Abstract and Keywords

In Christian thought, creation “out of nothing” is not an event or a process: there is no how, when, or where in the creation of the world. How, when, and where are all internal to finite being, and more precisely to space and time: any account of creation that mentions events or things is not an account of creation, but a description of the world. Such an account says nothing (except analogically) about the relation of the world to the source and ground of its being. It is already implicit in Aristotle that there can be no explanation of the being of things, of “how” things depend on “the thought that thinks itself”, because there is no how, no relation in any common sense (as between things or events), nothing to explain: self-subsistent Intellect is not in itself a thing, and is what it thinks. To grasp the Christian understanding of creation is to grasp a non-reciprocal and non-dual “relation of dependence” between a radically contingent world (at every instant it...
exists) and the self-subsistent and dimension-less ground of its being (which can only be known as oneself, through a revelation prepared by the surrender of self). This chapter traces this understanding in Dante by discussing the tension between Neoplatonic emanation and “Thomistic” creation, the meditation on unity in diversity of Paradiso 2; the relation between body and soul; and the “birth” of time and of space in the Primo Mobile.

**Keywords:** Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Thomistic creation, unity in diversity, Paradiso, Primo Mobile, time, space

We must now understand that creation “out of nothing,” in Christian thought, is not an event or a process: there is no how, when, or where in the creation of the world. How, when, and where are all internal to finite being, and more precisely to space and time: any account of creation that mentions events or things is not an account of creation, but a description of the world. Such an account says nothing (except analogically) about the relation of the world to the source and ground of its being. It is already implicit in Aristotle that there can be no explanation of the *being* of things, of “how” things depend on “the thought that thinks itself,” because there is no how, no relation in any common sense (as between things or events), nothing to explain: self-subsistent Intellect is not in itself a thing, and is what it thinks. As we have already begun to see in the preceding chapters, to grasp the Christian understanding of creation is to grasp a non-reciprocal and non-dual “relation of dependence” between a radically contingent world (at every instant it exists) and the self-subsistent and dimension-less ground of its being (which can only be known as oneself, through a revelation prepared by the surrender of self). In this chapter we shall trace this understanding in Dante by discussing the tension between Neoplatonic emanation and “Thomistic” creation, the meditation on unity in diversity of Paradiso 2, the relation between body and soul, and the “birth” of time and of space in the Primo Mobile.¹

**Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism**
The problem of creation in Dante's time involved interpreting, and synthesizing, Scripture, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonic tradition that fed on both. Much of the work of synthesis, especially in establishing the fundamental metaphysical compatibility between (Neo-)Platonism and Aristotle, had been done before the Middle Ages even began. Most of Aristotle's ancient commentators were in the Platonic-Neoplatonic tradition; indeed Philip Merlan has argued that Aristotle himself, as interpreted by his followers (especially Alexander of Aphrodisias, known in his time as “the second Aristotle”), may be thought of as the bridge between Platonism and Neoplatonism, between Plato and Plotinus. The New (Platonic) Academy, founded about 150 B.C. by Carneades, had already fostered what Cicero describes as “a philosophy that, though it had two appellations, was really a single uniform system, that of the Academic [Platonic] and the Peripatetic [Aristotelian] schools, which while agreeing in doctrine differed in name.” The Neoplatonists assume that in most cases Aristotle and Plato are in agreement (for example, in the fifth century Proclus sought to systematize all Greek philosophy as a progressive penetration of divine revelation; in the sixth Simplicius called Aristotle Plato's “truest pupil” and “best interpreter”), and Aristotle served for centuries as the basis for studying Plato. The writings of Plotinus himself, according to his great student and biographer Porphyry, are “full of concealed Peripatetic doctrines—Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in particular, is concentrated in them,” and indeed much of Plotinus's thought relies on or responds to Aristotle (and his commentators) more than Plato. The fusion of Aristotle and Neoplatonism is completed in the Islamic philosophers (e.g., al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroës), who consider Greek philosophy from Aristotle to Proclus to be one integrated corpus, capped by the mystical *Theology of Aristotle* (i.e., Plotinus's *Enneads* 4–6). Aristotle enters the Latin West in the thirteenth century from the Islamic philosophers and is read through their commentaries, which means that much of Aquinas's “Neoplatonism” in effect comes from his Aristotle. One example of the intricacy of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition will suffice: Bonaventure (an “Augustinian”) and Aquinas (an “Aristotelian”) both think Aristotle's God is the sustainer and (in some sense) “creator”
of a beginningless universe, a view that derives from Proclus's pupil Ammonius (who was reconciling Aristotle with Plato's *Timaeus*) and from the Plotinian *Theology of Aristotle*; the view was consolidated in the tenth century by the Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī, in a work called *The Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages, the Divine Plato and Aristotle*, whence it came to Avicenna and Maimonides, who bestowed it on thirteenth-century Latin philosophers. The point is that Aristotle, as he reentered the late-medieval world, was highly Neoplatonized (if he was not a Platonist himself), and Plato, as he reached Augustine and Christianity through Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, had already once assimilated Aristotle. The great historian of medieval philosophy Van Steenberghen has said that we should not think of the conflict between Franciscans (Bonaventure and Pecham) and Dominicans (Aquinas) in later medieval thought as a conflict between an Augustinian system and an Aristotelian system, but as a tension between “two unequally developed forms of Latin Aristotelianism.” When we impose “schools” on medieval thinkers, we need only remember that they thought, or could think, that Aristotle wrote the *Liber de causis*.  

(p.109) It was Bruno Nardi's lifelong effort to “discredit [sfatare] the legend of Dante's Thomism,” which first demonstrated the complexity of Dante's philosophical formation. Historically Nardi was reacting against the neo-Thomistic movement triggered by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Pope Leo XIII (1879) and reaffirmed ever more stringently by subsequent papal documents: *Doctoris Angelici* (1914), *Studiorum Ducem* (1923), and *Humani Generis* (1950). Ironically, given the conservative backlash against Aquinas in his own time (nine propositions of the Condemnations of 1277 are from Aquinas, and thirty involve his teachings), the movement was itself a reaction to “modernist” philosophy. It prompted several Catholic theologians and scholars, the most important of whom were Busnelli and Mandonnet, to try to demonstrate that Dante nowhere diverged from Thomistic “doctrine” (see the preface to Busnelli's *Cosmogonia e antropogenesi*, a book dedicated to Pius XI, author of *Studiorum Ducem*). Nardi's exaggerations in the other direction (Dante's Avicennism, Averroism, emanationism, and
heterodoxy) must be seen in light of this polemic. Kenelm Foster accurately summarizes the current view: Dante deeply admires Aquinas because Aquinas (especially through his Aristotelian commentaries) formed Dante as an “Aristotelian,” but no one would claim today that Dante was ever a “Thomist” in Busnelli’s sense; in any case Dante could not have distinguished the “schools” of his time as rigorously as modern scholars do. We might add that we should probably cease to accuse Aquinas (and Dante) of “Aristotelianism,” or any other “-ism”: as Mark Jordan has pointed out, Aquinas would be stunned to learn he was an “Aristotelian,” or even a “philosopher,” a term he reserves for non-Christians and often contrasts with Christian wisdom or beatitude. As we have already suggested, and as Jordan has argued in Aquinas’s case, to reduce philosophy to “isms” is to reduce it to dogmas, ideologies, bodies of propositions: this is largely a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, and foreign to Dante and Aquinas, who considered philosophy (a preliminary training in) the pursuit, and love, of wisdom, truth, and understanding.3

Wishing to gloss Aristotle’s profound silence about “how” the One “gives rise to” the Many, the Neoplatonic tradition, as we have already seen, spoke of an “emanation” in degrees or stages, an outpouring of light from Light in a series of reflexive turnings or hypostases, in which each level of reality causes (gives being to) the next, creating a chain of mediate links between attributeless self-subsistence and contingent finite being. In some ways, this hierarchy fit Aristotle well: it could be (and was, by the Arabic philosophers) identified with the descending sequence of his concentric cosmological spheres, each moved by an immaterial intelligence (soon to become angels), a hierarchy that begins with a transcendent Unmoved Mover “beyond” the world and ends at the center of the world in the realm of sublunar contingency, a kaleidoscope of ephemeral generation and corruption produced by the influence of the turning heavens.

