

Xavier University

## Exhibit

---

Philosophy Syllabi

Philosophy

---

2020

### CORE 100-20 Dante, Pilgrim of the Mind

Michael Sweeney  
*Xavier University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/philosophy\\_syllabi](https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/philosophy_syllabi)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Sweeney, Michael, "CORE 100-20 Dante, Pilgrim of the Mind" (2020). *Philosophy Syllabi*. 799.  
[https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/philosophy\\_syllabi/799](https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/philosophy_syllabi/799)

This Restricted-Access Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Syllabi by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact [exhibit@xavier.edu](mailto:exhibit@xavier.edu).

**FIRST YEAR SEMINAR:  
DANTE, PILGRIM OF THE MIND**

**CORE 100-20**

**A PART OF THE XAVIER FIRST-YEAR EXPERINCE**

Spring, 2020  
T/TH 11:30-12:45  
CLC 309

Prof. Michael Sweeney  
sweeney@xavier.edu  
Hinkle 205

**Office hours**

T 9:30-10:00  
M 10:00-11:00  
W 11:15-12:15  
TH 9:30-10:00  
Also by appointment and by chance

**WHY DANTE?**

1. Arguably, Dante is one of the two greatest writers of fiction.  
T. S. Eliot: “Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them; there is no third.”<sup>1</sup>  
Jorge Luis Borges: Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is “the best book literature has achieved.”<sup>2</sup>
2. College as pilgrimage: Dante will be our guide to college as a journey—a pilgrimage of the mind. Medieval pilgrimage was a physical journey to the Holy Land or to some other holy site that was meant to change and rehearse the journey of a life. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante is often called a “pilgrim,” but the *Divine Comedy* is a different kind of journey, an intellectual journey that is meant to change and rehearse the journey of a life. This course will propose the question whether college is merely job training or whether it is also an intellectual pilgrimage. We will read closely Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with the assistance of selections from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*.

---

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Dante” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 199-237.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger; trans. Esther Allen (New York: Viking, 1999), p. 30

**THE GREATER GOOD:** All first year seminar courses focus on the question of the greater good. There are three parts to this course, which correspond to hell, purgatory, and heaven. The question for the first part is “What is the relationship between justice and punishment?” For the second, the question is “What is the relationship between forgiveness and penance?” For the third, the questions are “What is the relationship between virtue and happiness?” and “What is the relationship between God and happiness?”

The *Divine Comedy* is revolutionary in its artistic focus on individuals, both living and historical. Nevertheless, it never treats individuals without relating them to community (or to lack of community). Individuals are seen through their place in hell, purgatory or heaven. Within each of those “communities,” individuals are further identified by their ranked place within that order. The nature of human society is revealed negatively through hell: alienation from God alienates human beings from each other. Only in hell are human beings alone. Nevertheless, even in hell there is order inasmuch as unequal vice merits unequal punishment. The nature of human society is revealed positively through heaven: communion with God creates communion with human beings. Here, too, there is hierarchy, inasmuch as unequal virtue (and grace) merits unequal reward. Purgatory is not simply the middle ground between heaven and hell, it is the revelation that suffering need not be an obstacle to communion with God and human beings; indeed, suffering can be meaningful because it can be the path to human society in a fallen world.

Although Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is a thoroughly religious work, philosophy is central to Dante’s religious perspective. When Beatrice died, Dante turned to philosophy and he calls Aristotle “the master of those who know (*Inferno* IV, 131).” Thomas Aquinas appears in *Paradiso* X-XIII as the spokesman for the twelve doctors of the church and, in spite of occasional deviations, Aquinas’ philosophy forms the philosophical structure of the *Divine Comedy*.

**CRITICAL:** From the perspective of the *Divine Comedy*, we will examine whether suffering prevents achievement of a common good and happiness (hell) or whether it is means to a common good and happiness (purgatory). What kind of suffering is compatible with achievement of a common good and which is not? How does vice divide human beings (hell) and virtue unite them (heaven)? Is human nature the source of a law that directs to a common good (purgatory and heaven) or something that unjustly restricts individual liberty (the perspective of hell)? Is communion with God the ultimate source of communion with human beings (purgatory and heaven) or is rejection of God necessary to achieve individual happiness (the perspective of hell)? Is divine punishment arbitrary and unjust? Like Dante, we will allow the voices in hell, purgatory and heaven to explain themselves and their answers to these questions.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY:** The nature of the *Divine Comedy* requires that the course incorporate literature, history, philosophy and theology. All three aspects are necessary for a full reading of the *Divine Comedy*.

**VOCATION:** Pilgrimage is inseparable from the notion of vocation. Pilgrimage is a journey to redefine oneself and one's place in the world. As the opening lines of the *Divine Comedy* express, Dante's vocation had to change mid-way in his life. Many students change their major in college and after college end up working in another field. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a good place to begin a discussion of why and how one's vocation can change.

**MENTORING:** Students must come to office hours to discuss their progress in the course (or schedule an appointment) at least once in the semester before November 25th. There will be a completely optional dinner at my home (date and time to be determined) with my family.

