

DANTE'S DEADLY SINS

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MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN HELL

RAYMOND ANGELO BELLIOTTI

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For Marcia
Che tra bella e buona non so qual fosse più

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond Angelo Belliotti is SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Fredonia. He received his undergraduate degree from Union College in 1970, after which he was conscripted into the United States Army, where he served three years in military intelligence units during the Vietnamese War. Upon his discharge, he enrolled at the University of Miami, where he earned his Master of Arts degree in 1976 and his Doctorate in 1977. After teaching stints at Florida International University and Virginia Commonwealth University, he entered Harvard University as a law student and teaching fellow. After receiving a Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School, he practiced law in New York City with the firm of Barrett Smith Schapiro Simon & Armstrong. In 1984 he joined the faculty at Fredonia.

Belliotti is the author of ten other books: *Justifying Law* (1992); *Good Sex* (1993); *Seeking Identity* (1995); *Stalking Nietzsche* (1998); *What is the Meaning of Human Life?* (2001); *Happiness is Overrated* (2004); *The Philosophy of Baseball* (2006); *Watching Baseball Seeing Philosophy* (2008); *Niccolò Machiavelli* (2008); and *Roman Philosophy and the Good Life* (2009). *Good Sex* was later translated into Korean and published in Asia. *What is the Meaning of Human Life?* was nominated for the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy's Book of the Year Award. He has also published 70 articles and 25 reviews in the areas of ethics, jurisprudence, sexual morality, medicine, politics, education, feminism, sports, Marxism, and legal ethics. These essays have appeared in scholarly journals based in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States. Belliotti has also made numerous presentations at philosophical conferences, including the Eighteenth World Congress of Philosophy in England, and he has been honored as a featured lecturer on the *Queen Elizabeth 2* ocean liner.

While at SUNY, Fredonia, he has served extensively on campus committees as the Chairperson of the Department of Philosophy, as the Chairperson of the University Senate, and as Director of General Education. Belliotti also served as United University Professions local Vice President for Academics. For six years he was faculty advisor to two student clubs: The Philosophical Society and *Il Circolo Italiano*. Belliotti has been the recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, the William T. Hagan Young Scholar/Artist Award, the Kasling Lecture Award for Excellence in Research and Scholarship, and the SUNY Foundation Research & Scholarship Recognition Award. He is also a member of the New York State "Speakers in the Humanities" Program.

PREFACE

Almost seven hundred years of research and scholarship have focused on Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) *Commedia*. With the exception of Shakespeare, no single writer has been subject to as much analysis and critical commentary. Dante's evocative images of the afterlife, clever rendering of philosophy expressed poetically, and vivid portrayals of Christian theology fire the imaginations of religious believers and nonbelievers alike. The enduring influence of Dante is undeniable and his place in the canon of Western literature is secure. Indeed, students of the humanities would be hard-pressed to consider themselves educated if they had never confronted the great Florentine poet.

But why publish another book on Dante? Has not everything of importance already been said? Do we risk straining reasonable interpretation and distorting Dante's meaning if we continue to trade on his brilliance?

The Rationale

Yes, hundreds of books have been written about Dante's *Commedia*. However, to the best of my knowledge, none has taken the approach to be found in the present work. Most books on Dante explain his vision and its connection to Christian theology; or unravel the literary or poetic dimensions of his work and its significance; or relate Dante to his literary and philosophy precursors and successors; and a few even explain the derivation of his moral theory from earlier religious thinkers and from the doctrines of Christianity. But I have not come upon a single book that teases out the practical, secular moral implications of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.

My book summarizes the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* while underscoring their moral implications – particularly the law of *contrapasso*. I then discuss the notion of moral desert and how it relates to the law of *contrapasso*, while adding case studies to deepen our understanding of that relationship. But Dante's treatments of certain historical figures in the *Commedia* produce moral puzzles and paradoxes that must be addressed. Whether Dante's moral system is consistent or not is called into question by these examples. The work also explains, analyzes, and evaluates Dante's understanding of the "Seven Deadly Sins" and the role they play as final causes of much wrongdoing. Finally, I explain how, in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, Dante the author offers Dante the pilgrim (the main character of the *Commedia*) ten moral lessons that anticipate the wisdom of modern existentialism. Indeed, deep similarities in general framework exist between the deeply religious Dante and the relentlessly secular existentialists.

The Origin

A problem first confronted by Plato fueled my interest in Dante as a moral philosopher. I have taught Plato to undergraduates for years. In the *Republic*, Plato talks – not in his own name, through the mouth of his teacher Socrates, as usual – about the perfectly unjust person: an imaginary miscreant who commits numerous evil acts but is never detected and who seemingly gains from his misdeeds. The perfectly unjust person enjoys a stellar, undeserved reputation and stalks the world triumphantly, seemingly buoyed by his ill-garnered material glitter and personal glory. Plato warns that appearances are deceiving. In his view, despite the external façade, the perfectly unjust man is internally diseased. His soul is out of balance and inharmonious. The perfectly unjust man thinks he has gained from his evil-doing, but in fact he is unhealthy. Much as a person could believe himself to be physically healthy while he was in fact in the early stages of a terminal illness, so, too, the perfectly unjust man is fooled into thinking that he has benefited from his treachery while in fact he has perpetrated the greatest harm upon himself (greatest, that is, by comparison to the effects, themselves considerable, of his evil on others). For Plato, our internal condition, like our overall physical health, is an objective condition about which our subjective judgments could be mistaken.

To convince students that Plato's convictions may have some merit is a hard sell. After all, the perfectly unjust person may never experience any

negative effects of the internal disease that Plato alleges. The person who suffers from the early stages of a terminal physical disease will soon enough change his judgment that he is healthy. Once he is confronted by the inevitable effects of the disease, reality will be unavoidable. Not so with the perfectly unjust person. Yes, he may confront a Platonic scolding, but so what? If the perpetrator of evil has no interest in conforming to moral conventions and obeying societal norms; if his own desires are fulfilled and he experiences satisfaction at that fulfillment; and if he glistens with external validation as he is widely celebrated by his peers, then in what sense is the perfectly unjust person internally damaged or diseased? In what way will the impurity of his soul bear practical consequences? If the perfectly unjust person lacks an antecedent desire to be a moral paragon, then how will he suffer from his corrupt lifestyle?

One way Plato might answer is by invoking his rich, but highly improbable, metaphysical vision, which is yoked to a speculative account of the afterlife: only pure, harmonious souls will rise to the world of Forms and enjoy an eternity suffused with Truth, Knowledge, Beauty, and the Good. Impure souls will be rejected and, perhaps, will transmigrate to another body, in another round of rebirth. If so, then the perfectly unjust person, even if not unmasked during his life, will meet his just deserts upon death. Within this vision, the cosmos is rational and just after all.

Despite the determined efforts of many contemporary philosophy instructors, Plato was never fully convinced about the nature of the afterlife, or even the world of Forms. Especially in his later dialogues, he recognizes philosophical problems surrounding his metaphysical speculations and images of the afterlife. Moreover, Plato would uphold his doctrines about the perfectly unjust person even if no afterlife awaited us. Even if the annihilation thesis is correct and personal immortality is a fantasy, Plato would insist that virtue is its own reward and vice is its own punishment. And that is the doctrine that often fails to convince readers.

Yes, Plato does argue that the perfectly unjust person lacks freedom because he is a slave to his boundless desires; he is without friends because he will use anyone to further his own purposes; he is impoverished because his insatiable desires consume his resources; and he is fearful because his ruse may be exposed and those whom he has wronged may discover his treachery and seek revenge. Thus, Plato concludes, the perfectly unjust person must be judged unsuccessful and unhappy. But those who hear these arguments often suspect that Plato has changed the image of the perfectly unjust person. We began with a person who committed sweeping

misdeeds and seemingly benefited lavishly, but we end with a fearful, craven soul – a type of petty reprobate. Plato seems to embrace his conclusion that the perfectly unjust person is the most miserable of human beings only by sleight of hand. Must all wrongdoers end so pathetically? If so, then the notion of a perfectly unjust person – as someone who seemingly gains from his conniving – is flawed from the outset. Readers may well suspect that Plato has not proven his case. Yet we hope that Plato is correct.

Having taught Plato for decades, I assumed no new light could be shed on this matter. Then I returned to Dante. His *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* glow with unsettling images of sinners who become their sins. Dante illustrates vividly how sins reflect and sustain unworthy characters. He does this not only with words, but also with the haunting visions those words inspire. He, like Plato, conjures, with metaphysical precision, a transcendent world – one based this time on Christian theology. But I am convinced that Dante, like Plato, would continue to insist that virtue is its own reward and sin is its own punishment, independently of his beliefs in personal immortality and in the nature of the afterlife.

That our choices and deeds reflect and reinforce our characters in profound ways is a common theme in secular twentieth-century existentialism. Of course, secular existentialists discard belief in personal immortality and the afterlife. I began to wonder what implications for moral philosophy would result if I read Dante's work while suspending his firm commitments to the metaphysics of Christian theology. What other similarities to existentialism might be present? Could Dante, the consummate religious believer, and the secular existentialists, the relentless debunkers of the transcendental world, agree on a broad framework for crafting worthwhile lives? If so, would not such a framework vivify our efforts at forging our characters admirably?

Such is the genesis of this book. My firm conclusion is that, whether we believe in Christian theory or not, Dante and existential philosophy have much to teach us about living a robustly meaningful and valuable human life.

In that vein, Electronic Arts recently released a computer game loosely based on Dante's *Inferno*. The manufacturer exploits the brand recognition of Dante's work to differentiate its product from the dozens of blood-and-gore competitors. The main protagonist is not the poet Dante, but a warrior bearing his name. A crusader freshly off a stirring victory over the Grim Reaper himself, Dante rides back to Tuscany bearing his vanquished foe's scythe over his shoulder. Although the warrior had been assured that he

would incur no mortal sins in service of advancing the church's interests in the Holy Land, Dante learns that his soul is in danger because of his participation in military atrocities. Expecting a grand reception at home, Dante is stunned to discover that his villa has been razed and his well-endowed wife, Beatrice, has been slaughtered. The ghost of Beatrice beseeches Dante to rescue her from Hell. This quest is the point of the game: Dante must descend into a Hell whose computer graphics become increasingly powerful and daunting as the journey proceeds, and he must confront countless monsters, demons, and horrors in order to rescue Beatrice and redeem his own soul. Armed with the trusty scythe and having access to the powers of the holy cross bestowed by Beatrice, Dante begins his sacred mission.

A touch of moral angst vivifies the contest: players must choose either to punish or to absolve the souls of defeated enemies, different probabilities of gain being attached to each decision. Moreover, Virgil the poet provides occasional literary authenticity and welcome relief from the incessant mayhem as he recites lines from the classic *Inferno*. Of course, the game exudes colorful graphics and rousing sound: screaming sinners; King Minos rendering verdicts on miscreants appearing before him; a giant skull spitting out the corpses of the damned; flaming rectal sphincters; wild monsters, to be expropriated and used to slay enemies; and the like.

Purists will recoil at what they take to be a crass, materialistic exploitation of canonical literature; they will insist that the computer game falls below even the level of a classic comic book's rendering of Dante's work. Imagine portraying Dante as an ancient version of contemporary movie action heroes such as Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger! Populists will rejoin that the computer game may stir interest in the Florentine poet and lead users to consult the original text. Moreover, even if it does not have that effect, the computer game, like the poem, evokes haunting images of Hell, which may incline users to moral reassessment. Finally, even if the game produces neither effect, its worth as entertainment is justification enough for its production.

In my judgment, the crucial observation is that the work and name of Dante Alighieri are still of such robust contemporary relevance that a game manufacturer perceived correctly that they *could* be exploited for commercial gain. That invoking the imagery of Dante, however imprecisely, would help sell a product speaks volumes about the enduring appeal of the Florentine poet, even among those who remember him dimly, or only through scattered popular references.

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Numerous people contributed to this work directly or indirectly. As always, my family comes first. My wife, Marcia, is my Beatrice. Fortunately, unlike Dante, my greatest love is not merely an idealized fantasy, but my one true *innamorata*. My children, Angelo and Vittoria, are the *sangu du me sangu* and my greatest legacy. It warms my spirit to think that this book will long outlive its author and that my words will be available to torment my children when I am no longer here.

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Finally, I thank the publishers of Rowman & Littlefield and Lexington Books for their permission to reprint and adapt material from my books, *Happiness is Overrated* and *Roman Philosophy and the Good Life*.

INTRODUCTION

The Historical Context

Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 in Florence. His mother died when Dante was a child. His father remarried and died when Dante was about 18 years old. The Alighieri family was noble in terms of titles, lineage, and tradition. For example, Dante's great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguیدا, was knighted by Emperor Conrad III. However, by the time of Dante's arrival, the family's fortunes had regressed.

The Alighieri family was politically identified with the *guelfo* (Guelf party), who were composed of artisans and lesser nobility, and aligned with the papacy. Their major opponents were the *ghibellino* (Ghibelline party), composed of feudal aristocrats aligned with the Holy Roman emperor. As time and events proceeded, these compositions and alignments were less distinguishable. Local loyalties, rivalries, and private maneuvering loomed larger than party platforms and traditional ideologies.

In 1244 the Florentine Ghibellines invited the leaders of the seven major guilds to join the city councils. (Guilds were voluntary, self-defining institutions authorized to receive dues from members, establish and monitor professional and business activities, supervise contracts members entered into with outside agencies, and discipline members for violations of professional ethics.) This overture was innovative in that the rival parties had previously been composed only of nobles and aristocrats. The pilot program was soon abandoned, but the seeds of popular political involvement had been sown.

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In 1250, taking advantage of the ongoing aristocratic feuds, the *popolo* (common people) seized control of Florence at the battle of Figline. A new General Council was established that permitted the *popolo* to exclude Guelfs and Ghibellines alike from the most important political offices. The rule *prima popolo* (“the common folk before all else”) survived for a decade. However, in 1260, the Sieneese and Florentine Ghibellines, led by Farinata degli Uberti and aided by forces supplied by King Manfred of Sicily, soundly defeated the Florentine Guelfs and their allies at Montaperti. (Dante recalls this disaster in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*.) Striving for neutrality, the *popolo* sought a peaceful resolution. Two years earlier the Ghibellines had tried to seize power from the *popolo*. That plot, combined with the humiliating loss to the Sieneese Ghibellines – “The deceitful, despicable, vainglorious Sieneese, for goodness sake!” – served to harden the resolve of the *popolo* and to drive it toward the Guelfs.

In February 1266, the popular guilds and the Guelfs rose up against the Ghibellines. In central and southern Italy the Ghibelline power was crushed by the victory of Charles of Anjou, brother of King Louis IX of France, over the forces of King Manfred of Sicily. The decisive battle of Benevento ended with the death of Manfred. His body was entombed on the battlefield under a huge pile of stones. Later the pope unearthed Manfred’s remains and cast them out of papal territory. (Dante recounts these events in the third canto of the *Purgatorio*.) Among numerous other titles, Charles assumed the post of *podestà* (chief magistrate) of Florence for twelve years. During his reign, Charles politically marginalized the *popolo*.

Accordingly, in 1266, the Guelfs took control of Florence and ushered in almost thirty years of relative peace (punctuated by occasional drama) and of economic prosperity spurred by thriving banking and manufacturing industries. Despite the aftermath of Benevento, the Ghibellines remained formidable and were especially prominent in Siena and Pisa, traditional rivals of Florence. In 1280, annoyed by the French power brokers, Pope Nicholas III sent his nephew, Cardinal Malabranca, to Florence. (In the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*, Dante condemns Nicholas with the other simonists to the eighth circle of Hell.) The next year, 50 Guelfs and 50 Ghibellines publicly joined hands and pledged to maintain the peace and to deepen it: pleasant theatre but ineffective politics. Groups of Guelfs and Ghibellines still managed to continue plots, schemes, and minor revolts.

In 1282 the famous Sicilian Vespers – in which Sicilians expelled the French forces of Charles from the island – emboldened Florentine Ghibellines to curry the support of the lower guilds, as the Guelfs courted



the seven major guilds. The result of this maneuvering favored the *popolo*, because government was controlled by the guilds, which elected from among their ranks six priors who ruled for two-month terms. Along with the General Council and the *podestà*, these officials ruled the city. However, the *magnati* (nobles) soon insinuated themselves into dominating positions within the guilds and oversaw the election of priors.

The Life of Dante

Meanwhile Dante enjoyed a pleasant family life and an apparently solid education. He probably studied in Franciscan elementary schools and in that order's schools of philosophy. Dante also probably studied with the renowned scholar and statesman Brunetto Latini, who energized Dante's thirst for knowledge. (The pilgrim meets Brunetto in the fifteenth canto of the *Inferno*, where the great writer is consigned with the other sodomites to the seventh circle of Hell.) Dante attributed to Brunetto several crucial dimensions of his education: that riches and lineage are poor substitutes for individual achievement and virtuous living; that effective rhetoric, robust ethical thinking, and progressive government are connected; that teaching and learning have critical practical effects; and that human beings are finite, but can attain a measure of earthly immortality through spiritual nobility and the creation of enduring works. The notion that the most distinguished human beings would earn enduring glory through the ongoing celebration of their achievements and good deeds on earth was deeply influential in ancient Rome. The Romans were convinced that, whether one was a senator and philosopher, like Cicero, or a militarist and powerful statesman, like Julius Caesar, grand achievement on behalf of the community earned one a glorious legacy, which defined earthly immortality. Brunetto learned this from assiduously studying the writings of Cicero; and he passed on the lessons to Dante. Dante would come to view the wisdom of the leader of a healthy, universal commonwealth as the greatest guide to attaining earthly happiness, in analogy to how the word of God is the supreme guide to attaining eternal bliss in Paradise.

In 1287 Dante traveled to the prestigious University of Bologna, to study rhetoric and the techniques of style. Dante was drawn to poetry, art, learning, and the nature of love. His friendship with Guido Cavalcanti, an aristocratic poet, animated his early verse writing. The two focused on images of inner human perfection and the nature of love. When he was



about eighteen Dante married Gemma di Manetto Donati. The pairing had been arranged by Dante's father at least six years earlier. The couple spawned two sons and a daughter (and, possibly, a fourth child).

A greater influence on Dante's life and work was his connection to Beatrice ("Bice") Portinari. She was a Florentine woman of remarkable beauty and goodness. Dante first met her when he was 9, and he was immediately *colpito dal fulmine* ("struck by lightning"). She remained the love of his life, at least in his fantasies. They met again later; they often greeted each other in the street, but apparently had no serious personal contact. Their shadow relationship was an example of quaint, courtly love. As years passed, Dante placed Beatrice on higher and higher pedestals, fantasizing her as the ideal of human perfection in virtue, beauty, and grace. Indeed the youthful Dante took Beatrice to be God's gift to humanity. Dante's idealization of Beatrice brightly supports the proposition that the most powerful erogenous zone is the human brain.

To fulfill his military service, at the age of 24, Dante enlisted in the cavalry. In 1289 he took part in the battle of Campaldino, where Florence and its Guelf allies defeated the forces of the town of Arezzo. The victory gave rise to reformation of the Florentine constitution. Later that year, Dante participated in the successful siege of the Pisan fortress of Caprona. (Both events are chronicled in Dante's *Commedia*: the pilgrim meets Buonconte da Montefeltro, who bravely died at Campaldino, in the fifth canto of the *Purgatorio*; in the twenty-first canto of the *Inferno* he recalls the surrender of the fortress of Caprona.)

In 1290 Beatrice died. This event only deepened Dante's idealized love for her. He followed his mourning by compiling numerous poems – some written in her honor, all inspired by her – added commentaries, and called the collection *Vita nuova* (*New Life*). Dante both recounts and reflects upon his experiences in this celebrated work. The relationship between love and reason is a recurring theme. Dante recalls how he became the servant of love when, as a 9-year-old, he saw 8-year-old Beatrice dressed in red. A servant of love? From the perspective of a jaded contemporary adult, with due deference to Beatrice's youthful comeliness and the intoxicating power of scarlet, to think that a 9-year-old boy could have had even an inkling of the nature of romantic love is beyond preposterousness. But Dante was apparently a child of rare sensitivity and unparalleled imagination.

Upon seeing Beatrice again nine years later, his passion deepened. This second encounter is followed by a dream in which the god of love announces his power over Dante. (Shades of Francesca in *Inferno*, canto



five!) Throughout the *Vita nuova*, the celebration of Beatrice as a gift of the divine is pervasive. In the final chapter Dante confesses his own inadequacy in dealing with these topics: the sentimentality of Dante the lover contrasts with the unfathomable perfection of Beatrice the beloved. The beloved inspires the author to attend to his own spiritual transformation. Philosophy offers great consolation, but cannot replace the author's love of Beatrice: The glories of this world cannot supplant a divine gift (especially when the distorting lens of retrospective falsification is in play).

The death of Beatrice led Dante to immerse himself in philosophy in order to deepen his understanding of the nature of human beings, of their prospects for perfection, and of the connection between love and spiritual redemption. He intellectually devoured the works of Boethius, Cicero, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and numerous Christian theologians.

Among the ancient poets, those highlighted in the fourth canto of the *Inferno* – Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan – were great influences upon Dante. However, Virgil, the master of the *Aeneid*, stands above all others. Dante was enamored of the age of Augustus, and Virgil represented the pinnacle of human reason, expressed aesthetically through poetry.

In 1293 the effects of the wars against Arezzo and Pisa beleaguered Florence. Officials had mismanaged the city's finances and political corruption had become embarrassing, even by Florence's low bar of governmental propriety. A prosperous merchant with noble lineage and deep sympathies for the *popolo* emerged. Giano della Bella promised reform and, unlike the vast majority of those espousing such platforms, he delivered. Through the political process, Giano shepherded ordinances that (a) excluded from the priorate all those who did not exercise a trade or a profession within a guild; and (b) established a new post, charged with controlling the behavior of the *magnati*.

As is well known, zealous reform can turn easily to wholesale political oppression. Soon any member of the *magnati* who had killed a member of the *popolo* was automatically sentenced to death, forfeited all property claims, and had his home razed. Leeway for mercy and consideration of extenuating circumstances were dismissed. Later Giano successfully urged another series of provisions, which stripped the *magnati* of important political rights. He concocted a list of 150 families, whose members he dubbed *magnati*. As such, these unfortunate clansmen were excluded from holding prominent political offices. Moreover, each designated member of the *magnati* was forced to swear an oath of obedience and to offer security, in the form of 2,000 lire that he would maintain the peace. Of course, we



are not born into the world with “member of the *magnati*” or “*popolo*” etched in our chests. Giano affixed the labels to families and individuals on the basis of their socio-economic station, their relationship to his own political designs, and their perceived usefulness to Florence. Speaking practically, not all nobles could be so easily manipulated (for example Giano did not disturb the Medici family, who were *über-magnati*).

Newton taught us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So, too, with the good intentions and deranged avidity of Giano della Bella. Led by Giano’s growing cast of enemies, a political backlash arose: Giano was forced into exile under the wrongful accusation that he had violated his own ordinances and had supported one of the *magnati*, Corso Donati (whom Dante consigns to the terrace of gluttony in the twenty-fourth canto of *Purgatorio*); amendments that softened or invalidated Giano’s ordinances were enacted; and the *magnati* were allowed to regain all political rights by merely enrolling in a guild (as opposed to actually practicing a craft or profession).

In the mid-1290s Dante entered public service. He first became a member of the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries. In the wise old days of the thirteenth century, the study of medicine required a solid grounding in philosophy. Dante’s choice of this guild was based on his conviction that true nobility flows from philosophical insight and moral understanding (“Until doctors are philosophers or philosophers are doctors...”). After securing the *bona fides* of guild affiliation, Dante became a member of the People’s Council of the Commune of Florence, served on the council for the election of city priors, and also served on the Council of the Hundred, which oversaw financial and paramount civic concerns.

But Florence was a center of political intrigue, treachery, and instability. Serenity, peace, and good will toward fellow creatures were unwelcome intrusions into the established traditions and collective character of Florentines. For the greater part of the thirteenth century the Guelfs and the Ghibellines had jockeyed for power. The temporary victors unleashed stern reprisals upon the vanquished. Constant conspiracies, political schemes, and unsteady alliances defined Florentine social life. The Guelfs were in control by 1266 and ruled relatively peacefully for three decades.

But never underestimate the thirteenth-century Florentine zest for political drama. By 1300 the Guelfs, beset by intramural feuding, split into two contentious sects: the *guelfi neri* (Black Guelfs) and the *guelfi bianchi* (White Guelfs). The traditionalist Blacks were led by prosperous bankers, whose influence spread over Europe. Most important among these were

the members of the Donati family. They were committed to Florentine imperialism, achieved through alliance with the papacy, as an avenue to their own – and by extension Florence's – economic well-being. The Whites, who were more sympathetic to certain Ghibelline aspirations, were led by prosperous bankers, merchants, and traders. Most prominent among these were the members of the Cerchi family. They were committed to European peace and Florentine republican independence, as required to facilitate trade. In general, the *guelfo neri* were comprised of older families with aristocratic lineage, while the *guelfo bianchi* included families that had only recently acquired wealth and a privileged social position.

The Cerchi were wealthy but of undistinguished lineage. Their public displays of wealth were a microcosm of the zeal for material goods that infected Florence. The Donati (one of whom was Dante's wife, Gemma) allied themselves with papal bankers. However, Dante, despite his aversion to the dispositions and mindset of the Cerchi family, would find himself in league with the *guelfo bianchi*.

Dante was fervently championing Florentine independence. He was constantly at odds with Pope Boniface VIII, who favored the Black Guelfs because he needed the continuing financial support of the bankers and aspired to place the entire region of Tuscany under the aegis of the church. Indeed, Boniface was steadfastly committed to advancing the interests of his family and the influence of the church. Characteristically, the crafty pope hoped to turn the political instability of Florence to his practical advantage. He pledged religious and political security to all who identified with and aided his imperial aspirations. In 1300 the pope's intrigues were resisted on numerous occasions by six priors (magistrates) of Florence, including Dante. Boniface played his trump card: He excommunicated those who opposed his designs. Dante was given a pass only because his term of service would soon end. (Dante would depict Boniface as a major villain of his times and consign him, in the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*, to the eighth circle of Hell, as a simonist.)

In 1301 Pope Boniface ratcheted up the pressure. He called upon the military forces of Charles of Valois, brother of the king of France, to aid his scheme of controlling Sicily and to defeating his political opposition in Florence. As the army of Charles neared Florence, Dante was one of three envoys sent to outline the treacheries of the Black Guelfs and to plead with the pope to alter his policies. After preliminary discussions, two of the Florentine envoys were excused; only Dante was detained. Meanwhile Charles marched into Florence. The Black Guelfs took their cue to revolt

and gained control of the city. Shortly thereafter, the new power brokers fined Dante *in absentia* and sentenced him to two years of exile from Florence and permanent ineligibility to public office. The basis of that sentence was a series of fabricated charges. Dante was declared guilty of everything, from taking bribes to embezzlement and to disturbing the peace (and most crimes in between). Attributing his political demise to the connivance of the pope, Dante seethed with anger.

Keenly aware that the fix was in, Dante did not bother to answer the scandalous charges levied against him by his political enemies. Nor did he bother to remit his fine. In 1302 an additional sentence was imposed: if Dante returned to Florence, he would be burned alive at the stake. Dante did not immediately renounce hope. He plotted with other Florentine exiles, most of whom were White Guelfs, to return to their native city. But the conspiracy failed. To the best available historical knowledge, although Dante made sporadic attempts to regain favor, he would never again enter the beloved city of his birth.

Politically disenfranchised, Dante wandered about Italy, accepting temporary refuge that flowed from the tender mercies of numerous prominent families. At various times he graced, among other locales, Verona, the University of Bologna, Padua, Lunigiana, Casentino, and Ravenna. His political experiences honed his appreciation of community, both religious and political. Heresy destroyed the fabric of religious communities; while factionalism shattered political communities. (Dante highlights these themes in the tenth canto of the *Inferno*.)

Later Writings

Between 1304 and 1308 Dante began the *Convivio*, a treatise designed to celebrate his love for his second mistress, philosophy. This work extols learning and the proper use of reason as prerequisites for attaining virtue and God. In the *Convivio* Dante sketches four dimensions of writing: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. If a story or a poem is literally true, then it should be understood as an allegory of theology. If a story or poem is not literally true, then it should be understood as an allegory of poetry. The moral dimension is instructive; although not necessarily spelled out, events in a story or poem should be interpreted, much like biblical parables or Aesop's fables, as containing a message for living well. The anagogical dimension points to eternal, spiritual truths.

Although Dante originally conceived the *Convivio* as containing fourteen books, he completed only four. The first book holds out the vernacular as a suitable mode of expressing philosophical truths, not merely poetical ones. The second book explains the four dimensions of writing. The third book explores the meaning of love, while the fourth book extols philosophy as the pursuit of truth.

During this period, Dante underwent a political conversion. Prior to this time he had endorsed the Augustinian and mainstream Guelf doctrine that the Roman Empire was based only on might, not on moral right. At this point Dante reassessed that position. He embraced the Ghibelline orthodoxy that the Roman Empire was grounded in justice, and even willed by God. Whether his conviction that only universal peace, constructed by a single ruler, could ensure human flourishing generated Dante's political conversion to the imperialist doctrine is unclear. Causation may run in the opposite direction. Another factor contributing to Dante's imperialistic turn was his rediscovery of Virgil, whom he read as glorifying, in the *Aeneid*, the Roman Empire and its destiny of world domination. Dante first signals his embrace of imperialism in the fourth book of his *Convivio*. The message that divine providence facilitated the rule of the Roman Empire became a trademark in Dante's later works.

Dante also composed a Latin treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia* – a scholarly analysis of the Italian vernacular. He concludes that only exalted subjects – such as love, virtue, and war – are worthy of such a glorious language. The date of composition is disputed. Some believed that Dante wrote this treatise in his old age; others date it around 1303 and 1304.

In 1310 Pope Clement V summoned Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg and his forces. Henry stormed into Italy with plans to reunite church and state and to establish order and stability. To put it mildly, his enterprise was controversial. By this time convinced that strong secular, imperial guidance was required in Italy, Dante welcomed the overture. However, most Florentines were opposed to the militaristic venture. Despite some early success, the invasion floundered because of the scope of the opposition and Pope Clement's weakness and vacillation. (Dante disparages Clement as a bobo of King Philip IV of France and relegates him to the eighth circle of Hell, with other simonists, in the nineteenth canto of the *Inferno*.) In 1313 Henry died near Siena – and so did Dante's last best hope of returning to Florence honorably and triumphantly.

The date of another composition, *De monarchia*, is also unclear. While several arguments have been advanced, the most likely possibility is that

De monarchia was written around 1312, in honor of Henry VII's invasion of Italy. Dante argued that a secular monarchy is required for international welfare. Only a single *imperium* ("power"), with dominion over everyone, can ensure world peace. A universal community, grounded in a secure peace, is required to maximize human potential for perfection, happiness, and spiritual transformation. Dante celebrates the Roman imperial age, whose authority flowed directly from God and not from the imprimatur of a pope. The empire flourished prior to the existence of Christian religious institutions. God endows human beings with two natural goals: happiness on earth and eternal bliss in the afterlife. Philosophy, human understanding, and exercising the moral and intellectual virtues nurture earthly happiness; while theology and spiritual learning, along with exercising faith, hope, and love, foster our ultimate end.

In the *De monarchia*, Dante's ideal of a divinely endorsed, universal monarchy under a single emperor would stymie papal officious intermeddling in politics, which Dante considered the main obstacle to peace and human flourishing. Civil discord, animated by avarice for worldly goods and most strikingly illustrated in Florence, prevented citizens from realizing their highest ends. For Dante, the only way to eliminate such avarice was to imagine a universal monarch who had nothing left to covet. Moreover, such a ruler would serve as a court of final appeal in any disagreements in his realm. Accordingly, human flourishing requires universal peace, which can be realized only through a divinely inspired universal monarch based in Rome. Dante championed the unification of Italy as a distinct nation, but he would not stop there. Only the expansion of Italy – and the presumed loss of much of its distinctiveness – could augur the universal monarchy that constituted Dante's ideal.

In sum, Dante describes a human ideal – a unitary temporal order in which the emperor fulfills the role that the pope assumes in the church – as the universal earthly community ensuring mankind's ultimate goal. The perfection of human intellect, which is required for maximizing the good, can be attained only by the entire species, not by a single person. We then understand why Dante bristles so violently at human sins that jeopardize temporal and religious communities: such transgressions set back the entire human race. A universal human community under a single emperor is required for peace; world peace is required for the human species to attain its highest knowledge; and attaining the highest knowledge is required for earthly and eternal fulfillment. Extending principles set forth by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Averroes, Dante concludes that a single leader is required in a



political community. He is of the view that such a leader, and peace, existed only once in all human history: during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Moreover, the fact that Jesus Christ was born under the Roman Empire confirms the divine imprimatur of the latter.

Dante here implicitly confronts a paramount concern of political philosophers: the condition of scarcity. Some philosophers take this condition to be unavoidable and conjure an allegedly self-sufficient republic as the localized antidote. Machiavelli would agree that material scarcity is ineliminable, but he concluded that the world was thus an international, zero-sum battleground where military and political excellence was crucial for national flourishing. Marx would argue to the contrary – that, once communist relations of production were unleashed in an advanced technological nation, a condition of material abundance would emerge and economic scarcity would evaporate. Dante argues that the condition of material scarcity fosters greed, which sparks conflict. The world cannot eliminate scarcity as such, but by installing a benevolent emperor, who possesses all authority and material goods, we eliminate greed because he has nothing left to covet. The motivation for war withers away because the contestants for resources have been reduced to one. Lacking the incentive for greed, the emperor evinces only sentiments of charity and compassion. The result is universal peace. Yes, the emperor may be influenced, and more importantly, blessed by a worthy pope; but God vests the sovereign's authority directly.

Accordingly, human beings reach their final earthly end by learning and by adhering to philosophical teachings regarding the intellectual and moral virtues that thrive under conditions of universal peace and justice. We attain our final supernatural end by learning and adhering to spiritual teachings and by performing deeds that flow from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Strikingly, the separation of church from temporal authority assumes the separation of theology from philosophy. As Etienne Gilson remarks,

[Dante] understood, with a profundity of thought for which he must be commended, that one cannot entirely withdraw the temporal world from the jurisdiction of the spiritual world without entirely withdrawing philosophy from the jurisdiction of theology [...] if philosophic reason, by which the Emperor is guided, were to remain in the smallest degree subject to the authority of the theologians, the pope would through their agency recover the authority over the Emperor which it is desired [by Dante] to take from him. By the very fact that he controlled reason, he would control the will that is guided by reason.¹



The *Commedia*

With Henry's death, Dante's fantasy of a benevolent universal monarchy evaporated. Sadly, the church would seemingly control Italian politics thereafter. Dante composed his masterpiece, the *Commedia*, over several years. The first of the three volumes composing the *Commedia*, the *Inferno*, was completed in 1314. The third volume, *Paradiso*, was still being refined in the year of Dante's death, 1321. Widely regarded as one of the greatest literary works composed in the Italian language and one of the great books of world literature, the *Commedia* was dubbed "*Divina*" by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) in his *Trattatello in laude di Dante* (*Short Treatise in Praise of Dante*).

Dante set forth his reasons for writing the *Commedia* in a letter to Cangrande della Scala, a noble Veronese patron of the poet. Dante called his work a "comedy" because, like tragedies, it begins in adversity, but, unlike tragedies, it ends happily. Dante the pilgrim starts out in Hell, rises through Purgatory, and ends in Paradise. Dante's purpose in writing was practical and redemptive: "to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness."²²

Roughly, the *Commedia* guides human beings to earthly happiness and eternal bliss. Although humanity has been led astray by the wrongful examples set by false spiritual leaders – Dante is unsparing in his criticisms of the popes of his day – redemption is possible once spiritual powers relinquish their aspirations for temporal authority.

The work consists of 100 canti, divided into three sections or volumes: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. The *Inferno* contains 34 canti, including an introductory canto, while the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* contain 33 canti each. The theme is the journey of Dante the pilgrim as he becomes educated in the nature of sin and in the potential for human perfectibility and ascends to a beatific vision. He is guided by the great poet Virgil in the first stages of his transformation, but requires divine grace – in the form of his beloved Beatrice – and loving contemplation – in the form of St. Bernard – to reach paradise. Spiritual transformation requires humility, education, right will, and divine grace. The pilgrim starts from ignorance and wrongful dispositions. He ends in knowledge and virtuous dispositions, while basking in divine grace and in the theological virtues.

Dante makes clear in his letter to Cangrande that the *Commedia* embodies several meanings:



the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical [...] And although these mystical meanings are called by various names [such as moral or anagogical], they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different from the literal or historical.³

The journey of Dante the pilgrim is the trek that every person seeking earthly happiness and eternal salvation must undertake. Along the way, the pilgrim participates in the sins of the reprobates he meets and identifies with their temptations and shortcomings. The pilgrim is aware that he is especially susceptible to the sins of pride and lust. Most important is the law of divine retribution, the *contrapasso*: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they willed through their choices and actions.

For Dante, the condition of the individual's soul at death determines his or her station in the afterlife. If we die reconciled to God – by repenting our transgressions – we will not be eternally damned. Of course, the earlier we repent and return to a righteous path, the less punishment we will suffer in the afterlife. But even late repentants are spared the horrors of Hell. In Hell sinners are consigned to sectors, together with those who committed similar moral transgressions. They have forfeited all hope and cannot escape their torment. In Purgatory sinners are sorted by the dispositions that triggered their sins, and their suffering defines their rehabilitation. They serve penance as a means to self-transformation. They are taught the virtuous dispositions that are the corrective to the wrongful inclinations they exhibited on earth. Accordingly, the punishments of Hell are strictly retributive, while the penances of Purgatory are both retributive and remedial.

A sub-theme in the *Commedia* is Dante's relentless scolding of the Florentines for their gratuitous violence, unending political bickering, social instability, veneration of material goods, and self-defeating resistance to the divinely decreed rule of the Roman emperor. In his view, the papacy encouraged these maladies by setting a feckless example, pursuing self-aggrandizing policies, coveting worldly goods, and thereby betraying the spiritual order. Dante underscores his convictions about the mutual independence of philosophy from theology, of the temporal from the spiritual order, and of the empire from the church. Whenever the stewards



of one of these realms exceed the boundaries of their domain, typically out of pride and avarice, they rebel against divine authority and jeopardize the well-being of the relevant community. Moreover, the gravest human transgression is betraying a rightful leader. Such treachery intrudes gravely on divine authority and severs the bond of human community. We must be steadfastly faithful to the powers and bonds established by divine authority. In the *Commedia*, among other things, Dante reveals his deepest convictions and firmest loyalties.

In his masterpiece Dante forsakes the selfishness of Florentine striving in order to celebrate the universalism of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Dante's vision of human redemption and perfection requires that he distance himself from Florence – taken as a metaphor for various human wrongful inclinations. For Dante, allegiance to the narrow concerns of party and family at the expense of the broader values embodied by city and country had led Florentines astray. Florentines had sacrificed the cherishing of the common good to a short-sighted pursuit of material interest. For Dante, the well-being of the entirety of humankind constituted the common good, and only a divinely ordained Roman emperor could legitimately reign over this universal community. Accordingly, in the *Commedia*, Dante aspires to derive meaning and value from the degradation he experienced during his exile from his native city.

Dante the author invokes both historical and mythological figures in the pilgrim's journey from Hell to Paradise. However, as Gilson points out, “[t]he historical reality of Dante's characters may influence their interpretation only in so far as it is essential to the representative function which Dante himself assigns to them and in view of which he has chosen them.”⁴ Moreover, the mythological figures are useful because their fictional biographies are well known and remain accessible.

Dante's Death

In 1315 Ugucione della Faggiuola, the Pisan military officer controlling Florence after his victory in the battle of Montecatini, forced the city to grant amnesty to its people in exile, on condition that they pay a fine and publicly repent. Dante refused, preferring exile to a dishonorable return to his native soil. His death sentence was reaffirmed and extended to his sons.

In the summer of 1321, the lord of Ravenna dispatched Dante to the doge of Venice to arbitrate an ongoing feud. During his return to Ravenna Dante



contracted a fever, probably malaria, and died soon thereafter. He was entombed in the church of San Pier Maggiore. Over fifty years later, in 1373, Florence was stirred from its dogmatic slumbers and formally recognized Dante's greatness. The city commissioned the great Renaissance humanist Giovanni Boccaccio to give a series of lectures on Dante at the Santo Stefano church, and these resulted in Boccaccio's final major work – an explanation and analysis of Dante's *Commedia*. On numerous occasions thereafter, Florence requested that Ravenna return Dante's remains to his native city. Justice was served: Ravenna rejected all such overtures. Fearing treachery, the Franciscans hid Dante's remains in a wall, where they were rediscovered only in 1865.

Today tourists fawn as they parade past a memorial to Dante in the basilica of Santa Croce in Florence. Built in 1828, the tomb is empty. The inscription on the front of the tomb reads *Onorate l'altissimo poeta* ("Honor the loftiest poet") – a line from the fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, where the pilgrim greets Virgil. In 2008, after due deliberation of almost seven hundred years, the city council of Florence passed a motion that nullified Dante's sentence of exile and death. However, Dante's corpse remains in Ravenna, where, we must assume, the spirit of the great poetic philosopher rests comfortably.

Aims of this Book

The purpose of this work is not to unveil a stunningly novel reading of Dante's work; nor is it even to describe and analyze the entire *Commedia*. Instead, I focus only on the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and on the philosophical issues of personal responsibility, individual moral desert, retributive justice, repentance, and the nature of virtue and vice.

Dante famously described the purpose of his *Commedia* as practical: to guide human beings out of misery and toward their appropriate earthly and eternal ends. This work takes Dante seriously and underscores the philosophical underpinnings of his mission. The work focuses on how Dante's moral philosophy underwrote his avowed purpose.

In Chapter 1 I summarize Dante's *Inferno*, while highlighting the moral assumptions that ground Dante's depictions of sinners in Hell. Crucial among these is the law of *contrapasso*: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they



willed through their choices and actions. I conclude this chapter by sketching a host of moral lessons that ground Dante's moral convictions and anticipate existential philosophical themes.

In Chapter 2 I summarize Dante's *Purgatorio*, while underscoring the distinctions he makes between denizens of Hell and residents of Purgatory. I also focus on the differences between Dante's depiction and the traditional Christian view of Purgatory. I conclude this chapter by outlining additional existential moral lessons that the pilgrim confronts in Purgatory.

Chapters 1 and 2, then, are descriptive summaries of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Those who are thoroughly acquainted with Dante's work are best advised to begin their reading of this book at Chapter 3. Those who are unfamiliar with Dante's work, or who recall it only hazily, should read this book from its beginning.

In Chapter 3, having completed the summaries about Dante's sinners and their punishments, I begin the philosophical analysis of Dante's understanding of vice, personal responsibility and desert, retribution, and redemption. I state and explain the modern principle of desert and how it is related to Dante's law of *contrapasso*, and I illustrate this crucial aspect of Dante's moral theory by examining three case studies: the lustful Francesca, relegated to the second circle of Hell; the assassins of Caesar – Brutus and Cassius – whom Dante stigmatizes as two of the three greatest sinners of all time and banishes to the ninth circle of Hell; and Epicurus, the noted philosopher, whom Dante labels a heretic and dispatches to the sixth circle of Hell.

In Chapter 4 I grapple with puzzles and paradoxes within Dante's moral philosophy, as illustrated by his treatment of Virgil and Cato. As a pre-Christian pagan, Virgil seems totally blameless for not having worshipped Jesus and for not being baptized. Yet, despite his lack of culpability, Virgil is relegated to Limbo, which, for Dante (following Bonaventure), is a region of unrequited longing for the divine. Although Virgil is described as a virtuous pagan and appears to be blameless for his lack of the theological virtues, he is denied salvation eternally. Has Dante unjustly relegated Virgil to Limbo? Meanwhile, Cato seems to have three strikes against him: he is a pre-Christian pagan; he committed suicide; and he was a strident foe of Julius Caesar, whom Dante seems otherwise to admire. Yet Cato is the gatekeeper of Purgatory and, apparently, will attain Paradise at Final Judgment. What accounts for the differences in Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato? Is Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato consistent with his general moral principles?

In Chapter 5 I describe and analyze Dante's treatment of the "seven deadly sins" (or seven capital vices): pride (arrogance), envy, avarice, wrath,



lust, gluttony, and sloth. I connect Dante's treatment of these "final causes" of evil deeds with his general moral philosophy.

In Chapter 6 I illustrate how ten of the most powerful moral lessons from Dante the author – lessons taught to Dante the pilgrim during his travels through Hell and Purgatory – anticipate the normative vision of modern existentialism. While viewing Dante as a prophet of existentialism is wildly off the mark, Dante nevertheless prefigures crucial existential themes. In being related in this way, the practical dimensions of both Dante and existentialism – centered on how best to live a good, human life – glisten.

I do not address the third volume of the *Commedia*, the *Paradiso*. Dante there chronicles the rise of the human soul to unity with God. As always, the ascension of the soul defines personal transformation. The soul moves gingerly through several necessary stages of understanding until it reaches its final vision in the highest realm, the Empyrean. There redeemed souls, united with their bodies, bask in the beatific vision that defines perfection. Beatrice, the personification of Divine Wisdom, leads the pilgrim on this journey; but she cannot explicitly reveal God to him. Only profound contemplation and divine grace can complete this task. In the thirty-first canto of the *Paradiso* Beatrice withdraws and St. Bernard takes her place. St. Bernard directs the pilgrim's gaze to the Virgin Mary, who brokers the bestowal of grace required to complete the journey. The pilgrim's mind is soon illuminated by Truth; he is granted the ultimate vision; and his will joins in harmony with Divine Love. The journey has ended, the self-purification process is complete, and the poet's vivid dream is suspended.

While this work contains a few allusions to the *Paradiso*, I neither summarize the latter's canti nor analyze its importance. The themes I address center on sin, personal responsibility, and desert, retribution, redemption, the nature of the seven capital vices as depicted in the *Purgatorio* and the *Inferno*, and Dante's existential moral lessons. While uncommonly evocative and aesthetically exciting, the metaphysics and the theology of the *Paradiso* are not required for my tasks and might even distract from my message.