Most of this picture poses little problem for the concept of Christian creation (and is in fact absorbed by Aquinas), on two conditions: (1) the “mediate links” are conceived as concurrent secondary or “nonessential” causes (in the production of differentiation or distinction) within the single
primary “act” whereby self-subsistent Intellect-Being spawns and sustains the totality of finite being; and (2) there is no necessity, no “natural overflowing,” in the emanation of the Many from the One (the One does not “need” to produce the Many). In other words, finite being is freely conferred by, or exists by participating in, only self-subsistent Being itself; it cannot be conferred by anything that Being has produced, or that is itself dependent and contingent. The world, in each particular thing and in its entirety, depends directly, immediately, non-dualistically, absolutely, and incessantly on the ground of its being: if the world were completely “other” than, not “one with” (i.e., did not “participate in”) that ground, it would not be. To use the closing words of Plato's *Parmenides*: “if the One is not, nothing is.” To lose sight of this point is to lose the very concept of creation, the nexus of identity and opposition between the One and the Many, between the self-subsistent and the contingent, which for medieval Christian thought is the center of all meaning, and which the Christian religion calls “Christ” or the “Word.” As we have seen, and shall see more clearly in this chapter and the next, it is the nexus the *Comedy* embodies in the *Primo Mobile*.

Neoplatonic emanation, with the conditions stipulated, is thus compatible with Christian creation, and in fact permeates Christian thought on creation. Augustine had already assimilated emanation (in its Plotinian guise) to Judeo-Christian creation, with the qualification (itself derived from Porphyry) that was to become the cornerstone of Christian medieval thought: God is not the Good or One beyond being, but true Being itself, both immanent and transcendent. Recent trends in the study of Aquinas have emphasized more and more the “Neoplatonic” character of his thought, stressing for example the principle of participation as the key to Aquinas’s understanding of the relation of creatures (and humans in particular) to divine Being; since each distinction of finite form (essence) reflects a diverse participation in Being, and hence degree of perfection, Aquinas’s cosmos is a great and continuous Neoplatonic hierarchy, in which all things freely emanate from, and are permeated by, God, and God “governs the lower things by means of the higher.”
Although Aquinas himself often speaks of creation as an “emanation,” he is addressing (and overcoming) a persistent tension between the two notions. The Plotinian tradition that produced the Liber de causis and the Theology of Aristotle tended to speak of each cause in the Neoplatonic hierarchy as producing its effect (the cause beneath it) in its entirety, and attempted (as in Proposition 18 of the Liber itself) to reconcile this idea with creation by saying that the remote (first) cause “is more intensely the cause” of a thing than the thing’s proximate cause, which serves as an instrument of the remote cause. Without precise glossing and interpretation, this tradition can suggest a notion of “mediate” creation (God “creates through” created things), blurring the distinction between contingency and self-subsistence, between the world and the ground of its being. The tendency is more pronounced in Neoplatonic currents that developed in an Islamic context. The paradigm is Avicenna: upon the premise that only one can come from One, God creates only the intelligence of the first sphere (the Primo Mobile); this intelligence then produces its sphere (both matter and form) out of nothing (ex nihilo sui et subiecti), as well as the intelligence of the second sphere, which produces its sphere and the intelligence of the third, and so on. The intelligence of the last sphere, of the moon, produces the matter of the sublunar world; variously disposed by the influence of all nine spheres, this matter is then “stamped” by the intelligence of the sphere of the moon (the dator formarum or agent intellect) with the forms of the elements and their compounds. The whole process has the “necessary” character of a natural mechanism or causal network.

There is no question that Dante is inspired by this “Avicennian” Neoplatonic picture, or even perhaps that (in some qualified sense) “the doctrine of mediate creation insinuated itself into Dante's mind,” as Nardi maintained. Nardi relished scandals and polemics, and certainly triggered some by this suggestion, since as Aquinas blandly observes (speaking of Avicenna), that “the heavenly bodies are media in some way between God and things here below even as regards creationis contrary to faith, which teaches that the whole of nature in its first beginning was created directly by God.” But
Nardi’s suggestion must be highly qualified, because there is also no question that Dante understands and emphasizes the Christian concept of creation. As Nardi too admits, and as we have already seen in chapter 2, creation for Dante is a “triform effect” (Pd 29.28) in which the top, middle, and bottom of the world come into being simultaneously, instantaneously, immediately, and spontaneously. In the Monarchia Dante states clearly, in harmony with Aquinas against Peter Lombard, that “it is easy to demonstrate” that God cannot in any way delegate the power to create.6

Let us look at passages from three cantos (Paradiso 2, 7, and 13) in which the Comedy directly addresses the question of the metaphysical relation between the One and the Many, between self-subsistent and contingent being. All three cantos have been said to betray lingering traces of a tempered “Avicennism” (Nardi), or to adapt Avicennistic reminiscences to new meanings (Mellone). The passages from the first of the three cantos, Paradiso 2, will constitute the second of our three examples of Dante’s poetics “in action.”7

Unity in Diversity: Moonspots

Paradiso 2 begins with a warning to Dante's readers, in their little boats, to turn back to their familiar shores, not to try to follow Dante's singing ship in its great and unprecedented crossing of the deep. Only those few who have already fed on the bread of angels—on the Word, on revelation, on Christ—may attempt to follow in their sturdier vessels, clinging to Dante's wake before it is lost in the equal water of the great sea:

O voi che siete in picioletta barca,
desiderosi d'ascoltar, seguiti
dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,
tornate a riveder li vostri liti:

(p.112)
non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,
perndo me, rimarreste smarriti.
L'acqua ch'io prenendo già mai non si corse;  
Minerva spira, e conducemi Appollo,  
e nove Muse mi dimostran l'Orse.  
Voialtri pochi che drizzaste il collo  
per tempo al pan de li angeli, del quale  
vivesi qui ma non sen vien satollo,  
metter potete ben per l'alto sale  
vostro navigio, servando mio solco  
dinanzi a l'acqua che ritorna equale.  

(Pd 2.1–15)

The divinely inspired poet gives a momentary trace of form—image, concept, word—to undifferentiated Intellect-Being, as he himself charts or experiences it, but that ephemeral wake or furrow (solco), like all finite being, is contingent, and inevitably dissolves in “the water that flows back smooth.” Only those willing to abandon the familiar names and forms of their finite existence (li vostri liti) and willing to confront the ocean of Awareness or Being itself should dare to follow Dante, and they must stay in his wake, guided by one who can “translate” the ground of being into finite signs or forms, thus revealing it to the reader, or, rather, triggering its self-revelation in the reader. The warning is not gratuitous: what follows in the canto is meant to drive back those who, not used to feeding on the pan de li angeli—Christ, the source of all being within or as themselves—cannot fathom the real meaning of the bizarre, dry, and “scientific” lecture Beatrice is about to deliver. Those few who have eyes to see or ears to hear may instead hope for a profound experience of revelation or understanding, and be confirmed in their navigation of the deep, their journey in Paradise.

The theme of the canto, unity in diversity, or the nexus One-Many, is introduced by the pilgrim's arrival in the sphere of the moon (30–36): he is “conjoined” with the solid,
diamondlike substance of that sphere, “received into it” as water receives a ray of light while remaining one (permanendo unita). The analogy is loaded: the image of matter-penetrating light that does not corrupt or divide is a medieval metaphor for the virgin maternity of Mary, that is, for the virgin birth or Incarnation of Christ, of God revealed in and as man. Indeed, Dante says (37–42), if he was body (s’io era corpo), and on earth we cannot conceive the compenetration of bodies or dimensions, that should only intensify “the desire to see that essence in which one sees how our nature and God were united” (il disio / di veder quella essenza in che si vede / come nostra natura e Dio s’unio). The repeated emphasis is on seeing, which is not a matter of concepts or reasoning: “There [in the Empyrean] shall be seen what we hold by faith, not demonstrated, but self-evident, like the first truth man believes” (Lì si vedrà ciò che tenem per fede, / non dimostrato, ma fia per sé noto / a guisa del ver primo che l’uom crede) (42–45). To grasp the non-duality or nexus between contingent finite being and its ground is a question of sight or experience: as we saw in chapter 3, it is to see (be) Christ, to give birth to Christ. It is the human birthright, because—as Christ reveals—he is himself the link or bridge between the world and its source. To see Christ is to see all spatiotemporal substances as contingencies “transparent” to their ground and to each other, as thoroughly “compenetrable” and not “other” than oneself. What alone prevents this angelic mirroring or “entering of one into another” (alterum alterum introire) is the thickness and opacity of the mortal body, which blocks or hides the human spirit (grossitie atque opacitate mortalis corporis humanus spiritus sit obiectus [DVE 1.3.1]).

