

***Monarchia*, an Introduction *or* Dante and the Goal of Humankind**

Giuseppe Vicinanza

Posted to the World Orders Forum: 2 September 2024

Giuseppe Vicinanza is a PhD student in the philosophy department at the New School for Social Research. His research focuses on the notions of direction of conscience and freedom (and freedom of the will), particularly as concerns medieval Christianity. He received an MA in Philosophy with a Certificate in Gender and Sexualities Studies from the New School for Social Research in 2021. He has been a visiting researcher at EHESS (Paris, France) and Università degli Studi di Milano, Bicocca (Milan, Italy).

*From all I did and all I said
let no one try to find out who I was.
An obstacle was there that changed the pattern
of my actions and the manner of my life.
An obstacle was often there
to stop me when I'd begin to speak.
From my most unnoticed actions,
my most veiled writing—
from these alone will I be understood.
But maybe it isn't worth so much concern,
so much effort to discover who I really am.
Later, in a more perfect society,
someone else made just like me
is certain to appear and act freely.
Constantine P. Cavafy - *Hidden Things**

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is among the most prominent figures in world literature and culture. Seven hundred years after his death in Italy, Dante is celebrated as the unrivaled pinnacle of the nation's intellectual history and revered as the father of the national language, partly due to his own investigations on the evolution of the vernaculars of the Italian peninsula in his treatise *On the Eloquence in the Vernacular* [Latin title: *De vulgari eloquentia*] and largely due to the success of his major work, through which so many words and turns of phrases entered what became the Italian language.

It is as a poet, to be sure, that people generally know and think of Dante. More precisely, as the author of the *Divine Comedy*, his *magnum opus* without a doubt, which many know for its first part (of three), the *Inferno*, endlessly referenced in popular culture—most recently, to my knowledge, in Hayao Miyazaki’s latest feature *The Boy and the Heron*. This imposing work (a total of 14233 verses) takes the reader, in its three parts, through the otherworldly realms of hell (*Inferno*), purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and paradise (*Paradiso*). In this highly systematized poem—rich in intratextual references and symmetries that invite the reader explicitly to identify “the doctrine that conceals itself beneath the veil of the mysterious verses” (*Inf.* IX vv. 62-63)—Dante works out his theological and philosophical views, which also find expression in the philosophical prose of the *Convivio*, an unfinished work where Dante offered allegorical readings of some of his earlier lyric poems or *canzoni*. Other of his earlier poetical works were collected in the *Vita Nova*, a so-called *prosimetrum*, where short pomes were inserted into a prose narrative that told the story of Dante’s encounter with his beloved Beatrice and the way in which the latter event marked, as per its title, the beginning of a new life. These recollections of his youthful love for Beatrice anticipate her role as a saintly guide through the heavenly skies of the third book of the *Divine Comedy*.

The Latin hexameters of the *Eclogues* and the compositions conventionally collected in the *Rime* (the *Rhymes*) complete Dante’s poetical production. Adding to the works mentioned so far a total of 13 epistles that have been preserved to our day and a lesser work known as the *Quaestio de aqua et terra* (a Latin transcription of a dispute in the typical form of the medieval *quaestiones*) leaves us (barring some scholarly disagreements on the authorship of the *Fiore*) with just one more work to complete Dante’s *corpus*. It is the work that we will be discussing here. Namely, Dante’s political treatise on “temporal monarchy,” by which he refers to “a universal, temporal authority [*unicus principatus et super omnes in tempore, Monarchia*, Book 1, II], or simply “empire” [*imperium*]. The qualifier ‘temporal’, used by Dante in the first chapter of his *Monarchia*, indicates the central theme of this treatise, which is the separation of temporal from spiritual power, of the power of the emperor from that of the pope.