Dante as Moral Philosopher

Some have argued that Dante would have been an even better poet if he were not so much of a philosopher. I rejoin that Dante the author understood acutely that poetic artistry was his medium; but philosophical understanding was his message. Dante was firmly convinced that the refinement of human reason was a necessary but not sufficient condition of attaining



personal salvation. He was also certain that philosophical understanding was required for the refinement of human reason. Dante did not aspire merely to compose a brilliant poem. We must take him at his word: he hoped to show readers the path to worldly happiness and personal salvation. We must conclude that Dante would have been a less effective instructor had he not been so zealous a philosopher. Taking Dante seriously as a moral philosopher, then, may well be a small step in our own journey toward self-transformation and spiritual health.

Notes and References

1. Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 211–212.
2. Dante Alighieri, *The Letters of Dante*, trans. and ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), “Letter to Can Grande della Scala,” para. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, para. 7.
4. Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher*, 268.

INFERNO

Christopher Moltisanti reports that Hell is The Emerald Piper, an Irish bar where it is St. Patrick Day, every day, forever. The bar is supervised by a bouncer – a big, Irish goon wearing old-fashioned clothes – and is always open for business; the Irishmen win every roll of the dice in the crap games they play against the Italians and two Roman soldiers; and Moltisanti's gangster father is murdered painfully every midnight, in the same fashion as he was slain on earth. Moltisanti, member of the mythical Soprano crime family, gleaned his vision of Hell from a one-minute near-death experience, when he suffered cardiac arrest after being shot by an enterprising hoodlum. For Moltisanti, being at the mercy of Irish American gangsters in the context of an eternal St. Patrick Day celebration tailors Hell specifically for Italian Americans.¹ Indeed, I shudder as I type.

Dante's Mission

Fortunately, Dante Alighieri has a more expansive vision of Hell. Dante the author had been exiled from Florence by the time he composed the *Commedia* and, like all of us, he had been exiled from heaven because of the transgressions of Adam and Eve. The prime character in the *Commedia*, Dante the pilgrim, portrays this dual exile as he journeys toward earthly and spiritual reconciliation. As the pilgrim travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, he interprets those regions and interprets himself. The process is an exercise in self-transformation. The pilgrim will move from the pure

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facticity of Hell – where character is forever fixed and frozen, and fresh possibilities are lacking – to increasing self-awareness, freedom, and self-creation. His self-transformation flows from his recognitions and struggles as he confronts the shades in the afterlife and his personal demons.

As the pilgrim meets condemned souls in Hell, he, along with the readers, finds many of them sympathetic. They are not merely one-dimensional personifications of pure evil. Some are seemingly seductive, classy, and attractive (such as Francesca in Canto 5); some are deeply patriotic and magnanimous (such as Farinata in Canto 10); some suffered grievously and excessively on earth (such as Pier in Canto 13); some are stunningly intellectual and accomplished (such as Brunetto in Canto 15); some manifest admirable parental compassion (such as Ugolino in Canto 33); and a few are noble, swashbuckling adventurers (such as Ulysses in Canto 26). But the pilgrim's moral development requires stern repudiation of the damned: they have received their proper sentences. The infallible Judge has meted out pure procedural and substantive justice. Each soul has received what it morally deserved. Compassion is now misplaced. Steely, uncompromising justice replaces the allure of pleasing appearances, personal charms, and special skills and crafts. Human behavior is complex and nuanced; sin may be encased in a seductive package. However, the pilgrim and we must come to despise sin regardless of its occasional pleasing façade. The afterlife is no place for sissies.

In this chapter I summarize Dante's *Inferno*, while highlighting the moral assumptions that ground his depictions of sinners in Hell. Crucial among these is the law of *contrapasso*: the punishment inflicted upon sinners must mirror the nature of their transgressions; the relationship between the particular suffering and the specific sin must be clear. In that sense, penitents bring about their own destiny. They receive what they willed through their choices and actions.

The Journey Begins

As the *Inferno* commences, the pilgrim awakens in a dark, dense forest. Terrified and lost, he roams until he faces a sunlit hill. Finding consolation in its beauty, he begins to climb the hill until three ferocious beasts block his path: a *lonza* (leopard), a *leone* (lion), and a *lupa* (she-wolf), who represent the three major types of sin – fraud, violence, and unrestrained desire, respectively. The fearful pilgrim retreats, but soon meets the shade of Virgil,



to whom the pilgrim pleads for aid. Virgil bears good and bad news. The bad news is that Virgil cannot overcome the terrifying beasts, who will remain until the time a *veltro* (greyhound) drives them back into hell. (The greyhound may symbolize an individual redeemer, or the moment of a spiritual kingdom on earth where wisdom, love, and virtue – attributes of the Trinity – will unseat sin.) The good news is that Virgil can help the pilgrim by leading him by another path. Also, Virgil promises to guide him through Hell and Purgatory, after which a more suitable spirit will help the pilgrim reach Paradise.²

Virgil may represent the best of human reason, art, and poetry: the pinnacle of human intelligence uninspired by knowledge of God. As the historical Virgil was the poetic and political guide of Dante the author, so, too, the character Virgil will lead Dante the pilgrim through the most terrifying regions of the afterlife. The three beasts cannot be defeated by a person standing alone. Virgil will guide the pilgrim geographically, but, more importantly, he will help the pilgrim recognize, rise above, and renounce his sins. Virgil (70–19 BC) cannot guide Dante the pilgrim to Paradise because he lived and died prior to the birth of Christ. Lacking knowledge of Christian salvation, he resides in Limbo. Symbolizing only human reason, Virgil lacks the connection to grace or theology required to lead the pilgrim to Paradise.

The pilgrim, however, is fearful. To reassure him, Virgil evokes the string of events that conferred upon him the role of guide: the Virgin Mary herself exercised her bountiful compassion and asked Santa Lucia, the personification of grace, to aid the pilgrim. The saint contacted the blessed Beatrice (“Bice”) Portinari, Dante’s idealized earthly love, who went to Limbo and asked Virgil to assume the task until the time when Beatrice would guide the pilgrim to Paradise. This explanation reassures and emboldens the pilgrim. The journey begins. The pilgrim requires an education about sin as prelude to his ascent to the vision of the Divine.

Vestibule (Ante-Hell): The Indecisive Neutrals

The pilgrim recoils as he reads the words inscribed about the gate: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* (“abandon every hope, you who enter”). Lacking all hope and possibility, the shades in Hell cannot perceive themselves except as fully actualized. Metaphorically, the denizens of Hell earned entrance by *antecedently* abandoning hope: they perceived themselves as



fully determined. In existential terms, they ran from their freedom and stripped themselves of possibilities. They thereby exude bad faith and are inauthentic. They have nothing left to abandon when they swing through the gate.

Virgil softens the pilgrim's fear by pointing out that the words apply to him – consigned forever to Limbo, as he is – but not to Dante the pilgrim.

Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto; ogni viltà convien che qui sia morta
[“Here one must leave behind all hesitation; here every cowardice must meet its death”]. (I III, 14–15)

Here the pilgrim observes two sets of unfulfilled souls: the first race endlessly just inside the gate, meaninglessly pursuing a banner while they are beset by flies and wasps; the second set are newly arrived souls and await their escort to their appropriate permanent place in the multi-layered Inferno. They died unrepentant and without reverence, and will meet their proper fate shortly.

Dante the author conjures the vestibule of Hell for those without passion, decisiveness, or conviction. They refused to take a stand between virtue and vice during their earthly lives, so they are now compelled to race forever without purpose. They are rejected equally by Hell proper and by Heaven. The cliché “getting nowhere fast” applies. (My mother would call them “*pasta asciutta*” – dried-up macaroni.) They now have no hope of transcending their meaningless activity. Shunning vigorous commitment and lacking deep passion while on earth, the neutrals are now stung repeatedly by insects. Having refused, in existentialist terms, to create a robust self on earth, they brought about their disgraceful eternity.

Questo misero modo tegnon l'anime triste di coloro che visser senza infamia e senza lodo [“This miserable way is taken by the melancholy souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise”]. (I III, 34–36)

As with all punishments in Hell, the sentences of those condemned reflect their earthly lives, or, in this case, their refusal to commit to crafting a substantive life. The *contrapasso* (law of counter-suffering) demands that the unrepentant and irreverent serve penance in proportion to, and according to, the nature of their sins. The lash of the *contrapasso* is only the fulfillment of the destiny chosen by each soul during his or her earthly life. The afterlife continues, deepens, and solidifies the life led by souls while they were on



earth. The sufferings of the damned are their sins, portrayed in horrifying images. At death, the sinful soul becomes “the emblematic form of its inward life.”³

The vast horde of indecisive neutrals remains nameless, as a just response to their nondescript lives. The neutrals sought personal safety over commitment to principle. Allusions are made to angels who refused to take sides when Lucifer rebelled against God; and, possibly, to Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands rather than pass judgment on Jesus. Naked in their despair, the indecisive neutrals run futilely after a banner which may symbolize a leader, or a firm conviction, or a connection to enduring value.

Dante the author invented the vestibule of Hell for cowardly *pasta asciutta* pieces – people who merited neither praise nor blame. Cravenly fleeing from an authentic existence and remaining agnostic about value, they deserve the disgraceful vacuousness of their eternity.

Upper Hell: Sins of Unrestrained Desire (the Wolf)

LIMBO, CIRCLE 1 Virtuous pagans, innocent babies

Those who died without being baptized and those who were virtuous but expired prior to the life of Christ occupy Limbo. They committed no serious unrepented sin, but they grieve without torment, as they now yearn hopelessly for God.

Che senza speme vivemo in desio [“Still desiring, we live without hope”]. (I IV, 42)

Dante the author underscores that baptism and faith in Christ are (almost) necessary conditions for salvation. But Dante the pilgrim will confront some exceptions later in his journey. For example, the church teaches the doctrine of the harrowing of Hell, when Christ descended into Hell after His death and redeemed Old Testament figures – such as Adam, Noah, Moses, David, and Solomon – who embodied *implicit* faith. Although these figures died prior to the birth of Christ, they embraced God’s earliest manifestations and thereby attained implicit faith. Moreover, at times, special bestowals of grace liberate those who would otherwise reside in limbo.

Dante the author names over three dozen historical and mythological figures among the countless in limbo: the great pagan poets Homer, Horace,



Lucan, and Ovid (and, of course, Virgil); the mythical poet and musician Orpheus; renown philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, Cicero, Diogenes, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Seneca, Socrates, Thales, and Zeno; famous military heroes such as Aeneas, Lucius Brutus, Julius Caesar, Hector, King Latinus, and Saladin; pioneers in mathematics and science such as Democritus, Dioscorides, Euclid, Galen, Hippocrates, and Ptolemy; and praiseworthy women such as Camilla, Cornelia, Electra, Julia, Lavinia, Lucretia, Marcia, and Penthesilea.

Virgil, who is otherwise firm in feeling no compassion for justifiably punished souls, expresses pity for those in limbo (including himself, we might suspect). His concern is well placed. Through no fault of their own, in most cases with no access to the life and teachings of Christ, and leading otherwise worthy lives as judged by secular morality and in the historical perspective of Dante the author, these virtuous pagans are consigned to an eternity of unrequited longing. Should luck play so critical a role in one's destiny?

CIRCLE 2 *The lustful*

The horror of Hell most graphically begins in the second circle. All human beings who die unrepentant and in a state of serious sin must confess their transgressions. There Minos, the mythological half-human, half-beastly creature, twists his tail a discernible number of times, to indicate to which of the eight circles of proper Hell sinners are to be relegated. Horrifying and snarling, Minos instructs the pilgrim to enter Hell carefully and be wary of trusting its denizens.

Sins of incontinence or unrestrained desire are natural for human beings and offend God less than sins of malice. The second circle of Hell, the first circle of Hell proper, punishes the lustful. These miscreants shriek, lament, and curse as they are blown about by an "infernal storm, eternal in its rage." The core of their sin, and the other transgressions punished in upper Hell, is desire unconstrained by reason and will. Virgil points out to the pilgrim the shades of historical and mythological figures such as Achilles, Cleopatra, Dido, Helen of Troy, Paris, and Tristan. However, the centerpiece of this circle is a couple bound tightly together and being hurled about violently. Francesca da Rimini and her brother-in-law Paolo Malatesta were adulterous lovers in life and were slain by Francesca's husband and Paolo's brother, Gianciotta.

Francesca weaves a seductive tale. She alleges that she was beguiled by her reading of a medieval French romance novel focused on the courtly story of the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. Spurred by the intoxications

of the novel, Paolo's initial kiss sealed her fate. Overcome by emotions not of her choosing, and captured by love itself, Francesca appeals to the pilgrim's pity and, perhaps, his empathy. Was not her amorous affair excusable, or a mere peccadillo? Was she not overwhelmed by forces too powerful to resist?

The pilgrim confronts a recurrent theme: sinners lack self-knowledge, deny responsibility, and fervently seek to blame other people or adverse circumstances for their plight. They obtusely see themselves as having been determined by external causes and forces. In existential terms, they are pure facticity. They deny their freedom, flee from responsibility, and clothe themselves in flimsy excuses. They exude bad faith as they cower in their "givenness," and they deny their capability of reimagining their characters and of remaking their contexts. The sinners in Hell view themselves as compelled by external causes and forces and project that meaning on their environment. They are in conflict with their own desire for freedom. For example, Francesca misinterprets the moral of the romance novel: its intent is to warn against, not to glorify, adulterous relationships. Francesca wrongly understands the romance novel as validating the power of love to overwhelm the banal restrictions oppressing married couples: even moral judgment must retreat before the majesty of noble hearts struck by uncontrollable passion. In acting as they do, Francesca and Paolo choose lust for each other over devotion to God, transience over permanence, and unguided desire over reason, while insisting that they did not choose at all.

Yet the pilgrim is moved deeply by Francesca's eloquence and by Paolo's sobbing. How could such an eloquent, compassionate, gracious woman such as Francesca be so heartlessly consigned to eternal damnation? The pilgrim's compassion is wildly misplaced. He has not learned how disingenuous the lustful are, nor how rational and just the punishment meted out in the afterlife is. The pilgrim has naively allowed Francesca to slide him through the grease. In fact Francesca distorts the meaning of the romance novel, cravenly casts off responsibility for her actions, and mistakes lust for love. She has chosen to be unfree, while dully believing that she had no choice. Glistening with inauthenticity, Francesca is now condemned together with Paolo, forever to be conjoined, as an eternal reminder of their mutual shame in privileging transient pleasure over moral duty. Worse, she now shamelessly exemplifies how seductive rhetoric can facilitate the triumph of desire over reason. Her situation in Hell mirrors the circumstance she found so pleasurable in life. Although insisting she was compelled by "love" while on earth, she, while living and now in Hell, cravenly flees from responsibility for crafting her destiny.

However, the *contrapasso* will not be denied. Francesca's desperate rationalizations of her actions only highlight her manipulative, self-indulgent, deceptive character. While on earth, she used her aristocratic charms to advance her station by currying favor with power; she continues her charade in the afterlife. She neither understood nor repented over her transgressions then or now. The overall lesson: love, unrestrained by reason, corrupts the good. Succumbing to uninformed passion is the road to all spiritual ruin. Francesca sexually seduced Paolo on earth, and now she tries to seduce the pilgrim rhetorically in the afterlife. Both efforts exalt desire over reason.

In all the circles of Hell, existence without hope is the most fundamental and eradicable punishment. In existential terms, to view oneself as completely determined by external causes and forces *is* Hell. Never-ending punishments without redemptive quality imply that retributive justice can never be satisfied: no amount of suffering can atone for the impoverishment of a soul that dies unrepentant and thoroughly corrupted. As an inescapable mode of being, Hell seems disproportionate. Moreover, many of the characters in Hell are not thoroughly reprehensible. For example, Francesca has charms, even virtues, which are overwhelmed by her fatal flaw of lust. She manifests a complexity of character that prevents fair evaluators from reducing her to merely a lustful reprobate. Dante the pilgrim's compassion toward her may well be naïve and misplaced, but does it completely miss the mark? Does the pilgrim intuit what we must all confront: is an everlasting punishment for a finite, earthly sin, committed by a human being who is not thoroughly reprehensible, justified? Is the law of *contrapasso* truly definitive of divine justice, or is it too often excessive and disproportionate to the offense? Are good and evil not so much separate substances but intertwined, interrelated opposites that flow from the same underlying impulses? Is Hell merely the ripening of sins themselves – the consequences requested by reprobates as evidenced by their choices on earth? Or should we simply read the *Inferno* allegorically and conclude that Dante's descriptions of punishments only reveal the nature of sin and not literal sentences meted out? Does the character of Francesca represent less a condemned individual and more the incarnation of unrepented lust?

CIRCLE 3 *The gluttonous*

The third circle of Hell encloses the gluttonous, who enlarged themselves in solitude while living. In a colorless, dark setting, they lie flat, gyrating and contorting to ease their pain. The ground is damp and fetid; dirty precipitation



ascends down upon the sinners; and Cerberus, a three-headed canine with an unctuous beard and protruding stomach, howls while periodically attacking the residents of this circle. The overall impression is of a bloated, junkyard dog reigning over a sanitation dump.

The pilgrim meets a fellow Florentine, Ciaccio (“hog”), who narrates the troubles of their native city. The shades in Hell are aware of the past, and even of the future – Ciaccio offers prophecies of Florence’s fate – but they are shrouded from the present. The glutton is a metaphor for the excesses of contemporary Florence. Ciaccio begs the pilgrim to tell others about him when the pilgrim returns to the world of the living. Ciaccio suggests that a robust, living legacy in the world is still a concern for those eternally damned in the afterlife. Lacking hope for transformation in the afterlife, the damned cling to the extension of memories of themselves on earth. Perhaps a thin continuation of their biographical lives is all that is left.

Superbia, invidia e avarizia sono le tre faville c’hanno i cuori accesi [“Three sparks that set on fire every heart are pride, envy, and avarice”]. (IVI, 74–75)

Virgil informs the pilgrim that at the Last Judgment Ciaccio the shade, like all others, will be reunited with his body. Being more complete, Ciaccio will experience more intense sensations and thus more striking pain – an appropriate fate for those of unconstrained appetite while on earth.

CIRCLE 4 *The avaricious and the prodigal: Hoarders and wasters*

The fourth circle of Hell snares those who misused wealth, either through avarice or through miserliness. Plutus, the mythological god of wealth, presides over those who were unable to apply the principle of moderation to material goods. Again, desire was unmollified by reason and will. The hoarders now push heavy rocks with their chests around a semicircle, where they soon clash with the wasters, who push in the opposite direction. When they meet, the first group shouts, “Why hoard?” while the second group yells, “Why squander?” Then each group reverses direction and prepares for the inevitable collision on the other side. Together the two groups constitute a community of pointless recrimination.

Although the individuals in the two groups, having been identified solely by their approach to material goods in life, are largely indistinguishable, the pilgrim notices numerous historical clergymen among the



wasters. As always, Dante the author is unsparing in his criticism of the worldly ambitions of clerics.

CIRCLE 5 The wrathful and the slothful

Amid a muddy marsh, the pilgrim observes naked, dirty shades pummeling each other with fists and feet, battering heads, and tearing at each other with teeth. The wrathful orphan all dignity and sputter with pettiness. Beneath them, producing surface bubbles in the slime, lie the sullen slothful. Here Dante the author understood that Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas differentiated between three degrees of wrath: the enraged; the sullen, who seethe but repress their feelings; and the vindictive, who pick their spots. Those beneath the slime in the fifth circle are a combination of sloth and sullenness.

The pilgrim begins to understand the vileness of sin and the rationality of the *contrapasso* as he spots the mean-spirited Florentine Filippo Argenti floundering and trashing in the muck of the wrathful. Filippo Argenti dramatically overreacts to Virgil and the pilgrim. He exemplifies the core of wrath: unlike righteous anger, wrath is irrational in that it is gravely disproportionate to the events that occasioned it. Righteous anger accords with reason in that it is appropriate to the circumstances and its intensity is determined by its causative offense. When the pilgrim becomes angry with Argenti, he is acting reasonably to Argenti's unreasonable initial salvo.

Whereas earlier the pilgrim had expressed deep sympathy for Francesca and even for Ciaccio, he is unmoved by Argenti. The pilgrim derides Argenti and a group of the wrathful assault their colleague. Virgil approves, hugging and kissing the pilgrim for his moral advance. Virgil interprets the pilgrim's hardness as evidence that he is righteously angry at the sin of wrath that Argenti exemplifies. Yet the pilgrim must still transcend his own sinful nature. Righteous anger – which is always distinguished from sinful wrath by Aristotle and Aquinas – must be subject to reason and will.

River Styx, Walls of the City of Dis

CIRCLE 6 The heretics

Dante the author locates negative heretics on the edge of upper hell. He places overt or paradigmatic heretics – those who were definitional heretics and the pre-Christian thinkers who denied personal immortality



or other Christian doctrines derivable by reason alone – on the rim of lower hell. Dante the author believes heresy flows from intellectual hubris, which rejects the Christian depiction of reality. The doomed heretics lament fiercely as their immortal souls are encased eternally within flaming tombs.

Unlike the other sinners in hell, the heretics are guilty of neither unrestrained desire nor malice. The same can be said of those who occupy Limbo and of the indecisive neutrals in the vestibule. In a category created by Dante the author, the indecisive neutrals are punished for their cowardice or indifference in failing to take a stand. Those who reside in Limbo also bore false beliefs, but their culpability is mitigated (should it be totally excused?) because their errors stemmed not from intellectual hubris but from (unavoidable?) ignorance. Heretics, whose transgressions flow from false beliefs generated by intellectual hubris, reside between the sins of unrestrained desire and those of malice. Heresy, like partisan politics, divides that which should be united.

Included among this heretical crowd are Epicurus and his followers. Believing that fear of death and of the gods obstructed mankind from attaining the good life, Epicurus taught that divine providence is a myth and no personal immortality awaits human beings upon death. Gods exist, but they are indifferent to human reality. Being composed entirely of atoms, the soul perishes along with the body.

Dante the pilgrim recognizes a famous Ghibelline leader, Farinata degli Uberti. Farinata does not recognize the pilgrim but smugly asks him to identify his ancestors. In life, Farinata was selfish, arrogant, and easily given to intellectual hubris. The pilgrim answers and Farinata recognizes some Guelfs he helped to rout in the famous battle of Montaperti in 1260. The pilgrim wryly responds that the Guelfs made a comeback, but Farinata cannot do the same. Farinata exudes several unpleasant dispositions and beliefs: he is an Epicurean (and thus he denied the immortality of the soul, at least while he was on earth), and he is arrogant and cruel. But he also loves his native city as deeply and sincerely as the pilgrim does. Unfortunately Farinata's soul was too meager to admit God. Farinata glistens with patriotism and political passion; but he rejects higher, supernatural matters. The earthly city is his only concern and reality.

The pilgrim also meets Farinata's tombmate, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, the father of his friend, the poet Guido Cavalcanti (who married Farinata's daughter). The old man assumes that Dante's poetic talent won him this journey through the afterlife and wonders why his son did not accompany



the pilgrim. The pilgrim suggests that the son lacked proper respect for Virgil, whom he does not name. Cavalcante wonders if his son is still alive and falls back into his tomb. Cavalcante, like Farinata, bears several flaws, but his love of his son is genuine.

Farinata, ignoring the passionate exchange between the pilgrim and Cavalcante, predicts that the pilgrim will learn how difficult comebacks really are after he is exiled from Florence. He continues by asking the pilgrim why the Guelfs have been so merciless to the Ghibellines. The pilgrim reminds Farinata of the brutality at the battle of Montaperti, where over four thousand Guelfs were slain in one day. (Note: After their victory at Montaperti, the Ghibellines proposed the total destruction of Florence. Farinata resisted the overture.) Preparing to leave, the pilgrim asks Farinata who else is with him in Hell. Farinata mentions only Emperor Frederick II and Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldini, both of whom allegedly denied personal immortality. The pilgrim asks Farinata to inform Cavalcante that his son is still alive.

Later on the pilgrim and Virgil, struggling amid rancid odor, pass the tomb of Pope Anastasius II, a late fifth-century prelate whom medieval tradition accused of denying the divinity of Christ by permitting a heretic to receive communion. (The tradition confused the pope with a Byzantine emperor of the same name.)

Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Violence (the Lion)

CIRCLE 7 The violent

RING 1 Violence against neighbors: Tyrants and murderers Unlike sins of incontinence or weakness of will, where desire overwhelms reason, sins of malice include a will to do harm. Those who harmed others violently are boiled eternally in a river of blood. The Minotaur, half-man, half-bull, a symbol of blind rage and irrational might, guards the entry to this circle. Thousands of centaurs shoot arrows at any shades that try to rise above their designated level in the boiling river. The more harm sinners cause in life – to other people and their possessions – the deeper they are submerged into the blood. Tyrants such as Alexander the Great, Dionysius of Syracuse, Attila the Hun, Ezzelino III da Romano, King Pyrrhus of Epirus, and Sextus, son of Pompey the Great, are immersed up to their eyebrows. Less avid murderers are immersed to their throats or chests or feet.

RING 2 Violence against self and one's possessions: Suicides and squanderers

Those who harmed themselves violently are consigned to a feral, dour forest: no green leaves, fruit, or smooth branches are in place. Repellent harpies – birds with women's faces – nest in the woods. The pilgrim meets Pier della Vigne, a thirteenth-century statesman who was accused of scheming with the pope to slay his master, Frederick II of Sicily. Pier was imprisoned, blinded, and led disgracefully from town to town on a donkey. He soon thereafter killed himself by bouncing his head against a prison wall. Unsurprisingly, Pier blames the envy of others at Frederick's court for his downfall. The pilgrim is rendered silent from pity as Pier claims innocence, requests a re-evaluation of his deeds, and a rehabilitation of his early fame. The pilgrim and Pier recognize that Pier is being punished only for his suicide, not on account of the false allegation that initiated his demise. Pier believed in the dominion of the emperor, but lacked faith in the divine.

Virgil questions Pier about the nature of the punishment meted out in this ring. Pier informs Virgil that the appropriate souls are hurled down into the forest, where they take root and sprout. The harpies feed on their leaves, and this act pains the shades. Only after a branch is torn may a shade utter a sound. At the Last Judgment the sinners will not be able to inhabit their bodies, which will hang isolated on the tree branches: those who rejected their bodies in life will not be reunited with them in the afterlife.

Neither suicides nor squanderers appreciate the value of material reality. The suicides renege on their corporeal life and destroy their own material substance. The squanderers undervalue material goods and waste them dramatically. The *contrapasso* declares that the bodies of squanderers be repeatedly torn asunder, as the wasted substances are now themselves; while the suicides, who, while on earth, perceived themselves as substances that they could destroy, are now transformed into complete materiality: trees.

Suddenly, two naked sinners rush across the area: Lano of Siena and Giacomo da Sant' Andrea. Shouting wildly at each other, they are chased and assailed by ferocious black dogs. These are the profligates or squanderers, who mistreated earthly goods by not valuing them appropriately. Lano and Giacomo squandered their wealth and property in life. Devastated by his foolishness, Lano sought combat in war in order to die. Instead of escaping by foot when the opportunity arose, he fought and was killed. The squanderers in the seventh circle of Dante the author are distinguished from those in the fourth circle by the fact that they were violent in their passion for wasting or in their methods. For example, Giacomo allegedly set several houses on fire for the sheer joy of destruction.

Soon thereafter the pilgrim and Virgil learn that the bleeding bush, which had been attacked by the savage dogs in their pursuit of Lano and Giacomo, is an anonymous Florentine who had killed himself in his home. As a representative of his city, the anonymous suicide underscores Dante the author's conviction that his native city was killing itself through excess.

RING 3 Violence against God: Blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers Those who blasphemed violently or sodomized or greedily lent money are relegated to a scorching desert through which a stream of boiling blood flows. Weeping shades lie in groups in different positions, as bloated flames cascade down. The blasphemers are fewest in number and lie inactively, facing the heaven they defamed; the usurers sit crouched over, like the money grubbers they were in life; and the sodomites are greatest in number and wander aimlessly and continually. The *contrapasso* treats sodomites similarly to the way the lustful in the second circle of Hell are treated: both groups, whether of their own accord or through the agency of wind, cast about futilely, seemingly in search of what they cannot ever find. Blasphemers sin directly against God; sodomites transgress against God's creation, nature; while usurers violate art.

The representative of the blasphemers is Capaneus, one of the seven kings who assaulted Thebes. When scaling the walls of Thebes, Capaneus cursed Jove, who killed him by casting down a thunderbolt. The pilgrim asks Virgil about the source of the river. Virgil instructs the pilgrim that the tears of the Old Man of Crete are the source of all the waterways in Hell.

The pilgrim then meets the spirit of a former mentor, Brunetto Latini, who has been condemned to the seventh circle and third ring of Hell on account of his homosexuality.

In modern law, sodomy is a term describing oral or anal sex between members of the same or of opposite sex; or homosexuality in general; or sex between a human being and an animal. (Less frequently, the term describes nonconsensual, violent sexual acts committed against persons.) Such sexual activity has often been considered "unnatural" in that its intent and result cannot include procreation. The biblical origin of this perspective resides in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for the alleged sexual wickedness of their inhabitants (Genesis 19: 1–13). Although the biblical passages are far from clear – some scholars interpret the sin of the inhabitants of Sodom to have been cruelty and lack of hospitality to strangers – the dominant Christian view concluded that God destroyed Sodom as punishment for widespread sexual immorality and unnatural desire (Jude 1:7).

In the *Inferno*, Dante the author focuses on consensual homosexual acts between men. Thoroughly influenced by the Christian view that homoerotic sexual activity arouses God's anger, Dante and the majority of his contemporaries would have regarded homosexuality as unnatural and sinful.

The pilgrim and Brunello wander together because Brunetto fears that, if he stops wandering, he will be sentenced to 100 years of more intense punishment. Brunetto predicts that the pilgrim will perform glorious deeds that will earn him numerous enemies among the Florentines. In life, Brunetto was a major positive influence on Dante the author. Yet here the author consigns Brunetto to eternal damnation. Brunetto's fatal flaw of sodomy overwhelms his numerous positive dispositions, which benefited many of his students and colleagues. Sodomy regards what is intended by God to be fruitful in a fashion that ensures its barrenness.

The pilgrim wonders about the identity of the three spirits accompanying Brunetto: Priscianus Caesariensis, a sixth-century Latin grammarian; Francesco d'Accorso, a thirteenth-century Florentine lawyer; and Andrea De' Mozzi, a thirteenth-century bishop of Florence, whom Pope Boniface VIII transferred to another diocese when the bishop's sexual preferences become known. (Apparently the Catholic church's proclivity for transferring sexually wayward priests from one diocese to another has a long history.) Suddenly, Brunetto runs off to catch up with his companions.

A trio of spirits, running in a circle to avoid the additional punishment meted out for stopping, implores the pilgrim to recognize them. They are prominent Guelfs of the generation immediately prior to the time of Dante the author: Jacopo Rusticucci, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Guido Guerra. The pilgrim expresses his admiration for their deeds and fame and his distress at seeing them among the damned. Jacopo asks whether Florentines still exuded bravery and dignity. The pilgrim laments that pride and excess mar contemporary Florentines, especially those entering the city from rural homelands. The three sinners ask the pilgrim to speak of them to those who remain on earth.

A terrifying monster appears: Geryon, who has the face of an earnest man and a poisoned tail. Geryon symbolizes fraud – an honest countenance masking venomous intent. While Virgil negotiates with Geryon, who will facilitate descent into the eighth circle of hell, the pilgrim sees usurers sitting hunched over on the desert sand. The usurers are unrecognizable, because their obsession with material accumulation overwhelmed their individuating characteristics on earth. However, the moneybags that hang

around their necks are adorned by crests that identify them as members of the Gianfigliuzzi, Ubriachi, and Scrovegni families.

Lower Hell: Sins of Malice Leading to Fraud (the Leopard)

CIRCLE 8 Simple or ordinary frauds: Fraud without treachery

THE TEN BOLGIE: 1 Panderers and seducers The pilgrim recognizes two lines of naked sinners walking in opposite directions; they are chased and whipped by horned demons. The line walking toward the pilgrim is composed of panderers who acted in life as go-betweens in *liaisons* and in illicit sex. The line walking in the same direction as the pilgrim is composed of seducers who, in life, deceptively lured victims into sexual encounters.

The pilgrim spots a shade which is trying to hide its face. Venedico Caccianemico, leader of the Guelfs in Bologna in the late thirteenth century, identifies himself and his transgression: he had sold his sister to a marquis. Venedico adds that this bolgia includes numerous panderers from Bologna.

As Virgil and the pilgrim cross an old bridge, they spot Jason, leader of the Argonauts, who has met the destiny he deserved for seducing Hypsipyle, abandoning her, and leaving her pregnant and desperate.

2 Flatterers The pilgrim then hears lamentations from souls mired in human excrement. He stares at Alessio Intermini, a prominent White Guelf in Lucca, and wryly adds that he had once seen him with dry hair. Virgil asks the pilgrim to observe a filthy, unkempt woman scratching herself with dirty fingernails: the mythical harlot Thaïs, well known for her larger-than-life personality. Flatterers are fraudulent purveyors and perverters of language and speech.

3 Simonists Stuck upside down into holes, with feet aflame and twitching like candlewicks, are the simonists – those who profited from selling sacred items such as indulgences and church offices. Dante the author places several popes in this bolgia, including the office holder at the time he composed the *Commedia*. Pope Nicholas III is the shade whose legs are twitching most noticeably. Nicholas informs the pilgrim that Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Clement V will descend to the same hole at death



and will stuff Nicholas even further down. Despite a disingenuous gesture of tardy repentance, Nicholas always advanced the interests of self and family over the interests of the wider religious community. With Virgil's approving embrace, the pilgrim delivers a stern lecture against simony and its practitioners. No misplaced sympathy here. The pilgrim's understanding of the *contrapasso* is deepening. The intensity of the pilgrim's moral outrage is here most striking. Entrusted by God to be the shepherd of His spiritual community, Nicholas (and, by extension, Boniface and Clement) fraudulently abused his position for money. Such fraud severs the church from its spiritual mission and desecrates communal trust.

4 *Sorcerers: Diviners, astrologers, and magicians* Because they spoke too promiscuously and peered into the future too indiscriminately while alive, the sorcerers no longer speak and are turned toward the past. Their heads are twisted grotesquely toward their rears; they walk backwards slowly and weep; the tears creep down their buttocks. Figures such as Amphiaraus, Tiresias, Aruns, Manto, Euryplus, Michael Scott, Guido Bonatti, and Asdente are identified. Surprisingly, the pilgrim cries when he first sees the contorted bodies of the sorcerers. Virgil sternly reprimands him and points out that piety is alive only when pity has expired. The pilgrim's pity is surprising not only because of his apparent moral advance in the previous bolgia, but also because Dante the author had criticized astrology so harshly at a time when its conclusions were widely accepted.

5 *Swindlers* Stuck in boiling tar in retribution for the stickiness of their fingers while alive, the swindlers are menaced by nasty winged-demons, the Malebranche, who claw at any grifter trying to escape from the tar pitch. Dante the author is most concerned with political corruption, which triggered his historical humiliation and exile. The swindlers in this bolgia are the secular counterparts of the simonists in the third bolgia. Virgil warns the pilgrim to hide behind a stone as a rush of demons appears. Virgil confidently confronts and straightens out the fearsome demon, Malacoda. He points out that he would never have gotten this far in the journey but for divine aid. Bowing to the necessity of a greater power, Malacoda orders his minions to ease off Virgil and the pilgrim. Amid the pilgrim's suspicions, which are allayed by Virgil, Malacoda provides an escort.

As they continue, a sinner pops out of the tar pitch, seeking respite from his punishment. One of the demons escorting the pilgrim stabs the



presumptuous miscreant. As the demon reads a more severe response, Virgil asks the sinner to identify himself: he is a Spaniard, Ciampolo of Navarre, who betrayed a king. Virgil asks if any Italians are in the pitch. Ciampolo mentions one whom he had just left and two Sardinians, Fra Gomita and Michele Zanche.

A grifter to the end, Ciampolo promises the demons that he will go below and entice some of his fellow swindlers to rise about the pitch, for the sadistic amusement of the demons. Instead, Ciampolo escapes back into the pitch, being followed by two of the hapless demons whose confederates must now rescue them. All in a day's work in the fifth bolgia, where sinners and their custodians parry and harass to the maximum possible extent.

6 *Hypocrites* The demons were tricked by Ciampolo and blame Virgil and the pilgrim. They race after the pair with outstretched wings. Virgil grabs the pilgrim and they safely slide down the bank leading to the sixth bolgia. The demons lack the power to leave the fifth bolgia. A crowd of sinners appears; they creep slowly along, in single file, while seeming overwhelmed as they weep. Unlike most sinners in Hell, who remain naked, these perpetrators are dressed in flashy golden cloaks lined with heavy lead. The hoods of their cloaks are pulled low. These are the hypocrites.

Two monks, Catalano de' Malavolti and Logerino degli Andalò, identify themselves: they belonged, in life, to an order of monks. This order was ostensibly formed in order to support peace among political sects and feuding families and to defend the powerless and disenfranchised. In practice, they were better known for pursuing pleasure than for demonstrating religious excellence. At the request of the Florentines, Catalano and Logerino had traveled from Bologna to Florence. They were jointly elected to the office of mayor (*podestà*). Instead of facilitating peace, they nurtured a divisiveness that climaxed with the expulsion of the Ghibellines from Florence. The pilgrim begins to reply when he spots a sinner on the ground, crucified to three stakes. The miscreant is none other than Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who persuaded his colleagues and Pontius Pilate to condemn Christ. All the other hypocrites in this bolgia walk slowly over his body – which, unlike their weighted-down bodies, remains naked.

Virgil and the pilgrim realize that they had been deceived in the fifth bolgia. Malacoda and his minions had lied when they claimed that, although the main bridge over the sixth bolgia was broken, another bridge further down the path was operable. Moreover, Ciampolo lied to them too, luring



them into believing that he was going to call up the Italians beneath the tar pitch to speak with them. Of course, Ciampolo had also lied to the Malebranche in order to escape from them. Virgil and the pilgrim are deceived by this mendacity. Their gullibility is often interpreted as symbolic of the inadequacy of human reason to pierce through the glitter and seduction of well-crafted trickery. But why would Virgil and the pilgrim trust those who are eternally condemned as swindlers and the demons who are their wards? I find it impossible to believe that Virgil exemplifies the highest attainment of human reason in this matter. Instead, he demonstrates that he is stained with *sciocchezza* (“foolishness”).

7 *Thieves* Virgil and the pilgrim continue the perilous trek through the rings of Hell. The pilgrim struggles as he ascends. Virgil urges him on with a traditional Roman appeal for pursuing enduring glory.

“Omai convien che tu così ti speltre,” disse ’l maestro; “ché, seggendo in piuma, in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre; senza la qual chi sua vita consuma, cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia, qual fummo in aere e in acqua la schiuma.” [“Now you must case aside your laziness,” my master said, “for he who rests on a featherbed or under covers cannot come to fame; and he who spends his life without fame leaves no more vestige of himself on earth than smoke bequeaths to air or foam to water”]. (I XXIV, 46–51)

In the seventh bolgia the pilgrim sees a frightening collection of exotic serpents. The condemned thieves relegated to this bolgia run among them naked, with their hands tied behind their backs, and utterly horrified; the thieves are powerless to prevent the serpents from forcing their heads and tails through the stomachs of the sinners.

An especially gruesome event follows: a serpent jumps on one of the condemned thieves, striking him at the base of his neck. The shade ignites, burns, and dissolves to ashes. Almost immediately, the ashes assume the thief’s previous form. The reconstructed shade is *stonato* (“stunned,” “made dumb”) and confused. Virgil asks his name. He is Vanni Fucci, the Beast from Pistoia. Fucci is an odd inhabitant of the seventh bolgia. It turns out that Fucci – by reputation a man of violent rage and not a purloiner of goods – had stolen the treasure of the sacristy in a church at Pistoia, and an innocent person had been blamed. Fucci adds that the pilgrim, a White Guef, should temper his satisfaction at the deserved punishment of Fucci, a Black Guef. He predicts joyfully, with the unwavering certitude of many



of those condemned in Hell, that the civil war in Pistoia will soon spill over to Florence, with disastrous consequences for the pilgrim's political party.

Vanni Fucci, continuing to live down to his reputation, makes the obscene gesture of the fig: closing the hand to form a fist, with the thumb inserted between the first and second fingers. (This maneuver, still popular in Italy, recalls sexual intercourse and is roughly comparably to giving someone the finger.) Fucci directs the obscenity to God. A serpent immediately wraps itself around Fucci's neck, while another serpent ties back his arms. Fucci speeds away as a centaur bearing snakes and a fire-breathing dragon pursue him. Clearly, Fucci's expression of rage was poor strategy.

Three shades, the Florentines Agnello, Buoso, and Puccio "the Cripple" Sciancato, ask Virgil and the pilgrim to identify themselves. Prior to the response, Agnello is beset upon by a fourth Florentine, Cianfa, while Buoso is attacked by yet another, Francesco de' Cavalcanti ("Guercio"). Both attackers assume the form of serpents. By means of their attack, they regain the human form that their victims relinquish. The law of *contrapasso* decrees that in life no object was safe from these thieves; in the afterlife, not even the human form of these shades is secure: not having distinguished, while they were on earth, between what was rightfully theirs and what rightfully belonged to others, in the afterlife they cannot claim possession even of their own shapes and personalities.

The scene deepens and widens in a fashion Federico Fellini would approve: the six-legged serpent Cianfa leaps on Agnello, and the two begin to merge. They temporarily form changing colors and semblances never before seen. The hideous hybrid skulks away. Soon thereafter Cavalcanti, as a small fiery serpent, leaps toward Buoso while Puccio escapes. Cavalcanti pierces the stomach of Buoso and falls at his feet. With smoke foaming from its mouth, the serpent joins the wound of Buoso. Each form begins to change into the other. The smoke ends and a newly formed beast, the former Buoso, flees, hissing, while Cavalcanti, now in human form, chases it.

8 Deceivers: Fraudulent counselors The pilgrim ruminates about the travails of his native city. Florence, represented so robustly in the ring of thieves, has experienced a downward spiral, not soon to end. Virgil and the pilgrim travel over the ridge of the eighth bolgia. The ring is sparking with flames, each of which conceals the tormented soul of a sinner. An approaching flame contains Ulysses (Odysseus) and Diomedes, condemned for their deceptions and fraudulent counseling during the Trojan War. Together in sin while living, the two are joined eternally in punishment.

Ulysses chronicles his quest for new adventures after leaving the seductive Circe, who enchanted Ulysses for more than a year and turned his men into swine. Along the way, Ulysses dishonored his commitments to his family and traveled past the limits allowed to pagans. Ulysses neglected his familial and civic duties and deceived comrades, in a foolish quest fueled by arrogance, vanity, and abused reason. He represents the relentless adventurer who pursues heroism for its own sake, detached from salutary moral convictions and values. Ulysses deeply appreciates his own rhetorical skills as he spins the tale of his final journey. Dante the author invents much of this tale.

After the Ulysses–Diomedes flame leaves, another flame, recognizing Virgil’s Lombardy accent, approaches and asks about his native Romagna. The pilgrim informs the flame that Romagna, although known for its internal strife, was relatively peaceful at the time. Upon being questioned, the flame identifies himself as Guido da Montefeltro, a renowned Ghibelline captain. Unlike several earlier sinners, Guido does not want his story retold to the living. Identifying his transgressions with those of the fox and not with those of the lion, he speaks only because he believes that the pilgrim will not return to earth. A militarist who became a monk in order to atone for his sins, Guido was duped by Pope Boniface VIII. Always one to seize opportunity, the vicar promised in advance to absolve Guido, at that point a Franciscan monk, and then convinced him to render counsel on how to deceive the pope’s enemies, the Colonna family, who were hunkered down in the seemingly unassailable town of Palestrina. Swallowing the bait, Guido advised the pope to give assurances, then to renege them once the Colonnas accepted. The pope agreed. He offered the Colonnas a complete pardon if they would abandon their fortress. Once the Colonnas left Palestrina, he had the town razed and salted. The Colonnas lost everything. Trusting in what turned out to be the pope’s fraudulent absolution, Guido never repented his sins. Moreover, Guido’s original motivation in becoming a monk – to repent his past sins – was annulled by his giving sinful counsel to the pope. When Guido died, St. Francis came to claim his soul. But a black cherubim interrupted the enterprise, citing the principle that we never earn absolution from sin while intending future sin; we cannot intend sinful action and repent over it, simultaneously. Also, Guido’s actions as a monk call into question the sincerity of his repentance over his sins as a militarist: his initial repentance was itself fraudulent. Thus Guido is encased in an eternal flame.

Both Ulysses and Guido embody prodigious talents, twisted toward fraudulent ends: uncommon intelligence unrestrained by moral virtue spells self-destruction and social disaster. Clever adventurers, prepared to

employ any means necessary to secure their ends, are dangerous to themselves and the community. The encasement of Ulysses in flames testifies to his brilliance; but the law of *contrapasso* militates for the eternal suffering of this type of self-absorbed adventurer.

9 *Sowers of discord and scandal* The ninth bolgia is constituted by mutilated, bloody shades continually ripped open, healed, then reopened by a demon's sword. A sinner split from the chin past the navel identifies himself as Mahomet (Muhammad). His son-in-law Ali stands in front of him, split from chin to brow and sobbing. Dante the author views Mahomet and his first disciple, Ali, as architects of the great schism between Christians and Moslems. Mahomet asks the pilgrim to identify himself. Virgil answers. More than one hundred shades stop and gape at the pilgrim. Mahomet raises a foot to move on, gives the pilgrim a message to relay to a living schismatic friar, Fra Dolcino, and sets his foot down.

Another shade, Pier da Medicina, gives the pilgrim a warning about two prominent men of Fano: a tyrant plans treachery against them. Pier was an originator of strife between the Polenta and Malatesta families in Medicina (east of Bologna). Pier then points to the tongueless head of Gaius Scribonius Curio, who urged Caesar to cross the Rubicon and ignite the Roman civil war. Another shade who lacks hands, Mosca de Lamberti, explains that he sparked the first clash between Guelfs and Ghibellines by agitating for an Easter Sunday attack of the family of a man who had broken off a marriage engagement with one of Mosca's relatives. The pilgrim points out that the intrigue ended in the death of Mosca's relatives. That reminder sends the sorrowful, bleeding shade away.