“If I was body”: this is indeed the question, because, as we saw in discussing Pyramus and Thisbe, human intellect is normally blinded by its self-identification with the body, leading it to experience itself as irreducibly “other” than the ultimate ontological principle, and thus other than all the objects of its experience. This blindness or self-alienation is the ground of sin, suffering, and violence. All three are promptly conjured by Dante’s next question to Beatrice (49–51): Ma ditemi: che son li segni bui / di questo corpo, che là giuso in terra / fan di Cain favoleggiare altrui? (“But tell me:
what are this body's dark marks, which down there on earth make people tell the tale of Cain?"). Popular belief “explained” the moon’s spots by saying that Cain, upon murdering his brother, was banished to the moon, where he had to bear in eternity a bundle of thorns, visible as the segni bui, the dark spots. Dante is evoking the opening event in the long litany of human violence and suffering. That litany arises from the eclipse or obscuring of the light of the One by the marks or signs of the Many: the paradigm of this eclipse is a human intellect that cannot recognize itself in its own brother, its brother as itself. The word altrui (“other”), the marker of Ulysses’ doom (If 26.141) and one of many Ulysslean echoes in the canto, may be charged here (it also recurs at line 88): the very notion of “else” or “other” is the root of all sin, of eviction from Eden. As Dante himself says in the Monarchia (1.15.2–3), “unity seems to be the root of what it is to be good, and multiplicity the root of what it is to be evil. Hence we can see that to sin is nothing other than to despise the one and progress toward the many.” Note that Dante is not saying that multiplicity is evil: rather, multiplicity, with its power to eclipse or hypnotize (“petrify”) intelligence, makes evil possible—it is its root.  

To Dante's question about moonspots, Beatrice indulgently answers (52–57), in effect, that even in the realm of nature, where the senses can unlock some answers, reason, in its dependence upon sensory input, does not get very far (dietro ai sensi / vedi che la ragion ha corte l’ali); it is much more prone to error in a metaphysical question, for which the senses are useless (dove chiave di senso non diserra). It is not reason (ratio), a discursive analysis and synthesis (divisio and compositio) of concepts derived from finite experience, that will supply the answer Dante is looking for, which is ultimately “how” the Many arise from, or inhere in, the One: reasoning will only clear the ground and aim Dante’s vision. The answer can come only from a simple and direct intuition or experience: through pure intellectus, proper to angelic intelligence, or rather, proper to all intelligence unlimited or unobscured by body, for which spatio temporal reality is “transparent,” not “other.” Among human intelligences, normally bound by sense and reason (Pd 4.40–42), these can
only be intelligences that have fed on the bread of angels, penetrating into themselves, into pure Intellect-Being, so far that memory cannot follow (Pd 1.7–9).

In the center of the canto, Beatrice uses rational demonstration (argomentar), grounded on empirical evidence, to show Dante that his own understanding of the moonspots is “submerged in falsehood” (61–63). The “explanation” Beatrice rejects, that the undifferentiated substance of the moon has varying density, reduces diversity to the varying appearance of one material substance, which is in effect to evade the question of “how” the Many arise from, or inhere in, the One, by not addressing the essential differentiation within material substances. When the pilgrim Dante ingenuously says (59–60), in consonance with the Convivio (2.13.9), that “what appears to us diverse up here is caused, I think, by the density or rarity of bodies” (Ciò che n’appar qua sù diverso / credo che fanno i corpi rari e densi), Beatrice answers:

    nel falso iCerto assai vedrai sommerso
    nel falso il creder tuo, se bene ascolti
    l’argomentar ch’io li farò avverso.

La spera ottava vi dimostra molti
lumi, li quali e nel quale e nel quanto
notar si posson di diversi volti.
Se raro e denso ciò facesser tanto,
una sola virtù sarebbe in tutti,
più e men distributa e altrettanto.
Virtù diverse esser convegnon frutti
di principi formali, e quei, for ch’uno,
seguiterieno a tua ragion distrutti.13

(Pd 2.61–72)
Beatrice's point is that the *denso/raro* explanation, if extended to all the stars, would eliminate all real diversity of form or formal-causal influence (*virtù*), which leaves the kaleidoscope of sublunar experience unaccounted for. This shows that the “explanation” ultimately explains nothing: an understanding of multiplicity must address the source of determinate form, which by definition must be beyond determinate form, beyond the empirical, in the origin of diverse “formal principles” (71, 147). These, as we shall see, can arise only in Intellect itself, and there is no “how” to that arising.¹⁴

Beatrice proceeds to dismantle Dante’s explanation on empirical grounds (73–93). If the appearance of dark spots results from patches of rare matter, then those patches must either extend entirely through the moon or alternate with denser matter. The first alternative is not the case, because if it were, then during a solar eclipse—and we must remember this evocation of eclipse—the light of the sun, “ingested” by the rare matter, should glimmer right through the moon, which it does not. If rare and dense matter alternate, then in some areas, where there is dense matter, the light would reflect off the surface, and these areas would appear bright; but the light would penetrate surface areas of rare matter and reflect from underlying strata of dense matter, as from a mirror: these reflections from farther in the moon, at a greater distance from the observer, would appear darker. At this point, if the reader has not already turned back, disillusioned by Paradise, Beatrice drives him back with a garage experiment (94–105): to dissolve the illusion that light reflected from a greater distance is dimmer, she tells Dante to take three mirrors, to place two on either side of him, one straight ahead of him and farther away, and a source of light behind his back, to illuminate all three mirrors. There you will see, she says (*lì vedrai*), if you actually try it (*se già mai la provi*), that, while the surface area of the light reflected in the central mirror is smaller, it has the same intensity as the light reflected from the closer mirrors.

Textually, as John Kleiner has underlined, this is an extraordinary moment. The fact is that in the central mirror Dante will see no light at all, but only the reflection of his own body, *unless his body is transparent to light.* Whether it is or
not, whether the pilgrim experiences himself as transparent to, one with, the ground of his being (“if I was body”), is, as we have seen, a question of his vision, of his experience of himself, of his awakening to the Christic nexus between One and Many, between self-subsistence and contingency. The implication that the pilgrim's body is now “transparent” to light marks this passage as the culmination and resolution of a persistent theme in the *Purgatorio*: the “breaking” of light by Dante's mortal body (as in 5.9, where the “breaking” is linked to the pilgrim's ego or self-consciousness, or in 26.22–23, where Dante's body is a *parete al sol*, a wall to the sun, evoking the frustrated eros of Pyramus and Thisbe). In *Paradiso* 2 the question of the eclipse/manifestation of the light of Intellect-Being by the human body is—in one of the most breathtaking moves in the *Comedy*—encoded into the experiment itself: as Kleiner has pointed out, by precisely specifying the location of the mirrors and lamp (and doubling the closer mirror, when one would do), Dante has deliberately inscribed the pilgrim in a cross, in a crucifixion. To see only the body is to fail to see it as the self-manifestation, in the world, of the ground of all being: it is to fail to recognize Christ, resulting in crucifixion. But crucifixion, the voluntary sacrifice of (one's self-identification with) the body, is itself the self-revelation of the divine, of the ground of all being, in the world. The mirror experiment proves to be the key to the canto, a canto that itself provides the key, and serves as a selective gateway, to the *Paradiso*.

At this culminating moment, Beatrice changes direction. Reason and demonstration are over; she has set up the trigger for awakening, understanding, *intellectus*, self-knowledge. The sublime discourse she now gives is not an explanation of “how” the Many arise from the One, the Other from the Same: there can be no such explanation. One must experience that nexus in and as oneself. Having stripped and purified Dante's intellect of concepts and misconceptions, like water denuded of any particular form, Beatrice wishes to “inform” it with pure light itself:

Or, come ai colpi de li caldi rai
de la neve riman nudo il suggetto
e dal colore e dal freddo primai,
cosi rimaso te ne l'intelletto
voglio informar di luce si vivace,
che ti tremolerà nel suo aspetto.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{(Pd 2.106–111)}

The water imagery, so insistent in the \textit{Comedy}, is not casual: as we have seen, water (the substrate or \textit{suggetto} of snow or ice) takes on and sheds different forms and names, thus becoming in one sense other than itself, while always remaining itself, as, analogously, Intellect-Being “takes on” (but remember it is not a thing!) and sheds the finite forms of reality. Multiplicity, Beatrice observes, arises in the eighth sphere: it thus balances the One (the Empyrean) across the nexus or fulcrum that is the \textit{Primo Mobile}.

