

George Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics. Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, pp. 246, £ 78.99, ISBN 9781108489416

Marco Vorcelli
Università degli Studi di Padova

“Removeve viventes in hac vita de statu miseriae et perducere ad statum felicitatis” (“To remove those living in this life from their state of misery and guide them to a state of felicity”). With these words from the *Epistle to Cangrande*, Dante indicates very clearly the chief purpose of the *Commedia*: his *magnum opus* is first and foremost an ethical enterprise (*morale negotium*), conceived “in pro del mondo che mal vive” (“for the good of the world which lives badly”; *Purg.* xxxii, 103). The great merit of George Corbett’s book lies precisely in reading Dante’s masterpiece as it was originally envisaged, that is, as a work of ethics: “Dante’s imaginative vision and poetic genius” – writes Corbett in the introduction – aimed “to transform people’s moral lives and to reform the institutions that governed them” (p. 2). As the title of the volume suggests, its main focus is the Christian ethics of *Purgatory*, the canticle where Dante, in the guise of *poeta theologus*, “represents [...] the Christian moral pilgrimage towards the *beatitudo vitae aeternae*” (p. 8).

The book is divided into three parts. The first (“Ethical and Political Manifesto”) comprises two introductory chapters.

The first chapter explains in detail the philosophical and theological concepts that underpin the moral structure of the three realms of Dante’s afterlife. While the division of *Inferno* depends upon classical authorities, notably Cicero’s *De officiis* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (cf. *Inf.* xi), the terraces of *Purgatory* are organised according to the Christian scheme of the seven capital vices, which, in the wake of Augustine, Dante regards as disordered manifestations of human love (cf. *Purg.* xvii). As for *Paradise*, although Dante does not illustrate so clearly the rationale behind its structure, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the

seven planetary spheres correspond to the theological and cardinal virtues.

The second chapter is devoted to the most relevant themes in Dante's political thought. As it is famously claimed in the *Monarchia*, by virtue of his twofold nature, mortal and immortal, man must fulfil two separate ethical goals: "human flourishing in this life and the beatific vision in the next" (p. 47). This sharp "distinction between *homo naturalis* and *homo Christianus*" (p. 48) features not only in the Latin political treatise, but also in the poem (the mention by Marco Lombardo of the two suns in *Purg.* xvi, 106-108 is one of the most well-known passages in this regard). Interestingly, Corbett argues that the earthly human flourishing of the *Monarchia* is depicted in *Inf.* iv with the "spiriti magni" of the limbo, as well as with Cato in *Purg.* i: his "startling presence" (p. 55) on the shore of Purgatory can only be accounted for if, on the backdrop of Dante's dualistic ethical theory, we interpret him as a figure of man's secular perfection. The last paragraph of the chapter deals with the *Commedia's* attitude towards the Church of the time: if, on the one hand, Dante does not hesitate to make caustic remarks about clerics, on the other, he puts forward, especially in *Paradise*, a radical manifesto for spiritual reform.

With the second part of the volume ("Reframing Dante's Christian Ethics"), which consists of two more chapters, the author turns his attention to *Purgatory*.

In the third chapter, he provides his general reading of the second canticle. Contrary to modern interpretations, which have considered Purgatory – even its summit – a representation of this-worldly felicity, Corbett espouses a more traditional approach: the purgatorial journey embodies the Christian moral reorientation from secular to spiritual goods, a reorientation that transcends the sphere of natural ethics regulated by Aristotle's doctrine of the mean (cf. pp. 78-84). The *Monarchia's* dualistic theory certainly informs also the *Commedia*, however, as we have seen, the function of symbolising philosophical happiness is taken on in the poem by the limbo of the magnanimous souls, with the significant advantage of freeing "Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise from a forced, overly secular interpretation" (p. 72).

The fourth chapter regards the sources of the structure of Dante's Purgatory and of his treatment of the capital vices. Corbett compares the analysis of the vices offered by William Peraldus (ca. 1200-1271) in the *De vitiis* with that proposed by his confrère Thomas Aquinas in the *De malo* and in the *Summa Theologiae*. Peraldus organises the vices according to the Augustinian criterion of disordered love, which, as we have said, is also adopted in the *Commedia*. Therefore, it is clear that Dante follows "the older, more conservative tradition represented by Peraldus rather than the innovative reforms of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae" (p. 101). One of the most original aspects of Corbett's book, especially in the third part, consists in constantly evaluating how Dante employs and reworks Peraldus's concepts and language in the poetic representations of *Purgatory*.

The third part of the volume ("Penance and Dante's Purgatory") includes the last three chapters, which are dedicated to the sins of pride, sloth, and avarice, respectively.

The main purpose of the fifth chapter is to demonstrate that the cantos devoted to the terrace of pride (*Purg.* x-xii) should be considered not in isolation, but rather as a unit. Indeed, Corbett argues that Dante deliberately contrasts the three examples of humility presented in *Purg.* x (Mary, King David, and Trajan) with the three prideful souls encountered in *Purg.* xi (Omberto Aldobrandeschi, Oderisi da Gubbio, and Provenzano Salvani), in whom Dante recognises three aspects of his own pride (in ancestors, in artistic skill, and in political power, respectively). Similarly, the twelve examples of pride portrayed in *Purg.* xii, which can be divided into three groups of four, are "set [...] in counterpoint with the three *exempla* of humility" (p. 126) of *Purg.* x and refer to the same three forms of pride represented in *Purg.* xi. Given the prominence of *exempla* in these cantos, it is clear that Dante does not want to "provide a detached theological reading" of pride, but rather attempts, by means of vivid images, "to engage his readers directly" (p. 132), in order to effect their spiritual conversion.