The pilgrim is then stunned as he spots a shade carrying his own head as if it were a lantern. As the shade approaches, he holds out his severed head to the pilgrim and identifies himself as Bertran de Born, a Cistercian monk and celebrated troubadour in life. Bertran had advised Prince Henry to rebel against his father, King Henry II. The insurrection was unsuccessful, as the prince was slain and Bertran imprisoned. Dante the author has Bertran severed from his head in Hell in order to underscore the imperatives of the *contrapasso*: the character is now separated from the brain that concocted his schemes.

10 *Falsifiers and counterfeiters* In the tenth bolgia the pilgrim encounters the shade of Geri del Bello degli Alighieri, a first cousin of Dante's father. An established agitator, Geri had been killed in a blood feud with the Sacchetti

family, but his death had not yet been avenged. In the day of Dante the author, the law permitted, even encouraged, private vendettas, and honor often required explicit retaliations. (In fact, 30 years after Geri's death, he was avenged by some nephews – an event that celebrated the adage that “revenge is a dish best served cold.”)

An unbearable stench permeates the tenth bolgia. Shades lie in various piles and in grotesque positions, unable to rise. They are afflicted with loathsome diseases. The pilgrim spots two leprosy-pocked sinners leaning against one another, scratching themselves avidly. Virgil asks if there are any Italians among them. One of the shades, Griffolino da Arezzo, says that they are both Italian. Griffolino hailed from Arezzo, but he was burned at the stake in Siena. He had jokingly told the bishop's son that he could teach him to fly, so that the boy might enter the Siena homes of desirable women through the window. The boy was *cafone* (obtuse and coarse) enough to pay Griffolino for lessons. After discovering the fraud, he reported his misfortune to the bishop, who acted decisively. But the sinner was relegated to the eighth circle, ten bolgia of Hell for the fraud of alchemy – acting as a magician. In an aside, the pilgrim asks Virgil if any people – even the notoriously vain French – are as self-enthralled as the Sienese.

The other sinner is the fraudulent alchemist Capocchio, a Florentine also burned at the stake in Siena. He was a fellow student of the pilgrim's and gives his opinion on the Sienese. He exempts some of them from harsh evaluations, but only tongue-in-cheek: members of the *Brigata Spendericcia* (Spendrift Club) were wealthy young men seeking attention. They rented palaces, threw lavish banquets, and ended up squandering their wealth.

Two pale, naked, deranged sinners, both condemned for impersonation, enter the scene. Gianni Schicchi bites Capocchio's neck and drags him away with his stomach bouncing over the ground. In life, at the urging of a dead man's son, Gianni impersonated the deceased in order to alter the will, making it more favorable toward the relatives of the dead man. Ever enterprising, Gianni bequeathed the best items to himself.

The other sinner, Myrrha of Cyprus, used impersonation to commit incest with her father. (She was turned into a myrrh tree, from which was begot Adonis.) The *contrapasso* decrees that impersonators are rendered insane – a corruption of the mind, which is an appropriate disease flowing from their own corrupt values. In that vein, the alchemists are afflicted with leprosy, a corruption of the body.

The pilgrim spies a swollen shade, who appears as a lute with legs. He calls himself Master Adam, who was burned alive for allegedly counterfeiting

gold florins at the urging of the Guidi family in Romena. Though desperately thirsty, he would trade water for the sight of the Guidi family members being rightfully punished. In fact, placing no premium on forgiveness, he would be willing to move only an inch every century in exchange for seeing them in pain. The pilgrim asks about two nearby feverish women. Adam identifies them as Potiphar, the seductive wife from the biblical story, who falsely accused Joseph of bold sexual advances; and Sinon the Greek, the deceitful woman who tricked the Trojans into taking the wooden horse inside their city gates.

Upset by the thinness of her description, Sinon whacks Adam in his stomach. Adam retaliates by thrusting his arm in Sinon's face. The two trade insults. The pilgrim enjoys the scene, until Virgil scolds him for his base desire to hear such trash talk. Virgil's sternness renders the pilgrim embarrassed and speechless. Virgil immediately forgives the pilgrim.

The counterfeiters suffer from dropsy and the deceivers are condemned to be plagued by a fever that produces a repellent odor. The *contrapasso* demands that these sinners, diseased and corrupt, while living, through the values they exemplified, eternally symbolize what they brought about in life.

CIRCLE 9 *Complex frauds: Fraud with treachery
against special bonds*

1 *Caina: Traitors to kin* The pilgrim and Virgil make their way through the thick air separating the eighth from ninth circles of Hell. Several mythological giants, who rebelled against their gods, are spotted on the way to the depths of Hell: Nimrod, Ephialtes, and Briareus are all eternally chained. As such rebellion centers on the sin of envy and pride, Dante the author flags these transgressions as the most grievous of all. Unlike sins of simple fraud, the transgressions of complex fraud include treachery, usually murder.

At Virgil's request, the unchained giant Antaeus lifts the two wanderers in his hand and places them lower, on a lake of ice – the Cocytus. The frozen lake consists of four concentric rings. Treacherous traitors to family bonds are relegated to the furthest ring, Caina, named after Cain, who murdered his brother Abel. They are punished by being buried in ice up to their necks. The pilgrim sees two shades near his feet standing chest to chest. Tears cascade down their cheeks and lock the two together. A third shade, whose ears have fallen off from the low temperature, says that the two others are brothers: Napoleone and Alessandro, sons of Count Alberto of Mangona.



The two quarreled incessantly and ultimately killed each other in a dispute over their inheritance. The speaker identifies himself as Camicion de Pazzi, who in life murdered a relative. The pilgrim also meets the mythological Mordred, evil nephew of King Arthur, who planned to kill his uncle and to seize the kingdom; Focaccia, a White Guelf who murdered his cousin; and Sassoll Mascheroni, a member of the Toschi family who got rid of his nephew to gain his inheritance.

2 *Antenora: Traitors to party and country* The second ring of the ninth circle of Hell, Antenora, is named after a Trojan warrior who betrayed his city to the Greeks. This division of the Cocytus punishes those who treacherously betrayed their city, country, or political party.

As he moves inward toward Antenora, the pilgrim accidentally kicks one of the faces sticking out of the ice. Angry, the pilgrim pulls at the shade's hair to force him to reveal his name. The shade dummies up. But another shade identifies him as Bocca degli Abati, a Ghibelline who pretended to side with the Guelfs at the infamous battle of Montaperti. Bocca allegedly cut off the hand of the Guelf standard bearer. The loss of the Guelf standard led to a state of panic that facilitated a major victory by the Sienese Ghibellines.

Enraged that he has been kicked and that his identity had been revealed, Bocca names other sinners in Antenora, including Buoso da Duera, chief of the Ghibellines in Cremona, who was assigned to stop Charles of Anjou, but instead accepted a bribe that allowed the French to pass freely into Naples; Tesauro dei Beccheria, an abbot and papal legate who was killed for betraying the Guelfs of Florence; Gianni de Soldanier, a prominent Ghibelline who switched parties; Ganelon, a knight who betrayed Roland to the Saracens; and Tibbald, a Ghibelline who opened Bologna to the Guelfs in order to take revenge on a Ghibelline family. As he journeys further, the pilgrim see two heads frozen in one hole, the mouth of one shade nibbling on the head of the other. Their situation recalls another one, from Greek mythology: Tydeus killed Menalippus in combat, but Menalippus severely wounded Tydeus, who demanded the head of Menalippus and ate his brains in a rage.

The hungry, enraged shade is Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, who now feasts on the head of Archbishop Ruggieri. The count, although belonging to a Ghibelline family, had conspired with his son-in-law to advance Guelf power in Pisa. He was exiled for subversive activity but still became prominent in the Guelf government. A few years later he schemed with the Archbishop to rid Pisa of the Visconti family. The archbishop betrayed the



plot and, with the help of the Ghibellines, assumed control of the city. At that point the archbishop imprisoned the count. The prelate locked the count and his innocent four children in the Tower of Pisa and kept them there for six months; then he starved them to death in eight days. (Historically, the count was incarcerated with two sons and two grandsons.) The count paints a gruesome picture of the family's final days. He hints that he ate his children in a fight against starvation. The dynamic duo now occupy the boundary between Antenora and Tolomea: Ugolino is condemned for betraying his country – his appropriate placement would be in Antenora – while Ruggieri is punished for betraying his confederate – and should be relegated to Tolomea. Because they are joined, they reside on the boundary of the two rings. Ugolino munches on the head of his jailor, Ruggieri, for eternity. Ugolino betrayed Nino Visconti, his grandson and political rival, and Ruggieri betrayed Ugolino after conspiring with him. Ugolino exemplifies rabid selfish desire for material goods – mainly political power and wealth. As the pilgrim curses the ruthless Pisans, who killed the four innocent scions of Ugolino, Ugolino returns to gnawing on the Archbishop's cranium.

3 *Tolomea: Traitors to guests and hosts* The pilgrim and Virgil mosey down to the third ring of ice, where traitors to guests are punished. Tolomea is named after the biblical captain of Jericho, Ptolemy, who murdered the Jewish high priest Simon and two of his sons after luring them to a dinner he hosted. Sinners in this ring are frozen in ice, with their faces tossed back, so that their tears freeze and seal their eyes. One of the condemned pleads with the pilgrim to remove frozen tears from his eyes. Dante asks his name and suggests that, if the shade complies, then the pilgrim will grant his request or go to the bottom of Hell if he does not. The beggar says he is Friar Alberigo, one of the Jovial Friars better known for pursuing hedonism than for pursuing religious devotion. Why was he condemned? Well, a relative had slapped his face during a dispute. The friar hired assassins and plotted his revenge: he invited the relative and his son to a reconciliation banquet; when the friar called for the fruit, the knife-wielding assassins murdered the two guests. Beware of prelates requesting kumquats!

The shade explains that souls in this ring of Hell often lose possession of their souls before death. Such miscreants arrive at Tolomea prior to the death of their bodies, which are inhabited by devils while they themselves are still alive on earth. Such was the case with the friar and with Branca d'Oria, whose soul is frozen just behind him, although his demon-infested



body still acts in the world. Branca is a Genoan who treacherously murdered his father-in-law, Michele Zanche – a swindler now condemned to the fifth bolgia of circle eight in Hell.

The pilgrim refuses to wipe the frozen eyes from the friar's eyes. Technically, he did not break his word – he is headed for the bottom ring in Hell. But the pilgrim is firmly convinced that the friar does not deserve common courtesy. Moreover, the pilgrim curses Branca's fellow Genoans. Having earlier wished that the Pisans would drown and now hoping that the Genoans would be driven from the planet, and showing no pity for the friar, the pilgrim judges that traitors should themselves be betrayed. The pilgrim's previous compassionate leanings have been replaced by a chilling, enthusiastic embrace of the law of *contrapasso*.

4 *Judecca: Traitors to lords and benefactors* Unsurprisingly, the innermost ring of the Cocytus contains Satan, the Knight of Darkness, Master of Spiritual Disaster, Most Fallen of Angels, the Sultan of Sin. Judecca punishes sinners who betrayed their rightful lords and benefactors, whether religious or secular. The treacherous souls now lie buried beneath the ice. Accordingly, they cannot speak, move, or connive. The pilgrim walks behind Virgil to shield himself from frigid gales blasting from what appears to be a giant windmill covered with mist. Virgil warns the pilgrim that they must conjure special courage. The giant windmill is in fact Satan. Having rejected God due to his pride and obsession with attention, Lucifer, now at the physical center of the universe, bears the entire weight of a sin-infested world. Fixed in ice from the chest down, the evil one has three faces: one red, one black, one yellowish–white. This distorted analogue to the Holy Trinity replaces the divine qualities of all-lovingness, all-power, and all-knowingness with hatred, impotence, and insanity. Under each of Satan's heads flap two huge wings – a parody of his once angelic form. The flapping wings generate the frigid gales that maintain the frozen lake of Cocytus. The more furiously Satan flaps his wings, in a futile effort to escape, the more securely he is locked into place. His six eyes weep in frustration; tears and bloody drool repulsively decorate his three chins.

In each of his mouths, Lucifer, the ultimate traitor, munches on one of the three worst sinners of all time (at least up to the time of Dante the author). Unsurprisingly, Satan's red, middle mouth chews on Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve original apostles – the one who betrayed Jesus in exchange for 30 pieces of silver. His head is entirely within Satan's mouth, while his legs



protrude out, kicking in anguish. Judas has the ignominious honor of occupying the lowest ring of Hell named after him.

But who are the other two worst sinners? None other than the major perpetrators of the assassination carried out on the Ides of March: Brutus and Cassius. Having betrayed what was, for Dante the author, the divinely willed beginning of the Roman Empire, they now dangle from Satan's other two mouths: Brutus, the moral conscience of the conspiracy, hangs from Satan's black face; Cassius, the instigator and organizer of the assassination, is suspended from Satan's yellowish–white face. Unlike with Judas, only their torsos are gnawed by Satan's mouths; their heads dangle outside, as both hall of shame sinners struggle eternally in silent desperation.

Dante the author ties a bow around his recurrent theme: the worst earthly transgressions are monumental betrayals of rightful divine and worldly authority. The Church and the Roman Empire remain for the author the symbols of that authority. Accordingly, the law of *contrapasso* exudes no mercy for history's three greatest evil-doers.

Dante's Existential Lessons in Hell

The *Inferno* expresses several themes that anticipate the arrival of existential philosophy. In Hell, Dante the pilgrim learns six lessons. First, human beings define themselves through their choices and decisions: our choices and actions shape our characters. The sinners in Hell crafted their destinies in unhealthy ways. Second, soul-making is our most important project. Although we too easily fail to reflect on our efforts and results, our grandest project is that of ongoing self-creation. The sinners in Hell failed this purpose miserably and their characters are now fixed. Third, living authentically is required for human flourishing. We must recognize our freedom, understand our personal context, and take responsibility for our actions. The sinners in Hell deny their freedom and cast off blame. Fourth, vice is its own punishment. Regardless of the perceptions of others, thoughts and actions arising from incontinence and malice mold our characters in unwholesome ways. The sinners in Hell now reap what they have sown – their punishments reveal what they made of themselves on earth. Fifth, self-deception nurtures vice. Facile rationalizations and self-serving excuses promote only our moral depravity. Having fixed their characters while on earth, the sinners in Hell continue their self-defeating strategies in the afterlife. Sixth, commitment and conviction are required



for crafting the soul. Allowing ourselves to be shaped by received wisdom and dominant ideas is an indolent recipe for personal dissolution. The sinners in Hell fell too easily into the allure of conformity and external validation by following noxious conventions.

The pilgrim is introduced to these lessons in Hell, but his spiritual education and personal transformation have only begun. To refine and supplement the lessons of Hell, the pilgrim must continue his journey and climb to Purgatory.

Notes and References

GENERAL NOTE Throughout this work I include parenthetical references to Dante's *Commedia*. These references are of the form:

P XXX 34–57 (= *Purgatorio*, Canto 30, Lines 34–57)
 I IV, 52–63 (= *Inferno*, Canto 4, Lines 52–63)
 Par. XX, 125 (= *Paradiso*, Canto 20, Line 125).

I also include a few parenthetical references to passages in the Bible and to Virgil's *Aeneid*, which should be self-explanatory.

1. From “Where to Eternity,” the 22nd episode of the HBO original series *The Sopranos*, and the 9th episode of the show's second season.
2. This chapter has been informed by Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Volume 1: *Inferno*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. and ed. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982); Mark Musa, *Advent at the Gates* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); Joseph Gallagher, *The Divine Comedy* (Liguori, MS: Liguori Publications, 1996); Rachel Jacoff, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); John A. Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Harold Bloom, ed., *Dante* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986); Etienne Gilson, *Dante the Philosopher* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948); W. H. V. Reade, *The Moral System of Dante's Inferno* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).
3. Bloom, *Dante*, 185.



PURGATORIO

Sentences in Purgatory are readily calculable: the total number of venial sins multiplied by 25, plus the total number of mortal sins multiplied by 50, equals a miscreant's term. So speculates Paul "Paulie Walnuts" Gualtieri, a member of the mythical Soprano crime family, when he advises his ailing comrade, Christopher Moltisanti. Paulie Walnuts gauges his own penance at about 6,000 years, a piddling rap when compared to eternity. Walnuts is confident he can do this time standing on his head. After all, relatively speaking, a 6,000-year sentence in Purgatory is no more than a couple of days in earthly time.¹

Purgatory in a Nutshell

The now-familiar conception of Purgatory – as a place for purification, where sinners atone for lesser sins than those committed by the reprobates in Hell – developed gradually in Christian doctrine. Christians prayed for their dead and implicitly recognized that the dead were not beyond reformation. Some passages in the holy books suggested the possibility of atonement.² Christian theologians intuited that a serious sinner who repented prior to death would not be consigned to Hell. Yet to elevate such a reprobate immediately to Paradise, along with saints and martyrs, seemed both unjust and unwise. Immediate elevation was unjust because saints and martyrs lived and died with pure souls, while late repentants lived in a state of serious sin. Immediate elevation was unwise because it gave human

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beings no incentive to live virtuously, while it overly rewarded sincere regret prior to death. Why not live wildly and selfishly during most of one's life, then straighten up in one's golden years?

Prior to the *Commedia*, Purgatory was mainly a preoccupation for theologians. After the *Commedia*, Purgatory gained an acknowledged structure and a deeper meaning for religious believers. Dante is most responsible for the lurid imagery of Purgatory that is still prevalent today. Dante the author conjures Purgatory as a lofty mountain on an island in the earth's otherwise barren southern hemisphere. The Forest of Eden rests at the top of the mountain; below it is Purgatory proper, where seven circling terraces contain souls stained with the seven capital sins. At the bottom is Ante-Purgatory, where sinners who were late repentants await the beginning of the process of their atonement.³

All stays in Purgatory are temporary: these souls died in God's grace and will eventually attain Paradise. The souls in Purgatory are not always required to suffer penance on each terrace. First, they may not have committed certain types of sin. Second, if their transgressions were minor, they may pass through a particular terrace, where penitents atone for that sin and ascend to the next level. However, sinners are sentenced in proportion to the quantity and quality of their transgressions. They must pay their debt to God and purify their souls by enduring the sufferings on each of the terraces that are appropriate given their wrongful earthly deeds. The dwellers of Purgatory learn about the nature of their earthly sins by contemplating historical examples, sometimes through their suffering and through their participation in didactic art work and religious rituals. Most strikingly, Purgatory is the original support group: souls work together in pursuit of moral perfection. The communal dimension underscores the fact that Purgatory, unlike Hell or Paradise, is a domain of change.

At the Final Judgment Purgatory will wither away, as all souls are reunited with their resurrected bodies. Presumably the remaining residents of Purgatory will rise to Paradise. As the only region in the *Commedia* that is transient, both in terms of its own existence and in nurturing salutary changes among its residents, Purgatory closely reflects earthly life. Moreover, the communal dimension of Purgatory suggests the ideal religious community on earth.

In this chapter I summarize Dante's *Purgatorio*, while underscoring the distinctions he makes between denizens of Hell and residents of Purgatory. I also focus on the differences between Dante's depiction and the traditional Christian view of Purgatory. Finally, I describe the additional existential lessons that the pilgrim confronts in Purgatory.

The Journey Continues

Virgil explains the moral system of Hell by appeal to the evil of injustice. He explains the moral system of Purgatory through the seven ways in which love can be corrupted. Morality, then, is simply love, understood broadly as desire properly directed. Several common themes bind the residents of Purgatory. They all, sooner or later, repented their sins; their transgressions were not tarnished by the malice that characterized the sinners in Hell; instead, their misdeeds flowed from a distortion, misunderstanding, or misdirected focusing of love – the perversion of love for the cause of evil. Whereas Hell extinguished all hope, Purgatory nourishes awareness of possibilities: salutary love, knowledge, and self-perfection. Purgatory is nothing less than the redirecting of love toward the divine.

Through Dante the pilgrim, Dante the author must experience and reflect upon the darkness of his soul prior to earning spiritual reemergence into the shimmering light of Paradise. He must evaluate the reasons why he has been unable to remain faithful to the righteous path. He must participate in the sins of those penitents he confronts. For Dante the author, composing the *Purgatorio* is nothing less than constructing his own Purgatory.

Ante-Purgatory: Late Repentants

Excommunicates, the Indolent, Victims of Violence, and Negligent Princes

As they burst out of Hell, Dante the pilgrim and Virgil bask in the glow of the planet Venus and of four luminous stars, representing the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They meet soon a figure with a long, white beard, whose face reflects the light of the four stars. Virgil recognizes Cato the Stoic – the arch-enemy of Caesar; the inflexible conscience of the Roman Senate; the hard man who committed suicide rather than live by accepting the victorious Caesar's largesse. Virgil informs Cato that he is from the circle of Hell, Limbo, where Cato's wife Marcia still longs for him.

In life, Cato was approached by the fabled orator Hortensius, who sought an alliance through marriage. Cato had previously rejected a marriage alliance with Pompey, claiming that he refused to stain his family morally.

But Cato admired the orator. Unfortunately, no one in his household was suitable for wedlock. But few ever accused Cato of acting in orthodox manner. He gave his own pregnant wife, Marcia, to Hortensius, and then remarried her, or at least took her and her children into his household, when the orator died several years later. Cato, even by Roman standards, was immune to sentimentality within marriage. Or was he? After all, he did take Marcia back ... once she was a wealthy widow. Perhaps Dante the author views Marcia's return to Cato as an allegory of a sinner's return to God and to Paradise.

In any event, Virgil asks Cato for permission to journey through Purgatory as evidence of Cato's love for Marcia. Virgil should have known better. In life, Cato was unsentimental; in death, he is immune to nostalgia. He informs Virgil that Marcia can no longer influence him now that Cato has left Hell (presumably from Limbo, which houses virtuous pagans). We learn that Cato, despite being a pagan, a suicide, and an enemy of Caesar, was removed from Limbo and assigned the important position of gatekeeper of Purgatory, possibly in anticipation of his own ascension to Paradise.

Fortunately the uncompromising Cato grants Virgil's request, out of respect for a special, celestial lady, Beatrice, who has paved the way for the pilgrim and for his guide. Cato gives the two travelers the proper instructions and disappears.

Ante-Purgatory is where souls not yet prepared to begin their spiritual transformation reside. Those who delayed their repentance on earth cannot legitimately hope to begin their purgation immediately upon death. In Ante-Purgatory temporary residents include four categories of sinners who failed to repent, or did so at the final moment of death: some were unjustly excommunicated, some failed because of utter negligence, others died suddenly and violently, and the rest were engrossed in political affairs. While they are in this waiting area, sinners suffer no defined punishment; instead, they whittle away time prior to entering Purgatory, where their suffering nurtures purification and correction. Several of these impatient souls implore Dante the pilgrim to ask their friends to pray for them in order to shorten their penal waiting period in Ante-Purgatory.

Standing at the edge of water, the pilgrim sees a red glow moving across at mind-numbing speed. An angel at the helm of a ship transporting the souls of the redeemed allows some to disembark and to walk along the shore. They speak briefly with Virgil and the pilgrim, who recognizes among them a former friend, Casella, who had set some of Dante's poems to music. The pilgrim tries in vain, three times over, to embrace the shade

of Casella, and then he asks him to sing. Lacking corporeality, Casella is bodily in form only, like all shades. Casella's musical gifts hold his audience in awe. Then Cato the Stoic reappears, disperses the crowd, and scolds them for dawdling when they should be beginning their ascent up the mountain of Purgatory. In effect, Cato interrupts the mesmerizing effects of Casella's song and reminds the pilgrim that his journey toward understanding is paramount. Musical pleasure is a distraction from the crucial journey to God: soul-crafting trumps aesthetic hedonism; moving forward is more important than waxing nostalgic. God has chosen a diligent, no-nonsense gatekeeper for his seven terraces of redemption.

As they travel toward the mountain, the pilgrim sees his shadow on the ground, but not that of Virgil. Thinking he has lost his guide, he begins to panic. But Virgil reminds him that a living body such as the pilgrim's is governed by different laws from those ruling over the shades of the disembodied. The moral of the incident is that ultimate reality transcends the analysis of ordinary human reason. For example, although a shade cannot project a shadow it is sensitive to temperature.

At the foot of the stunning steep mountain they spot a horde of spirits moving unnervingly slowly toward them. These are excommunicated souls. Having renounced spiritual guidance while on earth, they now lack leadership and firm purpose in the afterlife.

Ché perder tempo a chi più sa più spiace ["Those who best discern the worth of time are the most distressed whenever time is lost"]. (P III, 78)

One of the spirits asks the pilgrim if he recognizes him. Dante does not. The spirit identifies himself as Manfred, the illegitimate son of Emperor Frederick II. Manfred was a Ghibelline who was once king of Sicily and was twice excommunicated by popes. When Dante was about 1 year old, Manfred was killed in the battle of Benevento, the climactic imperial battle against the papacy. He was first buried beneath a pile of rocks; later, Pope Clement IV ordered the local prelate to remove his body and to scatter the remains of his body outside papal territory. But not even an official ban imposed by a pope can prevent a soul that repents before death from eventually attaining Paradise. Manfred was accused, among other horrors, of murdering his father, his half-brother, and two of his nephews. Still, he repented at the end of his life, and thus he saved his soul.

Manfred points out that no papal sentence, not even that of excommunication, can stymie God's grace from forgiving a sinner who repents prior

to death. Faith in God can trump ecclesiastical judgments. Because he was a late repentant, Manfred was sentenced to a stay in Ante-Purgatory for 30 times the period of his refusal to beg forgiveness (the period of his excommunication). However, the prayers of living human beings can shorten his sentence. Manfred asks the pilgrim to let his daughter know that she can help her father.

The travelers reach a steep pathway up the mountain. Virgil leads the pilgrim up the arduous track. Using arms and feet, the two of them are hard-pressed. When the pilgrim stops to rest, Virgil comforts him by explaining that the journey will become easier as they ascend. Suddenly, a voice suggests that the travelers need to sit down. Virgil and the pilgrim discover shades resting behind a large boulder. One of these, with sagging head and arms embracing his knees, challenges the two to move along if they think themselves so peppy. The pilgrim recognizes Belacqua, a Florentine lute-maker renowned for laziness. Whereas Manfred lingered among the excommunicates, Belacqua resides with the next class of late repentants, the indolent. The shade informs the travelers that he must wait in Ante-Purgatory for as long as he had lived on earth. (Although not entirely clear, it appears that excommunicates dwell in Ante-Purgatory for 30 times the length of their excommunication, while all others in Ante-Purgatory reside there for the same duration as their earthly lives.) Echoing Manfred, he reminds the pilgrim that his waiting period may be shortened if faithful living human beings – those in a state of grace – prayed on his behalf.

Soon Virgil and the pilgrim meet a third group of late repentants, chanting the *Miserere* as they walk. They were sinners and victims of violent deaths until their final moment. They are sentenced to remain in Ante-Purgatory for as long as they had lived. The pilgrim promises his support. Three of these shades speak. The first, Jacopo del Cassero of Fano, relates how he was waylaid and left to bleed to death in a swamp. As *podestà* of Bologna, Jacopo opposed the ruthless designs of the leader of Este. While on his way to assume duties as *podestà* of Milan, he was ambushed by the thugs of the scorned leader of Este. The second shade, Buonconte da Montefeltro, laments that no one on earth cares for him. He led the Ghibellines of Arezzo against the Florentine Guelfs in the battle of Campaldino. He was killed and his forces were defeated. At his death, the forces of good and evil battled for possession of his soul. But he had uttered the name of Mary with his dying gasp and shed one tear of sincere repentance, thus denying the devil his prey. Still, a demon took his dead

body and scattered his remains into a raging river swollen by a storm. Finally, the third shade, Pia de Tolomei of Siena (La Pia), a gracious female shade, pleads with the pilgrim to remember her when he returns to earth. She was murdered by her husband, who accused her of adultery. She is one of two women in Purgatory who speak to the pilgrim before he reaches the summit of the mountain.

More of these shades press in on the pilgrim. He can extricate himself from this group of late repentants only by pledging to solicit prayers for them upon his return to earth. The pilgrim then questions Virgil, who wrote in the *Aeneid* that we must “cease hoping to deflect by prayer the fates decreed by the gods” (VI: 37). Virgil instructs the pilgrim that he stands by his words, but that they refer to prayers flowing from pagans, those not in a state of grace, and the damned. Moreover, the pilgrim will receive more information on this topic from the blessed Beatrice, whom he will meet at the summit of the mountain.

Then Virgil notices a solitary shade from whom he hopes to discover the quickest way up the path. Virgil tells the shade he is from Mantua. The shade, identifying himself as the poet and troubadour Sordello of Goito, also from Mantua, embraces his fellow countryman. Moved by the sight of two Italians hugging, the pilgrim digresses and attacks regional fragmentation in Italy, the corruption that pervades Florence, and Emperor Albert of Austria, who should have intervened to restore order in Italy. Dante the author here highlights the ways in which political factionalism can frustrate earthly happiness and spiritual salvation. Dante the author portrays the historical Sordello as magnanimous in that he righteously takes to task political and religious leaders whose shortcomings set back human communities. Sordello does not fearfully or disingenuously conceal his judgments.

Virgil and Sordello continue their emotional exchange. Virgil informs Sordello that he has been given a reprieve from Limbo – which he shares with unbaptized babies and pagans who were devoid both of vices and of the theological virtues – to aid the pilgrim’s journey. Limbo houses those who failed to attain faith, hope, and charity. Those who perform good deeds without divine grace remain ineligible for Paradise. He asks Sordello to tell him the quickest route to Purgatory proper. Sordello agrees to help, but they must wait until the sun rises; in the dark, shades may travel only downward. He takes the pilgrim and Virgil to a beautiful and fragrant resting area. They observe many souls sitting and singing the *Salve Regina*. Sordello identifies a host of former rulers who died when the pilgrim was

young: Rudolf of Hapsburg, Henry VII of Luxembourg, Ottokar II of Bohemia, Philip III of France, Henry the Fat of Navarre, Peter III of Aragon, Charles of Anjou, Henry III of England, and William VII. These are the negligent princes who ignored the health of their souls in their pursuit of earthly glory.

The pilgrim converses with two former rulers: Nino Visconti, a Guelph who shared the office of *podestà* in Pisa, and Corrado Malaspina, a Ghibelline. Visconti laments that his widow has remarried and forgotten him. He launches a general attack on ungrateful widows who remarry. Visconti then requests that the pilgrim inform his daughter that her father needs her prayers. A snake, representing the constant temptation of evil, appears, but is quickly dispatched by two guardian angels. Malaspina asks for news of the coast of Tuscany. The pilgrim replies that he has not visited the area recently, but recalls the honor, generosity, and military might of the Malaspina family. Malaspina is pleased and predicts that within a few years Dante will need and enjoy the hospitality of his family. (In 1306, Corrado's brother housed the exiled Dante.)

Unlike evil-doers in Hell, penitents in Purgatory no longer sin. Purgatory serves two functions. First, its punishment is purifying and corrective in that rebellious wills are thereby elevated to harmony with the divine will. Second, its punishment is retributive in that penitents thereby pay the temporal penalty incurred by their earthly sins. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante concentrates overwhelmingly on the first function: restoration of noble nature assumes priority over justified, proportionate retaliation. At each level of Purgatory, penitents reflect on the virtue they must attain and on the evil they must transcend. While numerous residents of Ante-Purgatory petition Dante the pilgrim to implore their friends on earth to pray for them as a way of possibly shortening their stay outside Purgatory proper, no penitent in Purgatory makes such a request. (However, some ask Dante the pilgrim to pray for them.) Apparently, while purely punitive penalties can be mitigated *as such* by the implorations of pious living human beings – as the detainees in Ante-Purgatory may thereby gain swifter access to Purgatory proper – that principle does not apply to purifying and corrective punishment. Still, prayers from pious living humans can help penitents in Purgatory *indirectly*, as God answers these implorations by influencing the receptivity of penitents to remediation, thus making purgative punishment more speedily effective. Whereas stretches in Ante-Purgatory can be shortened without any commensurate change in character on the part of the penitent, remission of sentences in Purgatory is never direct, but

flows only from a changed disposition of the sinner to embrace purifying and corrective punishment. Moreover, as in Ante-Purgatory, the purely penal aspects of punishment in Purgatory should be amenable to direct remission through God's merciful response to the prayers of pious living human beings.

During Dante the pilgrim's journey, he descended into Hell and thus the gravity of evil increased during his trek; while he ascends through Purgatory, the gravity of evil decreases.

Gate of Purgatory

The pilgrim falls asleep and dreams that a golden eagle lifts him through the sphere of fire covering the earth. He awakens and finds himself with Virgil at the top of Ante-Purgatory. Virgil tells him that Santa Lucia (St. Lucy) transported him while he slept. Sordello remained behind. The travelers have arrived at the gate of Purgatory. An angel with a glowing face and sharpened sword challenges the duo. But Virgil mentions Santa Lucia. Following Virgil's instructions, the pilgrim prostrates himself before the angel and begs for admittance. The angel uses the point of his sword to mark the letter P – signifying *peccatum* (sin) – seven times (a number that represents the seven capital sins) on the pilgrim's forehead. He asks the pilgrim to wash away the wounds, as is appropriate when he journeys through Purgatory. These wounds literally weigh down the pilgrim – his body sags under their force – and figuratively they challenge him to resist evil temptations and weakness of will. The pilgrim must earn the removal of each *peccatum* as he journeys through Purgatory. He will be transformed in the process. Using keys first given by Jesus to Saint Peter, the angel unlocks the gate and warns the pilgrim not to look back, which would signify a weakening of his resolve and will to attain Paradise. The travelers have finally entered Purgatory proper.

Each tier of Purgatory includes common features: an appropriate form of penal and corrective punishment, which mirrors the effects that sin had on penitents during their earthly lives; sufficient time for meditation on the nature of the relevant vice and its correlated virtue; historical and religious examples to illustrate those vices and virtues; the use of events in the life of Mary as illustrations of the virtues; the invocation of Christian scripture, prayer, hymn, or ritual, and the presence of an angel who dispatches penitents with a beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount.

The First Three Terraces: Misdirected Love

Love of Wrongful Objects and Harming Others

1 *The proud*

Pride is the most general and the most grievous of capital sins, and the root of all the others. When we overrate our capabilities, downplay the divine origins of our powers, or overreach our development, we nurture the sin of pride. In short, pride is an overabundance of the natural human desire to attain and to exhibit excellence. (In my view, “arrogance” is a more precise description of this vice.)

The white marble inner wall of this terrace is decorated with stunningly realistic carvings. As with all the terraces in Purgatory, the etchings depict examples of the virtue to be nurtured as an antidote to the sin that relegated souls to this locale. Didactic art can help remediate a corrupted will. At all seven terraces, the first example of the virtue is related to Mary, mother of Jesus. The first terrace exalts humility as the remedy for the sin of pride: the scene of the Annunciation, David’s humble dance before God, and the Emperor Trajan’s thoughtful hearing of a poor widow’s plea to avenge her son’s wrongful death are depicted. The overall message is that charity reinforces justice and humility is the antidote to undeserved pride.

The pilgrim is stunned when he comes across prideful sinners beating their chests and walking about while burdened with stones of enormous weight. The weights of the stones are proportionate to the seriousness and scope of the penitents’ sins. Some of the penitents on this terrace are unable to raise their heads and eyes. Having looked down on others while on earth, they are now unable to look up to anything. Looking downward now helps induce humility. During their earthly lives, the proud were so self-satisfied that they withdrew from others.

The pilgrim worries that reporting this punishment to living human beings might deter them from repenting their sins and reforming. But the suffering is deserved and temporary, while the reward of attaining Paradise is everlasting. Stressing human limitations and concern for others, the penitent sinners recite a version of the Lord’s Prayer as they mosey about. While the pilgrim feels he is weighed down by his own prideful tendencies – as he participates in the suffering of the prideful in Purgatory – Virgil asks the sinners about the best path upward.

Omberto Aldobrandesco, who represents aristocratic pride of family, wonders if the travelers have ever heard of his once prominent clan, all of whom exuded excessive pride. His own overreaching in battle against the Sieneese led to his death. While speaking with Omberto, the pilgrim bends his head and his body. To the extent appropriate, he must participate in the atonement for sins at each terrace, as a way of earning the right to wash away the P on his forehead, which stands for the particular capital sin at issue. Suddenly the pilgrim is recognized by another denizen of the first terrace, who shouts out to him. Oderisi of Gubbio, who represents the pride of talent, was an over-competitive artist while he was alive. He now extols the talents of a former rival. Oderisi mocks the conceit of the talented, who fail to understand that a better version of their talent is already present or will soon emerge: Cimabue is overshadowed by Giotto as a painter; Guido Guinizelli has been surpassed by Guido Cavalcanti as a poet, and there may be someone already alive who will outshine both (Dante the author?). While Omberto still resonates with pomp and glory, Oderisi is humbler but still reserves for himself some glory as an artist. Just ahead of Oderisi shuffles Provenzan Salvani, the powerful Ghibelline dictator of Siena, who is now hardly remembered. He represents pride in political power. The pilgrim wonders how Salvani, who was a late repentant, made it so quickly into Purgatory proper. Oderisi explains that the Sieneese power monger once humbled himself publicly by successfully begging for money to ransom an imprisoned friend. A moral of these discussions: the sin of pride deeply infects the pursuit of art and politics; excessive ambition reaps spiritual disaster.

Virgil shows the pilgrim the carvings at the bottom of the terrace. These depict extreme examples of pride: scenes involving Lucifer, Nimrod, King Saul, Rehoboam, Eriphyle, Sennacherib, Holofernes, Briareus, Niobe, Arachne, the fall of Troy, and Cyrus the Great.

O gene umana, per volar sù nata, perché a poco vento così cadi? ["O, human race, born to fly upward, why are you driven back by a wind so slight?"].
(P XII, 95–96)

The travelers quicken their pace as they seek the next terrace of Purgatory. While guarding the stairway, the Angel of Humility brushes his wing over the pilgrim's brow, which allows him to ascend with humility. The pilgrim hears the first beatitude of Christ ("Blessed are the poor in spirit"), put into song, and is surprised that his ascent is much easier.

Virgil points out that one of the Ps has been erased from the pilgrim's brow and the other six Ps are fainter. To some extent, the pilgrim has been purged of pride – which he identifies as his major character flaw – and the spirit of gravity has eased. Unburdened by the most grievous sin punished in Purgatory – pride is the root of all evil – the pilgrim rises with less effort. The lightness of being, far from being unbearable, brings delight and anticipation.

2 *The envious*

The travelers climb to the second terrace of Purgatory. They journey on an empty stone-colored road. Three bodiless voices rush past them. The voices proclaim: “They have no wine” (Mary's words to Jesus at the marriage feast of Cana); “I am Orestes” (Pylades' words, expressing his attempt to die in the place of his friend, who was condemned for avenging the murder of his father); “Love those from whom you have suffered wrong” (a verse from the book of Matthew). The envious, who are invariably saddened by the good fortune of others and often elated at the misfortune of others, are consigned to the second terrace, and the messages of the voices offer examples of loving one's neighbors and strangers: generosity opposes envy. The law of *contrapasso* meted out a stern penance to the envious: because in life they gazed hatefully at the well-being of others or could not bear to cast their eyes upon the good fortune of others, their eyes are now sown together with an iron thread. They can no longer bask in the light of the sun. Donning coarse haircloth cloaks and seated along a bank of the terrace, the penitents rest in each other's company and pray for each other, thereby distancing themselves from the self-absorption that defined their sins.

As he participates in the punishment of the envious, the pilgrim is moved by the dire scene and sobs. With Virgil's consent, he asks them if any Italians are in their midst. A voice cries out that they are all citizens of Heaven, although she was in life an Italian. She is Sapia of Siena, who admits that she took more joy in the misfortune of others than in her own well-being. She despised her fellow Sienese. When the Florentine Guelfs defeated her Sienese Ghibellines, she rejoiced especially because her nephew (Provenzan Salvani, now lingering in the first terrace of Purgatory), whose rise to power she resented, was killed. Sapia watched her nephew being beheaded and relished the event. Sapia repented late in her life and would still be in Ante-Purgatory but for the prayers of Peter, an impoverished seller of combs and member of the Franciscan order.

Sapia asks the pilgrim to identify himself. Dante describes himself as a man not given to envy, but inclined mightily toward pride. He fears that he will be sentenced to spend a significant stretch of time on the first terrace upon his death. Upon the pilgrim's inquiry, Sapia asks him to pray for her and to tell her family where she is. The pilgrim will find her family members among the foolish Sieneese planning a new seaport.

Overhearing the exchange between the pilgrim and Sapia, Guido del Duca and Rinieri da Calboli, penitents from Romagna, ask the pilgrim to identify himself. The pilgrim says he hails from the bank of a river in mid-Tuscany; but to speak his own name would be presumptuous, as he is not well known. Guido guesses that the pilgrim referred to the Arno River of Florence. If that is the pilgrim's referent, then Guido understands why the name should not be spoken: throughout the area virtue is spurned. Responding to the pilgrim's questioning, Guido describes the invidious envy he embodied when other people prospered. He decries the loss of honorable men in Romagna and bemoans its current condition.

As they continue their trek, the two poets hear more disembodied voices. Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, shouts out: "Everyone who finds me shall slay me" (from the book of Genesis). Aglauros – an Athenian princess who was turned to stone because she envied her sister, who was loved by the god Mercury – identifies herself. Virgil rails against human folly.

3 *The wrathful*

The two poets continue to the next terrace of Purgatory. Bright sunshine and lights dazzle as the Angel of Generosity invites the pilgrim and Virgil to ascend the appropriate stairway. Voices sing "Blessed are the merciful."

The pilgrim puzzles over part of Guido's earlier ruminations about the reluctance of human beings to focus on the common good. Virgil provides an answer: the love of material goods is divisive, while the love of spiritual goods is not. Put in contemporary terms: the competition for scarce tangible goods divides us from one another, while the pursuit of bountiful spiritual goods unites us. Love, well directed, multiplies; love, distorted, divides. In Paradise everyone shares and gains. On earth, human beings are too often obsessed by zero-sum contests: my gain comes only at the expense of others. Virgil observes that the second P has been expunged from the brow of the pilgrim.

As they reach the third terrace, the pilgrim is overcome by several visions of meekness, the opposite of wrath: Mary gently asks the youthful Jesus why

he allowed her to think he was lost when he was teaching in the Temple; Pisistratus, ruler of Athens, calmly refuses his wife's demand that he exact vengeance against a young man who had kissed their daughter in public; and Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, prays for the forgiveness of his murderers as he dies. Virgil informs the pilgrim that he was given these visions so that he would open his heart to peace and virtue. Then a thick, black cloud surrounds the two travelers.

The poets are blinded by oppressive smoke, which punishes the wrathful and represents the fiery rage that blinded their reason and sullied their lives on earth. The pilgrim hears voices incanting the *Agnus Dei* as the formerly squabbling, confrontational penitents act now as one. One spirit speaks: this is Marco Lombardo, a courtier known for his sharp tongue and stubborn temperament. He informs the pilgrim that the stairway to the higher terraces of Purgatory is straight ahead. He asks the pilgrim to pray for him. Marco repeats a constant theme in Dante's *Purgatorio*: the exalted values, adherence to honor, and glorious principles of olden times have evaporated; corrupt and self-serving actions are now pervasive. Of course, the pilgrim concurs.

The pilgrim then asks the crucial philosophical question: Is evil caused by fate and the forces of nature, or is it caused by wrongful use of human free choice? Marco sighs but is prepared for the quiz: Human beings often blame celestial forces, irresistible impulses, or malevolent natural forces, but such external vectors are, at best, merely influences upon, not the determinants of, human choice.

A maggior forza e a miglior natura liberi soggiacete; e quella cria la mente in voi, che'l ciel non ha in sua cura. Però, se 'l mondo presente disvia, in voi è la cagione, in voi si chiegia ["To a greater power and a better nature you, who are free, depend; that force creates the mind in you, outside the heaven's sway. Therefore, if the present world has gone astray, the cause is in you, in you it is to be sought"]. (P XVI, 79–83)

Everlasting reward and punishment presuppose human freedom. Human beings must accept responsibility for the world they have conjured. We are born innocent, but we require guidance, including that provided by virtuous leaders. Still, the human soul is ontologically prior to nature and transcends the power of the world.

Unsurprisingly, Marco, in the hands of Dante the author, denounces the political power of the papacy. In earlier, better times, Rome had an emperor

to tend to secular concerns and a pope to minister to spiritual matters. Each complemented the other. Since the pope clashed with Emperor Frederick II, events have spiraled out of control in northern Italy. However, three elderly, old-school paragons still personify the ancient, honorable ways: Corrado da Palazzo, Gherardo da Camino, and Guido da Castel. Suddenly, Marco sees through the smoke and recognizes the radiant Angel of Meekness. He turns back and ends his conversation with the pilgrim. Through Marco, Dante the author stresses the need for cooperation between the mutually independent domains of imperial and papal authority. Whereas wrath betrays an excessive, misdirected love of self, righteous anger is the genesis of all salutary reform.

The smoke eases as the travelers continue. The pilgrim is struck by three visions that underscore the horrors and destructiveness of wrath: Procne, who, enraged by her husband's rape of her sister, murdered her son, fed him to his father, and was transformed into a nightingale in retribution; Haman, the Persian minister, who, enraged by perceived disrespect from the Jew Mordecai, planned with his king to murder all Jews in the land, but was thwarted by his own execution; and Amata, the wife of King Latinus, who committed suicide when her daughter decided to wed a foreigner, Aeneas, instead of her townsman Turnus. All three stories highlight the folly of wrath unguided by reason.

