same time the author did not fail to mend the hem in order to eliminate a sudden tear in the transition from that work to the *Comedy*, Dante's major theological poem. *The Banquet*'s first book (consisting of 13 chapters) serves as a general prologue; the second book (of the 14 planned) has 15 chapters, as does the third book; finally, the fourth book is divided into 30 chapters and is longer than the previous two books combined.

In the fourth treatise of *The Banquet*, Dante explains that, as far as true happiness is concerned, 'God is always in advance of our contemplation, and that here below we

[4]See Petrus Iohannis Olivi (1922-1926: vol. II, qq. 16, 51 & 113). See also Petrus Iohannis Olivi (2010), prol. gen., p. 3; Boulnois (2013).

[5]See, for example, Catà (2008); Garcia Mateo (1997).

[6]On the impact of Paul's thought (and in particular the theme of *kenosis*) in contemporary thinking, which also underpins readings such as those conducted by Vattimo (cited above), see at least: Dawe (1964) and van der Heiden & Cimino (2017, part. the essays by Boechl and Vedder).

[7]See Dante (2023).

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can never reach him who is our supreme blessedness' (*Conv*. IV, xxii, 17)[8]. Intellectual happiness remains only 'almost' perfect (ibid., 18), but not quite. Deprived of the vision granted to him by divine grace, man can only develop theories that are limited in their speculative ambitions. Consequently, the void left by metaphysics must somehow be filled by practical philosophy[9].

In other words, thought discovers that it is not self-sufficient, despite its undeniable autonomy. At this point, it is worth highlighting an interesting aspect of this intellectual process: it is precisely human thought that always makes this discovery; it is human thought that experiences the impasse in the contemplation of truth. Thought thus finds its strength less in the constitution of a knowledge of the Absolute (to refer to one of the classic definitions of metaphysical knowledge) than in the clarity concerning its own judgements, which enables it to recognize the reasons for its intellectual failures and chart a new metaphysical course. This clarity about limits, in turn, is not self-evident: Ulysses' shipwreck, as interpreted by Dante in Canto XXVI of *Inferno*, shows the extent to which an intellectually gifted person can avoid recognizing his own epistemic limitations. In other words, the capacity for responsible judgment must be constantly reformed: both on an individual and on a social level, for in the case of the *animal civile* (viz., human being), there is a constitutive relationship between the two. Dante (*Conv.* IV, xxi, 6) precisely quotes Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*: 'O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unfathomable are your judgments and your ways past finding out!' (*Conv*. IV, xxi, 6 [trans. slightly modified]). The poverty of our metaphysics is the flip side of the excessive richness of divine science as well as of the incommensurability between them.

The primacy of moral science

In fact, other elements of Dante's philosophical vision seem supportive of this 'weak' position, which the poet-philosopher insisted on above all in his mature years.

In the second book of *The Banquet*, the author had proposed a system of the sciences that contained a surprising inversion, asserting the primacy of moral philosophy over metaphysics. This latter facet was highlighted by Étienne Gilson (1884-1978), who credited Dante with having maintained 'a position entirely extraordinary in the Middle Ages' (Gilson 1953: 107; see also Bird 1984). As a matter of fact, because the degree of

[8]Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Dante are from the Princeton Dante Project (PDP), see dante.princeton.edu.

[9]'Unable to decide whether prime matter was conceived by God, Dante turns away from the philosophy of truth to enter the battle against error. […] Nature reigns over this reorientation, just as it reigned over the series of first statements. Whatever the error: "All this has to do with the error concerning human goodness insofar as it is sown in us by nature and which must be called nobility" [*Conv*. IV, i, 7]. As we can see, the error concerning nobility becomes so central that it takes the place of any moral or theological judgement on the human condition and bears sole responsibility for error in this world' (Pinchard in Dante [2023: 56-57]; my translation). In a similar context, compare the use of the Pauline passage in the *Quaestio de situ aquae et terrae* (1320), § 77-78: 'Let them hearken to the voice of the apostle *Ad Romanos*: "Oh the height of the wealth, of the knowledge, and wisdom of God! how incomprehensible are his judgments and his ways are past finding out". And finally let them hearken to the proper voice of the Creator, when he says: "Whither I go, ye cannot come" [*John* 13:33]. And let this suffice for the inquiry into the truth we set before us'.

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perfection of the different sciences is given by the perfection of the 'subject' of each science, metaphysics must be higher than ethics, since the latter deals with human actions that are anything but unchangeable and eternal entities. Nonetheless, Dante does not follow the trodden path. In Book II of *The Banquet* he wants to compare the various sciences to the different heavens:

> To the first seven correspond the seven sciences of the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium*, namely Grammar, Dialectics, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astrology. To the eighth sphere, namely the Starry Heaven, corresponds Natural Science, which is called Physics, and the first science, which is called Metaphysics; to the ninth sphere corresponds Moral Science; and to the still heaven corresponds Divine Science, which is called Theology. And the reason why this is so must be briefly considered[10]. (*Conv*. II, xiii, 8)