**SEMINAR:** Since the first year seminar is a seminar, students must participate in the class discussion. Since the class discussion will be textually based, students must do the assigned (private) reading of the *Divine Comedy* prior to class.

## **I. Requirements**

### **A. Three exams**

1. *Inferno*: 20%
  - a. Date: Tentatively February 18th
  - b. Questions: the two questions below.
    - i. Explain Aristotle's notion of virtue; how is it related to the function/final cause of a human being, to moral character, to habituation and happiness? Explain the use of Aristotle's notion of virtue by Dante in the *Inferno*.
    - ii. Explain Aquinas' notion of natural law. Explain the use of Aquinas' notion of natural law by Dante in the *Inferno*.
2. *Purgatorio*: 20%
  - a. Date: Tentatively March 26th
  - b. Question: What, according to Aquinas, is the relationship between mercy and penance? How is that account of mercy and penance exemplified in Dante's *Purgatorio*?
3. *Paradiso*: 20%
  - a. Date: Definitely Tuesday, May 5<sup>h</sup>, 10:30-12:20
  - b. Question: What, according to Aquinas, is human happiness, and how is that exemplified in Dante's *Paradiso*?

### **B. Paper: 20%**

1. Students will volunteer to join one group comparing one movie to the *Divine Comedy*
    - a. *Loveless* compared to *Inferno*
    - b. *The Wrestler* compared to *Purgatorio*
    - c. *Babette's Feast* compared to *Paradiso*
  2. One week after the movie is shown, the group will give a 10-15 minute presentation comparing the movie to the *Divine Comedy*
  3. One week after the presentation, the group will turn in a six-page paper comparing the movie to the appropriate part of the *Divine Comedy*
  4. More information about the movies is at the end of the syllabus.
- C. Class participation: 20%**
1. Daily class discussion
  2. Group responses to reading questions
  3. Public vs. private reading: The philosophical-theological background on the *Divine Comedy* will be read together in class, i.e., publicly. The *Divine Comedy* itself will be read privately and then discussed in class. Regular, brief quizzes will ensure private reading of the *Divine Comedy*.

## II. General schedule

### Part I: *Inferno*

- A. Philosophical and theological structure
  1. Aristotle: virtue and happiness (3 classes)
  2. Aquinas: justice and punishment (2 classes)
- B. Dante: *Inferno*, Cantos 1-33 (5 classes)
- C. Showing of *Loveless*: tentatively February 3rd
- D. Group presentation on *Loveless* and *Inferno*: Feb. 11th
- E. Exam: February 18th
- F. Paper of group on *Loveless* and *Inferno*: February 25th

### Part II: *Purgatorio*

- A. Aquinas: forgiveness and penance (3 classes)
- B. Dante: *Purgatorio*, Cantos 1-33 (5 classes)
- C. Showing of *The Wrestler*: tentatively March 4th
- D. Group presentation on *The Wrestler* and *Purgatorio*: March 17th
- E. Exam: Tentatively November 7<sup>th</sup>
- F. Paper of group on *The Wrestler* and *Purgatorio*: November 14th

### Part III: *Paradiso*

- A. Aquinas: God and happiness (3 classes)
- B. Dante: *Paradiso*, Cantos 1-33 (4 classes)
- C. Showing of *Babette's Feast*: April 15<sup>th</sup>
- D. Group presentation on *Babette's Feast* and *Paradiso*: April 21st

- E. Paper of group on *Babette's Feast*: April 28th
- F. Exam: definitively Tuesday May 5 10:30-12:20

**III. Schedule of Dante readings (private):** Our edition of the *Divine Comedy* has the original Italian on the left page and the English translation on the right page. Although the page numbers will include both the Italian and English, you are, of course, only required to read the English, which means half of the assigned page numbers. Readings average 18 pages of English per class or 36 per week.

**A. *Inferno***

- January 14: Cantos I-IV, pp. 2-39
- January 16: Cantos V-VIII, pp. 40-75
- January 21: Cantos IX-XII, pp. 76-111
- January 23: Cantos XIII-XVI, pp. 112-149
- January 30: Cantos XVII-XX: pp. 150-185
- February 4: Cantos XXI-XXIV: pp. 186-225
- February 6: Cantos XXV-XXVIII: pp. 226-263
- February 11: Cantos XXIX-XXXII: pp. 264-299
- February 13: Canto XXXIII: pp. 300-309

**B. *Purgatorio***

- February 20: Cantos I-IV: pp. 2-37
- February 25: Cantos V-VIII: pp. 38-75
- February 27: Cantos IX-XII: pp. 76-111
- March 3: Cantos XIII-XVI: pp. 112-151
- March 5: Cantos XVII-XX: pp. 152-189
- March 17: Cantos XXI-XXIV: pp. 190-229
- March 19: Cantos XXV-XXVIII: pp. 230-265
- March 24: Cantos XXIX-XXXIII: pp. 266-313