The pilgrim shakes off the effects of his visions, and the Angel of Peace points the way upward. He feels the touch of a wing on his face – which signifies the erasure of another P from his brow – and hears a beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

The Fourth Terrace: Deficient Love of the Good

4 *The slothful*

At the top of the stairs the pilgrim's legs weaken. Virgil informs him that they have reached the fourth terrace, where the slothful atone for their sins. Virgil explains that properly directed love informs every virtue, while improperly directed love generates every vice. The purified soul loves the appropriate things in the proper measure. Loving inappropriate things or loving appropriate things in an improper measure animates evil. The lower terraces of Purgatory punished transgressions flowing from pride, envy, and wrath. Penitents in these terraces misdirected their love while they lived on earth: they loved harming others. The fourth terrace punishes deficient

love: the slothful love goodness insufficiently. In the fifth, sixth, and seventh terraces of Purgatory, excessive love is punished.

The pilgrim presses Virgil to elaborate upon how love informs every action. Virgil eagerly responds. Human souls are drawn naturally to objects they judge to be pleasing. While the inclination to love God and to seek our return to Him is innate and always good, not every object of desire flowing from human free will is good. The pilgrim wonders: if every attraction or desire is natural, how do human beings deserve praise or blame? Virgil claims that human beings also have an innate faculty that is the soul's power of restraint and capability of distinguishing proper from improper loves: free will governs our choices. Selecting the wrong objects to love, or choosing to love an appropriate object with either insufficient or excessive zeal, is the basis of sin. Love of self sometimes wrongly seeks the abasement of others, and the sin of pride results; if it leads to the fear of loss of fame, power, and honor, then envy ensues; if we feel injured and seek another person's harm, then wrath follows. As most students in the midst of deep philosophical reflection from an instructor do, the pilgrim grows drowsy. The pilgrim is about to fall asleep in class!

His impending slumber is interrupted by a great multitude of shades running beneath the moon rays. Two of these shades cry out examples of zeal, the antidote to sloth. The first shade remembers Mary, pregnant with Jesus, speeding off to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist. The second shade recalls Julius Caesar marching off to Spain to confront Pompey. The throng of remaining shades shouts out exhortations for haste and fervent love.

Virgil asks the shades about the location of the upward stairway. One penitent instructs him to follow them, but advises that they are sated with desire and must keep moving. They hope the travelers do not mistake their zeal for rudeness. While in life their emotions were effete and understated, they now brim with almost deranged avidity, which is their penance. They must practice the virtue opposed to their vice.

The penitent who responded to Virgil is a former abbot of San Zeno in Verona, back when Emperor Frederick Barbarossa destroyed Milan. At the rear, two shades recall scenes of laziness: the followers of Moses, who moaned and complained during the escape from Egypt and never saw the Promised Land; and the tired, lotus-eating Trojans, who were left behind by Aeneas in Sicily and consigned to an inglorious existence.

The pilgrim dozes off and dreams of a hideous woman: cross-eyed, with maimed hands and crooked feet, sallow complexion, and unsteady voice.

She symbolizes the vices of greed, gluttony, and lust, which define the penitents on the upper three terraces of Purgatory. As he gazes at her, she changes – all for the good. She straightens up, speaks fluidly, and rosy color flows in her face. She identifies herself as a “sweet siren”; those attracted to her rarely leave her. Her singing captivates the pilgrim. Suddenly, a saintly and sharp woman, representing divine grace, appears and scolds Virgil for his negligence: grace is required in order to energize reason against artifices. Virgil steps lively, grabs the siren, rips open her clothes, and reveals her stinking stomach. The pilgrim is startled and awakens.

The Angel of Zeal leads the travelers up the stairway, brushes the pilgrim with its wings (signaling another erasure of a P from the pilgrim’s forehead), and avers that those who mourn are blessed: to express sorrow for one’s own needs and for those of others will frustrate sloth.

The Final Three Terraces: Excessive Love of Secondary Goods

5 The avaricious and prodigal (the covetous)

At the fifth terrace of Purgatory, the avaricious lie stretched out on the surface, limbs bound and face down. They sob and recite a Psalm: “My soul hath cleaved to the pavement.”

Virgil asks directions to the next stairway. A voice gives directions. The pilgrim asks it to identify itself. The shade is none other than Pope Adrian V, who explains his avaricious – in the sense of being dominated by inflated ambition – earthly life. Because the avaricious turned their backs to the divine and obsessed over earthly goods, they are now bound and lie face down to the ground: their minds must reflect on the results of their greed. In life they had obsessed over material goods and success, to their spiritual impoverishment. They are now reduced to the debased posture implicit in their sin: avarice contaminates justice. The pilgrim kneels out of respect (for an avaricious clergyman who held office for only 38 days?). Adrian asks the pilgrim to rise: earthly relationships do not count in the afterlife (remember Cato the Stoic and Marcia; see also Matthew 22: 23–30). Adrian asks the pilgrim to move ahead, because the pilgrim’s presence hinders his weeping.

The pilgrim walks off, bemoaning the avariciousness so common on earth and the wolf, which has more prey than other beasts. He hears

a voice wailing in praise of those who distance themselves from the pursuit of wealth: Mary, who was impoverished when she bore Jesus in a manger; Fabricius, a Roman consul and hero who refused to accept bribes while holding political office; and Saint Nicholas, who rescued three destitute girls from prostitution by providing them with dowries. The speaker is Hugh Capet, first of the Capetian kings of France. Dante the author was no fan of these French rulers. From his vantage point, they expanded their power at the expense of the Holy Roman Empire. They also influenced the papacy adversely. Capet recounts several instances of the avariciousness – understood as greed in many guises – of his line.

Capet explains that the penitents on this terrace cite examples of generosity during the day, while at night they recall examples of greed. Their group includes Pygmalion, who murdered his brother-in-law for his money; Midas, who was granted the touch of gold to his misfortune; Achan, who stole after the battle of Jericho; Sapphira and Ananias, who, when acting as sales agents, lied to the apostles about their profits; Heliodorus, who was kicked by a horse as he was stealing treasures from the Temple in Jerusalem; Polymnestor, who killed his ward for his money; and Crassus, member of the first triumvirate, whose acquisitiveness was so legendary that when he was killed by the Parthians they filled his decapitated head with liquid gold.

As the pilgrim travels on, the mountain of Purgatory shakes and produces an eerie chill. The penitents begin singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo.” Virgil comforts and reassures the pilgrim. They stand still momentarily and then move on with purpose.

A shade passes by and, upon being questioned by Virgil, explains that Purgatory (which is a mountain) shakes and voices rejoice when a soul has been purified and is prepared to rise to Heaven. The shade confides that this time the upheaval is related to his person: he is the penitent who has earned liberation after spending over 500 years atoning. He is Publius Papinius Statius, a major first-century poet inspired by Virgil’s *Aeneid*, who now expresses his admiration for and his longstanding ambition to meet the great Roman poet. The pilgrim wryly smiles and informs Statius that he stands before his idol at this very moment. Statius supplicates himself and vainly grasps for Virgil’s knees. Virgil reminds Statius that they are physically vacant shades.

Adjusting history to suit his literary purposes, Dante the author describes Statius as a convert to Christianity; and he will serve as the pilgrim’s secondary guide until Beatrice emerges. If Virgil symbolizes the best of

human reason and classical Roman virtue, and Beatrice represents divine grace and revelation, then Statius symbolizes the Christian humanism of contemporary Rome. Statius, then, is the middleman who brokers the transition from the pinnacle of secular culture to the realization of the beatific vision.

6 *The gluttonous*

The three poets arrive at the sixth terrace of Purgatory. Here the gluttonous, understood more as those who overly glorified or indulged the self than as literal overeaters, are purged. The pilgrim recalls how the Angel of Generosity had fanned his brow and expunged another P from his forehead with the beatitude “Blessed are they who thirst for righteousness.”

Amore, acceso di virtù, sempre altro accese, pur che la fiamma sua paresse fore [“Love that is kindled by virtue always kindles another, as long as that love’s flame appears outwardly”]. (P XXII, 10–12)

Virgil tells Statius that the poet Juvenal had journeyed to Limbo to report the esteem Statius bore for Virgil. Virgil wonders how a man as wise and generous as Statius could have fallen prey to avarice. Statius smiles knowingly and corrects Virgil: Statius atoned for the vice of wastefulness on the fifth terrace. Although greed and prodigality are apparent opposites, they are both purged on the fifth terrace. He avoided an eternity in Hell only because he repented after being inspired by a line from the *Aeneid*. Moreover, Dante the author has Statius inform Virgil that he converted to Christianity after embracing (what he took to be) Virgil’s prophecy that a new age would flourish with the birth of a child from Heaven (a reference to Virgil’s famous *Bucolic* iv). Statius became aware of the teachings of Jesus and befriended persecuted Christians. He was secretly baptized, but pretended to have remained a pagan. For his deficiency in spiritual zeal, Statius atoned for over 400 years on the fourth terrace of Purgatory. (Tack on more than 500 years on the fifth terrace, atoning for wastefulness, and almost 300 years in Ante-Purgatory – and/or at the first three terraces – and Statius’s total sentence exceeds 1,200 years. Paulie Walnuts must adjust his calculus!)

Statius asks about a host of other famous poets. Virgil tells him that they reside in Limbo with him: without faith and baptism, good deeds are insufficient. The poets conclude their ascent and come upon a fruit tree that is difficult to climb because of its configuration. Fresh water falls upon

it and is rapidly absorbed, lest penitents partake of its refreshment. Voices resounding from the branches forbid anyone from eating the fruit. The voices laud examples of moderate drinking and eating, the virtues opposed to gluttony: Mary at the wedding feast of Cana; ancient Roman women who were satisfied by drinking water; Daniel, who rejected the food and drink at a king's table and was rewarded with the gift of visionary interpretation; and John the Baptist, who survived on honey and locusts.

The poets soon hear the words from a Psalm: "Lord, Thou will open my lips to Thy praise" (as opposed to opening my mouth to copious food and drink). A passel of shades with sunken eyes, pasty complexions, emaciated faces, and spare frames stroll by and stare silently at the three poets. The pilgrim wonders what caused these disturbing appearances.

One of the shades pops off. "What grace I have been granted." The pilgrim recognizes the voice – he would never have registered the face or the frame – of an old friend and collaborator in rhyming, Forese Donati. (Historically, Dante the author and Forese had verbally sparred with a series of mocking, disparaging sonnets.) The pilgrim expresses his sorrow at Forese's condition. The shade explains how the aroma of forbidden fruit and the imagined nourishment of prohibited water reduce the penitents of this terrace. On earth they had overindulged; now they are deprived. The pilgrim asks how such a late repentant such as Forese was not in Ante-Purgatory (the historical Forese had died only four or five years prior to the mythical date of the beginning of the pilgrim's journey). Forese credits his loving and faithful wife, Nella, whose prayers sped Forese's journey past Ante-Purgatory and the lower terraces of Purgatory. Forese goes off on a riff against the shameless women and the general corruption of Florence, for which the city will be punished forthwith. The pilgrim expresses regret over the excesses he and Forese pursued, and describes to Forese the nature of his present journey.

Forese tells the pilgrim that his sister, Piccarda, about whom he is unsure whether her beauty or her virtue was greater, is in heaven. But his cruel wild brother, Corso, will die violently after harming Florence (Corso was a major player in the exile from Florence of Dante the author). Forese identifies a bunch of gluttonous souls – among them Bonagiunta Orbicciani of Lucca, Pope Martin IV, Ubaldino della Pila, Boniface de Fieschi, and the Marchese degli Argogliosi. He then darts off to pursue his atonement. Souls who in life languished over food and beverage prize speed while purging their sins on the sixth terrace of Purgatory.

The pilgrim speaks with Bonagiunta, who approaches him. Bonagiunta had died a few years earlier and was renown as a wine drinker and poet.

The shade predicts that a woman, Gentucca, will convince the pilgrim to appreciate Lucca. In an essay on the vernacular, Dante the author has taken Bonagiunta to task for his poetic style. The shade Bonagiunta now asks the pilgrim if he is the author of “You ladies who understand love.” The pilgrim acknowledges that he is, and the two discuss the *dolce stil nuovo* (sweet new style) of Dante the author. Bonagiunta praises Dante’s poetic innovations.

The pilgrim, Virgil, and Statius proceed and come upon another fruit tree. Shades beg for fruit beneath the branches but are rejected. A voice orders the penitents away and informs all within earshot that this tree sprang from the Tree of Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden. The voice recalls examples of excess: drunken centaurs, who tried to carry off the bride and other women at a wedding and were thereafter murdered by Theseus; and Gideon’s uncontrolled soldiers, who drank from a river by leaning directly into it, making themselves vulnerable to attack.

The Angel of Temperance (or Abstinence) appears to lead the way to the next terrace. The Angel scolds the three poets who are reflecting deeply: poetry must not distract them from their divine mission.

As the three poets ascend to the final terrace of Purgatory, the pilgrim wonders how the gluttonous could appear so slender, given that they are non-bodily shades with no need for food. Virgil asks Statius to explain. Statius, following the reasoning of St. Thomas Aquinas, advances several Christian doctrines: the human soul is created directly by God and is not merely an effect of the body; body and soul combine to form a person; the soul is immortal and continues to be oriented toward matter in the afterlife. (These doctrines help explain the belief in resurrection and the distance Christian doctrine strays from the Platonic dualistic notion of disembodied souls that attain full potential only when they are liberated from their bodies.) Dante the author has Statius proclaim the formation, after earthly death, of a shade, or aerial body, that unites with the soul until the resurrection. Not part of Christian doctrine, this poetic fiction permits the pilgrim to observe the sinners in Hell and Purgatory and accounts for the emaciated figures of the penitents in the sixth terrace.

Statius distinguishes between the heart’s production of ordinary and perfect blood. The former nurtures salutary effects throughout the body; the latter becomes semen and flows to the male genitals. During sexual intercourse, the semen generated by perfect blood flows into the ordinary blood of the female, possibly conceiving an embryo. At first, only a vegetative embryo is generated. At the point of quickening, God creates a spiritual

soul, which assimilates the body and forms an individual person. The pilgrim absorbs Statius's explanation without comment.

7 *The lustful*

The poets arrive at the top of the stairway leading to the seventh terrace of Purgatory. They are stunned by a road bursting with flames. An air blast creates a narrow pathway at the outer edge of the terrace. The pervasiveness of the fire suggests that the temptations of lust are always nearby. Indulging in a double entendre in this region of atonement by the lustful, Virgil observes that “[a]long this road the eyes must be tightly controlled for a false step could easily be taken.” The pilgrim hears a hymn emanating from within the flames: “Summae Deus clementiae.” He spies spirits within the fire. At the end of the recitation of the hymn they plead for the self-control to resist lust and invoke models of chastity: the Virgin Mary; the moon-goddess, Diana, who protected her virginity by fleeing to the woods as a huntress; and faithful spouses.

The pilgrim soon thereafter observes two lines of shades, meeting as they file in opposite directions. As they pass, they slow down and chastely kiss. Each line tries to shout over the other. One group screams out the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; the other cries out Pasiphae, who lusted after a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur. A shade who had earlier asked the pilgrim about his earthly body, identifies himself as Guido Guinizelli, legendary thirteenth-century poet from Bologna, who died when Dante the author was a pre-teen. He returns the pilgrim's unabashed praise and explains the penance exacted in this terrace of Purgatory: “unnatural” homosexuals shriek “Sodom and Gomorrah” as self-indictment, while “natural” but unconstrained sexual libertines recall the shameful, animal lust of Pasiphae. (Is this “natural” lust?! Perhaps it is the worst excess – bestiality – of heterosexuality.) Guido then points out another great poet, asks the pilgrim to pray for him, and dives back into the flames.

The other poet identifies himself as Arnaut Daniel, French troubadour known as “the master of love.” He describes his justified punishment for past indiscretions, but he is hopeful about his purification. He asks the pilgrim to remember him and vanishes into the flames.

The deep theme of poetry's connection to salvation shines. Poetry should help human beings live virtuously on earth. The pilgrim's ascent up the mountain of Purgatory is linked to his work as a poet. His past poetry, not merely his soul, may well need purgation.

The pilgrim and his two guides meet the Angel of Chastity, who sings the beatitude “Blessed are the pure of heart.” The angel then terrifies the pilgrim by suggesting that the travelers may go no further unless they first go through flames. (Dante the author had been condemned by Florence to be burned alive if he was captured within the city limits.) Virgil comforts the pilgrim that he will not be harmed and instructs him to test the flames with his clothes. The pilgrim does not easily buy into Virgil’s assurances. Impatiently, Virgil puts a finer point on the matter: the pilgrim must cross the wall of flames if he is to meet Beatrice. The three poets hasten through the flames, guided and encouraged by a voice: to overcome the vice of lust, human beings require a grander love, not merely reason.

They emerge no worse from the fire and approach the stairway. A dazzling angel chants “Come, ye blessed of my Father.” They begin the climb, eventually resting on the steps as the sun sets. (Remember, after sunset no upward movement is permitted.) The pilgrim falls asleep under more luminous stars than usual. He dreams of a beautiful young woman, Leah, who represents the active life. She walks through a meadow, singing and gathering flowers. Her sister, Rachel, represents the contemplative life. She stares reflectively at herself in a mirror. In the Bible, both women were wives of the patriarch, Jacob. Prior to entering Paradise, in the forest of Eden, the pilgrim will meet a woman who gathers flowers, Matilda, and his first great love, the cerebral Beatrice.

The pilgrim awakens and with his two guides continues the ascent out of Purgatory. As they reach the top step of the staircase, Virgil informs the pilgrim that his job is complete: the pilgrim’s spiritual growth and moral development have been striking. Henceforth the pilgrim will rule over himself – at least until he meets Beatrice, symbolizing divine grace, who will accompany him to Paradise.

Dante locates all motivation and inclination in love. Loving the wrong objects or loving in an improper measure facilitates sin. But earthly Christian love focuses on a concrete individual, in a mutual quest for salvation (P XXX 34–57, 73, 75; XXXI 128–130). Beatrice scolds the pilgrim for his pursuit of worldly honor and material resources, which misdirected his love away from her (P XXX, 131). As in the case of all sinners in Purgatory, the pilgrim’s love was wrongly directed: the seductions of the material world rerouted his desire away from the particularity of Beatrice. Dante’s journey through the depths of Hell, participation in the sins of penitents, and preparation for saving grace have energized his spiritual transformation.

Dante's Existential Lessons in Purgatory

The *Purgatorio* refines and adds to the existential lessons that the pilgrim confronted in Hell. First, suffering can be redemptive. We should not view adversity as merely unwelcome pain. The art of living requires that we turn adversity to practical advantage. The sinners in Purgatory purify their souls through their approach to suffering. Second, faith is critical for a life lived well. Reason is insufficient to establish itself, much less everything else. At foundational levels, we must believe, choose, and act under conditions of radical uncertainty. The sinners in Purgatory repented prior to dying, an act of faith that elevated them from the dismal fixity of Hell. Third, human beings have the freedom and power to reimagine their characters and to remake their contexts. We have the power to change where the will and resolution to do so are firm. The penitents in Purgatory exercise their possibilities for self-transformation. Fourth, we must all confront our mortality directly. In the end, time always wins. By recognizing and acting on our finitude on earth we can establish healthy priorities and inspire grand actions. The penitents in Purgatory came to this recognition late in their lives, but not too late to earn eventual redemption.

We now leave the pilgrim as Beatrice guides him to the stairway to heaven and prepares him to receive the grace required for the beatific vision in the *Paradiso*. Our philosophical journey is elsewhere. In order to understand fully the existential lessons of Dante the author, we must first examine some of the crucial moral conceptions that underlie his philosophy. The first leg of our journey will include an examination of the law of *contrapasso* and of the notion of moral desert.

Notes and References

1. From "Where to Eternity," the 22nd episode of the HBO original series *The Sopranos*, and the 9th episode of the show's second season.
2. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), pp. 1–17.
3. This chapter has been informed by Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Volume 2: *Purgatory*, trans. and ed. Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, trans. and ed. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982); Mark Musa, *Advent at the Gates* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974); Joseph Gallagher, *The*

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THE NOTION OF DESERT AND THE LAW OF *CONTRAPASSO*

Having completed the summaries of Dante's sinners and their punishments, in this chapter I begin the philosophical analysis of Dante's understanding of vice, personal responsibility and desert, retribution, and redemption. I state and explain the modern principle of desert, how it is related to Dante's law of *contrapasso*, and I illustrate this crucial aspect of Dante's moral theory by examining three case studies: the lustful Francesca, relegated to the second circle of Hell; the assassins of Caesar – Brutus and Cassius – whom Dante stigmatizes as two of the three greatest sinners of all time and banishes to the ninth circle of Hell; and Epicurus, the noted philosopher, whom Dante labels a heretic and dispatches to the sixth circle of Hell.

The Notion of Desert

Dante enthusiastically embraces the notion of justice, as defined by the principle of moral desert and enforced by the law of *contrapasso*, as the cornerstone of his *Commedia*: “The subject [of the *Commedia*] is man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.”¹

Although the principle of moral desert seems intuitively obvious, it exudes ambiguities that merit examination. I will focus only on the concept of *personal* desert. Accordingly, I will not discuss other locutions and questions of desert such as “Do beautiful artistic pieces deserve attention?” or “Do useful, valuable material objects deserve care?”

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A few general principles:²

- If people deserve something, they do so on the basis of some prior performance or by virtue of some characteristic they possess.
- If someone deserves something, then that is a good reason for giving that something to him or her; but it is not always a sufficient or conclusive reason.
- The nature of the something to be distributed – whether it is prize, reward, blame, punishment, praise, or anything like that – will determine, at least partially, the nature of the basis that warrants the person's claim of deserving that something.

Typically, for someone to claim to deserve something he or she must point to some prior performance that might warrant the claim: the person must have done something in the past. We deserve something in virtue of prior acts for which we are responsible. In some cases, though, we may justifiably claim to deserve something on the basis of our possession of a relevant characteristic, and not on a prior performance.³ For example, I deserve equal consideration of certain of my interests, along with those of other human beings, only on the basis of my possession of humanness. However, a person who lacks both a relevant past performance and a relevant characteristic has no legitimate claim based on desert. For example, we cannot justifiably claim that we deserve to win the New York State Lottery, or that we deserve our natural talents. In the case of the lottery, merely purchasing a ticket and wishing on our lucky stars that we might win are past performances that are not enough to support a justified claim of desert. In the case of natural talents, we possess them due only to genetic chance; we did nothing to “earn” them – we were nothing prior to our birth.

Claims of desert are typically, although not always, connected to the results of voluntary actions over which we have major control. The notion of desert is often invoked for the purpose of treating human beings appropriately, given that they are responsible for their actions. Having no control over the amount and type of natural talents we possess, or over who wins the New York State Lottery, we can make no credible claim of desert in either case. If a person deserves something, that is a reason why he ought to receive it, but not always a conclusive consideration to that effect.

Claims of desert must be distinguished from claims of entitlement – another principle of justice. Consider the following example. The Buffalo Bills play the Miami Dolphins for the right to enter the Super Bowl. The Bills

prove conclusively that they are the better team, and also that they exerted the most effort on this particular Sunday. However, because of a stunning series of lucky breaks, fortuitous decisions by the game officials, and cooperation of the weather, the Dolphins win the contest, 21–20. To claim that the Bills *deserved* to win – should not the better team, and the one that tries harder, be declared the more deserving? – is reasonable. But even if the Bills are unanimously deemed the more deserving team, they are neither *entitled* to play in the Super Bowl nor do they have a *right* to play in the Super Bowl. The Dolphins, the less deserving squad, is entitled and has a right to compete in the Super Bowl. By the same token, the winner of the New State Lottery did not deserve to win, but is entitled to the prize.

- Someone is *entitled* to a prize if and only if he or she has fulfilled the qualifying conditions specified by the rules determining who receives that prize.
- Someone *deserves* to win a prize if and only if he or she demonstrated to a higher degree than all other competitors the skill and effort set forth as the basis of the competition.

Accordingly, one may be entitled to something but not deserve it, and one may deserve something but not be entitled to it. For example, children may work steadfastly to support their elderly, disabled parents, and observers may well conclude that the children deserve a reward for their effort, commitment, and contribution; but there may simply not be a reward for which they qualify, and thus none to which they are entitled. Having been legally designated in a will, Jones may be entitled to a huge inheritance, which observers might accurately conclude Jones does not deserve on the basis of their examination of Jones's life. Desert and entitlement, then, are two distinct claims of justice that sometimes conflict when others determine what one *ought* to receive as his or her just due. Although they deserved to win the crucial game, the disappointed Bills cannot legitimately claim they are entitled to win, or have a right to compete in the Super Bowl. The right to compete in the Super Bowl is conferred on that team that fulfills the relevant qualifying condition – winning the preceding playoff game – and not necessarily on the team that deserved to win that game.

- If someone deserves something it does not follow that he or she has a right to that something.
- If someone is entitled to something then he or she has a right to that something.

Again, a person may deserve something but not be able to lodge a justified claim to it, either because there is no prize or award to be claimed, or, even if there is such a prize or award, because he or she has not fulfilled the qualifying conditions to receive it.

Consider the following:

- Mary deserves praise.
- Mary deserves blame.
- Mary is entitled to praise.
- Mary is entitled to blame.

Under the appropriate conditions, the first three attributions make sense. But the fourth is problematic. While a person may deserve either praise or blame (or reward or punishment), the claim that a person is entitled to blame (or punishment) rings hollow. Entitlement is a consideration of justice that applies only to things that people desire or ought to desire. In contrast, desert is a consideration of justice that sometimes applies – in the cases of punishment and blame – to things that people typically do not desire. In that vein, to claim that someone has a right to praise or reward is compelling under the appropriate circumstances, but to claim that someone has a right to blame or punishment is odd. Accordingly, the notion of rights is tightly connected to the concept of entitlement, but not to the concept of desert. In that vein, the notion of personal desert is mainly or entirely pre-institutional; it is a natural moral notion that is not conceptually tied to political institutions, social structures, and legal rules. The notion of entitlement is mainly or entirely institutional; and this institutional notion is logically linked to political institutions, social structures, and legal rules.

This distinction, though, is far from iron-clad. Several desert claims do presuppose a sociopolitical context because of the nature of the treatment or object at stake. For example, to say that Mary deserves a Pulitzer Prize, Vito deserves the Medal of Honor, and John deserves a long stretch in prison are all legitimate assertions under the appropriate circumstances, and they all presuppose the existence of different social, military, and legal institutions. Still, claims of desert, unlike those of entitlement, do not arise merely by fulfilling the conditions specified in an institutional system of political or legal rules. Mary, Vito, and John may have satisfied the conditions laid down for their respective treatments, but doing so is not the basis of their desert claims. That there are such things as the Pulitzer Prize, the Medal

of Honor, and imprisonment is a function of institutional arrangements. But, unlike entitlement claims, desert claims related to these awards and treatments must be grounded on bases other than satisfying the qualifying conditions specified for them. The basis of desert, then, remains certain qualities that Mary, Vito, and John embodied and how those qualities animated their respective actions.

Numerous bases have been offered in support of claims of desert. For example, a person may lodge a claim of desert on the basis of moral worth; of success in contributing to society; of general productivity; of effort expended in seeking to contribute to society or to general productivity; or of the possession of relevant characteristics. Of course, these considerations do not always coalesce easily. Who deserves the prize – the person who made the most effort or the person who demonstrated the most skill and produced more? The nature of the object at stake and a series of value judgments will typically determine the appropriate basis of the desert claim. For example, if a scarce medical resource can be administered to only one of two equally needy patients, one of the possible recipients might be more deserving of the resource on the basis of her superior contributions to society. Of course, that she ought, all things considered, to receive the resource only on the basis of the fact that she is more deserving is another matter. In other contexts, claims of desert based on greater societal productivity are irrelevant. For example, a renowned, stunningly productive citizen is not allowed to vote more times in a national election than an ordinary person.

Controversy swirls around the question whether need is a legitimate basis for desert claims. We might see need as the type of personal characteristic that grounds desert claims to, say, medical treatment or allocation of food. But need is less a personal characteristic and more a (hopefully) temporary condition or situation. A person is needy not because of his or her inherent personal attributes but because of a series of describable choices, causes, and events. In fact, we are all antecedently needy until our biological, psychological, and material desires are satisfied to one degree or another. But what of a person whose needs flow from an extraordinary run of misfortune, none of which is due to her misdeeds or shortcomings? To conclude that she deserves a break or some good fortune is not misplaced. We would be assuming that nonculpable people should not be subject to a disproportionate amount of bad luck. We hope that luck would finally even out or at least occasionally smile on those it had unduly abandoned. Such a desert claim would underscore the disparity between a person's blameless

performance and massive misfortune. Having not deserved relentless battering from lady luck, the person now deserves a squaring of accounts. Of course, such a claim appears platitudinous. Having no control over the whims of fortune, we are only casting a hope into the wind.

Suppose you had one delicious slice of pepperoni pizza to bestow and two possible recipients. Both were strangers who were equal in all respects – contributions, effort, productivity, and the like. However, one had been the constant victim of bad luck, while the other was unremarkable in that regard. Would you conclude that the nonculpable victim deserved the food more than the other person, and you now had a chance to reverse the cycle of misfortune, at least to a small extent? Although the two possible recipients are equally needy in terms of food, they are unequally needy in terms of reversing outrageous fortune in the past. Neither of them is entitled, nor do they have a right to the slice, but a review of past circumstances might well impel you to decide in favor of the unfortunate pilgrim. Still, the case is not clear-cut. If the two famished people are equal in respect to contributions, effort, and productivity, then more credit might be given to the person who battled through more adverse circumstances; perhaps effort is not equal after all. Or perhaps the more unfortunate of the two was blessed with greater (undeserved) innate talents, which permitted her to equal the production of her more fortunate but less naturally gifted colleague. If so, attributions of desert are more ambiguous. In any event, appeals to need are better severed from appeals to desert. The two types of appeals often constitute conflicting claims to the just distribution of social goods. However, innocent suffering and bad luck can affect a person's desert claims in indirect ways.

Dante's *Commedia* is most concerned with the notion of moral desert. Moral desert arises from voluntary choices, deep intentions, sincere efforts, and cultivated character. But from a human perspective the idea of rewarding or punishing the internal origins of moral desert is highly problematic. Lacking unambiguous access to motivations, intentions, and past socialization, human evaluators cannot easily separate what someone genuinely deserves from what someone acquired by luck.

For example, John Rawls argues that none of us deserves our innate talents and initial social position.⁴ After all, none of us can point to any prior performance or antecedent characteristic by virtue of which a legitimate claim of desert for those things could bloom. Rawls concludes that we do not deserve those rewards and prizes, which flow from such undeserved qualities. He suggests that the major bases for desert claims – effort, productivity, contribution, and even moral worth – greatly depend

on underserved innate talents and initial social position. Even our willingness to make an effort and fulfill one of the major bases of desert depends largely on our initial starting position, social circumstances, and innate talents. Rawls tacitly accepts the principle that we deserve something if and only if we deserve the characteristics by which we obtain that something. (The principle would hold for all desert claims other than those based on possessing relevant characteristics, some of which would not be deserved.)

However, even if *willingness* to work is a character trait that a person embodies through the luck of genetic lottery, *actual* work and effort may still underwrite a genuine claim of desert. The mere possession of desirable character traits flowing from the genetic lottery – such as high intelligence, willingness to work, physical strength, natural wit, and the like – does not produce genuine desert claims. Lacking the animation provided by effort, such desirable characteristics produce little or nothing. Possessing desirable characteristics as innate gifts is one thing, but exercising those characteristics is quite another. Manifesting and exercising desirable character traits requires the concentrated effort that vivifies legitimate desert claims. To treat people as they deserve is to respond to them as autonomous, free beings responsible for their actions. Doing so also heightens our understanding that, by crafting our actions in certain ways, we can strongly influence how others will respond to us. When others treat us as we deserve, they are responding to us according to our deeds, commensurately to what we have earned.

Of course, even if a person does not deserve something, it does not follow that he ought not to receive it, or even that he is not entitled to it; it follows only that the notion of desert cannot provide him with any claim to it. Rawls highlights the problem that, while a person may well deserve certain things, it is typically impossible to calculate what she genuinely deserves; and this epistemological problem renders the notion of desert a feckless practical guide to the distribution of social goods. To calculate what accomplishments, exertions of effort, notable deeds, and the like flow from characteristics that a person deserves or has earned and what arises from undeserved initial social position and innate talents is virtually impossible.

Happily, God presumably discerns infallibly the inner intentions, motivations, and cogitations of human beings. All the hoary problems infecting human judgments regarding just deserts are properly brushed aside by Dante the author. Are human beings genuinely free? Can we deserve certain treatment even though we do not deserve our initial starting position, social circumstances, and innate talents? How can we

separate the effects of innocent suffering, bad luck, and the like from the results of our actions for which we are fully responsible? How do the different bases of desert interrelate when one is calculating a person's overall moral desert?

According to Dante, *la prima voglia* (the primary desire) in us is an innate inclination outside the control of our will. Our primary desire can be seen as God's creation, prior to human choice. We can neither deliberate about it nor expunge it. Our primary desire is for an ultimate culmination that defines final fulfillment. Only reconciliation with God constitutes final fulfillment. All human desire aims at fulfillment or happiness; only reconciliation with God can ultimately satisfy our yearning; and the goodness we encounter in ourselves, others, and nature draws us to that final fulfillment. Accordingly, the ultimate end of human action is fixed as tightly as planetary motions and celestial bodies. Individual human autonomy consists in the will deliberating upon and choosing means and intermediary ends offered to it by reason.

However, we can deliberate about, choose, and act upon our responses to particular events. Our secondary desires are subject to human reason and will. Choices in accord with our *prima voglia* are morally worthy, but our thoughts and actions pursuant to secondary desires are often inconsistent with *la prima voglia* and thus constitute sin. Evil creeps into the cosmos through human will, as conscious choice informs actions in pursuit of secondary desires. But why would we pursue secondary desires that were incompatible with *la prima voglia*? Why do human beings pursue the wrong objects of desire, or pursue the right objects of desire too avidly or too feebly?

For Dante, misdirected, insufficient, and excessive love flows from a host of overlapping personal and social shortcomings: weakness of will, ignorance, corrupt secular and religious structures, improper training and leadership, and wrongful habits that harden the heart and distort character. At times, we know the good but follow evil because doing so is the easier route, or because we lack resolve. At times, evil results from ignorance, as we confuse what appears to be good with what is in fact good. At all times, we can fall prey to flawed political and religious systems. Dante, echoing Plato, is firm in identifying the morally upright person with morally righteous social authorities. In that vein, inadequate education and feckless leadership facilitate moral evil. Finally, the performing of a wrong action, if left uncorrected and allowed to be repeated, leads to fixed habits that define our characters and weaken moral rectitude. In all cases, sin violates reason.

As existentialists are fond of reminding us, experience is the greatest “proof” that human beings have freedom. We cannot deny our freedom once we experience the anguish of choice, profoundly sense that we could have done otherwise than we did, and, at times, break entrenched habits and patterns by apparent acts of will. Although neuroscience may insist that my decisions and choices are conjured in my brain prior to my consciousness of them, my felt experiences persist. Even if science repeats that my mind is subject to the typical material pattern of causes and effects, even if all events are determined by prior chains of causes and effects, we cling to a thin reed: causation need not be compulsion. My choices are neither random nor coerced. If freedom requires making choices and acting on the basis of reasons that are not causes, then rationally establishing freedom is gravely problematic. But our experiences scream out and win the day: How could we live and act under the self-conscious view that we are unfree? How would we experience the world? If we are antecedently constructed so as to experience – and hence believe – that we are free, what rational evidence could change our manner of living other than in a purely academic way? Even if we are convinced by the evidence against human free will, we must heed Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1905–1980) slogan “We are condemned to be free” and paraphrase it: “We are condemned to live *as if* we were free.” Sartre insists that we are radically free and fully responsible. His rallying cry “no excuses” amplifies that theme. As a matter of theory, Sartre may well be incorrect, but as a function of practice – how we must live our lives – his program resonates deeply. We are biologically constructed to live as if we were free. No other practical alternative is available.

Following Dante, we must *assume* that human beings are autonomous, responsible, free moral agents responsible for their actions, and that God can correctly answer all of these questions and everything else. The conundrums of the principle of desert may well be unsolvable by human beings, but Dante relentlessly reminds us that God is uniquely placed to make infallibly correct determinations, however mysterious they may be to us.

The Contrapasso

In Purgatory, moving from least serious to most serious, the seven capital sins are lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. In Hell, the classification runs: lust, gluttony, wrath, sloth, avarice, heresy, violence, fraud, and fraud with treachery. In Hell, sins of incontinence – understood

as weakness of will, where impulse and lack of self-control overwhelm judgment – are less evil than sins of malice, understood as sins of fixed habit and hardened heart. Within sins of malice, those involving violence are less evil than those involving fraud, because the latter abuse God's greatest gift to human beings, reason. Unsurprisingly, heretics are found only in the sixth circle of Hell. Having willfully rejected and perverted Christian teaching, they have committed a spiritual suicide that precludes purification and correction. So, too, have the simonists, fraudulent vendors of ecclesiastic pardons and indulgences, who now reside eternally in the eighth circle of Hell. Surprisingly, at least to modern evaluators, Dante places usurers below tyrants, murderers, blasphemers, and suicides, in the seventh circle of Hell. Moreover, flatterers, sorcerers, hypocrites, and a cast of other colorful characters suffer in the eighth circle, below the condemned merchants of stark violence.

Dante's major distinction between evils flowing from force and arising from fraud echoes Cicero's:

While wrong may be done, then, in either of two ways, that is, by force or by fraud, both are bestial: fraud seems to belong to the cunning fox, force to the lion; both are unworthy of man, but fraud is the more contemptible. But of all forms of injustice, none is more flagrant than that of the hypocrite who, at the very moment when he is most false, makes it his business to appear virtuous.⁵

To soften the conflict between medieval Christian and contemporary moral sensibilities, we must examine more closely the seven capital sins. As final causes, the seven capital sins generate evil effects that may not resemble their cause. For example, perpetrators may murder from envy or pride. Dante, following Aquinas, classifies the deed in accord with its final cause, envy or pride, and not as an act of murder as such. Put another way, murder is a species, a type of evil, which is derived from a genus such as pride or envy. Moreover, understood as habits constituting character, the seven capital sins form the best guide to our deepest intentions and to the condition of our souls. Even if obscured from human perception, the seven capital sins are transparent to God. Accordingly, the banality, the apparent harmlessness, or even the acceptability of some of the seven capital sins are based on radically misinterpreting the role they play in the Christian doctrine upon which Dante relied. This is one of several reasons why Dante regards acts of fraud and violence differently from contemporary moralists. Dante traces the acts back to their animating dispositions – one or more of the seven capital sins.

Every mortal sin punches the perpetrator's ticket to Hell. But none is so inexcusable that repentance during life cannot make the atoner a candidate for salvation. Moreover, if relegated to Purgatory, penitents become candidates for Paradise through penal and corrective punishment, in accord with the law of *contrapasso*.

No sins arising from passion are malicious; all acts of injustice are malicious; some malicious acts, such as sins against the Holy Spirit, are not transgressions against justice. Sins of malice are classified according to the nature of the external act, while sins of passion – those arising from incontinence – are not. Thus sins of incontinence do not aim at injustice, while all malicious sins punished in the lowest circles of Hell transgress against justice. Malice is an inward condition of the sinner that is incompatible with repentance. To repent is to demonstrate that malice no longer dominates the soul. The effect of repentance is to cleanse malice, but the will still requires further purification and penance. To die unrepentant is to select Hell and to exclude oneself from Purgatory. In Purgatory there are no sins of malice. There we cannot classify a sin until we understand the internal condition of the penitent. The seven capital sins are the source of all wrongs redressed, purified, and corrected in Purgatory, but only some of those are punished in Hell.

To sin requires more than Stoic “first movements,” which are akin to instinctive reactions. Even Stoics may fall prey to first movements – being overwhelmed by the force of a first impression. If someone suddenly cracks me over the head with a club, I garner immediate impressions of pain. Instantaneously, I form the propositions “I have been smacked upside the head; my head hurts; and this event is awful, unwarranted, unjust, and, in general, not conducive to my good.” (In truth, at least in my case, the propositions would be richly spiced with expletives and embraced with overflowing anger.) At this point, however, I will have not concluded – wrongly, from a Stoic perspective – that the physical injury is evil. I have succumbed only to a first movement, which is not a judgment but only an immediate reaction. I have not yet assented to the proposition that the physical injury is evil. I still have time to suck it up and hold on to Stoic wisdom: that only corrosions of my soul are genuinely evil and physical injury is merely a non-preferred indifferent (an event I may not prefer to occur in certain circumstances, but one that is irrelevant to the condition of my soul, which defines my personal good).

Accordingly, Stoics dismiss my spontaneous reaction to a first movement as essentially involuntary, and even natural. For, aside from the Marquis

de Sade and his fellow travelers, who enjoys being smacked across the head? The proposition I formed consisted both of the sense perception (sensations of pain) forced upon me and of the involuntary initial value judgment. But my final assent to, or rejection of, the value judgment marks me as a Stoic. For the Stoics, external events are neither good nor evil. When I assent to a proposition containing in part a value judgment describing an external event I stumble into epistemological error. In this manner, my emotional response to giving assent – “I am angry at the injustice of this evil assault” – is wrong, based on a mistaken judgment, and is fully under my control.

In like fashion, sin requires that we must voluntarily assent to, and will, the intentions that constitute a guilty internal condition, that manifest and reinforce a corrupt soul. A passing thought, an instinctive reaction, or an unconsidered judgment are insufficient. But a deed or an act undertaken pursuant to voluntary assent and willed intention is not required for sin. Thus an evil act that is willed, but unaccomplished, may nevertheless spawn moral culpability. Why would the act go undone? External circumstances might prevent the act from taking place – in which case the failure to execute the deed is merely involuntary, and thus the agent still bears guilt. If the agent restrains himself short of initiating the wrongful deed under circumstances where completion was possible, then the agent did not completely will the sin and culpability evaporates. In any case, from the standpoint of Dante and Aquinas and of Christian doctrine, moral culpability flows from the will alone.

Unlike earthly legal systems, which, for completely understandable reasons, punish only wrongful deeds, Dante’s system of punishment, animated by the infallible judgments of the divine mind, also addresses wrongful thoughts and intentions. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts and wills of men? God infallibly does, and Dante the author fallibly intuits the results. In the *Commedia* the inward condition of the soul, not merely a chronicle of earthly deeds, is paramount. However, some sins, such as hypocrisy, do require an external act for their existence. Thus external acts are not completely irrelevant to Dante’s scheme of punishment.

One way of interpreting the *contrapasso* is to conclude that our sins *constitute* our punishment. Instead of conceiving of divine justice as external to sinners and their deeds, we can conceive of punishment as an internal, inherent part of the deeds themselves. Socrates famously argued in the Platonic dialogues that to do evil is to harm the self by distorting the harmony and balance of the soul. Dante may be arguing that in life and in the afterlife we *become* our sins. As we read the *Inferno*, sinners are rarely

the best chroniclers of their earthly deeds. Their sins have distorted their humanity, and their self-deceptions have skewed their vision. We learn of the nature of their souls, then and now, by closely perceiving their sufferings in Hell. The *contrapasso* reveals who they were and what they have become. Each sin has a unique way of distorting miscreants' souls and of diminishing their characters.

For example, in the eighth circle of Hell, the region of commonplace frauds, panderers and seducers join in the first bolgia. Both traded human flesh as currency. Panderers exploited others for profit, while seducers extracted pleasure from others, then forsook them. In Hell they cover the same ground, being headed in different directions, while demons lash at them. As in life, they get nowhere fast. Directionless, incapable of forging a worthy self because they understand and value others inadequately, these sinners, as in life, continually seek but never find.

In the second bolgia of the eighth circle we find flatterers who babble, rant, or are silent. As in life, their communication is unreliable or false. Flatterers end up believing their own attempts at illusion, and their fraudulent speech reveals their disconnection from reality. They are unable to speak truthfully and veridically because they have become their sin. Whereas panderers and seducers commodify human flesh, flatterers falsely trade on language, which is required for robust human community. As always, Dante scorns those who tear at the social fabric necessary for salutary communal relations.

In the fourth bolgia we find sorcerers of various kinds. The diviners claimed to know the future. With bodies now distorted, they move slowly, unable to see their destination, if any. In life, they fraudulently projected into the future and were unable to exercise their freedom to create salutary selves. They now stroll aimlessly, aware only of their own deprivation and purposelessness. They, too, have become their sin, as their present (and future) is only twisted illusion.

In the fifth bolgia barraters abound. They sold offices while on earth; in Hell they struggle in boiling tar. When they stick their bodies above the surface, demons strike them with hooked claws. The barraters were corrupt on earth, dealing below the surface of fair relations and in the dark. The misdealing of barraters jeopardizes urban politics, as ordinary citizens become suspicious of government. The barraters have become their sin. They know only darkness, depravity, and disaggregation from community.

In the sixth bolgia, hypocrites conceal their identities with glittering capes and painted faces. Having judged only by appearances while on earth,

they are unable to make any sense of Virgil and the pilgrim. Hypocrites have difficulty distinguishing reality from superficial images. Even in Hell, their glittering capes are disconnected from their somber reality. Like the Jovial Friars, they talk a noble game, but live quite differently. Hypocrites often evoke seemingly lofty principles they are unwilling to apply to themselves. Such hypocrisy also corrodes the public trust and threatens human community.

In the seventh bolgia, thieves are harassed by serpents. When bitten, a thief ignites, evaporates, and is reconstituted. Thieves not only steal material goods, but also impose fear, insecurity, and anxiety upon their victims. The serpents of Hell reenact the deeds of thieves. Whereas diviners, barraters and hypocrites create false impressions or orchestrate fraudulent dramas, thieves yearn to be different from the persons they are and try to seize the identity of their victims, to switch their own insecurity with the serenity of their prey. Impervious to the relation between deeds, character, and salvation, thieves ignore all that is divine, eternal, and redemptive. In Hell, their insubstantiality is repeatedly dramatized.

In the ninth bolgia, sowers of discord, hatred, and scandal exhibit their just desert. A saber-wielding demon slices them from the top of their heads to below their waists. Having divided relationships while on earth, they are disfigured in Hell. As they journey in a circle, their mourning heals their wounds; but, as they pass the demon, it slices them once again. To undermine human relationships and mutual affection intentionally is to destroy the self. Sowers of discord minimize their opportunities for genuine love and friendship. After a time, such purveyors of distress dehumanize themselves so deeply that salutary human relationships are impossible. In Hell, they become who they are: they can experience existence only when they are injured by their own destructive actions. Enduring relations, indeed the continuity of their own identities, are impossible. They forge a fraudulent life as they claw at the fabric of human community.