As Bruno Nardi (1884-1968) has noted, the position of 'moral science' above 'metaphysics' was not unrepresented in the theological sources Dante might have received an echo of. Al-Fārābi, for instance, was already a proponent of this position; his *Liber de scientiis*, in the Latin translation executed by Gerard of Cremona, placed ethics (*scientia civilis)* above metaphysics in the hierarchy of knowledge[11]. Such a plausible indirect source, however, does not suffice to explain Dante's strategy as a whole. This consists in two unconventional moves: first, the author groups physics and metaphysics together and makes both of them, for distinct reasons, have 'resemblance' with the 'Starry Heaven'[12]; secondly, he establishes ethics as the highest science man can attain with the judicious use of reason (*Conv.* II, xiv, 14): 'The Crystalline Heaven, which has previously been designated as the Primum Mobile, has a very clear resemblance to Moral Philosophy; for Moral Philosophy, as Thomas says in commenting on the second book of the Ethics, disposes us properly to the other sciences'. Theology lays still beyond the Crystalline Heaven – that is to say, beyond the grasp of human argument (xiv, 19):

> Moreover, the Empyrean Heaven by its peace resembles the Divine Science, which is full of all peace and suffers no diversity of opinion or sophistical reasoning because of the supreme certainty of its subject, which is God. Christ says of this science to his disciples: 'My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you', giving and leaving to them his teaching, which is this science of which I speak.

Against the opinion of the Master of Theology (against both Aquinas and Bonaventure), 'the Dantean notion of theology may be characterized either negatively,

[10]For a detailed background of Dante's cosmology, see Stabile (2007: 137-172).

[11]On this, see Maierù (2004: 7-9). The Latin translation of al-Fārābi is edited by Schupp (2005).

[12]As Maierù once noticed, this grouping might mirror a conception of natural philosophy as it was taught in the Dominican religious schools and has as possible motivation Aquinas's prologue to his commentary of Aristotle's *Ethics* (Maierù 2004: 16 n. 41). The threefold division of philosophy in Logic ('philosophia rationalis'), Ethics ('philosophia moralis'), and Physics and Metaphysics ('philosophia naturalis') dates back to the Platonic Academy of Athens (e.g., Aristotle, *Topics*, I, 14) and had coalesced with Stoic epistemology.

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viz. the dismissal of reason in the realm of theology, or positively, as identification of it with the very teaching of Christ' (Foster 1976: 565[a]).

Poverty transformed

Metaphysics or 'first philosophy', as 'imperfect theology', is insufficient for reaching the supreme goal, and must therefore submit to the demands of ethics[13].

In so doing, however, we remain within the realm of thought, and do not abandon the search for the meta-empirical foundation of the historical experience. Dante insists on the structural link that binds ethics thus conceived to the exercise of the highest speculation. 'Vision' – once it has been rationally established that it is 'given' but not acquired by man with his intellectual powers – presupposes that the thinker, instead of persisting in cognitive effort and his will-to-know, takes note of the limit and works in a new direction.

Let us recall the passage we have seen above: evidence and vision, and thus the final victory over any skeptical doubt, cannot be acquired by man's intellectual and moral powers alone. Vision is not acquired by the power of human reason but is 'received' after human reason has abandoned its pride, amended its errors, and overcome its blindness. Vision is given to those whom God recognizes and even 'elect'. The intellect receives the gift of sight. But this does not require mere passivity or inaction. On the contrary, we must not forget the courtly atmosphere permeating every aspect of Dante's thought[14].

The Lord makes a gift to his knight: let us leave aside the Lord, whose judgments remain inscrutable, as Paul taught, and ask ourselves about the knight. How should he behave towards the Lord? First of all, he must not want to obtain anything, let alone induce anyone to give him titles. He must be courageous, not for his own sake, but to be 'worthy' of his Lord. Only after proving his worth and reliability is the knight ready to receive the Lord's gift. Incidentally said, the gesture of benevolence will not be lacking, for the Lord here is the one who is noble and trustworthy to the highest degree.

The chivalric metaphor helps illuminate the deeper structure of Dante's argument: the thinker, unable to achieve perfect contemplation on his own, must possess the will to create the conditions that enable such contemplation, upon which his happiness depends. He must strive to make himself worthy of receiving the supernatural gift. The value of speculative research remains intact – along with the value of metaphysical inquiry – but it is no longer absolute or selfless. According to Dante, the 'disinterestedness' of metaphysical research, no matter how valuable, ultimately conceals what Friedrich Nietzsche would later describe as a 'will to power'. The search for truth is neither unconditioned nor 'anonymous', for man has no hold on the horizon of knowledge and cannot legitimately count on the self-sufficiency of his mind. The human

[13]See footnote 10 above. One should first consider the epistemic virtues' ethics: for Dante, the goal is to correct fundamental misconceptions about human nature. If these errors remain uncorrected, they could ultimately lead to the ruin of society. In the fourth Treatise of the *Banquet*, it is significant that the adversary Dante confronts is referred to as the slanderer, 'calunniatore' (see IV, xii, 11; xiii, 6; xv, 9; xxiv, 17). Slander, as the intentional distortion of others' speech, will evolve into a philosophical theme during the Quattrocento Humanism, as demonstrated by Mariani Zini (2015).

[14]For a bibliographical guide on this aspect, which we might refer to as Dante's 'romance philosophy', see Robiglio (2021).

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spirit must first purify itself, as the pilgrim Dante shows in his dialogue with Virgil on the rocky slopes of Purgatory, right up to the threshold of Paradise, where one can only enter if invited.

Upon closer inspection, there is no anti-metaphysical motivation in Dante's philosophical project. Rather, it suggests a hermeneutic conception of first philosophy, aligning with the earlier discussion of a 'poor' determination of it. This poverty is poised to be transformed, as illustrated in the famous Pauline passage: precisely because it is poor, such metaphysics opens the door to a foundational understanding of human knowledge and conduct. In its weakness, then, lies the strength of its success.

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