Notes on Dante's *De Monarchia*

1. Preliminary Notes
    a. Prue Shaw posits that Books I and II are effectively preludes to Book III, in which Dante lays his cards on the table and tells us what he really thinks about the struggle between papal and imperial authorities. As with Aquinas, then, we are faced with the question of how broadly the political theory student should read within these works. Reading the whole is always advisable, of course, but points of focus still tend to be chosen. What, then, will be the value of Books I and II in the final analysis?
    b. The other question is the degree to which Dante's own struggle with the papacy--or, better, with the person of particular popes--colours his analysis. Is the point here to develop a systematic political theory on blended Aristotelian-Augustinian grounds? Or is it to pick and choose case studies from Scripture and history to suit his growing sympathies with the Holy Roman Empire? A little of both?
    c. Dante's work was clearly shaped in part by the ongoing Guelf-Ghibelline struggles in the northern Italian cities, not to mention the even more precise squabbles between White and Black Guelfs (and other sub-groups). Interestingly, Frederick II brought Guelf-Ghibelline struggles to bear upon the crusader kingdom of Cyprus. This seems to have flared up most in the range of 1229-1233 CE. Would that have been on Aquinas' radar when he was composing his manifesto on kingship for the king of Cyprus? At least in selected form, the Thomistic political writings seem to have a rather delicate touch when it comes to the extremely messy HRE-papacy situation.
2. Book One
    a. Self-Justification (I.i)
        i. Dante introduces his contribution to political theory first by pointing out the duty one has to improving the lives of future generations (just as previous generations have done for us; an emphasis on heritage is unmistakable here), then by arguing that politics is a new, almost untested field of inquiry. Who wants to read any more books on geometry or old age or happiness? Nobody! But everybody could stand to think more deeply about where political authority might find its foundations.
        ii. Why has no one written about "temporal monarchy?" Because there's no gain in it! Strange, since it seems there would be... but I suppose that would only be the case if one could guarantee that such monarchy would come out looking its best.
    b. Temporal Monarchy
        i. Temporal monarchy, which Dante (all to quickly?) equates with empire, is defined as "a single sovereign authority set over all others in time, that is to say over all authorities which operate in those things and over those things which are measured by time." (I.ii; cf. III.x)
        ii. On the one hand, this is boilerplate talk that equates the "temporal" with the "secular," both in opposition to the "spiritual" authorities that would deal with "eternal" matters. But Dante does seem to lay a little extra emphasis on the fact that Time plays a decisive role in defining monarchy (or political power as such?). And it's not just time, but also "measurement" in time that produces the main criterion. Those things which can be measured in time are

subject to political authority; those things which cannot be so measured fall under other jurisdictions.

iii. Cf. Aquinas, who seems happy to speaks of kings of "cities" and "provinces," rather than emperors of empires, which would presumably include many provinces. He also leaves a special place for the pope as the Melchizedek-like ruler of both spiritual and secular realms. Does all of this make for straight contrast with Dante?

iv. Three questions are to be asked of temporal monarchy:
    1. Is it necessary for the well-being of the world?
    2. Did the Romans acquire their 'monarchy' (empire) by right?
    3. Does monarchical power derive directly from God or is it rather mediated by a 'vicar' (e.g., the pope)?

c. Peace as First Principle

i. As in any sound Aristotelian inquiry, we must begin with first principles. Otherwise, our reflections would be based on nothing. Yet, since politics is a province of practical reason rather than theoretical (cf. Aquinas' painstaking proof thereof), we must take the ends (goals) of our practical action into account. In other words: if we want to ground ourselves in an *arche*, we have to look for our *telos*.

ii. The *telos* of political action would be nothing less than the purpose of human society as a whole. (I.ii-iii) It is not a question of the purpose of this or that society, but of any and all human community.

iii. The highest goal for humankind is to be found in the highest potentiality that is specific to humankind: i.e., the "potential intellect." This is the only things we share neither with the animals (lacking full intellect) nor with the angels (who are fully active intellect, self-understanding without potentiality). So the use of this potential intellect will have much to do with humankind fulfilling its total purpose.

iv. However, since our intellectual potentiality cannot be actualized by any one human being (or even a small group of us), there is a need for many human beings of many different kinds. All of these, engaging in intellectual activity simultaneously, come closest to pushing the imperfect intellectual potential of humankind in the direction of full actualization (our goal).