In the tenth bolgia, falsifiers lie in piles or recline or crawl. An unbearable odor emanates from their being; leprous wounds cause them to scratch continually; a sense of madness prevails. Utterly confused, both in life and in Hell, and unable to distinguish image from reality, falsifiers never trust their own judgment. The stench they emit symbolizes how their superficiality corrodes their existence. Fleeing from personal responsibility and wallowing in their own suffering, falsifiers continually assault one another, both physically and verbally. Their existence exemplifies their effects on human community and on themselves.

The law of *contrapasso* decrees, then, that specific punishment must reflect the character of the sinner and the nature of his transgression. Thus pride is punished by bearing heavy rocks (in proportion to the amount of sin) that bend the body almost to the ground; envy, by suturing eyes shut with wire; wrath, by an oppressive, blinding, putrid smoke; sloth by continual, pointless, futile motion; avarice by the deflation of the body downward into the ground; gluttony by extreme emaciation joined with constant hunger and thirst, and by the futile temptations of a mystic fruit tree and alluring stream; and lust by a burning, purifying fire. Understood in this fashion, the retributive dimension of the law of *contrapasso* in the afterlife merely reflects what sinners have made of themselves by their free choices and earthly deeds. Understood metaphorically, the punishments of Hell and Purgatory only manifest the internal condition of sinners; the torments of the afterlife merely make visible what was the case all along. Even during our earthly lives, we become our sins, which reflect and sustain our deficient characters.

The Problem of Proportionality

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) claims only hatred (or at least *ressentiment*) could motivate the fortunate sons and daughters in Paradise to revel in the eternal torment of the condemned souls in Hell. For Nietzsche, Hell is a fiction conjured by resentful moralists who, driven by fear, envy, and hatred, devise a suitable torture chamber for those who exceed their earthly talents.

Dante, I think, committed a crude blunder when, with a terror-inspiring ingenuity, he placed above the gateway of his Hell the inscription, “I too was created by eternal love” – at any rate, there would be more justification for placing above the gateway to the Christian Paradise and its “eternal bliss” the inscription “I too was created by eternal *hate*” – provided a truth may be placed above the gateway to a lie!⁶

For Nietzsche, the same drive for competitive advantage, special favor, and external validation that Dante otherwise excoriates motivates the creation of Paradise and Hell. Against Nietzsche, perhaps Christians could argue that either (a) those in Paradise do not rejoice in the suffering of those in Hell; or (b) they actually feel empathy and pain at the thought of their condemned

brothers and sisters suffering in Hell; or (c) if the blessed do rejoice, they do so only in celebration of a rational, just order, where everyone receives what he or she deserves. If any of three situations pertains, then the blessed in Paradise need not be animated by resentment and hate.

However, the problem of disproportionate retribution – how can a finite human transgression translate into an infinite, unrelenting punishment? – amplifies Nietzsche's indictment.

One response is that human sins are not merely finite and discrete; they are fundamentally transgressions against God. The conviction is that the disproportionality claim withers away once we refuse to view earthly sins only on earthly terms. To sin against the human community is to transgress against God. Accordingly, calculating the enormity of a sin must include the offense to God, not merely the noxious earthly effects of the transgression and the vile motives and intentions of the perpetrator.

But the problem does not vanish so easily. That God is so susceptible to irredeemable harm does not coalesce easily with God's other attributes. Could an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient divinity be so fragile in the face of the abuse of human free will? That human sins victimize God is unclear. This idea makes a presumably all-powerful God extremely vulnerable to human actions. While the well-being of God may well be infinitely important, the fact that human transgressions set back God's interests to an extent that justifies infinite punishment for sinners in Hell is starkly contestable. Intuitively, we would accept that only an infinitely grievous offense could justify an infinite punishment. Can the transgressions of one human sinner set back God's interests infinitely?

Stunningly, Dante anticipated some of the problems of treating the punishments of Hell retributively. How can love motivate the creation of Hell? By infusing human beings with freedom and volition, God lovingly allows them to choose their destiny. Instead of sentencing souls to eternal damnation, God merely respects the choices human beings have made. God must not save the damned against their will, because a forced redemption is less valuable than a freely chosen destiny in Hell. Love is connected to helping others become the best people they can be, respecting their freedom, and honoring their choices. God's love for human beings requires that God treat us according to our nature. The sinners in Hell have misdirected, weak, or malicious wills, which lead them to serious errors about the good and the true. They use reason in defective ways and become habituated to their mistakes. They form stable dispositions of character that are contrary to the good of human nature. Through their choices – by continuing to will in

self-destructive, irrational fashions – sinners forge defective characters that become their secondary natures. These reprobates do not will what is needed to reconcile themselves to God and to unite themselves with their own primary human natures. God treats sinners in accord with the secondary natures they have forged, unable as they are both to honor their choices and to fulfill their primary natures. In Hell, sinners still choose and act in accord with their secondary, self-created natures. Their punishment is merely the consequence of their earthly and afterlife actions. God permits these sinners a reality and an ontological significance commensurate with the capabilities of their self-chosen secondary natures. In effect, God loves the damned insofar as he recognizes and maximizes those capabilities. If God unilaterally transformed sinners, then God would be overturning their choices and renegeing on their freedom.

The notion that sinners choose Hell by voluntarily pursuing deeds that separate them from God is complicated by the fact that it is God who constructs the system whereby sinners suffer greatly for refusing to comply with His imperatives and to accept Him into their lives. Presumably human beings have no choice but to fall under that system. Thus God imposes the structure of reward and punishment that includes Hell. The claim – that by condemning certain sinners to Hell, God is only honoring their choices – becomes less clear. Undoubtedly, most of those sinners would have preferred not to have been subject to the structure of rewards and punishments that God unilaterally imposed.

Still, Dante portrays many of the characters in the *Inferno* as having chosen their fate. For Dante, moral desert flows from choices: we deserve and receive the fate we selected. He is concerned with matching earthly transgressions to afterlife suffering in terms of retribution, but not necessarily in strict proportionality. Although historically connected to the *lex talionis* by Aquinas, the *contrapasso* need not be read in precise terms of proportionality. Yes, Hell has various circles that reflect increasingly serious offenses, but these are distinguished only by the willingness and malice of the offense and by the extent to which it disrupted the cohesiveness of a salutary, moral community.

But one wonders why a human being would freely choose to sever relations with God permanently. Plato spoke of vice flowing from ignorance: to know the good is to follow it. Clearly, from Aristotle on, most thinkers, including Dante, have rejected that view and have recognized weakness of will: we sometimes know the good but follow evil because we are weak, lazy, or indifferent. Our desires often undermine our reason. But to choose freely

a destiny so starkly opposed to the divine will is difficult to explain. And why are souls not given a second chance once they have presumably chosen Hell? Would repentance at this point be understood as cowardly, or as bowing before the forces of might? Is freely chosen and reaffirmed damnation more valuable – as a celebration of human autonomy – than a repentance motivated, at least in part, by the horrors of Hell? Is facing eternal damnation without hope, but with courage, a perverse badge of honor?

First Case Study: Francesca

Francesca can point to extenuating circumstances. First she was allegedly tricked into marriage; then she fell victim of being *colpita dal fulmine* (struck by the lightning bolt of love); finally she was murdered by her husband without opportunity to repent over her adultery. Moreover, why should Francesca be defined by this deed, especially in light of her numerous positive attributes: intelligence, grace, charm, and generosity? Did not her sensitivity render her even more vulnerable to the seductions of romance?

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende, prese costui de la bella persona che mi fu tolta; e'l modo ancor m'offende. Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona, mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. Amore condusse noi ad una morte ["Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart, took hold of him because of the fair body taken from me; how that was done still wounds me. Love, that releases no beloved from loving, took hold of me so strongly through his beauty that, as you can see, it has not left me yet. Love led the two of us unto one death"]. (IV, 100–106)

While Paolo was defenseless once he confronted Francesca's *bella figura*, she was equally defenseless. All this was reinforced by their reading of the romance novel. Francesca pleads a persuasive case.

Per più fiata li occhi ci sospinse quella lettura, e scolorocci il viso; ma solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse. Quando leggemmo il disiato riso esser baciato da cotanto amante, questi, che mai da me non fia diviso, la bocca mi baciò tutto tremante ["And time and time again that reading [of the Lancelot book] led our eyes to meet, and made our faces pale, and yet one point alone defeated us. When we had read how the desired smile was kissed by

one who was so true a lover, this one, who never shall be parted from me, while all his body trembled, kissed my mouth”]. (IV, 130–136)

But Christian doctrine holds adultery to be a uniquely venal type of lust, which is inherently wrong. Francesca self-delusionally elevates lust to love. While a superficial reading of the *Commedia* might lead us to indict Dante the author for wrongly reducing a person to only one of her acts, in fact that one act is an illustration of a deeper disposition that reveals overall character. Although Francesca appears intelligent, graceful, charming, and generous, her affair with Paolo manifests her predominant character. She venerates desire over reason, a defining attribute of those who have chosen Hell or were condemned to it. When Dante the pilgrim sympathizes with Francesca, he shows that his reason is too easily swayed by misplaced sentiment. Francesca inadequately assumes responsibility for her actions and reveals, by her misreading of the novel, that she is in love more with an idea or fantasy than with the hapless Paolo. Her yearning is not for the concrete person with whom she copulates, but for an abstraction conjured from her imagination (Does this suggest a parallel to Dante’s idealization of Beatrice?) and animated by the romance novel she misinterprets to make it fit her wants. This, too, reveals the shortcomings of her character. We have no reason to assume she would have repented if given the chance. Even in Hell, she focuses on excusing rather than distancing herself from her adultery. Her self-serving conviction that human beings are defenseless when confronting the overwhelming power of love and its thunderbolt only underscores her celebration of desire over reason. We have no compelling evidence to conclude that she was misjudged. Her verbal seduction of Dante the pilgrim reinforces this judgment.

E quella a me: “Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria” [“And she to me: “There is no greater sorrow than thinking back upon a happy time in misery”]. (IV, 121–123)

Dante the author lures us into sympathizing with Francesca and Paolo, just as Dante the pilgrim is seduced by Francesca’s account. Who among us is so hardened that our romantic yearnings are completely untouched by Francesca’s tender words and exquisite articulation? Who among us can sneer coldly at the majesty of romantic love kindled by being *colpito dal fulmine*? Moreover, the mutual seduction of the two lovers is nurtured

while they read a book. Now we are reading Dante's book. Will it, too, invigorate our hearts and souls? (Will reading my book spark healthy reflection and personal transformation?)

Second Case Study: Brutus and Cassius

The ninth circle of Hell includes only the treacherous. With his eye unwaveringly fixed on the importance of community, Dante concluded that betraying trust was the most grievous sin, because it was completely knowing and intentional and tore most viciously at the fabric of society. Malice energizes fraud and force, the tools of crooks and goons. For Dante, fraud is morally worse than force, and for numerous reasons. First, fraud abuses human reason, our unique and defining attribute. Treachery is uniquely human and most directly implicates an abuse of free will. Animals are violent, but cannot perpetrate treacheries, at least not in the deepest sense. For Dante, the most willful transgressions are the worst. Second, by destroying trust, fraud tears at the fabric of political and religious communities. Dante's frame of reference was strikingly more communal than the individualistic mindset of contemporary Western moral theorists. Treachery is malice hurled at society as a whole; it amplifies the betrayer at the expense of others. In contrast, taking the individual as the fundamental moral building-block, contemporary moralists unanimously agree that crimes of violence such as murder and rape are the most grievous. Third, Dante was also moved to the conclusion that treachery was the worst sin because the violent resolution of disputes was more commonplace during his time than it is today. As a result, violence was considered less aberrational than it is today. Fourth, Dante was convinced that people are rarely treacherous only once. For him, betrayals are a way of life that illuminates the deeper character of perpetrators. Violence is often relatively spontaneous, but treachery is willed, plotted, and savored. Finally, Dante, as always, peers beyond the external deed to the fixed disposition of character – grounded in the seven capital sins – that animates the deed. Lurking beyond treachery is a nest of unwholesome vices.

But why are Brutus and Cassius indicted as two of the three greatest sinners of all time? Was not Brutus the "noblest Roman," at least to those in whose bosoms burned the love of the Roman republic? As the instigator of the plot to eviscerate tyranny, is not Cassius owed some respect, even by those loyal to Julius Caesar? Let's take a closer look.

Marcus Junius Brutus: The conscience of the conspiracy

Marcus Junius Brutus (85 BC–42 BC) felt a biological destiny to uphold Roman republican traditions. His alleged distant ancestor, the fabled Lucius Junius Brutus (c.545 BC–c.509 BC), led a popular rebellion that expelled Rome's legendary seventh and last ever king, the tyrannical "Tarquin the Proud" (Tarquinius Superbus). When his two sons joined a counter-revolution, they were eventually exposed and brought to justice. Brutus had to choose between the rule of law and his family. He chose the rule of law and all conspirators, including his two sons, were executed under his own supervision.

Marcus Junius Brutus grew up, like all Roman youth, admiring the legend of the ancient Brutus, who venerated republican values even more than the lives of his own sons. If that connection was not enough to stoke Brutus's political fires, his mother, Servilia, was a half-sister of Cato the Stoic, the relentless advocate of republican values. Moreover, in 45 BC Brutus divorced his first wife Claudia and married his first cousin Porcia, daughter of Cato. The dead Cato, then, was both Brutus's uncle and his father-in-law. Also, Servilia was descended from Servilius Ahala, a man who murdered a would-be tyrant, Spurius Maelius, with a dagger. When Brutus served as official in charge of the Roman mint, around 54 BC, one of the coins he designed had an image of Lucius Brutus on one side and one of Servilius Ahala on the other.

Brutus was a keen student of philosophy and an adherent to the eclectic Fourth Academy, whose last scholarch, Philo of Larissa, had sought to resuscitate a more "dogmatic" variant of Platonism, less skeptical than that of the New Academy of Carneades and Arcesilaos and closer to Plato's original doctrine. During the Roman civil war Brutus sided with Pompey. Although Pompey had ruthlessly and fraudulently slain his father, Brutus was tightly aligned with the *optimates* (senate aristocrats), who had won Pompey to their cause. At the battle of Pharsalus Caesar ordered his men not to harm Brutus and to take him prisoner. After routing Pompey, Caesar was thrilled to accept Brutus's plea for mercy. Plutarch reports that Brutus tipped off Caesar that Pompey was headed for Egypt,⁷ but this speculation may be false.⁸ Clearly, however, Brutus grew himself further into Caesar's warm graces. Caesar named him governor of the Cisalpine Gaul in 46 BC, even though Brutus had held no political office above that of quaestor. He proved to be an excellent administrator, whose lack of avarice and of resort to violence won him and Caesar great acclaim. Caesar appointed him as senior praetor in 44 BC. He even alluded to the possibility that Brutus might one day succeed him.

As forces against Caesar converged, they looked to Brutus to spearhead the assassination plot. Caesar had often favored Brutus, probably in deference to the dictator's longstanding, intimate relationship with Servilia, Brutus's mother. Brutus must have had strong feelings of gratitude. Each man, though, probably bore deep ambivalences about the other.

Here is the standard historical judgment on his role: "Brutus provided the ideological backbone to the conspiracy. He was famously puritanical and consciously imitated the old Roman virtues. He was motivated not by greed or ambition, but by a desire to emulate his famous ancestor and liberate Rome."⁹ Reality is rarely so simple.

Gaius Cassius Longinus: Nobody's fool

Married to a daughter of Servilia, Cassius (85 BC–42 BC) was Brutus's brother-in-law. He was fluent in Greek, had studied philosophy, and was a recent convert to Epicureanism. During the civil war he cast his lot with the *optimates* and commanded Pompey's fleet. After Pompey's defeat and his own capture by Caesar, Cassius accepted Caesar's clemency. Caesar appointed him a praetor in 44 BC, but elevated Brutus to a more prestigious praetorship, even though he recognized Cassius's superior credentials for the post.

Although Cassius was also promised the governorship of Syria at the expiration of his term, he was not a man to suffer slights gladly. He already resented his obligation to Caesar for sparing his life; he loathed his own willingness to recognize Caesar's superiority by accepting dishonor instead of death; and he soothed his weakened *dignitas* with fantasies of revenge. Cassius knew that Caesar did not trust him and that his own political fortunes were therefore limited. He began gathering confederates, most of whom insisted that Brutus assume a leadership role. These were not common thugs or professional hit men. The conspirators would number among the most respected *optimates* in Rome. They yearned for legitimacy and Brutus, with his high reputation for moral rectitude and a profoundly philosophical temperament, exuded the *gravitas* required to justify tyrannicide.

Cassius began his recruitment campaign. Playing upon Brutus's presumed hereditary destiny and upon his visceral aversion to tyranny, Cassius strummed a beguiling tune of political liberation. Brutus pondered upon the alternatives, filtered them through the complexities of Platonic doctrine, consulted with others, and committed to the cause.

The standard historical judgment on the role of Cassius is that he was the manipulative, "lean and hungry" dynamo who orchestrated the plot.

Whereas Brutus is typically portrayed as a philosophically principled enemy of tyranny who loved Caesar but despised his rule, Cassius is pictured as a fierce warrior who detested Caesar and who fumed with designs of vendetta. Whereas Brutus embodied pure motivations and entered the project with a heavy heart, Cassius boiled with envy and resentment and initiated the conspiracy with a heavy hand. In truth, Cassius, like Brutus, operated from mixed motives. He, too, was weaned on the ancient myths of Roman valor in the face of tyranny.

Was the assassination of Caesar justified?

Once Caesar was in power, the senatorial aristocrats correctly perceived him as a threat to their political prerogatives. He had squashed the authority of the senate while advancing, to a limited but discernible degree, the interests of small farmers, debtors, and urban workers. The *optimates* were convinced that such reforms came at their expense. The call for republican liberty, which resonates so sweetly in our ears today, was in the practices of the late Roman republic a euphemism for aristocratic privilege. Under the cover of lofty appeals to the “common good” and to “traditions of our forefathers,” the *optimates* and their cohorts luxuriated in class advantage.

Yes, Caesar also wielded a kind of power that was in a few respects reminiscent of tyranny: he appointed numerous public officials; elections were either skirted or *pro forma*; and he controlled political power in Rome. But he avoided the worst abuses that characterize tyrannies. The masses of Romans were somewhat better off economically under Caesar, although they lost the genuine right to vote for most public officials. Roman aristocracy was somewhat worse off economically under Caesar, but still prospered. They were, though, significantly worse off politically, as Caesar eviscerated the privileges of the senate. The small middle class was only a little better off economically under Caesar, but it had greater opportunity to attain public office, even though elections were limited. Caesar’s generosity to citizens, expressed in his will, was manifest at his death and contrasted starkly to the avarice that most unadulterated tyrants embodied. Can we imagine Josef Stalin or Idi Amin, upon death, dispersing a large part of their fortunes to all their citizens equally? Would villains of their stature have ever shown mercy toward vanquished foes in a civil war? Would they have ever renounced purges for the sake of reconciliation?

Caesar had seized power unconstitutionally; hence to call him a tyrant on arrival is fair. But to call him a tyrant in political practice is contestable.

By truncating or limiting the elections of public officials, by claiming full political power, and by governing with the form but not substance of law, he may display the incipient signs common to all tyrants. But, in the light of the counter-indicators sketched above, he falls far short of the paradigm. Whether his actions, on balance, deflated the common good is also highly disputable. A strong case can be made that the alleged common good that pre-existed Caesar benefited only (or stunningly disproportionately) the aristocrats. Caesar's reforms benefited in substance more people than the pre-existing "common good" did, although some political rights of all people withered away under Caesar.

The conspirators, stunningly naïve, were convinced that the death of Caesar would automatically resuscitate the Roman republic. The assassins were so tone-deaf to social reality that they never considered the prospect that the political liberties of the Roman *aristocracy* did not define liberty *as such*. They did not *reject* the view that middle-class, poor, and disenfranchised people might embody interests other than their own; they never even *entertained* the possibility. The freedom of Roman nobles to compete for public office, honors, and enduring glory *constituted* traditional republican liberty.

The Roman aristocracy had hijacked the common good: what was good for the *optimates* and their fellow travelers was good for Rome. Whether the beneficial changes to state practices, policies, institutions, or laws that the assassins sought would in fact have facilitated the common good is highly disputable. A return to the old ways – which was the critical goal of the conspirators – would not have served equally the interests of all citizens. The failure of the conspirators to grasp this, even dimly, invites the accusation that they were culpable for their political insensitivity to social reality.

That the changes sought by the assassins were benefits is disputable. Yes, the aristocratic senators would have gained much politically, and even more economically. That other social classes would have gained much is doubtful: perhaps some political rights. But how effective had those rights been in securing members of those social classes a reasonable chance to flourish? The aristocrats had purloined the common good. The changes brought by an assassination followed by the resurrection of the republic in substance would have understood the common good, as ever, in strictly aristocratic terms.

Moreover, even if I grant – contrary to fact – that the changes sought by the assassins were unambiguous benefits to everyone, they did not have a high probability of occurring. The republic was not going to rise

spontaneously from Caesar's ashes and that was foreseeable in 44 BC, at least by those not blinded by their class interests, romantic dreams of redemption, or personal vendetta.

That the conspirators wildly miscalculated the aftermath of their deed is indisputable and has been chronicled above. They were culpable for their errors. Their belief that the republic would rise again, entertained in good faith, but blatantly inaccurate, was inexcusable. The assassins' self-absorbed identification of their class interests with the common good as such; their estrangement from and ignorance of the concerns of less fortunate classes; their failure to set in motion a plan to facilitate a transition to republicanism in substance; and their disregard for the predictable reactions of Caesar's loyalists were then – and appear now to us – morally culpable.

The result was thirteen years of renewed civil war that devastated the Roman world, doomed the republic, and ushered in centuries of imperial rule. The conspirators had failed to address the most daunting obstacle blocking political change: the problem of the transition. How does a revolution, or an assassination, if successful, then nurture the political structure its instigators prize? Caesar's murderers dim-wittingly concluded that their aspirations reflected the hopes of all right-thinking Romans and that no blueprint for political transition was required. No, the republic in full form and substance would arise spontaneously or through an invisible hand instructed by the general will. An atrocious case of wishful thinking, that.

Accordingly, the view that the assassination produced a positive balance of good over evil is unpersuasive. Overall, the death of Caesar resulted in thirteen years of devastating civil war, served as the obituary for the Roman republic, and inaugurated the reign of centuries of emperors. Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, Cicero, all of the conspirators, and countless others perished. The assassins' goal of restoring the republic was squashed.

The tidy picture of Brutus as single-minded, noble, firm in purpose, and incorruptible in spirit is unworthy of belief. He was an avaricious money-lender, even by Roman standards. He fought on the side of Pompey, the man who dishonorably murdered Brutus's father. Upon defeat, he implored the victor, Caesar, for forgiveness. After Caesar had granted clemency and rewarded Brutus with desirable political posts, to the chagrin of better qualified applicants, he plotted against his benefactor and assassinated him. He positioned himself as a contemplative philosopher, but was spurred to political action. He celebrated peace but commanded an army. He was the symbol of republican constitutionality, but assumed extraordinary political powers while he was in the East. He left Italy in the aftermath of Caesar's

assassination to avoid civil war, yet rose to command a sizable army that fought against his fellow-citizens.¹⁰ Yes, Brutus was moved by a sense of ancestral destiny and by a sincere love of Roman tradition and republican government. But he was neither Goody Two-Shoes nor Braveheart.

History has been less kind to Cassius than to Brutus. That Cassius despised Caesar is uncontested. What Brutus found distasteful, Cassius loathed. He resented the inferior position that accepting Caesar's mercy had engendered; he despised Caesar for appointing Brutus as first praetor after acknowledging Cassius's superior credentials; he suspected that Caesar had an adulterous affair with his wife, Tertia; and he bristled at Caesar's high-handed expropriation of lions that Cassius had earmarked for public games. Moreover, Cassius was a tougher, more aggressive, more overtly proud man than Brutus was. He treasured his *dignitas* as profoundly as Caesar himself did.

To paint Cassius's portrait in one dimension, though, does violence to history and to truth. He, too, was an aristocratic patriot, inspired by the heroic sagas of his youth and overflowing with pride in Roman traditions. He was made from harder steel than Brutus, but the two men shared a common political vision.

In sum, a strong case can be made that the assassination of Julius Caesar was morally unjustified.¹¹ The treachery did not advance, but set back, the common good; that Caesar was a tyrannical ruler is highly contestable; and the assassination did not restore the Roman republic. Its perpetrators should have foreseen that it would not do so.

But why does Dante the author consign Brutus and Cassius to the *lowest* rung in Hell? Even if we grant that the assassination of Caesar was morally unjustified, at first blush placing these Romans together with Judas seems harsh.

For Dante, the establishment of a universal political monarchy, under the aegis of Rome, was crucial for human flourishing. Rightly or wrongly, he saw Julius Caesar as the inaugurator of such a polity. Judas, after accepting favors from his Lord, betrayed his benefactor in the most contemptible fashion. For his part, Judas destroyed the spiritual monarch. Brutus and Cassius, after petitioning for, and receiving, Caesar's clemency and subsequently currying his favors, assassinated their benefactor. For their part, Brutus and Cassius destroyed the secular monarch. The magnitude of their offenses against human and spiritual communities, their shocking ingratitude toward their benefactors, and the callousness of their fraudulent betrayals cannot be denied. Accordingly, for Dante, the three reprobates merit their lowly rung in the sinners' hall of shame.

Dante's scheme of sin builds on analyses and understandings that can be found in Aristotle, Cicero, the Bible, and Aquinas. For Dante, sins of fraud are, typically, morally worse than sins of violence, because they reveal a deeper depravity of the perpetrator; it is an abuse of the gift of reason – the gift that defines human beings, distinguishes them from nonhuman animals, and constitutes their special likeness to God. As illustrated in the ninth circle of the *Inferno*, ingratitude, when it issues in the cruel betrayal of one's benefactor, is the gravest sin of all. Judas, Brutus, and Cassius stand out as the worst sinners of all time because their heartless betrayals struck most deeply at the spiritual and human communities required for salvation. For Dante, loyalty to God, the ultimate benefactor, and to the political empire of Rome, as divinely inspired and decreed, is paramount. The ingratitude of the unholy trio abused human reason and struck a harsh blow upon the divine order, earthly and transcendent alike.

Third Case Study: Epicurus

Epicureans abound in the heretical sixth circle of Hell. For Dante, they erred in not grasping sufficiently truths accessible to reason such as the existence of a providential God, personal immortality, and an afterlife that mirrors human choices and deeds on earth. Epicurus himself (341–270 BC) resides in the sixth circle, instead of being granted status in Limbo as a virtuous pagan. Not only did Epicurus inaugurate false doctrines about spiritual matters, but he also declared the pursuit of pleasure as the highest good and promoted a radical materialism, which insisted that everything was corporeal – namely composed of atoms. Accordingly, although Epicurus lived prior to the birth of Christ and could not access the theological virtues, he cannot benefit from the excuse that bad luck was the only impediment to his salvation. His spiritual heresies – concerning God, immortality, and the afterlife – denied truths that were accessible to reason and, whether intentionally or not, undermined the fundamentals of moral life, including the existence of a universal order and divine justice.

Epicurus devised a powerful strategy for living the good life. First, he identified the beliefs and actions that caused unnecessary pain and suffering for human beings: fear of the gods, anxiety about death and an afterlife, and the pursuit of self-defeating pleasures. Then he reimagined and re-created a vision of human life that eliminated the main causes of human pain

and suffering. Finally, he and his followers embodied and acted on this vision, and they found supporters attracted to the charismatic exemplars of the Epicurean lifestyle.

If fear of gods is a problem, then what is the solution? Epicurus might have simply denied that gods exist: no gods, no fear. This solution, though, would have been unpersuasive in a Hellenistic world that acknowledged and paid tribute to numerous anthropomorphic deities with carefully circumscribed but increasingly overlapping spheres of influence. Moreover, Epicurus, uninformed by the masters of suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – whom he predated by over two millennia, was convinced that the universal belief in the gods could be explained only by their objective reality. The gods, then, existed because they were believed in.

Epicurus, though, rejected the common view that celestial bodies were deities. The sun, moon, and stars are inanimate, whereas gods must be animate; celestial bodies are destructible, whereas gods are immortal; and celestial bodies are insensitive, whereas gods enjoy pleasurable lives. Anticipating an enduring theological problem, Epicurus was puzzled by the amount of evil and suffering in the world. How could such enormous, unexplainable evil persist if divine providence ruled? Epicurus concluded that divine providence was a myth, a misunderstanding of the nature of the gods. Although the gods existed, the nature of their existence differed from the prevalent understanding. Epicurus brought forth the good news that the real nature of the existence of the gods should not engender fear. The gods exist as beautiful, happy, calm, merry, and indifferent to human life. The gods, fortuitously, are Epicureans! Indeed, they serve as divine ideals for the proper human life. Accordingly, human beings should not fear the gods because the gods do not punish or reward us. Instead, we should look to the lives of the gods as exemplars toward which to strive while on earth.

Having eliminated to his satisfaction the fear of gods, Epicurus took on his next target: fear of death and of an afterlife. He observed that fear of death and anxiety over an afterlife disabled numerous human beings from full engagement with this world. Such suffering was unnecessary, and it was grounded on philosophical errors.

Epicurus rejected mind–body dualism and beliefs in personal immortality. Subscribing to the atomic theory developed by the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus (c.460–c.370 BC), Epicurus argued that the world is eternal and composed of atoms that produce everything through their infinitely variable combinations. Each human being is composed of atoms that disperse entirely after the death of the body. No afterlife waits us.

Epicurus held that death is not an evil. He argued that death is irrelevant to us. For Epicurus, all good and all evil consists in sensations: pleasure is good, pain is evil. However, death is the end of all sensations, so death is nothing to us. We have no good reason to fear what is nothing to us.

Having eliminated to their satisfaction the fear of death and of the afterlife, Epicureans took on their final target: the dissatisfaction caused by the pursuit of self-defeating pleasures. Epicurus, following the Socratic–Platonic tradition, disparaged physical and material pleasures as enslaving: the more we get the more we want, and so *ad infinitum*. We become too easily addicted to pleasures over which we have too little control, and which jeopardize a well-ordered, harmonious internal condition. Such pleasures are, at best, transitory, and they turn into more enduring suffering. Epicurus, though, goes further. He disputes several of the projects that Aristotle thought necessary for *eudaemonia* (roughly, “happiness”). Epicurus observed that politics, marriage, family relations, and the most passionate pursuits too often produced anxiety and ended badly. Avoiding pain, especially mental suffering, is even more important than pursuing pleasure. The absence of raging passion facilitates contentment. We must discard many of our desires or, at least, not act on them. The Epicurean program is explicitly for personal development, an egoistic hedonism grounded in withdrawal from public life.

“Live unknown” was the Epicurean motto – excellent advice no doubt, especially in so turbulent a period. One ought to abstain not only from politics and other ways of perhaps fatally attracting attention, but from sex also: “Sexual intercourse never did anyone any good, and a man is lucky if it has not harmed him.” It is better not to marry and have children, for families are constant sources of anxiety. You should not overeat or drink much, for fear of indigestion and hangover. Epicurus deemed a little bread and cheese to constitute a banquet [...] “plain living and moderately high thinking.”¹²

Pain and suffering, though, are sure to greet us. If we focus on past pleasures and the transient nature of our plight, we can ease our pain. Seek moderate pleasures, avoid pain, accept misfortunes with aplomb, cast aside irrational fears, and strive for serenity. The Epicurean recipe seemed accessible and sagacious to loads of ancient Greeks and Romans seeking the good life.

Dante, however, was unimpressed. He highlights the Epicureans as heretics (IX, 15). To argue, as the Epicureans did, that personal immortality was an illusion and that divine providence was superstition eviscerated

the core of Christian belief. Although Epicureanism was a pre-Christian movement, Dante was convinced that the two cornerstones of personal immortality and divine providence were discoverable by human reason alone. Thus no Epicureans are found in Limbo among the virtuous, pre-Christian pagans. Instead, Dante views the Epicureans as prime abusers of human reason, whose heretic views diverted the human community. Woe to those deemed by Dante to have sinned against the social fabric.

Dante's Moral Conception

To overestimate the importance Dante confers on religious and political communities is almost impossible. His righteous anger is unvaryingly directed at those whose thoughts and deeds upset the rightful divine and secular orders. His commitments to loyalty and to faith are unwavering. Dante's celebration of personal responsibility, the notion of desert, and the law of *contrapasso* ground his moral conclusions. His paean to human freedom rests comfortably with the existential themes to which I have alluded and which I will examine more deeply later.

Still, loose ends abound. In particular, we must now turn to the moral paradoxes and puzzles in his work, as exemplified in his treatment of Virgil and Cato. Is it fair that Virgil, that most virtuous of pagans, the paragon of human reason unguided by knowledge of the divine, should fritter away eternity in Limbo? After all, Virgil, who lived prior to the birth of Christ, should not be held morally responsible for his lack of knowledge of the divine, should he? Then we have the intriguing case of Cato. He was a pagan, he committed suicide, and he was a knee-jerk enemy of Julius Caesar. Yet Dante the author elevates him to the position of guardian of Purgatory, apparently making him eligible for eternal salvation at Final Judgment. Why should Cato receive such preferential treatment? At first blush, we might well conclude that Virgil has been unjustly relegated to Limbo, while Cato has been showered with a free pass. Can Dante's treatment of these two cases be squared with his general moral theory? It is to such questions that we shall now turn.

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4PARADOXES AND PUZZLES
VIRGIL AND CATO

The nature and the justification of Limbo pose challenges. Should innocent, unbaptized babies be consigned to a place of eternally unrequited yearning for the divine? What about the virtuous pagans who, having lived and died prior to the birth of Christ, could not have sworn allegiance to His church? Should not living morally as righteously as one could have, given a person's historical circumstances, be enough to gain entrance to Paradise? Or at least could not a different realm exist, one not pervaded by an unending, unanswered desire for the divine?



In this chapter I grapple with moral puzzles and paradoxes within Dante's moral philosophy as illustrated by his treatment of Virgil and Cato. As a pre-Christian pagan, Virgil seems totally blameless for not having worshipped Jesus and for not being baptized. Yet despite his lack of culpability, Virgil is relegated to Limbo, which, for Dante (following Bonaventure), is a region of unrequited longing for the divine. Has Dante cheated Virgil? Meanwhile, Cato seems to have three strikes against him: he is a pre-Christian pagan; he has committed suicide; and he was a strident foe of Julius Caesar, whom Dante seems otherwise to admire. Yet Cato is the gatekeeper of Purgatory and, apparently, will attain Paradise at Final Judgment. What accounts for the differences in Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato? Is Dante's treatment of the two men consistent with his general moral philosophy?



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The Paradox of Virgil

Dante the author holds Virgil in the highest esteem. Regardless of scholarly quibbling over whether, in the *Commedia*, Virgil represents the pinnacle of human reason unaided by divine grace or symbolizes something else, that Dante casts Virgil in a positive, bright light is uncontested. Yet, once Virgil's tasks as a guide are complete, he presumably returns to Limbo. In fact his brief reprieve as guide to Dante the pilgrim was brokered only through the intercession of blessed ladies. But why must Virgil return to that place of unrequited yearning? Was he morally responsible for his fate? Was he predestined for his relegation to Limbo? Why is Virgil relegated to Limbo while other virtuous pagans (e.g. Cato, Trajan, and the mythical Ripheus in the *Aeneid*) are saved? Are Virgil's sentence and the nature and purpose of Limbo simply matters too mysterious for human beings to comprehend?

Dante clearly accepts that not the whole of God's plan and design will seem coherent to human beings. He embraces the ineffability and inscrutability of the divine mind. But an appeal to mystery should be a final, not a first, resort. Accordingly, an examination of other possibilities is required.

Is Virgil morally deficient? Apparently not. Not all pagans reside in Limbo. Indeed, those that do are hailed as "virtuous." Yes, some pre-Christians were brought to Paradise during Christ's harrowing of Hell. But those rescued were righteous Old Testament stalwarts, who prefigured Christianity and thus embodied implicit faith. Perhaps Dante intends Virgil the guide to represent the limits of natural reason. If so, by lacking faith (even blamelessly) and by being without grace and unguided by scripture, Virgil cannot enter Paradise. However, his pagan virtue permits him to evade the torments of Hell and Purgatory. As for Virgil the historical figure, we can only speculate (although Christian doctrine suggests that, yes, he dwells in Limbo).

However, this account is strikingly inadequate. Neither as a guide nor as a historical figure is Virgil responsible for the period in which he lived, for the impossibility of connecting to Christ, or for his ignorance of the gift of grace. The question remains: Why would an exemplar of pagan virtue and reason, who is not responsible for his lack of faith and of other purifying and perfecting spiritual elements, be consigned to Limbo? Natural reason may well be only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for salvation. But when the other necessary conditions are unavailable to a soul strictly because of an accident of birth, the case for divine unfairness arises. Moreover,

remember that Limbo is not a place of joy. The everlasting, unrequited yearning for connection to God seems a grievous price to pay for bad luck.

We must assume that Virgil, as a virtuous pagan, possesses the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. However, he must lack one or more of the theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity. As some virtuous pagans are saved, we must conclude that Virgil was either predestined for Limbo or that Virgil never received the gift of grace, which might have perfected his soul. Both alternatives are unsettling. If the fate of some (all?) souls is predestined, to what do free will, moral desert, personal responsibility, and divine justice amount? If some souls receive the gift of grace while others do not, is not divine justice replaced by the randomness of a divine lottery?

Perhaps Virgil could be saved by the prayers of the living. At several junctures in Purgatory we hear penitents implore Dante the pilgrim to pray for them or to petition their descendants to pray for them. Most strikingly, in Ante-Purgatory several sinners beg Dante to ask their living descendants to pray for them. Presumably prayers from the living faithful can shorten the waiting period of those about to enter Purgatory proper. Moreover, other sinners in Purgatory beg Dante to remember or to pray for them. Presumably these penitents believe that Dante's prayers might soften the retributive dimension of their punishments.

But does the same hold for Limbo? Probably not. Prayers should be ineffective when intended to aid residents of Hell and Limbo, which represent fixed states. Perhaps this identifies Virgil as a despairing soul and thus makes him responsible for his continued stay in Limbo. Still, it would not account for Virgil's original sentence; nor is it realistic to think that a throng of faithful human beings living in the early 1300s would pray for a person – however noteworthy – who died almost thirteen centuries earlier. Surely, their list of deserving dead souls would be more up-to-date. Also, allowing the prayers of the living to redeem the depravity of the deceased who reside in Purgatory deepens the impression of a divine lottery instead of effacing it. Whether a dead penitent has been survived by faithful and praying relatives and friends is more a matter of luck and popularity than the fruit of moral desert.

Another possibility is that Virgil, although a virtuous pagan, was still morally flawed. Perhaps he was offered the gift of grace, but his soul was unreceptive. This account is pure speculation and must include a reason why so virtuous a pagan would refuse such an overwhelmingly transformative gift. Only a stone-cold fool or a thoroughly corrupt soul would waive a benefit that promised spiritual perfection. As the exemplar of human reason, Virgil is far from being a fool. As a virtuous pagan,

Virgil may have shortcomings, but he is far from deeply evil. Accordingly, this account seems ad hoc and unpersuasive.

Perhaps the virtuous pagans declined God's gift of saving or elevating grace. Given their moral natures and behavior, these pagans accepted healing grace. But the pagan sin, which consigns its perpetrators to Limbo, may well have been a refusal of God's offer of saving grace (I 1 124–126; IV 37–39). If so, how is God's justice consistent with relegating the entire pagan community to everlasting, unrequited yearning for the Divine? If the rejoinder is that every pagan refused elevating grace, a mystery follows: How, when, and where was such an offer extended to every pagan? Aquinas believed that God offered a special explicit revelation to only *some* pagans, but that *all* pagans potentially could embrace implicit faith that was animated by a general extra-Christian revelation. Quite reasonably, Aquinas assumes that condemning sinners for a lack of saving grace without giving them an opportunity to acquire it would be unjust. Where Dante the author stands on this matter is less clear.

Within the other regions of the afterlife, sinners continue the deeds and dispositions they had chosen while living, or they work on correcting those activities and attitudes. But denizens of Limbo, such as Virgil, are in a different position. Could Virgil have truly conjured the possibilities of paradise through faith during his own time? Can he be faulted for not anticipating the birth of Jesus? Surely not. One of the main purposes for which Christ was born was to vivify the possibilities of robust faith, to reveal the true path to salvation. Faith does not emerge from a vacuum – there is no Big Bang theory of faith. Faith becomes a real possibility only after revelation. (Of course, a few Old Testament icons prefigured faith on account of of religious experiences – another type of revelation.)

Deepening the problem, Dante wrote to Cangrande della Scala that “the subject [of the *Commedia*] is man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.”¹ That moral desert, retributive and redemptive punishment, and justice are at the heart of the *Commedia* is beyond dispute. Either Virgil has some personal shortcoming that precludes his salvation or he is an exception to the law of *contrapasso*. But seemingly Virgil is not morally culpable for his lack of the theological virtue of faith. He cannot accurately be faulted for not having anticipated divine revelation. Moreover, he bears no personal responsibility for original sin. Nor is it clear that Virgil is an exception to the divine order – numerous virtuous pagans share Limbo.

The most reasonable, albeit disturbing, conclusion is that Virgil is not a *unique* exception to the law of *contrapasso*. Numerous virtuous pagans,

innocent babies, and others inhabit Limbo not because of personal shortcomings or just retribution, but simply because they were predestined for that region; or were never offered the gift of grace; or were offered but blamelessly or unwittingly declined grace. In other words, Virgil's fate flows simply from bad luck or blameless ignorance. We cannot fault Virgil for nurturing a soul unreceptive to divine grace. After all, to expect souls prior to revelation to anticipate the possibility of salvation through grace is unreasonable. Nor can Virgil transcend divine predestination (Par. XX, 130–135). In either case, Virgil's destiny is not mainly under his control. The divine lottery seems to trump individual free will and moral desert.

However, this account is only a slightly more substantial version of the thesis of the ineffability and inscrutability of the divine mind. That is, no satisfactory explanation is available as to whom God predestines to what region and for what reasons, if any. The image reduces to a divine lottery and conjures visions of a carnival barker spinning a wheel of fortune.

Suppose, though, that God offers grace to *everyone*, but only certain souls are in a state receptive enough to receive the gift. This alternative removes the randomness of salvation through grace, softens the notion of predestination, and restores the primacy of moral desert. But we return to an earlier problem: If God offered grace to Virgil (and all others), why did the great Roman poet refuse it? Surely he did not do it out of dim-wittedness. Did Virgil have a specific personal shortcoming that made his soul ill-fitted to receive God's overture? This is not likely. After all, Virgil is an exemplar of the intellectual and moral virtues.

Christine O'Connell Baur offers a way out of the morass. She argues that we should distinguish God's offer of a gift from his gift as such. To amount to a bona fide offer, an overture must be perceived as an offer by the potential recipient. In this case, the capability to receive grace is both under the individual's control (at least to some extent) and necessary for the gift to occur.

The ability to receive sanctifying grace [whereby one is united to God and enters paradise] depends upon the process of justification, which, in turn, begins with the reception of prevenient grace [whereby one turns toward righteousness and heals the soul] [...] [which] depends upon God's turning the will, but God does not force anyone's will to turn [...] free will is not completely self-sufficient, but neither are its movements beyond its own control [...] All good habits are the result of the intervention of outside "help," combined with the individual's desire (which itself is partly the result of outside "help") to be something that he is not yet.²

Just as a learner's receptivity to education is required for a successful teacher–student relationship, a soul's receptivity to sanctifying grace is required for a person even to recognize God's overture as an offer of that gift. A person is at least somewhat culpable for the state of his or her soul and its capability to recognize the offer of sanctifying grace. The suggestion is that Virgil did not explicitly reject the offer of grace – he would have been too savvy for such a clumsy refusal. Instead, Virgil's soul was not in a morally refined state sufficient for recognizing that God had offered grace. Virgil's soul was not open to the overture of grace: "The blessed know and love God [...] to the extent that God reveals Himself to them. But God revealed to them according to their own ability and their own willingness to behold Him."³

Given his robust connection to the intellectual and moral virtues, to conclude that Virgil received prevenient grace is reasonable. But, if we are firmly committed to the primacy of divine justice and to the law of *contrapasso*, we must also conclude that (a) God offers the gift of sanctifying grace to everyone, or at least to those who accepted prevenient grace; (b) but not everyone accepts the gift of sanctifying grace, or even recognizes God's overture as an offer of a gift; (c) the failure of recognition stems from the state of the potential recipient's soul; (d) the potential recipient is at least partially responsible for that failure; and (e) Virgil falls into precisely this category. Accordingly, his sentence in Limbo reaffirms moral desert, personal responsibility, and cosmic justice. In effect, Virgil has insufficiently created himself and his environment by failing to order fully his power of intellectual desire and will.⁴ As with all other souls in the afterlife, his punishment in Limbo is connected to his earthly activities: his own deeds make Limbo what it is.

Baur creates a slightly more nuanced version of the "Virgil had shortcomings" thesis. But is her view persuasive enough to restore the luster of divine justice and the law of *contrapasso*? Obviously, we have no way of knowing whether the historical Virgil was offered a pre-Incarnation vision or revelation of Christ. If that offer was made and Virgil did not recognize it as such because of a deficiency in his soul – a failure to be receptive enough to transcend natural reason and to embrace the supernatural – for which he was morally responsible, then divine justice is restored. But if he did not receive that offer or did not recognize it as such because God turned Virgil's will insufficiently, or because he was excusably ignorant of the glories of revelation, then we must conclude that the ineffability/inscrutability thesis and the divine mystery persist. Moreover, even if Virgil was offered a pre-Incarnation vision or revelation of Christ, *to what*

degree is he morally culpable for not recognizing the offer of sanctifying grace? Is the punishment of everlasting unrequited longing for God *proportionate* to the severity of Virgil's alleged moral shortcoming? Given the extent to which God's outside "help" influences human behavior patterns and dispositions, is the version of Virgil under consideration morally deficient *enough* to have deserved the sentence that he is assigned in Limbo?

