

Seven Long Centuries Ago, Dante Imagined the End of War and the Unity of Humankind

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Dante showed us the pathway out of the Ukraine war. Dante anticipated both federalism and democracy. And Dante showed us how someday humanity might abolish war.

It's difficult to imagine any sort of connection between the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and something that occurred in an unremarkable bedroom in Italy almost exactly 700 years prior. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the deep historical connections between Russia and Ukraine, at many times one and the same state, during the preceding seven centuries. But last autumn marked the 700th anniversary of the death of the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri, from malaria, in Ravenna, on September 14, 1321. His bones lie there still.

And though it's almost wholly unknown today, Dante was arguably the first great political philosopher to make a systematic case that all wars between nations might someday be eliminated entirely, and that it is within the power of human ingenuity to cast war forever onto

the rubble heap of history. Dante showed us the pathway out of the Ukraine war. Dante anticipated both federalism and democracy.

And Dante showed us how someday humanity might abolish war.

The great poet, of course, is considered one of the brightest stars in the firmament of humanity because of his immortal poem, “The Divine Comedy.” Yet another wonderful new translation just arrived this year from the poet Mary Jo Bang. It contains three parts: “Inferno,” “Purgatorio,” and “Paradiso.” It’s universally held up as one of the most important works of literature in history. It’s deemed one of the primary progenitors of the Renaissance. It puts on display the full spectrum of human behavior, from dark depravity to divine benevolence—and suggests that any one of us can journey from the one to the other. Its poetic rhythms and deployment of vivid imagery are spellbinding. And because he wrote in the Italian dialect of the Florence of his day, Dante is considered today no less than the “Father of the Italian Language.”

And though his distant heirs today likely receive zero royalties, “Dante’s Inferno” has even been made into a wildly-popular video game as well.

But if one considers not just literary excellence but also historical impact, it may be, in the very long run, that another more obscure work by Dante will provide humankind with an even greater tangible consequence. Because in a work called “De Monarchia,” (“On Monarchy”)—this one written in Latin in 1313—Dante put forth one singular grand idea about how the human race as a whole might one day organize its affairs. And it appears to be the very first work of literature to present in a comprehensive, coherent, and compelling fashion a solution to the problem of war. He called it “world government.”

It is difficult to understand why Dante’s manifesto about the political unification of humanity is so wholly unknown today. (Pope John XXII’s decree in 1329 that it be cast into the flames in the public square of Bologna might have something to do with that.) Strobe Talbott expressed his exasperation about this obscurity in his 2008 book “The Great Experiment: The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern States, and the Quest for a Global Nation.” Talbott was Bill Clinton’s Rhodes Scholar housemate at Oxford, a longtime TIME magazine correspondent, the number two State Department official for most of the Clinton administration, and president of the Brookings Institution think tank from 2002-2017. His book is an eloquent narrative history of the world state as a philosophical idea. And Talbott recalls and laments a “high-brow international conference in Venice,” where his erudite Italian hosts could recite long passages of “The Divine Comedy” from memory, but had not even heard of “De Monarchia”!

Dante concerns himself in Books Two and Three of “De Monarchia” with an issue that preoccupied many in 14th-century Europe—the political power struggle between various secular rulers and the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Dante in these two books (and in “The Divine Comedy” as well) clearly came down on the side of the former, arguing that while the pope was responsible for the fate of one’s eternal soul, other individuals and institutions should govern our earthly pursuits. This writing is seen by many scholars as one of the important early

lodestars that led finally to the separation of church and state in much of the world five centuries or so down the road.

In Book One, however, Dante concerns himself instead with the political power struggle between those autonomous secular rulers—and the perpetual state of war, or preparation for war, that prevailed among them all.

Speaking to His Own Age and Speaking to Us

Did Dante himself believe that this small work might prove someday even more consequential than “The Divine Comedy”? The opening page of “De Monarchia” suggests as much.