The treatise is divided into three books. Book I asks whether the universal authority of the temporal monarchy is necessary for the well-being of the world, Book II whether the Roman people rightfully [*de iure*] attributed to themselves the office of the monarch: Dante responds affirmatively to both questions. Lastly, Book III deals with an issue that was of extreme consequence for Dante’s contemporaries in fourteenth century Europe: whether the pope should or should not have the power to choose the emperor, or, more precisely, whether the religious ruler should have authority over the temporal one, the papacy over the empire. Dante concludes that the emperor is not subordinate to the pope, that their powers are independent, and both derive their authority immediately from God.

At first glance, the treatise may seem to belong to a diatribe that today moves us no longer and that we, therefore, have no business in investigating. To be sure, there is some truth to this way of thinking and very few of Dante’s frankly quite extravagant arguments throughout the treatise seem to carry any significant interest for us today. Why care about the *Monarchia* then?

In what follows, I would like to show why something more is at stake in this work, something that speaks to us, if we manage to understand the project in which Dante is invested with this treatise.

There is a lively scholarly debate around what occasion of the *Monarchia* might have been. Several scholars have tried to determine whether the text was meant to be some kind of ‘instant book’, intended to be a commentary on the political situation of the time, produced perhaps in conjunction with the coming to Italy for coronation in Rome of a new emperor (Claude Lefort calls this the most probable hypothesis, referring to the 1311 descent to Italy of Henry VII of Luxembourg), or if rather it intended to offer a timeless endorsement of monarchy as a form of government. This debate is rendered particularly complicated, like many others concerning Dante, by the uncertain dating of the work.

Regardless of the answer to this vexed question, it seems likely that the work was only published in the last year of Dante’s life (as argued by Enrico Fenzi¹). Moreover, in virtue of the fact that the composition and publication of a work in the manuscript culture of the Middle Ages is very different from a publication phenomenon of the kind that we are familiar with today, we can infer from the number of surviving manuscript copies that the work did not see any significant circulation until after the author’s death (Chiesa 98-99). Very soon, however, Dante’s *Monarchia* began to be used as an instrument of pro-empire propaganda in the controversy between Louis IV ‘the Bavarian’ and pope John XXII (Chiesa 93) and it is perhaps here, immediately after its appearance, that the idea that the *Monarchia* was an occasional work, thereby reducing its interest beyond that occasion, started to form. Further, and precisely because of its use in imperialist propaganda, the *Monarchia* was first, in 1328, the target of a vitriolic refutation (the *Reprobatio*) by the Dominican theologian Guido Vernani, and then condemned (98-99) by the papal legate Bertrando del Poggetto in 1329, before it was finally added to the index of prohibited books by the Catholic Church in the time of the Counter Reformation. While this history didn’t prevent the treatise from gaining a certain importance in the intellectual history of European politics, in the sixteenth century in particular (Lefort, 55-61), thanks also to its publication in Basel in 1559 and ensuing free-circulation in protestant countries (Chiesa 99), it is one that risks cornering this work in the role of a piece of propaganda in a battle that, once again, fails to move us today.

What I would like us to recuperate, however, is the importance of this work, for us and for Dante, besides that battle, which I locate in the articulation in this work of a collective goal of humankind, namely the attainment of universal knowledge, and its placement within a political project towards the latter’s realization. I take up, here, Paolo Chiesa’s strong suggestion that, together with the *Divine Comedy*, the *Monarchia* is entrusted by Dante with his highest message (p. 93)—something that is certainly plausible, for one, if indeed this was a very late, if not Dante’s final work. Chiesa makes this suggestion in light of the words that Dante uses in the first chapter of the *Monarchia*’s first book, a chapter which works as a prologue to the treatise and to which I would like us to turn. I reproduce the chapter here in full, but ask the reader, for now to focus, with

¹ Enrico Fenzi, “È la ‘Monarchia’ l’ultima opera di Dante? (A proposito di una recente edizione),” *Studi Danteschi*, vol. 72, 233.

Chiesa, on the third and fourth paragraphs, where Dante compares his project to the work of Euclid, Aristotle and Cicero. We will return to the first two paragraphs below.

For all men whom the Higher Nature has endowed with a love of truth, this above all seems to be a matter of concern, that just as they have been enriched by the efforts of their forebears, so they too may work for future generations, in order that posterity may be enriched by their efforts.