Complicating matters are certain verses in Virgil's *Eclogue iv*, which were taken by scholars in the Middle Ages as a prophesy of Christ's birth: "The great line of the centuries is born anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new progeny descends from high heaven" (lines 5–7). The historical Virgil may have been identifying a son of Caesar Augustus or Mark Antony, or a prominent consul of his day. But his allusion to the dawn of a special period and a great "redeemer" can be taken, as it may well have been by Dante the author, as a prefigurement of the birth of Jesus and rise of Christianity. Perhaps Virgil, who was not aware of what he was prophesying, was used by God to portend what Virgil himself could not accept: the coming of Christ. Indeed, Dante has Statius mention these verses and attest, contrary to historical fact, that reading Virgil led him to convert to Christianity (P XXII, 65–73). In that same canto, Dante indicates that Virgil's failing was a lack of faith (P XXII, 60). Could Dante be signaling that God did offer Virgil a revelatory vision that should have led him to faith – after all, Virgil's words nurtured Statius's mythical religious conversion – but that Virgil was insufficiently attentive or inadequately prepared to recognize God's offer of sanctifying grace? Or, in historical terms, was Virgil merely celebrating in these verses what he hoped would be a glorious age of Roman secular rule?

In any event, Virgil, unlike the Old Testament religious icons, did not make an existential leap of faith and did not develop a personal relationship with God. The text of the *Commedia* suggests that he could have done so: he lacked faith where the possibility was available. The robust faith of the Old Testament patriarchs was not in Jesus Christ as such, but in the revealed promises of God. The story of Abraham and Isaac stands as an exemplar of a human being's personal commitment to and relationship with the Almighty. Dante may assume in the *Commedia* that Virgil, like the Old Testament patriarchs, was offered the gift of sanctifying grace but could not make the existential leap of faith required for personal salvation. (Obviously we have no way of knowing whether the historical Virgil was privy to religious experiences similar to those that vivified the Old Testament

figures. Nor do we know whether the historical Virgil endures in Limbo, or whether an afterlife even exists.)

Dante has Virgil caution that it is “madness to hope that human minds can ever understand the Infinite [...] Be satisfied with *quia* [the fact seen in its effects] unexplained” (P III, 33–48). Virgil represents not only the pinnacle, but the limitations and insufficiency of human reason. The unredeemed character of Virgil, then, cautions living readers that a leap of faith that outstrips the calculations of reason is required for personal salvation. Good deeds, keen intellect, and a pure heart are insufficient. Although we must view Virgil’s punishment as disproportionate when taken literally, for Dante the allegorical meaning is paramount, and perhaps Virgil bears enough moral responsibility for his lack of faith to have forged his own Limbo.

Summary of the Paradox of Virgil

The paradox of Virgil flows from the following convictions, creeds, principles, and inferences, many of which coalesce uneasily.

The nature of Limbo

- 1 Limbo is the place where those who are neither saved nor condemned reside.
- 2 The nature of Limbo is either that (a) the souls residing there are *not conscious* of lacking the beatific vision and live contentedly in a natural order (the view of St. Thomas Aquinas), or that (b) these souls are *aware* of the beatific vision and endlessly yearn without hope to attain it (the view of St. Bonaventure and Dante, I IV, 30; I IV, 42; P VII, 28–30). Dante also suggests that souls in Limbo receive a type of divine blessing for which they are grateful (I IV, 78). They are also honored by the vestiges of the moral virtues they acquired on earth (I IV, 67–78). But is their afterlife nothing but knowingly hopeless yearning for the beatific vision? Do they represent nothing more than morally good, but incomplete, human nature?
- 3 After He died, Christ descended into Limbo and swept pious Old Testament icons into Paradise (“the Harrowing of Hell”) (Ephesians 4: 8–10; Peter 3: 19–20; I IV, 52–63).

4 Some souls in Limbo, the virtuous pagans who lived prior to the birth of Christ, will remain there forever. They lacked faith and the sacrament of baptism but lived virtuously, in accord with the highest standards of human reason. However, Dante refers to the “stench of the pagan creed” (Par. XX, 125) and to “false and lying” pagan gods (I I, 72).

5 Some souls in Limbo, human beings who died in infancy and without baptism or were mentally incapable of moral agency, will remain there forever.

6 Limbo, then, contains those who are personally innocent of sin.

Grace, faith, and salvation

7 Salvation is impossible for human beings without supernatural assistance, namely grace.

8 God wills the salvation of all human beings (Timothy 1: 2–4; Romans 1: 9–11; 8: 32).

9 *Healing* grace strengthens the will against evil and remedies the moral deficiencies of original sin. *Healing* grace is necessary in order to avoid mortal sins that damn the soul. *Saving* grace is the illumination of the intellect, and it is also necessary in order to attain Paradise. Faith, baptism, and living a virtuous life are also necessary for attaining Paradise.

10 From (8) and (9) it follows that God must offer healing and saving grace to *all* human beings (even those virtuous pagans who predated the birth of Christ?).

11 Mere absence of faith, under conditions where faith was impossible due to accident of birth, is a flimsy, unjust ground upon which to relegate souls to Limbo. As Dante says, where there is no act of free will there is neither merit nor culpability (P XVIII, 64–66).

12 The concept of *implicit faith* claims that certain pre-Christian Jewish paragons implicitly believed in Christ because of their allegiance to God’s first stage of self-revelation. Whether Dante attributes implicit faith or explicit faith to these paragons is unclear (I IV, 52–63). But the

Commedia does not seemingly apply this notion of implicit faith to virtuous pre-Christian pagans.

13 That pre-Christian pagans were completely denied access to saving grace is seemingly inconsistent with (7), (8), (9), and (11).

Virgil and pre-Christian pagans

14 Virgil, whom Dante idolizes, confesses that he rebelled against God's law and that the virtuous pagans did not adore God rightly (I IV, 37–39; I I, 121–126; P VII, 2–27), although at times he claims to have lost Paradise only because of lack of faith (P VII, 7–8). Was Virgil too proud to believe? Did he refuse God's offer of grace in some way?

15 The pre-Christian pagans in the *Commedia* are located either in Limbo, if they were virtuous according to human reason, or in Hell. Those in Hell did not live a virtuous life in accord with human reason and natural law. The assumption is that even pre-Christian pagans could have been morally virtuous through proper application of their reason.

16 The *Commedia* admits three exceptions to (15):

- a Cato the Stoic, the guardian of Purgatory, whose faith or lack of faith goes unexplored;
- b Emperor Trajan, a case of miraculously nurtured explicit faith, as he was dead but brought back by the prayers of St. Gregory the Great. He then expressed his faith in Christ, died again, and ascended to Paradise (Par. XX, 106–117); and
- c Ripheus the Trojan, a minor character in Virgil's *Aeneid*, of whom Dante imagines that he was granted, by special grace, a prophetic vision of Christ that kindled his faith (Par. XX, 67–72, 118–129).

Statius might be viewed as a fourth candidate for salvation. But here Dante conjures the fiction that Statius did convert to Christianity and was baptized, having been inspired by Virgil's fourth *Eclogue*. Thus, Statius, on Dante's fictionalized account, bore explicit faith and was not merely a "virtuous pagan" at all.

17 Trajan, Ripheus (and Cato?) were afforded special experiences, which were denied to the masses of virtuous pagans. Why? Energized by reports of Trajan's striking humility when he paused in battle and aided a grieving widow, St. Gregory the Great prays for Trajan, whose soul is miraculously returned to life, so that he might repent and gain eternal salvation (P X, 73–93). The fictional Ripheus was so inclined toward righteousness that Dante imagines that God offered sufficient grace for Ripheus to have opened his heart to redemption and renounced paganism thereafter. For Ripheus, the theological virtues seemed to replace the formal sacrament of Baptism. Why did not Dante extend this principle to other “virtuous pagans”?

18 If God bestowed upon pre-Christian pagans the opportunity for grace, then perhaps Virgil's “act of rebellion” and failure to worship God properly involved an improper attitude toward God. Perhaps Virgil did not “submit” to God (Romans 1: 7, 25). Perhaps Virgil (and the other virtuous pagans in Limbo) implicitly rejected God's saving grace by having an improper attitude – an unsubmitive heart, or a refusal to prepare for saving grace, or false worship of pagan deities, or failure to worship in accord with Jewish revelation? – toward God.

19 To support (18): St. Paul and St. Thomas Aquinas alleged that God had given pre-Christian pagans some awareness that was sufficient to turn them toward God – some incipient knowledge of Himself (Romans 1: 18–23).

20 Dante seems at times to chalk up the problem of reconciling the plight of virtuous pagans to divine mystery (Par. XIX, 40–69, 70–81, 82–90; XX, 130–132).

Tentative summary

21 Problems with (18):

- a If all pre-Christian pagans had an opportunity to receive saving grace, why were no such folks, even the morally virtuous, saved? Did they *all* react like Virgil? If so, then how vibrant was God's offer of saving grace to begin with? Did the pre-Christian pagans really get a fair chance at Paradise?

b Why was it necessary to save Trajan and Ripheus (and Cato?) *miraculously*? To illustrate the power of the prayers of pious living people (in Trajan's case)? To illustrate predestination or special intervention (in Ripheus's case)? Why hadn't Trajan and Ripheus accepted God's presumed offer of saving grace in the first place, in which case no miracle would have been required?

22 If Limbo is a place of unrequited yearning without hope, should not its inhabitants have been given a fair shot at salvation? That is, Dante's description, following St. Bonaventure, of Limbo adds ballast to the view that pre-Christian pagans should have been afforded a full opportunity to attain Paradise, given they are now relegated to eternal frustration. At least under St. Thomas Aquinas's rendering of Limbo, the residents would suffer neither torment nor frustration, as they would remain unaware of the glory of the beatific vision. If pre-Christian pagans did not have full opportunity for salvation, Aquinas's version of Limbo seems more just than the Bonaventure/Dante version.

Accordingly, we are left with two possibilities. First, perhaps Virgil bore enough responsibility for the condition of his soul and its lack of preparation to receive God's offer of saving grace to justify his everlasting consignment to Limbo. This conclusion is supported by (10), (14), (18), and (19). In that vein, James Wetzel comments:

Virgil sins not because he has come to the wrong view of God, but because his confidence in his own rectitude has left him without a God to seek. Those who, like Virgil, suppose that being mistaken [in the proper way to worship because of circumstances of birth] is their only fault are bound to make their own integrity their highest good. They will tend to surround themselves with those who confirm their rectitude and exclude the rest. The first circle [Limbo] of hell enshrines a partisan wisdom and rejects humility as weakness.⁵

Second, perhaps the simplest answer is that Dante intentionally and knowingly makes it *impossible* to reconcile the fate of the virtuous pagans with the other propositions of justice, salvation, grace, and faith, as a way to illustrate his commitment to (20). Perhaps (21) and (22) underscore Dante's conviction that ultimately a systematic reconciliation of this paradox would jeopardize the ineffability, mystery, and glory of the divine.

The Strange Case of Cato

At first blush, Cato is an unlikely choice as the guardian of Purgatory. He has at least three strikes against him: Cato was a pagan; he committed suicide; and he was a rabid, strident, and often irrational enemy of Caesar. As a pagan, Cato should be expected to be found in Limbo. As a perpetrator of suicide, Cato might well have been sentenced to the seventh circle, second ring of Hell. And, as he is an effective, uncompromising enemy of Caesar, the pit of Hell beckons to him.

We need only recall where Dante cast the two main assassins of Caesar – Brutus and Cassius: in the lowest region of the ninth circle of Hell, in the mouth of Satan. Seemingly Dante was thoroughly committed to Julius Caesar as the agent of a divinely ordained Roman Empire that might inaugurate the world peace Dante heralded in his *De monarchia*. Fearing that Caesar was the strongest foe of the Roman republic and being completely convinced of his imperial ambitions, Cato resisted Caesar with every fiber of his being. When Caesar's victory in the Roman civil war was assured, Cato killed himself rather than live under the sort of empire to which Dante appears to have aspired centuries later.

Dante's understanding of God's providential governance represented it a dual monarchy: a universal emperor, to tend to temporal human happiness, and a universal pope, to tend to eternal human spiritual happiness. Each vicar must be supreme in his own sphere of influence. Dante accepts that the Jews were God's "chosen people" in matters spiritual, but adds that the Romans, as founders of the great political empire, were God's chosen people in matters political. God selected each set of people to discharge their respective duties in His dual monarchy. For Dante, the fact that the incarnation of Christ and the establishment of the Roman Empire occurred at roughly the same time was not merely a coincidence. Caesar was the inaugural figure in the Roman Empire.

Yet, instead of consigning him to an ignoble rung of Hell or to the everlasting unrequited longing of Limbo, Dante honors Cato as the steward of Purgatory; as a soul who does not require the prayers of the living for purification; and as someone liberated from his relationship with Marcia, his earthly wife, which suggests the separation of the blessed from the condemned (P 1, 78–79, 85–90; I IV, 128). Indeed, Cato presumably will ascend to Paradise once his time as overseer of Purgatory has passed, no later than the Final Judgment (I I, 73–75). Even while he is in Purgatory,

Cato's face is illuminated by four stars signifying the cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice (I, I, 37–39).

“The Perfect Stoic”

Marcus Porcius Cato Salonianus the Younger – Cato the Stoic (95–46 BC) – was a hard man. To his enemies, he was a rigid, merciless, sanctimonious, supercilious fanatic. To his compatriots, he was a principled, incorruptible, fearless, glistening moral paragon. Both foes and friends alike understood that Marcus Porcius Cato inhabited a strictly black-and-white world. Cato greeted ambiguity less warmly than a broncobuster welcomes hemorrhoids. Persuading Cato to compromise was more difficult than convincing a penguin to play hopscotch.

Orphaned soon after his birth, Cato was raised by a maternal uncle. Far from being mercurial, Cato learned slowly but surely. Cicero attributed the following adages to Zeno of Citium, founder of Stoicism⁶:

- The sage is never influenced by favor, and never forgives someone who has done wrong.
- No one feels pity unless he is a fool or idiot.
- A true man is never prevailed upon or appeased.
- Only the sage is (internally) attractive, wealthy, and regal, regardless of external appearances.
- All misdeeds are equal: every transgression is an unspeakable crime.
- The sage never supposes anything, never regrets anything, is never mistaken, and never changes his mind.

Cato soon discovered that this rigid version of Stoicism fitted his temperament perfectly: austere, emotionally indifferent, tough-minded, drawn to rule-governed behavior, bearing a low tolerance of ambiguity ... the boy was born a Stoic. Imagine his surprise that a distinguished philosophy had already been devised to accommodate his personality! Cato luxuriated in treating both high success and abject failure as frauds. And here was a philosophy that took Cato's natural instincts as doctrine!

After a brief military stint during which he earned a high reputation for enduring hardships willingly, he entered politics. Cato eventually became a senator and aligned himself with the *optimates*. His apparent incorruptibility and complete indifference to the seductions that tempted most

people disconcerted powerful military figures such as Pompey and Caesar. Cato's relentless appeals to justice – without asking for exceptions or special favors – won him almost boundless admiration. Cato followed one rule above all others: if Caesar was in favor of something, then Cato must oppose it. Cato was the only Roman who unequivocally and consistently foresaw Caesar as a threat to the republic. Cicero had the same instincts, but he was always susceptible to Caesar's personal charm. Caesar knew which buttons to push if he wanted to ingratiate himself with Cicero. He discussed literature with him, indulged Cicero's vanity, and conjured images of enduring glory. Cato had no buttons to push. Anyone who tried to curry his favor was brusquely rejected. As always, he drew a bright line in the dirt of Rome: Caesar was the force of darkness; he was Cato's enemy then, in the future, and forever.⁷

Throughout his public life Cato was both ridiculed and admired. He was ridiculed for his fanaticism, obstinacy, and self-righteousness; admired for his refusal to succumb to the temptations and allures that drew other Romans. In a world where even the most talented men had a price – power, money, sex, prestige – Cato's integrity was not for sale. When civil war broke out in 49 BC, Cato joined Pompey's forces. After all, the alternative was Caesar.

Cato assumed military command in Sicily, but did not distinguish himself. After Caesar routed Pompey's forces at Pharsalus, Cato escaped to Africa, where he joined Metellus Scipio (100–46 BC), father-in-law to Pompey. The troops asked Cato to lead them, but he unwisely declined, invoking Scipio's superior standing as an ex-consul. Cato assumed command of Utica. Scipio was convinced that the Uticans were treacherous and seditious; he advised Cato to slay them. Cato refused and advised Scipio to avoid battle with Caesar. Scipio refused and Caesar devastated his forces at Thapsus. In contrast to his usual policy of clemency to the defeated, Caesar slaughtered Scipio's troops upon their surrender. The Uticans remained true to Cato.

When others volunteered to petition Caesar for clemency on Cato's behalf, the Stoic declined. No retreat, no surrender. Could anyone genuinely suspect that Marcus Porcius Cato would yield to Caesar's mercy? Could anyone even imagine that Cato would repudiate his entire life history by asking or accepting a favor from Gaius Julius Caesar? A favor that would obligate him throughout his life to the man he most despised? That would compel him to recognize that he owed his life to the largesse of Caesar? To accept an act of mercy that would forever elevate Caesar and demean Cato?

Instead, Cato dined with magistrates of Utica, his son, and friends. They ate and drank wine and discussed passionately a critical Stoic paradox: Is it true that only the virtuous are free, and all the wicked people are slaves? Philosophy would prove crucial even at the end. One of his friends answered negatively. Cato, with an inappropriate vehemence, argued with stentorian bravado that the answer was “yes.” His guests understood the message: Cato was going to take his own life as his final act of liberation. Everyone embraced, more warmly and tenderly than usual, and took their leave.

Cato curled up with his copy of Plato’s *Phaedo*, a spectacularly evocative depiction of Socrates’s last moments prior to drinking the hemlock that killed him. The topic of that dialogue was the immortality of the soul, an especially relevant subject for a man of Cato’s disposition. After perusing a good portion of the book, Cato reached for his sword. No luck. His son had removed it from the room. Cato bellowed for his servants and demanded his weapon. As he waited for their return, he kept reading. Cato roared, again, for his servants. He demanded his sword, angrily smacked one of his servants in the mouth, and bemoaned the lack of cooperation from those closest to him. His son and his friends entered. High drama followed. Finally, a young boy returned the sword to Cato.

A physician dressed the hand that had struck the servant. Conversations ensued. Finally, once he was alone, Cato stabbed himself in the chest or abdomen, but not fatally. His bandaged hand limited the power of his trust. Cato fell off his bed, knocked down an abacus, and inadvertently alerted the others. They scrambled into his room. He was awash in his own blood, with most of his intestines outside his body. The physician hurried to replace the organs and stitch the wound. However, Cato pushed away the physician, tore open the wound, and ripped out his intestines. The man Cicero had called “the perfect Stoic” died immediately. Marcus Porcius Cato was a hard man straight to the end.

Cato understood keenly that victory was possible in martyrdom. He could more effectively oppose Caesar as a dead symbol than as a compromised stooge, beholden to the tyrant for his life. Nor could Cato live free under a tyranny that would eviscerate the political traditions of the Roman republic. Always opposed to luxury, avarice, mercy, pity, and external honors in life, Cato would exemplify in death the virtuous man who applied philosophical principles and patriotic zeal to the perils of tyranny. In one stroke, Cato’s suicide underscored his own Stoic freedom; spurned Caesar’s tyranny; indicted the moral weakness of the likes of Cicero, Brutus, and Cassius, who had lapped up Caesar’s mercy; and sealed Cato’s case as

a moral exemplar for future generations. Good career move, that! An impliable Roman competitor right to the end, Cato won his final victory with his last gasp.

Cato's victory in martyrdom trumped all of his numerous shortcomings. His death symbolized the final breath of republican liberty; it demonstrated the insoluble marriage of philosophical principle to iron will; it manifested Cato's willingness to die rather than bend his knee to Caesar's beneficence; and it underscored the Stoic's refusal to accept tyranny over death. A free man perishes but once, Cato taught, and an honorable death amplifies the value of the life that it terminates.

In sum, Cato came to be a symbol for "preserving republican virtue, tradition, and precedent; for respecting established institutions and the Senate in particular; and for his unwavering adherence to principle."⁸ For better or worse, Marcus Porcius Cato, "the perfect Stoic," lived up to his philosophical principles as well as any person in history.

Dante's Decision

Dante celebrated Cato, both in his *Convivio* and in his *De monarchia*, as a champion of liberty, as the earthly man most worthy of signifying God, and as a principled person who chose death over dishonor.⁹ Dante suggests that Cato combines the most glorious traits of a Roman republican hero and of an Old Testament patriarch. Along with numerous Old Testament paragons, Cato was apparently freed from Limbo when Christ descended during the harrowing of Hell (I IV, 52–61). We might merely dismiss Dante's decision to elevate Cato as part of the mystery of the *Commedia*. After all, the capability of human beings to unravel the judgments of the divine mind will often be inadequate. As always, however, that conclusion should be final, not a starting point.

A possible alternative explanation can be crafted. First, Dante does not accept Cato's suicide at face value. When Cato is considered only as a perpetrator of suicide, Dante's treatment of him is unique. While others who took their own lives are relegated to the seventh circle of Hell (I XIII, 103–108) or, in the case of Seneca, to Limbo (I IV, 141), Dante holds out the promise that Cato will attain Paradise at the Final Judgment (P I, 73–75). Instead of taking Cato's suicide as exemplifying the sin of despair, Dante views it as secular martyrdom: if freedom is impossible, death, even by suicide, can be honorable. (Recall that Seneca, another political suicide,

is relegated to Limbo, not to the seventh circle of Hell.) The pagan moral code of Stoicism permitted suicide under appropriate circumstances. Dante judges Cato by the Stoic moral law Cato embraced. Moreover, Cato's death (much like Socrates's death) was taken as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ. Cato's highest pagan value, political freedom, represents the quest for religious freedom from evil desires, the triumph of will over inclination, the downplaying of the material for the spiritual. Historically, Roman authors had praised Cato for his virtue and resolution in the face of oppression. Dante embraces that legacy. For him, Roman political dominion was justified by Roman civic virtue. Cato's life glistens as a secular corollary to the religious quest for salvation. In a pagan context, as a virtuous Roman martyr, Cato earned his position as the stern, righteous steward of spiritual purification in Purgatory. From Dante's perspective – Cato's own acceptable pre-Christian morality, Cato's motive for committing suicide, and his self-sacrifice in service to the Roman republic – Cato's suicide counts in favor of his character, not as a damnable sin as such.

Second, for Dante, even Cato's paganism is ambiguous. If no earthly man is more worthy of signifying Christ than Cato and if Cato, like the Old Testament patriarchs, was rescued by Christ during the harrowing of Hell (which was truly the harrowing of Limbo), then Cato might well have shared the implicit faith embodied by certain Old Testament heroes. As he underscores Cato's lack of explicit faith, Dante assigns Cato only the cardinal, not the theological, virtues. But his allusions to Cato in his other works suggest that Dante so admired Cato that he may have granted him, unlike Virgil, implicit faith.

Third, Cato's relationship to Caesar was blazingly different from the relationships that Brutus and Cassius forged with Caesar. Judecca, the lowest rung of the ninth circle of Hell, admits traitors to lords and benefactors. Caesar offered, and Brutus and Cassius accepted, stunning benefits at times when Caesar could have crushed them both. During the Roman civil war Brutus sided with Pompey. At the Battle of Pharsalus the victorious Caesar ordered his men not to harm Brutus, but to take him prisoner. After routing Pompey, Caesar was thrilled to accept Brutus's plea for mercy. Moreover, Brutus grew himself further into Caesar's warm graces. Caesar appointed him governor of Cisalpine Gaul in 46 BC, even though Brutus had held no political office above that of quaestor. Then he appointed him as senior praetor in 44 BC. Caesar even alluded to the possibility that Brutus might one day succeed him. After Pompey's defeat and his own capture by Caesar, Cassius accepted Caesar's clemency.

He served as Caesar's legate in Egypt. Later on, Caesar appointed him a praetor in 44 BC. Accordingly, from Dante's vantage point, Brutus and Cassius were treacherous and unworthy by leading a conspiracy against their benefactor.

For his part, Cato was always straightforward with Caesar: what Caesar favored, Cato strenuously opposed; what Caesar opposed, Cato championed. Whereas Brutus and Cassius accepted Caesar's benefits when doing so amplified their self-interests, Cato refused Caesar's overtures of clemency. Cato was not even tempted. Accordingly, no one can plausibly accuse Cato of treachery or betrayal.

However, this evidence exonerates Cato only from a sentence of eternal damnation in the ninth circle of Hell; it does not explain why truculent opposition to Caesar should not by itself disqualify Cato from his honorific treatment in the *Commedia*. After all, according to Dante's political convictions, divine providence underwrote the Roman Empire and vindicated Caesar's military and political excesses. The Roman Empire augured an era of universal peace and human happiness. As an inflexible opponent of this divinely inspired secular institution, should not Cato be justifiably punished in the afterlife?

As a keen student of history and philosophy, Dante was intoxicated by the glorious tradition of the Roman republic. Cato brightly symbolized the civic virtue of that regime. Dante's political convictions admit tensions: he is not merely a champion of the Roman Empire, but he also deeply appreciates the civic virtue and the value of the common good, which flourished in the grandest days of the Roman republic. In fact the development of a robust republic may well have been a prerequisite, or a necessary historical stage toward the Roman Empire. Another tension: Dante venerates the personal motives of Cato while understanding that the republic was, at best, only a temporary stage of political development; Dante is also adverse to many of Caesar's personal motives, even though he celebrates the inauguration of the divinely inspired Roman Empire (P XXVI, 76–81; P IX, 136–138; Par. XI, 64–69). Accordingly, Dante will not condemn a person solely on the basis of that person's opposition to Caesar. The poet's political views and assessments of historical figures are more subtle than they first appear.

Finally, who could better guard the integrity of Purgatory than Cato the Stoic? Incorruptible (at least by reputation), no-nonsense, unsentimental, immune to the seductions of flattery – Cato embodies the ultimate, principled overseer of justice, whose zeal is not tempered by compassion.

For Dante, weaned as he was on the legends of the Roman republic, Cato exemplifies reason impartially applied and justice unsparingly administered.

Dante and Conflict

The moral paradoxes and puzzles surrounding Dante's treatment of Virgil and Cato cannot be completely dissolved. Plausible explanations can be advanced, especially in the case of Cato, but elements of mystery persist. I submit that this is intentional. Dante cannot presume to capture all the conclusions and the full reasoning of the divine mind and method. He is dust; and to dust shall he return. Accordingly, readers should not expect a tightly knit, fully coherent rendering of the moral theory that grounds the *Commedia*. For Dante, such a picture would presume too much and be motivated by philosophical arrogance.

The sin of arrogance, or exaggerated pride, is one of the seven deadly sins. These vices give rise to all evil; they reveal and further corrupt human character. We cannot fully understand Dante's existential moral lessons without first analyzing his view of the seven deadly sins. To that task we shall now turn.

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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

In this chapter, I describe and analyze Dante's treatment of the Seven Deadly Sins (aka seven capital sins or seven capital vices): Pride (Arrogance), Envy, Avarice, Wrath, Lust, Gluttony, and Sloth. I connect Dante's treatment of these "final causes" of evil deeds with his general moral philosophy. This connection paves the way for understanding Dante's existential moral lessons.

Historical Background

The seven deadly sins lack unambiguous biblical foundations (see Proverbs 1: 16–19, 12: 16–27, 15: 18–19, 25; Galatians 5: 19–21). Nevertheless, their history is cross-cultural and lengthy.¹ Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) and John Cassian of Marseilles (360–435), contemporaries of St. Augustine (354–430), compiled the earliest catalogue of the capital sins. Evagrius gathered a group of monks in Egypt who journeyed to a desert to distance themselves from earthly distractions and to focus more keenly on the divine. These "desert fathers" identified eight demons or sins that jeopardized the monastic community: gluttony, avarice, fornication/lust, anger, sorrow/despair, pride, vainglory (unjustified boasting), and sloth. Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great, 540–604) provided the first seven-fold division of the capital sins. Gregory combined sorrow/despair with sloth, included vainglory with pride, removed fornication, and added envy and luxury to the list. He made clear that the seven dispositions were deadly because they generated serious sins and injuries; they served as necessary

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and final causes of the worst human excesses. Gregory broadened the application of the seven capital sins from their monastic origins to general theological status.

Over time, lust was substituted for luxury. Much later, the greatest Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) distinguished the five spiritual capital sins – pride, wrath, envy, greed, and sloth – from the two carnal capital sins – lust and gluttony. Whereas Evagrius and Aquinas distinguished between (a) entertaining these sins in our thoughts and (b) yielding to temptation and actually committing them, Jesus had stressed that inner thoughts, motives, and dispositions were sinful in themselves, even if they did not translate into wrong deeds. Even sinful thoughts separate us from the divine.

What is common among the seven capital sins is that they rise up so naturally and frequently among human beings; they distort our being and distract us from the divine; they immediately punish those who commit them; they fracture our relationship with God; they reveal our insufficient desire for the highest goods; and they facilitate the commission of the worst human deeds. Instead of lurking as fully independent forms of evil, the seven capital sins are interwoven. Their pervasiveness and utter banality mask their destructiveness. The seven capital sins are profound inclinations of character that spawn every imaginable evil deed. For example, avarice leads us to insufficient charity and tolerance of abject poverty; lust gives rise to numerous perversions; gluttony nurtures obsession with enlarging the self and indifference to the needs of others; and arrogance is the root or at least a part of all sin. Moreover, the seven capital sins undermine the four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

As Thomas Aquinas detailed, commission of *sin* requires a deed, not merely a disposition or an unworthy personal attribute. Forming vile intentions followed by evil deeds intensifies the wrong. Sin is a blemish on the soul, known to God even if it is obscured from human judges. However, *vices* are wrong in themselves, and if they are not remedied they develop into habits that unwholesomely solidify our characters.

Pride infatuates a person with his own status and needs, to the exclusion of concern for those of others. Moreover, pride tempts us to diminish others as a means of amplifying the self. Envy attends too closely to the status of others and fuels competition rather than love. Wrath exaggerates perceived wrongs done by others to the self and animates our desire to exact vengeance. Sloth is inadequate love, while gluttony overamplifies the self; both of them

run at the expense of the needs of others. Lust is insular, as it replaces mutuality and reciprocity between concrete individuals with bodily desire and pleasure. In lust, the other person is taken only as an instrument of pleasure.

Pride causes actions contemptuous of God or of other human beings. Avaricious acts facilitate or constitute only the ends of the miserly. Similar analyses can be offered for the other capital sins. The point is that the same external deed – say, gorging oneself on meatballs – may flow from gluttony or from pride, depending on the mindset and will of the actor. Moreover, one person may steal or murder as an end in itself, while another may steal or murder as a means of exercising envy, avarice, wrath, or the like. Sins produced by misdirected, excessive, or insufficient passion arise from the seven capital sins; sins opposed to justice are caused by malice. Accordingly, we cannot always judge the final cause of an external act merely by observing the deed.

In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates advances a host of seemingly counter-intuitive claims: to know the good is to do the good; the commission of evil automatically harms the evil-doer; to be the victim of injustice is therefore preferable than to be the perpetrator of injustice; all and only the just people have harmonious, balanced, healthy souls, regardless of the misfortunes and physical abuse they might endure; and the proper type of human community is required to nurture virtuous individuals. In so doing, Socrates anticipated the deeper implications flowing from the Christian doctrine of the seven capital sins. Sins betray the self, the community, and the divine. As Socrates intuited, sin is its own punishment. Sins reflect, sustain, and deepen the depravity of our character.

Dante stresses the role of the community in both secular and eternal well-being. He cautions against the excessive individualism that forms the core of the seven capital sins. For Dante, these sins are the result of love gone astray. Human beings desire what pleases them and disregard, or have inadequate regard for, what they ought to love; or they love worthy objects excessively, insufficiently, or incorrectly. Arrogance, envy, and wrath are misdirected efforts to enhance what is, in itself, a deserving object of care and concern: the self. They are sins springing from the common belief that to demean and harm others enhances the self; hence all three are characterized by unbalanced concern with oneself, at the expense of salutary human community, which victims prey to these sins most clearly reject. Sloth desires insufficiently; while avarice, gluttony, and lust desire excessively. In all cases, the seven capital sins avert our gaze from the spiritual and the

divine. They constitute their own punishment, as they corrupt the spiritual, physical, and mental health of those who uphold them.

Superbia (Pride)

At first glance, pride is an odd inclusion among the seven capital sins. Justified pride in our accomplishments animates the quest for excellence. Yes, if exaggerated, pride amplifies into arrogance and vanity: an unjustified sense of superiority that exalts the self by diminishing others. But, if it is justified and measured, pride is seemingly the basis of self-respect, which is presupposed in our ability to love self and others. Is not pride, understood charitably, merely a justified sense of self-worth? Moreover, even from a Christian standpoint, pride seems necessary if we are to maximize our highest potentials and thereby glorify God's bestowed gifts. Without pride and the desire to excel, we court passivity and slothfulness. Indeed, pride ignites heroism and underwrites most of the great accomplishments in the world. In short, a healthy pride spurs our best efforts, vivifies our quest for meaning and purpose, and protects us from resignation when adversity stings us.

The case against pride is primarily biblical (Proverbs 16: 18–19; Luke 4: 1–11; Luke 18: 9–14; Romans 5: 6). Pride corrodes judgment and facilitates sin. By luxuriating in our attainments and savoring our development, we jeopardize our connection to wider community and to the divine. We set ourselves apart, regarding ourselves as special, or even unique, while evaluating others as less capable. We incline toward excessive love of self and of the objects that glorify the self – such as honor, awards, and social station – instead of focusing on spiritual goods. The most horrifying human acts bloom on the soil of pride. Wars, murders, rapes, terrorism, and the like are perpetrated not by the self-effacing and apathetic, but by those fueled by an inflated sense of entitlement and excessive self-worth. Worse, pride supplies an unworthy motivation for performing deeds that seem from an external standpoint to be virtuous. We are all familiar with the charity worker who benefits the disenfranchised more from a sense of superiority than from genuine concern for their welfare: “Hey, look at me, I am doing what the better people always do, helping my social inferiors.”

For Dante, pride is misdirected love that goes away from the divine and toward only the self. We idolize ourselves wrongly, as we should be worshipping God. We become what we idolize. To focus on the self is to distort our identities. In sum, the Christian tradition casts a wary eye on those aspiring

for greatness. Behind every would-be hero stands the mythical Odysseus, gifted but preening and negligent in higher duties. The prouder and more self-sufficient we become, the more we withdraw from healthy human and spiritual communities. For Dante, one of the more destructive features of sin is its tendency to rupture the communities required for earthly and heavenly well-being.

The paradox is that we can be proud even in our humility: "Hey, look at me, I am more self-effacing than most." We can take pride in our ability to ignore the temptations and glitters that lure the masses. Again, internal motives are often obscure; only external deeds are apparent, and they bear ambiguous meaning.

Still, the indictment against pride is flawed. The Christian tradition instructs us to love our neighbor just as we love ourselves. This presupposes that self-love as such is not sinful, but a requirement for the fulfillment of our duty to love others. Accordingly, pride, insofar as it is self-love, is necessary for discharging moral obligation. Pride, as a justifiable appreciation of the self, would appear to be unavoidable, and even encouraged. Pride requires robust communal connections if it is to secure its value. What justifies pride is personal excellence, stellar achievements, and uncommon worth. Such achievements need not be historic. Small tasks done with exceptional skill and diligence give rise to justified pride. Intelligence, creativity, determination, imagination, overcoming significant obstacles, and maximizing one's highest potentials help constitute that skill and diligence. Recognition by others and the acclaim of the masses often accompany such skill and diligence, but are unnecessary to their existence.

The spectacular problem is that pride so easily amplifies into arrogance, which I take to be a more precise rendering of the capital sin. Arrogance is excessive, idolatrous, misdirected, and inaccurate. Arrogance is love of the self wrongly diverted toward contempt and hatred of others. Arrogance is redolent with the stench of epistemological and moral error, and scoffs contemptuously at community. Arrogance shuns moral duty as unworthy of pursuit. Arrogance struggles mightily to make the self invulnerable. Arrogance is unreasonable, inaccurate, excessive, and narcissistic. As such, arrogance hardens our hearts to intimacy, spiritual and earthly, and celebrates self-aggrandizement as an intrinsic good. Like all sins, arrogance corrodes the self and eviscerates human relationships. It persuades us that we are more than we are; that we must demean those who may seem more exalted; that others are less worthy and deserve our scorn and condescension; that we are exceptions to the supposed moral law; that the good life consists



in relentlessly striving for ever more recognition and status; that victories in zero-sum contests are the measure of greatness. The citadel of the self becomes impenetrable and supreme. As such, arrogance denies the need for community and thereby reneges on our moral duties to others: the arrogant are selfish in that they ignore the interests of others when they should not.

Arrogance flows from the desire to excel. But other people are seen as obstacles. We must strive mightily to diminish them in order to elevate the self. Moreover, arrogance is rebellion against rightful superiors, including the divine, as the self amplifies to become its own God. As Nietzsche observes when he announces the alleged “death of God”:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives – who will wipe the blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?²

Like all sin, arrogance is its own punishment. The more desperately we struggle for self-sufficiency, the emptier and more self-absorbed we become. Socrates whispers in our ears that evil-doing is its own punishment, as our internal psyches reflect our wrong actions.

The adage is by now a cliché: our vices are merely our virtues, exaggerated. Pride grows so easily into arrogance that we must be permanently vigilant and self-assessing. Perhaps arrogance is unavoidable from a practical standpoint, and we must yet again admit to being sinners. We must supplicate ourselves in the knowledge that pride, as a condition of fulfilling a moral duty, will perhaps inevitably fatten into arrogance, which threatens our humanity and contaminates our relationships. Although we cannot extinguish the problem, which lies at the core of the human condition, we can minimize its deleterious effects and remain resolute (and humble) in our predicament.

Invidia (Envy)

Like pride, envy is an inner disposition, not an external deed. While wrath, gluttony, greed, and the like manifest themselves readily, envy simmers and seethes. Of course, numerous wrong acts are animated by envy – like



all the seven capital sins, envy is a final cause and instigator of a host of wrongs – but the inner motive of wrongdoing is often hidden. Envy grows from the attainments or good luck of others. Envy is more dangerous than the more public capital sins, because its interiority conceals its mission. Grounded in insufficient love of others and in sorrow at their good fortune, envy stewes in its own resentment. Worse, whereas the other capital sins all bear temporary, ill-focused, ultimately self-defeating joy, envy brings no pleasure. It eats at the self, diminishing it through invidious comparison and deepening its sense of inadequacy. By definition, envy tears at the fabric of the community, as we begrudge our fellow human beings their perceived successes and good fortune. We measure ourselves through comparisons to others, and, instead of judging the attainments of others as irrelevant to our fulfillment or as worthwhile accomplishments toward which to strive, envy spews contempt as a way of passively elevating the self. Unlike pride, which aspires to self-sufficiency, envy presupposes a concern for community: we are envious of others, to whom we bear some connection. But the concern of envy is not to rejoice or celebrate their well-being, but only to demean it. We want what the other possesses, but we understand at some level that we neither deserve it nor are entitled to it. Fueled by bitter regret, we carve away at the success of others, in a mighty struggle to ascend from our dejection. Energized by unrewarded excessive self-love, our lack of self-esteem gives rise to a devaluation of what is worthy, even admirable. As our communities grow more intimate, the prospects that envy will creep into social life increase. We mourn at the thought of another's good because we judge that it diminishes us. The bitterness of envy heightens our alienation and estrangement, places us at odds with our communities, and deepens our deprecation.

We are rarely envious of the extraordinary accomplishments of historical and public figures such as Einstein, Mozart, Washington, DiMaggio, Gandhi, and the like. We do not fester with negativity at their deserved enduring glory: "Mozart, what a creep, he probably brown-nosed his way to the top. I could compose as well as he did if I was willing to compromise my art and my sense of self." Instead, we are most envious of those we know, whom we judge to be antecedently no more naturally talented than ourselves. We must rationalize away their success and our relative obscurity. We shudder at the thought of being a nobody, but we quake even more at the thought that those whom we know have become somebodies.

An adage, attributed to Gore Vidal, is instructive: to succeed is not enough. My friends must fail, too. This slogan highlights the other side of

envy: rejoicing at the failures and shortcomings of others (*Schadenfreude*). That both faces of envy are in themselves vices and facilitate wrong deeds is clear. Being based on contempt and ill-will toward others, envy destroys human and spiritual communities. Whereas arrogance falsely amplifies the self and inclines its bearer toward self-sufficiency, envy takes the community as a focus of resentment. Indeed, envy is part and parcel of social life. We judge our well-being in part by comparing ourselves to others. Evaluated abstractly, we cannot determine whether we are successes or not. Only by perceiving the lot of others in the community can we judge ourselves worthy in crucial respects.

For example, contemporary social scientists inform us that happiness is tied less to our objective situation and more to our inner judgments and perceptions, the way we feel about our objective situation. We will be happy when we compare our circumstances to our expectations and inner standards and judge ourselves to be successful. Thus our expectations and standards are at least as important as our actual situation in determining our level of happiness. Here happiness is taken to be a healthy psychological state or a relatively enduring feeling of joy, contentment, or exuberance. Most importantly, happiness has a strong social component.

We might conclude that the secret of a good life is to lower our expectations and standards drastically, thereby ensuring favorable terms of comparison for our actual situation. But life is not so simple. First, the suggested device reeks of sour grapes: if we desire something but do not obtain it, we pretend that we never wanted it to begin with, or that it must be flawed. The fox wanted the grapes, could not reach them, and concluded they were sour anyway. Second, the device requires too much explicit self-deception. By lowering our expectations as a recipe for happiness, we – too often artificially and insincerely – simulate desires rather than pursue real ones. “I wanted to marry Mr. Right, but I have not done it. So I will marry Mr. Not-So-Hot. He is not much but he does bathe regularly.” Third, part of a meaningful and significant life involves reimagining and re-creating our self and our projects, not resting on our laurels or merely contemplating past triumphs.

The happiest and healthiest people have an internal solution to the problem of matching expectations to actual circumstances. They distort reality. They harbor illusions. The happiest and healthiest human beings have unrealistically positive views of themselves, exaggerate the amount of control they have over their lives, and are unrealistically optimistic. In sum, the traditional advice of academic philosophy –distinguish rigorously

between appearance and reality, know yourself as thoroughly as possible, eliminate illusions – may not be the most reliable path to happiness.

People can go overboard. Embracing delusions of grandeur is not a road to happiness. But neither is relentlessly viewing things as they really are. Happiness typically flows from our achieving a measure of success in meeting our expectations and internal standards, plus slightly enhancing the fit between external circumstances and internal standards in our minds. The enhancement factor consists of self-flattering, optimistic illusions that overestimate our accomplishments in relation to the success of others. If we are below average in a certain respect, we perceive ourselves as average. If we are average, we perceive ourselves as above average, and so on. The self-flattering misperception should not be wildly exaggerated, lest it border on delusion; nor can it be *consciously* induced: “I understand that I am only average, but I will consider myself above average, so I will be happier.” The controversial self-esteem programs of self-help literature and education theory may be ways of learning how to induce the enhancement factor innocently. (Will pride, arrogance, then envy follow?)

Take a common example. Most motor vehicle operators gleefully recount the driving errors of their fellow operators. Others “drive like maniacs,” or “dawdle along like little old ladies,” or “fail to keep their attention on the road,” or “think they are the only car on the highway.” How many people admit that they are below-average drivers? I once asked an undergraduate class of 150 whether any of them considered themselves below-average drivers. Only two students raised their hands – undeniable evidence that the enhancement factor is alive and well. (For the record: I am an above-average driver.)

Some readers will recoil at the social comparison aspect of happiness. Judging myself, whether realistically or optimistically, in relation to others introduces an unseemly competitiveness into the happiness quotient. The danger of desires based on social comparison is that we both depend on and fear others. We need others, particularly those who are “below average,” to feed our self-esteem. Yet others threaten us, particularly those who are “above average,” by potentially deflating our illusions. The unmistakable stench of pride and envy pervades the atmosphere.

Whether the social comparison aspect of happiness is universal or whether it is unique to competitive cultures such as that of the United States goes beyond the scope of my inquiry. Happiness, at least in this culture, is tied closely to a subjective judgment that the self is worthy and effective. (Again, pride and envy enter the picture.) This judgment involves the

intersection of objective circumstances, internal expectations and standards, and the enhancement factor. All these aspects involve social comparisons.

We can also select carefully the relevant social comparisons. I have taught at a state comprehensive college for almost thirty years. Prior to assuming my current post, I was an attorney in New York City. If I compare my current salary to the salaries of those who started at the law firm at the same time as I did and continued as attorneys, my salary is the lowest. If I compare my salary to those of other 1982 graduates of Harvard Law School, it is among the (if not *the*) lowest. If I compare my salary to those of other professors who have taught at my school over the same period, it is among the highest. If I compare my salary to those of all the residents of the United States, it is relatively high. Which comparison should I use? I do not advocate salary comparisons as the road to happiness; I am only illustrating that any social comparison is malleable. (Sociologists argue that, once a person earns a livable salary, additional income is irrelevant to that person's sense of well-being.)³

The point of this digression into happiness is that our well-being seems tied to communal comparisons. Accordingly, because they are woven intricately into the fabric of social life, the wrongs of arrogance and envy are not easily eradicated. This is one reason why many of our vices are merely exaggerated versions of our virtues.

