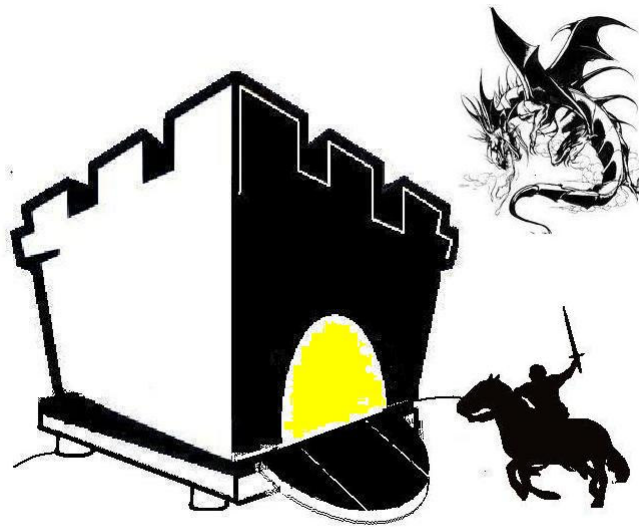# Fortress Living

Three Solutions for Your Greatest Problems in Life

Fortress Living: Three Solutions for your Greatest Problems in Life

Lesson Eight *Renaissance Solutions to the Greatest Problems in Life*
Seven Historical Periods

PERIOD	YEARS	Normative Solutions (Philosophy and Theology)	Situational Solutions (Arts and Culture)	Relational Solutions (Ethics and Spirituality)
Ancient	5th Century BC to 5th Century AD	The State Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Rationalism*	Classicism – – – – – – – – – – – – Stauary	* Ethical Hedonism * Bad: religious persecution * Good: religious purification
Medieval	500 AD to 1400	The Church Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Scholasticism*	Mysticism – – – – – – – – – – – – Byzantine	* Ethical Legalism * Bad: Biblical illiteracy * Good: Piety and Devotion
Renaissance	1400 to 1600	Reason Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Humanism*	Naturalism – – – – – – – – – – – – Giotto	* Ethical Dualism * Bad: compartmentalization * Good: helpful inventions
Enlightenment	1600 to 1800	Subjective Mind Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Rational Idealism*	Neoclassicism – – – – – – – – – – – – Beethoven and J.L David	* Ethical Utopianism * Bad: idolatry of the state * Good: religious liberty
Scientific	1800 to 1900	Science Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Empiricism*	Romanticism – – – – – – – – – – – – R. Wagner *Ring Cycle*	* Ethical Positivism * Bad: reason over revelation * Good: reasons to believe
Modern	1900 to 2000	Self Gives Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Pragmatism*	Impressionism – – – – – – – – – – – – Monet *Poplars at Giverney*	* Ethical Individualism * Bad: social isolation * Good: inner spirituality
Post-modern	2000 and Beyond	No Norms – – – – – – – – – – – – *Nihilism*	Deconstructionism – – – – – – – – – – – – Picasso *Le Demoiselles*	* Ethical Relativism * Bad: reject tradition * Good: truth alone

Renaissance Solutions to the Greatest Problems in Life

Renaissance	1400 to 1600	Reason Gives Norms _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _Humanism_	Naturalism _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ Giotto and Raphael	* Ethical Dualism * Bad: compartmentalization * Good: helpful inventions

The Period: 1400 to 1600

The fourteenth century after the time of Christ marked a significant milestone in world history. In addition to the enormous changes in the economies of Europe (the breakup of the Medieval feudal system and the rise of the middle class merchant), academies of learning like Oxford and Cambridge Universities became increasingly influential. But far and away the most momentous development was a simple invention: the moveable type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg, in 1450. What may appear to be a mere advance in technology actually had enormous impact on the philosophy, theology, arts and even ethics of the world. For Gutenberg's invention ultimately resulted in a radical shift in the balance of power—from the church chancels, throne rooms and classrooms of the educated elites to the public squares and marketplaces of the people. More and more "common people" learned to read and write as books, pamphlets and even newspapers were produced. This development fanned the flames of individual liberty that resulted in the next period with the Enlightenment. And in this period, the Gutenberg Revolution inspired the philosophy of life we will call Renaissance Humanism.

Dominant Normative Solutions: Renaissance Humanism

Humanism as a way of thinking that exalts humanity was nothing new in the 15th century. Indeed, the humanistic ideals are as old as humanity. Even in ancient Greece, the philosopher Pythagoras articulated humanistic views. It was Pythagoras who first uttered the "humanist motto" that "man is the measure of all things."