For the man who is steeped in the teachings which form our common heritage, yet has no interest in contributing something to the community, is failing in his duty: let him be in no doubt of that; for he is not "a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in due season", but rather a destructive whirlpool which forever swallows things down and never gives back what it has swallowed.

Thinking often about these things, lest some day I be accused of burying my talent, I wish not just to put forth buds but to bear fruit for the benefit of all, and to reveal truths that have not been attempted by others.

For what fruit would a man bear who proved once again a theorem of Euclid's? or who sought to show once again the nature of happiness, which has already been shown by Aristotle? or who took up the defence of old age which has already been defended by Cicero? None at all; indeed the tiresome pointlessness of the exercise would arouse distaste.

Now since among other truths which are hidden and useful, a knowledge of temporal monarchy is both extremely useful and most inaccessible, and since no one has attempted to elucidate it (on account of its not leading directly to material gain), I propose to draw it forth from where it lies hidden, so that my wakeful nights may be of benefit to the world, and so that I may be the first to win for my own glory the honour of so great a prize.

It is indeed an arduous task, and one beyond my strength, that I embark on, trusting not so much in my own powers as in the light of that Giver who "giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not."²

Paolo Chiesa brings our attention to the fourth paragraph of this text where Dante equates his revelatory work, aimed at unearthing the useful and hidden truth about the temporal monarchy to that which the likes of Aristotle, Cicero and Euclide have carried out in their respective fields where they were able to arrive at "decisive truths"—truths unique and original that have contributed to the human community and *in this sense* have been "fruitful" (an important attribute, to which we will soon return). It is in light of this comparison that Chiesa finds himself in disagreement with those who read the *Monarchia* as a highly context-specific propagandist text. "Corresponding to such important ambitions," Chiesa writes, "we expect to find a message which goes far beyond the political contingency of the moment and that rather has a wider perspective, or even absolute value."³ He concedes, however, that it is not easy to identify this absolute, timeless, value. Especially, I add, because it is easy to get lost in the weeds of Dante's arguments, particularly those from the second and the third book.

To help us achieve at least a preliminary understanding of this message of absolute, timeless value, having to do as I suggested with a collective goal of humankind, I invite us to look at the first two paragraphs of the prologue, and hence the very beginning of the book. We would not be surprised, after all, to find that Dante laid his cards out right away, at the beginning of his text, though perhaps somewhat indirectly: if the *Monarchia* identifies the attainment of universal

² Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3-4.

³ Paolo Chiesa, "La *Monarchia* di Dante: un pensiero politico ancora attuale?," in *Primus in Gloriam / Studi per il VII Centenario della Morte di Dante 1321-2021* (Bergamo: Edizioni dell'Ateneo di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Bergamo, 2023), 93.

knowledge as the collective goal of humankind, Dante opens the book by a discussion of the figure of intellectuals and the role that they play in this project. The reference, in the book's opening line, to "all men whom the Higher Nature has endowed with a love of truth" has been at times confused (as pointed out by Ricci and Pizzica⁴) with a reference to *Metaphysics* I, 1 1980 a (quoted verbatim in the opening chapter of another of Dante's works, *Convivio* I, 1: "all men by nature desire to know"). A careful reader will have noticed that while here, too, reference is made to a natural love of knowledge, the field is restricted to some men only, who, by nature, burn with a *special love* for truth. Dante is speaking here of the *litterati*. Then, he adds that these men who have drawn benefit from the *authorities*, who are "steeped in the teachings which form our common heritage," having "been enriched by the efforts of their forebears," now need to make themselves useful by "contributing something to the community." This, he says, is these special men's main task. They need to become *authors*: as per the word's etymology, which Dante investigates in the *Convivio*, from *auctus*, past participle of *augeo* (to increase, to let prosper), an author is someone who has a capital (having been "enriched by the efforts of their forebears") that he ought to invest "in order that posterity may be enriched by their efforts."