v. The actualization of our intellectual potential can take two forms: theoretical and practical. While theoretical actualization is 'highest,' since it grasps the universal classes of things, practical actualization is of consequence, as well. It consists of actions (doings) guided by political judgment and products (makings) shaped by practical skill. Politics thus falls into this latter realm of the practical actualization of humankind's intellectual potential.

vi. Certain conditions of possibility must be met if the actualization of our intellectual potential is to take place (either theoretically or practically). The foremost such prerequisite is what Dante takes as our first principle for political theory: namely, universal peace. (cf. Marsilius)

vii. Everything that follows, then, must follow from the grounding maxim that universal peace is the means by which humankind will be able to reach its proper end. (I.iv)

(That end is, again, the full-er actualization of our potential intellect, via both theoretical understanding and practical engagement.)

d. Necessity of Monarchy
    i. In every goal-oriented situation, the highest authority in any whole must guide the other constituent parts in their collective activity. This is true of the intellect guiding the other faculties within one person; it is true of a paterfamilias and his household; and it is true of the leader of a city or kingdom. Here multiplicity seems to be rather quickly sloughed off as inherently divisive and unstable. A kingdom divided itself cannot stand--and all that. Proper activity toward a goal requires singular leadership.
    ii. Dante notes that the purpose of a city and an empire are the same: to attain self-sufficiency so that the inhabitants might be able to live the good life. We now know that 'living the good life' has to do with living in a way that's conducive to the actualization of theoretical and practical intellectual potential. The only difference between a city and an empire, here, is that the empire is more certain about its ability to preserve peace. (The city, meanwhile, has its self-sufficient stability tossed about by the storms of micropolitics.) (I.v)
    iii. Since universal peace is the first principle of politics and the starting-point for human actualization, and since a monarchical regime stands the best chance of ensuring peace, then monarchy would seem to be necessary for the well-being of the entire world. (Well-being can be taken as the possibility of living the good life, i.e., the possibility of many members of humankind pursuing intellectual actualization.)
    iv. Monarchy, in granting the harmony that ensures unity, also has the happy effect of making humankind resemble more closely both God (the source and paradigm of all unity) and the heavens (the regularity of the celestial motions; cf. Timaeus). (I.vi-ix)

e. Justice
    i. Monarchy also has the effect of rendering judgments more soundly. (I.x) This is because, if society had many judges who were themselves part of the judge-able populace, they themselves could always be judged in turn for their judgments. As a result, their judgments would not be secure, but always subject to infinite revision. No finality or certainty would attend such a system of justice. But a monarch, as someone who is in but not really of the society, can render judgments with final, unimpeachable certainty. Such stability is key the harmonious unity that makes monarchy both expedient and divine.
    ii. Here Dante pauses to pontificate about the nature of justice. (I.xi) Justice is a "kind of rectitude or rule which spurns deviation from the straight path to either side; and it does not admit of a more or a less--just like whiteness considered in the abstract."
    iii. When justice is manifested via just acts or dispositions (*habitus*?) in particular people, however, we can see that these acts or dispositions are 'more' or 'less' just. The two factors that tend to limit someone's attempts to act justly are (1) weakness of will and (2) lack of power. Luckily, the monarch is (or should be) endowed both with a strong will and the power to act on that will. Only then can the rendering of equity take place (the work of justice as described by Aristotle and Aquinas).

iv. The monarch is also uniquely well-positioned to ensure justice because he (or she?) is able to preserve the proper 'order of love,' both for themselves and for society. Dante argues that the monarch, embodying the ideal of self-sufficiency, is immune to greed (though presumably not in the same way that the ascetic is). Similarly, the monarch is immune to petty grievances since, understood properly, he simply cannot have enemies (for who could oppose the embodiment of the community on the feeble grounds of personal animosity?). The monarch is also tightly bound to his people, since his not simply one ruler--one particular person more powerful than they are. He is instead the head and manifestation of the community as a totality. Because of that, each subject bears an indelibly intimate relationship to the monarch, as part does to whole.