“If I have seen further,” said Isaac Newton in a 1675 letter to the scientist Robert Hooke, “it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” While the very first line of Dante’s “De Monarchia” is not nearly as well-known as Newton’s famous tribute to the scientific geniuses who came before him, it expresses much the same sentiment: “All men whose higher nature has endowed them with a love of truth obviously have the greatest interest in working for posterity, so that in return for the patrimony provided for them by their predecessors’ labors they may make provision for the patrimony of future generations.”

(While Dante refers to “men” and “mankind” throughout this work, today in a similar context we use terms like “people” and “humankind.” Dante quite obviously means the latter, but nevertheless I will quote the text accurately whenever the former appears.)

Dante’s sentence, indeed, is richer and more elaborate than Newton’s. (Both have been called perhaps the smartest humans ever to walk the Earth—though we might qualify that to recognize the 99% of all who ever lived, past and present, never given the opportunity to develop any of their intellectual gifts at all.) Not only do we “stand on the shoulders” of those who have gone before us, but also we hold living obligations to these departed souls. (And as we will see, Dante name checks several of his intellectual predecessors in “De Monarchia.”) To honor what they have provided to us, we must provide them with something “in return.” How might we do that? By taking the torch they have passed forward to us, says Dante, by holding it aloft and endeavoring to make it burn even more robustly, and by handing it off then to those who will come after us.

It is hard to imagine a more powerful definition of a meaningful life than that.

Dante then lays out how he proposes, in “De Monarchia,” to contribute to “the public weal.” Not for him a mere elaboration upon “a theorem in Euclid,” or yet another exploration of “true happiness which Aristotle has already shown,” or extolling “old age as Cicero did.” No, says Dante, “I wish not to be charged with burying my talent ... [So] I endeavor ... to bear fruit by publishing truths that have not been attempted by others.” And which uncultivated verity does he choose?

“The knowledge of a single temporal government over mankind is most important and least explored ... (and) has been neglected by all.”

And then, Dante says something remarkable for its open display of abundant ambition.

“I therefore propose to drag it from its hiding place, in order that my alertness ... may bring me the glory of being the first to win this great prize.”

Hardly anyone would openly proclaim such a thing today. Public modesty is the fashion of our age. One invariably balks when asked to assess one’s own contributions in most any endeavor. Are you the greatest shooter of a basketball of all time Stephen Curry? “That’s for others to judge.” Many writers, thinkers, and actors in many arenas may privately hope or believe that their contributions to the larger world, whatever they may be, may “bring them the glory.” But no one openly says so.

Why did Dante? Perhaps an extravagant confidence or even cockiness was not frowned upon then and there, in the same way as here and now. Perhaps he refused to engage in what today we call “false modesty.” Or perhaps Dante simply possessed such conceit in a greater quantity than almost anyone alive today. As the ancient schoolyard taunt goes: “It ain’t bragging if it’s true.” Perhaps Dante recognized that his literary and creative achievements would remain as luminescent as anyone who has ever lived.

And yet, seven centuries on, it is undeniable that “De Monarchia” failed to bring Dante any kind of glory whatsoever. His openly stated aspiration remains wholly unfulfilled. Many educated and literate individuals in the 21st century have heard of “The Divine Comedy.” Some of those have read it from beginning to end. A few of them have even fully understood it. (I do not count myself among the latter.) But today, 700 years later, virtually no one thinks of Dante as “the first to win the great prize” of revealing to the world the Big Idea that world government might banish war from the human condition forever. As Strobe Talbott discovered, hardly anyone, even among the well-read and privileged, has even ever heard of “De Monarchia.” And our human race doesn’t seem a whole lot closer to bringing about “a single temporal government over mankind” today than we were when Dante died 700 years ago.

But what if we fast forward another seven centuries, let’s say to the year 2722? It doesn’t strike one as wholly fanciful to suppose that humanity by then will have put war behind itself, gotten a grip on our greatest transnational challenges (climate change paramount but hardly alone among them), and somehow inaugurated the spiritual, political and constitutional unification of humankind. One might even posit that if we don’t manage somehow to move in that direction long before then, and learn how to manage as a whole the complex affairs of our one human race, seven centuries from now we may not find any descendants of ours around at all.

