

La virtù in Dante. Un'etica della libertà e dell'amore

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In his latest book *La virtù in Dante. Un'etica della libertà e dell'amore* (*The Virtue in Dante: An Ethics of Freedom and Love*), Gianfranco Maglio offers a comprehensive analysis of Dante Alighieri's ethical thought, tracing its evolution from an initial Aristotelian framework to a distinctly Christian perspective. This work is the culmination of Maglio's "piccola trilogia" (p. IX) on Dante's philosophy, following his previous volumes *Ordine e giustizia in Dante* (Wolters Kluwer, 2015) and *Il mondo di Dante e la povertà evangelica* (Wolters Kluwer, 2018).

The book is structured into four chapters, preceded by a preface, a foreword by Alessandro Ghisalberti, and an introduction. Chapter I, titled "Il concetto di virtù nella riflessione del *Convivio*," analyzes Dante's conception of virtue in his work *Convivio*, highlighting its Aristotelian roots and predominantly classical and humanistic vision. The next chapter, "Le virtù nella *Commedia*, I. Il viaggio di Dante alla ricerca della virtù perduta: *Inferno*," focuses on the evolution of Dante's ethical thought in his masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*. In particular, it examines the references to virtues present in the first realm of the afterlife, *Inferno*, where an Aristotelian framework still predominates. The third chapter, "Le virtù spirituali o beatitudini: *Purgatorio*," represents a crucial turning point in Maglio's analysis. Here, he highlights the radical change in the ethical scenario that occurs in *Purgatorio*, where the perspective becomes intimately Christian, and the sources of reference are those of Christian moral philosophy, culminating in the monumental conceptual edifice of Thomas Aquinas. Chapter IV, "Trionfo della virtù e beatitudine eterna: III. *Paradiso*," continues the exploration of the theme of virtues in Dante's final cantica, *Paradiso*, where the definitive triumph of virtue and the realization of eternal beatitude are witnessed. Finally, the book concludes with a chapter titled "Dante e l'etica della virtù," in which Maglio draws the threads of his interpretative journey together, emphasizing how Dante's ethics, while evolving from an initially Aristotelian vision to a more

distinctly Christian approach, remains firmly anchored in an ethics of virtue, centered on the celebration of the virtuous life as the only path to true happiness.

This chapter structure allows Maglio to clearly trace the evolution of Dante's ethical thought, starting from its classical roots in the *Convivio*, traversing the Christian turn of the *Commedia*, and ultimately arriving at a final synthesis that maintains the principles of virtue ethics while sublimating them within a religious and soteriological perspective.

Let us look in more detail at the contents of Maglio's work. In the *Convivio*, Dante lays the ethical-philosophical foundations of his conception of virtue, drawing heavily and consistently from Aristotelian thought, as Maglio asserts (p. 3). This early text reveals Dante's initial adherence to a predominantly classical, Aristotelian framework for understanding and categorizing the virtues, though integrated with Christian elements. The Aristotelian influence is evident in Dante's systematic division of the virtues into moral and intellectual categories, mirroring the bipartite scheme of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, Dante does not simply reproduce Aristotle's ethics wholesale, but Christianizes it by grounding the virtues in a theological perspective. They are seen as ultimately deriving from God as the source and exemplar of all goodness and virtue. There is an emphasis on the role of divine grace in acquiring and perfecting the virtues that tempers the rationalistic autonomy of the pagan model.

Nonetheless, Maglio states that the overall doctrinal framework of virtue theory in the *Convivio* remains of a prevailing classical imprint and strong Aristotelian stamp (p. 18). It upholds the quintessentially Aristotelian notion that the moral and intellectual virtues enable humans to achieve a form of earthly happiness, even if imperfect compared to the supreme beatitude of the afterlife. This attempted synthesis between Aristotelian

virtue ethics and Christian theology in many ways typifies the Scholastic project of integrating pagan philosophy with revealed truth. Yet it also contains intrinsic tensions, such as positing two “beatitudes” –an earthly happiness from human virtues alone, and a heavenly one requiring the theological virtues.

Maglio identifies these fissures as problems that remained open in the *Convivio*, which Dante will grapple with and ultimately resolve through the more unified Christian anthropology and virtue theory that emerges in his masterwork, the *Divine Comedy*. A core tension is: “fino a che punto l'esercizio di queste virtù nobilitanti è in grado di rimuovere dalla natura umana le conseguenze del peccato originale?” (p. 16). Despite integrating Christian elements, the *Convivio* still operates within an essentially naturalistic, rationalistic framework derived from ancient philosophy. But can virtue conceived in these terms truly redeem fallen human nature? Maglio highlights the paradox in Dante's positing of two beatitudes. “Ma, alla fine,” he asks, “le virtù umane, anche se pienamente esercitate, sono in grado di salvare l'uomo?” (p. 198). This dilemma points to an inconsistency in Dante's thought at this stage. If there is indeed one supreme beatitude as the final end, how can the virtues oriented towards an inferior, earthly happiness be sufficient? A “strong” conception of beatitude as complete human fulfillment seems to demand more than Aristotelian virtue ethics can provide.

Maglio suggests Dante is already gesturing towards a more unified, theological understanding that will take shape in the *Commedia*. “Ben presto Dante capirà che il concetto di virtù è unitario, riguarda l'uomo nella sua integralità di essere creato a immagine e somiglianza di Dio, e che la felicità vera non può prescindere dall'amore divino, inteso anche come fine di tutta la realtà” (p. 18). However, in the *Convivio* this realization remains inchoate. The work is still caught between the classical vision of virtue leading to an earthly happiness, and Christian doctrine which intimates that grace, the theological virtues, and the beatific vision are necessary for man's true end. Maglio's analysis identifies these fissures in the *Convivio*'s framework that set the stage for Dante's subsequent re-conception of ethics through the lens of his masterpiece's unified Christian teleology. The unresolved tensions will drive Dante to forge a more holistic synthesis transcending the limitations of his early Aristotelian-Christian model of virtue.

