The Empyrean

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the context and originality of Dante's Empyrean, as developed in the Comedy. Its principal characteristics are summarized under three points: (i) In radical distinction from the Empyrean of the Scholastics, the Empyrean of the Comedy is absolutely immaterial and uncreated: it does not exist in space or time; (ii) In the Comedy Dante identifies the Empyrean with the divine mind; the splendor of that mind is the luminosity of the “tenth heaven”; (iii) The Empyrean is the “cause” of the phenomenal world only in the sense that it is its “foundation,” the ground of its being.

Keywords: Aristotle, Dante, Comedy, space, time, divine mind, cause, foundation
Dante and Beatrice arrive in the *Primo Mobile* around line 100 of *Paradiso* 27, and abandon it for the Empyrean at approximately *Paradiso* 30.37. In the cosmology accepted by Dante and most of his contemporaries, summarized by Dante in the *Convivio* (2.3.3–7), the *Primo Mobile* is the ninth of ten (sometimes eleven) heavens, or concentric spheres of creation. In this model, the earth is taken to be the fixed center of the cosmos, and the eighth sphere, containing the constellations of the stars, is the outer limit of the visible universe. Each of the wandering stars (“planets”) is assigned its own sphere, the innermost being the moon, followed by Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. This system (with a different order of planets) was worked out by Eudoxus of Cnidus in response to Plato’s challenge to develop a mathematical analysis that would account for observed astronomical movements. In what has been sternly termed “perhaps the most retrograde step ever taken in the history of a science,” Aristotle translated this mathematical model into physical description. He considered each planet to be embedded in a material sphere made of an invisible and incorruptible *ether*, or “fifth essence,” which manifests its perfection by uniform circular motion. It has been often observed that Aristotle’s cosmology superimposes mechanical explanation on an inherited Platonism. Thus, for example, the spheres impart motion to each other through physical contact as efficient causes, yet the stars they contain partake in action and life, and the final cause of their movement is their love for the Unmoved Mover.¹

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¹ Aristotle

For Aristotle, beyond the convex outer surface of the sphere of fixed stars, there was nothing, or rather there was God, the Unmoved Mover or First Cause, conceived as the metaphysical starting point for the chain of natural causality: “there is neither place nor void nor time outside the heaven. Hence whatever is there, is of such a nature as not to occupy any place, nor does time age it.” Aristotle’s Prime Mover, the foundational principle of the entire physical universe, was pure actuality, divine, perfect, eternal, changeless, absolutely necessary, good, indivisible, and dimensionless; as the goal of
desire, it triggered eternal circular movement, the primary motion; as pure thought and life, its state was the joy of uninterrupted self-contemplation, the highest goal of life. The immediate subject of its influence, the eighth sphere, of the constellations, was then the “first moved,” the primum mobile. Its regular rotation upon the axis of the earth once every twenty-four hours imparted motion to the spheres it contained, and thus to the cosmos as a whole. The observed irregularity of planetary movements was accounted for by complex combinations of the regular motions of multiple concentric spheres for each of the heavens (there were fifty-five orbs in all in Aristotle's system).  

Hipparchus's discovery of the precession of the equinoxes about 129 B.C. implied that the motion of the sphere of fixed stars too was complex (there was a slight west–east slippage in its daily east–west rotation), and so an invisible ninth heaven, “which many call Crystalline, that is, diaphanous or completely transparent” (Cv 2.3.7), was posited; Dante attributes both the discovery of the problem and its solution to Ptolemy (Cv 2.3.3, 5; VN 29.2). This sphere contained no heavenly body: its function was simply to impart diurnal motion to the universe as a whole. Thus the Primo Mobile came to be a sphere distinct from the sphere of fixed stars. With the introduction of a ninth sphere responsible for the daily east–west movement of the heavens, the eighth sphere was no longer the fastest; indeed in its own particular motion it became the slowest, the cerchio che più tardi in cielo è torto (“the circle which is slowest turned in heaven” [Pg 11.108]): it completed one west–east rotation in 36,000 years, one degree per century (Cv 2.14.11, 2.5.16; VN 2.2), according to Ptolemy's calculations, or about 26,000, by ours. As the First Moved sphere was moved directly by God, so the particular motions of the other spheres were thought to be governed by immaterial Aristotelian “movers” or “substances,” which in the Christian world usually came to be identified with angelic intelligences, instruments of the First Mover. This cosmological, “fundamentally religious” Aristotelian system eventually overlapped (never too comfortably) with the geometric calculating techniques of Ptolemy, whose epicycles,
eccentrics, and equants reduced the number of concentric spheres to the nine mobile heavens inherited by Dante.³

(p.17) Dante's Predecessors

The Empyrean, or tenth heaven, was a Christian addition to the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic universe, as Dante explicitly declares: “to be sure, beyond all these [mobile heavens] Catholics place the Empyrean heaven, that is to say, the heaven of flame or luminous heaven.”⁴ Indeed, its essential characteristic was to be “outside” or beyond the rotating spheres of the universe, occupying the same metaphysical position as, and absorbing the functions of, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. Aristotle had insisted that since the eighth sphere, as the outer limit of the universe, contained all things, the universe was nowhere: there could be nothing, neither void nor space, “outside” the last moving sphere. To speak of an “outside” could only be to speak of a metaphysical principle of Being, “the thought that thinks itself,” on which “depend the heavens and the world of nature.” The problem was that, by Aristotle's physics, all motion must be referred to place, and all place to an immobile “container” or encompassing spatial referent. If the last sphere was not in a place, how could it be said to turn once a day?⁵

An unexpected nonastronomical contribution to the problem arose among the Catholics, who needed a place, that was not quite a place, to put the angels, Christ, and the resurrected blessed. This was the Empyrean, which arose as a purely intellectual or luminous realm, yet came to be thought of, among Dante's predecessors and contemporaries, as an immobile, almost-immaterial heaven containing the rest of the universe. In one of his most famous essays, Bruno Nardi traced the evolution of the concept of the Empyrean from its roots in Eastern and Near Eastern identifications of the conscious essential principle of the universe (God or Brahma), with light and fire (agni). Absorbed into the cosmogony of the Greeks, these ideas issued into the Neoplatonic doctrine that the One, identified with the principle of light, radiates from itself as nous (the “Intellectual-Principle” or “Intelligence” that is the foundation of the sensible world), in the same way that the sun radiates light. Re-reflecting as the world-soul, the One-
as-nous both contains and penetrates the physical world (an idea echoed in the opening verses of the Paradiso: *La gloria di colui che tutto move / per l'universo penetra* [“The glory of him who moves all things / penetrates through the universe”]). Simultaneously one and many, the universal anima bridges the duality of spirit and matter: the world exists only as the manifestation of the world-soul. The supernatural splendor of that soul is the luminous Empyrean: it is both *tupos* (the ideal exemplar of the material world) and *topos* (the “where” of the universe), insofar as the world is situated nowhere except “within” it. As Nardi emphasizes, in Neoplatonic (and Platonic) thought the world-soul, or supernatural light, links the eternal to the temporal, the realm of intellect to the realm of sense it “contains.”

This Neoplatonic heritage informs the scattered references to the Empyrean in the early medieval period. Saint Basil (fourth century) postulates an invisible, timeless, changeless world of intelligible light, prior to the sensible universe, to host immaterial intelligences. Martianus Capella (fifth century) speaks of a luminous “Empyrean realm of pure understanding” beyond the swiftly turning periphery of the sensible world, a world “contained by the depth of the infinite Father.” Isidore of Seville (seventh century) and the Venerable Bede (eighth century) mention an angel-containing heaven separated from the world by the turning firmament and cooled by the supracelestial waters of Genesis 1.6–7; Bede adds that this heaven is absolutely immobile. The doctrine of the Empyrean gained currency only in the twelfth century, when the widely diffused *Glossa ordinaria* explain the first verse of Genesis (*In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram*) by saying, “Not the visible firmament, but the Empyrean, that is, the fiery or intellectual heaven, which is so called not because of its burning but because of its splendor, since it was immediately filled with angels.” Echoed by Peter Lombard in the *Sentences* (2.2.4), the *Glossa ordinaria*’s definition of the Empyrean was absorbed into Scholastic philosophy, albeit as a more or less malleable concept based, as Aquinas remarks in the *Summa theologiae* (1a.61.4), on theological tradition rather than on scriptural authority. With the sudden infusion of Greco-Arabic learning into Christian thought at the end of
the twelfth century (Ptolemy's *Almagest* was translated from Greek in Sicily in 1160, and from Arabic by Gherardo da Cremona in 1175; the *Liber de motus celorum* of Alpetragius [al-Bitruji], which defended the original Aristotelian system, was translated by Michael Scot in 1217), the seven heavens (air, ether, olympus, *spacium igneum*, firmament, acqueous [crystalline] heaven, and Empyrean or heaven of angels) common in pre-Scholastic cosmologies were replaced by the ten known to Dante: the nine mobile heavens of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic system, plus the Empyrean.7

As Nardi demonstrates, not only the origin, but also the entire history, of the Empyrean is intertwined with that of Neoplatonism, both in Islamic and Christian thought. The *Liber Scalae Machometi*, a thirteenth-century Latin version of a long tradition of Muhammadan ascension narratives, speaks of a theological heaven that is a vast ocean of light. Sufic speculation, culminating in Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), conceives paradise as a world-encompassing angel-filled fire of eternal light; this is the One, and from it emanate as hypostases spiritual matter, universal intellect, and universal soul, which give being to all finite things. Among Christians, Michael Scot (c. 1170–c. 1235), in discussing the Empyrean, is concerned with the primacy of unity to multiplicity, that the Many are contained within the One. About fifty years later, Pseudo-Grosseteste observes that the Empyrean, as the *locus naturalis* of the universe, contains the cosmos not only spatially but also virtually: the *virtus* or causal-formative influence of all things contained within the Empyrean ultimately derives from the Empyrean itself, the foundation and first cause. More committed Aristotelians, like Albert the Great and Aquinas, as well as thinkers strongly influenced by the empiricism of Averroës, had little use for the Empyrean, except as the hypothesized supernatural home of the blessed. Their Empyrean had little or undetermined connection with, or influence on, the sensory world.8

Though this abode of God was said to be a purely intellectual realm, Dante’s contemporaries conceived it as a spherical, corporeal, and immobile body containing the *Primo Mobile*. Despite their reluctance to say too much about what
can so little be known (Bonaventure remarks that “of this heaven hidden to our senses, the holy doctors say little, and the philosophers even less”), they agreed that it had to be material, because it made little sense to speak of a place that was not a place, or of glorified bodies being nowhere. Albert the Great sums up the picture: “the heaven [caelum] is a pure body, in nature most simple, in essence most subtle, in incorruptibility most solid, greatest in size [quantitate], most pure in matter.” Alexander of Hales, Richard of Middleton, Bonaventure, and Aquinas all speak of the Empyrean as material, as the greatest or highest body enclosing all other bodies; Aquinas specifies its matter as the supralunar quintessence or aither. In 1241 and 1244 the theological faculty at Paris decreed, “We firmly believe, that this corporeal place, that is, the empyrean heaven, will be [the abode of] the angels and holy souls and glorified bodies.”

That the Empyrean was immobile had always been assumed; since it encompassed the sphere of the Primo Mobile, it was natural to think of it as spherical. Based on the first verse of Genesis, as well as on Bede, the Glossa ordinaria, and Peter Lombard, the established view, as Aquinas observes, was that the Empyrean was created “in the beginning,” together with the angels and matter. Since the Empyrean was not created to serve a purpose in the order of nature, opinion was tentative and divided about whether it exerted any influence or causality on the rest of the material world: Pseudo-Grosseteste and Richard of Middleton thought it did; Albert the Great thought not; Bonaventure thought maybe; Aquinas thought probably not, then changed his mind. He came to think that though both positions are probable, it was most likely that the Empyrean produced in the first moving heaven (and lower spheres) not transient effects of motion, but a fixed and stable “power of conservation or causation,” or something of equal dignity; his final position was even more affirmative.

All were unanimous on one thing: the Empyrean was luminous, though this was understood in various senses. As the home of the blessed, who shone brilliantly as they gazed, “face to face,” on God, uncreated source of all light, with nothing interposed, the Empyrean was at least full of light, if indeed it was not light itself. For Bonaventure, for example, it was both
“the most luminous of bodies” and “pure light,” in the sense that it had no determining substantial form or essence except light. In the latter assertion Bonaventure, like many theologians of the Augustinian-Franciscan tradition, shows the influence of the so-called metaphysics of light. The complex of ideas now loosely termed the “metaphysics of light” descended from the Neoplatonic tendency, absorbed by the Christian patristic tradition, to identify God with light in a strict sense, and to think of created things as the reflection or radiation of that light. We may summarize the central strands of this variegated tradition in six points: (1) as self-subsistent Intellect-Being, God is self-radiant, intelligible, uncreated light, pure light in a proper sense; (2) created things are a reflection of the divine light, and participate in being and causality to the extent that they share in the nature of divine or created (reflected) light; (3) as the common substantial form of everything that exists, and the universal principle of causality, light (in whatever precise sense) informs and determines each finite thing in a hierarchy of being, from the most luminous, existent, and active (the outermost spheres) to the most inert, dark limit of non-being, the earth; (4) as a reflection of divine reality, the first and most immaterial of material things, physical light reveals the world to the senses; (5) in a subtle form, light bridges matter and spirit, linking body and soul and constituting the spirits of movement and sensation that animate living things; and (6) the human intellect is itself an active, radiant, spiritual light-energy, illuminating the objects of perception and receptive to the direct infusion of divine illumination. Indeed, in this picture the human soul is a great concentration of matter-informing light, akin in nature to the pure reflected lumen of the spheres and angelic intelligences, and even to originary lux itself. In varied guises and contexts, explicitly or implicitly, these ideas all become part of the fabric of medieval Christian thought, and of the Comedy.¹¹