But if we do? Then perhaps it is not too farfetched to suppose that those denizens of a future age will see “De Monarchia” as not just a towering literary achievement like “The Divine

Comedy,” but a work of literature that, in the very long run, helped to move human history in the direction of its destiny.

Why a World Government?

The central idea of Dante’s “De Monarchia,” like so much of the literature on the basic causes of peace and war that followed in subsequent centuries, is the distinction between law and anarchy. Dante observes that while there are laws that govern relations within individual political communities, no such laws exist to govern relations among political communities. The result of the absence of such enforceable law is a continual state of war between those separate political communities. Such a state was defined by Dante in much the same way as it would be a couple of centuries later by Thomas Hobbes and many others: not just violent conflict, but the absolute necessity in the absence of a superior legal order to constantly prepare for the next violent conflict to come.

And yet, Dante asks, why can’t there be laws on that largest level of human community? If we could find a way to establish the world rule of law—through the establishment of world government—we would bring about the end of that state of perpetual war.

Dante signals the logical case he intends to construct with the titles of his opening chapters. “The goal of human civilization [Chapter 2] ... is the realization of man’s ability to grow in intelligence [Chapter 3]. The best means toward this end is universal peace [Chapter 4]. To achieve this state of universal well-being a single world government is necessary [Chapter 5].” “De Monarchia” consists of 16 such focused individual chapters. He concludes one with this statement: “Hence it follows that mankind lives best under a single government, and therefore that such a government is necessary for the well-being of the world.” As if he is teaching a class on symbolic logic to a room full of college undergraduates, Dante ends almost every one of the 16 chapters with a similar forthright assertion. No hidden meanings in parables that one must struggle to puzzle out. No camels passing through the eye of a needle. Dante is convinced that a single world state could bring about permanent world peace. And in “De Monarchia” he sets out not just to convince us of that but to “prove” his assertion—a word he uses repeatedly throughout his manuscript.

Dante launches directly into illuminating the logic of anarchy in the absence of higher authority. Conflict, Dante tells us, is inevitable in human relations. This is true of interactions between both individuals and groups. Without some way to resolve such conflicts in a peaceful manner, they likely will be—as they have been throughout all history—settled in a less-peaceful manner.

Between any two governments, neither of which is in any way subordinate to the other, contention can arise ... Therefore there should be adjudication between them ... a third and wider power which can rule both within its own jurisdiction. ... We must arrive at a first and supreme judge for whom all contentions are judiciable ... and this will be our world governor or emperor.

Now as terrifying as the phrase “world emperor” might seem, as quick as it might be to summon images of a universal Stalin or Hitler or Genghis, consider closely the words that Dante deploys in this passage: “judge,” “jurisdiction,” “judiciable contentions.” The possibility of a world government becoming a global dictatorship is not one to be just casually dismissed. But it’s a danger that Dante clearly wanted to forestall. How can we know that?

Because astonishingly, in “De Monarchia,” nearly 500 years before the American and French Revolutions, Dante presaged both the republican principles and the federative structures that most of the nations of the world have adopted in our own age.

No World Tyranny, But a Carefully-Balanced World Authority

“It should be clearly understood that not every little regulation for every city could come directly from the world government ... nations, states, and cities have their own internal concerns which require special laws.”

Obviously, it is those on the ground, in those localities, who are best acquainted with those local concerns—and best equipped to devise the consequent necessary “little regulations.” Seven centuries later, we call that “subsidiarity” or “federalism.”

And who, in those nations, states and cities, should be devising and applying those special laws? Local leaders, says Dante, “raised to office by the consent of others.” Seven centuries later, we call that “democracy.”