Ira (Wrath)

As with pride and arrogance, we should distinguish between righteous anger and wrath. At times, as was recognized by thinkers from Aristotle to present-day philosophers, anger is a salutary passion, which motivates virtuous action. Outrage at injustice, at the conditions of poverty, at enforced ignorance, and the like stirs us to forge remedies. Indeed, anger is an antidote for sloth. The Bible reports that, on Palm Sunday, righteously indignant at sacrilege, Jesus scattered the moneylenders and drove them from the Temple in Jerusalem. Moreover, suppressing justified anger and turning it inward leads easily to resentment and/or depression. Aimed at appropriate targets and intelligently discharged, anger animates our sense of purpose, underscores our highest values, and externalizes our commitment to a better world. Anger, then, motivates actions, whether wisely or not. Moreover, at times, the call to simmer down is nothing but a ploy, intended to demean and suppress an appropriate response to injustice. Yes, anger is accusatory,

judgmental, and unpleasant. But numerous events in the world merit such a response. To care deeply about any and every thing is to risk permanent outbursts of anger. If reason without passion is vacuous, passion without reason is directionless.

In contrast to righteous anger, wrath is excessive, misdirected, and erroneous. Lacking justification and connection to the good, wrath differs from anger. Wrath is even more accusatory, judgmental, and unpleasant than anger, but it lacks a righteous basis and it is severed from intelligent expression. Anger is divisive in that it distances us from a pernicious segment of society; but it can unite us with a righteous part of the community. Wrath is the love of justice wrongly inflated into revenge and spite. Wrath either divides us from almost all of society or severs us from the righteous sector while joining us with noxious elements of the community. Wrath is a fixation, an inordinate desire for retaliation, a hardened heart, an overly resolute spirit, and a knowing and willing expression of malice. Wrath inflames envy, arrogance, resentment, and greed. Righteous anger expresses our considered judgments, while wrath suffocates our ability to make rational evaluations.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC–AD 65), Stoic philosopher and one of Dante's virtuous pagans in Limbo (I IV, 141), explicitly rejects Aristotle's advice to moderate, but not to eliminate, the passions. The key, for Seneca, lies in self-command. Permitting oneself to feel or pursue something is different from ordering oneself to do so.

The question has often been put whether it is better to have moderate passions or none. Our school [Stoics] drives them out, the Peripatetics [Aristotelians] moderate them. I do not see how any moderately diseased state can be healthy or useful [...] For though I forbid you to desire I will permit you to want, so that you can do the same things, but without fear and with a surer counsel, and so that you can better perceive the pleasures themselves. And why shouldn't they make a bigger impact on you if you give them orders rather than taking orders from them?⁴

In that vein, Seneca concludes that anger clouds rationality because it arrogates a special standing to itself, which hinders all correction of its own judgments.

Seneca distinguishes emotions from non-voluntary, instinctive reactions such as tears, sexual excitement, sighs, involuntary fears and nerves, and the like. Instinctive reactions – first movements – are not altered by judgments; but emotions are produced and can be transformed by judgments.

The initial disturbance of the mind inflicted by the impression of harm is no more anger than is the simple impression of harm. Anger is the subsequent impulse which doesn't just accept the impression but approves of it; it is the agitation of the mind which is pressing on for vengeance on the basis of the desire and a judgment [...] just see whether you think anything could be either pursued or avoided without the assent of the mind.⁵

Anger, however, emerges from weakness and error. We assent to impulsive impressions and we act inappropriately. Generally, an unwarranted, overly optimistic view of the world and of our fellow human beings triggers negative judgments that issue in anger. Our expectations, then, are critical to our subsequent conviction that the imperfectability of our existence merits an angry response. Moreover, the internal qualities of human beings do not automatically correlate to their external circumstances. Also, when we subconsciously suspect we are deserving of ridicule or disrespect we are more likely to take another person's remarks in that vein. Seneca accepts the Stoic hard line here: the sage does not feel anger because his reason shows it to be contrary to nature.

Anger results not from an uncontrollable eruption of the passions, but from a basic (and correctable) error of reasoning [...] anger does not belong in the category of involuntary physical movement, it can only break out on the back of certain rationally held *ideas*; if we can only change the ideas, we will change our propensity to anger.⁶

How our emotions influence our general outlook on life and how they affect our possibilities of leading the good life preoccupied the Stoics. Reflecting a dominant Stoic view, Seneca insisted that emotions are judgments; but they are irrational judgments. They transgress reason because the beliefs grounding the emotions are false. In the case of anger, we believe that something bad has occurred; we believe that a certain person is responsible for that bad event; and we believe that anger is an appropriate response. For a Stoic such as Seneca, all three beliefs are false. Events are neither good nor bad in themselves, only our labeling makes them so. Typically, what we judge to be a bad event is the wrong frustration caused by a preferred indifferent. That is our first cognitive error: the loss of a preferred indifferent, or the failure to attain it, is neither a wrong to us nor a bad event.

Next, we hold someone responsible for what we wrongly take to be a bad event. But that person is not culpable because the event is not bad. Moreover,

even if it were bad, the person's action flows from ignorance, not from malevolence. The Stoics, following Socrates, contended that we all seek the good and stray from it only because we fail to understand where it lies – in the felicitous union of virtue and self-interest. Thus the indictment of the perpetrator of our alleged wrong is doubly mistaken: it rests on the erroneous belief that a bad event has taken place, for which moral blame should be affixed.

Finally, given that nothing bad has happened and no one is culpable for anything bad, anger is an inappropriate response to the situation. Accordingly, for Seneca, the emotion of anger is always irrational, as it is grounded in completely false beliefs.

The Stoic prescription bears much truth, but it is too simplistic. If some events are evil and if their perpetrators are sometimes morally culpable for their occurrence, then the question whether anger is an appropriate response is reopened. The Stoics would still insist that anger lacks healthy effects: it cannot alter the past, and it clouds our assessment of how to respond in the present. In this they are undoubtedly correct, at least up to a point. Where anger distorts our vision and jeopardizes our judgment, it is an inappropriate indulgence. But is that *always* the case? Cannot anger help steel our resolve and energize our motivation for righteous action? Have the Stoics ignored the distinction between anger and wrath?

Anger is a biologically natural emotion that often promotes human survival, a way of amassing psychological resources for constructive action. Of course, taken to an extreme, anger inflates and degenerates into wrath, which destroys relationships and unsettles the social fabric. But systematically suppressing anger may also be harmful. Suppressed anger may cause physical illness, explode into misplaced violence, or promote the manufacture of social scapegoats. That anger is sometimes, even often, a poor strategy for attaining our ends does not mean that it always is. Even religious paragons such as Jesus occasionally displayed anger. Are not some outrages so profoundly destructive and unforgettably evil that they merit anger? In the same way in which mourning is an appropriate response to the loss of a loved one under tragic circumstances, anger is sometimes an appropriate response to wrongdoing and injustice. If extended inappropriately, mourning can easily morph into unseemly self-pity. If widely practiced and indiscriminately nurtured, anger can quickly transform into a weapon of manipulation and mass destruction. Anger can easily amplify into wrath. Understanding the dangers should serve as a caution. The elimination of the so-called negative emotions, though, is ill-advised. We need to transform

our perceptions of the world magically in order to cope with an environment otherwise largely beyond our making. Anger, sorrow, and the like are sometimes artful strategies for attaining our ends.

Acedia (Sloth)

At first glance, sloth appears to be relatively unthreatening, more of a laid-back approach to life than a sin or an unambiguous vice. In fact, much labor may go into securing leisure time for slothful pursuits. Moreover, most horrifying injuries, such as war, murders, rapes, and terrorism, result from excessive energy, not from disengaged sloth. We can only imagine how our world might have developed had such lunatics as Hitler and Stalin been more slothful and less avidly deranged.

But sloth is a capital sin for a reason. Classically, sloth embodies insufficient ardor for the highest pursuits: spiritual worship, profound values, adventuresome deeds, robust meaning, and grand purpose. Sloth neglects that which should be cared for. Sloth is dejection that turns away from the divine and the good, less in active rebellion and more in effete resignation. Sloth embraces joyless apathy, which too frequently deflates even further, into hopelessness and despair. Sloth causes its bearer to lack the motivation and energy to embrace the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and to lack the passion and understanding to celebrate the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. At the core of sloth are self-absorption, self-pity, sorrow, alienation, and estrangement. Sloth has little to offer the community other than an invitation for collective narcolepsy. Sloth is cowardly and suggests a slow or a repeated death. The external failures produced by it are the sins of omission. Sloth embodies muted convictions, feeble knowledge, minor enjoyments, diluted purposes and interests, and tepid exertion. Worse, sloth turns inward out of resignation and exhaustion. It estranges us from concern, caring, intimacy, and worthy projects. Through neglect, insufficient conviction and commitment, and passivity, sloth corrodes the social fabric. For Dante, the slothful recognize the good, but pursue it inadequately due to their indolence. Their punishment in the afterlife is frenzied, pointless activity – literally getting nowhere fast.

Friedrich Nietzsche reserves special contempt for that most despicable human type he calls the “last man.” The last man shrivels before the thought that the cosmos lacks inherent value and meaning. In their search for

security, contentment, and minimal exertion, last men lead shallow lives of timid conformity and superficial happiness. They take solace in a narrow egalitarianism that severs them from the highest human possibilities: intense love, grand creation, deep longing, passionate exertion, and adventure in pursuit of excellence.

‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth. Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death. One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion [...] everybody wants the same, everybody is the same [...] ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.⁷

The highest ambitions of last men are comfort and security. These people are an extreme case of herd mentality: habit, custom, indolence, self-preservation, and muted will to power prevail. Last men embody none of the inner tensions and conflicts that spur transformative action: they take no risks, lack convictions, avoid experimentation, and seek only bland survival. They invent “happiness” as the brutish accumulation of pleasure and avoidance of suffering. They “blink” to hide themselves from reality. They ingest “poison” now and then in the form of religious indoctrination focused on a supposedly blissful afterlife. Last men lack the vigor and exalted will to power that can recognize the tragic nature of the world, yet maximally affirm it.

Assuming that the world and human life are inherently meaningless and that religious belief reneges on a maximally affirmative attitude toward this life, Nietzsche’s account is decidedly secular. But his description of last men mirrors the pathos and muted self-absorption of slothful existence.

Avaritia (Avarice)

Greed signals an obsession with material accumulation such as wealth, status, and power. Making us focused too acutely on the wrong objects of desire, greed distracts us from loftier pursuits. Avaricious people yearn counter-productively to calm their restless spirits with tangible goods.

Money and property – which often issue in social power and privilege – are their means of keeping score and of measuring self-worth. They conjure the most chilling images of Plato's insatiable tyrant flailing futilely on a treadmill of desire: the more he strives and strides, the more deeply he is imprisoned by desire. Successful accumulation breeds only more desire. Nothing can fully satisfy the avaricious, as they impale themselves on a pendulum of frustration: if their desires are unfulfilled, they are frustrated and disappointed; if their desires are satisfied, they enjoy a temporary joy, which is soon overwhelmed by more rapacious desires. Worse, the single-minded quest for material accumulation typically spawns a host of evil deeds that trample on the interests of other people, destroy the salutary human community, and obstruct spiritual endeavors. Greed breeds disloyalty, betrayal, hoarding, theft, robbery, simony, and fraud.

The literary image of Ebenezer Scrooge, before he turned soft, resonates. He warped his own soul by attributing false, inflated value to material accumulation. He sacrificed the bounty and adventure of life on the altar of possessing for its own sake. Scrooge's possessions ruled him by directing his energies and molding his daily tasks. He found himself on Plato's endless treadmill, where the more he exerted himself the less he developed as a person. His face betrayed his character and chronicled his spiritual deprivation. Avarice deflates the heart, misdirects our energies, fetishizes commodities, and alienates us from others. Possessions become our measuring stick and our instruments for wrongdoing. The avaricious are self-defined by the desires they gratify and material objects they amass. The worst case scenario: a virtually infinite, insatiable yearning for more. The result: a selfish quest for material accumulation that transgresses upon the needs and entitlements of others. In sum, the avaricious have a distorted sense of boundaries and misguided priorities; they are emotionally aloof and profoundly insensitive.

Gula (Gluttony)

Gluttony can be understood specifically, as an inordinate desire for food and drink, or generally, as an unhealthy concern with enlarging the self. The overindulgence of gluttony leads to waste. The exaggerated focus on consumption distracts us from spiritual activities, leads to evil deeds, strikes a decidedly unaesthetic portrait, and reneges on our duty to maximize our natural talents. Understanding gluttony as excessive self-indulgence

highlights its error of privileging the unnecessary wants of the self above the desperate needs of others. The extreme concern with, and consumption of, food and drink also nurture sloth and low self-esteem. The glutton struggles mightily to fill his acutely sensed internal void. To compensate, the glutton turns to tasty edibles. However, the emptiness within the self results not from a lack of nutrition, but from an insufficient understanding of and attention to the highest goods.

The glutton is a type of addict whose focus is distorted. Gluttony privileges consumption beyond the fulfillment of needs and reasonable wants to an entire way of life. Like the other capital sins, gluttony distracts us from most of the value, beauty, and fulfilling love surrounding human life. Gluttony shows itself not only in over-consumption, but in all the obsessive aspects of eating and drinking: anorexia, bulimia, fastidiousness, avidity, gourmetism, and the like. Gluttony diverts our energies away from grand deeds and admirable adventures and toward self-defeating, self-absorbed isolation. An effete, pervasive, self-defeating yearning animates gluttony. The aesthetically unpleasing result reflects the spiritual impoverishment of the soul. Gluttony celebrates instant gratification and bodily pleasure and exudes a weakness of will, while ignoring long-term spiritual and physical well-being. In less economically developed cultures, gluttony courts avarice, as it grasps for an unfair share of scarce resources. Gluttony champions an indefensible value system, and its obvious punishment is often immediate physical suffering (“the morning after”). The long-term physical and spiritual punishments are graver and often unobservable.

Luxuria (Lust)

Lust is wrong or inordinate sexual desire. Advancing a strict morality of motivations and intentions, Jesus asserts: “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed [adultery] with her in his heart” (Matthew 5: 27). The “lust of the heart” proposition indicts most of the human race for multiple sins. Dante the author has good reason to admit pride and lust as his two greatest personal flaws. He joins countless others in that confession. Lust can also be understood, more generally, to be inordinate desire for material goods. As such, it overlaps with avarice and gluttony. In any form, lust betrays excessive desire for improper objects. Sexual perversions, at least in part, flow from lust. Lust focuses, not on the other person, but on the satisfaction of one’s own desire. Intimacy,

bonding, establishing a wider subjectivity are tossed aside; only immediate craving reigns.

A complicating matter is the extent to which lustful feelings and thoughts are autonomic responses and reflexes, not considered judgments. In a strikingly non-Stoic account, John Medina reports that

there are aspects of sexual responsiveness that lie outside our conscious control. For us to consciously experience such impulses, they must be brought into our awareness, i.e., to our brains, and from that awareness we may experience the subjective feelings of arousal. However, since these reflex arcs occur independently of even the most rudimentary comment from the brain, we can say an astonishing thing. Sexual feeling (perhaps even the emotion itself) is something that *happens* to us. There is a certain amount of processing of our responses that occurs outside our conscious control.⁸

If lust of the heart is punishable as sin and lustful feelings and thoughts are often autonomic responses and reflexes outside our conscious control, then the principle of moral desert seems to be violated. If our sins do not arise from our free acts of choice, then no moral culpability results. In the absence of moral culpability, punishment cannot rightfully be levied.

Perhaps returning to an old Stoic distinction can soften the puzzle. For the Stoics, forming judgments involves perception, evaluation, and understanding. Impressions, whether sense perceptions caused by observations or products of reasoning flowing from the mind, imprint themselves on the soul. We turn the impression into a proposition and then we either accept or reject the proposition. For example, we look in a certain direction and gain sense perceptions. We turn the sense perceptions into the proposition that “there is a dog relieving itself against a tree.” We then either accept or reject the proposition depending on, in this case, how certain we are that there truly is a dog relieving itself against a tree. Sometimes the propositions we form may contain a value judgment such as “that a dog is relieving itself against a tree is a good (or bad) event.”

The impressions we get, the sense perceptions, are beyond our control. They imprint themselves on us. However, whether we accept or reject the propositions accompanying those impressions is within our control. We again turn to the Stoic distinction between “first movements” and considered judgments. Even the Stoics are often overcome by the force of first impressions or instinctive reactions. My spontaneous reaction is essentially involuntary and natural. But I need not assent to the proposition that, say,

lusting after another person is worthy of being acted upon. I still have time to reconsider my initial impression and affirm, in conformity with Stoic wisdom, that only what benefits my soul is genuinely good. From a Stoic standpoint, yearning for, and even loving, another person is merely a preferred indifferent (an event I antecedently desire, but one that is irrelevant to the health of my soul, the only personal good).

Brushing aside Stoicism's view of what constitutes good and evil, the distinction between first movements (immediate impressions) and considered judgments bears currency. If lustful feelings are only autonomic responses and reflexes, then they should engender neither moral culpability nor punishment. Only when we form a lustful judgment – which involves rationally assenting to various propositions – do moral culpability and punishment come into play. If they are persuasive, we can accommodate the science of how lustful feelings arise with Dante's commitment to punishment for sin and to the principle of moral desert.

The Antidote: Righteous Love

The Stoic sage, or the Buddhist, aspires to be completely free of the seven capital vices. Where most of us are vain, the sage is self-effacing and modest. Where most of us are envious, the sage is grateful and cheerful. Where most of us are slothful, the sage is industrious and self-sacrificing. Where most of us are gluttonous, the sage is spare and contented. Where most of us are wrathful, the sage is calm and caring. Where most of us are avaricious, the sage's honor cannot be purchased. Where most of us are lustful, the sage covets no one.

Dante, like Plato, celebrates awe and wonder when confronting beauty. An intellectual passion intersects with erotic desire and with a yearning for the eternal. Love is a way to connect to the divine and to reach beyond ourselves. It is a plea for immortality, the quest for the eternal. As such, for Dante, love aspires to connect human beings with enduring values. Still, love flows from desire, which signifies a lack: human beings struggle in a world not of their making and yearn for an ultimate culmination, a rational and just cosmos, and reunification with the divine. Dante's great love, Beatrice, is amplified and elevated in death. As obsessed as Dante was about her in life, he loves her even more after she died. She becomes his conduit of grace, a necessary link to the beatific vision. Sexual consummation, then, is not a requirement of either Dante's or Plato's idealized depiction of love.

Dante's spirit of gravity correlates the condition of a person's soul to its proper site in the universe. How, what, and to the extent, a soul loves manifests its quality.

This measureless craving, this desire for eternal possession of good or beauty, is a function of the rational soul, of man's natural desire for possession of eternal good in an external existence [...] for Dante sensible human beauty is the highest temporal analogue of the perpetual joys and contentment of the eternal existence man desires. This satisfaction which is the goal of man's desire is a union of peace and ardor, tranquility and passion, a passionate tranquility in which desire finds rest without in some sense ceasing to be a desire – a state in which Paradise cannot be lost and which requires no effort to retain.⁹

Love is righteous if directed toward God and virtue, or, in moderation, toward secondary goods. Love is evil when it is directed toward the wrong objects, or toward the right objects but pursued with an improper measure. Pride prompts us to desire ill for others in order for us to appear superior by contrast. Envy prompts us to desire ill for others because of the perceived loss to self that results from wealth, honor, fame, and the like being in the possession of those others. Wrath prompts us to strike out at others, to avenge the perceived injury they would have inflicted. These three capital sins are forms of misdirected love – love to wrong objects. The other four capital sins are directed to objects that are good to various degrees; but these objects are pursued in an excessive or deficient fashion. Sloth pursues virtue and the divine with insufficient zeal. Avarice, gluttony, and lust pursue secondary goods (material, nutrient, and sensual) with gusto, and pursues them as if they were capable of ensuring human fulfillment.

To understand the general phenomenon of love, I will briefly discuss the particular form most familiar to us. Righteous erotic love is an inherently discriminatory notion. I cannot be a lover, in the deepest sense, to everyone, even if I were so inclined and even if everyone were morally good. I would still not have enough time and I could not expend enough effort to pursue the common commitments and joint activities that genuine love requires. This underscores why trading up is misplaced in genuine erotic love. While I may perceive, accurately, that a stranger possesses a higher degree of excellence – more desirable qualities and properties – than my beloved, our past connection and mutually satisfying relationship exude currency. My lover and I are not at a *lontananza* (distance), but forge a shared identity.

Our relationship, if profound enough, entails that my interests are not experienced as being fully apart from my lover's interests, and vice versa. Relationships, of course, vary in intensity and depth, but all genuine love shares this element.¹⁰

Accordingly, I would not trade up easily, because my current lover and I share a relationship that has valuable ramifications for who I am. I would recognize the transition costs – time, energy, uncertainty, and changes to my self-image – of substituting the stranger for my current lover. I would also understand that, even if the stranger is endowed with more excellent properties than my lover, the stranger cannot exemplify those properties in the same way as my lover. The excellences of my lover and that of the stranger will differ qualitatively in the particular ways they are manifested. The stranger may be physically more beautiful than my lover, but the stranger does not have more of *my lover's* beauty. The unique way my lover embodies and expresses beauty may be more appealing to me than the way the stranger expresses his or her admittedly greater physical beauty. Finally, the historical relationship lovers have shared has a special significance that should not be dismissed. Lovers form a union or a “federation” that is not defined merely by adding together the interests of the parties. In genuinely loving relationships and in well-functioning marriages, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The bond, or union, or federation that lovers nurture transforms the parties. The historical relationship that chronicles that development has independent value, in a way similar to the value produced by positive family relationships. Shared memories, gratitude, reciprocal self-making, and a sense of belonging make trading-up in loving relationships problematic. Where trading-up does seem to happen easily, we can legitimately call into question whether a fulfilling, deep love was present. In friendships the situation is somewhat different. Often, instead of facing a choice of trading-up – dumping our current friend for another person – we can simply add to our list in a way that is precluded in romantic love. Still, practicalities limit even the number of close friends with whom we can share deep relationships.

The joint identity principle I am urging will trouble some philosophers. They will screech that my standard of love is too high, as it requires a loss of individual autonomy. Once we talk of extended or shared identity, we seem to infringe upon an individual's freedom of choice and independence. My choices, projects, and actions are no longer *mine*, they are *ours*. Does this not demand concessions of the individual's will?

The short answer is: “Yes, but why the surprise?” Every intimate relationship has that consequence. Can we coherently conjure, say, a romantic love

where each spouse retains full, individual autonomy? Living together, sharing a life, pooling material resources, planning for the future require shared decision-making, reciprocity, and mutuality. To believe that full independence can be retained is fatuous. The deepest versions of intimacy transform our characters. Why should we shrink back in horror when we find that our independence is no longer sacrosanct? A world of strangers may be a world of complete independence for individuals; a community of lovers and friends is not.

We care about our lovers and friends, at least in part, because we perceive that they bear excellences or admirable qualities. We could be mistaken in that assessment, of course. Our evaluations are not infallible, our perceptions are not flawless. Once we realize our error, the incipient relationship may end. But the ground of our initial attraction is the value we think the other possesses.

A critic might rejoin, however, that making the perceived value of the other the ground of love is troubling. First, our real focus seems to be on that value, wherever it may reside, and not on a particular person. Human beings are not merely repositories of value, nor does value alone define who we are. We have other qualities – beyond our glorious value – that are neutral in terms of value, or are imperfections or disvalues. To focus only on the other's value is to love her only for a part of her personhood. Second, to ground love only in the other's current perceived value is to freeze him in time. We all change, grow, and regress. To rivet a loving relationship in the current image of the other is to deny inevitable change. Again, such a love is not directed at a whole person but at a certain value, which we now think we have found in the other.

These criticisms are difficult, but not impossible to answer. To establish a love of whole persons, our critic is correct: we must appreciate more than the currently perceived value of each other. Each of us is a compendium of qualities, not all admirable, wrapped together by our unique way of embodying and expressing those qualities, seasoned by hosts of possibilities (potential qualities that we can develop into actualities). By considering the other person's qualities beyond their perceived value, we parry the charge that we are drawn only to value, not whole people. By attending to the other's idealized possibilities, we block the charge that love wrongly freezes the other in the present. Friends affect each other's choices, actions, and personal development. They do not simply take each other as fixed, permanent characters.

One of the functions of love is to control access to ourselves and to regulate our privacy. Intimacy is mutually nurtured in several ways: through

privileged self-disclosure, through participation in shared projects, through discerning and advancing each other's best interests, and through having a roughly similar system of values. Bonds of trust, far beyond the level we enjoy with strangers, flow from the heightened mutual vulnerability that distinguishes deep intimacy.

With apologies to the new age of promiscuous public disclosures of virtually everything on the internet, we typically reveal to our lovers and friends information about ourselves that we normally keep shrouded from the general public. In so doing, we regulate our privacy – permitting more access to those whom we choose – and we both acknowledge and reinforce the bonds of trust between our lovers and ourselves. By participating in shared projects, lovers and friends reveal and sustain the projects of their most profound concern. Lovers and friends share activities, at least partly, for the sake of sharing them. They often strive to advance each other's interests. I can advance my lover's interests only after appraising what her best interests are. Throughout all these processes, the values of the parties are paramount. Sometimes lovers come to their relationship with roughly similar values. Sometimes they develop roughly similar values as a consequence of their relationship and shared activities. In any case, lovers mutually influence each other's values in proportion to the closeness of the relationship.

I may be drawn to, or try out, a new value or project simply because my lover already embodies that value or pursues that project. But my initial attraction need not translate into final acceptance of the value or project in question into my life scheme. We should recognize a distinction between what motivates my desire to try out a new project or examine a new value – I pursue them just because they rivet my lover's concern – and the grounds upon which I will decide whether to adopt that value or project as my own. My lover's values and projects never fully define mine. I must make a relatively independent assessment of the new value or project at some point.

Love is also an exercise in self-making in proportion to the closeness of the relationship. Aristotle insisted that human beings are social animals. A person, alone on a desert island, might be a beast or a god, but not a human being. We need others to help understand and define ourselves. Those closest to us play a disproportionately strong role. The annoying parental warning – “Be careful who your friends are, don't associate with the wrong crowd” – hits the mark squarely. Lovers and friends influence the people we are becoming.

Love is, accordingly, a process, not a fixed condition. It begins in lack and is grounded in power. But the grandeur of love is that it is not a commodity:

it cannot be bought or sold, yet it is not costless. Love struggles to overcome its internal paradoxes of consolation and growth, dependency and freedom. The uniqueness and specialness of the lovers – not in terms of their facility in guiding the mutual quest for individual perfection – form the core of their relationship. Love is a mysterious mixture of choice and discovery that changes our perception of the world without actually changing the world. Love is transformative but not redemptive. But, mostly, it is an acknowledgment of bonds not fully chosen.

Love cannot be an arm's length, mutual aid exercise in individualism. Lovers cannot be creators in *lontananza*. No, love widens our subjectivity and creates a new identity, which immediately embodies its own unrealized ideals. And the unrealized ideal possibilities of those bound by love are never merely the sum of the unrealized ideal possibilities embodied by the two individuals. Love is not two minds thinking or valuing as one. Even the most committed lovers must retain a healthy measure of independence.

Love is also dangerous. No one can betray us more hurtfully or thoroughly than a lover. Any time we heighten our vulnerability by revealing special information about ourselves, by sharing intimate activities, by forging bonds of trust, and by relying upon the good will of others, we not only enjoy the fruits of positive self-making, but also risk treachery. My lover knows more about me, has shared and helped to shape my values, and benefits from my trust. She is in a better position than the general public to advance my best interests – but also to frustrate my deepest aspirations.

Are the risks worth the value of love? Love increases our flow of experiences by energizing our efforts in the projects at hand. Shared activities and commitments are also necessary for moral and intellectual growth. Lovers help us evaluate accurately the quality and meaningfulness of our lives. The sense of belonging and intimate validation love produces soften our fears that we are alone and powerless. Because we are social animals, love is valuable for its own sake, not just for benefits directly derived from the relationship.

Desire and love, properly directed and entertained in an appropriate measure, are the best antidotes to the seven capital sins. The account of righteous erotic love and deep friendship can be extended to include healthy desire of other worthy objects, projects, and values. Unfortunately we are inherently fallible and flawed: the human condition and our required but threatening connection to wider communities suggest we will always struggle mightily with the seven capital sins, particularly envy, arrogance, and lust. Like Dante, we are born of dust and to dust we shall return.

The Bridge to Salvation

Understanding Dante's conception of the spiritual poison oozing from the seven capital sins and the power of the antidote of love, rightly measured and directed, allows us to examine fully the existential moral lessons he revealed in the *Inferno* and in the *Purgatorio*. Dante aspires to elevate his readers and to show them the way to personal salvation. His spiritual mission can succeed, and he can promote our inner purification, only if we grasp the bridge to salvation: ten existential lessons that will ground our moral understanding and inform our personal strategies for transforming our characters in fulfilling ways. We must now approach that bridge.

Notes and References

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DANTE'S EXISTENTIAL MORAL LESSONS

Although the *Commedia* is a poem, Dante proclaims that its major purpose is to “to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of happiness.”¹ His hopes, then, are moral and practical. Unsurprisingly, much of the advice he renders is a compilation of the most profound insights of the greatest classical and medieval thinkers. Surprisingly, many of the moral lessons Dante advances prefigure existential themes.

Dante and Existentialism

On a first hearing, to claim that Dante anticipates aspects of existentialism seems odd. Most modern existentialists are nontheists; in fact some, such as Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre, are notorious rebels against dominant religious traditions.² They openly claim that, in a scientific age, belief in a god is unworthy; that the cosmos is inherently meaningless and thus we cannot discover, but must create, value and purpose; that our deepest yearnings – for a rational and just cosmos, for a connection to some enduring value, and for an ultimate culmination of our lives – are unrequited because the cosmos “regards” human beings with benign indifference; that objective truths concerning values either do not exist or, if they do, they have no importance for the “individual,” given that they are applicable to everyone; and that human beings lack foundational justifications for the choices, actions, values, and projects to which they are most committed. Such an agenda is stunningly incompatible with the traditional Christian vision of the world that informs Dante’s work.

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Yes, some existentialists, such as Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Tillich, are religious. But even here, Dante is in strange company. Søren Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) spiritualism flows from a personal relationship with God that champions a leap of faith over rational commitment; intense experience over religious ritual; and the infusion of God into everyday life, above institutional affiliation. Kierkegaard's knight of faith is Abraham, willing to abrogate conventional morality and slay his own son because his religious experience – against all reason – convinces him that God so decrees. The knight of faith must sometimes suspend universal ethical principles in deference to divine commands; but he has no determinate rule that can tell him all and only those occasions when doing so is wise. Another noted religious existentialist, Paul Tillich (1886–1965), highlights objects of ultimate concern, but these are particular and concrete entities such as persons, social groups, and causes, not an ineffable, metaphysical ultimate that Dante would identify as God. Although Tillich claims that particular objects of ultimate concern point to and symbolize the ultimate, those relationships remain murky in his work. Moreover, Tillich's version of “absolute faith” transcends the theistic notion of God. The views of the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) are closer to Dante's convictions than those of most religious existentialists, but Marcel stresses that our deepest questions about freedom, meaning, and the existence of God are riddled with mystery and cannot be objectively answered. Instead, Marcel concentrated on unraveling the nature of personal relationships; the dynamics between the individual and modernity; and the dangerous ways science defined human life in terms of how we functioned to serve technological values.

Accordingly, my claim that many of Dante's moral lessons anticipated existential themes seems rash. To support that claim in this chapter, I must first introduce an explicitly existential vision of Hell offered by Sartre. I will then state, explain, and analyze ten existential moral lessons that Dante advances in his *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Finally, I will outline how grounding our moral understanding in these lessons can promote personal strategies for constructive self-transformation.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Hell

Sartre's rendering of Hell is described through three main characters in his one-act play, *No Exit*.³ Often these characters describe themselves in ways that make them conflict with the people they truly are. Part of the existential

inauthenticity consists of denying one's freedom, failing to take responsibility for one's actions, and taking refuge in ego-saving excuses.

Hell is a sitting room, or what we might call a living room. No devils, pitchforks, blazing inferno, brimstone, or hideous figures plague its denizens. None is needed, because the residents have each other. Three unmovable sofas are unarranged in a "U." A mantle is adorned with a letter opener. A pedestrian bronze sculpture masquerades as art. A single door serves as the entryway and occasionally opens to admit new residents. A valet escorts the newly condemned to Hell. Human dignity is discarded at entry. The bell-push, which might summon the valet, functions erratically. The room is overly warm and stuffy. No windows are available to provide comfort. The room lacks mirrors that might aid self-image. The residents have no need of toothbrushes or bedding or any of life's mundane implements: the episodic rhythms of everyday living are absent in Hell. The lights are always on. The residents lack eyelids and cannot blink. In short, Hell is a stultifying room from which residents cannot escape even momentarily. Worse, they cannot escape from each other. Each person will act as torturer and tortured in turn. Reexamining our past without an opportunity to reimagine our future underscores the frightening theme of Sartre's Hell.

Joseph Garcin was a journalist for a pacifist newspaper. He was executed by a firing squad that riddled his torso with a dozen bullets. He is attracted to Inez, who despises him.

Inez Serrano was a post-office clerk who perished in a murder-suicide. She is the same age as Garcin, but she is a lesbian who is attracted to Estelle. Estelle, however, is not interested in Inez.

Estelle Rigault is a young, physically attractive socialite who died of pneumonia. Estelle claims to have married an older, wealthy man to ensure that her ill younger brother would receive adequate medical care. She revels in her femininity, she is interested in Garcin, but he is not interested in her.

The action of Sartre's play and the essence of Hell is conversation. The residents explore the possibility that they have been misjudged. Why did they deserve to be condemned? Garcin suggests he has been wrongly sentenced because all he did was remain firm to his political principles. Estelle admits she married strategically and sacrificed her youth, but was her doing so sinful, given her noble motive? Inez, though, points out that they should stop trying to deceive themselves and each other: they are all in Hell for some reason. Those in charge of such matters do not err.

As the conversations continue, Garcin finally admits that he treated his wife shabbily. For five years, he would arrive home late, drunk, and reeking

of alcohol and women. His wife would wait for his arrival. Eventually, Garcin brought one of his hussies to stay at his home. His wife slept upstairs and served Garcin and his playmate their morning coffee. Garcin's insensitivity, coarseness, and selfishness glisten unmistakably. Garcin claims that his wife was a "born martyr" and a "victim."⁴ Moreover, Garcin, it turns out, was executed by a firing squad, but he was running for his life, in contrast to standing up for his political principles. He had resolved to face his final act of death courageously, to prove that he was not a coward. But, by his own admission, he failed miserably in that effort.

Inez describes herself as impolite, cruel, and a bitch. She was a lesbian who enjoyed an intimate relationship with a woman, Florence, who was also seeing one of Inez's male cousins. The three lived together. The women treated the man poorly. He was eventually run over, perhaps mercifully, by a tram. Inez then manipulated, taunted, and used her lover. One night, the woman turned on the gas while Inez was asleep and both women died.

When she first was escorted into Hell, Estelle had seen Garcin sitting on one of the sofas with his hand in his face. She had screamed and only regained her poise after Garcin looked up and Estelle did not recognize him. She had thought that Garcin was Roger, her lover. While conducting their adulterous affair, Roger had tried to convince Estelle to run off with him and to conceive a child. Although a gifted dancer, Roger was poor. Estelle passed. Estelle, it appears, enjoyed the privileges of wealth; she had married for reasons other than concern for her ailing sibling. But Estelle and Roger did conceive a child, although not by Estelle's design. They traveled to Switzerland, where Estelle gave birth. Roger was ecstatic. Estelle was morose. She killed her newborn daughter and Roger, devastated, committed suicide.

The three characters, then, are condemned to be the eternal instruments and recipients of torment. When any one or two of them try to disengage from the others or to develop a fulfilling relationship, they are disrupted by another who has been snubbed. Inez is cold and dismissive of Garcin, whose mere presence is annoying to her: Inez resents having to put up with someone whom she disdains. Inez curries Estelle's favor, but is rebuked and turns ugly toward her – acting as a false "mirror" that gives alternately flattering and unflattering appraisals. Estelle is attracted to Garcin, who is lured into paying attention to her, but only because he wants her to vindicate his bravery. Inez seethes and does her best to torment the other two. Garcin recognizes that Estelle is not a reliable judge of his valor; only Inez is, because she knows what it is like to be a coward. Of course, Inez

luxuriates in her power to reduce Garcin's self-image. Each penitent's choices affect the others.

Initially, Sartre's depictions of the transgressions that lead to Hell are puzzling. Adultery, lesbianism, cruel and insensitive behavior toward others that contributes to their suicide, and even murder are odd choices for an existentialist. Inez, Garcin, and Estelle would be warmly received in Dante's *Inferno*, but Sartre, unlike Dante, is no champion of Christian theology. To understand Sartre's message we must remind ourselves what existentialists take to be the gravest violations of its highest value, authenticity: denying one's freedom, denying one's responsibility, inventing lame excuses for one's conduct, and fleeing from reality. While my facticity – unalterable features and circumstances of my history – limits my capability to transcend my current self-conception, I nevertheless have robust freedom to reimagine and remake my relationships to my interests, projects, and commitments. Once we recall this aspect of existentialism, we can sketch how Sartre's villains merit their fate.

In the instant case, Garcin and Estelle were immersed in self-deception. Garcin, a self-described man of political principle, wrapped himself in an unconvincing veneer of nobility. Estelle, a woman so callous that she could kill her own newborn daughter, claims to have sacrificed her happiness to aid her ill brother. Both exuded bad faith in that they had conjured palatable covers for darker behaviors. Only the conversation in Hell forces them to cast off self-deception and to confront their realities. Despite ample evidence of their character deficiencies, Garcin and Estelle entered Hell wondering about the injustice of their sentences. As Hell lacks mirrors, the characters perceive themselves only through the evaluations of others.

Although Garcin's account of his life fails to demonstrate any courageous acts, he nevertheless *wonders* whether he was a coward. He recognizes that he treated horribly his wife, herself a weak person. Instead of remaining faithful to his pacifist political principles, he ran for his life when confronted by the prospect of fighting in war. A deserter condemned to death, he admits that he faced his execution "miserably" and "rottenly."⁵ He understands that "a thousand" people believe that he is a coward.⁶ Garcin tries feebly to obtain Estelle's assurance that he was not a coward. But the charade arises from desperation and falls short of demonstration. He pleads for Estelle's reassurance and faith in him as necessary tools for his personal redemption. He offers to love and cherish Estelle eternally in exchange for her validation.

But Estelle is not concerned with whether Garcin is a coward. Her words cannot produce a sincere evaluation that might redeem Garcin in his own

eyes. Meanwhile Inez, jealous of the burgeoning relationship between Garcin and Estelle, taunts him: "I'm watching you, everybody's watching. I'm a crowd all by myself. Do you hear the crowd? Do you hear them muttering, Garcin? Mumbling and muttering. 'Coward! Coward! Coward!' – that's what they are saying."⁷ Inez demands that Garcin finally be honest with himself. Inez underscores that her earlier self-assessment that she was impolite and cruel may have been understated.

Garcin, though, is in bad faith because, despite the evidence, he refuses to draw the rather obvious conclusion that he was a coward. His feckless and ego-saving judgment is that the issue is "left in suspense forever."⁸ Garcin is mired in self-deception and bad faith. He fails to assume responsibility for his actions. Estelle and Inez dislodge his pretenses and stymie his craven flight from freedom. They are now the only mirror Garcin has for self-knowledge. He must judge himself through their unblinking eyes. In turn, all those condemned to Sartre's Hell are in the same situation regarding their peers.

Sartrean Hell, then, might be understood as the automatic result of human relationships, part of the human condition. Thus Garcin shrieks: "*L'Enfer, c'est les autres!*" ("Hell is other people!")⁹ Others are capable of denying our existence and transcendence by treating us as objects – fixed entities with assigned essences. Because others evaluate us without direct knowledge of our inner intentions and motives, their images of us often fail to correspond to those we have of ourselves. Yet we need their input. Within the play, the characters try to isolate themselves from others, to slide others through the grease by providing false images of themselves and disguises, to conjure clumsy attempts at intimacy, and even to instigate violence (which is especially ineffective in Hell). All such maneuvers only deepen their suffering. We may well conclude that "Hell is other people" means that we are cast upon the earth to be tortured by our colleagues. They define us, sap our power to live, and condemn us. We have no exit.

But such an interpretation rings hollow. If we are all antecedently condemned to Hell by our biological natures and required interactions, then Hell is banal. Moreover, our consignment to Hell would be a looming part of our facticity that freedom, wise choices, and deeds could not overcome. If the inescapable facts of human reality *determine* that our relationships constitute our Hell, then human freedom is not merely marginalized, but pushed right off the page. The claim that human relationships are necessarily hellish is an admission that we are not free in a crucial dimension. This is an odd position for an existentialist such as

Sartre, who otherwise preaches as an apostle of human freedom and personal responsibility.

Instead, Sartrean Hell is the result of deeply flawed personal relationships and of the attitude we harbor toward them. However, our relationships are not automatically doomed. As always, we are responsible for being in Hell and we are free to break away from our torment. If we continue to see ourselves as doomed to destructive relationships, if we see them as constituting who we are, if we are sunk in everyday-ness – because habit punctuated by diversion defines our lives – and if we are dominated by the judgments of the masses, then we are responsible for our suffering. Inez, Estelle, and Garcin are dead in the more fundamental sense that they cannot transcend their self-conceptions; they wallow in bad faith; and they spiritlessly take refuge in habits and customs. Their fate is not inevitable, not an unalterable feature of the human condition. But, to the extent that we reproduce the mindset of these three characters, we constitute the “living dead” and we create our Hell on earth.

The constant presence of others energizes Hell, which is full of meanings that are independent of our choices. To depend on the other to be your mirror is Hell. Actual mirrors cannot distort or make demands, or refuse to reflect, but other people can, and they do. In Hell, rather than controlling the world through our assignation of values, we are at the mercy of other meaning makers. As in Dante's *Inferno*, the law of *contrapasso* rules: the characters in Sartre's Hell receive the fruits of their own evil. Having practiced bad faith in life, they have in death what they had surrendered themselves to in life: they fled from their freedom in order to possess their being as a fixed entity, as an essence. Having died, they cannot now change anything and are static. They exist only in each other's gaze and have lost their subjective being, because they identify themselves with what they were in the eyes of others. One of Sartre's points is that most of us create our own Hell on earth while living. By living inauthentically and in bad faith, we manufacture our own torment.

Authenticity, then, concerns an ongoing struggle guided by sound epistemology. We are inauthentic insofar as we think and act only in accord with the expectations of others. To accept the seductions of conformity is to immerse oneself in a stultifying life of habit and routine, punctuated by diversions. We are also inauthentic to the extent that we deny our freedom and possibilities for transcendence: we force ourselves to think of ourselves as *necessarily* being who and what we presently are. Regarding the roles we play and the categories to which we belong as necessarily a part of who

we are reneges on our capability for self-transformation. We are inauthentic to the extent that we prostrate ourselves before false necessity: to regard our decisions, choices, and actions as being the appropriate, natural, inevitable result of the kind of people we are relegates our future to an allegedly unalterable nature. We are also inauthentic to the extent that we deny our facticity: we neither recognize nor accept responsibility for our past. For example, Garcin refuses to conclude that he was a coward, despite admitting that he repeatedly acted cowardly. Such bad faith secretly aspires to unburden Garcin of the anguish of accepting freedom and of assuming responsibility for the person he is becoming; it denies the basic ambiguity of human existence, the tension between facticity and transcendence.

We are, then, in bad faith when we deny what we are or are not. Self-deception and unsound epistemology are at the core of bad faith. The soldier who only and always obeys orders is posing as pure facticity and denies his transcendence. The waiter who is playing at being a waiter is likewise denying his transcendence and posing as a fixed entity. The racist, who regards the members of a particular ethnic or religious group as stereotypical, fixed entities in order to deny his own shortcomings and to indict others for his failures, is in bad faith because he flees from responsibilities. Bad faith emerges both from the tendency to think of oneself as pure facticity – as we identify wholly with our unalterable past – and from the tendency to wish oneself totally free from that past. We are all in bad faith at times.

Some human beings avoid the anguish of choice by refusing to engage themselves. They shuck off responsibility and take refuge in the dominant social ideas and practices. Habit and custom – fixed orientations to the past – assume privilege of place. Here Sartre joins thoughts with Dante, whose vestibule of Hell is reserved precisely for such cowards.

As always, Sartre offers hope. Our lives consist of our choices and actions – our expressions of freedom. Our dreams, hopes, fantasies, and the like are at most incidental to the people we are becoming. We are all condemned to be free; we are not all antecedently condemned to Sartrean Hell. Our lives are framed in an ongoing struggle between authenticity and bad faith. Although choosing from a context – our facticity and our circumstances – we have the power to reimagine and remake our contexts. At least while we are alive.

For Sartre, we are authentic to the extent that we accept reality and assume our freedom. The process requires a radical conversion, kindled by profound experiences of anguish. Anxiety reminds us that we are without

excuses, but also without ultimate justifications; it reminds us that we must decide our future in confrontation with possibilities. We know we are free because of our experience of anxiety. Freedom is the burden we bear for our choices. Our actions concern not only our interests; they affect wider society, even the whole of humanity. Self-conscious choices are commitments that mold the people we are becoming. We must pursue interests, make commitments, and invest our energy in projects as our way of creating meaning through action. We attain no fixed final goals, but, if Sartre is correct, such a life is more authentic than not. To lead an intense, mostly authentic life, then, is a worthy human goal. We should all be so fortunate as to attain that end.

Dante's Ten Existential Lessons

To regard Dante and Sartre as philosophical twins would be zany. Whereas Dante's *Inferno* literally accepts Hell, Sartre's depiction in *No Exit* is only a metaphor for inauthentic earthly living. Whereas Dante unequivocally accepts the Divine, Sartre unequivocally accepts only earthly life. Whereas Dante gratefully embraces an inherently meaningful cosmos, Sartre relishes the opportunities afforded by an inherently meaningless world. The list of differences could be extended considerably.

However, when judged only in terms of how human beings ought to live their lives on earth, numerous points of agreement between Dante and existentialism sparkle. I'll call these Dante's ten existential lessons for leading a good human life.