The essence of the “metaphysics of light” is that the assertion that God is light is not simply a metaphor. On the other hand, neither is it to be understood as reducing God to a sensory quality, or to any common notion of light. The thrust of this tradition is to bridge (not eliminate) the duality between
creator and creation: light is in some sense both the self-subsistent transcendent reality and the first common principle of all finite things; it is in some sense both \textit{lumen gloriae}, spiritual light apprehended directly by the intellect, and the reflected experience of that self-subsistent principle as a sensory quality. The second is the first as known ("reflected") within the sensible world; in this way earthly sensory experience is continuous with, a manifestation of, spiritual reality. Hence the paradigmatic expression of the "metaphysics of light," the early-thirteenth-century treatise \textit{De intelligentiis} attributed to Adam de Belle-Mère, asserts that since light is a divine entity and the first of all substances, all things participate in the nature of light, which is to participate in divine being; light contains and sustains all things. In Robert Grosseteste's \textit{De luce}, from the same years, a created point of pure light (\textit{lux}, or simple being) radiates to distend matter (and space) to its most subtle, almost spiritual extension, forming the outermost sphere (for him the ninth sphere, or \textit{Primum Mobile}); this then diffuses its reflected light (\textit{lumen}, or spiritual body) back toward the center, concentrating matter into a hierarchy of spheres. Bonaventure too regards corporeal (created) light as a substance, the "common form" of all beings; it is more or less manifest in things insofar as they participate in being (are non-contingent or immaterial). The limit case in the created world is the Empyrean, which is pure light (the pure, created, substantial form of light), as in a different but analogous sense God can be said to be pure light (pure immaterial form).\textsuperscript{12}

These ideas about light as a metaphysical and cosmological principle are easily corrupted into three rather primitive notions: (1) that light as a quality experienced by the senses could be self-subsistent, even God Himself; (2) if God is light and the world consists in light, then the world is "made of" God, thus collapsing the distinction between creator and creature; (3) if God is a self-radiating light, and creation that radiation, then the world emanates or pours out necessarily from God, thus annihilating the principle of a free act of creation by a creator. Aquinas in particular undercut these ambiguities at their source by insisting that light was an accident of a substance, and therefore not self-subsistent. So
understood, light for Aquinas could be identified with God only metaphorically, and was simply a quality, not the substance, of the Empyrean. It is worth noting, however, that none of the Christian philosophers in the tradition of light metaphysics, not even the author of the *De intelligentiis*, made the mistakes mentioned. For example, what Bonaventure meant by “light,” the “common form or nature of all bodies,” is probably very close to what Aquinas meant by “act” or “being,” and Bonaventure himself warns against ambiguities. Indeed, most of the characteristic features of the “light metaphysics” tradition were recuperated in various forms by Aquinas himself.\footnote{13}

Dante

This background is sufficient to clarify both the context and the originality of Dante's Empyrean, as developed in the *Comedy*. Its principal characteristics may be summarized under three points, which I shall treat under separate headings.

The Uncreated Edifice

*In radical distinction from the Empyrean of the Scholastics, the Empyrean of the Comedy is absolutely immaterial and uncreated: it does not exist in space or time.*

Apart from the *Comedy*, which is our primary concern, the Empyrean makes an appearance in the *Convivio* (2.3.8–12) and in the *Letter to Cangrande*, and we must briefly consider these. Dante's conception of the Empyrean shows some evolution from the *Convivio* to the *Comedy*: in fact, the standard view, as expressed by Attilio Mellone, is that the Empyrean of the *Convivio non esorbita dal suo tempo* (“does not depart from its time”), while that of the *Comedy* does. Although this is essentially true, it may not do justice to the tensions that already appear in the *Convivio*\footnote{14}

In the *Convivio* (2.3.11), Dante says of the Empyrean: *Questo è lo soprano edificio del mondo, nel quale tutto lo mondo s'inchiude, e di fuori dal quale nulla è; ed esso non è in luogo ma formato fu solo nella Prima Mente, la quale li Greci dicono Protonè.*\footnote{15} The Empyrean contains the entire universe, and it
itself “is not in place.” While we have seen that this is a proper Aristotelian assertion to make about the largest sphere of the physical universe (the “supreme edifice”), beyond which there is no place or void, the statement “it does not exist in place” could ambiguously suggest that the Empyrean does not itself occupy place (it encloses everything that does, “all the world”), and thus belongs to a metaphysical order of reality. The suggestion is reinforced by its being “formed only in the first Mind,” and by the statements about the Empyrean that immediately precede and follow this passage:

E quieto e pacifico è lo luogo di quella somma Deitate che sola [sé] compiutamente vede. Questo loco è di spiriti beati, secondo che la Santa Chiesa vuole, che non può dire menzogna; e Aristotile pare ciò sentire, a chi bene lo ’ntende, nel primo Di Cielo e Mondo.Questa è quella magnificenza della quale parlò il Salmista, quando dice a Dio: “Levata è la magnificenza tua sopra li cieli.”

The Empyrean is the “abode” of God and of the blessed; however, as Étienne Gilson observes, “how can God and incorporeal spirits be someplace?” The Psalmist implies (Psalms 8.2) that the Empyrean is a divine magnificence or splendor raised above the skies. In fact, Dante seems to identify his Empyrean with what Aristotle placed beyond the physical universe, and Aristotle had certainly not placed an immobile astronomical heaven there, but rather nothing. Aristotle had said,

In the absence of natural body there is no movement, and outside the heaven [Primum Mobile] body neither exists nor can come to exist. Hence whatever is there, is of such a nature as not to occupy any place, nor does time age it; nor is there any change in any of the things which lie beyond the outermost motion; they continue through their entire duration unalterable and unmodified, living the best and most self-sufficient of lives.
It seems likely that in referring to Book 1 of the *De Caelo* Dante had in mind this passage, implying that these beings are to be identified with Dante’s “blessed spirits,” by whoever properly understands Aristotle.

Ultimately what Aristotle had placed “beyond” the *Primum Mobile*, his sphere of fixed stars, was the Unmoved Mover, the thought that thinks only itself. The latter phrase is perhaps echoed by Dante’s “that most high Godhead that alone fully sees itself,” while the notion of Unmoved Mover is precisely how Dante begins his entire discussion of the Empyrean:

> Veramente, fuori di tutti questi [cieli mobili], li catolici pongono lo cielo Empireo, che è a dire cielo di fiamma o vero luminoso; e pongono esso essere immobile per avere in sè, secondo ciascuna [sua] parte, ciò che la sua materia vuole. E questo è cagione al Primo Mobile per avere velociassimo movimento; chè per lo ferventissimo appetito ch’è ['n] ciascuna parte di quello nono cielo, che è [im]mediato a quello, d’essere congiunta con ciascuna parte di quello divinissimo ciel quieto, in quello si rivolve con tanto desiderio, che la sua velocitade è quasi incomprensibile.\textsuperscript{19}

The Empyrean is “immobile,” “at rest and peaceful,” because, unlike the *Primo Mobile*, it lacks nothing and hence has no desire; as the ultimate object of movement and desire, it is in effect identified with the *ens primum quietum et sempiternum*, the motionless and eternal First Being. By Aristotelian doctrine, \textsuperscript{(p.23)} all motion derives from desire or incompleteness; all motion is the actualizing or fulfillment of potentiality. The Unmoved Mover does not move because it alone is pure actuality; as the object of the desire that causes all motion, it must be eternal, without parts, and without magnitude. It is clear that if Dante is associating his Empyrean with what Aristotle places beyond the mobile spheres, he is implicitly dematerializing it.\textsuperscript{20} On the other hand, we have seen that in these same passages Dante speaks of the Empyrean as *formed*, an *edifice* with *matter* and *flame*, whose *parts* are conjoined to the parts of the rotating Primo Mobile, to which it is *contiguous*.
There is in fact an obvious tension in this chapter from the *Convivio* between what Gilson terms astronomical and theological conceptions of the Empyrean: as a “tenth heaven” the Empyrean must be located beyond the *Primo Mobile*, containing it, but as “the seat of Divinity and the Blessed, it was impossible to consider it a material and astronomical heaven.” Gilson observes that in passing from the ninth to the tenth heaven we are passing from a physical to a theological order of ideas, a fact implicit in Dante’s introductory expression, “Catholics place,” but obscured by placing the Empyrean in the sequence of astronomical spheres. The Empyrean understood as paradise (“spiritual fire, which is holy love or charity,” as the *Letter to Cangrande* explains [24.68]) does not function well as an Aristotelian sphere.²¹

The treatment of the Empyrean in the *Comedy* is much more sophisticated: the tension is no longer between theology and astronomy, but between the One and the Many, how it is that contingent differentiation arises from, and yet is “contained within,” simple Being. Along with this development, the word *empireo* itself disappears from the *Comedy* after being used only once (in *If* 2.21), as Gilson observes (“Recherche de l’Empyrée” 160): “the Empyrean has lost its name because its nature has changed. It became anonymous at the same time that it lost its reality as a distinct astronomical entity. What is this ‘heaven’ that has no place and no duration? Physically speaking, it is a myth; theologically speaking, it is a metaphor.” In the *Comedy* the word *empireo* is replaced by a breathtaking array of metaphors for the omnipresent light-sweetness-love in which Being consists. As Gilson remarks (161), what all these phrases have in common is that they eliminate “the proper name of the thing that has ceased to be a thing,” and thus avoid all the physical or limiting connotations of the word *empireo*. It is precisely when the all-permeating, all-encompassing beginning and end of all things becomes Dante’s central focus that he no longer calls it *empireo*.

Thus in the *Comedy* the Empyrean is explicitly immaterial. When Dante leaves the *Primo Mobile*, Beatrice explains:
del maggior corpo
Noi siamo usciti fore:
del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce:
luce intellettual, piena d'amore;
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
letizia che trascende ogne dolzore.\(^{22}\)

\((Pd\ 30.38-42)\)

(p.24)

The *Primo Mobile* is the “greatest body,” the Empyrean is pure intellectual light, awareness-love-bliss-sweetness. The same dichotomy is stressed elsewhere: the *Primo Mobile* is *lo real manto di tutti i volumi / del mondo, che più ferve e più s'avviva / ne l'alito di Dio e nei costumi* (“the royal cloak of all the world's revolving spheres, the heaven most alive and burning in the breath of God and in His ways” \([Pd\ 23.112-114]\)); it is the *miro e angelico templo / che solo amore e luce ha per confine* (“the wondrous and angelic temple bounded only by love and light” \([Pd\ 28.53-54]\)). The Empyrean is the “breath of God,” love, light. In fact, as Mellone points out (\*Dottrina* 32), Dante refers to the heavens as the “sensible world” or “body” (\*mondo sensibile, corpo*) only when he means the nine spheres without the Empyrean.

Although in the *Comedy* (and the *Letter to Cangrande*, if it is his) Dante still occasionally speaks of the Empyrean as an encompassing sphere with “parts,” he is more careful to correct misimpressions.\(^{23}\) Thus Saint Benedict tells the pilgrim,

su l'ultima spera il tuo alto disio
s'adempierà in su l'ultima spera,
ove s'adempion tutti li altri e 'l mio.

Ivi è perfetta, matura e intera
ciascuna disïanza; in quella sola
è ogne parte là ove sempr' era,
perché non è in loco e non s'impola.24

(Pd 22.61–67)

If we wish to conceive the reality in which all desire ends as the “last sphere,” it is a sphere that “is not in place and has no poles.” If we wish to picture it (for example, as a gigantic rose full of seats, children and sages), we must be aware that all that is appearance (parvenza), and the reality is light, however understood:

Lume è là sù che visibile face
lo creatore a quella creatura
che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.
E’ si distende in circular figura,
in tanto che la sua circunferenza
sarebbe al sol troppo larga cintura.
Fassi di raggio tutta sua parvenza
reflesso al sommo del mobile primo,
che prende quindi vivere e potenza.25

(Pd 30.100–108)

The light through which the creator becomes manifest to the creature can be none other than the lumen gloriae, the essence of beatific vision. The lumen gloriae is pure intellectual light, supernaturally infused into the created intellect, making that intellect deiform, conformed to the essence of God, Intellect itself. This intellectual light is won through love and desire; the beatific vision that results is marked by the three attributes of understanding, love, and bliss, which, as Giovanni Fallani and Simon Gilson point out, is precisely how Beatrice describes the Empyrean when she and Dante enter it: luce intellettūal, amor di vero ben, letizia. Dante is explicitly identifying the beatific vision with
the Empyrean itself, a move that may make Dante unique among the theologians of his time.\textsuperscript{26}

It is consistent with the \textit{Comedy}'s understanding of the Empyrean that it, unlike the mobile heavens, is uncreated. In fact Dante does not list it among the first created things, which he identifies as the angels (\textit{puro atto}), matter (\textit{pura potenza}), and the material heavens between the two (\textit{Pd} 29.22–36); nor does he ever say that it was created later. This too distinguishes Dante's understanding sharply from contemporary doctrines, which asserted, on the authority of the \textit{Glossa ordinaria}, Bede, and Peter Lombard, that the Empyrean was created together with the angels and matter.\textsuperscript{27}

One serious attempt has been made to demonstrate that Dante's Empyrean is corporeal. In a ninety-page essay, Bortolo Martinelli marshalls an overwhelming battery of references to argue, in effect, that since thirteenth- and fourteenth-century thought unanimously considers the Empyrean material and created, Dante must too (112, 142). The argument is unconvincing and requires elaborate and forced interpretations of Dante's text. Perhaps the easiest rebuttal is to note that in the inverse image of creation that appears in \textit{Paradiso} 28, the burning point, “from which heaven and all nature depend,” as Beatrice explains (\textit{Da quel punto/depende il cielo e tutta la natura} [41–42]), projects around itself nine (not ten) rings of fire, which correspond to the nine moving spheres alone, the first of which is clearly the \textit{Primo Mobile} (43–45, 70–72). Beatrice has identified the \textit{punto} by translating Aristotle's phrase for the Unmoved Mover: \textit{ex tali igitur principio dependet caelum et naturahoc enim est Deus}, in the Latin version of Dante's time. Aristotle also explains that the Unmoved Mover is indivisible and has no parts or size, and in fact Dante states in the \textit{Convivio} (2.13.27) that a point is unmeasurable and indivisible. The inference is clear: the dimensionless point, corresponding to the Empyrean and identified with the ultimate ontological principle, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover—which, Aristotle explicitly demonstrates, can have no size—is self-subsistent, uncreated, and immaterial, occupies no place, and is divinity itself, the source of the creation it projects. Martinelli's essay is precious, however, for
its scholarship, and as the best demonstration of the audacity of Dante's departure from his contemporaries.28

The Divine Mind

_In the Comedy Dante identifies the Empyrean with the divine mind; the splendor of that mind is the luminosity of the “tenth heaven.”_

Dante could not be more explicit. Beatrice says of the _Primo Mobile:_

La natura del mondo, che quïeta
il mezzo e tutto l’altro intorno move,
quinci comincia come da sua meta;
e questo cielo non ha altro dove
che la mente divina, in che s'accende
l'amor che 'l volge e la virtù ch'ei piove.
Luce e amor d'un cerchio lui comprende,
si come questo li altri; e quel precinto
colui che 'l cinge solamente intende.29

_(Pd 27.106–114)_

The _Primo Mobile_ has no “where” except the divine mind, which of course is itself nowhere: the Empyrean is pure Intellect. As Gilson remarks, “It is absolutely certain that Dante is here speaking of the Crystalline heaven [the _Primo Mobile_] as encompassed by divine thought, the only place that one could attribute to it, even though that thought itself has no place.”30

Mellone, up to his time alone (as he himself noted) among the interpreters of the passage, but later followed by others, argued that Dante was to be understood as saying: “the _Primo Mobile_ has no other place in which are kindled the love that turns it and the virtue it rains down, except the divine mind.”
Then the following lines would be saying that as the *Primo Mobile* is encompassed by the Empyrean, so the Empyrean is encompassed by God (*colui che 'l cinge*).\(^{31}\) Apart from the unnatural reading of lines 109–111 (a reading that moreover reduces them to a banality) and the conflict with *Paradiso* 28.16–78 outlined earlier, Mellone forgot his own demonstration (29) that the Empyrean is not a sphere: it does not exist in space-time. Indeed it does not exist at all, if to “exist” is to have any kind of determinate being. To “circumscribe the Empyrean” is simply to circumscribe the boundary of the *Primo Mobile*, a limit defined by love and light. Dante is saying that only the intelligence that can encompass the “outer boundary” (*precinto*) of the sensible world, that is, only the intelligence that can find all of reality within itself (*colui che 'l cinge*), can understand *that* or *how* the world is encompassed in, created by, Intellect (the divine mind). (It is to encompass the encompassing itself, so to speak.)\(^{32}\) Such an intelligence can only be God or one assimilated to God (deiform): in other words, one that has reached the Empyrean, and thus passed beyond the “boundary” of the sensible world to the changeless reality (love-intellect-being) in which it consists. The *precinto* is the dividing line between the natural world, as known to the mind and senses, and its metaphysical (spiritual) foundation. Dante, by his own account in the *Comedy*, is one who has passed that boundary. That makes him, in his own estimation, one whose words reach beyond the “dividing line” to reveal the light-love-bliss in which all spatiotemporal experience ultimately consists.