Dentro dal ciel de la divina pace
si gira un corpo ne la cui virtute
l'esser di tutto suo contento giace.
Lo ciel seguente, c'ha tante vedute,
quell'esser parte per diverse essenze
da lui distratte e da lui contenute.
Gli altri giron per varie differenze
le distinzion che dentro da sé hanno,
dispongono a' lor fini e lor semenze.
Questi organi del mondo così vanno,
come tu vedi omai, di grado in grado,
che di sù prendono e di sotto fanno.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{(Pd 2.112–123)}
Although I discussed the first two tercets in chapter 1, I may recapitulate here: The “heaven of divine peace” is the Empyrean; the “turning body in whose causal-formative influence lies the being of all it contains” is the Primo Mobile; the heaven with many sights or eyes is the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars or constellations. The eighth sphere “distributes” the act of existence through diverse essences (the stars), essences that are distinct from, but nothing apart from or “outside” of, the act of existence they qualify. The seven planetary spheres absorb and dispose these distinct formal-causal influences in different ways, each receiving them from above and radiating them below, thus controlling (“seeding”) the incessant generation and corruption of sublunar substances.

Although the picture and its expression are quite Avicennian, as Nardi emphasized, Dante is not saying that the Primo Mobile (or any subsequent sphere) confers being in an Avicennian sense, producing both the matter and form of what it contains, which would flatly contradict Paradiso 29.35–36 and 7.70–72: matter, angels, and spheres issued directly from God with no other agents. Essere here denotes spatiotemporal existence, the mode of being of all that the Primo Mobile contains. The qualification of being as spatiotemporal attribute arises in the Empyrean as the Primo Mobile, and begins from the Primo Mobile, the limit of nature. It cannot be attributed to Intellect-Being itself, and in this sense, as we saw in chapter 1, the Primo Mobile, not the Empyrean, may be thought of as the first cause or origin of finite being: “the nature of the world begins from here as from its goal” (la natura del mondo/ quinci comincia come da sua meta” [Pd 27.106-108]).

The reference to finite sublunar form—the content of human earthly experience—as a “seeding” (semenze) by the “organs of the world” (the heavens) picks up an evocation, earlier in the canto, of Jason as a farmer: those few who follow in Dante's wake will be more astonished than the followers of Jason, who saw armed men spring up when he planted serpents' teeth (Que' gloriosi che passaro al Colco / non s'ammiraron come voi farete, / quando Iasón vider fatto bifolco [16-18]). Jason—that great crosser of seas—grew men from
teeth, but those few humans who stay in the furrow (solco [14]) made by Dante as he plows the ocean of being will be born—to their much greater astonishment—as gods, transhumanized, like Glaucus, who in the sea became “a consort of the other gods” (Pd 1.67–72). To be deified is to see, in Paradise, how creation, including oneself, is “seeded,” born from, the ground of its being: this is Christ’s revelation, itself a plant “seeded” only through the blood of self-sacrifice (Pd 29.92, 24.110, 23.132). It is the “seeding” Ulysses never saw, when—in a profound irony—he exhorted his own followers on the deep, Considerate la vostra semenza: / fatti non foste a viver come bruti (“Consider your seeding: you were not made to live as brutes” [If’26.118–119]). One who does not know one’s “seeding” or source, or identifies that seeding with the seeding of sublunar ephemerality, is himself an eclipse of the light of Intellect or Being, a soul assimilated to a brute animal, and not to an angel. Such a one will drown in the sea of being, like Ulysses, instead of swimming in it as his home, like Glaucus.19

Beatrice tells Dante (124–126) that he can now see how she is heading for the vero, the truth, being, and understanding that he desires, so that now he can ford the waters alone (Riguarda bene omai si com‘io vado / per questo loco al vero che disiri, / si che poi sappi sol tener lo guado). She is implicitly saying that the understanding Dante seeks cannot be communicated as words or concepts, but only pointed to through them: he must see or experience truth/being, and its relation to finite form, in or as himself. The single undifferentiated source or ground of diversity is Intellect itself:

Lo moto e la virtù d‘i santi giri,

come dal fabbro l‘arte del martello,

da‘ beati motor convien che spiri;

e ‘l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello,

de la mente profonda che lui volve

prende l‘image e fassene suggello.
E come l’alma dentro a vostra polve
per differenti membra e conformate
a diverse potenze si risolve,
cosi l’intelligenza sua bontate
multiplicata per le stelle spiega,
girando sé sovra sua unitate.²⁰

(Pd 2.127-138)

The “blessed movers” are angelic intelligences; virtù is the causal-formative influence intrinsic to intellect/will. A particular virtù arises from an intelligence as the “hammer’s art” “breathes” from a smith: the intelligence is the smith, the stars are the hammer, the formative influence of the stars (ultimately displayed in sublunar matter) is the hammer's art (compare Cv 4.4.12, 1.13.4, Mn 3.6.5). The stars of the eighth sphere are the image (and, for what lies within the sphere, the impressing stamp or seal) of the ideas or formal principles that arise in the angelic intelligence (mente profonda) that moves the sphere. Thus, multiplying or unfolding its power or nature (bontate) in or through particular finite essences (the stars), that intelligence remains one and indivisible, like the divine mind it reflects, reflexively (like all unobstructed intellect) “circling upon its unity” in self-knowledge (compare Cv 2.4.18). In a similar way the human rational soul is one, despite the fact that it “resolves” or unfolds itself in or as the varied organs of the body, exercising (“conformed to”) the different powers (potenze) of sensation, nutrition, and so forth. What bonds with and “vivifies” the stars or sphere is not the intelligence itself (angelic intelligences, unlike the human soul, are by definition substances “separated from matter,” sustanze separate da materia [Cv 2.4.2]), but its influence (139–141): Virtù diversa fa diversa lega / col prezioso corpo ch’ella avviva, / nel qual, si come vita in voi, si lega (“Each formative influence makes a different compound with the precious body it vivifies, binding itself to it like life in you”).
Mixed with, and variously shining through, the matter of the heavenly bodies, like the joy of a soul shining through a living eye, these influences appear as different luminosities, reflecting the joy of the angelic intelligences that are their source (142–148). Hence the dark and the bright (*lo turbo e ’l chiaro*): hence moonspots.

It may well be that the moonspots are apparent only to unperfected (“sublunar”) human vision, which is more attuned to difference, to the obscuring of the light of being by “otherness,” than to unity, the nonduality of all things with the light that gives them being. We saw that Dante introduces the spots as “what makes others [altrui] down there on earth speak of Cain” (50–51); the spots are “what appears to us [i.e., on earth] diverse up here” (*ciò che n'appar qua sù diverso* [59]). Arriving in the moon itself, on the other hand, he sees it as a pure diamond struck by sunlight, *lucida, spessa, solida e pulita* (“brilliant, dense, solid, and polished” [32–33]), and when he looks back at the moon with heavenly eyes, from *Paradiso* 22—that is, from the eighth sphere, the very source of multiplicity itself—he sees the moon (“Latona’s daughter”) “without that shadow” (*senza quell'ombra*) that had made him think it had varying density (139–141). The marks of difference, the root of Cain’s sad legacy, no longer obscure unity, the light of the Empyrean, to a perfected understanding or love.21

As we saw in chapter 1, Dante and the Neoplatonic tradition tended to identify Intellect or Being with light taken in a strict sense (the so-called metaphysics of light): this is the light that penetrates and sustains the universe, reflecting more in one place and less in another (*Pd* 1.1–3). Dante’s *Paradiso* is built on representing the light of Intellect-Being through its sensible reflection, through light as a sensory quality. One function of *Paradiso* 2 and its mirror experiment is to establish, at the outset of the *Paradiso*, the qualities of sensory light that allow it to represent the ultimate ontological principle. The most important of these is precisely what Beatrice says the mirror experiment will establish: the penetrative intensity, or apparent surface brightness, of a source of light is (at least in theory) invariant with distance: it
is equal in intensity throughout the universe, though its source appears smaller when perceived or reflected from a greater distance, as Beatrice says. The principle is both startling and valid, and Dante may have discovered it. It is perhaps equally important that (as the experiment suggests) reflections of light may be endlessly multiplied without affecting the intensity or unity of their source; moreover we have seen that for Dante light propagates instantly, so that all reflections at any distance will be simultaneous. Like Intellect-Being itself, light is everywhere all at once, totum simul, all-encompassing, all-penetrating, and omnipresent. By raising and rejecting the raro/denso theory of moonspots, Beatrice also introduces the principle fundamental to the canto's (and the Paradiso's) meditation on revelation/crucifixion, intellect, and the body: the (varying) capacity of matter to “ingest,” reflect, or eclipse light is an image of the varying degrees to which finite intelligences experience themselves (and spatiotemporal bodies) as “other” than (alienated from) or “transparent” to (one with) the ground of their being.22