Dante, then, proceeds to use a metaphor (taken from a psalm) which we also encounter in the *Divine Comedy*. It is the metaphor of the author as a tree that is supposed to bear fruit, and to do so, Dante adds, "for the benefit of all." An author who is unable to do that is to be compared rather to "a destructive whirlpool which forever swallows things down and never gives back what it has swallowed." An example of this failure can be encountered, I argue, in the figure of Dante's teacher Brunetto Latini (which we encounter in *Inferno* XV), an author capable of offering, though unwittingly, guidance to eternal doom.

At *Inferno* XV 55-60, in truth, Brunetto assures Dante that if "he follows his star" he "cannot fail but reach a glorious harbour." Trust me, Dante, Brunetto seems to be saying with this marine metaphor, but what would he know about sailing anyway? Based on what he saw "in the fair life" (*se ben m'accorsi nella vita bella*)—that is, if he is to draw a conclusion from what he saw when he was still alive and Dante was his student—Brunetto is confident that Dante cannot fail to achieve glory, i.e., fame (or, put simply, that sweet life that a famous author like Brunetto would have enjoyed, appreciated and revered in the way that Dante seems so pressed to revere him) if he just deploys his talent for writing (i.e., if he follows his star). Had he lived a bit longer, Brunetto adds, he would have loved to help him reach this glory, just like, per Dante words, he tried to do when still alive: *m'insegnavate come l'uom s'eterna*, Dante tells Brunetto, you used to teach me how to make oneself eternal. But is there a double meaning in Dante's words? That's what you used to do, Brunetto, that's what you claimed to do, and look at you now...Dante, after all, encounters him in hell!

So let's look at this encounter a bit closer. Just as we may find it surprising to find Dante's own teacher in hell, Dante too appears to be surprised to find Brunetto where he does. This is the text narrating the encounter at *Inferno* XV, 23-30:

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, (ed.) Maurizio Pizzica (Milano: BUR, 1988), 211

...

By some one I was recognised, who seized
My garment's hem, and cried out, "What a marvel!"

And I, when he stretched forth his arm-to me,
On his baked aspect fastened so mine eyes,
That the scorched countenance prevented not

His recognition by my intellect;
And bowing down my face onto his own,
"Are you here, Ser Brunetto?"

(trans. Longfellow)

You?! Here?! Ser Brunetto?! That's the tone in which the Italian reads. The passage seems almost too obviously meant to shock us (but nothing is 'too obvious' in the *Divine Comedy*). By the words of Dante-character, Dante-author is saying to the reader: 'You are surprised to find Brunetto in hell? Imagine how *I* felt about it!' For a moment, caught in the text's fiction (we will return to this), we may even believe him, but a moment later we remember that none other than Dante himself has placed Brunetto where we find him. What, then, is going on in this passage?

Brunetto, author of the *Trésor*, being Dante's "friend and teacher", we understand why this encounter is so charged with emotion. *'n la mente m'è fitta, e or m'accora, / la cara e buona imagine paterna / di voi*: in my mind is fixed, and touches now / My heart the dear and good paternal image / Of you (trans. Longfellow), Dante tells Brunetto. It makes sense that, if Dante is glad to be reunited with his dead teacher, he is sorry to meet him in the place where least of all he would have liked to find him (but again, let us not forget that he put him there).

The scene is touching, Dante is walking on an embankment that keeps him and Virgil removed from the fiery plain where the sinners' souls are treading. When a soul, stunned, pulls his robe from below. The two recognize each other and Brunetto suggests that they walk a bit of the way together. But Dante is embarrassed. For starters, Dante is not comfortable walking at a higher level than his master. Hovering above Brunetto, he already put the latter in the undignified condition of a little kid who, in order to get the attention of an adult, needs to pull the hem of his robe. Moreover, having his clothes pulled reminds Dante that Brunetto, like the other souls that are punished around him, is naked (!) and if that weren't enough, he is burnt all over, scorched by the fire of hell. Abashed, Dante tries to suggest that, if it is okay with Virgil, perhaps they could sit with Brunetto for a minute, so that he would not need to walk chin-up below them while they talk and perhaps be able to hide his... '*trésor*'. Because of the rules of the place, however, Brunetto cannot stop walking. Dante, then, flustered, hunches forward as they walk so as to at least keep his head down in show of reverence. To make the scene all the more scandalous, we are offered another important detail: we find ourselves in the circle of the 'sodomites'...you? here? Brunetto?!