And when Dante offers up a couple of examples to illustrate his thesis, he reveals a bit of what the people of his own time and place knew about world geography a couple of centuries before Columbus. The “Scythians” he writes, must govern themselves in certain ways because of an “almost intolerable, freezing cold.” “Garamantes,” on the other hand, choose very different practices because they live “below the equinoctial circle, where daylight and dark of night are always balanced, and where the excessive heat makes clothes unendurable.”

Take note, 21st-century conservative Christians who, in the view of some, concern themselves excessively with issues of “public morality.” Apparently, according to arguably the greatest of all medieval Christian thinkers, no world government should ever ban public nudity!

Those “Scythians” lived in what we would describe as the former Soviet Union, in the seemingly endless forests and steppes to the north and east of the Black Sea, and are referred to often in Greco-Roman times. The reference to the “Garamantes” is a bit trickier. They were a civilization that first appeared in modern-day Libya about 1000 BCE. Yet they had long since disappeared by Dante’s day. Moreover, “equinoctial circle” is another term for the equator, and Dante indicates as much by his clear understanding of the “balance” between day and night. The equator, of course, runs not through the Libya of today, but the heart of Africa a good 1000 miles to the south. So Dante appears to be referring to sub-Saharan Africans, which Italians in the

early-14th century knew very little about. But enough, presumably, to insist that if they were someday to be incorporated into a world state, they should be allowed to devise their own “special laws” for their own “internal concerns!”

And yet, these local customs and governing mechanisms, Dante makes clear, would have to be consistent with the larger laws of the world state. And as example for this point the great poet summons Moses. The best guess of modern historians is that the Jewish patriarch lived roughly 1300 BCE. But 2600 years later, Dante informs us that Moses skillfully sustained the same kind of delicate poise that must prevail in a future world state: “Moses followed this pattern in the law which he composed, for having chosen the chiefs of the several tribes, he left them the lesser judgements, reserving to himself alone the higher and more general.”

This, we might posit, is why Moses instructed his followers to obey ten commandments, not ten thousand. The chiefs, however, in rendering those “lesser” judgements, must act consistently with those ten. “*These common norms*,” says Dante, “were then used by the tribal chiefs according to their special needs” (emphasis added).

The Goal of Human Endeavor

Like so many later thinkers about the world government idea, Dante sees it hardly as an end in itself—glorious though perpetual peace might seem to our eternally warring world—but a means to a grander end still. In this regard he is much like H.G. Wells, who six centuries later would forecast that what he called “a federation of all humanity” would bring about “a new phase in human history.” What is that grander end for Dante?

“This goal is proved to be the realization of man’s ability to grow in intelligence.”

Now many today would protest immediately that so much else needs to be done, for so many in our world of nearly eight billion souls, before we can start tutoring them on the most arcane points of philosophy or mathematics or high art. A habitable planet that hasn’t been driven completely haywire by climate change. Clean air. Clean water. Healthy food. Adequate, comfortable, perhaps even beautiful places to live. Safety, especially for the young, from sexual abuse. Safety for everyone from violence and fear of physical assault. An ability to make a living, to receive meaningful compensation for an honest day’s labor. An opportunity to live a life of dignity and purpose. Perhaps even a chance to pursue one’s dreams.

Yet, though Dante doesn’t put it in those terms, one feels certain that he would agree. All these things are necessary and desirable, and for Dante, the bedrock variable that allows any individual to pursue such things is the opportunity “to grow in intelligence.”

Moreover, Dante draws a distinction between particular individuals expanding their knowledge, and the human race as a whole doing much the same thing. “There is some proper function for the whole of mankind as an organized multitude which cannot be achieved by any single man, or

family, or neighborhood, or city, or state ... There must be a multitude ... through whom this whole power can be actualized.”

Now it is certainly not the case today that there is absolutely no cross-border intellectual collaboration of any kind. But plenty of such potential collaborations are constrained by international borders and conflict. Moreover, so much intellectual effort gets diverted away from international collaboration and diverted instead into national competition—most especially in the military and “national security” realms. When that kind of rivalry is eliminated forever, says Dante, it will be not just individuals, but the collective global brain, which can then move toward its highest potential in ways we probably cannot begin to imagine.