Subsistences and Contingencies

A further indication that Dante is not speaking of (mediate) creation in Paradiso 2.112–123 is the word fanno, to “make” or “do”: Questi organi del mondodì su prendono e di sotto fanno (“These organs of the universetake from above and make or do below” [123]). The distinction between “creating” (creare) and “making” or “doing” (facere) is fundamental in later medieval thought. The first is what God alone can do; the second, in its proper sense, is what things can do, or rather what God “does through things,” and is more technically known as “generation” or “propagation” or the “work of distinction.” Piccarda makes the distinction explicitly in Paradiso 3.86–87: the will of God is quel mare al qual tutto si move / ciò ch’ella [divine will] crïa o che natura face (“that sea toward which moves all that it [divine will] creates or that nature makes”). Although facere can be used in a broad sense to indicate creation out of nothing (as it is in the Nicene Creed), creare can never be used to indicate the generation of things from or by what is itself a contingent finite being. Creation is the “act” whereby a thing has being; generation is what determines it,
at any instant (including the instant of first creation), as this-or-that. As the Nicene Creed makes clear, all things are created by God: whatever is, insofar as it is, “participates” in self-subsistent being, or it would not be. As Aquinas puts it, “a created thing is called created because it is a being, not because it is *this* being. God is the cause, not of some particular kind of being, but of the whole universal being.” On the other hand, the changing and ephemeral identities of things are governed by the processes of nature, and in this sense, almost everything is subject to generation and corruption. One might say: insofar as things exist, they “depend” directly on the Empyrean; insofar as they exist as this-or-that, most things also depend on nature (particularly on the spheres, beginning from the *Primo Mobile*).\(^\text{23}\)

All things are therefore created, and most of them are also made. This does not imply that some things (such as the spheres or angels) were created first and then “made” others. It only means that some things are ontologically dependent on others: there is a hierarchy of being in the order of nature (distinction), in which some things cannot exist as what they are unless a whole series of other things exist as what they are. These other things may be said to be logically prior or “prior in nature,” but they are not “prior in duration” or in time: nothing stands between any thing and the ground of its being. It is in this sense that Aquinas says, “The corporeal forms that bodies had when first produced came immediately from God”; as he explains, this simply means that “in the first production of corporeal creatures no transmutation from potentiality to act can have taken place.” In other words, there was no becoming. This in no way implies that at the moment of first creation the hierarchy of ontological dependence inherent in the distinction of being did not exist, or that in the first production of things God “had to do something special,” which “later” the spheres did. The moment of first creation is only conceptually, but not essentially, different from any other: the only difference is that before that moment there was nothing. Indeed, for Aquinas the created world could very well have always existed, with little consequence for the Christian understanding of creation; we only know that the world is not eternal because Scripture tells us so. The “act” of creation
(the radical dependence of all things on the ground of their being at every instant they exist) logically implies, but must not be identified with, the hierarchical dependencies of determinate form within spatiotemporal being.\textsuperscript{24}

Not unlike Aquinas, but more than Aquinas, Dante emphasizes the hierarchy of ontological dependence embodied in the spheres, reflecting a different balance in the fusion of the “Aristotelian” and “Neoplatonic” traditions. This fusion is strikingly apparent in one of the most beautiful passages of the \textit{Comedy}, in \textit{Paradiso} 13. It is no small tribute to Aquinas, and no accident, that Dante places these lines in his mouth:\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{quote}

\textit{Ciò che non more e ciò che può morire
non è se non splendor di quella idea
che partorisce, amando, il nostro Sire;
ché quella viva luce che si mea
dal suo lucente, che non si disuna
da lui né da l'amor ch'a lor s'intrea,
per sua bontate il suo raggiare aduna,
quasi specchiato, in nove sussistenze,
eternalmente rimanendosi una.
Quindi discende a l'ultime potenze
giù d'atto in atto, tanto divenendo,
che più non fa che brevi contingenze;
}\textsuperscript{(p.121)}
\textit{e queste contingenze essere intendo
le cose generate, che produce
con seme e sanza seme il ciel movendo.}\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textit{(Pd} 13.52–66)
All things, mortal and immortal, are the (apparently self-subsistent) reflection (*splendore*) of the idea (the Word-Son-Christ) born from Intellect-Being (our Father, *il nostro Sire*) through an act of love (the Holy Spirit, *amando*). Since form is not a thing, but both the principle of being itself and the principle through which all things participate in being, metaphysically it corresponds to the Son or Word, the Second Person of the Trinity. Finite form arises through love (the Third Person): it is the power of self-subsistent awareness or being (the First Person) to experience itself as, or give itself to, finite attribute and identity. The Trinity evoked in the first tercet is evoked again in the second: the Word-Son is a living light (*viva luce*) which flows from the source of light (its *lucente*, the Father), but is not other than (does not “dis-one” itself from) its source: both are a power of love, of self-identification or self-giving, which “en-threes” itself with them. Metaphysically, Dante’s persistent plays on the Trinity point to three perspectives on the ultimate ontological principle. Applying the Aristotelian analysis of causality to the indissoluble unity of the first principle, Dante repeatedly assimilates what creates (the “starting point” or efficient cause) to the First Person, *how* (by what law or pattern) it creates (the formal or exemplary cause) to the Second Person, and to what *end* it creates (the final cause) to the Third Person. Since the three are one, one could say that nothing exists in an absolute sense except love: love may be described either as pure awareness, the power of *what is* to be (know itself as) all things (this power is the Father); or else it may be described as the world, all the things conscious being gives being to by knowing them as itself (the Son). One could also say that ultimately nothing exists except the principle of form (the Word): the self-determination of the principle of form as this-or-that is love (the Holy Spirit); unqualified, form is pure intelligence or being (the Father).27

In the sense that angels are immaterial intelligences, not “other” than (not alienated from) the ground of their being, and ontologically not dependent on anything created, they are “subsistences” (*sussistenze*): not contingent or ephemeral. Because they are individual finite intelligences, awareness qualified by some trace of attribute or identity, they are *nove*: 
they are new (created), and they are nine (differentiated in perfection), resulting in a hierarchy of nine choirs, corresponding to the nine heavenly spheres. Note that this rise of individual “I am”s from the “I AM” of pure awareness is not an explanation, nor does it admit one. To “gather its rays” into finite intelligences that are mirrors of itself and in which it mirrors itself (quasi specchiato) is intrinsic to the nature of conscious being, to its actuality or goodness or fullness (bontate), and (as we saw in Paradiso 29.142–145) it in no way affects its unity (eternalmente rimanendosi una).

Conscious being (form or light) is (in some sense) both the One and the Many, and it is the nexus between them.

Opposed to the nove sussistenze (“nine/new subsistences”) are the brevi contingenze or ultime potenze (“brief contingencies” or “last potentialities”), whose being in space at any moment in time hinges on a whole series of ontological dependencies within finite being, beginning with the angels (quindi discende). These “generated things” (cose generate) are the transitory names and forms of sublunar experience, which give way one to the other under the influence of the turning heavens (il ciel movendo), whether through inorganic change (sanza seme) or through reproduction (con seme). Nevertheless, these sublunar things too are nothing but the “shining” (raggiare) of the light source (lucente), a radiance now highly qualified, conditional, and ephemeral, being that is almost extinguished in darkness. Note that here, as in Paradiso 29, Dante refers to the angels (the links in the ontological hierarchy) as “act” or “actuality” (giù d’atto in atto), and to sublunar material substances as “potentialities” or “contingencies” (potenze, contingenze). Since matter, as the potential for change exhibited by spatiotemporal form, is the principle of “non-subsistence” (except in the spheres, which are a special case), immaterial intelligences may be thought of as non-contingent actualities in their own nature; on the other hand, as substances whose transitory actuality in no way depends on themselves (they are a constant “becoming” governed by the turning spheres), sublunar material things may be thought of as pure potentiality or contingency.
Since Aquinas’s speech follows the chiastic balancing of the Franciscan “Neoplatonic” and Dominican “Aristotelian” traditions in Paradiso 11 and 12 (among other chiasmi, the Dominican Aquinas praises Francis, and the Franciscan Bonaventure praises Dominic), it may not be far-fetched to observe, as a last remark on the passage from Paradiso 13, that the first half of the speech uses a Christianized Neoplatonic vocabulary (idea, reflection, light, love, goodness, shining, reflected, remaining one), although philosophically it implicitly rests on Aristotelian metaphysics, while the second half uses an Aristotelian vocabulary (subsistences, potentialities, act, contingencies, generated, seed, moving heaven) but philosophically describes a Neoplatonic “relayed” ontology.