f. Freedom
   i. Dante adds that the ideal state of the human community would be "completely free." (I.xii) But what is freedom? Is it identical to the free choice of the will? Is it free judgments in matters of volition? Perhaps, but Dante finds that definition far too rote.
   ii. For Dante, freedom and judgment must be understood together, but in a more precise manner. First of all: judgment is a combination of perception and 'appetition' (seeking or shunning). First a thing is perceived; then judgment decides whether to seek or shun that thing.
   iii. Here's where freedom comes in. If judgment retains its sovereignty over desire (which obviously also could affect our seeking and shunning), then that judgment is Free. If judgment is overwhelmed by desire, then the result is Unfreedom. If desire is in control, then freedom is not there.
   iv. This is why animals are not truly free, even though they do in a sense make choices (between, say, eating a banana or a mango). Yet those appetitive choices are driven by desire, which overrides any hint of judgment proper. Immaterial beings (e.g., angels) retain their freedom, however, even though they don't make 'choices' in any obvious sense, given their immutable stability. But their judgments always preside over any possibility of desire, which means that they are in this sense Free.
   v. This kind of freedom (judgment against desire) is the greatest gift given to humankind by God. And it is also this kind of freedom which is found most perfectly under -- a monarchy!
   vi. This sense of freedom also goes hand-in-hand with Aristotle's claim that to be free is to exist for the sake of oneself, not for the sake of something else. (One must be one's own *umwillen*.) But humankind only lives for its own sake when it is under a monarchy (which may contain elements of aristocracy and polity), rather than under the perverse forms of government which enslave us, make us live for the sake of something else (e.g., tyranny, oligarchy, democracy).
   vii. Here we find that, though the monarch is the 'master' of the people with regard to (powerful) means, he is the servant of the people with regards to their collective end. The monarch exists so that both he and the people can be free: i.e., exist for their own sake; i.e., let their judgments reign free over the desires that would make them lie for the sake of something else...

g. Why Just One?
    i. Earlier, slyly, Dante seems to have left open the possibility that aristocracy and polity are as good as monarchy, insofar as they all point human potentiality in the direction of its free actualization. However, monarchy still takes the cakes, since the unity of the ruling authority in one person is preferable on a number of grounds.
    ii. What are those grounds? They are varied. Dante dips into syllogism, quasi-mathematical language, and litanies of philosophical name-dropping (especially Aristotle and Pythagoras). In sum, he operates on the idea that unity is itself a prerequisite for goodness. Unity itself presumes perfect being, while perfect unity amounts to goodness.
    iii. Less abstractly, Dante argues that for any two comparable things (say, two ruling aristocrats), one will be better, one worse (at ruling, presumably). Given that there are only two claimants, whichever is the better of the two counts as the outright best. And that claimant should rule, with the totality of the members of society gathering under him as the head of whole, rather than splintering into factions based on troublesome plurality.
    iv. Most fully (I.xv), Dante argues that, since humankind's goal of actualizing intellectual potential is best achieved via a concord of human wills, and since this is best achieved via one controlling will which guides all others, humankind should adopt a monarchy if it wishes to reach its goals. (Why do we need one controlling will to bring many human wills into concord? Because the wills of us mortals need to be directed away from the seductive pleasures of our relative youth... NE 10.9)

h. From Theory to History
    i. As Book One draws to a close, Dante begins to set the table for Book Two. (I.xvi) More specifically, he returns to the theme of universal peace, the prerequisite for human actualization which only an ideal monarch could bring about. But has there indeed ever been such an ideal monarch? Has there truly ever been a peace approaching universal?
    ii. In short: yes! The reign of Augustus was in effect a golden age. This is attested not just by Aristotelian political theory (which has laid out the ideal outlines of monarchical rulership, which Octavian then embodies), secular history (the Roman historical and poetical cataloguing of the Augustan age), but even by the Scriptures themselves! Dante reads the Gospels as possibly even sanctioning the secular peace of Augustus. Perhaps this was indeed a privileged epoch, chosen as a fitting period during which the Incarnation could take place.
    iii. Is this Eusebian triumphalism? Western Caesaropapism? Simple nostalgia? Regardless, Book Two will have to investigate Roman 'monarchy' at its best (at least), in order to determine whether it counts as a divinely sanctioned paradigm for the top-down unification of wills that's needed for humankind to seek the actualization of its potential intellect both theoretically and practically.
    iv. Intriguingly, Dante here again returns to an emphasis on time as such--or at least time as a political construct. For him, the 'temporal' in temporal monarchy remains a loaded adjective.