What's happening here? Is this Brunetto's roast (quite literally so)? Is Dante taking a petty revenge on a master whose tendencies he did not quite like by outing him as a 'pervert,' someone who was 'violent against nature' (as per Dante's definition of 'sodomy') and perhaps to him, too?

Did Brunetto take advantage of his young student? Certainly a juicy piece of gossip for the people who knew Dante and Brunetto. Is it for this reason that in the sixteenth-century commentary of the *Comedy* by the ‘Anonimo Fiorentino’, as pointed out by Johnny L. Bertolio,⁵ Brunetto is not described as Dante’s teacher but as a “singulare amico dell’Auttore,” a special friend...? For us, all of this would at most be evidence of a retrograde society where homosexual intercourse was believed to be cause for eternal punishment, but is there more?

Let us return to the surprise that Dante reports upon meeting Brunetto. Dante’s surprise, I want to suggest, is after all not just a fiction, at the very least, it serves a purpose. The reality of his fictionalized surprise is gathered in the words that I quoted above and that Dante uses to describe his relationship to Brunetto: *m’insegnavate come l’uom s’eterna*. I trusted you, Brunetto, I put my faith in you, he seems to be saying. You made me believe that you knew and were teaching me how to make myself eternal, but look at you here...“here? Ser Brunetto?” At some point between his studies with Brunetto, and the writing of the *Comedy*, Dante must have felt disillusioned: Brunetto had the wrong goal in view, the wrong truth, the wrong glory. The glorious harbor which he was guiding him towards, the final destination his teaching would have led him to and to which, he now understands, Brunetto had led himself to, the eternity that he promised, has turned out to be that of perennial doom (*li eterni danni*). As a teacher and an author, Brunetto cannot be trusted as he turns out to be the kind of author who is like a “destructive whirlpool which forever swallows things down and never gives back what it has swallowed.”

What disappointment must have been in Dante’s voice: you, you who are now naked and burnt, you wanted to teach me how man makes himself eternal? Dante must have felt betrayed by his master. It is for this reason, that, as argued by Alison Cornish,⁶ Brunetto finds himself, to the surprise of Dante—in the sense of disenchantment, disillusion, and in contrast to Brunetto’s enchantment: “*qual meraviglia!*”—amongst the ‘sodomites’. Just like ‘sodomitical’ intercourse is sterile (and in this sense, for Dante, against nature, against the ‘eternalizing’ of man through procreation), Brunetto’s writing/teaching was sterile, not capable of bearing fruit other than the egoistic and perishable fruit of terrestrial fame. It is for this reason that sodomy is presented, later in the canto, as the sin characteristic of the *litterati*: an all-important detail revealed by Brunetto himself, who, however, seems to be oblivious to its meaning. In this connection, Bertolio points out that the first literary appearance of the word ‘*umanista*’ was in relation to Sodom and ‘the vice of sodomy’ in a satire by Ludovico Ariosto, which was directed at Pietro Bembo (vv. 25-33):

Senza quel vizio son pochi *umanisti*
Che fe’ a Dio forza, non che persüase,
di far Gomorra e i suoi vicini tristi:

mandò fuoco da ciel, ch’uomini e case
tutto consumpse; et ebbe tempo a pena
Lot a fugir, ma la moglier rimase.

⁵ Johnny L. Bertolio, “La rivincita di Ser Brunetto,” *La ricerca*, 31 Mar 2022, available at: <https://laricerca.loescher.it/la-rivincita-di-ser-brunetto/> [accessed: 29 Aug 2024]

⁶ Alison Cornish, *Believing in Dante: Truth in Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Ride il volgo, se sente un ch'abbia vena
di poesia, e poi dice: – È gran perigilo
a dormir seco e voglierli la schiena.

