
PURGATION IN PLATO AND DANTE

Charles Briffa

SINCE man is never absolutely good¹ he is liable to be under continuous judgement as an affirmation or negation of the identity of his actions. If man's actions are acceptable by authority he receives a rewarding judgement, if unacceptable a punishing judgement. However, the evil-doer has a chance to expiate his crimes. The concept of expiation is related to judgement for purification,² an idea that finds its way in both Plato and Dante.³

They both make the individual a responsible being and agree that the soul must be purified to attain divine grace. For Plato the soul must attain purification through knowledge; and Dante's soul through reason. Reason in Plato is essential to the concept of justice in the state and in the individual because it is a component of the soul or mind that is endowed with the faculty of taking decisions⁴ and this is what makes the individual responsible for his own actions. Even Dante, in *De Monarchia*, speaks of the intellectual faculty that acts as guide and ruler of all other faculties for the attainment of happiness.⁵ Literary development later on sees Milton emphasizing knowledge of evil that helps man to 'see and know, and yet abstain'.⁶ The Miltonic view of the Christian hero is partially based on the

1. H. Morris, *Philosophy for Beginners* (Dublin, 1960). Morris treats briefly the metaphysical idea of evil of nature, 'a kind of inherent evil of all created things' (p. 107).
2. Many cultures use purifying ritual techniques as protection against undesirable situations. In Egyptian mythology Horus, for instance, had a purificatory function in the coronation of the Pharaoh: *vide* J. Viaud, 'Egyptian Mythology' in *Mythology* introduced by R. Graves (London, 1969), p. 21. A whole community may feel threatened in the presence of a violator of laws as in the Old Testament story of Jonah on his way to Tarshish: the menace will stop after purification. Rituals of purification include water (baptism), mutilation (circumcision), fasting (*ramadhan*), prayer, and confession.
3. The major treatment of this theme is to be found in Plato's *Phaedo* in *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated by H. Tredennick (London, 1987), 108–115, and in Dante's 'Purgatorio' in *The Portable Dante*, edited by P. Milano (London, 1987), 188–365. All references here are for these two texts.
4. Plato, *The Republic*, translated by H. D. P. Lee (London, 1968), Part 5 Section 2.
5. *The Portable Dante*, 643.
6. Milton, *Areopagitica*, 25.

idea of purification by trial: “Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.”⁷

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates, justifying his altruistic suicide despite his view that voluntary self-destruction is a crime against God,⁸ defines death as ‘the release of the soul from the body’⁹ which he uses as the basis for his argument about purification. The true philosopher¹⁰ seeks fulfilment of the soul, not material pleasures: he avoids physical pleasures to concentrate on the acquisition of knowledge that is synonymous with virtue in which happiness may be found.¹¹ The soul must try to attain truth or knowledge without the aid of the body which is an imperfection that contaminates the soul, and it succeeds only ‘when it ignores the body and becomes as far as possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in its search for reality.’¹² As long as body and soul are together there is little chance of reaching Absolute Truth since the body, because of disease, emotion, and ambition, is full of distractions that interrupt the quest for reality. So, disposing of the body, the soul can obtain the required knowledge. This can only be done if it purifies itself before joining the company of the pure. ‘For one who is not pure himself to attain to the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of universal justice.’¹³

For Socrates, purification consists in separating the soul from the shackles of the body. In the meantime, virtue can be obtained on earth through knowledge which is itself a sort of purification since it ‘makes possible courage and self-control and integrity or, in a word, true goodness’.¹⁴ Moreover, knowledge does not lead only to the soul’s purification but also to its liberation. It sets the soul free, whereas desires and passions enslave it.¹⁵ It is with a free, purified soul that Socrates wants to go to God, and everything depends on knowledge that leads to virtue: ‘he who enters the next world uninitiated and unenlightened shall lie

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Last Days of Socrates*, 104–105.

9. *Ibid.*, 108.

10. *Verus philosophus est amator Dei* (The true philosopher is the lover of God) — these are St Augustine’s words in *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*, viii, 1) which may easily fit a portrait of Socrates. Socrates’ ideas have a ring of Christianity in them and it is up to the reader to decide how far we can call Socrates ‘a Christian’.

11. Knowledge and wisdom in Greek mentality had strong ethical connections: H. D. P. Lee translator of *Plato: The Republic* (England, 1968), 13.

12. *The End of Socrates*, 109–110.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

14. *Ibid.*, 115.