v. To wit, of the age of Augustus he writes: "That mankind was then happy in the calm of universal peace is attested by all historians [mostly Orosius, who makes the Augustan *pax*-age a pivotal turning-point, deserving of the Christ-event] and by famous poets; even the chronicler of Christ's gentleness [Luke 2.1?] deigned to bear witness to it; and finally Paul called that most happy state 'the fullness of time.' [Gal. 4.4] Truly that time was 'full,' as were all temporal things, for no ministry to our happiness lacked its minister. What the state of the world has been since that seamless garment was first rent by the talon of cupidity [i.e., the Donation of Constantine as tearing apart the proper secular-spiritual unity] we can read about -- would that we might not witness it."

3. Book Two
    a. Historical Roots
        i. Turning to history, Dante first reminds us that he himself has undergone a change of heart when it comes to Roman Empire. While a younger man, he saw Rome mostly as the largest band of robbers, the militarized monster of aggressive conquest, as described by Augustine in the *City of God*. (Of course, Augustine wasn't entirely down on Rome, but he was resistant to the glorious renderings of both Eusebius and Orosius.)
        ii. Eventually, however, Dante came to see Rome's imperial rule as by right, not simply by conquest. This changed everything, at least as far as his political theory was concerned. Is this the beginning of the end, perhaps? Did Dante's political-theoretical awakening come before or after the political turmoil which upended his own life?
        iii. Both reason and divine authority mandate that the Roman Empire—and presumably its revival or continuation in the HRE—rules by right, not simply by force. It is therefore fundamentally unlike all or most other forms of political rule, as they can be observed across early modern Europe, at least. The Roman regime has become, for Dante, a manifestation of divine providence. There is little ambiguity about that. (II.i) He even refers to the Roman Emperor as the Lord's "Anointed!"
        iv. The only thing left to do is to demonstrate why—in the light of both reason and authority—Roman rule is by right. Once that's done, we could presumably apply this *de jure* principle to the contemporary political scene.
    b. Rule by Right
        i. Dante next makes it clear that to rule by right and to rule in accordance with divine will are the very same thing. (II.ii) This is because for something to be right is simply for it to be in accordance with divine will, which wills what is right within itself in the nature of God. (cf. the Euthyphro problem) Our sense of right is a mere derivation of this more fundamental, intra-divine Right.
        ii. So how are we to interpret political right or the will of God in the world? Do we know the heart of God? No—arrogant blasphemy! But we do know of certain "signs" which indicate something about what is right, what is the will of God. Here Dante invokes Rom. 1.20: we are to approach the invisible things of God via the visible things he has made. (Of course, this could lead to a dangerous path of taking 'historical evidence' of ancient Rome as some privileged path into divine providence… Not all signs are made equal!)

iii. Just as in Book One, Book Two will proceed on the basis of a teleological principle, viz.: "what God wills in human society must be considered true and pure right." (II.ii)