[my translation: Few *humanists* lack that vice, / which did not persuade, but rather forced God / to make Gomorrah and his neighbors sad: / he sent fire from the skies, which men and houses / both consumed; and just in time / was Lot able to escape, but his wife was left behind. / People laugh, if they hear of someone with an inclination / for poetry, and they say: – It is very dangerous / to sleep with this one and turn your back to him.]

You get the picture, I think, without having to offer an exegesis. Importantly, however, Bertolio notes that, at least up to the council of Trento and its 1559 Index of prohibited books entered into function, one could easily encounter works such as Benedetto Varchi's *Sonetti* (1555), written for his same-sex lover Lorenzo Lenzi, referred to in the text with the *senhal* Lauro, published under the author's real name and dedicated to high figures such as Francesco de Medici (the son of the then duke Cosimo I) when the book was published in Florence, and to Giovanni della Casa (an important cleric) when it was published in Venezia. If these figures had nothing to fear, beyond perhaps the jovial tease of Ariosto, in being associated with homosexual love, would Dante have gone to such great extents in condemning his teacher to eternal punishment just to clear himself from suspicions of homosexuality? Is Dante telling the reader that he was abused, that he took no pleasure in the perversion of Brunetto, that he was not, in fact, his special friend [*singulare amico*]? If this were the case, Dante would have spoken differently of his teacher, whose memory, he says, *still* touches his heart (*or m'accora*).

Rather, Dante seems to be brilliantly picking up on a running joke, a common stereotype, 'writers, teachers, intellectuals are a bunch of ...', to say that most writers do indeed sin against nature, that the stereotype is getting at some truth, but not because they indulge in the ancient pleasures of homosexual love but because their writing, aimed at fame alone, is *sterile*. And here we return to the idea, expressed in the *Monarchia*, that an author has to bear fruit, which returns at *Inferno* 20, 19-20, where Dante expresses the following wish: "may God let thee, Reader, gather fruit from your reading," that is, from your reading of my work. Dante, then, must be aiming to be a different author, a writer who, unlike Brunetto, *bears fruit*. Like in the famous parable, Dante does not want to be accused of burying his talent or, as put by Brunetto, his "star".

After this excursus into the *Divine Comedy*, let us now return to the prologue of the *Monarchia*. The contribution to posterity that Dante sets out to make is, we said, the drawing forth of a knowledge of temporal monarchy. He will be glorified, he says, by this achievement, but this is a different glory from that which Brunetto had promised and rather seems to retrace that *grazia* which Dante wishes for his *Comedy* in *Inferno* XVI (vv.127-129). The *grazia* that comes from writing, as Beatrice invites him to do towards the end of the speech that had begun at *Purgatorio* XXX, "for that world's good which liveth ill" (trans. Longfellow, *Purgatorio* XXXII, 103-105), so that, as he puts in *Monarchia* I, 1 in very similar words, his "wakeful nights may be of benefit to the world." Or consider his words in the letter to Cangrande where he describes his goal in

writing the *Divine Comedy* to be “to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity.”

But why is it so important for the lovers of knowledge, for the “men whom the Higher Nature has endowed with a love of truth,” to bear fruit? Consider first that these intellectuals, Dante told us, “have been enriched by the efforts of their forebears,” they would be nothing without “the teachings of their forebears” in which they are “steeped,” that what they have to offer for their own glory is, in fact, received. There is first of all a question of humility (cf. Dante’s description of the centrality of humility to the meaning of the figure of the lover of knowledge in the *Convivio*), an awareness of one’s own limitations, that one wouldn’t be what one is without others. Dante states this more clearly at a later point of Book I (ch. 3) of the *Monarchia*: perfect knowledge, Dante argues, is only achievable collectively.