In fact Dante consistently calls the Empyrean the “residence” of God, as well as of the blessed. We saw that the *Convivio* refers to the Empyrean as “the dwelling-place of that most high Godhead who alone fully sees Himself.” In the *Comedy*, God, “that infinite and ineffable good that is there above” (*quello infinito e ineffabil bene / che là sù è*)\(^{[Pg 15.67–68]}\), dwells “in the heavens, but not circumscribed” (*ne’ cieli, non circunscritto* [Pg 11.1–2]): “there is his city and high throne: oh happy those whom he elects to be there!” (*quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio: / oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!*
[If 1.128]). Denoting God as the Trinity, Dante “locates” Him in the same way:

Quell’uno e due e tre che sempre vive

e regna sempre in tre e ’n due e ’n uno,

non circunscritto, e tutto circunscreве.33

(Pd 14.28–30)

Mellone, followed by others, argued, however, that Dante places yet another heaven, identified with God Himself, beyond the Empyrean. This extra heaven would be the *coelum Trinitatis*, a heaven occasionally added to the seven spheres of pre-Scholastic cosmologies. Among Scholastic philosophers, the *coelum Trinitatis* became a metaphor for the all-encompassing Trinity; precisely for this reason it was often interchanged with the Empyrean. Indeed, if the *coelum Trinitatis* was distinguished from the Empyrean in Scholastic thought, it was only because the Empyrean was conceived as created and material, and hence among the created things contained within the all-containing deity. It seems evident that Dante has fused Empyrean and *coelum Trinitatis* in his uncreated and transcendent tenth heaven, which he identifies with the radiance of *la mente divina*. Indeed the blessed, and the pilgrim himself, contemplate Christ and the Trinity from their “places” within the Empyrean, and it is within the Empyrean that the mystery of the Trinity is revealed to Dante.34

Dante has called the supranatural realm of the Empyrean “pure light, intellectual light,” the light through which the creator becomes visible to the creature. To paraphrase *Paradiso* 13.52–63, God is the *lucente* (effulgent light), the Word is *viva luce* (living light), both are one with *Amor* (Love). Creation is the *splendore* (reflection) of that Intellect-Light, a “raying” (*raggiare*) into determinate identities while remaining always one (*eternalmente rimanendosi una*). Elsewhere Dante says, “The divine goodness, which spurns all envy from itself, burning in itself, so scintillates that it displays the eternal beauties” (*La divina bontà, che da sé sperne / ogne livore,*)
ardendo in sé, sfavilla / sì che dispiega le bellezze etterne [Pd 7.64–66]). We have seen that nothing was more natural to Christian thinkers than to speak of God as light, and that in the Augustinian tradition this manner of speaking was not considered strictly metaphorical, on Augustine's own authority.\textsuperscript{35} Nardi's insistence, beginning in 1912, that Dante should be understood against the background of the "metaphysics of light" has been generally accepted, contested in the past only by a few Thomistic interpreters. The point of contention was not so much the identification of the Empyrean with God as pure intellectual light, as the supposed consequence that this would commit Dante to a doctrine of Neoplatonic emanation, as opposed to Thomistic creation. The real question then is, In what sense is the luminous Empyrean the cause or source of spatiotemporal reality? This question will be considered next; for now we can say that in the face of the multitude of explicit assertions in the \textit{Comedy}, it is an uphill battle to argue that Dante considers light simply a metaphor for spiritual reality.\textsuperscript{36} Nor is it easy in the context of medieval philosophy to give a precise meaning to "light taken in a strict sense," as opposed to common usage: all philosophical language is to varying degrees metaphorical, or "analogical." We can only conclude that in some sense spatiotemporal reality consists in (is "contained within") a self-subsistent light, "the lofty light which in itself is true" (L'alta luce che da sé è vera) [Pd 33.54, and see 124]), however understood. That light (etterno lume, somma luce, vivo raggio, luce etterna, vivo lume, alto lume, fulgore, to cite only from \textit{Paradiso} 33.43–141) is identified with the supranatural conscious reality that "encompasses," sustains, and pervades creation.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Ground of Being}

\textit{The Empyrean is the “cause” of the phenomenal world only in the sense that it is its “foundation,” the ground of its being.}

As the changeless substratum of sensible reality, Dante's Empyrean does not operate on the cosmos. The “tenth heaven” is the reality in which the universe consists (participates). As the ground of being of the sensible world, however—its source and end—the Empyrean may be
conceived as the ultimate “cause” or basis of creation. It is in this sense that God is spoken of as First Cause throughout both the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian traditions.

We must guard against attributing our post-empiricist notion of causality to medieval philosophers. Neither Neoplatonists nor Peripatetics thought of the First Cause as the starting point of a temporal sequence of causes and effects; rather, they considered it the supreme principle in an ontological order of dependence. It is a vertical hierarchy: a relation of subsuming under more fundamental principles. Causality for the medieval world is less a temporal association between events than an ontological relation between things: an effect depends on its cause to the extent that it owes its existence to it. In other words, once a thing exists, it no longer “depends” in any sense on the preceding cause in a temporal series, but owes its continuing existence “here and now” to a cause above it in the hierarchy of being. Aquinas, for example, thought that a temporal series of causes and effects could stretch back to infinity, while the ontological series necessarily had to end in Being itself, God.38

The verticality of causality as a hierarchy of being is typically associated with Neoplatonism. A particularly vivid example is the Book of Causes (Liber de causis), a short treatise of great influence and authority (frequently cited by Dante) that circulated under the name of Aristotle in the Islamic and Christian world, was required reading at the Faculty of Arts in Paris in the thirteenth century, and was eventually correctly identified by Aquinas as a synthesis of Proclus's Elements of Theology. But the verticality of causality is also one of the most Platonic features of Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle's aition, normally translated as “cause” in English, but perhaps better rendered as “explanatory principle” or “ground,” answers the question, “What is responsible for the fact that such and such a state of things now exists?” What Aristotle means by “cause” cannot be reduced to an event that uniformly precedes another; when Aristotle says that we know a thing through its causes, he means (Platonically) that we understand it through its relation to more fundamental principles, the “first things” or aitia.39
The point may be rephrased by saying that cause and effect in a temporal sense are terms that apply only within creation. It is clear that between what exists out of time and without attributes, and what exists in time, there can be no causality in the sense of relations between events, or even between things. More generally, we shall see that the “secondary causes” that make a finite thing a this-or-that at any moment in time, as opposed to giving it being, cannot be attributed to Dante's Empyrean. The Empyrean does not determine identity; it is the reality within which the determination of identity occurs. God does nothing; God is.

These facts are obscured by any attempt to speak of the relation between God and creation, which always amounts to forming a mental picture. The picture offered to Dante was that of Aristotelian and medieval cosmology, in which God contains (and penetrates) a universe of rotating concentric spheres. The outermost of these, the Primo Mobile, is spun by its love for that Unmoved Mover, thus imparting motion to the eighth sphere and that sphere to the next. The formative influence (virtù) of all these rotating spheres generates the kaleidoscope at the center that is the sublunar realm of ephemeral sensory experience, of “brief contingencies” or brevi contingenze (Pd 13.63). By being the ultimate object of love, God “sets in motion” the entire chain of natural causality, or generation and corruption, which begins with the Primo Mobile.

The Convivio’s gloss on this picture, from the passage discussed earlier (2.3.8–12), is perhaps a little crude. After observing that “Catholics hold that beyond all these [moving heavens] lies the Empyrean Heaven and they hold that this is motionless because it possesses in its every part the perfection required by its matter,” Dante explains that the Primo Mobile spins “with the utmost speed, because in every part of that ninth heaven bordering the Empyrean there burns an ardent longing to be united to every part of that most divine heaven which is at rest.” The Empyrean is immobile insofar as none of its “parts” would have any reason to occupy the position of any other of its parts, because they are all perfect and interchangeable. This is to say in effect that it has no parts
and is thus uniform and indivisible. Nardi traces this argument to Michael Scot, who derived it from the opening proposition of Aristotle's *Physics* 6.4: “everything that changes must be divisible.” The argument does not differ appreciably from saying, as Michael Scot also does, that a being does not move (change) insofar as it is perfect, that is, has no potential that remains unactualized.40

Then how is the “fastest heaven” (*ciel velocissimo*) different from the “immobile heaven” (*cielo immobile*)? To say that “each part” of the *Primo Mobile* wishes to join “each part” of the Empyrean is to say that, while the *Primo Mobile* is fully actualized in “substance” or in its totality, it is in potential as far as location. In other words, each of its parts is not, but could be, in the position occupied by each of its other parts. Since it cannot occupy each position with each part simultaneously, but only one at a time, it must move, which is in effect a desire on the part of the *Primo Mobile* to be assimilated to, one with, the First Cause. Nardi traces this argument to the great eleventh-century Islamic philosophers Avicenna (Ibn Sinā) and Algazel (al-Ghazālī), who of course put no Empyrean beyond the ninth sphere, only the Unmoved Mover. The Unmoved Mover is *totum simul*, everything all at once: the *Primo Mobile* mimics the Unmoved Mover in space-time by all-encompassing and “incomprehensible” speed. As Nardi points out, in adopting this argument through Michael Scot, Dante has in effect substituted the Empyrean for the Unmoved Mover. Again the implication, not yet in focus in the *Convivio*, is that the *Primo Mobile* exists in space-time (although without any other limiting attributes), and the Empyrean does not.

Spatiotemporal being can “assimilate itself” to what it consists in, the act-of-being itself, only by featurelessness, all-inclusiveness, and the omnipresence of infinite speed. In this sense, the *Primo Mobile* is moved from “within”: there is nothing “without,” beyond itself.41

In chapters 24–26 of the *Letter to Cangrande*, the same metaphysical picture is glossed in terms of light, in order to explain Dante’s assertion that he was in “the heaven that most receives of His [God’s] light” (*Pd* 1.4–5). The explanation rests
on identifying the divine light with perfection (the actualization of all potentiality) and with the principle of ontological causality, the ultimate source of all finite being. There are two arguments. The first is that what contains something else as its natural place is also its formative cause, the source of its finite being: “containing” serves as a cosmological analog or metaphor for ontological causality. As the ultimate natural place, “which contains all bodies and is contained by none” (continens corpora universa et a nullo contentum [67]), the Empyrean is the ultimate ground of the being of the universe. Since ontological causality is nothing but divine light, in virtue of which all things are, the Empyrean is the most luminous heaven. As Mazzeo observes, this argument constitutes a fusion of Neoplatonic light theory with Aristotelian natural place; Martinelli traces the Neoplatonism to the De intelligentiis and the Liber de causis. The second argument resembles the Convivio’s argument for the Empyrean’s immobility. The Empyrean alone does not move, because it always has perfectly in every part everything it could have: its “parts” do not suffer the limitation of being in one place instead of another (which is to say in effect that it does not suffer the privation of spatiotemporal extension). Since perfection is divine light, and the Empyrean is fully perfect, it is more luminous than all the other heavens. The two arguments together may be summed up in one sentence: the Empyrean is the light (however understood) in which reality ultimately consists.42

The sharp distinction traced here, between the totality of the natural order on the one hand and the metaphysical basis of its existence on the other, is a feature of Aristotle’s philosophy, which, transformed by Christianity and Neoplatonism, persists as a central trait of Thomistic, indeed of Christian, thought. Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover stands “outside” an eternally existing world that it perhaps did not create, and that it moves and sustains simply by existing, by being its good. The identification of God with pure existence, already penetratingly developed in an Islamic context by Avicenna and the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, culminates in Aquinas, who, as the great Étienne Gilson never tired of reminding the world, conceived being not as “that
crust of essences which is but the outer coating of reality,” but rather as “the primitive existential act which causes [a thing] both to be and to be precisely that which it is.” In short, for Aquinas, “existence is an act, not a thing.” The distinction between creator and creation thus becomes the distinction between “to be” and “to-be-this-or-that.” The essence of a creature is to-be-a-certain-thing. God's essence is simply to be: this is why essence and existence are identical only in God. It is the distinction between what lies “beyond” the all-encompassing boundary of the Primo Mobile and everything that it “contains.”\footnote{43}