c. Roman Rule as Right
   i. It is right for the noblest to rule. Nobility, according to Aristotle, consists of virtue mixed with ancient wealth. Dante thus seeks to prove that Romans fulfill both of these 'minor premises.' In doing so, he interprets the literary inheritance of the Romans as evidence of their virtue (especially their honorable conduct in positions of authority) and patrimony (who could be nobler than Aeneas?). (II.iii)
   ii. Building on both the poetic record and Orosius' history, Dante emphasizes the fact that "predestination" (!) becomes visible in the very heritage of Aeneas, who combines the best of European and African "blood" via both his ancestors and his wives. This is an odd mixing of predestination language and proto-genetics.
   iii. Dante also interprets the remarkable events of early Roman history as "miracles" performed by the Christian God for the sake of Rome's political ascendancy. (II.iv) This includes even miracles superficially occasioned by acts of pagan worship and sacrifice! It turns out it was God behind the scenes all along (or at least some of the time)… (*Contra Augustinum*, who'd prefer to emphasize the demonic quality of even seemingly 'miraculous' pagan interventions…)
   iv. Reminder: "Right is a relationship between one individual and another in respect of things and people; when it is respected, it preserves human society…" (II.v) The purpose of observing right is to point human community in the direction of the common good. This is done through the rejection of greed and the prospering of universal peace & civic virtue. And what does the Roman historical record show us? Precisely examples of this shunning and approving… (Supposedly; contra Augustine's *magna latrocinia*.)
   v. The Romans were not "dominating" the world, but rather "protecting" it. Here Dante is riffing on Ciceronian patriotic propaganda. He then goes on to list a litany of great Roman individuals; the particulars need not be rehearsed here. The point is: to pursue the common good is to pursue right (*ius*) on the basis of right (*de iure*); the Romans conquered the world to preserve it and direct it to the common good; therefore, the Romans pursued right by right.
   vi. Dante continues on in this way. The Romans were ordained by nature to rule; therefore, they ruled by right. (II.vi) Natural hierarchy and military-political hierarchy are thus perfectly harmonious—at least, when the Roman prince reigns.
   vii. Dante next pauses to consider the question of how we actually know what the will of God providentially demands. (II.vii) To get at that, he unfolds a branching series of avenues:
      1. Revealed Providence
         a. By Reason
            i. Human reason can grasp certain moral truths by itself (e.g., die for your country!). No fall of reason here.
         b. By Scripture

i. Faith in Scriptural revelations is clearly a prerequisite for Christian understanding.

c. By Special Grace
   i. Direct Revelation
      1. By Spontaneous Divine Act
      2. In Response to Prayer
   ii. Indirect Revelation (putting-to-a-test)
      1. By Lot
         a. E.g., Matthias chosen as thirteenth disciple.
      2. By Contest
         a. Clash of Strength
         b. Race to the Finish

2. Hidden Providence
   a. What is even left in this category?
   b. This would be a less robust field of hidden providence than one finds in, say, Augustine.

viii. The Race: Dante next conceives of world history as a race for world domination. Many ancient empires have tried—here he cites Orosius copiously—but failed to conquer everything. Only the Romans accomplish world domination. (Bold claim!) This means they won the race, which means they won by divine judgment, which means they won by right. (II.viii)

ix. The Fight: Dante builds on the medieval model of 'trial by combat,' making it too world-historical in scale. (II.ix) When good Christians gather together in a passionate desire for justice to fight, then God cannot fail to be there with them. (Quite the application of Mt. 18.20!) Roman military conquest of the known world thus counts as a maximalist victory via trial by combat. And since trial by combat effectively communicates divine judgment and therefore right, this conquest was accomplished *de iure*.

x. The very life of Christ, it turns out, also ratifies Roman rule as right. (II.x-xi) The fact that He allowed Himself to be enrolled in the Roman census means that He supported Roman rule (Orosius makes a similar claim); the same goes for His crucifixion, which only carries the force of proper punishment (for Adam's sin) if the punishing authority is taken to be legitimate.

xi. Dante then concludes Book Two by taking a swipe at certain Church authorities (e.g., the Papacy) who claim to speak for Christ but who miss all of these supposedly clear signs of Christ favouring Roman secular authority. The claim for that authority is in fact buttressed not simply by non-sacral reasons, but by the life of the Incarnate Word and its retelling in the Gospel narratives. (II.xi)

xii. Even more boldly, Dante adds in one last line wishing that Emperor Constantine had never been born! The reason for this is that, if never born, Constantine would never have donated the lands and powers of the West to the papacy. At this point, Dante is a firm opponent of the *Donation of Constantine*, though he'll die long before Lorenzo Valla proves it to be a forgery.

