

Interactive comment on “La Commedia Scientifica: Dante and the Scientific Virtues” by Anthea R. Lacchia and Stephen Webster

Fabien Medvecky (Referee)

fabien.medvecky@otago.ac.nz

Received and published: 24 July 2020

Reversing Dante's tale, I'll start with paradise and the good. This is a beautiful written text, and narratively, I was happy to go along with it, almost no matter what it claimed. It was a lovely dance between ethics, scientific practice, and one of the great texts of classical literature. Scientifically, or, more precisely, academically, it was somewhat less robust. I'll divide my comments by purgatory (minor) and hell (major issues).

Purgatory: Also, not mentioning the mertonian norms of science seems a significant oversight. These set norms that are, at least potentially, akin to virtue, and some acknowledgement of their role needs to be present.

There are also some minor points. eg. Comparing science's ills with Florence's is

C1

messy. Florence's ills were very contextualised. But here it confounds what is science's ills (reproducibility etc) and what are academia's ills. There is overlap, but these are not the same. So are the virtues virtues of scientists or academics? Indeed, the manuscript messily plays around the lack of definition of what counts as science, but this matters. In fact, we might think it matters when it comes to some of the virtues (does scientific humility require scientists to take non-scientific academically fields as equally relevant and worthwhile intellectual pursuits?) Hell: The paper opens with the tantalising promise to respond to the question: "in contemporary science, is the good scientist also likely to be a successful one?" by looking at the moral world Dante presents in poem, specifically as work in virtue ethics. While the manuscript beautifully (I was going to say cleverly, but that would have missed the aesthetic virtues of the work) weaves a scientific parallel to Dante's guided journey during which a bunch of (scientist's) virtues emerge, the question as to whether this can make one a successful scientists (and the relationship between a 'good' scientist and a 'successful' scientist) is never returned to. Yet that's what I was sold on, so either the promise needs to change, or the delivery needs to amend to fulfil the promise. This is probably the major point.

The second issue, from a purely academic point, is what I can only think of as cherry picking (choosing one aspect or element to make a point and ignoring other potentially equally good aspects of elements), often without much justifying. For example, while Ulysses is potentially a good guide, it's not necessarily obvious, yet it flavours the work in a unique way. Similarly, in terms of which circles of hell are represented and mirrored for scientists (I'll limit myself to inferno) also shapes and somehow determines the discussion and interpretation. There is no discussion of the first circle, but issues around retrospectively problematic science - things/acts not thought at an issue at the time, but are now viewed an issue... eg p-hacking - seems like a good candidate (interestingly, Solzhenitsyn's gulag in the First Circle is a science and research gulag where scientists, due to the perceived value and virtue of science have a less-harsh gulag experience, which brings up interesting questions about the social placing of science). And likewise, there are no wood of the suicide. Maybe one of the sins/vices

C2

of science is to sacrifice scientific success for the sake of other cares...at least this opens important discussions which the paper promised to respond to (see my first point)

I really enjoyed reading this, and I think it need to be out in the public sphere. It invites much needed reflection, and the invitation to draw on Dante's journey is apt. If the intellectual rigour can be made to match the prose, this would make one hell of a paper.

Interactive comment on Geosci. Commun. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/gc-2020-29>, 2020.