

LIBERAL ARTS

Dante's Appropriations of Aristotle's Universe

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Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* features the proto-scientific worldview that conceptualizes sexuality as cosmic disorder, violence as denaturing, and nature without God as evil. Medieval concepts of the *Inferno* rest upon the Aristotelian-Averroistic and Ptolemaic philosophies that conceived the ancient worldview of a geocentric universe. Dante's cantos extensively stress Aristotelian geocentric order, weather, and metaphysics. The Aristotelian concept of disorderly wind, for example, malevolently assails adulterers for marital disruption, and "blind Cupidity" or sexual incontinence disturbs the souls of Dante's sinners who neglect to use their sense of sight, the Aristotelian mode of acquiring rational intellect. In featuring his God, Dante Christianizes Aristotle's "Uncaused Cause," the highest "substance" and intellect described in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Dante sought to demonstrate his Christian faith by localizing Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven in the spaces of the natural universe, but his work inscribes a medieval divine justice system to the celestial order of the moon, planets, and live immense spheres called "Intelligences" orbiting the Earth in desire for God. Unfortunately, past scholarship has questioned Dante's interest in Aristotle, so much as to say that Dante was fundamentally "against Aristotle," but the scholarship omits Dante's deployment of Scholasticism, a philosophy that sought to demonstrate faith through the Aristotelian geocentric worldview. For readers today, we can see in Dante's *Comedy* the Roman Catholic faith evangelized through Aristotle's science. "*Quantum illos proximus imitemur, tantum rectius poetemur,*" Dante writes in *De*

Vulgari Eloquentia, which essentially means, the more closely we imitate, the better the poetry.

Research advisor Dennis Barbour writes, "Jacob Zatorski's research project for my seminar in Science Fiction/Fantasy was the most ingenious project in the class. Who would have thought of the medieval poet Dante in connection with this genre? But, Jacob demonstrated convincingly that Dante based his imaginative (fantasy/fiction) description of Hell on Aristotle (science)."



La Divina Commedia di Dante by Domenico di Michelino in 1465 portrays Dante reciting poetry to the city of Florence with the Paradise "Intelligences" above, the Inferno to his left, and Mount Purgatory behind him (photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Opera di S. Maria del Fiore).

Zatorski, J. (2015). Dante's appropriations of Aristotle's universe. *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, 5, 103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315686>