The point is that nothing lies “outside” the precinto of creation, except, if you will, an uninflected active verb, “to be.” So in what sense do all “saved” beings in the Comedy “reside” in the Empyrean? What does it mean, metaphysically speaking, for the pilgrim to cross the boundary of the Primo Mobile? In terms of Aquinian metaphysics, perhaps we could say a rational being is “in the Empyrean” if, when it says “I am,” “am” is an active verb. Summed up in one sentence, Dante's journey of salvation would be to move from I am to I am. I am not (primarily) a thing, but (one with) the act of existing itself, however qualified. The act of existence of course cannot be described in itself, because it is all there is. In this flash of insight, all “I”s are one: each is everything and nothing. This was the revelation experienced by Moses on Mount Sinai, which prompted him to tell the Israelites: “I AM sent me to you.”\footnote{44}

Here we can see to what point the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian pictures of reality become indistinguishable in Aquinas, and in later medieval thought in general, in that great period of “Neoplatonizing Aristotelianism” that had, we should remember, absorbed as Aristotelian both the Proclean Liber de causis and (through Avicenna and others) the so-called Theology of Aristotle, an epitome of the Enneads of Plotinus himself. Aquinas's sharp distinction between essence and existence, between non-self-subsistent being-this-or-that and the timeless, dimensionless act of being itself, is heir to both the Aristotelian and the Judaeo-Christian conceptions of God as an untouchable and attributeless transcendence over
empirical reality. It is also, Platonically and Neoplatonically, the principle that “spiritualizes” material reality and establishes continuity between God and creation. In Aquinian terms, finite things share in the act of existence. This sharing in being is one way of conceiving ontological causality, whereby divine reality (light) permeates all things. As the Letter to Cangrande explains, citing Aristotle’s Metaphysics and the Liber de causis together, in the whole hierarchy of being, “mediately or immediately, everything that has being, derives being from [God],” and this first cause, Light or Intellect itself, is more the cause of each thing than any secondary cause (54–61). It is through this sharing or causality that God is One and yet (omnipresent in the) Many, or “all-pervading,” a truth for which the Letter cites many biblical authorities, as well as Lucan (62–63).45

To put it another way: God is no more a carpenter within the Aristotelian tradition than He is in the Neoplatonic tradition. To cite Aquinas citing Augustine, the universe is not a house God built and left standing. The act by which God “first gave being” cannot be essentially distinguished from the act by which God sustains being, nor is that act an event in space-time. The universe is something the divine act-of-existence is doing or making or lending itself to, moment to moment: should it cease to do so at any instant, there would be instantaneous nothingness. The divine is in every place because it gives being intimately, “from the inside,” so to speak, to whatever exists in place, as the being of its being. In Augustine’s words: “my God, I would have no being, I would not have any existence, unless you were in me. Or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you `of whom are all things, through whom are all things, in whom are all things.’”

A sentence from the Book of Causes (1.7) could serve as a gloss on Augustine: “A thing must be `being' first of all, then `living,' and after `man.'” Or as Patrick Boyde elegantly (and Neoplatonically) summarizes the point: “if the source of light were ever to be switched off, the sphere of radiance that is the universe would immediately cease to exist.” To understand medieval Christian thought is above all to grasp the radical contingency of the sensible world, which is to awaken to the notion of a creature and a Creator.46
These observations may help to clarify the Letter to Cangrande’s famous gloss (23.64) on the opening lines of the Paradiso: “the divine ray or divine glory `penetrates and reflects throughout the universe’: penetrates in regard to essence, reflects in regard to being.” The act of being is “reflected” (resplendet) in the existence of finite beings as their substantiality, which is their luminosity. The determinate identity (attributes) that makes being finite (this-or-that), through or by which a thing is a certain kind or qualification of the act-of-existence, is essence. The divine light “penetrates through” the universe as essence in the sense that all attribute or identity is simply a mode of being, characteristics through which things exist, through which they share more or less in being: essence is nothing without existence. The distinction between essence and existence is thus more philosophical than empirical (existence in itself is no thing, and essence in itself is nonexistent), whether it applies to the self-subsistent divine light (in which they are identical) or to the reflection of that light as creation (in which they are not). Essence is no more a “thing” than existence.47

Given the pilgrim’s claim to have “visited” the realm of transcendent being, it is not surprising that in the Comedy Dante is particularly careful to distinguish the Empyrean from the natural order, which alone is limited by identity, change, and causality. Representing the absence of all motion and desire, the essential traits of creation, the Empyrean is the heaven that the light of Providence “makes ever quiet, within which turns the one in the greatest hurry” (fa ‘l ciel sempre quieto / nel qual si volge quel c’ha maggior fretta [Pd 1.122–123]). The “heaven in a hurry” is of course the Primo Mobile, “the one that sweeps the rest of the world along with it” (costui che tutto quanto rape / l’altro universo seco [Pd 28.70–71]). All formative-generative influence (virtute) in the physical world begins with this motion.48

Dentro dal ciel de la divina pace

si gira un corpo ne la cui virtute

(p.33)

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.49

(Pd 2.112–117)

The “heaven of divine peace” is the Empyrean; the “turning body in whose power lies the being of all that it contains” is the Primo Mobile; the “following heaven, which has so many eyes/visible things,” that is, stars, and “distributes that being into diverse essences, distinguished from, and yet contained within, that being,” is the eighth sphere, the sphere of fixed stars or constellations. The Primo Mobile is thus the nexus between pure being and the differentiation of being into identity (essence). We have seen that finite being (to-be-a-certain-thing) may be thought of as a subcategory of being (to be), the ground represented by the Empyrean. The Primo Mobile “translates” the one into the other: it is not only the sharp dividing line between creator and creation, it is also the nexus between them. The great Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius, to whom we shall return, put it this way: the Preexistent, or Source and End of all things, “is the boundary to all things and is the unbounded infinity about them in a fashion which rises above the contradiction between finite and infinite. He proceeds to everything while yet remaining within himself.” For Dante, the Primo Mobile is what Nardi called the anello di congiunzione, the connecting ring or intermediary linking the temporal to the timeless, the finite to the dimensionless, the determinate to the featureless, the Many to the One. It is the link that for Nardi was lacking in Aristotle, and that was philosophically supplied by the Neoplatonists as the notion of a world-soul that contains, forms, and animates spatiotemporal reality.50

Nardi, however, tended to over-Neoplatonize Dante, sometimes interpreting his metaphysics in a “pagan” mode insufficiently tempered by Thomas or Augustine. The principal distinction is that in “pagan” Neoplatonism the One, or supreme deity, is above being or existence in any sense, and therefore also above the divine mind or supreme intelligence,
while Christian thought, both Augustinian and Aristotelian, tends to identify the divine mind with pure being, the divine itself. Thus in “Dottrina dell'Empireo” Nardi is led to equate Dante's Empyrean with Plotinus's world-soul, and the mente divina with nous, the luminous radiation of the One as awareness or Intellect. In this view the Empyrean, and not the Primo Mobile, would be the link between the sensible world and transcendent reality. It would be more accurate to say, however, that Dante's Empyrean is transcendent reality (the Christian equivalence God-Trinity-Logos), and the “vivifying container” of the world, which would perhaps correspond to the Neoplatonic world-soul (which cannot exist except in a body it animates), is the Primo Mobile, the “translator” of being into spatiotemporal manifestation. The radiant hypostasis of the One as nous is, if anything, what the Empyrean represents: it is the motionless radiance of the mente divina, the luce intellettua beyond the precinto of sensible reality. In the “simple light” (semplice lume) of the Empyrean Dante sees the One that “binds” within itself (p.34) “that which in the universe is scattered, dispersed in leaves” (ciò che per l'universo si squaderna [Pd 33.85–90]). In fact, in other essays Nardi makes no distinction between the Empyrean and the divine mind.51

That the Empyrean does not “act upon” creation is more explicit in Paradiso 27.106–111, where Beatrice says of the Primo Mobile that “the nature of the universe begins from here as from its goal and starting-point” (la natura del mondoquinci comincia come da sua meta). Meta can be glossed as the Aristotelian final cause, here the perfect motion all the other spheres seek to imitate by their nature and desire, and which prompts and regulates their movement. All finite being (natura del mondo) begins from the Primo Mobile and tends toward the Primo Mobile, the limit beyond which there is nothing except existence itself. In this sense, meta also preserves its etymological meaning of “turning-post” (as in a Roman hippodrome), here the ultimate limit of the world of determinate identity. As the source of finite being within being itself, the Primo Mobile is the link on which the pilgrim's journey, and the Comedy's salvific mission, depends: there can
be no “transhumanizing” or “inGoding” (trasumanar, indiare) if God is not “Creator” and the universe is not “creation,” if determinate identity is not a sharing in, not in a profound sense one with, self-subsistent being. The Christian religion calls the bridge or union between finite being and sheer unqualified existence “Christ” or Logos, names that designate the identity/continuity between spatiotemporal reality and conscious self-subsistence.52

The Comedy, we have seen, represents that conscious self-subsistence as the Empyrean, which is divine being, pure intellectual light, the divine mind, love, joy, and sweetness (luce intellettual, la mente divina, amore, letizia, dolzore). In the next two chapters I shall try to give a more precise sense to this string of identifications and to make clearer what it could mean to say that a mortal, finite, corporeal, spatiotemporal creature, such as the pilgrim Dante, could travel beyond the world to become one with the divine, with Intellect-Being itself. For now it is enough to observe that the “boundary” that “limits” creation is the act of being in which creation consists: in Aquinian terms it is to move from the realm of essence to that of existence, which is to move nowhere at all. What divides the natural from the metaphysical is the point where they are seen to coincide: “the love that turns” the Primo Mobile “and the generative power it rains down” (l’amore che volge e la virtù ch’ei piove), arise or ignite (s’accende) in that nothingness, the divine mind (la mente divina), in which all being consists (Pd 27.109–111). The Primo Mobile represents that “ignition”: it draws life and power (vivere e potenza) from the ray (raggio) that constitutes the appearance (parvenza) of the Empyrean (Pd 30.107–108). In this sense the “nothingness” of the Empyrean may be thought of as a “something” that spawns and “moves” creation, and is the final cause, in a supernatural order, of the movement of the Primo Mobile. It is also in this sense that God is spoken of, for example in the opening and closing verses of the Paradiso, as the reality that moves and animates all things.

It should now also be evident why Beatrice picks Dante’s sojourn in the Primo Mobile as the moment to teach him how time (Pd 27.115–120) and space (Pd 28.16–78) “sprout”
from the featureless “pot” of the ninth heaven—lectures that culminate in a full-fledged account of how the cosmos as a whole came into being (Pd 29.1–36). As we shall see in chapter 4, it is only when all this is clear to Dante that he will find himself beyond the precinto of space-time, in the omnipresent conscious nowhere that is the Empyrean. [p.36]

Notes:

(1.) The quoted remark is Taylor's (Aristotle 69); Aristotle, however, was seeking an explanatory cosmological system, while Eudoxus (and later Ptolemy) were aiming only at predictive astronomical computing techniques (see, e.g., Hanson, Constellations and Conjectures 64–66, 145–165). For the circular motion of the aether, see Aristotle, De Caelo 1.2–3, Physics 8.7–8; for the concentric physical spheres, Metaphysics 12.8, De Caelo 2.7–8; for the Platonic elements of Aristotle's cosmology, see especially De Caelo 2.12,1.3.270b.1–10, Metaphysics 12.7. Particularly lucid accounts of Aristotelian cosmology and its background are Toulmin and Goodfield, Fabric of the Heavens 79–114; Dicks, Early Greek Astronomy 194–219; Hanson, Constellations and Conjectures 35–88; Pederson, Early Physics and Astronomy 24–76; and the introduction to Elders, Aristotle's Cosmology. Dicks (216), Elders (27–33), Randall (Aristotle 161), Moraux (“Méthode d’Aristote” 184–185), Solmsen (“Platonic Influences” and Aristotle's System), and Düring (“Aristotle and the Heritage”) are among those who underline the Platonism of Aristotle's cosmology.

(2.) Beyond the convex outer surface: De Caelo 1.9.278b.22–279b.1; quotation: 279a.17–19. The principal texts for the Unmoved Mover or First Being are Metaphysics 12.6–8 and Physics 7.1, 8.4–7,10; for the terminus of the chain of causality, see Metaphysics 2.2, cited in the Letter to Cangrande (20.55). The description of the Prime Mover in this paragraph is culled from Metaphysics 12.7. Parts of the De Caelo (especially books 1 and 2) seem still to allow for Platonic self-moving movers, ruled out in the Physics and Metaphysics, which are presumably later. Hence in the context of the De Caelo (e.g., 2.3.286a.9–11), the eighth sphere, as itself divine,
could be both primum mobile and primum movens; other passages (e.g., 2.6.288a.27-b7) already suggest an Unmoved First Mover. See Elders, Aristotle's Cosmology 29–33, and Dicks, Early Greek Astronomy 211–214. Complex combinations of regular motions: Metaphysics 12.8.1073b.1–1074a.15. For the number of Aristotle's spheres, ranging between forty-seven and sixty-one, and a precise explanation of how the system worked, see Hanson, “On Counting Aristotle's Spheres” and Constellations and Conjectures 66–80; and Dicks, Early Greek Astronomy 200–203.

(3.) Some (e.g., Roger Bacon) who thought the sphere of fixed stars had a third motion (trepidation) posited two mobile spheres beyond the eighth. For Aristotle's “movers,” see Metaphysics 12.8; for their identification with angelic intelligences (rejected by Albert and others), see Weisheipl, “Celestial Movers,” and Bemrose, Dante's Angelic Intelligences 37–55; in Dante, see, e.g., Cv 2.5.14–18; If 7.74; Pd 12.97–98, 28.78. The tension between Aristotelian cosmology and Ptolemaic geometry is traced by Grant, Planets, Stars, and Orbs 275–308; Hanson, Constellations and Conjectures 145–165; and Toulmin and Goodfield, Fabric of the Heavens 128–149, who remark the religious aspect assumed by Aristotelian cosmology (128). For a more detailed discussion of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic basis of Dante's cosmology, see Boyde, Philomythes and Philosopher 132–171; Tonquédec, Questions 7–29, 56–63; Duhem, Système du monde, vol. 3; Grant, Planets, Stars, and Orbs; useful short accounts may be found in Andriani, Forma del paradiso 8–22; Ghisalberti, “Cosmologia nel Duecento,” who stresses the variety of Dante's cosmological sources; Faes de Mottoni, “Universo” 830–831; Hartner, “Astronomy from Antiquity to Copernicus”; and Crombie, Augustine to Galileo 52–62. Dante's certain or possible astronomical sources include Alfraganus, Libro dell'aggregazione; Sacrobosco, De sphera; Restoro [Ristoro] d'Arezzo, Composizione del mondo; Brunetto Latini, Livres dou Tresor 1.103–120; Campanus of Novara, Theorica planetarum; Albertus Magnus, De caelo et mundo; Aquinas, commentary on Aristotle's De caelo et mundo; and al-Bitrūjī
(4.) Veramente, fuori di tutti questi [cieli mobili], li catolici pongono lo cielo Empireo, che è a dire cielo di fiamma o vero luminoso (Cv 2.3.8).


analogy of the sun), 5.5.9; Proclus (source of the play on *topos*
and *tupos*), as referred by Simplicius, *In Aristotelis Physicorum*
4.5. World contained in soul: “Soul is not in the universe, on
the contrary the universe is in the Soul; bodily substance is
not a place to the Soul; soul is contained in Intellectual-
Principle [*nous*] and is the container of body” (Plotinus,
*Enneads* 5.5.9 [MacKenna]). See also *Timaeus* 36d: “Now
when the creator had framed the soul according to his will, he
formed within her the corporeal universe.” One is reminded
also of Dante’s blessed souls, whose features are hidden
within their own luminosity.