So how do individuals often achieve their own intellectual enhancement, and enlargement, and perhaps even original breakthroughs? And how might humanity do the same? Dante’s answer seems spectacularly obvious: “Since individual men find that they grow in prudence and wisdom when they can sit quietly, it is evident that mankind, too, is most free and easy to carry on its work when it enjoys the quiet and tranquility of peace.”

Peace and quiet. When we as individuals can find some, our brains begin to clear, our minds begin to work, and sometimes our creativity begins to soar. It sounds so simple, and yet, for so many, it is so often elusive. Dante, who was of course a devout Christian, summons the heritage of Christianity to make the point. Yet his analysis is every bit as relevant for non-Christians and non-believers in any kind of deity alike.

The good news from the shepherds, Dante says, was “not of riches, nor pleasures, nor honors, nor long life, nor health, nor strength, nor beauty.” It was instead, he insists, quoting from the Book of Luke, “peace to men of good will.” Indeed, says Dante, the standard greeting given by Jesus Christ was “peace be with you.” He calls it “the supreme salutation.” It is the greeting that the disciples of Jesus adopted as their own. And it is the same greeting that all Roman Catholics today, about 2/3 of the way through each Sunday mass, are asked to give to their fellow parishioners sitting around them in the adjacent pews.

We often attain our highest and best moments, and our greatest achievements, when we can sit down and sit still. Surely, says Dante, if all the human race, for the first time in history, could similarly “sit quietly,” and not have to live perpetually in fear of conquest, and not have to concern itself with the requirements of military security, this year and next year and every year after that, the same will be true “for the whole of mankind as an organized multitude.”

Step by step, almost as if he is constructing a mathematical theorem, Dante has built the road to the redemption of humanity. World government will bring universal peace. Such peace will bring the quiet life. That quiet life, for human individuals and the human race alike, will bring a new and unprecedented “growth in intelligence.” And that growth will generate a creative spark that will allow at last the full unfolding of the capacities of the human mind, and the full flowering of human civilization.

Dante, it seems, in drawing the analogy between quiet human beings and a quiet human race, crafted for us in “De Monarchia” a parallel of perfection.

The Shoulders of Giants

Moses is not the only intellectual predecessor summoned by Dante in “De Monarchia.” The late University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins (who also chaired the 1948 “Committee to Frame a World Constitution”) spoke often of “the great conversation”—great minds engaging each other about great ideas across the gulf of many centuries. In this spirit Dante repeatedly cites Aristotle (in both “De Monarchia” and “The Divine Comedy”), 16 centuries prior, to drive home his points. (He calls him simply, as did others during the Middle Ages, “The Philosopher.”)

“Things hate to be in disorder,” says Dante quoting Aristotle, “but a plurality of authorities is disorder; therefore, authority is single.” But when one goes in search of this passage in Aristotle, and finds it in his “Metaphysics,” we see that the philosopher there is himself quoting Homer from “The Iliad”—which as best we know was written four or five centuries before Aristotle. (Or, more precisely, that’s when “The Iliad” was written down, recording oral traditions that originated perhaps four or five centuries earlier than that!)

Now the phrase “authority is single” is most problematic when expressed in the present tense. Authority was certainly not “single” in the lands around the Aegean Sea circa 1200 or 1300 BCE, otherwise there would have been no dreadful war between the Mycenaean Greeks and the Trojans over a beguiling woman named Helen. Authority was certainly not “single” in the lands of the Peloponnesus during Aristotle’s lifetime (384 to 322 BCE), otherwise there would have been no catastrophic war between Athens and Sparta just a few decades before Aristotle was born. (Although before Aristotle died a strong single authority was imposed on Ancient Greece, and far beyond, by the conquests of his own student Alexander the Great in 335 BCE—possibly suggesting why this passage appeared in the “Metaphysics.”)