Even so, there was something new in this expression of humanism. It was different in many ways from the older versions. Perhaps the greatest difference was accessibility. As I said above, the invention of the printing press put literacy in the grasp of even the most impoverished peasant. This gave him a kind of power. It also gave him a sense of his own dignity and individual worth peasants rarely had in former times. The vast social and economic upheaval that began in this period resulted stemmed in great part from that singular event. It has often been noted that the Gutenberg Revolution was as cataclysmic and momentous in the 15th century as the Computer Revolution was in the 20th. Perhaps it was even more.

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Renaissance Humanism became the dominant normative solution throughout Europe. Recall that norms are the rules and laws by which we attempt to answer the greatest problems of life—especially the problem of failure. And in Renaissance Humanism the problem of human failure was given a resounding answer. The source of normative solutions shifted dramatically as well. It wasn't all at once nor totally accomplished during the Renaissance. But the balance of power began gradually moving away from institutions like the State and Church to individuals.

Though not usually thought of as a philosopher, one of the key figures of the period who embodied many of the humanistic ideals was Dante Algheiri. Dante is most famous for his literary masterpiece called, *The Divine Comedy*. In those days the word "comedy" meant something very different from today. It referred to a story with a happy ending—in contrast to a tragedy, which had a sad ending. The *Divine Comedy* was a notable work of humanistic literature for several reasons.

- **Humanistic and Christian Sources** – The story involved Dante's journey to the depths of hell, though it ended with him leaving hell and going up to heaven. From that standpoint, it dealt with Christian themes. However, most of the source material Dante used was definitely *not* Christian. Drawing from his own imagination more than the Bible, Dante envisioned a journey through seven levels of hell (purgatory) followed by a return trip through seven levels of heaven (paradise).

  His guide was the ancient poet, Virgil. Why didn't Dante chose someone from Christian history? Because his Renaissance humanism gave him more confidence in the pagan poet than one of the Bible saints. Virgil represented all that humanity should be. Apparently his lack of Christian belief mattered little to Dante.
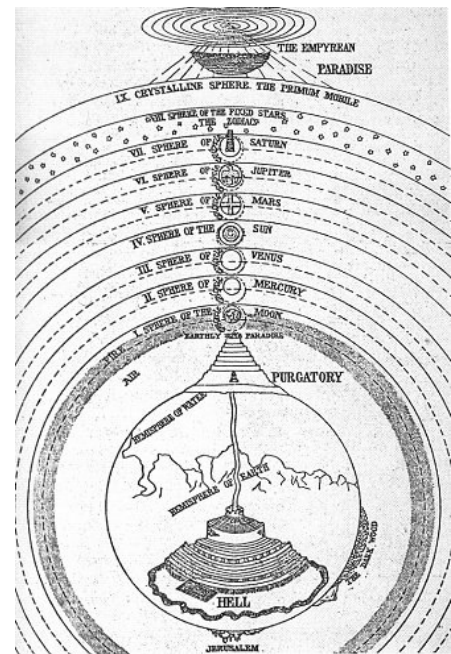

- **Humanistic and Christian Language** –The *Divine Comedy* was written in Italian—the language of his country. Prior to this, works of literature, theology and philosophy were written exclusively in Latin, known only by churchmen and academics. His use of the common tongue sent an unmistakable humanistic message to everyone that truth was no longer reserved for a few.

- **Humanistic and "Christian" Themes** – Though Dante's destinations—hell and heaven—were recognizably Christian, the means by which he reached them was definitely not in the biblical sense. The humanistic confidence in good works and human ability is everywhere in the *Divine Comedy*. We saw in the Medieval Period that the prevailing ethic was legalism: a focus on works and good deeds—regardless of the condition of the heart. In this way, Dante continued that tradition.

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Recall from earlier periods that the Socratic solution of two realms of knowledge, like a two story house—became the accepted explanation for how we know what is true, and how we find the solutions to the greatest problems of life. In those ancient times, Plato and Aristotle described the "upper level" of the house as the realm of reason and the "lower level" as the realm of experience. During the Medieval Period the scholastics continued this understanding.

However, during the Renaissance, there was a gradual shift. Though no philosopher of the time would have described it this way, in effect this was the change:

UPPER LEVEL: Grace and Faith
_____

LOWER LEVEL: Reason and Experience
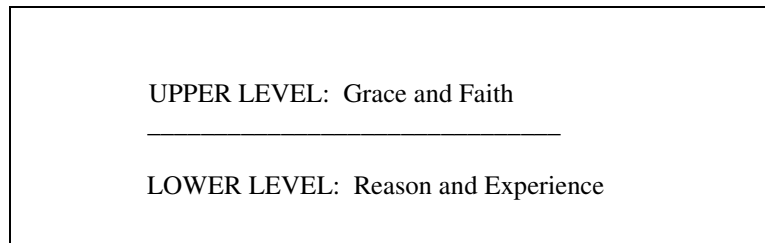
Reason was increasingly brought into the "lower level," alongside experience. You can see how this was driven, in part, by the new confidence in the common man. Reason was not just for some elite scholars somewhere. It was for everyone! But as good church men, the artists and philosophers of the Renaissance knew they must give some recognition to Christian ideals like "grace" and "faith." So, those were left in the "upper level"—where they wouldn't hurt anyone!