While the *Convivio* presented unresolved tensions between Aristotelian and Christian perspectives on virtue, Maglio argues that in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's ethical thought reaches a fuller, more distinctly religious resolution. The *Commedia* charts Dante's journey towards

a profoundly theological understanding of virtue culminating in a Christian soteriological vision. In this great poetic voyage, civil virtues extolled by classical culture are certainly valorized, but their insufficiency is exposed if not completed and sublimated by the Christian virtues (p. 2). Especially crucial are the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, without which no true human perfection is possible. The *Comedy* develops these themes coherently to provide testimony to virtue's proper religious foundations.

Maglio identifies the *Purgatorio* as the pivotal point where “cambia radicalmente lo scenario etico di riferimento” (p. 51). If the *Inferno* was dominated by an Aristotelian ethics, *Purgatorio* ushers in an intimately Christian perspective, drawing on seminal Christian moral philosophers like Aquinas. The classical virtues do not disappear but undergo a spiritual sublimation within this new theological framework. The journey through the realms of the afterlife is fundamentally driven by Dante's desire to regain the virtue lost in the dark wood of sin and understand virtue's role not just in human perfection but above all in the salvation of the soul and attainment of a timeless beatitude. Virtue is no longer conceived solely in naturalistic terms, but as intrinsically ordered towards supernatural ends.

Ultimately (p. 206), Maglio argues Dante's discourse reveals how from the *Convivio* to the *Commedia* he follows a path that on one side clarifies the meaning of what he had sustained from the beginning –that God is virtue's foundation, and the unifying principle is love. But Dante also experiences this process of progressive unveiling in his own interior spiritual history recounted in the great poem. The *Comedy* is Dante's extraordinary ultramundane journey in search of a perfect virtue that can fully satisfy the human spirit, grasping the Gospel truth that only love can make us free. Dante recognizes the insufficiency of a certain vision of man divorced from God and strives to recover the value of faith and the theological virtues which become the fulcrum of the human search for true happiness.

While Maglio's analysis highlights the profound religious reorientation of Dante's ethical thought in the *Divine Comedy*, he also emphasizes that at its core, Dante's ethics remains firmly rooted in the tradition of virtue ethics. Even as Dante integrates Christian theological elements, his is still fundamentally an ethics of virtue. According to Maglio, for Dante “la celebrazione della vita virtuosa si pone quale unico percorso possibile verso una ‘vita beata’ in quanto realizzabile nell'esistenza terrena dell'uomo e all'interno dei limiti ontologici che comunque ne caratterizzano la natura” (p. 1). Despite the *Comedy*'s transcendent vision, Dante

remains focused on articulating an ethics grounded in this world and the realities of human being.

Maglio argues that Dante's ethical thought is linked to his anthropological conception and is founded on the conviction that man cannot live in just any way. The idea that every behavior, though freely chosen, is equivalent on the basis that happiness can simply be achieved by following needs and desires is rejected. True happiness requires the cultivation of virtue. Even as Dante embraces a Christian teleology, the virtuous life remains the path to authentic happiness. Maglio describes Dante's ethics as "un'etica della virtù liberata che culmina nell'epifania dell'amore [...] come carità" (p. 208). The virtues are not discarded but liberated and grounded in the theological virtue of *caritas*. So, while Dante undoubtedly undergoes a profound evolution in his understanding of virtue's foundations and final cause, Maglio argues he remains coherently within the tradition of virtue ethics. The *Comedy* may transcend but does not overturn that tradition. Instead, it accomplishes a creative reintegration –virtue is upheld as the path to human flourishing, but that flourishing is now understood as only fully realizable through the theological virtues and grounding in divine love.

Throughout the book, Maglio navigates the complexities of Dante's ethical discourse with remarkable clarity and depth. Maglio's writing is both erudite and accessible, combining rigorous scholarship with a clarity of expression that makes the book appealing to a wide range of readers. The book is meticulously structured, with each chapter building upon the previous

one, leading the reader through a logical and coherent progression of ideas.

One of the book's strengths lies in Maglio's ability to situate Dante's ethical thought within its historical and philosophical context, drawing insightful connections with the works of thinkers such as Aristotle, Boethius, and Thomas Aquinas. At the same time, he skillfully illuminates the distinctiveness of Dante's contribution, highlighting the poet's unique synthesis of classical and Christian elements and his profound understanding of the human condition.

Moreover, Maglio's analysis is not merely an exercise in historical exegesis; it also invites readers to reflect on the enduring relevance of virtue ethics in our own pursuit of a life well-lived. By tracing Dante's evolution from an Aristotelian conception of virtue to a more explicitly Christian one, Maglio highlights the perennial tension between purely philosophical and religious approaches to ethics, a tension that continues to shape contemporary debates in moral philosophy.

In conclusion, *La virtù in Dante. Un'etica della libertà e dell'amore* is a significant contribution to the study of Dante's ethical thought and, more broadly, to the understanding of medieval moral philosophy. Maglio's meticulous analysis and nuanced interpretation shed new light on Dante's evolving conception of virtue, revealing its richness and complexity. Maglio's work not only enriches our understanding of Dante's literary and philosophical achievements but also invites us to reflect on the enduring relevance of virtue ethics in our own pursuit of a well-lived life, a pursuit that remains as urgent and challenging today as it was in Dante's time.