The distinction between generation and creation is spelled out in Paradiso 7:

La divina bontà, che da sé sperne
ogne livore, ardendo in sé, sfavilla
si che dispiega le bellezze etterne.
Ciò che da lei sanza mezzo distilla
non ha poi fine, perché non si move
la sua imprenta quand’ ella sigilla.
Ciò che da essa sanza mezzo piove
libero è tutto, perché non soggiace
a la virtute de le cose nove.³⁰

(Pd 7.64–72)

The passage is saturated with “Neoplatonism,” as Nardi repeatedly argued. Besides the evident echoes of the “metaphysics of light,” it seems explicitly to distinguish “mediate” and “immediate” creation, with the corollary that only what is “immediately” created (sanza mezzo, without an intermediary) is eternal. Although almost universally diffused
in commentaries, such a reading is a serious misunderstanding, because it undercuts what Beatrice is trying to make Dante see about the freedom of the will, Christian revelation and redemption, and the relation between the human rational soul and God, not to mention that it undercuts the fundamental Christian principle, which Beatrice will shortly reaffirm (although here too she has been misunderstood), that all things are created by God without any “help.” Beatrice is saying that what scintillates, distills, or rains (sfavilla, distilla, piove) directly from the fullness of conscious being (la divina bontà) without the qualifying concurrence of natural processes (sanza mezzo) is immortal (non ha poi fine), because it is dependent on nothing but the ultimate ontological principle. In this sense, it is not “other than” the ground of its being: it is not “separable from” or other than the “seal” or “stamp” that determines its finite identity within Intellect-Being itself, so to speak. Any thing that is not dependent on anything created (that is, not subject to anything “new,” to anything that now is but once was not, which means to any thing) is fully free: it is governed or controlled by nothing except the ground of all being (which is not a thing).

Later in the canto, anxious that Dante should “see as she sees” (123), Beatrice clarifies further:

Tu dici: “Io veggio l’acqua, io veggio il foco,
l’aere e la terra e tutte lor misture
venire a corruzione, e durar poco;
e queste cose pur furon creature;
per che, se ciò ch’è detto è stato vero,
esser dovrien da corruzion sicure.”
Li angeli, frate, e ’l paese sincero
nel qual tu se’, dir si posson creati,
sì come sono, in loro essere intero;
ma li alimenti che tu hai nomati

e quelle cose che di lor si fanno
da creata virtù sono informati.

Creatu fu la materia ch'elli hanno;
creata fu la virtù informante

in queste stelle che ‘ntorno a lor vanno.\(^{32}\)

\textit{(Pd 7.124–138)}

The endless arguments over this passage derive from conflating the ontological hierarchy intrinsic to the cosmos with the “act” of creation itself, and from thinking of creation as a process in time.\(^{33}\) Beatrice imagines a confused Dante objecting, with respect to her earlier explanation, that since every thing, including the four sublunar elements (\textit{acqua, foco, aere, and terra}) and all their compounds, is created by God, then everything must be immune to corruption (\textit{da corruzion sicure}), which certainly does not seem to be the case. Again Beatrice explains that of all the things created, some are ontologically dependent on (\textit{informati}, “informed by”) others (which in no way implies that those other things were created first in time), while some things are dependent on nothing created, but only on Intellect-Being itself. Those that are not dependent on anything created (that is, on any thing) are “created just as they are, in their entire being” (\textit{creati si come sono, in loro essere intero}): these are the angels and the heavenly spheres (\textit{il paese sincero}). What the four elements and all things made of them (in other words, all sublunar objects) are at any given instant (including the instant of first creation) depends on other created things, namely the causal-formative influence embodied in the stars and angels (note the word \textit{fanno}: sublunar things are not “created in their entirety” because they are also made or generated). Hence one cannot have a sublunar object unless one also has angels, stars, heavenly spheres, and matter (which is not a thing, but may be variously conceived as the spatiotemporal “substrate” of the sensible universe, the potential for change and multiplicity in spatiotemporal form, or the “otherness” or duality between
spatiotemporal form and Intellect-Being). This means, again, that sublunar things are radically ephemeral and contingent: their coming and going (generation and corruption) are completely subject to the processes of nature, internal to the mechanism of the world.

As we saw in discussing the creation passage of Paradiso 29 (in the “Dante” section of chapter 2), the spheres are a special case: even though they are spatiotemporal (material), Beatrice says that they too, like the angels, were “created as they are, in their entire being.” This is because the spheres are made of ether, a fifth element (quintessence) that does not mix with or change into any other element: its potentiality is completely exhausted (actualized) by the forms of the spheres. Remember that form gives being to matter: to have created the spheres is to have created spatiotemporal bodies with no potential for change, but only for motion. Not dependent on any created thing, immune to any process of generation and corruption, the material spheres are in time, move in time, and in fact generate time, but they are immune to time: they are aeviternal. They are both within and beyond the order of nature: in it, but not subject to it. Indeed by existing in space-time they themselves generate the processes of nature and its laws: they are the “instruments” of angelic intelligences, which “reside” beyond nature in the Empyrean. The spheres are thus the mezzo or medium between Intellect-Being and fluitans materia, sublunar contingency. In the Comedy, the spheres or stars become an emblem of salvation: salvation (Christ's revelation) is to be able to live within time, as a mortal creature subject to, and with a character and physical attributes completely determined by, the order of nature (the stars), and yet to transcend time and nature, by coming to know oneself as (one with) the ground and source of all finite being, as immune to the power of any created thing. This is one reason why the souls of the blessed appear to the pilgrim within the spheres that determined their character, dispositions, and earthly destiny, although they “live in” and are not “other than” the Empyrean.
Body and Soul

Both *Paradiso* 7 and *Paradiso* 13 emphasize the “mechanistic” causal subjection, ephemerality, and contingency of sublunar things for a specific purpose: in order to distinguish the human intelligence or rational soul from such things. In *Paradiso* 7.70–72 Beatrice says that what rains from divine goodness without a medium (mezzo) is “fully free, because it is not subject to the influence of the new things,” which means not subject to anything, since all things are “new” (created). The paradigm of this freedom is an angelic intelligence. Beatrice continues by saying that “the more conformed” an intelligence is to “the divine goodness” that is its source, the more it “pleases” that source, because the power of selfless love (l’ardor santo) is greatest (più vivace) in what is most like that source. All of this applies equally to human intelligence:

Più l’è conforme, e però più le piace;
ché l’ardor santo ch’ogne cosa raggia,
ne la più somigliante è più vivace.
Di tutte queste dote s’avvantaggia
l’umana creatura, e s’una manca,
di sua nobilità convien che caggia.
Solo il peccato è quel che la disfranca
e falla dissimile al sommo bene,
per che del lume suo poco s’imbianca.  

(*Pd* 7.73–81)

What alone makes a human intelligence dissimilar (dissimile) to self-subsistent Intellect-Being (the sommo bene or God)—in other words, what alone makes it subject to things or “disfranchised”—is sin, which obscures the light of Intellect-Being in that intelligence (the intelligence is “little illumined” by that light). Sin, as we have seen, is in fact an obsessive and self-limiting self-identification with ephemer
spatiotemporal form, paradigmatically the body: it is to experience oneself as enslaved and mortal by identifying oneself entirely with what is subject to natural causality and corruption, which is to petrify, obscure, or eclipse the light of intellect in oneself. Beatrice is saying that in its true, original, and redeemed nature, the human soul or intelligence is wholly free—in no way dependent on or governed by the order of nature, or any thing. Thus it is radically different from plant and animal life, which is entirely subject to natural causality and therefore contingent and ephemeral:

L'anima d'ogne bruto e de le piante
di complession potenzïata tira
lo raggio e 'l moto de le luci sante;
ma vostra vita sanza mezzo spira
la somma beninanza, e la innamora
di sé si che poi sempre la disira.\(^{37}\)

\((Pd\ 7.139-144)\)

The souls of all plants and animals are “drawn from” varying compounds of the sublunar elements (\textit{complession potenzïata}) by the influence of the stars, but human life (the human intelligence or rational soul) “breathes directly” from the “supreme beneficence,” from Intellect-Being itself. That is why the human mind or soul is always in love with, and never ceases to seek union with, the ground of its being, of all being.

\(^{38}\) That is precisely why, by identifying ourselves exclusively with them, we “disfranchise” ourselves, alienating ourselves from the ground of all being, and assimilating ourselves to animals.
whose entire being is simply an ephemeral production of nature. It is, like Ulysses, not to know one's “seeding,” or to confuse it with the “seeding” or generation of the body.