(7.) Basil, *Exegetic Homilies* [*Hexaemeron*] 1.5; Martianus
Capella, *Marriage of Philology* 2.200–203; Isidore of Seville,
*De natura rerum* 12; Bede, *De natura rerum* 7, *Commentarium
in Pentateuch* 2. For the early history of the Empyrean and its
patristic sources, see Maurach, *Coelum Empyreum*. Glossa
ordinaria quotation: *Caelum, non visibile firmamentum, sed
empyreum, idest igneum, vel intellectuale, quod non ab ardore
sed a splendore dicitur, quod statim repletum est angelis*. The
gloss is probably by Anselm of Laon. According to Genesis,
God created *caelum* (1.1), then *firmamentum* to divide the
waters above the firmament from those below it (1.6–7).
*Caelum* was identified with the Empyrean; *firmamentum*
usually with the eighth sphere of fixed stars; the
suprafirmamental waters, in “crystalline” form, were identified
with the ninth and/or sometimes with a tenth (or eleventh)
moving sphere. In the latter case the Empyrean became the
eleventh (or twelfth) sphere; see, e.g., Campanus of Novara,

(8.) Ibn ʽArabī: *al-Futūḥāt*. For Islamic conceptions of Paradise
and their relation to Dante’s Empyrean, see, e.g., Asín
Palacios, *Dante e l’Islam* 209–259, *Abenmasarra y su escuela
212ff.*, and Corti, “`Commedia' di Dante e l’oltretomba
islamico”; for parallels between the *Comedy* and Jewish
mysticism, see Stow, *Dante e la mistica ebraica*. Strohmaier
(*Von Demokrit bis Dante*) studies parallels with the *Comedy* in
both Islamic and Jewish mysticism, qualifying the former;
Baffioni (“Aspetti delle cosmologie”) provides a recent and
balanced overview of the question; Cantarino, “Dante and Islam,” presents an extensive earlier survey. Other references: Michael Scot, Commentary 283 (see Nardi, “Dante e Alpetragio” 153–156, and Vasoli’s commentary to Cv 2.3.5); Pseudo-Grosseteste, Summa philosophiae 15.3, 16.4; Albertus Magnus, Summa theologiae 1.t18.q73.m2.a1, Scripta in Sententiarum 2.2.3–5; Aquinas, Scriptum super Sententiarum 2.d2.p2.a1.q2, ST 1a.66.3, 1a.61.4. Nardi traces the Neoplatonic lineage in “Dottrina dell’Empireo” 187–204.

(9.) Bonaventure quotation: Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d2.p2.a1.q1; Albert [Hugh of Strassburg] quotation: caelum est corpus purum, natura simplicissimum, essentia subtilissimum, incorruptibilitate solidissimum, quantitate maximum, materia purissimum (Compendium theologicae 2.4).

The decree of 1244 states: firmiter credimus, quod idem locus corporalis, scilicet celum empyreum, angelorum et animarum sanctarum erit et corporum glorificatorum (Denifle, Chartularium 128 [1:171]); the error condemned is that glorified souls should end up in the crystalline heaven instead of in the Empyrean with the angels. On the corporality of the Empyrean: Alexander of Hales, Summa theologica 2.47.2; Richard of Middleton, Super Sententiarum 2.d2.a3.q1; Bonaventure, Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d2.p2.a1.q1–2; and Aquinas, ST 1a.66.3. Aquinas on the Empyrean made of quintessence: Scriptum super Sententiarum 2.d14.q1.a2; Questiones Quodlibetales 6.11.19.

(10.) Bede: Hexaemeron 1; Glossa ordinaria: Liber genesis 1.1; Peter Lombard: Sententiae 2.2.4–5; and Aquinas: ST 1a.66.4 (Communiter dicitur, quatuor esse primo creata; scilicet naturam angelicam, caelum empyreum, materiam corporalem informem et tempus). Pseudo-Grosseteste, Summa philosophiae 9.4, 15.2–3, 16.4; Richard of Middleton, Super Sententiarum 2.d2.a3.q3; Albertus Magnus, Scripta in Sententiarum 2.2.4–5; and Bonaventure, Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d2.p2.a1.q1–2. Aquinas: against influence, Scriptum super Sententiarum 2.d2.q2.a2–3; probable influence, ST 1a.q66.a3.ad2 (c. 1268); final position,
Questiones Quodlibetales 6.11.19 (c. 1272). On this retraction (extremely rare in Aquinas), see Litt, Corps célestes 255–261. For an overview of the question of the Empyrean's influence, see Grant, Planets, Stars, and Orbs 378–382.

(11.) That to be in the Empyrean was itself to see God was definitively fixed in 1336 by the constitution Benedictus Deus of Benedict XII; see Bernard, “Ciel” 2510. Bonaventure: Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d2.p2.a1.q2, 2.d13.p2.a2; Brevisoliquium 2.3.4; see also Nardi, “Dottrina dell’Empireo” 202; Mellone, “Empireo” 670–671. For the “metaphysics of light,” see Hedwig, Sphaera Lucis; Baemeker, Witelo, esp. 357–459; Mazzeto, Medieval Cultural Tradition 56–90; McEvoy, “Metaphysics of Light”; Lindberg, “The Genesis”; and McKeon, Study of the Summa philosophiae 156–174.

(12.) The Liber de intelligentiis is printed in Baeumker, Witelo 1–71; Grosseteste's De luce is also available in English (On Light). On Grosseteste's philosophy of light, see Speer, “Physics or Metaphysics?“; Crombie, Robert Grosseteste, esp. 104–116, 128–134; Lindberg, Theories of Vision 94–102; and McEvoy, “Ein Paradigma.” Bonaventure on light as common form: Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d13, and 2.d12.a2.q1 (Lux est natura communis, reperta in omnibus corporibus, tam caelestibus quam terrestribus); light manifest in things: 2.d13.a2.q2, and 2.d13.a1.q1 (Proprissime [“in a strict sense”] Deus lux est, et quae ad ipsum magis accedunt, plus habent de natura lucis); Empyrean as light: Brevisoliquium 2.3.5, Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d13.a2.q2, 2.d2.p2.a1.q1 (Lux est forma totius orbis primi).

(13.) Aquinas on light not a substance: ST 1a.67.1–2, Scriptum super Sententiarum 2.q13.a1.ad3; light as metaphor, quality of Empyrean: Quodlibetales 6.12.19, Scriptum super Sententiarum 2.q13.a1.ad2, ST 1a.67.3. Bonaventure on light as form: Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d12.a2.q1, 2.d13; on ambiguity, e.g., 2.d13.a1.q1 (of the Augustinian proposition that God is light in a strict sense, he says, Dicendum quod verum est quantum ad proprietatem vocabuli, non est tamen verum quantum ad usum communem). The orthodoxy of
Christian “light metaphysicians” and Aquinas’s debt to them is noted by McEvoy, “Metaphysics of Light” 140-141.

(14.) Quotation: Mellone, Dottrina 23. For this evolution, see Nardi, “Dottrinadell'Empireo” 204–211 (which stresses the continuities); Mellone, “Empireo” 669–670, Dottrina 22–57; Étienne Gilson, “Recherche de l'Empyrée”; and Foster, “Tommaso d'Aquino” 641; on the Empyrean in the Convivio, see also Nardi, “Note al Convivio” 65–75. Martinelli (”Dottrina dell'Empireo”) alone denies an evolution.

(15.) “This is the crowning edifice of the world, in which the entire world is contained, and outside of which nothing exists; and it does not exist in place but was formed only in the first Mind, which the Greeks call Protonoe.”

(16.) Cv 2.3.10, 12. “Restfulness and peace are the marks of this dwelling-place of that most high Godhead who alone fully sees Himself. According to the teaching of Holy Church, which cannot lie, this is the dwelling-place of blessed spirits; and it will be clear to anyone who properly grasps his meaning that Aristotle implies the same view in the first part of On the Heavens and the Earth. This is the splendor to which the Psalmist referred where he says to God: 'Your splendor rises up above the heavens!' ” [Ryan].

(17.) Étienne Gilson: “Recherche de l'Empyrée” 150 (Comment Dieu et des esprits incorporels peuvent-ils se trouver quelque part?); Gilson also notes (151) that Aristotle had not placed a heaven beyond the Primum Mobile (Aristote n'avait rien fait de tel). For the problem of “locating” Aristotle's immaterial mover, see Lang, “Aristotle's Immaterial Mover.”

(18.) On the Heavens [De Caelo] 1.9.279a.15–22. Étienne Gilson instead cites 1.9.279a.11; Nardi (“Dottrina dell'Empireo” 205) cites instead 1.3.270b.1–10 and 1.2.269b.16; the latter passage, which is really about the ether, is quoted in the Letter to Cangrande (27.75).

(19.) Cv 2.3.8–9. “However, Catholics hold that beyond all these [moving heavens] there lies the Empyrean Heaven, meaning the heaven of flame or of light. They hold that this is
motionless because it possesses in its every part the perfection required by its matter. It is this quality that causes the First Moving Heaven to move with the utmost speed, for since in every part of that ninth heaven bordering the Empyrean there burns an ardent longing to be united to every part of that most divine heaven which is at rest, it revolves inside that heaven with a desire so intense that its speed is almost beyond comprehension” [Ryan].

(20.) Aristotle: *Metaphysics* 11.9, 12.7, *Physics* 8.6–10; see also *De Caelo* 1.3–8. Lloyd (*Aristotle* 137-144) gives a particularly insightful account of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. Compare the *Letter to Cangrande* (25.71): *Omne quod movetur, movetur propter aliquid quod non habet, quod est terminus sui motus* (“Everything that moves moves for something it does not have, which is the goal of its motion.”) For references to the *ens primum quietum et sempiternum* (a phrase echoed in the *Letter*’s description of the Empyrean [24.67]), see Martinelli, “*Dottrina dell’Empireo*” 74-82.

(21.) “Recherche de l’Empyrée” 149; previous quotation, 155. Ghisalberti (“Cosmologia” 40) points out that Albert and Aquinas do not mention the Empyrean in their commentaries on Aristotle’s *Physics* and *De caelo* but accept it in their theological treatises. For all of Paradise as “no place,” see Brandeis, *Ladder of Vision* esp. 157.

(22.) “We have issued forth from the greatest body to the heaven that is pure light: light of the intellect, full of love, love of the true good, full of joy, joy that transcends every sweetness.”

(23.) Spatiotemporal allusions to the Empyrean in the *Comedy* include If 2.84 (*ampio loco*); *Pg* 26.63 (*l’cielch’è pien d’amore e più ampio si spazia*); and of course all of the visual spectacles of *Pd* 30–33.

(24.) “Your high desire shall be fulfilled up in the last sphere, where are fulfilled all others, and my own. There every desire is perfect, mature, and whole; in that[sphere] alone is every part where it always was, for it is not in a place, and it does not im-pole itself.”
(25.) “There is a Light above that makes the Creator visible to every creature that has its peace only in seeing Him. That light spreads in a circular form, so much that its circumference would be too wide a girdle for the sun. Its whole expanse is made by a ray reflected from the summit of the First Moved Sphere, which from it draws life and power.”

(26.) See Nardi, “Dottrina dell'Empireo” 208; Mellone, Dottrina 39-41; Foster, “Tommaso d’Aquino” 641; and Stornon, “Problems of the Empyrean.” For the lumen gloriae, see, e.g., Aquinas ST 1a.12.5–6, SCG 3.53; in Dante, see Simon Gilson, Medieval Optics 233–239, and Fallani, “Visio beatifica” 1071.


(28.) Martinelli, “Dottrina dell'Empireo”; see also Simon Gilson, Medieval Optics 234–235. Before Nardi's and Mellone's clarifications, Busnelli assumed, but did not argue, that Dante's Empyrean was Thomistic, that is, both corporeal and spiritual (see, e.g., Concetto e ordine 1.53). Aristotle's phrase for the Unmoved Mover: Metaphysics 12.7.1072b14; no size or parts: Physics 8.10.266a10–267b26. Difficulties with Martinelli's interpretations include: he reads contenta in the Letter to Cangrande (24.67) to mean the angels and blessed, instead of the moving spheres (in response see Cecchini's introduction to his edition of the Letter [p. xlviii]); he maintains that angels and the blessed need a physical place (for counterevidence see Mellone, Dottrina 48); he himself demonstrates that the locution in sempiterna quiete permanente used for the Empyrean in the Letter (24.67) refers, in its proper sense, to First Being or divine nature, not a created thing; he maintains, implausibly, that the Empyrean is “intellectual” only in the sense that it is invisible (the Primo Mobile is also invisible); he maintains that Dante implies the creation of the Empyrean in the creation of the angels; as he acknowledges, Pd 29.35–36 excludes the Empyrean as a created heaven; he is reduced to saying that Dante equates the Empyrean with the divine mind formaliter but not...
essentialiter; he is reduced to saying that both the Empyrean and Primo Mobile are the “greatest body.”

(29.) “The nature of the universe that holds the center still and moves all the rest around it begins here as from its starting point; and this Heaven has no other where than the divine mind, in which are kindled the love that turns it and the formative influence it rains down. Light and love enclose it in a circle, as it does the others, and this enclosing, he alone who girds it understands.”

(30.) Il est absolument certain que Dante parle ici du cristallin comme inclus sous la pensée divine, seul lieu qu’on puisse lui attribuer, bien que’elle même n’ait pas de lieu (“Recherche de l’Empyrée” 160). Russell’s remarks on Dante’s Empyrean in “History of Heaven” (178–180) are quite accurate.