4. Book Three
   a. Contemporary Concerns

i. With Book Three, Dante brings the lessons learned in Books One and Two to bear upon his own contemporary political situation. More specifically, he wants to know whether the Roman Prince (cf. HRE) gains authority directly from God or instead needs a mediator (cf. pope as vicar of Christ). We can surmise where he might be going with this. Sensing the delicacy of his topic, Dante also invokes divine protection, like Daniel entering the lion's den. (III.i)
ii. What shall our teleological principle be this time around? Dante gets right to it: "What is contrary to nature's intention is against God's will." (III.ii)
iii. Dante goes on to list three major groups of those who will oppose his closing arguments here (III.iii):
    1. The well-intentioned but wrong leaders of the church (including the pope and many clerics)
    2. The devilish wolves in sheep's clothing (non-HRE rulers?)
    3. The Decretalist, pencil-pushing lawyer-types
        a. They're not as evil, but they do place far too much emphasis on Tradition at the expense of Scriptural authority. The decretals may have some importance, but they shouldn't make it to the top of the heap.
iv. Generally speaking, Dante's opponents apparently want to say that the relationship between the Pope and the HRE is like that between an architect and a builder. The former grasps the theoretical totality of the situation, while the latter puts that theoretical understanding into practice at the behest of the former. (III.iv)
    1. Note: It is only here, in III.iv, that Dante cites Augustine openly. In doing so, he is merely making a point about exegetical methodology. Namely, he wants to use Augustine to back up his claims that his opponents play too fast and loose with the 'mystical meaning' of Scripture (fitting allegorical readings to suit their political interpretations). His silence on Augustine's complex historical and political stance is deafening.
v. Dante refuses to read the two great lights of Genesis 1:16 as prefiguring the sacred and the secular realms of power. He refuses to let such accidental qualities precede the creation of their substance (i.e., humankind, not yet created). Furthermore, he adds that political states become necessary for humankind only after the Fall of Adam. If there'd been no fall, there'd be no need for the state. (This may not sit well with his arguments, in Book One, that state-development is a natural process for humankind…) (III.iv)

b. Opposing Arguments
    i. Dante spends some time cataloguing and undermining his opponents' various arguments for the Pope as vicar of imperial power. They break down as follows:
        1. Arguments from Scripture (III.ix-ix)
        2. Arguments from Papal-Imperial History (III.x-xi)
        3. Arguments from Reason (III.xii; Dante is most doubtful about his opponents' hopes here…)

c. Dante's Solutions
    i. Against all of his opponents, Dante maintains that imperial power does directly derive authority from God. There is no need for the Pope to play his role as vicar, at least when it comes to imperial sovereignty in itself. (III.xiii)
    ii. The Empire directly derived power from God even when there was no Church, as Dante's valorized reading of Roman history showed. The Church hierarchy only arose later, and so it would be anachronistic to say that papal vicariousness is 'necessary' for imperial rule to be divinely sanctioned.
    iii. For his part, Dante finds no evidence from a papal role in imperial affairs in the Scriptures. Neither the Old nor New Testament demand clerical mediation between the divine and the one who rulers by right. (III.xiv) Instead, he finds Christ saying things about His kingdom not being of this world, etc. The life and teachings of the Incarnate Word constitute the "form" and "nature" of the Church. For the Church to aim to have an earthly empire, then, would be for it to go against its own nature. (III.xv)
    iv. All that remains is to make a positive proof that the right to rule is given directly to the emperors by God. This is already implied by the fact that the papal claim to mediation is false. But to add positivity to this negativity, Dante again deigns to proceed via distinctions. Each member of humankind, it turns out, is like a 'horizon' between hemispheres (III.xvi):
        1. The Corruptible
            a. Body
            b. Goal: Happiness in this Life
            c. Exercise of our own powers on a heavenly paradigm
            d. Reason
            e. Moral & Intellectual Virtues (Philosophy)
            f. Imperial Power
        2. The Incorruptible
            a. Soul
            b. Goal: Happiness in Eternal Life
            c. Enjoyment of the Vision of God (not attained by our own powers)
            d. Revelation
            e. Theological Virtues (Scripture)
            f. Papal Authority
    v. In order for humankind's goals to be reached, the Emperor must use his authority to suppress greed and encourage tranquil peace. In doing so, he disposes the social world, just as God has pre-disposed the natural world. The emperor's license for doing so is granted directly by God. One dispensation licenses the other. (Is this a positive proof?)
    vi. In the end, Dante does allow one minor caveat. When it comes to purely spiritual matters, even the emperor must still show deference to the Pope. So no emperor should co-opt the specifically supernatural functions of the clergy. But when it comes to pure politics, the Emperor is supreme. Even though he appears to be selected by the Electors, He is in fact chosen directly by God. If there is any disagreement among the Electors, this can only be because they are struggling with the difficulty of seeing the predestined, providential choice of God most clearly.