Dominant Situational Solutions: Naturalism

The humanistic elements in the Renaissance gave increasing importance to particular things in the natural world. It was as if the philosophers, theologians, and especially artists were rediscovering the natural world. The confidence in the power of humanity to triumph over adversity and, like Dante, make it to heaven by self-effort, had implications in the arts and crafts, where the Situational Solutions are so often found.

The new appreciation for the particular things in nature is clearly evident in the paintings of the Renaissance. Though there are many we could consider, we'll focus on one.

- Giotto di Bondone

Giotto lived in Italy during the 14th century and made a significant break with the artists before him, especially the Byzantine stylists with their preference for mysticism. Giotto experimented with "realism" in a way unseen since the ancients. The facial expressions, postures, gestures and even colorations of his subjects were much more natural and representational. Giotto still painted Christian themes, but he did so in a radically different way from his Byzantine predecessors.

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Compare these two mosaics. The first represents the mystical, Byzantine style. The one below is Giotto's rendering of the same subject:

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Giotto did not completely reject the traditions of the Medieval Period. His figures still have the nimbus around their heads. But if you look carefully at the features and colors of the subjects, you will see how "natural" and "realistic" they look, in contrast to the Byzantine rendering. Note the apostle at the extreme right and how his hands are clasped in front of him—or the backs of those seated on the ground—reflecting a very realistic curve. Giotto was not simply trying to communicate a message about the otherness and mystery of the crucifixion. He wanted to capture the historicity of it. And for this, we can certainly appreciate his efforts.

Indeed, most of the Renaissance artists had the same determination. They sought to communicate the truths from the Bible but in familiar, recognizable terms. So far, this posed no threat. However, as artists and philosophers often do, some attempted to, as we would say today, "push the envelope."

Over in France, another Renaissance artist, Jean Fouquet, set out to paint a picture of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Certainly many others had painted on this theme and for hundreds of years. However, no one had ever attempted it like Fouquet. I apologize for the disturbing image below, but you need to consider the implications. Fouquet titled it, *The Red Virgin*:

Is this simply another portrayal of the Virgin Mary attending to the Baby Jesus? Clearly not! Fouqet wanted us to know that was the subject matter: the woman wears a crown and is seated on a throne—in the theology of the time a reference to Mary as the Queen of Heaven. They are surrounded by angels. But those were simply excuses for the "real" message. And everyone of the time who saw it would understand. The model Fouqet selected for "Mary" was none other than the King's mistress. Her name was Agnes Sorel. The king knew this and so did everyone else. No longer was Mary the holy Mother of Jesus. Mary was an excuse to paint something shockingly pornographic. This is what happens when naturalistic expression, humanistic reason and the situations of life are unfettered by traditional norms.

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Grace and faith were increasingly isolated from the rest of life. They were placed in their own compartment, removed and separate from "real" life. This was especially evident in the relational solutions that dominated the ethics and spiritual formation of the Renaissance.

Dominant Relational Solutions: Ethical Dualism

The term "dualism" is used in many disciples and always describes an effort to hold two things separate but equal. Theological dualism was common in the early church, in a heresy known as "Gnosticism." In simple terms, ethical dualism meant that professing Christians created separate lives and lived them by different rules. Dante himself was an example.

I mentioned that Dante's guide into hell and paradise was the Latin poet Virgil. His love for the old pagan poet is itself an expression of his ethical dualism. But there was an even more glaring example: the woman who led him to heaven: Beatrice.

The character in his story was based on his real life mistress, Beatrice Portinari of Venice. Though he never married her, he always loved her from a distance. One gets the impression it was a kind of "affair of the mind" for he stayed married to his actual wife in his entire life. Today we would call it Dante's "secret life." It wasn't his wife that filled his poetry or his dreams. What's more, the prevailing ethical dualism of the time permitted him to feel totally justified in having two lives.

We have seen earlier that our human relationships are the "access" into the normative and situational solutions of life; they are the bridge that unites what we think with what we do. In Dante's case, and in countless others of the period, those relationships became increasingly detached from truth. And as they did, they ceased providing answers for the greatest problems of life. How could Dante solve the great problems of danger, pleasure and failure when he spent his life in a secret affection? The tragedy of such dualism is evident in this 19th century painting of Dante admiring Beatrice from afar. It was by Henry Holiday and was based on passages in Dante's lovesick biography. Though he wrote poems about her, we can only imagine what life was "really" like in Dante's own home.