(31.) Dottrina 33–34. Mellone’s reading is followed by the commentators Porena and Chimenz (with variations), and by Bosco-Reggio (at Pd 27.109–111); it is implicitly followed by Martinelli, “Dottrina dell’Empireo” 80–81. That on the contrary Dante essentially identifies the Empyrean with the divine mind and the lumen gloriae is the central point of Nardi’s essay on the Empyrean (see 207–209).

(32.) Intende can have a double sense as “understand” or “will consciously to an end, i.e., create”; see, e.g., Albertus, Scripta in Sententiarum 2.d38.a2.q2; Aquinas, SCG 2.42; Nardi, “Se la prima materia”; and Martinelli, “Dottrina dell’Empireo” 81n61.

(33.) “That One and Two and Three which ever lives and reigns ever in Three and Two and One, uncircumscribed, and circumscribing all.”

(34.) For the coelum Trinitatis, see, e.g., Albertus, Scripta in Sententiarum 2.d2.a7–8; Alexander of Hales, Quaestiones 47.2.1–2; and Vincent of Beauvais, Speculum naturale 3.84–85; as metaphor, see, e.g., Albertus, Summa de creaturis 1.10.2 (Est enim caelum Trinitatis nihil aliud quam excellentia virtutis eius [of God], quae continet et ambit omnia creat a[“The caelum Trinitatis is thus nothing but the eminence of the power of God, which contains and encompasses all created

(35.) For example, Augustine's remark (*Genesi ad litteram* 4.28) that Christ is said to be light in a proper, not figurative sense, a statement often echoed (e.g., Aquinas *ST* 1a.67.1, Bonaventure (*Commentaria in Sententiarum* 2.d13.a1.q1); see also Augustine, *Soliloquies* 1.1.3, *Contra Faustum* 20.7, *De Trinitate* 7.4.

(36.) In addition to passages already cited, see also *Pd* 3.32; *Pd* 14.46–60; *Pd* 29.14–18, 25–30; and the light imagery of *Pd* 30–33, especially *Pd* 33.52–57, 76–90, 100–114, 124–132, 140–141.


(38.) E.g., Aquinas, *ST* 1a.2.3, 1a.46.1–2; *De aeternitate mundi*, *SCG* 2.31–38; see, e.g., Copleston, *Aquinas* 117–119; Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Aquinas* 178–179.


(40.) Michael Scot, *Commentary* 283, and Nardi, “Note al Convivio” 67–74. What seems philosophically naive or imprecise in the *Convivio* (“Note al Convivio” 75) may be a deliberate effort to cut through excessive subtleties and find a new and accessible language for philosophy (see Vasoli's introduction to the *Convivio*, lxvii).

(41.) Avicenna: *Metaphysica* 9.2; Algazel: *Philosophia* 1.4.2; Nardi: “Note al Convivio” 67–74; see also *Cv* 2.3.5: philosophy requires *un primo mobile semplicissimo* (“a Primo Mobile free of all multiplicity”).

(42.) The expression for the Empyrean “containing all bodies and contained by none” is a commonplace in the tradition: see, e.g., Bonaventure, *Commentaria in Sententiarum* 2.d14.p2.a1.q3, 2.d2.p2.a1.q1; Campanus of Novara, *Theorica planetarum* 4.335; Duhem, *Medieval Cosmology* 174–175. Mazzeo: *Medieval Cultural Tradition* 101; Martinelli: “Dottrina dell’Empireo” 117–124, “‘Esse’ ed ‘essentia’” 649–657. I shall not engage the question of the authenticity of the *Letter to Cangrande*, although my own inclination accords with Étienne Gilson's: “to me it seems to express admirably the spirit and, as it were, the essence of the *Divine Comedy*” (*Dante and Philosophy* 278n2). Poets make little attempt to say in prose
what for them can be said only in poetry; if it were otherwise, they would not be poets, or their poetry would not be very good. Hence their peculiar reticence, apparent naïveté, or peripheral concerns (“missing the point”) when they explicate their own texts.

(43.) The principal text for essence and existence in Aquinas is *On Being and Essence* [*De ente et essentia*], esp. 1.4, 4.2–8, 5.2–4. Gilson quotations: *God and Philosophy* 67–72; see also, e.g., *Being and Some Philosophers*, esp. 154–189. Kahn (“Why Existence Does Not Emerge” 323–324) links the new concept of existence in the Islamic world to the notion of creation, which involves radical contingency.

(44.) Ex. 3.14. On the “sublime truth” (*sublimis veritas*) that God's essence is His act of being, see, e.g., Aquinas, *SCG* 1.22, and Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* 84–95.

(45.) I draw the phrase “Neoplatonizing Aristotelianism” from Bazán’s foreword to the *Book of Causes* (2). The *Letter to Cangrande*’s argument summarizes apothegms 1–18 (Proposition 1) of the *Liber de causis*, quoting the opening apothegm and 9.92.


(47.) *Letter to Cangrande* quotation: *divinus radius sive divina gloria “per universum penetrat et resplendet”: penetrat quantum ad essentiam; resplendet quantum ad esse*. On the “reality” of the essence-existence distinction in Aquinas (not explicit in the *De ente et essentia*), see, e.g., *Scriptum super Sententiarum* 1.d13.q1.a3, *De veritate* 27.1.ad8; also Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes* 107–161 and “Essence and Existence”;
Owens, “Quiddity and Real Distinction” 19–22; Fabro, *La nozione metafisica* 212–244; Sweeney, “Existence/Essence”; and Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*. The Letter's distinction against contemporary background: Martinelli, “’Esse’ ed ’essentia.’” Nardi argued (“Punto sull'Epistola” 222–223) that the Letter's distinction between essence and existence is not true to Dante's “strictly Neoplatonic” derivation of the Many from the One; but Dante was not a strict Neoplatonist, and the Letter does not deny, as he implies it does, that essence is a limitation or determination of being.


(49.) “Within the heaven of divine peace revolves a body in whose causal power lies the being of all that it contains. The following heaven, which has so many eyes [things to show] distributes this being through diverse essences, distinct from it and contained by it.”


(51.) Soul and body: e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.4, 4.3.8–9; Plato, *Timaeus* 34b–37c; and Aristotle, *De anima* 2.2.414a20. No distinction between Empyrean and divine mind: see, e.g., Nardi, “Caduta di Lucifero” 229.

(52.) The *Primo Mobile* as final cause: Mellone, *Dottrina* 32–33; and Nardi, “Dante e Alpetragio” 165. *Meta* as turning-post: see, e.g., Bosco-Reggio's commentary at *Pd* 27.108.
Matter

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that matter, for Dante, can have no ontological ground or source other than Intellect-Being. Dante's world is not made of fundamental building blocks, rather all sensible reality is a contingent (but otherwise absolutely “real”) projection of self-subsistent Being, identified with pure Intellect or Awareness (which is not a thing). In rough terms this means, for example, that ontologically the brain depends upon consciousness, and not vice versa. It also implies that there is a way to travel in the physical world, and even beyond it, that leaves aside the laws of physics and material bodies. It is the route the pilgrim exploits, or rather the route that happens to the pilgrim: to identify more and more perfectly with the dimensionless conscious reality to which all spatiotemporal experience is immediately present, as in an extensionless point. To locate oneself in space and time
is to locate oneself in conscious being, which is, as one who reaches the Primo Mobile discovers, “where” they exist.

Keywords: Aristotle, Dante, Intellect-Being, Primo Mobile, pure Intellect, awareness

We must now dispatch the notion that matter, for Dante and the tradition he inherited, is something “material,” in the senses the word might evoke for a post-Cartesian (and perhaps pre-quantum) reader. The essential point is that we must not attribute to Dante an irreducible Cartesian duality between matter and mind, or think of matter as a self-subsistent explanatory principle: matter, for Dante, can have no ontological ground or source other than Intellect-Being. Dante’s world is not made of fundamental building blocks, atomic or subatomic billiard balls, as it were; rather all sensible reality is a contingent (but otherwise absolutely “real”) projection of self-subsistent Being, identified with pure Intellect or Awareness (which is not a thing). In rough terms this means, for example, that ontologically the brain depends upon consciousness, and not vice versa. It also implies that there is a way to travel in the physical world, and even beyond it, that leaves aside the laws of physics and material bodies. It is the route the pilgrim exploits, or rather the route that happens to the pilgrim: to identify more and more perfectly with the dimensionless conscious reality to which all spatiotemporal experience is immediately present, as in an extensionless point. To locate oneself in space and time is to locate oneself in conscious being, which is, as one who reaches the Primo Mobile discovers, “where” they exist.

Aristotle

We have seen that the Primo Mobile is a curious sphere: it is material, in fact the last material sphere of the universe (the “greatest body” or maggior corpo), but it contains no star or planet, and hence has no perceptible attributes except speed: it is the “fastest heaven” (ciel velocissimo). Thus Dante observes, upon his arrival in it: “Its parts, most living and exalted, are so uniform that I cannot tell which of them Beatrice chose as a place for me” (Le parti sue vivissime ed eccelse / si uniforme son, ch’i’ non so dire / qual Bèatrice per
loco mi scelse [Pd 27.100–102]). In what sense does something have parts if those parts are indistinguishable? Speed implies motion, but the motion of what has no distinguishable attributes cannot be detected: what is moving, and in what sense can it be said to move?

What Dante is underscoring in the Primo Mobile is the concept of motion itself. Motion is ubi, where, plotted against quando, when. Dante has in effect already introduced the two great themes, quando and ubi, time and space, that will occupy this canto and the next, to culminate in Paradiso 29: the Primo Mobile represents the matrix space-time. Local motion is characteristic only of material things, as Dante, citing Aristotle, observes in the Vita Nova, because to exist as a material thing is to be located in space, which is to be located in time, and vice versa: it is again to plot ubi against quando. The point is still deeper: by Aristotelian (and modern) physics, in contrast to the Cartesian-Newtonian picture, space-time is a relative and dependent attribute, which has no existence independent of bodies in motion. The Primo Mobile could thus be said to represent matter itself, analyzed to its fundamental principles: extension in space and time, which is unfulfilled potentiality, which is motion or change.¹

As the nexus between creator and creation, Dante’s Primo Mobile “translates” self-subsistent being into contingent spatiotemporal manifestation. If Dante’s aim is not only to guarantee the transcendence of the divine, but also, as Nardi suggests, “to heal [saldare] the fracture of theological dualism, between the spiritual world and the sensible universe, into a perfect and continuous unity,” it is the Primo Mobile that must do the healing or welding.² Thus the Primo Mobile embodies an apparent metaphysical paradox: it is self-sufficient divine awareness and power projected into pure motion and desire, and material reality become featureless extension (what is extended?) and exalted, living potentiality. As we saw in chapter 1, it is the nexus between the One and the Many, between pure being and finite identity, between existence and essence.
So what is matter, as it “arises” from being in the Primo Mobile? We could say: material things are intelligible identities (forms) determined within the matrix space-time. Since it is form that gives being to matter, matter (and space-time) is nothing in itself: it is the character common to all spatiotemporal (changeable) form. This is the basic conception of matter in the later Middle Ages, and it derives, not surprisingly, from Aristotle.

Form and matter in Aristotle are concepts that have meaning only in relation to each other. This is to say that they do not refer to things; they are terms used in the philosophical analysis of things. Form denotes the identities assumed by what is, through which being is knowable; matter denotes the (apparent) autonomy or self-subsistence, as individual corporeal substances, of changeable spatiotemporal identities (forms). The matter of a thing is the “substratum” determined by the thing’s form: it is the potential of that thing to change, that is, to be (further) determined by identity. If it had to be defined in itself, matter would have no attributes at all: “by matter I mean that which in itself is neither a something nor a quantity nor any of those other things by which being is determined.”

This analysis is intuitive at its simplest level: if a copper bowl is made into a statue, the same matter has had two successive forms. The copper that now has the identity of a bowl can potentially become a statue. Its becoming a statue would be the actualization of that potential. The bowl is in potentiality insofar as it is material, that is, insofar as it consists in copper that could become a statue. The (Platonic) implication is that what has no matter (potential for change) is eternal and unchanging: it is, at least loosely speaking, pure form or actuality. “Hylomorphism,” the technical term for the form-matter analysis of reality, in fact refers to the (changing) forms, morphai, taken by hyle, the “stuff” or matter of the world. (Hyle literally means “wood” or “timber,” corresponding to the Latin silva; thus the selva oscura, the dark wood from which the pilgrim’s journey begins, philosophically evokes the flux of the material world.)
Since the matter of a thing is designated only in relation to the form that determines it, copper itself can be thought of as some underlying matter determined by the form that makes it copper. What is that matter? For Aristotle it would be water, one of the four Empedoclean elements out of which all sublunar things are composed. Since water (or air, or fire, or earth) can be mentally conceived and talked about, it too is a determinate form of being; indeed the transmutation of the elements into each other is a fundamental principle of Aristotle’s physics. What is the potentiality or substratum (matter) that takes on these successive identities? “What is ultimate is in itself neither a thing nor a quantity nor anything else” (Metaphysics 7.3.1029a25). Aristotle calls it prime or primary matter (prote hule), and hastens to clarify that it is simply a product of thought and never exists without some determining form by which it can be known, namely the elements and their compounds. This assertion, as well as Aristotle’s statements about the indeterminacy of matter, led Aquinas and most Aristotelian Scholastic philosophers to think of prime matter, defined in itself apart from any form, as pure potentiality, an utter absence of any actuality or determinate being. This is to say that the ultimate stuff of the universe, in which all things consist, has no consistency at all, indeed does not exist, apart from its determination as identity.\(^5\)

Aristotle’s penetrating insight is that no materialistic doctrine (“the world is made of”) can sustain analysis: in defining matter, the ultimate stuff of the world, we are never saying what it is, but simply describing a form that it has assumed. By making Plato’s transcendent forms immanent to, or constitutive of, material reality, Aristotle effectively “deconstructed” or dissolved the common notion of matter as something, however vague. One might say that for Aristotle “matter” refers to the continuity of objective experience in all its transmutations. It is perhaps an irony that Aristotle, not Plato, provided me with the insight that allowed it to overcome the duality between the material and the spiritual or intelligible, the great reconciliation denoted by “Christ” or logos that is so central to Christian Neoplatonism. (Medieval philosophers, most of whom viewed Aristotle as perfecting Plato, would have seen no irony at all.)
The dissolution of dualism is particularly evident in the metaphysics of the soul: while Augustine (De moribus 1.27.52), echoing Plotinus (Enneads 1.1.3), echoing Plato (Alcibiades I 129e), could define man as “a soul that uses a body,” Aristotle instead saw the soul as the form of the body, apart from which the body has no existence at all. Christian theology of the thirteenth century is in large measure a flowering of this prodigious insight.6