The body, or human animal organism itself (what Dante in the Convivio calls l'anima in vita), is produced by the processes of nature, just as animals are. We have seen that in Aristotelian thought soul is a “serial” concept: in the progression from vegetative to sensitive to rational soul, each stage in the series presupposes, and in some sense assimilates, all the preceding stages. In the series nutrition, sensation, and intelligence, each power or life principle is subsumed by the next as a facet of its greater possibilities of being. Thus sensation, as we saw, is a kind of proto-intellect, a capacity to take on a limited range of being (specific qualities within a certain range of intensity), but it is completely dependent on bodily organs, and thus ephemeral. The sensitive soul, or living organism, is the “greatest work” that the processes of nature (things) can produce. Since the human potential intellect, or rational soul, is a power to take on or encompass the forms of all things, it certainly cannot be any of those things, or be produced by any thing: it radically transcends the order of nature. As Aristotle explained, it comes “from outside” and is immune to all natural processes; as Dante says, it “breathes” only from God, in whose unqualified existence it shares.

The generation or “seeding” of the human animal organism (the sensitive soul or anima in vita) through the processes of nature is spelled out in detail by Statius in Purgatorio 25.37–60. The active power of the semen first informs menstrual matter with a nutritive life principle corresponding to that of a plant; continuing its work, it becomes a sensitive life principle with powers of movement and sensation, and as such produces, through the processes of nature (natura [60]), all the members and organs of the fetus. Now, says Statius, comes the critical point or nexus (tal punto [62]), which has misled even the wise, namely Averroës: how the fetus is transformed from a mere living thing or animal (animal) into a “speaker” or human child (fante), a rational soul, a user of language (61–66). Why is this point so critical? Because not to see this point clearly is to be blind to the Christic nexus
between the natural and the transcendent, the human and the divine: it is either to “disjoin” (64) the possible intellect from the living organism (like Averroës) or to conflate the two. In either case, it is to consider oneself an ephemeral product of nature, which is to eclipse the light of being in oneself, which is to crucify Christ (to fail to recognize Christ). Note that this lesson is given by Statius, who has himself just been liberated from any self-subjection to the finite through a Christlike resurrection or revelation (Pg 20–21), and that he gives it on the threshold of the seventh ledge, the ledge of lust or body identification, just after the culmination of the Comedy’s meditation on its own revelatory poetics in Purgatorio 24. Statius now dramatically reveals truth:

Apri a la verità che viene il petto;
e sappi che, si tosto come al feto
l’articular del cerebro è perfetto,
lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto
sovra tant’ arte di natura, e spira
spirito novo, di vertù repleto,
che ciò che trova attivo qui ci,
che vive e sente e sé in sé rigira.41

(Pg 25.67–75)

When nature has finished the production of the fetus or living organism, completing also its brain, its work in making a human being is done. The First Cause now turns to this “great work of nature” (tant’ arte di natura), and breathes into it “a new spirit, full of power,” which subsumes the active life principle of the fetus (corresponding to the sensitive soul) into its own substance, making one soul: this “new spirit” is the rational soul, created “directly” by God, and dependent on nothing. Thus this soul not only “lives and feels” (vive e sente), through the powers of nutrition and sensation it has
subsumed; it also “turns itself upon itself” (sé in sé rigira): like the angels, and the ultimate ontological principle itself, it is a power of self-awareness or consciousness or self-knowledge, a power to know all things as itself, and to know itself as (one with) the ground of all things.  

That this self-knowledge or self-awareness is obscured more in one human being than another is the fault of nature, of the whole process of generating the human organism that Statius has just outlined. In simple terms, the ground of all being is more or less manifest in different human beings, depending on their physical characteristics, dispositions, and character, which are governed by nature and the stars. Thus the Convivio explains (4.21.5–8) that the “distance” of the human possible intellect from the pure Intelligence that is its source depends on the more or less limiting characteristics of the human organism into which it descends, and these depend on the semen and on the dispositions of the inseminator (seminante) and of the heavens or constellations. If the receiving (sensitive) soul is pure, then the intelligence will be “well abstracted and absolved from all bodily shadow” (bene astratta e assoluta da ogni ombra corporea) and the power of divine intelligence will multiply in it; this is the seed (seme) of happiness. The same point is made just after the passage discussed earlier from Paradiso 13: the compounds of elements (cera or “wax”) from which the turning heavens (il ciel movendo) generate “brief contingencies” may be better or worse suited to receive that heavenly influence, which is why one tree gives more fruit than another, and why humans are born with different dispositions (con diverso ingegno) (67–72). If those compounds were worked to the perfect point (se fosse a punto la cera dedutta) and the heavens aligned to exert their greatest power, the light of the imprinting seal would be completely manifest (la luce del suggel parrebbe tutta): the Trinity or ground of being would be fully revealed in human form (73–75), as in another incarnation of God (Cv 4.21.10). (Note that yet again a point designates the nexus of human and divine.) Working like an artisan with a trembling hand, however, nature always transmits the light of being defectively (76–78), except at the
creation of Adam (humanity in its original or natural state) and at the incarnation of Christ:

Però se 'l caldo amor la chiara vista
de la prima virtù dispone e segna,
tutta la perfezion quivi s'acquista.
Così fu fatta già la terra degna
di tutta l'animal perfezione;
cosi fu fatta la Vergine pregna.43

(Pd 13.79–84)

At the moment of first creation, and at the Incarnation, the “informing stamp” of the Trinity (the “first power,” “clear sight,” “warm love”) perfectly disposed and aligned nature through the whole ontological hierarchy, so that the fullness of divine being was manifest in nature (quivi) through the human form, the greatest work of nature. Note the equivalence of Adam and Christ: in the case of Adam (at the moment of first creation) the compounds of elements (la terra, or cera dedutta) were perfectly disposed at their peak or punto, to be “worthy” of the perfection or summit of all organic life (l’animal perfezione), which allowed the rational soul to fully manifest its divinity as, through, and in a perfect human being; in the second case (the Incarnation), the informing power of Intellect-Being directly impregnated the Virgin. In both cases the result was the same: the divine revealed itself in nature as or through the human form, thus revealing the true or original nature of the human being as divine. We might add that according to the Vita Nova (29.2–3), this perfect disposition of nature, or concurrence of secondary causes, also occurred at the birth of Beatrice, which is why she is a miracle (a nine), a self-revelation of the Trinity within the world.

It is essential to realize that no matter what one’s nature-determined characteristics and character may be, they in no way preclude the human soul from coming to self-knowledge, from Christically awakening to its transcendence of nature, precisely because the human soul or intelligence is
ontologically prior to nature, and thus not in its power, no matter how much it identifies itself with things that are. This is the truth Marco Lombardo unveils, with a sigh at the blindness of the world and the pilgrim (“Frate, / lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien ben da lui” [“ Brother, the world is blind, and you clearly come from it’ ”]), when Dante asks him if the stars are the cause of human evil (Pg 16.58–66). Even if the stars initiated every one of your movements (as they do initiate almost all of them), Marco Lombardo says (73–74), you would still be perfectly free:

A maggior forza e a miglior natura

liberi soggiacete; e quella cria

la mente in voi, che 'l ciel non ha in sua cura.44

(Pg 16.79–81)

The freedom of the human intellect/will is precisely that it lies subject to a higher power and greater nature than the natural world: because it is only created (cria) and not generated (it rains directly from the Empyrean, so to speak), the heavens have no power over it. Blindness to this truth led the ancients to make the planets that initiate human actions into gods (Pd 4.58–63): this blindness, or failure to see/recognize Christ, is the essence of paganism (26–27, 64–69).

As our discussion has shown, the freedom of the will, in Christian thought, is not a question of having many choices, as in a supermarket. To be free is not to be in the power of any thing that exists, to know oneself as ontologically prior to the order of nature, one with the Empyrean itself, even though as a spatiotemporal being one is also a product of nature. That is why the freedom of the will is at the core of Christian revelation, and why a meditation on broken vows, and on different degrees of beatitude (Pd 3–4), immediately follows the meditation on body, light, and crucifixion in Paradiso 2.

The pilgrim wants to know why Piccarda should have a lesser degree of beatitude if she was forced to break her vow of renunciation against her will. Beatrice first clarifies that blessed souls reside not in the planets that determined their character, but all equally in the Empyrean (i.e., beyond the
order of nature), though they participate in that “eternal breath” to different degrees (Pd 4.28–39). She then explains that in truth nothing could have constrained Piccarda to break her vow if her will had been “entire” (82), as the counterexamples of Saint Lawrence, who allowed himself to be grilled alive, or Gaius Scaevola, who burned off his own hand, clearly show (73–87). Beatrice's point is that what qualified or obscured Piccarda's intellect/will was some degree of attachment to, or limiting self-identification with, the natural world, namely her own body. This is a failure of perfect self-knowledge, some obscuring of the light of Intellect-Being by the body. *Lume non è, se non vien dal sereno / che non si turba mai: anzi è tenebra / od ombra de la carne o suo veleno* (“There is no light, if it come not from the serene that never is obscured: all else is darkness, the shadow or the poison of the flesh” [Pd 19.64–66]). This obscuring of the light of the Empyrean by body is manifest in Piccarda's own shadowy bodily form (Pd 3.10–30), which contrasts with the pure luminosity of the souls of upper Paradise. Some degree of body identification or worldly ambition is characteristic of all the blessed in the first nine cantos of the *Paradiso*, encompassing the first three spheres (up to the sphere of the sun); not coincidentally, these are the spheres that fall within the conical shadow cast by the earth (Pd 9.118–119).