The sixth chapter turns to a pivotal vice in Dante's account of moral life, namely, sloth. In this case, the comparison between *Purgatory* and Peraldus's *De vitiis* is all the more necessary, since

many elements of the latter – from the very definition of sloth as “*amor parvus boni magni*” (“little love of a big good”) to the notions of *tepiditas*, *mollitia*, and *imperseverantia* – can be traced, whether explicitly or implicitly, in the verses of *Purg.* xvii-xix. Crucially, Dante hints at his own struggle against sloth through the figure of Statius, who turns out to be both his poetic *alter ego* – in view of the shared lionisation of Virgil – and his moral double. Statius, “a delayer, one who stayed (from the Latin *status*)” (p. 164), must atone for not having been a sufficiently fervent Christian after his alleged conversion, but his sloth may also consist in having left the *Achilleid* incomplete. Unlike him, Dante – exactly halfway through his spiritual and poetic journey – must overcome the temptation to sloth and complete his masterwork, however demanding it may be. Furthermore, Corbett detects the typical symptoms of sloth also at the outset of the *Commedia*, when Dante is stuck in the “*selva oscura*”. In fact, his exhausted body and still foot (*Inf.* i, 28-30) betray the presence of *ignavia*, a subspecies of sloth according to Peraldus, which affects whoever prefers to remain in grave misery instead of making the effort to step out of it. Encouraged by Virgil, however, Dante manages to surmount pusillanimity (“*viltade*”; *Inf.*, ii, 45) and resolves to undertake his unprecedented enterprise.

The seventh and last chapter explores the other fundamental sin in human moral dynamics, i.e., avarice. The central character in this respect is Hugh Capet (*Purg.* xx, 43-96), whom Corbett interprets not only as a spokesperson for Dante’s political polemic against France, but also as a penitent soul. The chastisement of the Capetian line should be reappraised in light of the idea – widespread in Christian moral literature – that the love of children (*amor filiorum*) is an insidious source of avarice: Hugh Capet, who had longed for wealth, fame, and power for the sake of his bloodline, now turns away from the fruits of greed, pursues the true goods, and rebukes his descendants to prompt them to do the same. In doing so, he “recovers the primary duty of a Christian father: to lead his children [...] to eternal beatitude” (p. 175). Corbett remarks that Dante’s emphasis on this point might conceal an autobiographical motive: although in exile and bereft of material goods for himself and for his children, the author of the *Comme-*

dia could still fulfil his most important task of bequeathing the vital nourishment (“vital nodrimento”; *Par.* xvii, 131) of the poem to his children and to all of us. The last paragraphs of the chapter address the opposite vice to avarice, that is, prodigality. Because it is another sin of Dante’s *alter ego* Statius, one can conclude – as in the case of sloth – that Dante spots prodigality also in his own conduct, especially in the Florentine years evoked in the dialogue with Forese Donati (*Purg.* xxiii, 115-119). However, observes Corbett, prodigality is also the vice of St. Francis prior to conversion. Thus, through Statius, Dante associates himself with one of the leading figures of religious reformatory movements.

It is evident from this survey that *Dante’s Christian Ethics*, with its innovative and fruitful approach, is an invaluable contribution to Dante studies. The first two parts of the book, which are more general, provide the English reader with an excellent introduction to Dante’s moral and political thought, whereas the last part, by carefully examining some key episodes of *Purgatory*, casts new light on their complexity and ingenuity. In particular, Corbett displays a remarkable capacity to pinpoint subtle connections between distant passages of the *Commedia*, thus considerably deepening our appreciation of the text. To quote a striking example, Dante’s self-professed supremacy over the two Guidos (*Purg.* xi, 97-99) – at first glance rather unseemly in the context of the condemnation of pride – becomes intelligible in light of Cavalcanti’s disdain (“disdegno”; *Inf.* x, 63) for the salvific truth Dante is pursuing. Bearing in mind the *exempla* of humility of *Purg.* x, one can suppose that Cavalcanti’s intellectual pride is contrasted with the humbleness of King David, the pious poet of the psalms, whom Dante tries to emulate both with his very first words in the *Commedia* (“Miserere di me”; *Inf.* i, 65) and by vernacularising the Lord’s prayer in *Purg.* xi, 1-24 (cf. pp. 120-121).

On a more general level, Corbett’s volume presents two extremely relevant features. First, it offers a reappraisal of the moral sources of *Purgatory*, drawing attention to Peraldus’s *De vitiis* and “away from more bookish ‘high’ Aristotelian philosophy and rationalistic theology” (p. 5). Second, as we stressed at the beginning, it approaches the *Commedia* as it was intended by its author,

i.e., as a work of ethics written for the good of mankind. In doing so, Corbett undoubtedly succeeds in leading us “to a greater appreciation of Dante’s eschatological innovations and his literary genius” (p. 214).

Useful links

www.cambridge.org/core/books/dantes-christian-ethics/36A1FB-E92C1D8E0C24AFED6FC5BA0E71#fndtn-information