15. *Ibid.*, 135.

in the mire, but he who arrives there purified and enlightened shall dwell among the gods.¹⁶

In *La Divina Commedia*, Dante uses established Christian doctrine which provides him with Purgatory¹⁷ – a state of punishment where repentant souls pay the debt of temporal punishment and are purified from all stains of sin. After they leave Hell, Virgil tells the custodian of Purgatory, Cato:

I have shown him all the sinners in their pain,
And now intend to show him those who dwell
Under thy charge and cleanse themselves of stain.¹⁸

In his Purgatory, Dante is concerned with showing the roots of sin¹⁹ and the reformatory nature of the punishment. The sinner, having been persuaded to accept judgement,²⁰ must be detained in Purgatory to receive his expiatory value from Christ's infinite merits:

Its will alone gives of the cleansing proof,
Which, all free now to change its company,
Seizes the soul and makes it glad thereof.
It wills indeed before, but is not free
From that desire God's justice against will
Sets, as toward sin once, now to its penalty.²¹

After accepting judgement, three things are necessary for expiation: *confession* (admitting that you are in the wrong), *contrition* (feeling and saying you are sorry for what you did and asking forgiveness) – at this stage the sinner becomes free of the guilt of sin – and *reparation* (making amends to remove the stain of sin) – the sinner at this point cleanses his soul from the stain of sin.²² The soul then becomes free:

He seeketh freedom, that so precious thing,
How precious, he knows who for her will die.²³

16. *Ibid.*, 115.

17. St Augustine: 'As for temporal pain, some endure it here and some here-after, and some both here and there; yet all is past before the Last Judgement.' (*De Civitate Dei*, xxi, 13).

18. 'Purgatorio', I, vv. 64–66, (p. 190).

19. *Dante: The Divine Comedy – 2 – Purgatory*, translated by D. L. Sayers (England, 1969), 15.

20. St Thomas Aquinas: 'the stain of sin cannot be removed from man unless his will accepts the order of divine justice.' (*Summa Theologica*).

21. 'Purgatorio' XXI, vv. 61–66 (p. 296).

22. The 'Purgatorio' must have influenced Cardinal Newman's poem, 'The Dream of Gerontius' (1866) which describes the experiences of the soul in Purgatory.

23. 'Purgatorio' I, vv. 71–72 (p. 190–191).

And the will and judgement are no longer fettered. It can proceed to eternal happiness.

Allegorically, *La Divina Commedia* is the journey of the human soul (Dante) under judgement.²⁴ Made aware²⁵ of its own sinfulness by reason (Virgil), the soul of the sinner sees a vision of evil possibilities (Hell) within it and decides to enter a period of repentance and purification (Purgatory) from the guilt and stain of sin. The soul has now attained an experience of revelation (Beatrice) of God's presence as it enjoys its state of grace (Heaven).²⁶

The theme of purification is thus significant to the subject of man's judgement of man. The responsible individual who chooses freely to purge himself can profit immensely by the experience of expiation so that the will does not remain hardened in evil. His power to repent is not destroyed and he avoids a condition of a living hell here on earth, a condition typical of Branca's soul dragged down to Ptolema in Nether Hell still alive, leaving a devil in his body on earth:

When this man left a devil in his stead
 In his own body, and in one of his house
 Who with him played the traitor and did the deed.²⁷

Purgation restores order and discipline in the whole man through a vision of virtue²⁸ that brings about tranquillity of mind full of hope for heavenly bliss in eternity.²⁹

24. In contemporary literature, Graham Greene does the same in *The Power and the Glory* (1940): the power of the judgement makes the whisky priest journey through a period of purification on earth because of the lieutenant's pursuit that ultimately leads him to glory. The journey is freely undertaken (on the symbolical level) since the priest had ample opportunity to escape. Greene's novel may very well be a modern version of Dante's poem.
25. F. Chiappelli ed. *La Divina Commedia*, (Milan, 1965): 'l'idea fondamentale che guida tali esplorazioni nella psiche non e' l'applicazione meccanica di una dottrina che elenca peccati e penitenze. E' un'altra grande intuizione personale, o almeno interamente personalizzata dal poeta che l'ha fatta sua e l'ha riconosciuta nei mille aspetti della vita.' (p. 13).
26. E. Camerini ed. *La Divina Commedia* (Milano), 17.
27. 'Inferno' XXXIII, vv. 145–147 (p. 181).
28. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* (London, 1967), Ch. XI: virtue is connected with the hierarchical conception of things; if this conception is disrupted monstrosity results 'until the peccant being is either destroyed or corrected' (p. 74).
29. F. de Sanctis, *Storia della Letteratura Italiana* (Vol. 1) (Milan, 1956): 'L'uomo del purgatorio ha i sentimenti conformi a questo stato dell'anima. Il suo carattere e' la calma interiore, assai simile alla tranquilla gioia dell'uomo virtuoso, che, nella miseria terrena, sulle ali della fede e della speranza, alza lo spirito al paradiso.' (p. 243)