The Limits of Renaissance Humanism

- **The Renaissance Foundation –The Norms of Life**

As a normative solution for the greatest problems of life—danger, pain and failure—Renaissance Humanism reached back into antiquity to an ancient answer: it's man himself that is the answer to the greatest problems in life. Whereas the source of those answers in earlier times was the State or the Church, during the flowering of the Renaissance, man looked increasingly within as the authoritative guide for rules of life.

Recall that normative solutions require a trusted authority. In the waning days of the Ancient and Medieval periods, confidence in the institutional authorities of government and the church were breaking down. The Renaissance brought cataclysmic shifts in the balance of power—away from traditional institutions and toward new ones. And don't underestimate the influence of the printing press in all this. As we saw, it provided the technology and the impetus for the continued shift of power.

While these changes had some good results, the real test would be the trustworthiness of the new authority structures to which men turned. If they would have rejected a power-hungry State and a power-hungry Church, and turned toward a renewed devotion to God and the Bible, it could have turned out very differently. In fact, it did in some corners of the world. During the Renaissance, men of faith called "reformers," devoted to God in profound ways, made significant attempts at turning the tide in this way. Men like Martin Luther in Germany, Jean Calvin in Switzerland, and John Knox in Scotland had a very different foundation from their Renaissance peers. And while their efforts made a sizable splash in the ocean of Renaissance history, it was relatively short-lived. As we will see in later lessons.

- **The Renaissance Structure –The Situations of Life**
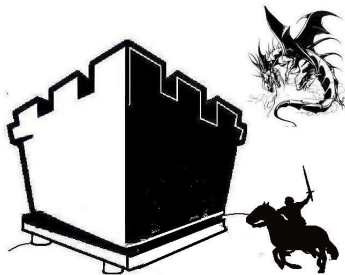
It's the sensitive men—the artists and craftsmen—who define situational solutions to the greatest problems of life. In a good way, the artists of the Renaissance spread a new appreciation for the particular things of the world and reflected this in their work. As we saw, there was a growing "naturalism" in the arts, leaving behind many of the restrictions and prohibitions so evident in the Middle Ages. There were wonderful inventions during this period that greatly improved the standard of life and understanding—for example, the printing press.

As we've seen, situational solutions rely on maintaining balance and equilibrium in the larger systems. Prohibitions and restrictions help serve that purpose, defining norms. However, when restrictions are abandoned, it is often difficult to know where to stop.

This grew increasingly common in Renaissance art. We looked at the shocking portrait of the Red Virgin, by French painter Jean Fouquet. He chose for his model not a simple peasant girl but the king's mistress. A painting of Mary and Jesus was no longer for the purpose of inspiring mystery and reverence. It became an excuse for pornography. The balance of truth, experience and action was increasingly precarious. And many of the "artistic" excesses so prevalent in our day trace their origin to the imbalances of the renaissance.

- **The Renaissance Access – The Relationships of Life**
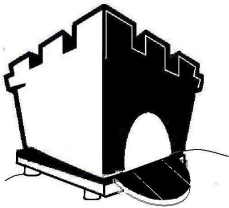
Even when all else fails we like to think that family and friends will always be there. Renaissance humanism naturally tended toward respect for the individual, regardless of wealth or social class. This could have ended well, with an even greater value of relationships such as a husband and wife. But as we saw, there was a problem. In the ethics and moral formulations of the Renaissance there was an increasing reliance on ethical dualism. Ethical dualism became an excuse for living out secret passions and lusts even while maintaining an outward show of virtue and morality.

In many ways, ethical dualism is the natural descendent of legalism. Legalism focuses only on external behavior. It sets up rules—especially for everyone else. But, secretly, it is a ruse to allow one to cling to selfish pursuits. We can only imagine what it was really like in Dante's home, sitting around the dinner table, with his "real" wife, when he had spent all day writing passionate poetry about Beatrice. It could not have been a mutually satisfying relationship for either of them. If the great problem of danger is answered by safe and trusted relationships with one who will love us no matter what, how did that work out for Dante in his marriage?

Quiz 8 Questions

1. The Renaissance Period covers what years?

    a. 1000 AD to 1500 AD
    b. 1400 AD to 1600 AD
    c. 500 AD to 1500 AD

2. The dominant normative solution during this period was:

    a. Mysticism
    b. Scholasticism
    c. Humanism

3. The painter Giotto created situational solutions to the greatest problems in life through what artistic style?

    a. Classicism
    b. Expressionism
    c. Naturalism

4. Dante pursued his secret love of Beatrice using a system of morality called

    a. Ethical utopianism
    b. Ethical dualism
    c. Ethical utilitarianism

5.Though many of the new discoveries of nature during the Renaissance were good, the reason even the good ones eventually turned bad was:

a. They found their source of norms (authority) in the Church
b. The found their source of norms (authority) in the State
c. The found their source of norms (authority) in Humanity