**C. *Paradiso***

- March 31: Cantos I-IV: pp. 2-37
- April 2: Cantos V-VIII: pp. 38-73
- April 7: Cantos IX-XII: pp. 74-109
- April 14: Cantos XIII-XVI: pp. 110-147
- April 16: Cantos XVII-XX: pp. 148-183
- April 21: Cantos XXI-XXIV: pp. 184-223
- April 23: Cantos XXV-XXVIII: pp. 224-259
- April 28: Canto XXIX-XXXIII: pp. 260-303

**IV. Schedule of Philosophy/Theology Readings** (public, i.e., read together in class from handout)

Part I

Aristotle: virtue and happiness (4 classes)

*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapters 7-11, 13

*Nicomachean Ethics*, VII.1-10

*Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1-6

*Nicomachean Ethics* III.10-12

*Nicomachean Ethics* X.1-6, 9

*Nicomachean Ethics* V.1-4

Aquinas: justice and punishment (3 classes)

*Summa theologiae* I-II.90.4

*Summa theologiae* I-II.94.2

*Summa theologiae* II-II.57-63

*Summa theologiae* I-II.87

Part II

Aquinas: forgiveness and penance (3 classes)

*Summa theologiae* II-II.30

*Summa theologiae* III.85-86

Part III

Aquinas: God and happiness (3 classes)

*Summa theologiae* I-II.1-5

**V. Texts**

Aristotle: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>

Aquinas: <https://archive.org/details/summatheologica02thom>

Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols [Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso], transl. Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam, 2004). This is a dual-language version; that is, it has the original Italian on the left and the English translation on the right. Here are the ISBN numbers:

*Inferno* 978-0-553-21339-3

*Purgatorio* 0-553-21344-X

*Paradiso* 978-0-553-21204-4

## WARNING

The content of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is deeply disturbing. *Inferno* depicts in extraordinary detail hopeless and endless human suffering. Moreover, Dante describes this world as governed by natural law, and so hell begins for the vicious in this life; Dante shows this life, and not merely the afterlife, from the perspective of hell. Dante himself (the pilgrim and character in the poem) is so disturbed by the experience of hell that he twice collapses unconscious. The suffering of those in *Purgatorio* is meaningful—it is not hopeless—but it is still painful and long. Dante shows this life from the perspective of purgatory, as he shows this life from the perspective of heaven in *Paradiso*.

*The Divine Comedy* is populated by individuals from Dante's world and previous human history. Since that world is distant from us in time and place, we will compare three contemporary movies to each part of the *Divine Comedy*—*Loveless* to the *Inferno*, *The Wrestler* to *Purgatorio* and *Babette's Feast* to *Paradiso*. These movies are not at all perfect matches to the *Divine Comedy*, but they allow discussion of themes from *Divine Comedy* in a more contemporary context. *Loveless* and *The Wrestler* are deeply disturbing, and you may rightfully opt out of watching these films with no penalty whatsoever to your grade.

### 1. *Loveless*

- a. Is a highly acclaimed (for a list of its awards, see the Wikipedia page: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loveless>) 2017 Russian film in which the abuse and neglect of a child is central.
- b. There are two long and very explicit sex scenes involving the parents of the child with other partners.
- c. There is an on-going debate among characters whether the child should have been aborted.

### 2. *The Wrestler*

- a. Is a highly acclaimed (for a list of its awards, see the Wikipedia page: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Wrestler](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wrestler)) 2008 American film about a WWE wrestler who attempts to change his life morally.
- b. There are extremely graphic portrayals of physical self-abuse involved in the wrestling spectacles.
- c. Use of illegal drugs is depicted.

- d. There are graphic scenes of impersonal sex.

**3. *Babette's Feast***

- a. Is a highly acclaimed (for a list of its awards, see the Wikipedia page: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette%27s\\_Feast](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette%27s_Feast)) 1987 Danish film about food and beauty.
- b. It is surprising, but not disturbing.

**If you think that watching *Loveless* or *The Wrestler* would be morally or psychologically harmful to you, do not watch these movies.** You may substitute for *Loveless* the 2008 American film *The Dark Knight*. You may substitute for *The Wrestler* the 2012 American film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Again, these substitutions will not lower your grade. If you start watching *Loveless* or *The Wrestler* and wish to leave the film, you are free to do so without repercussion. If you are in the group that will present on *Loveless* or *The Wrestler* and change your mind, you may leave the group without repercussion.

There will be showings of *Loveless*, *The Wrestler* and *Babette's Feast*. If you cannot attend the showing, you may watch the film on your own. For the sake of time, there will be no group showing of *The Dark Knight* or *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*; you may watch these movies on your own.

You may find all of these movies for rent at Amazon.

Detach and return at the second class.

**AGREEMENT**

1. I have read and understood the syllabus.
2. I understand the disturbing nature of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
3. I understand the disturbing content of the movies *Loveless* and *The Wrestler*.
4. I understand that I can substitute *The Dark Knight* for *Loveless* and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* for *The Wrestler* without penalty.
5. If I become distraught by the content of this course, I will reach out for help.

---

Name

---

Date