So what if we take the liberty of altering the text from the present to the future tense? What if we suppose that the sentence might have been intended—possibly by Homer, perhaps by Aristotle, and almost certainly seen in its context by Dante—as prescription rather than description? “Things hate to be in disorder, but a plurality of authorities is disorder,” perhaps sang some ancient bard, perhaps as long as 33 centuries ago, perhaps as she or he observed the denizens of the Aegean world slaughtering each other incessantly during the grueling and protracted Trojan War. “Therefore authority,” she or he pleaded, “must someday become single.”

Was this single sentence merely a throwaway line in “The Iliad”? Perhaps. And yet, one of our human heritage’s great geniuses, Aristotle, found it important enough to quote five centuries later. And another great genius, Dante, chose to highlight it again 16 centuries after that. So perhaps it is not too much of a stretch for us to suppose that the first glimmer of the idea that a “single authority” can bring an end to war appeared in the first known work of Western literature, Homer’s “Iliad”—which, as every undergraduate learns in World Civilization 101, is a

piece of literature quintessentially about the human condition during the (so far) eternal times of war.

But Can it Ever Happen? Dante Says Yes, Because Once it Did Happen

Dante brings Book One of “De Monarchia” to a close with the same kind of poetic brilliance and *cri de coeur* he displayed in “The Divine Comedy,” which has brought him, if not the glory of delivering eternal world peace to all subsequent generations, nonetheless still an eternal fame. And he does so by insisting that his vision is the opposite of some forever unattainable utopia—because in fact it had already once come to pass. When? During the days of *Pax Romana*.

Dante was likely not blind to the flaws and depredations of Ancient Rome. He certainly knew of the cruelties of slavery (which of course were not unique in the ancient world to Rome). He certainly knew that in that age (as well as in Dante’s), women almost never obtained the same kind of opportunities to develop their minds and lead fulfilling meaningful lives as (some) men. He certainly knew that the magnificent edifice of the Roman Empire had been constructed by the hard hammer of Roman conquest, unfolding over the course of several centuries.

And yet the peace that resulted within that vast empire, brought about by a single unified political authority, seems to Dante to be no less than the greatest achievement in all of human history.

During the Augustan Empire there prevailed a maximum of world peace ... [but] miseries have overtaken man since we departed from that golden age. ... For if we recall all the ages and conditions of men ... we shall find that not until the time of Augustus was there a complete and single world government which pacified the world. That in his time mankind enjoyed the blessing of universal peace and tranquility is the testimony of all historians.

Now we must acknowledge that Dante uses terms here that he undoubtedly knew to be hyperbolic. “Pacified the world.” “Mankind.” “A complete and single world government.” Obviously Roman rule and its consequent *Pax Romana* did not extend over the entire planet. And while Dante certainly didn’t know of the existence of the Americas, and probably did not recognize the full extent of Eurasia to his north and east and Africa to his south, the earlier passage about “Scythians” and “Garamentes” clearly indicates that he knew of vast lands far beyond the borders of the Roman Empire 12 centuries or so earlier. So too did the Romans themselves.

And yet, to the Romans themselves, at their empire’s height of extent and power and durability, it must have seemed like it was in effect all of humankind that mattered to them, all of the world that needed to be governed by them. They conquered and reigned over everything west of Rome to the shores of the vast Atlantic Ocean, and all the way as far north as Scotland. They completely encircled the Mediterranean Sea. They extended their domain as far east as the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. They controlled completely the three great rivers that had served as the earliest cradles of civilization in antiquity: the Nile, the Tigris, and

the Euphrates. They interacted and somehow coexisted peacefully with only one other entity that we might today consider a state—the Parthian Empire (roughly modern-day Iran), to the east of the vast lands of the Levant, which Rome had brought under its sway (roughly modern-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq). This vast dominion for them, measured by speed of travel and communication, was a great deal larger for the Romans than the entire world is for us today. “There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus,” it is said in the Bible’s Book of Luke about events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ, “that all the world should be enrolled.” That was surely not the only time that Romans referred to their realm as “all the world.” To the Romans themselves, and to Dante looking back on this time with longing, it must have seemed very much like it was “a complete and single world government.”