After explaining that the human rational soul or intelligence is subject to no thing, *Paradiso* 7 concludes with some of the most misunderstood lines in the *Comedy*:

E quinci puoi argomentare ancora
vostra resurrezion, se tu ripensi
come l'umana carne fessi allora
che li primi parenti intrambo fensi.45

*(Pd 7.145–148)*

In the standard view, which is virtually universal, Beatrice would be saying that God “directly created” the human body “in its entire being” (like the angels, the rational soul, and
spheres) when God created the rational soul (our “first parents”), and the body is therefore in its “true nature” immortal. As David O’Keeffe pointed out in 1924 (to no avail), and as this discussion has already shown, it is highly unlikely that Beatrice is saying something so incoherent. First of all, we know from extensive empirical evidence that the body is indeed mortal: no one has ever lived who has not died, including Adam, Eve, and Christ Himself. In fact no spiritual tradition more than the Christian reminds man that the body is made from dust and returns to dust. Second, the body is not at all created “in its entire being,” but is very much dependent on created things, on the processes of nature: Statius has indeed given a painstaking account of this dependence, and has called the body tant’arte di natura (such art of nature [Pg 25.71]). Third, if the body were not dependent on anything, but only on Intellect-Being itself (like the spheres or rational soul), then its immortality (not its resurrection) would follow as an immediate logical consequence from what Beatrice has said: no arguments or reasoning would even be necessary. Fourth, developing the third point, and ignoring for the moment the confusion between immortality and resurrection, if the resurrection/immortality of the body could be proved (deduced), then Christ’s resurrection, the central article of Christian faith, would be perfectly gratuitous: unnecessary, and not an article of faith.46

Beatrice is of course saying something different, more coherent, and more interesting. O’Keeffe observes (61–62) that the argomentare Beatrice suggests is an argumentum convenientiae (“of fittingness”), a set of considerations that allow one to make a case for the resurrection of the body, even on rational grounds. The principal ground (quinci) is that the rational soul transcends nature and always desires la somma beninanza, union with the beatitude that is its source (142–144); an added consideration (se tu ripensi) is that the human body and the human soul were created not as separate things, but as one: to create a human being is to create an embodied life principle or intelligence, not a Platonic soul on the one hand, and on the other a body in which to trap it. (In other words, not only was the “body” not created “in its entire being,” it was never created at all as a “thing”: what was
created was a human being.) Besides the parabolic authority of Genesis (1.26–27, 2.21–22), Beatrice is drawing on the profound Aristotelian principle that the soul is the form of the body: it gives it being. The body is ontologically dependent on the soul and has no existence apart from it, as all creation depends on Intellect-Being, and matter on form. Now the rational soul is immortal, since it is not dependent on nature. Because the rational soul or intelligence subsumes as itself the nutritive and sensitive life principles of the body, the natural entelechy or perfection of the immortal human soul is embodiment: it is in a sense incomplete, not fully itself, if it does not exercise all its intrinsic powers as or through a body. Incomplete, it would never experience the perfection of beatitude toward which its very nature disposes it, which means it would desire what is unattainable, which is against philosophical and natural principles. From all these considerations one might reasonably postulate the resurrection of the body. In fact, in Dante’s otherworld, souls cannot even wait for the resurrection: Statius explains that upon death, human souls, carrying with them both “the human and the divine” (both the nutritive-sensitive and the intellective powers), unfold their powers of life and sensation as temporary aerial bodies, through which they act and feel (Pg 25.79–108).

How then did Adam and Eve, and all their progeny, come to suffer death, if the soul gives being to the body, and the rational soul is immortal? Beatrice answered this question earlier in her talk, in the passage with which this section opened (Pd 7.73–81): only sin disfranchises the human creature and makes it dissimilar to its source, the sommo bene. Sin, Beatrice says, is a mal diletta, a faulty seeking of delight or pleasure, through which “our nature” removes or distances itself from Paradise (82–87). In the subsection on Pyramus and Thisbe (in chapter 3) I glossed this mal diletta as the “hypnosis of the finite,” the obscuring or petrification of the light of intellect by an obsessive self-identification with the body, a seeking of oneself as “other” through the senses. Remember that intellect, as nothing in itself, is what it identifies itself with; an embodied intellect that remains awake to its own transcendence (its “source”) lives in time but not
subject to time, in the eternity that is the now, the Christic point or nexus between space-time and its ground; nor perhaps does such an intellect lose the formative power over nature intrinsic to conscious being. If it forgets itself—forgets, like Adam, that it already is potentially all things in all time—it experiences itself merely as the greatest work of nature, a sensitive soul or organism, and thus experiences the natural fate of that organism; it also loses its power over nature.\(^4\) In simple terms, to alienate oneself from the ground of all being, and identify oneself instead with what is contingent, ephemeral, and subject to nature, is to suffer the fate of such things, and to lose all power over them.

How is eternal life regained? Beatrice goes on to explain, in effect, that despite the penitential correctives through which an obscured intellect can, and must, retrain its search for happiness (i.e., from “outside” to “inside”), there is no way it can come to clarity and redemption on its own, overcoming its own Ulyssian madness (\textit{follia} [93]), unless the Light itself clears it, so to speak (82–93). In the most exalted and magnificent manifestation of its own nature (both as self-giving and as justice) “between the last night and first day” (i.e., in all time, seen as a collapsed point), the “divine goodness” did this clearing by sacrificing itself to take on the human form as Christ and then sacrificing that form in Crucifixion, thus making humans themselves (those \(\text{(p.132)}\) with eyes to see and understand [94–96]) capable of raising themselves (97–120). To “raise themselves” is to regain the Empyrean through their own awakening to the ground of all being, which is really the awakening of that ground to itself in them. Beatrice has re-expressed the great Clementine dictum that God became man so that man may learn from man how to become God.\(^4\)

\section*{Time}

On the threshold of the \textit{Primo Mobile}, and about to leave the eighth sphere, the source of spatiotemporal multiplicity, the pilgrim has his last look back into space and time. Beatrice tells him to turn his eyes from above to below, and to “see how he has turned” (\textit{Adima / il viso e guarda come tu se' volto [Pd 27.77–78]}). The pilgrim obeys:
Da l'ora ch'io avea guardato prima
i' vidi mosso me per tutto l'arco
che fa dal mezzo al fine il primo clima;
si ch'io vedea di là da Gade il varco
folle d'Ulisse, e di qua presso il lito
nel qual si fece Europa dolce carco.
E più mi fora discovertò il sito
di questa aiuola; ma 'l sol procedea
sotto i mie' piedi un segno e più partito.\(^{50}\)

\((Pd \ 27.79-87)\)

The “first clime” is one of seven parallel horizontal zones into which geographers divided the habitable earth. In breadth it spans the area from the equator to about eight degrees north; its full length (\(tutto \ l'arco\)) is 180 degrees, from the Ganges to Gibraltar (Cadiz, or Gade). When Dante last looked down, upon entering the eighth sphere in \(Paradiso\) 22 (133–154), he was at the midpoint of the arc, over Jerusalem. He has now traveled 90 degrees to the end of the arc: he is over the limit of the inhabited world, the strait of Gibraltar. Dante is on the threshold between the finite Mediterranean world of familiar names and forms and the open ocean of formless being: he can look either way, so to speak, as in the eighth sphere he can look down or up. The sun is moving ahead of Dante: it illumines only the part of the inhabited world touched by Christ's revelation—the span Dante has just traveled—from the coast of Asia Minor to Gibraltar, and it is lighting more and more of the open ocean beyond. In his sojourn in the sphere of fixed stars, moving from Jerusalem to Gibraltar, Dante has covered the entire “threshing ground” (the earth is called \(aiuola\) both times he looks back \((Pd \ 22.151, \ 27.86)\)) in which the good grain sprouted from Christian revelation is divided from the weeds and chaff. The crop to be threshed is planted and harvested by the eighth sphere itself: it is ultimately what “seeds” all the dispositions, ambitions, and