Dante's Predecessors

Although Aristotle may never have entertained a notion of prime matter as “what matter is in itself,” precisely because it could not be anything, the idea of matter as a pure receptive potentiality, an unknowable substratum of all things (sometimes viewed as if this were the description of something), did become common currency in medieval thought. William Charlton, who does not attribute such an idea to Aristotle, gives a persuasive account of how it was consolidated: in short, by fusing Plato with Aristotle. Plato's Timaeus (49–52) speaks of an ultimate, undefinable, virtually unknowable receptacle of all things, “an invisible and shapeless kind of thing,” an eternal space “that provides a seat for all things which come to be” and is thus a principle of multiplicity in contrast to the One. Quite naturally, subsequent thinkers, beginning with the Stoics, identified this receptacle with Aristotle's prote hule, prime matter. This Aristotelian-Platonic conflation was then identified in turn with the earth created as a formless void (terrainanis et vacua) in the first verses of Genesis, an identification promulgated repeatedly by Augustine. The groundwork for the later Middle Ages was completed by Chalcidius (fourth or fifth century), who explains the Timaeus by quoting Aristotle, whom he considers a Platonist, and by Simplicius (sixth century), who explains Aristotle's view of matter in the Physics by quoting the Timaeus, which he considers to be in fundamental agreement with Aristotle. As we have seen, by the Scholastic period, in the absence of new Platonic texts, most Platonic influence had already been absorbed by Aristotelianism (largely through Islamic philosophers), and went by Aristotle's name.7
By glossing the first verse of Genesis as the *hule* of the Greek philosophers, Augustine (perhaps inadvertently) spawned the notion of “formless matter” (*materia informis*) as a “something” separately created by God in the beginning, even though he may never have held such an idea himself. The key issue, which I will discuss in chapter 4, is whether creation can be conceived as a process in time. Aquinas, for example, does not think Augustine thought there was ever a moment when matter existed without form: it was separately created by God not in the order of time, but in the order of nature or origin. In other words, Augustine understands the days of creation in Genesis to reflect only the logical order of dependence in nature; creation itself is instantaneous, in no time. Even if for Augustine *materia informis* was thus in effect equivalent to Aristotelian *prima materia*, Aquinas observes that for some of his successors (Basil, Ambrose, and Chrysostom) it was not: for them the informity of matter meant that matter had some rudimentary form (actuality) in itself, which was perfected in beauty or completion when it subsequently (i.e., in time) took on (some precise) form, in the “work of distinction.”

With the resurgence of Aristotelianism, philosophers found themselves with two (more or less) distinct notions of “first matter”: the *materia informis* (or *incomposita*) of the Patristic tradition, and the technical Aristotelian term *materia prima*. Thus some Scholastic philosophers, especially in the Augustinian-Franciscan tradition, thought that “first matter” could exist separately in time, either through having some slight actuality or determination (e.g., Bonaventure) or, since God could do all things, as pure potentiality (e.g., Duns Scotus). This claim is often connected with Augustine's notion of *rationes seminales*, the idea that the first matter created by God “contains” the “seeds” of all the finite beings that “germinate” in time. This metaphorical notion is more exegetical than philosophical, meant to reconcile the simultaneity of creation (Ecclesiasticus 18.1) with its implied unfolding in time in Genesis; under analysis the doctrine may not be distinguishable from that of Aquinas, who attributed such “germination” in the potentiality of matter to the direct or indirect influence of the motion of the stars on particular
material substances. In any case it is clear that neither Augustine nor his followers were "materialists" in any sense. As David Knowles points out, Augustine would never call the sensible world the *material* world: being a good student of Plotinus, he knew that the ultimate reality is spiritual, not corporeal, substance. Thinkers directly influenced by Aristotle's conception of matter (such as Albert, Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, and Giles of Rome) denied that matter is anything at all in itself. All medieval philosophers agreed with Dante (e.g., *Pd* 29.32–34) that matter, as (pure) potentiality, is at the opposite extreme from being or actuality (God): *pura potenza tenne la parte ima* ("pure potentiality held the lowest place" [34]).

A few other strands in the medieval understanding of matter should be mentioned. An indirect but pervasive influence (especially through Pseudo-Dionysius) is Plotinus, who viewed matter as the element of non-being or "otherness" that limits the being of things, a kind of privation that distinguishes them from being itself, making them tend toward unreality and unintelligibility. For the Islamic philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sinā), matter was responsible for contingency and multiplicity, a negation or darkness absorbing the light of form radiated by intellect. Averroës (Ibn Rushd), the great twelfth-century Islamic commentator of Aristotle, maintained, and showed convincingly that Aristotle maintained, not only that matter is nothing in itself, but that, as actualized by the world, matter is co-eternal with the Prime Mover and thus uncreated. These ideas were to provoke some philosophical stress in the later thirteenth century.

Saint Bonaventure, agreeing with Aristotle that matter has no being apart from form, completely identified matter with potentiality and form with actuality. Since God alone is pure actuality, this led him to consider matter as a principle of dependent but autonomous existence ("otherness") present in all things except God: as an attribute of contingency common to all determinate (and not simply spatiotemporal) identities, matter was corporeal (spatiotemporal and changeable) in physical objects and spiritual in angels. Aquinas rejected the idea of noncorporeal matter: angels are pure form,
distinguished from God only by the fact that what they are (their essence or particular understanding) is not identical with the act of existence itself (that they are). Aquinas followed Aristotle closely but of course rejected the idea that matter was uncreated and eternal: given being by form, it can be said to have been “concreated” with form. In itself matter is not responsible for the existence of things, but once created as a universal principle of nature, it is not in itself subject to generation or corruption and in this sense endures forever. Aquinas also dispensed with rationes seminales as superfluous.

The sum of this survey is simple: matter, in medieval thought, is nothing, or at best, very nearly nothing. The world does not consist in anything, in any thing: there is nothing it is “made out of.” The failure to feel the power of this understanding is perhaps the greatest barrier in any effort to engage the Comedy on its own terms.

Dante

From what we have said, one could perhaps think of Dante's Primo Mobile as, among other things, the “birth” of matter: as an otherness or duality that arises from or within being-in-itself. This otherness is characterized by incompleteness (the capacity for motion or change, and thus desire) and by extension in space and time. It can be thought of as a substratum in which all noneternal things consist, as long as we remember it is nothing in itself apart from those things: it is only, so to speak, the “common form“ of all spatiotemporal being. Dante's Primo Mobile suggests that the world is energy-consciousness-being reflected or manifest as spatiotemporal extension, an idea that might not shock contemporary physicists, though they might use different words.

Matter, for Dante, is indeed nothing in itself. In the Monarchia (1.3.8–9) Dante asserts categorically that prime matter is pure potentiality and thus cannot exist apart from form. Indeed he goes further: he says that the multitude or totality of generated things is necessary in order to actualize at all times the full potentiality of prime matter; otherwise we would have to presume that unactualized potentiality could exist in itself, which is impossible. According to Monarchia 2.2.2–3, the
world exists in the mind of God, and is extended or unfolded in fluctuating matter (in fluitantem materiam explicatur) through the instrument of the spheres; since matter itself “exists only as potentiality,” it contributes nothing positive to the divine ideas, but can only detract from them. The *Questio de aqua et terra*, the little scientific treatise on the elements that Dante wrote at the end of his life, explains that all things composed of matter and form are contingent (possunt esse et non esse), but their forms exist eternally as act in divine intelligence and as potential in matter (44–46). The purpose of universal nature therefore is to realize the full potential of matter to manifest as form. This is to say that through the movement of the spheres every possible material form is simultaneously realized in matter, if matter is taken as a totality; but of course, by being actualized as one particular form, the matter of each corporeal body remains in potentiality to all the other forms it could (and will) take on. In relation to all the forms it does not have at the moment, but could, it is in privation, which functions as a third principle (with form and matter) of natural things.  

It can be seen, then, that sublunary matter is indeed fluitans, the realm of “brief contingencies” or “last potentialities” (brevi contingenze, ultime potenze [Pd 13.61, 63]): possessing no given form in itself, but successively taking on all forms, it is “pure potentiality” (pura potenza [Pd 29.34]). It is also clear from these passages that Dante believes that prime matter cannot exist in itself apart from some form. These statements in Dante’s later works are consistent with his assertion in the *Convivio* (3.8.15) that God, the angels, and prima materia can be known only through their effects, and not in themselves; again in the *Convivio* (3.15.6) he says that prime matter, like God and eternity, cannot be grasped by the intellect for what it is, but only approached by specifying everything it is not (se non cose negando si può apressare alla sua conoscenza, e non altrimenti).

Nevertheless the issue of prime matter in Dante has generated some controversy. The source of the trouble has been Beatrice’s assertion, in *Paradiso* 29.22–36, that in the act of creation forma e materia, congiunte e purette / usciro ad esser
che non avia fallo (“form and matter, conjoined and separate, 
came into being which had no defect”); of the substances 
things) created,

nel mondo in che purquelle furon cima 
nel mondo in che puro atto fu prodotto; 
pura potenza tenne la parte ima; 
nel mezzo strinse potenza con atto 
tal vime, che già mai non si divima.15

(Pd 29.32–36)

In these lines it is clear that Dante is using technical terms 
loosely to make a threefold contrast in creation, which he in 
fact calls a triforme effetto (28). In the sense that they have no 
matter, and are thus immortal, immune to change, space, and 
time (they are at the “top of the world” in the Empyrean), 
angelic intelligences can be said to be pure form or pure act, 
although speaking technically this would make them identical 
with, and nothing but, God. In the sense that the material and 
ephemeral sublunar world of the four elements has no 
partial form of its own but is constantly transmuting from 
one form into another with no stability or end, it can be said to 
be pure matter or pure potency (though of course if it were 
that in a technical sense it would not exist at all). Between the 
sublunar world and the Empyrean, the perfect and unchanging 
celestial spheres, material but stable, can be thought of as a 
permanent fusion of matter (as the special stable “fifth 
element,” or ether) with their particular forms.

Most, however, have taken Beatrice's statement to mean that 
matter was created as a separate “thing” in time, and there 
was thus a “moment” when it existed either as a 
Bonaventurian materia informis with some inchoate form or 
actuality, or else as a (somehow) self-subsistent pure 
potentiality (what Scotus said God could, but probably did not, 
do). Nardi argued first for the former view, and then the 
latter; in both he was joined by other scholars and roundly 
attacked by neo-Thomists, joined in their turn by others. The
first position contradicts Beatrice’s identification of *materia puretta* with *pura potenza*, as well as the passages from the *Monarchia* and the *Questio*; the second, which has more recently been maintained by Mellone and Bemrose, contradicts the explicit assertions of the *Monarchia, Questio*, and *Convivio*; and both positions contradict other passages in the *Comedy*.16

The dispute is groundless, because, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, the entire thrust of Beatrice’s account of creation in *Paradiso* 29 is that the “act of creation” is not a sequence of events in time: the world is a “triform effect” that flashes into being in its entirety instantaneously, literally in no time. At the center of the lines just quoted, Beatrice says (25–32):

> E come in vetro, in ambra o cristallo
> raggio resplende sì, che dal venire
> a l’esser tutto non è intervallo,
> così ’l triforme effetto del suo sire
> ne l’esser suo raggiò insieme tutto
> sanza distinzïone in essordire.
> Concreato fu ordine e costrutto
> a le sustanze; e quelle furon cima17

(*Pd* 29.25–32)

The light metaphor is more precise for Dante than it is for modern readers: by Aristotelian authority, light propagates to infinity in no time, which is to say it is motionless.18 As Beatrice explains, there is no interval between the emanation of light and its reflection: they are simultaneous. In the same way, all of creation (the “triform effect”) “flashed into being all at once, with no distinction in beginning.” Therefore matter came into being not merely in some inchoate form awaiting perfection, nor as ordered simply into the elements: there was never a moment when matter existed unactualized by all the
forms that constitute creation, which is what the Monarchia and Quaestio also say. “Substances” (i.e., created things, not form and matter, which are not substances) “were con-created with their order and structure,” which follows intrinsically from their particular balance of act and potency, form and matter.

As this passage makes clear, what is created is not form here and matter there (a nonsensical notion in any case), but rather things, the world. To have created anything is to have created (determinate) form or act; to have created any potential for change and multiplicity in form is to have created matter or potentiality; to have created the spheres is to have created forms that exhaust completely the potentiality of their particular substrate, the ether, and thus do not change (unlike the four elements, ether does not mix with or turn into any other element). In other words, to have created the world is to have created nothing but (determinate) form and matter, act and potency, which is not to have created something the world “is made of,” but rather to have inflected or restricted the verb “to be,” so to speak, giving rise to what is “other” than light-being-awareness-love itself.

Arising directly from the ground of being and dependent on nothing created, the principles of matter and form (virtù informante) are not in themselves subject to generation and corruption, and thus may be considered to have a beginning (with the world), but no end (Pd 7.64–72,124–138). The same applies to the angels, the human soul, and the spheres. These observations, which we will discuss in more detail in chapter 4, also accord with Dante's other assertions about matter. We need not conclude, with Nardi and others, that Dante changed his mind about matter just for the Comedy (and then changed it back again!).

