Understanding The Self Through the Spiritual

In the third and final part of Dante Alighieri’s The Divine Comedy, *Paradiso*, Dante uses scientific language in order to illustrate the importance of difference in the universe. In particular, in Canto II and III the importance of difference is explained as a manifestation of god’s spiritual power. Moreover, Dante uses the spiritual space of the heavens in order to provide an abstract solution to the reason for our differences. He shows that difference originates in our spiritual and intellectual natures. Without our thoughts, Dante shows, everything would be the same: nothing but dust.

In Canto II of *Paradiso* the main characters of this Canto, the Pilgrim (Dante) and Beatrice, enter the sphere/heaven of the moon. The pilgrim and Beatrice begin exchanging a set of educational, classroom-style question and answer. The pilgrim questions his heavenly guide, Beatrice, “how matter may admit another matter to it, when body flows into, becomes another body” (Canto II, 38-39), meaning that Dante’s matter has merged with the moon—highlighting not only that they have entered an outer, heavenly space and time, but that this location is a type of a miraculous space only understood from an immaterial level. Yet the pilgrim has questions about the material composition of this space. He questions why the moon has spots: “what are the dark marks on this planet's body, that there below, on earth, have made men tell the tale of Cain?” (Canto II, 49-51). Why would the moon have imperfections if it is located in a heavenly space?

The pilgrim explains that the moon spots are caused by the variation of denser and less dense concentrations of matter in random areas. But Beatrice says if the pilgrim was correct, then
this would imply that the entire moon would have spots that are free from matter, or that their density would consist of stripes. Beatrice explains that light does not shine through, or reflect off of, the moon in a way that suggests that it consists of matter that has different densities (Canto II, 8081).

Beatrice’s solution to this problem answers a material question in spiritual terms. She shows that the pilgrim’s questions can only be answered in relation to God and the heavenly spaces (immaterial)—where the material concerns become immaterial and is used as a way to connect "our nature [to...] God" (Canto II, 42). Secondly, the transformation from material to immaterial occurs when Beatrice denies the pilgrims science. Beatrice does not provide a direct answer to his question, but rather answers by talking about the importance of difference in context to the universe's celestial spheres.

Beatrice explains that the pilgrims reasoning is incorrect because this would mean that "a single power would be in them all: here more, there less — or equally" (Canto II, 68). In other words, if the pilgrim was correct in stating that the moon spots are caused by denser and less dense matter in certain spots, then all of the differences between each sphere would be caused because of the same thing, making them equal. She furthers her reasoning by explaining where differences originate (the highest heaven closet to God) and how different appearances reside from different powers. Moreover, these differences do not exist because of the material (matter) (as the pilgrim thinks the moon spots are created ), but rather from the immaterial; that is: it is God's choice of who he thinks should get more power. And, the higher the power the closer to God. In this passage Dante is suggesting that there is a hierarchy in the way heaven is created, and that some parts of heaven are naturally chosen by God to have a higher power—thus since the moon is chosen to be the furthest from God, it has the most "imperfections".
But there is another issue. If this difference did consist of matter (material) of randomly selected areas of denser and less dense areas rather than spiritual (immaterial) forces, then the moon and all the other sphere's would be one consistency. All the spheres would be the same where they all would randomly have some areas denser than others. If there is no difference with the celestial spheres, there would be no need for God to create different spheres. Through Dante's use of scientific language he explains to the readers that if the sphere's (God's creations) are made of material then there would be no true difference between the stars. Dante explains that difference exist because of God, where "different powers must be the fruit resulting from formative principles" (Canto II, 70-71).

Now, I have already discussed the importance of immateriality in the cosmos which results in differences, but I will now discuss how Dante relates the importance of immaterial to earth and humanity. In other words, why do all the debates matter to mankind?

Beatrice thinks that "the soul within your dust is shared by different organs" and this emphasizes that all material ends as "dust". Simple enough, but the reason for the "different potenc[ies]" is caused through the Mind and Intellect, and therefore come from the spiritual (God). Dante implies that although our material self decays and ends up like everything else, our differences (our choices, mind, actions, being) come from where our souls differences lie within the heavens that is created by God. Difference and Diversity –the very themes of our conference—are partly ours, partly the result of divine influence, Dante suggests.

Our differences are caused because of the immaterial: God’s influence transforms dust into specific things. This, allows us to be immortal through our souls, where we will be united with God in the afterlife, where "Intellect itself revolves upon its unity" (Canto II, 138). Dante uses the spiritual as a way to critique science, but also attempts to answer something many
scientists, philosophers and poets struggle to answer: “Why do we think?”. Dante’s *Paradiso* attempts to answer this essential question by explaining that our differences are created by our own minds. Our ability to have such intellect and thoughts cannot be understood on the material level, but comes from the spiritual level, where our souls reside in the heavens, and these souls are different because if they all were the same then we would all be off the same essence—just as God creates our differences, we exist because of our differences.

I want to return now to the pilgrim’s question—the question with which I began: why are there spots on the moon if heaven is supposed to be perfect? This question is explored more thoroughly in Canto III, where the souls in heaven are imagined to be different. The pilgrim is concerned with the fact that they are in heaven yet there still exists hierarchies, where the souls are "assigned this place for failing in their vows" (Canto III, 30). Why does heaven have a hierarchy? Isn’t that the vexing problem of earth and man? To explore the problem, the Pilgrim asks one of the souls, Piccarda, for her story of why she ended up in the least powerful sphere (the moon), and she explains that she has broken her vows. Interestingly, the pilgrim asks her if she is happy being on the lowest sphere, and she responds by saying "brother, the power of love subdues our will so that we long for only what we have and thirst for nothing else, If we desired to be more exalted, our desires would be discordant with His will, which assigns us to this place " (Canto III, 70-75). Not only does Piccarda explain to the pilgrim in order to be happy you need to accept where you are in life, but she also implicitly explains the importance of difference itself.

Previous to Canto III, the reader begins to understand the importance of difference, while it is explained in the context of the immaterial. But now, the reader is also able acknowledge that
one must want to accept their differences because this is what allows us to exist. Moreover, Dante is suggesting the idea of difference involves hierarchy (some souls lower than others).

This medieval way of thinking is problematic in the context of modern approaches to diversity, which reject—or strive to reject ideas of—hierarchy. Although Dante's divine hierarchies are not perhaps models for us today (what, after all would the non-religious person make of this cosmic order; and where in this vision is there room for the polytheist, for example), it is important, nonetheless, to note that these hierarchies are divine and not human. Dante shows how human efforts to impose hierarchies are hubristic, materialistic, imperfect—human hierarchies are doomed to failure. Therefore, any attempt to appropriate medieval thinking for ideas about natural worldly hierarchies miss this crucial distinction.

What interests me, in the context of our discussion today about diversity and difference, is the way Dante turns to scientific language as his starting point for explaining the differences that exist within the heavens. Through this methodology, he explains the importance of differences between humanity, and the fact that these differences need to be accepted by the individual because they are the reason for existence, where "in his will is our peace,” (Canto III, 85). Dante provides us with an abstract answer to where our thoughts come from, but also explains the afterlife in unique terms. The afterlife being a result of our differences, as our material being will vanish to dust, while our immaterial being will reside in a specific sphere. Even if one does not believe in God, Dante’s Paradiso is relevant to explain why we cannot understand where our intellect, minds and beings come from (and that is because we are thinking in terms of matter and in terms of science), but when we think in terms of the immaterial (spiritual) —and when we think with and through literature—we are given a reason for why it is important to questions of difference.
Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. The divine comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradise; translated by Allen Mandelbaum.