And regardless of his extravagant depiction of the geography of Roman rule 12 centuries earlier, Dante’s substantive point about the consequences of that rule is, in many ways, the point of “De Monarchia.” It brought “the blessing of universal peace and tranquility.” That blessing was not some fantastic dream, the kind that Machiavelli would scornfully insist a couple of centuries after Dante had “never been known or seen.” A robust peace had once extended over a vast portion of geography and an enormous and diverse assortment of humanity. It had endured for many centuries. And it had been brought about by Dante’s own ancestors on the Italian peninsula.

And more than a millennium later, Dante knew well that the absence of such peace, brought about by the dissolution of Roman rule, had brought only woe to humankind. And so he concludes Book One of “De Monarchia”: “O race of men, how many storms and misfortunes must thou endure, and how many shipwrecks, because thou, beast of many heads, strugglest in many directions!”

It is a question we struggle to answer still.

The Legacy of “De Monarchia”

Just about a year before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in early 2021, something went terribly wrong on a 44-year-old Indonesian military submarine, the *KRI Nanggala*, just a few miles off the coast of the idyllic island of Bali. It descended into the depths, broke at some point into three pieces, and was found on the ocean floor 2750 feet below. All 53 crew members perished. Emergency survival suits were found floating underwater, indicating that perhaps the crew had tried desperately to put them on at some point during their ordeal. It may never be known whether the 53 young men drowned, were crushed to death by the immense pressure of half a mile of water weight above them, or were slowly asphyxiated as the oxygen supply on their submarine dwindled and finally disappeared. “All Indonesians convey deep sorrow for this tragedy,” said the nation’s president, Joko Widodo. “They are the best sons of the nation, patriots guarding the sovereignty of the country.”

Why was the submarine at sea in the first place? It was deployed to conduct a “torpedo firing drill.”

Dante teaches us that perhaps such military exercises won't have to take place forever. Dante teaches us that perhaps young submariners won't have to perish in such a horrible fashion forever. Dante teaches us that perhaps countries won't have to "guard their sovereignty" forever, through perpetual preparation for the possibility of military action against some other country, which will be guarding a sovereignty of its own.

How we might get from this world to that is a thorny problem indeed. How such a world government might be designed is no less difficult a question. Dante in "De Monarchia" provides us with no form of a constitutional framework at all.

Many later thinkers in subsequent centuries would elaborate upon both the concept and the case for world government, including Erasmus, William Penn, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, the founder of the Baha'i Faith Baha'u'llah, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Victor Hugo, Sigmund Freud, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Albert Einstein. Projects such as the Hutchins committee mentioned above tried to flesh out the details of a constitutional structure for a hypothetical future world state. And many scholars and activists today, in the "global governance" arena, propose imaginative innovations that might be seen as "in between" the 1945 United Nations Charter and the full world government Dante envisions. Many of their proposals will be placed squarely on the table during the "Summit of the Future" that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres plans to convene in September 2023.

But must the Westphalian sovereign state system, which many historians date precisely from 1648, serve as the final form of global political organization? Must we all be divided into tribes with clubs for all of eternity? And even though we cannot forecast which diabolical creations will emerge from the weapons laboratories, not only 700 but even just seven years from now, must all nations engage in arms races in the latest in weapons technology forever until the end of time?

Dante teaches us that, just possibly, our best daughters and sons, of our one global nation, might one day devote their patriotism not to their separate countries but to our one indivisible planet, and that they might guard not their separate nations but our one human race, and that someday, our descendants might all dwell together in perpetual peace.

And then at last we can bestow upon Dante Alighieri the glory, for "De Monarchia," that he so richly deserves.