Matter-in-itself, conceived in the abstract as an analog to form-in-itself, is not usually what Dante means when he refers to the matter of a particular existing thing, of a “substantial form” (forma sustanzïal, formas particulares). That is, rather, proximate or relative matter, the immediately “underlying” substratum (suggetto, subietto, subiectum), or complex mixture of the elements (complession potenziata, subiectum
mixtum et complexionatum) that serves as matter for the form, as iron might for an ax, or wood for a bed.\textsuperscript{20} (All corruptible things are formed from differing compounds of the four elements; how these elements could “leave their natural place” to be so mixed is the subject of the Questio.) An ax or bed or human considered apart from any particular material substrate is a “universal form,” sometimes variously thought of as an exemplar, divine idea, or Platonic form. What detracts from these divine ideas or exemplars as they are realized in the world is not prime matter, which is nothing in itself, but ill-disposed complession potenziata, the preexisting forms of matter, compounded from the elements, in which the new “image” (always perfect in itself) is to arise, or be “stamped.” That matter, which Dante often calls worldly, mortal, or worked “wax,” can be “deaf” or “disobedient” to the form it is to assume, just as certain materials are more suitable for a particular use than others. The height of material perfection is reached when the spheres (or the Creator Himself) order and predispose the “wax” most suitably for the new form to be assumed, as at the creation of Adam or the birth of Christ.\textsuperscript{21}

Not only is (proximate) matter responsible for all imperfection in nature, it is also the principle of non-intelligence or non-intelligibility in reality: a thing can know and is knowable only insofar as it is form, not matter—actual, not potential. As we shall see in the next chapter, any immaterial substantial form (that is, any substance “separated from,” not dependent upon, matter) is in fact an intelligence, commonly known as an angel.\textsuperscript{22} To the angels we can add God, who as pure form or actuality is sheer intelligence-intelligibility (but not a thing in any sense), and the human soul, a substantial form separated from matter (not dependent upon it) and yet united with it (setta / è da materia ed è con lei [p.46] unita [Pg 18.49–50]). Considered in its own essence (“denuded of matter”), the human soul is an incorruptible intelligence, like an angel (Cv 3.2.14); unlike animal souls (Cv 3.7.5), it does not require any matter or substratum to exist, but body is its natural manifestation or completion (e.g., Pg 25.88–108; Pd 14.43–66). The human soul is thus the “horizon” between the material and the immaterial, the corruptible and incorruptible (Mn 3.15.3).
Since prime matter is the paradigm of unintelligibility and (relative) nothingness, the question arose among Scholastic philosophers whether, as Dante puts it (Cv 4.1.8), *la prima materia delli elementi era da Dio intesa* (“whether the prime matter of the elements was an object of God’s intention or understanding”). An avalanche of discussion has shown that the question cannot be answered, because it is hopelessly complex and confused: one cannot even be sure what Dante meant by it. *Intendere* could mean, as Nardi argued, “to will its existence,” implying the question whether God (rather than finite intelligences) created it, or even whether it was something that could be created at all. These questions are really asking: what is prime matter, and in what sense can it be said to exist? This problem is intimately connected with the other senses of *intendere*: to know, or to conceive as an idea (*intelligere*). If prime matter is nothing, a pure potentiality, how can it be conceived (or said to exist)? What does the word refer to? Anything that can exist in itself as a determinate entity can also be known (through its form): if matter were something “material,” so to speak, the question would not arise. The notion of matter is grounded in the duality between the subject (immaterial form or intelligence) and object (spatiotemporal form) of experience. This duality does not exist for God: God knows creation as His own ideas, which are identical with Himself. From a divine perspective (that is, from no perspective), there is no element of otherness (self-subsistence) in creation: it is not “real” in the sense of being a thing-in-itself. Then in what sense does matter exist? What is it? How did duality come into being?\(^{23}\)

The questions are complex and confused enough to bring on discouragement. This seems to have happened to Dante: when he became entangled in the problem, his lady, Philosophy, ceased her benevolent diffusion of understanding, which so dampened his enthusiasm for her that he abandoned philosophy altogether for a time: *con ciò fosse cosa che questa mia donna un poco li suoi dolci sembianti transmutasse a meun poco dal frequentare lo suo aspetto mi sostenni* (“since this lady of mine ceased to look at me with quite her usual sweetness I kept away from her countenance a little while” [(Cv 4.1.8)])]. Nardi and others have argued that Lady
Philosophy's changed countenance implies that at some point Dante lapsed into emanatistic (Avicennian) doctrines incompatible with Christian faith. This may be creating a mystery story where it does not exist. There is no need to posit dramatic lapses into exotic heresies on Dante's part: Dante is merely describing how he learned that prime matter is one of "those things that vanquish our intellect" (quelle cose che lo 'ntelletto nostro vincono), which we can know not in themselves, but only through their effects (Cv 3.8.15). It is one of those things, like God and eternity, that "dazzle our intellect," "upon which our intellect cannot look," and which we cannot begin to understand except by way of negation. If there is a deeper lesson, or a hint of a crisis, it may be that Dante is first beginning to realize, on the threshold of abandoning the Convivio, that philosophy, and one's own efforts, cannot penetrate the mystery of being and creation. That understanding can only come from the self-revelation of the Real, that is, from grace, for which the only preparation within human power is purity and selflessness, the dissolution of ego and proud autonomy. Only moral perfection can bring understanding: when that truth comes into full focus, in a mature Dante, the Convivio dies, and the Comedy is born.

Notes:

(1.) Vita Nova: con ciò sia cosa chelocalmente mobile per sé, secondo lo Phylosofo, sia solamente corpo ("since according to the Philosopher, only a body is by its nature subject to local motion" [25.2]); see Mugnai, "Mobile." Aristotle: no place or void without body, Physics 4.1–9; no time without movement: 4.10–14; for the contrast with Descartes, see Mensch, "Aristotle and the Overcoming"; for the relation to modern physics, see Maudlin, "Substances and Space-Time."

(2.) “Dottrina dell'Empireo” 209; see also, e.g., “Dottrina delle macchie” 19–20.

(3.) Metaphysics 7.3.1029a20. In the Middle Ages this became the formula nec quid, nec quale, nec quantum, nec aliquid eorum quibus ens determinatur. The principal Aristotelian texts for the form-matter distinction are Physics 1.4–9,
Metaphysics 7.3.7–8, Generation and Corruption 2. On the general conception of matter in Aristotle, see, e.g., Gill, Aristotle on Substance; Sokolowski, “Matter, Elements and Substance”; Fred Miller, “Aristotle's Use of Matter”; and Skemp, “Hule and Upodoxe.”

(4.) For the identity hyle-silva, see, e.g., Chalcidius, Timaeus a Calcidio (esp. 295–297); Bernardus Sylvestris, De mundi universitate 1.1.18–22, 1.2.23–25; and Isidore of Seville, Etymologiarum 13.3.1. The connection with Dante's selva oscura has been noted since Landino's commentary; see also Ragni, “Selva” 141, and Hallock, “Dante's Selva Oscura.”

(5.) Copper as form of water: Metaphysics 5.4.1015a10. Prime matter only in form: see esp. Generation and Corruption 2.1.329a24–35, 2.5.332a35; unknowable in itself: Metaphysics 7.10.1036a8, Physics 3.6.207a25. The other principal texts for prime matter are Metaphysics 5.4.1015a7–10, 7.3.1028b33–1029a33.

(6.) Form immanent, not transcendent: Metaphysics 5.4.1015a7–11, 5.24.1023a31–32, 7.8.1033a24–1034a5. The point that Plato stands at the head of a dualist view of what is now called the mind-body problem, and Aristotle at the head of a non-dualist view, is made by G.E.R. Lloyd, Aristotle 186; see, e.g., Aquinas, ST 1a.76.4. For the Augustine-Plotinus-Plato link, see Étienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy 74, 593, and Augustin Mansion, “L'immortalité de l’âme” 456–465; see also Olshewsky, “On the Relations.” The Platonic authorship of the Alcibiades was unquestioned in antiquity.

(7.) Prime matter not anything: “Aristotle has ruled out the following kinds of universal substratum: incorporeal, corporeal, void, plenum, extension, triangles, objects of mathematics, Timaean space, some one of the elements, something over and above the elements” (Charlton, “Did Aristotle Believe” 135). Key entries in the forty-year debate on whether Aristotle “believed in prime matter” include King, “Aristotle Without”; Solmsen, “Aristotle and Prime Matter”; Charlton, “Did Aristotle” (which includes the history of the

Augustine: De Genesi ad litteram 1.14–15, De Genesi contra Manichaeos 1.5–7, Contra Faustum 20.14; see also Confessions 12.5–6 and 12.15.22.

Aquinas: ST 1a.66.1; see also 1a.69.1, 1a.74.3, De potentia 4.1. Augustine on “instantaneous” creation: e.g., De Genesi ad litteram 1.15; 4.26,28,33; 5.3,23; Confessions 12.12–13. On the patristic notion of prime matter, see Sorabji, Time, Creation and the Continuum 292–294.


(9.) Plotinus’s principal treatment of matter is Ennæads 2.4, especially sections 14–16.

(10.) Matter concreated with form: SCG 4.63, ST 1a.q7.a2.ad3; 1a.q84.a3.ad2; incorruptible: ST 1a.104.4.

(11.) For the congruence between Aristotelian and contemporary concepts of matter, see Suppes, “Aristotle’s Concept”; the epilogue outlines other parallels.

(12.) Monarchia 1.3.8–9: Necesse est multitudinem rerum generabilium ut potentia tota materie prime semper sub actu sit: aliter esset dare potentiam separatam, quod est inpossibile; 2.2.2–3: Restat quod quicquid in rebus inferioribus est peccatum, ex parte materie subiacentis peccatum sitet quod quicquid est in rebus inferioribus bonum, cum ab ipsa
materia esse non possit, sola potencia existente, per prius ab artifice Deo sit. On the three principles of natural things, see Cv 2.13.17, and If 25.100–102.

(14.) See also Cv 2.14.10: le cose naturali corruttibilicoditnanamente compiono loro via, e la loro materia si muta di forma in forma (“corruptible natural things complete their course day by day, and their matter changes from form to form”). Dante often refers to this capacity to “receive” changing form as cera, “wax”: e.g., Pd 1.40–42, 8.127–129, 13.67–69.

(15.) “Those in whom pure act was produced were the summit of the universe. Pure potentiality held the lowest place; in the middle such a bond tied up potentiality with act that it is never unbound.”

(16.) Nardi argued for the first position in Sigieri di Brabante 23–32, “Intorno al tomismo” 182–184, “Noterelle polemiche” 132–133, “Dante e Pietro d'Abano” 43–45, “Rassegna bibliografica” 309–312, and “Meditantur sua stercora” 57–59; he argued for the second position in “ ´Tutto il frutto ricolto’” 260–262; in “Il tomismo secondo Emilio Brodero” 369 he says that Dante's position is “agostinian[a] e scotistic[a]” (curious, since the two views are incompatible). The first position was attacked by the Thomists Calò (Review of Sigieri di Brabante 264–270); Moretti, “La filosofia di Dante: Le creature” 52–54; Busnelli, Cosmogonia 20–49; and Mandonnet, Dante le théologien 247–248, 275–276. Nardi's second position was adopted by Mellone (Dottrina 60–68) and (with some reservations) Bemrose (Dante's Angelic Intelligences 194). For lucid surveys of the controversy, see Bruce-Jones, “L'importanza primaria”; Mellone, Dottrina 58–60; Mazzoni's introduction to his edition of the Questio (712–724); and the appendix (“The Angels and Prime Matter”) in Bemrose, Dante's Angelic Intelligences. The commentary tradition is uniformly confused.

(17.) “And as in glass, in amber or in crystal, a ray shines so that there is no interval between its coming and its being fully there, so did the triform effect ray forth from its Lord in all its
being, all at once, without distinction of beginning. Order and structure was concreated with the substances; and those were at the top in whom”

(18.) Aristotle, De sensu 6.446b27; De anima 2.7.418b20–28; see, e.g., Aquinas, ST 1a.67.2, 1a.q45.a3.ad3; Bonaventure, Commentaria in Sententiarum 2.d13.a3.q1.

(19.) Nardi said that the concept of matter in the Monarchia and Convivio is “completely different” from that of the Comedy (“Rassegna bibliografica” 309–310; see also “Dante e Pietro d’Abano” 45, and “Meditantur sua stercora” 57–58). Mellone concurs: the Monarchia and Comedy present “opposite conceptions,” the former Aristotelian-Thomistic, the latter Augustinian-Scotistic (Dottrina 67–70); Bemrose calls the Comedy’s views a “striking departure” from the Monarchia and Aristotelianism (Dante’s Angelic Intelligences 201). Nardi ended up dating the Monarchia before the Comedy (“Tre pretese fasi” 294–301) and denying that Dante wrote the Questio at all (“Caduta di Lucifero” 241–265).

(20.) Forma sustanzial: e.g., Pg 18.49; formas particulares: Mn 1.3.9; suggetto: e.g., VN 20.7 (Pd 2.107 and 29.51 are ambiguous); substratto: e.g., Cv 4.14.10, 3.11.13; subiectum: e.g., Mn 1.11.4, 3.4.13; complession potenzia: Pd 7.140; subiectum mixtum et complexionatum: Questio 47. Also referring to mixtures of elements: Cv 4.21.4; 4.23.7; Pg 25.51; Mn 1.3.6 (in minerals); to the totality of such mixtures: Pd 17.38 (la vostra materia).

(21.) Mondana cera: Pd 1.41; cera mortal: Pd 8.128; cera dedutta: Pd 13.67, 73; sorda: Pd 1.129; inobedientiam materie: Questio 44. See also Cv 3.4.7, 3.6.6, 3.2.4, 4.5.4; Questio 74. “Wax perfectly readied or disposed” (a punto la cera dedutta) at creation of Adam and birth of Christ: Pd 13.67–87. Matter, not form, cause of imperfection: see also Cv 3.2.4; Mn 2.2.3.

(22.) Sustanze separate da materia, cioè intelligenze, le quali la volgare gente chiamano Angeli (Cv 2.4.2); see also, e.g., Cv 3.4.9 (sustanze partite da materia).
(23.) Nardi: “Se la prima materia”; see also “Intorno al tomismo” 185-186, “Dante e Pietro d’Abano” 45, “Tutto il frutto ricolto” 256-258, and “Meditantur sua stercora” 57-58. Nardi’s understanding of intendere is supported by Corti (Felicità mentale 116, 125) and accepted by Foster (“Tommaso d’Aquino” 636); it was anticipated, in a less subtle form, by Moore (“Dante’s Theory of Creation” 141-142). (Nardi points out [“Intorno al tomismo” 186, “Rassegna bibliografica” 310, and “Se la prima materia” 202] that Dante is not asking “how” but “if the first matter”: “how” would restrict the question to the old Augustinian-Aristotelian debate about whether matter has any actuality [form] in itself, i.e., whether it can be known in itself or only through the analysis of substantial material forms.) Intendere as intelligere: Busnelli, Cosmogonia 37-42, “Un famoso dubbio”; see also Calò, Review of Sigieri di Brabante 268-270; O’Keeffe, “Dante’s Theory of Creation” 53-54. For a balanced summary of the controversy, see Vasoli’s notes to his edition of the Convivio (at 4.1.8), and now see Sasso, “Se la materia”; for other bibliography, see Mellone, “Esemplarismo divino” 222. Bemrose gives useful clarifications in Dante’s Angelic Intelligences 186-190; see also De Bonfils Templer, “La prima materia.”


(25.) In alcuno modo queste cose nostro intelletto abbaglianoche lo ’ntelletto nostro guardare non può, cioè Dio e la eternitate e la prima materia:quello che sono intender noi non potemo, se non cose negando si può apressare alla sua conoscenza, e non altrimenti (Cv 3.15.6).