As per Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, “all men by nature desire to know” and in the opening of the *Convivio* Dante had identified the source of men’s natural desire for knowledge in each thing’s natural inclination towards its own perfection, but immediately, Dante goes on to list a number of obstacles that we encounter on the road towards such perfection. It is in virtue of the existence of these obstacles that the poet/philosopher proposes himself as a guide, as a beacon for the rest of us on our journey to our ultimate perfection, in which, he says, resides our ultimate happiness. The portrait of the human offered here by Dante is quite strange in that it seems that while the desire for knowledge is produced by our innate inclination (common to all things) towards our own perfection, we do not seem to possess the tools for attaining that perfection. If we pay attention to Dante’s word choice, however, we begin to see a way out of this impasse. In speaking of the ultimate perfection of our soul which leads to happiness Dante speaks in the plural (*nostra felicitate*) and he emphasizes that *all of us* are naturally subject to this desire for knowledge. The use of the plural here reminds us of the well-known beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, “nel mezzo del cammin di *nostra* vita.” This recurring reference to a common condition is perhaps not just a rhetorical trope, or a stylistic choice. The *Monarchia* finally drives the point home:

There is therefore some activity specific to humanity as a whole, for which the whole human race in all its vast number of individual human beings is designed; and no single person, or household, or small community, or city or individual kingdom can fully achieve it. (*Monarchia* I, III, iv)⁷

And then he continues:

...the highest potentiality of mankind is his intellectual potentiality or faculty. And since that potentiality cannot be fully actualized all at once in any one individual or in any one of the particular social groupings enumerated above, there must needs be a vast number of individual people in the human race, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized. (*Monarchia* I, III, vii)⁸

⁷ Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

For Dante, only the whole of humanity working in concert could attain universal knowledge, or as put by Ruedi Imbach, “the actualisation of the knowledge of all that which is knowable.”⁹ That is, in the case of humans the realization of our potential is dependent on a collective act of actualization. Dante thus “elaborates a remarkably original theory of the intellect that stresses the social dimension of human reason.”¹⁰ (Imbach, 62). What this means is that each man is inherently dependent on each other for its realization which, forcibly, becomes a collective realization.

Crucially, Imbach points out, Dante develops his “thesis on the collective realization of human reason in a political context, namely in a text dedicated to the reflection on the best possible political order.” The establishment of an empire is shown to be necessary precisely in order to achieve this collective realization. “It is apparent,” Dante continues in Book I, iv, “that mankind most freely and readily attends to this activity...in the calm or tranquillity of peace. Hence it is clear that universal peace is the best of those things which are ordained for our human happiness.” It is with a view towards attaining universal peace that, Dante will argue, a temporal monarchy proves necessary to the well-being of the world (*Monarchia* I, III, vi).

Aristotle, Dante notes, showed us in the *Politics* “that when a number of things are ordered to a single end, one of them must guide or direct, and the others be guided or directed; and it is not only the authors illustrious name which requires us to believe this, but inductive reasoning as well” (*Monarchia*, I, V, 3)¹¹, and since “it is agreed that the whole of mankind is ordered to one goal, as has already been demonstrated: there must therefore be one person who directs and rules mankind, and he is properly called 'Monarch' or 'Emperor'. And thus it is apparent that the well-being of the world requires that there be a monarchy or empire” (*Monarchia*, I, V, 9-10).¹²

Whether or not we ‘buy’ Dante’s Aristotelian line of argumentation in favor of the monarchy is of little interest to me here, what I have been trying to bring attention to and what for me is at stake in this work is, rather, the notion that reflection on the political organization of society is ordained according to the premise that humanity has a collective goal, inherent to its nature and that that goal is the actualization of the knowledge of all that which is knowable. The most perfect society, then, is for Dante one that is ordained towards knowledge, a philosophical society we could say, and one where intellectual work for the benefit of the community is crucial “to remove those living in this life from the state of misery and lead them to the state of felicity.”

⁹ Ruedi Imbach, *Portrait du Poète en tant que Philosophe* (Paris: Vrin, 2023), 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹ Dante, *Monarchy*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.