1 *We define ourselves through our choices and decisions*

For Dante, unlike for existentialist philosophers, human beings embody a natural telos: the goal of spiritual purification and reunification with the divine. But, like the existentialists, Dante does not claim that human beings embody an antecedently fixed essence. We must define ourselves through our choices and decisions, which reflect our exercises of freedom. Our goal must be won through the process of living artfully. We are responsible for the people we are becoming. Facile excuses, ego-saving rationalizations, and denials of responsibility are all too common, but unhelpful. Assuming a transcendent world of perfect substantive justice, Dante is confident that we will all receive precisely what we deserve. Lacking belief in a transcendent

world, existentialism makes no such guarantees; although in a sense we will get what we deserve on earth, as our choices and actions rebound to mold our characters. Neither Dante nor the existentialists exonerate individuals from responsibility on the basis of their starting position in society, their early socialization, or the vicissitudes of outrageous fortune. For better or for worse, both Dante and the existentialists highlight human freedom (transcendence) over genetic endowments and social circumstances (facticity). At the end of our lives, Dante and the existentialists jointly insist that we are responsible for the lives we have led and for the people we have become. Sartre's overly simplified but still profound slogan "No excuses" could just as easily have been uttered by the Florentine poet.

Dante is utterly convinced that we can connect to enduring value, that the transcendental world is rational and just, and that our lives attain an ultimate culmination; whereas secular existentialism contends that human beings have no fixed final end and that our lives are thoroughly finite. But both sides agree that, for human beings, the process of earthly living is self-definition through the exercise of freedom. We are completely responsible for those matters that fall under our control. Both Dante and the existentialists are convinced that the most important matters – those pertaining to the construction of the self – are under our control. No excuses!

2 *Soul-crafting is our most important project*

Moreover, the ongoing process of soul-crafting is the paramount human project for both Dante and the existentialists. That the two parties differ radically on the final end of this process must not obscure their agreement on the essential point that we must never lose sight of the value of soul-crafting.

For Dante, soul-crafting involves spiritual purification in confrontation with temptation, suffering, and human fallibility. No light matter is at stake: our flourishing on earth and our fate in the afterlife depend on the outcome of this struggle. For (secular) existentialists, soul-crafting involves forging a worthy character in confrontation with human weakness, the inclination to make excuses, and the comfort of inauthentic living. Again, no light matter is at stake: our flourishing on earth depends on our success at living a life that is authentic for the most part and avoids major self-deceptions. We become what we choose and what we do.

For example, Nietzsche sketches the process of soul-crafting in terms of higher human types. They represent the full process of Nietzschean

becoming – recurrent construction, deconstruction, reimagination, and re-creation. To prepare as much as to approximate a higher human type, we must pass through the “three metamorphoses” of discipline, defiance, and creation. The spirit, like a camel, flees into the solitude of the desert to bear enormous burdens (the process of socialization and the construction of the self); the spirit, like a lion, must transform itself into a master, a conqueror who releases its own freedom by destroying traditional prohibitions (the process of deconstruction of the self and liberation from the past); but the lion cannot create new values, so the spirit must transform itself into a child, whose playful innocence, ability to forget, and capability for creative games signals the spirit's willing its own will (the process of re-imagination and re-creation of the self).¹⁰

The texture and shadings of Nietzschean transcendence, eternity, and world creation are much different from religious versions of these features. The focus is on this world, the premises are cosmic meaninglessness and a tragic view of life, eternity is recurrent flux, and transcendence is the process of socialization, destruction, reimagination, and re-creation. In sum, Nietzschean redemption is nothing but a response to the lack of religious salvation, a message of affirmation to nudge away the chaos arising from the awareness that “God is dead.” Cosmic congratulations will not spring forth, but higher human types, who embody the proper attitudes, do not need any.

Nietzsche's grand individualism, however, is dangerous. Physicians understand that insecurity, a relentless striving for achievement, chronic impatience, intense competitiveness, and deep hostility increase bodily stress and their presence is the best predictor of several diseases. These characteristics are much more likely to be embodied by people alienated from others than by people intimately connected to others. The path to health, wisdom, and joy is reached by broadening one's boundaries and widening one's subjectivity. Moral of the story: our inner deconstructions, reimaginings, and re-creations must ultimately invigorate the quality of our participation in the external world. Otherwise internal explorations are tepid exercises in abstraction and narcissism. Are Nietzschean relationships robust enough to ensure mental and physical health?

In any event, the parallel between Dante and an existentialist such as Nietzsche is created by their joint concern for the human art of soul-crafting in a context where everything is at stake and nothing is guaranteed. Embedded in the vortex of everyday tasks and activities, human beings, too often unconsciously, relinquish the paramount project of their lives. Typically, we expend too little of our conscious effort and we reflect too

infrequently on crafting our souls. Dante anticipates existentialism when he demands that we explicitly and vigorously attend to this matter.

3 *Authenticity is required for human flourishing*

Dante does not use anything like the term “authenticity.” But his emphasis on human freedom; avoiding self-deception; taking responsibility for one’s choices and deeds; reflecting upon one’s mortality; self-consciously crafting one’s soul; rejecting facile excuses for inappropriate conduct; and parlaying suffering and adversity into practical advantage – all prefigure existential themes. Dante sketches how to live authentically in what he takes to be an inherently meaningful cosmos. His position diverges from that of modern secular existentialism in the matter of whether the cosmos is inherently meaningful. But both Dante and the existentialists agree on the broader framework of what authentic living requires; they differ stronger on the details because of their divergent views on the fundamental nature of the cosmos.

For example, Albert Camus provides an alternative sketch of living authentically in what he takes to be an inherently meaningless cosmos.¹¹ Camus argues that human beings desperately crave for inherent value, meaning, and rationality, but discover only a neutral, meaningless, indifferent cosmos. The enormous gap between human needs and an unresponsive universe is the summit of absurdity. Once we recognize the absence of a master plan and the absurdity of our existence, we underscore our own insignificance, our alienation, our lack of ultimate hope. Our acts are ultimately futile. The absurd is not a philosophical concept but a lived experience. Camus concludes that we cannot transcend or destroy the absurd, but we can forge and manifest our characters through our response to it.

Camus’s account oscillates between two descriptions of how human beings might create meaning and live authentically. The first way is by meeting our fate with scorn and rebellion. Camus’s preferred authentic response requires an awareness of the absurd: living life in the face of our fate, affirming life through rebellion, maximizing life’s intensity, and dying unreconciled. Relentlessly confronting his or her fate; refusing to yield, rejecting psychological crutches; embracing no doomed hopes for release; and creating a fragile meaning through endless rebellion – the existential hero soldiers forward.

Fueled by resentment and bravado, the existential hero refuses to bend or to beg for relief. We should not live within a perspective from which our lives are insignificant; we should revel in our hardness and endurance.

We can create virtues out of contempt, pride, and strength. Like a stubborn army recruit sentenced to dig continually and fill the same hole all over again, the existential hero finds victory in his or her refusal to seek the consolations of ordinary human beings. The hero will neither admit defeat nor yield. The hero lays a patina of defiance on extraordinary mental toughness. The hero's attitude is a monument to the human spirit: authenticity leavened by indefatigability.

The image invokes mixed blessings. Some of us will admire such defiance as it distances the existential hero from typical human reactions. The hero has seemingly proved himself or herself superior to peers, most of whom will be unable to fight the good fight while consciously accepting the human condition. However, other people will not embrace the existential hero's self-styled martyrdom and victimization. Fueled by resentment, utterly detached from commitment beyond rebellion, intolerant of lesser responses, and keenly aware of his punishment, the hero embodies a destructive romanticism.

Camus offers a second description of how human beings might create meaning and live authentically: they may bask in the immediacy of their life, engage in the process of living to the fullest extent, and immerse themselves in the textures of experience. We should avert our gaze from questions of what we are accomplishing by hurling ourselves into our tasks with gusto. We must pay close attention to the textures of our journey. By luxuriating in the process of life and by living in the present, to the extent possible, we internalize and transform our fate. For those who are thoroughly engaged in their tasks, the meaning of their lives is single-minded engagement. From this perspective, we are too busy and too fascinated with the wonders surrounding our journey to focus on destructive emotions such as contempt and defiance.

The best experiences of flow, though, are episodic and unique. We cannot live our entire lives "in the moment" even if we wanted to. The temporary loss of a sense of self, total immersion in the project at hand, and suspension of our awareness of time energize our spirits. At their best, flow experiences add complexity and nuance to our selves. The risk, however, is dehumanization through inadequate reflection. By operating solely from a personal perspective, without a robust sense of past and future, and oblivious to other possibilities, a perpetually engaged flowmeister could become less human. Perhaps such a person would be relatively happy, innocently contented, or simply too engaged to assess his or her condition. Nevertheless, flowmeisters risk dehumanization as their givenness destroys their

transcendence. Such people work busily in their chains, but do not recognize how they remake their context.

An important message lies at the heart of the image. Human beings too often project into the future while immersed in the everyday-ness and routines of life. We ignore the textures of the immediacy of life as we busily fulfill our daily schedules and fantasize about a better future. In the meantime much that is valuable in life seeps through our fingers. Even if total immersion in the flowmeister image is dehumanizing, a dose of it is healthy, given the structure of our lives.

4 *Vice is its own punishment*

That bad things sometimes happen to good people and good things happen to bad people seems uncontested. In response, Eastern spiritualists invoke the notion of karma: bad things happen only to those who deserve them; although it appears at times that bad things happen to good people, in fact those seemingly good people are working off their karmic debt from past lives. The doctrine of karma, in concert with a belief in reincarnation, allows the conclusion that earthly life is, after all, rational and just.

Neither Dante nor the existentialists accept the doctrine of karma. Whereas Dante was convinced that perfect rationality and justice would be realized only in the afterlife, secular existentialism is equally convinced that the cosmos is benignly indifferent to human needs and that no afterlife awaits us. Yet Dante and the existentialists insist that vice is its own punishment.

For Dante, the seven capital vices deeply affect a person's character regardless of how fortune and other people respond. We become our sins in that our souls reflect the nature of our deeds. Regardless of how other people perceive us and of how luck favors us, who and what we are is an objective matter, determined by the way we exercise our freedom – what we choose and what we do. For Dante, although a fuller dispensation of justice occurs in the afterlife, we do reap what we sow on earth. Thus arrogance distorts and amplifies the self; alienates us from salutary human communities; and renders us empty and self-absorbed. Envy simmers in its own resentment; diminishes the self; and deepens our sense of inadequacy. Wrath wallows in spite; severs us from righteous elements in the community; and hardens our hearts. Sloth begins in joyless apathy and blossoms into hopelessness and muted self-absorption. Avarice fastens us onto a pendulum of frustration and relegates us to a quicksand of rapacious desire; we ignore the interests of others when we should not, and we become captive to our

own insatiability. Gluttony, understood as excessive self-indulgence, diverts us from noble pursuits; weakens the resolve of our wills; and promotes unnecessary suffering. Lust replaces the human need for intimacy and bonding with the yearning to satisfy immediate cravings. As such, lust distances us from loving the proper things in the appropriate measure.

Accordingly, Dante is firmly convinced that vice carries its own punishment; our characters are formed and reflected by the way we exercise our freedom; and the condition of our characters is an objective matter. Indeed, the punishments Dante conjures in Hell and Purgatory are metaphors for what sinners have already made of themselves while living. The afterlife reflects infallibly what sinners have become through their choices and acts. For Dante, the law of *contrapasso* operates on earth, not merely in the afterlife.

In that sense, Dante prefigured an existential theme. For example, in Sartre's *No Exit*, the Hell depicted is not literal. Instead Sartre describes how many people, through their choices and deeds, create their own Hell on earth. As a secular existentialist, Sartre put no stock in an afterlife. By living inauthentically, wallowing in bad faith, immersing ourselves in received opinions, fleeing from responsibility, and the like, we forge our characters in feckless fashion. For Dante, Christian vices bring their own punishments; for Sartre, existentialist vices do the same. Similarly, for Nietzsche, to live as a "last man" – whose central interests revolve around trivial pursuits, a life of comfort, and social conformity – is to craft one's soul pathetically; for Heidegger, to take solace in *das Man* – seeing myself as a member of a generic type and submerging myself into the crowd – is to manufacture one's own craven existence; for Camus, to grasp for psychological crutches and to remain in denial about the human condition is to supplicate oneself before illusion. In all cases, existentialists regard these behaviors as the worst human vices, which engender their own punishments. For Dante and for the existentialists, to flunk the test of soul-crafting is to fail life. Regardless of how fortune responds to us and how others perceive us, we are in the process of becoming certain people, with particular characters that are forged from the way we exercise our freedom.

5 *Self-deception nurtures vice*

Dante's Hell includes a host of sinners whose self-deception constituted or promoted their vices. Of course, the most infamous of this group is Francesca. She deceives herself that lust is love; that her (mis)reading of a romance novel underwrote her actions; that reason is defenseless when

confronted by strong desire; and that she is not responsible for her misdeeds. Francesca is one of several cases where self-deception abets wrongdoing. In general, for Dante, self-deception is a major cause of why we too often love the wrong objects, or love the right objects in inappropriate measure. Once again, Dante anticipated an existential theme.

For example, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) gave to existentialism the terminology of authenticity. He described inauthentic human living as distinguished by wrongly denying freedom and succumbing to false ideas of inevitability. He suggested at least five, partially overlapping, ways in which I might be living inauthentically, denying my individuality.¹² For Heidegger, living inauthentically is the greatest human vice and various forms of self-deception are its most common cause.

I am *sunk in everyday-ness* if I live in the “they” and consider myself as *das Man* – which applies roughly to generic humankind; thinking and acting in accord with “what one does” or “what people do”; subjugating myself to the mass of others; regarding myself as a member of a kind or type. If I accept the seductions of conformity, then a banal life of habit and routine, punctuated by diversions, follows. A particular example of this is distancing myself from any reflection on my mortality. If I recognize in the abstract that all human beings are mortal, but I insist that my death has nothing to do with me now, then I prevent myself from consciously and continually creating who I will be. Heidegger calls this a mark of *falling*.

I am *denying my freedom and transcendence* if I think of myself as *necessarily* being who and what I am. The act of regarding the roles I play and the categories to which I belong as a necessary part of who I am denies my capability of transforming who I am.

I am *kneeling before false necessity* if I take my decisions, choices, and actions as being the appropriate, natural, inevitable result of the kind of person I am. Doing so relegates my future to my unalterable nature.

I am *clinging to fixity* if I accept that I have a fixed, unalterable essence. Doing so denies my transcendence – my freedom and capability of transforming who I am – and overly empowers my facticity – my givenness, aspects of me that cannot be changed, such as my birthdate, biological inheritance, birth parents, and the like.

I am *settling for chatter* if the overwhelming bulk of my conversation with others centers on small talk, babble, gossip, and shop. I am merely squandering time in non-threatening ways. I avoid profound issues such as politics, religion, philosophy, and race because discussing such topics

jeopardizes my acceptance by *das Man*. In sum, *das Man*, necessity, fixity, fallenness, and chatter are the standard bearers for inauthentic living.

For Heidegger, authentic human living focuses on transcendent self-creation in the context of one's facticity. I must *recognize my uniqueness* and not identify as a member of a kind or type. I must embrace *consciousness of my particular death* by heightening my awareness of my mortality instead of regarding mortality in the abstract, as universally pertinent. I must *embrace my freedom* by concentrating on the decisions, choices, and actions that constitute my life and help form my self. I must *shape my future in context*, by denying that I am a fixed essence, by accepting the limits of my facticity, and by understanding my transcendent possibilities. I must *appreciate the contingency of kinds and types* by viewing them as accidental memberships subject to reimagining and revision. Although none of us is entirely authentic or inauthentic, we differ in degree, and those differences distinguish the quality of our being.

For Heidegger, as for Dante, the forms of self-deception are numerous and its results are dire.

6 *Commitment and conviction are required for crafting the soul*

Dante invents the vestibule of Hell for those without passion, decisiveness, or conviction. They refused to take a stand between virtue and vice during their earthly lives, so they are now compelled to race forever without purpose. They are rejected equally by both Hell and Heaven. Being in the vestibule, they have no hope of transcending their meaningless activity. Shunning vigorous commitment and lacking deep passion while on earth, the neutrals are now stung repeatedly by insects. Having refused, in existentialist terms, to create a robust self on earth, they brought about their disgraceful eternity. As with all punishments in Hell, the sentences of those condemned reflect their earthly lives, or, in this case, their refusal to commit to crafting a substantive life.

The vast horde of indecisive neutrals remains nameless: this is a just response to their nondescript lives. The neutrals sought personal safety over commitment to principle. Stark in their despair, the indecisive neutrals run futilely after a banner that may symbolize a leader or a firm conviction or a connection to enduring value. Dante the author invented the vestibule of Hell for cowardly "nowhere people," who merited neither praise nor blame. Cravenly fleeing from an authentic existence and remaining agnostic

about value, they deserve the disgraceful vacuity of their eternity. It is striking that Dante depicted a vestibule of Hell for the cowardly, because Christian doctrine does not include such a reference. Again, Dante heralds the existential theme that intense commitment and robust conviction are required for authentic living.

Nietzsche provides a striking image of soul-crafting. His desiderata for higher human types include the ability to marginalize, but not eliminate, negative and destructive impulses within oneself and to transfigure them into joyous affirmation of all aspects of life. The best among us will understand and celebrate the radical contingency, finitude, and fragility of ourselves, our institutions and the cosmos itself. They will regard life itself as fully and merely natural, as embodying no transcendent meaning or value. They will harbor little or no resentment toward others or toward the human condition; confront the world in immediacy; and with a sense of vital connection. Higher human types will refuse to avert their gaze from a tragic worldview and, instead, will find value not in happiness conceived as pure pleasure uncontaminated by pain and suffering, but in the inherent activities and processes themselves. They will refuse to supplicate themselves before great people of the past but, instead, they will accept the challenge to go beyond these exemplars. They will give style to their character by transforming their conflicting internal passions into a disciplined and dynamic unity. Higher human types facilitate high culture by sustaining a favorable environment for the rise of other great individuals. They strive for excellence through a self-overcoming that honors the recurrent flux of the cosmos as they refuse to accept a "finished" self as dispositive of personal identity. Most important, they celebrate the ongoing process of human existence – release from the tasks described here is found only in death. Given the human condition, high energy is more important than a final, fixed goal. The mantra of "challenge, struggle, overcoming, and growth," animating and transfiguring perpetual internal conflict, replaces prayers for redemption to supernatural powers.¹³

Regardless of how we might evaluate Nietzsche's image, we cannot deny that his vision, like that of Dante, celebrates the importance of intense commitment and conviction for progressive soul-crafting.

7 *Suffering can be redemptive*

For Dante the author, writing the *Commedia* was, among other things, to participate in a redemptive process, a coming to grips with his own shortcomings and a struggle for possible remedies. For Dante the pilgrim,

participating in the sins of penitents in Purgatory was a necessary part of purifying his soul, in preparation for Paradise. Following established Christian doctrine, Dante deeply appreciated the redemptive power of suffering. He understood keenly that a pristine world of pleasure would bring no glad tidings for the development of human character. Dante could easily have embraced the slogan “No pain, no gain,” especially when applied to mental and spiritual transformation.

With its emphasis on how the experiences of dread, angst, anxiety, and the absurd nurture insight, existentialism underscores the power of suffering. For example, Nietzsche argues that the will to power is not fulfilled unless it confronts struggle, resistance, and opposition. Pursuing power, in the sense of increasing one's influence and strength, requires intentionally and actually finding obstacles to overcome. Indeed the will to power is a will to the precise activity of struggling with and overcoming obstacles. Because suffering and pain attend the experience of such struggle, a robust will to power must desire suffering. The resulting paradox is that the fulfillment of the will to power – the overcoming of resistance – results in dissatisfaction when the struggle has (temporarily) concluded. The will to power actually requires obstacles to the satisfaction of its specific desires because, beyond specific desires, the will to power has a more fundamental desire: to struggle with, and to overcome, obstacles. In sum, the will to power deeply desires resistance to the satisfaction of its own specific desires. Accordingly, it cannot embrace final serenity or permanent fulfillment. The satisfaction of one specific desire brings both fulfillment – a feeling of increased strength and influence – and dissatisfaction – as resistance has been overcome and is no longer present. Only endless striving and continual conquests fuel a robust will to power.¹⁴

Nietzsche, then, embraces the criterion of power: exertion, struggle, and suffering are at the core of overcoming obstacles, and human beings experience and truly feel their power only through overcoming obstacles. Higher human types joyfully embrace the values of power, while “last men,” Nietzsche's male-gendered notion of embodied banality, and utilitarian philosophers extol the values of hedonism.

The highest ambitions of last men are comfort and security. Last men are an extreme case of herd mentality: habit, custom, indolence, egalitarianism, self-preservation, and muted will to power prevail. As seekers only of comfort, security, survival, and conformity, last men lack deep convictions, inspiring projects, or significant purpose. Accordingly, they embody none of the inner tensions and conflicts that spur transformative action. They take no risks, lack convictions, avoid experimentation, and seek only bland existence.

Nietzsche's tragic view of life understands fully the inevitability of human suffering, the flux that is the world, and the routinized character of daily life. Yet it is in our response to tragedy that we manifest either a heroic or a herd mentality. We cannot rationalize or justify the inherent meaninglessness of our suffering. We cannot transcend our vulnerability and journey to fixed security. We are contingent, mortal beings, and we will remain so.

A happiness worth pursuing is based on experiencing and expressing human creative power. Instead of taking refuge in an easy, secure, comfortable life, the best among us will achieve creative greatness through confrontation with and overcoming of formidable suffering. On this view, suffering is not evil as such, but it provides opportunities for the only life worth pursuing. Imagination and effort give pain and suffering an important role in a good life. While a life of overwhelming misery precludes happiness and prevents the robust creativity that Nietzsche prizes, a worthwhile happiness resides in passionate response to an appropriate amount and range of suffering.

We are tempted to fantasize a painless life, devoid of suffering and loss. Such a life is more easily invoked than fully imagined. A life without pain, suffering, and tragedy is not human. Completeness, self-sufficiency, and the absence of suffering are unreliable criteria for human happiness. No single accomplishment or event is capable of saturating our spirits once and forever. And that is good news. For Nietzsche, human life requires continuous activity, self-transformation, and exertion, not a perfection that ends the journey. A worthy happiness must be earned through choices, actions, and direct confrontation with suffering. The sense of having earned our satisfactions elevates our spirits and partially defines the only happiness worth pursuing.

Most importantly, we are free to create ourselves: we bear no antecedent duties to external authority; we are not under the yoke of preestablished goals. We need not recoil squeamishly from the horrors of existence; instead, we can rejoice in a passionate life of perpetual self-overcoming. Art can validate our creativity; laughter can ease our pain and soften our pretensions.

Of course, Dante does not subscribe to the radical contingency of human life; instead, he joyfully embraces antecedent duties and pre-established goals. For him, struggle and conquest concern the ongoing personal quest for spiritual purity. Dante's process, unlike Nietzsche's, embraces a fixed context and aims at a given human telos. As always, Dante and existentialism part company on those foundational themes. However, both Dante and existentialism profoundly appreciate that struggle with and conquest of

challenges, obstacles, and suffering are critical for the paramount human project of soul-crafting.

8 *Faith is a must or your life is a bust*

At the beginning of the *Inferno*, the pilgrim remembers how he found himself in a deep, dark, dense wilderness whose savagery mirrored his own forlornness and hopelessness when he was about 35 years old.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, chè la diritta via era smarrita. Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte che nel pensier rinnova la paura! Tant' è amara che poco è più morte ["Midway along the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path. How hard it is to speak of what it was like, that savage forest, dense and difficult, which even in recall renews my fear; a bitter place! Death is hardly bitterer"]. (II, 1–7)

The pilgrim must visit Hell in order to begin his own redemption. Having lost hope, he is severed from the theological virtues that define salvation. By observing and interacting with those who never developed or regained faith, hope, and love, the pilgrim can deepen his understanding of the inexorable connection between despair and the corruption of the soul. Without faith, hope must perish, and the soul automatically shrivels. Theologically, this is spiritual death. The denizens of Hell abandoned all faith and hope on earth; they now reap in the afterlife what their lives embodied.

At first glance, the fact that Dante celebrated faith is a yawner. His religious convictions and the narratives, myths, and rituals that sustained those convictions supplied meaning, a sense of order, and answers to the fundamental questions of life: Who am I? What is my destiny? Why am I here? How should I live? What does it all mean? Dante's faith nourished him and soothed his doubts in times good and bad.

Kierkegaard celebrated the knight of faith, the person who sometimes renounced universal, ethical norms in service of a higher calling. He understood the danger of doing so and the lack of guarantees that the leap of faith required in order to cast aside the general demands of reason and of the moral law. Kierkegaard, though, was convinced that such risks promised great rewards for those human beings willing to take them in service to the religious life.

Not all faith, though, is religious. Believing in ourselves, accepting ourselves unconditionally, and being deeply committed to projects that transcend our own concerns all require faith. Faith can be defined more generally as commitment, conviction, and action in the face of radical uncertainty. Nietzsche's highest value, *amor fati*, a maximally affirmative attitude toward life, required faith. Neither he nor anyone else can prove, deductively, that such an attitude is of the greatest objective value. On Nietzsche's own standards, this is impossible. His highest value requires instead an act of faith.

Nietzsche's highest value, *amor fati*, exemplified and was reinforced by great creative projects; sharp understanding of the tragic dimensions of life; acceptance of the world as it is; enthusiastic engagement in the recurring process of self-evaluation, self-deconstruction, reimagination, and re-creation; the ongoing transformation of values; and willingness to live our lives innumerable times over, in the same sequence and without editing out disturbing events. The greatest good is the maximally affirmative attitude toward life, the values it exudes, the creative projects it undertakes, and the obstacles it vanquishes. A worthwhile happiness is often, but not invariably, an accompanying benefit.

We should be drawn to life so powerfully as to celebrate it in all its dimensions, sufferings, and joys alike. We should not seek to edit out tragedy or revise the past. For Nietzsche, suffering does not have an antecedent negative value. The value of suffering or joy or any state in between is mostly up to us. Influenced by aesthetic values, he advises us to evaluate our lives in their entirety. To edit out the pain from our life is to want to be a different person, which betrays a lack of love for our life and for life generally. To desire to live our life as it has been, time and time again, is the psychological test. If we had full knowledge of our lives, only the robust would pass this test. The inner power that either attracts us to life or repels us from it is a person's measure. The greater the attractive power, the greater the person who embodies it. As his highest value, Nietzsche's *amor fati* is not derived from more basic reasons or rational argument. Those who are most strongly attracted to our world, the only world for Nietzsche, will find it most valuable.

Nietzsche's attitude of *amor fati* is not achieved through rational argument. Instead, it focuses on the rapture of being alive. *Amor fati* is an experience animated by faith, not by cognitive discovery. *Amor fati* demands high energy and robust engagement. First, human beings have the freedom to order their interior life, their responses, to the thought of leading a life

worthy of being repeated, in every detail, over and over again. Nietzsche's notion of eternal recurrence embodies this theme. While lower types adopt passive nihilism, higher types will embrace the entirety of life and will view the lack of inherent cosmic meaning and infinite redemption as liberation from external authority. Even the Stoics admitted that there are things that nature cannot control: our attitudes toward events in the world. Second, unlike the Stoics, Nietzsche glorifies the passions as robust manifestations of the will to power. To become who you are, to overcome yourself, and to destroy, reimagine, and re-create require an active nihilism that elevates the present into a fated eternity. Third, higher types will recognize that passive nihilism or fatalism rests upon the life-denying illusion that the "individual" is separate from the world. On the contrary, the thought of eternal recurrence underscores the individual's complete immersion in the world of becoming: cosmic fate is not external to us, it is us. Eternal recurrence is the test determining whether one truly loves life. Would you live the life you now lead, in all its details, over and over again? The test can make a difference to your life, as you may ask now and in the future: "Does this action merit infinite repetition? Am I becoming the kind of person whose life deserves to be lived repeatedly?" The thrust of the test is to affirm life in all its dimensions, to love that we are alive, to aspire to excellence. Instead of imputing a crude determinism to the acceptance of eternal recurrence, we can view acceptance as a free act: affirming the immediate moment, the present, willing its return and the return of every other "moment." By visualizing the present moment in terms of eternity, Nietzsche challenges us to embrace the ceaseless world of becoming, in which eternity does not freeze our choices but, instead, fulfills the present with endless possibility. The solution to the problem of living the good life, then, is grounded in attitude, not in cognition.

Living a robust life requires faith of some sort. Even the most pious worshipers at the shrine of reason must admit that reason cannot prove its own standards noncircularly; reason cannot prove itself. Even the idolators of reason require faith. Part of the human condition is the lack of certain answers to our most pressing questions about life. Religious believers accept a series of answers, but faith is at the core of their acceptance. Nonbelievers in the religious answers must develop other values, principles, and narratives, which can sustain their connection to the life force. A maximally affirmative attitude toward life also has faith at its core.

Camus once claimed, (over-)dramatically, that suicide was the only genuine philosophical question. For Dante the author, those who commit

suicide, with only a few exceptions, are consigned to the second ring of the seventh circle of Hell. From a purely practical vantage point, Dante gives Camus an answer: you should not commit suicide unless you yearn for eternal damnation.

More profoundly, both Dante and secular existentialism could agree that the lack of faith and hope creates a hell on earth. For Dante, the law of *contrapasso* declares that Hell is merely the eternal continuation of the kind of life of the soul that reprobates molded during their earthly existences: Hell makes transparent what was hitherto obscure. For existentialists, human beings without faith and hope in life – fueled, for example, by Nietzsche's *amor fati*, or Camus's attitude of rebellion or commitment to reveling in immediate experience – become unwitting collaborators in their own spiritual impoverishment. Neither Dante nor the secular existentialists require appeals to punishment in an afterlife to locate the horror of despair. After considering the question of suicide, Camus concludes that it is typically a cowardly, inauthentic response to the human condition.

While Camus insists that we should discard the false hope of being rescued from the human condition, his prescriptions for resolute action in the face of what he takes to be the absurdity of our plight require faith and hope. Without faith and hope of a different sort, relentless rebellion and immersion in immediate experience lack all motivation.

Nietzsche disparages as lower types of human beings those who deny, or shroud themselves from, the tragic nature of life. Despite numerous philosophical differences and theological commitments, Dante, Camus, and Nietzsche join hands in declaring that faith and hope are absolute requirements for human fulfillment. (Of course, they differ as to the definition, recipe, and scope of human fulfillment.)

The fact that faith is required for living the good life is not earth-shattering news either for Dante or for the existentialists. For, without faith in something, we lose the ballast for living. Where there is no faith, there is no hope; where there is no hope, there can be no human fulfillment.

9 *We have the power to change*

Dante hammers the theme that human beings have the power to change their wrong habits, to learn to love the proper objects in the appropriate measure, and to repent over their past wrongdoing. Sincere repentance, even at the moment of death, will lift a soul out of Hell. Although Dante did not invent a twelve-step program, his embrace of human freedom and

responsibility, as well as his intense commitment to faith, coalesce comfortably with his firm conviction that salutary change is possible. We are not fixed objects whose characters are set once and forever.

For their part, the existentialists glorify human transcendence, our capability of reimagining and re-creating our characters. For example, Nietzsche insists that the good life is not found in reason, but in the passions: in aspects of life that are of ultimate concern, our creations, devotion to worthwhile causes, and commitment to projects. Our instincts and drives create our meanings. Conscious thought can obscure our creativity. Not only does Nietzsche recognize the power to change, he extols that power as crucial to worthy soul-crafting.

For Nietzsche, the meaning of life focuses on stylistic movement – graceful dancing, joyful creation, negotiating the processes of a world of flux with panache and vigor – instead of goal achievement. We cannot reach an ultimate goal. But we can develop through recurrent personal and institutional deconstruction, reimagination, and re-creation. Our exertion of our wills to power in the face of obstacles, in the knowledge of inherent cosmic meaninglessness, and with profound immersion in the immediacy of life, reflects and sustains our psychological health.

Personal and institutional overcomings will permit us to become who we are: radically conditional beings deeply implicated in a world of flux. By aspiring to live a life worthy of being infinitely repeated in all its details, we joyously embrace life for what it is and we regard it, and ourselves, as part of a grand aesthetic epic.

Whether self-mastery and self-perfection are the sole focus of the will to power, they are the prime concerns of Nietzsche's work. Neither state idolatry nor discredited supernatural images can offer human beings enduring consolations for their unresolvable existential crises. Instead, a new image of human beings is necessary.

Nietzsche promotes the individualism of the highest human types while understanding that values are initially established by people. Human beings create the value they embody by living experimentally and by nurturing an environment that propagates great people and high culture. Existence and the world are justified as aesthetic phenomena in that the highest artistic creations are great human beings themselves.

Nietzsche's new image of human beings is not projected for all, or achievable by all. His vision is an explicitly aristocratic ideal, which is pitched only to the few capable of approximating it. Greatness and genius are fragile and vulnerable: they bring about their own destruction, but arise stronger than ever.

The thrust of Nietzsche's thought is that we can formulate entirely new modes of evaluation that correspond to new, higher forms of life. The value of humanity is established by its highest exemplars and their creations. The higher human forms are extremely fragile and rare: self-control, mastery of inclinations, resisting obstacles, experimentation, and forging a unified character require recurrent destruction and re-creation of self.

We can never transcend our conditionality and the lack of inherent meaning in the world of becoming, but at least a few of us can loosen the limits of contingency, experience fully the multiplicity of our spirits, forge a coherent unity from our internal conflicts, and learn to overcome ourselves and our institutions: theoretical insight can be turned to practical advantage. The episodic rhythms of the camel (self-construction and socialization), the lion (deconstruction), and the child (reimagination and re-creation of the self) beat on.

10 *We must confront our mortality*

That human beings inevitably die is not newsworthy. But Dante anticipates the stress on a proper attitude toward death, which distinguishes much existentialist writing. For Dante, death is the ultimate, radical fact – a fact that we cannot overcome. Although he is convinced, unlike secular existentialists, that an afterlife awaits us, Dante suggests that the proper approach to death has implications for how we live. That is, our explicit awareness of death bears value by ratcheting up the intensity of our earthly choices and deeds; by highlighting the urgency of our soul-crafting; by underwriting our experience of freedom; by celebrating our individuality; by distancing us from the minor concerns that consume everyday life; and by riveting our attention to the major projects, especially soul-crafting, that make our lives meaningful, significant, and valuable. In short, for Dante, a more acute awareness of our inevitable death can energize us into appreciating our freedom and responsibility more deeply, and can make us attend more carefully to molding our destinies in the afterlife.

While secular existentialists discard the appeal to an afterlife, they, too, emphasize that a keener awareness of our mortality can energize our lives. For example, Heidegger argues that human beings are beings-toward-death. This stilted expression means that human existence is saturated by the understanding that it is finite and headed toward extinction. We suffer inevitable and recurrent anxiety because of our impending deaths. This anxiety is not merely psychological; it is not a problem we may or may not endure.

The problem is ontological; it is inseparable from human existence. Awareness of death is an immanent structure of human consciousness. Death is an ever-present potentiality, a constant foreshadowing of the future.

Human beings often deal with ontological anxiety inauthentically. We take refuge in routine, habit, and diversion as a way to forget our destiny. Or we imagine, irrationally, that death is something that happens only to others and applies abstractly to us. Or we regard death as the great disaster that we need not confront until a later, undefined moment. Such approaches are inauthentic because they falsely try to bracket, instead of confronting, ontological anxiety.

To confront ontological anxiety authentically requires continuous awareness of our destiny. Death is part of human experience and should not be denied, either explicitly or implicitly, through the strategies of bracketing. We should affirm ontological anxiety as a step toward liberation. Although we begin from the distractions of everyday-ness, we nevertheless must confront nothingness self-consciously. Heidegger takes the dread of our own nonexistence as the road to authenticity. My death is the one event of my life that no one can duplicate: it is my own and no one can understudy my role. Thus, awareness of death confers on us a sense of our own individuality. To bracket awareness of death is to renege on individuality. Awareness of death energizes life by stimulating a sense of urgency life would otherwise lack.¹⁵

Heidegger draws us to the particularities and concreteness of our experience instead of our typical definitions in public terms. He is not counseling an obsession with death, but a more authentic understanding of our own individual lives. Keen awareness of the ontological anxiety we confront in our death shakes us out of the everyday-ness of habit and diversion, which dulls our sensibilities. Our desperation can no longer be silenced. Received opinion, inherited social structures, and preexisting political institutions turn us toward stultifying conformity. But getting in touch with the anxiety spurred by impending nothingness turns us back toward authentic living. Learning to confront our death teaches us how to live as authentic individuals. The unspoken dictatorship of social conformity, the leveling tendencies of group-think, and the push and pull toward mediocrity require a strong antidote. The cost of being tranquilized is inauthenticity. The flight from mortality corrodes the spirit.

Heidegger's call to rise from everyday structures, thought, and action is inspiring. But is confronting death the answer? Other strong moods and emotions – such as love, vengeance, compassion, hate, and conviction – can awake us from dogmatic complacency. Confronting death, then, is not necessary for individuality and concreteness. Confronting death is not

always enough to elevate us above social conformity. Even direct experiences with death do not necessarily lead to authentic living. Nevertheless, Heidegger's main insights can be refashioned: sharpening our awareness of death can be one path toward more robust and authentic living; confronting death is connected to learning how to live; and tranquilized immersion in the everyday-ness of habit and diversion dulls our spirits and dishonors the narrative of our life. But we must temper Heidegger: we are more than beings-toward-death. Death is not the center of our existence.

Heidegger assumes that only the monumental can elevate the everyday-ness of human life to authenticity. Death, then, is for him a source of meaning. But how much awareness of death is liberating? Existentialists such as Heidegger are invariably dramatic. They stress dread, nausea, angst, and high anxiety as primary moods. Sometimes the drama works, sometimes it does not. In the case of awareness of death, too much concern becomes the kind of obsession and neurosis parodied in Woody Allen's films. Preoccupation with death paralyzes rather than liberates. Much human activity aims at nurturing and extending life, and at struggling against death. A healthy attitude toward death includes fully recognizing its inevitability, refusing to live less energetically, constructing our projects in ways compatible with viewing ourselves as part of a long generational chain, pursuing ideals that affirm life's possibilities, maintaining a zest for the adventures, triumphs, and failures that constitute life, and appreciating the chance to be part of human history.

I am not necessarily criticizing Heidegger. I do not think his view amounts to a neurotic obsession with death. But he tends to downplay our survival instincts and to venerate ontological anxiety in ways that invite correction. While it is true that denial of death and distraction by the routines of everyday-ness are self-defeating, and that recognizing mortality can provide opportunities for meaning, Heidegger leaves the misleading impression that *only* immersion in our finitude produces liberation. In any event, both Dante and Heidegger insist that a proper attitude toward death, confronting our own mortality, can facilitate valuable soul-crafting. To ignore our mortality – to refuse to reflect upon it and to bracket it from consciousness – is to live inauthentically.

Individualism and Community

Although he anticipates a host of existentialist themes, Dante is not the prophet of the movement. As already noted, Dante and existentialism violently disagree on a host of foundational issues: the inherent meaning of

the cosmos; the possibility of reaching a rational and just cosmos, an ultimate culmination to earthly life, and a connection to enduring value; the prospects for accessing objective answers to the deepest questions of human existence; and the like. Moreover, Dante and the existentialists disagree as to whether social relationships are crucial to our well-being and how our actions affect others.

Dante argued that a secular monarchy is required for international welfare. Only a single *imperium* with dominion over everyone can ensure world peace. A universal community, grounded in a secure peace, is required in order to maximize the human potential for perfection, happiness, and spiritual transformation. Dante celebrates the Roman imperial age, whose authority presumably flowed directly from God and not from the imprimatur of a pope. The empire flourished prior to the existence of Christian religious institutions. God endows human beings with two natural goals: happiness on earth and eternal bliss in the afterlife. Philosophy, human understanding, and exercising the moral and intellectual virtues nurture earthly happiness; while theology and spiritual learning, along with exercising faith, hope, and love, foster our ultimate end. In short, for Dante, only a universal political community and a universal religious institution can ensure human flourishing.

Dante's ideal of a divinely endorsed, universal monarchy under a single emperor would stymie papal officious intermeddling in politics, which Dante considered to be the main obstacle to peace and human flourishing. Civil discord, animated by avarice for worldly goods and most strikingly illustrated in Florence, prevented citizens from realizing their highest ends. For Dante, the only way to eliminate such avarice was to imagine a universal monarch who had nothing left to covet. Moreover, such a ruler would serve as a court of final appeal in any disagreements in his realm. Accordingly, human flourishing requires a universal peace that can be realized only through a divinely inspired universal monarch based in Rome.

In sum, Dante describes a human ideal – a unitary temporal order in which the emperor fulfills the role that the pope assumes in the church – as the universal earthly community ensuring mankind's ultimate goal. The perfection of human intellect, which is required for maximizing the good, can be attained only by the entire species, not by a single person. We then understand why Dante bristles so violently at human sins that jeopardize temporal and religious communities: such transgressions set back the entire human race. A universal human community under a single emperor is required for peace; world peace is required for the human species to attain

its highest knowledge; and attaining the highest knowledge is required for earthly and eternal fulfillment. Dante warmly embraces the notion that social relationships are critical to human flourishing and that our actions affect others.

The existentialists prize individualism and are wary of the conformist inclinations of large collectivities. For example, Sartre concludes that other people are critical for our self-understanding, and yet our personal relationships are typically problematic. Although our personal relations are not inevitably hellish, they incline in that direction. Through our choices we determine or create what we will be. We are creating ourselves according to what we think a person ought to be – our image of what we think human beings ought to be. We are responsible for what we are, and we are responsible for everyone, since we choose for mankind. We create an image of human beings as they ought to be. We confer a universal value upon our acts by deciding in accordance with the belief that all persons in *this* situation should act in *this* manner. In that sense, a larger image than merely one's self is at stake in our choices. Still, for Sartre, the community as such provides scant consolation for the individual committed to (mostly) authentic living.

Moreover, Nietzsche warns us against the leveling effects of human society, its tendencies toward mediocrity and lowest common denominator thinking. Heidegger cautions us not to be mired in the conformity of *das Man*. Existentialism, then, typically glorifies the individual who stands apart from dominant societal ideas – whereas Dante aspires to elevate certain, presumably objectively true doctrines, to universal acceptance under the aegis of the proper secular and religious authorities.

Neither Dante nor the existentialists suggest that establishing healthy communities is easy. On the contrary, we can only imagine what is required if one is to form Dante's salutary secular political monarchy – not to mention the radical reforms necessary for his ideal religious institution. Sartre is clear that – typically, although not inevitably – “Hell is other people.” A skeptic might well conclude that, by setting the bar for healthy communities so high, Dante and the existentialists underscore the major obstacle confronting widespread human flourishing.

Nevertheless, in at least ten undeniable ways, Dante, the pre-Renaissance Christian philosopher-poet, and twentieth-century existentialism share a fundamental ethical cause when they describe the recipe for living a fulfilling human life on earth. Attention must be paid when two types of philosophies that differ so radically on foundational convictions converge on practical moral matters. To pursue the good life is in part to confront the

wisdom of the tormented Florentine exile and the modern, secular existential themes he anticipated.

Personal Strategies

Dante saddles his ten existential moral lessons to his substantive Christian themes: belief in personal immortality; the Final Judgment of a providential God; a recipe of commandments and creeds specifying proper earthly behavior; commitment to a human telos; and, in sum, the principle that an ultimate culmination, connection to enduring value, and a rational, just cosmos define human existence. Dante recognizes that the ten existential moral lessons provide only a framework for the good human life. That framework must be animated by substantive convictions, choices, and actions. For Dante, such substance is readily available in Christian theology and practice.

The existentialists cannot offer such substance. They can affirm the framework; celebrate authenticity and intensity; caution about the dangers of bad faith, lack of reflection, and social conformity; and challenge us to understand and affirm the human condition and the tragic view of life. But any specific recipe for attaining the good human life, any set of substantive convictions or values applicable to everyone, would betray the underlying existential message of freedom and individuality. From an existential standpoint, such efforts are imperialistic and invariably degenerate into just another form of herd mentality. In general, secular existentialists view morality as a set of conventional, subjective values that masquerade as transcendent, objective imperatives; a series of thoroughly conditional maxims pretending to be categorical commands.

On this view, the ballast of morality is a host of inherited and invented values that falsely claim to be embedded in the fabric of the universe. If this account is correct, we create morality while wrongly claiming to have discovered it. Secular existentialists inhabit a thoroughly ambiguous, indeterminate world, wherein human actions are not underwritten by clear principles determining their moral character.

As a result, the existential paean to authenticity provides, at most, a required but not sufficient condition for the good human life. We can easily imagine a person who is existentially authentic and intense, but who, from the standpoint of conventional morality, is largely an evil person, causing much unjustified injury to others. Existentialism, then, in the final analysis condemns us to our freedom and holds us accountable for our choices and actions.

Dante's Christian prescription has a long and well-understood tradition; it requires no elaboration or clarification from me. But how might a person who rejects the underlying Christian themes that Dante presupposed go about crafting moral substance onto the existential framework?

Let's imagine someone who believes, in contrast to Dante, that the cosmic is inherently meaningless; that no personal immortality awaits us; that no human telos defines our condition; that no ultimate culmination will make sense of our lives; that we will not connect with enduring value; and that the cosmos is neither just nor rational. How might such a person use the framework that Dante and the existentialists share?

First, some values must be accepted on a combination of their power to attract our allegiance and on faith. For example, Nietzsche embraced *amor fati*, a maximally affirmative attitude toward life, as his highest value. He accepted a tragic view of life, yet chose to affirm life radically. Some instrumental reasons could support Nietzsche's decision: throwing oneself into life generally produces better results than passive resignation or defeatism. By investing our energies we are directly engaged in life and we will experience more joy in immediate experience; even if life is tragic, we can transform our relationship to it through our attitude; and the like. But such considerations fall short of constituting a proof. We still must take a leap of faith.

Second, we might choose subsidiary values according to their ability to support our maximally affirmative attitude toward life. Objects and relationships that promote health, strength, activity, and the commitment to *amor fati* itself might be recommended. Also, subsidiary values that nurture the process and products of creativity, thereby enriching *amor fati*, might well be adopted. Here the existential value of intensity – which increases our commitment to purposes, projects, and interests, thereby enhancing the process of striving and the value of accomplishments – may seem paramount. A life devoid of creativity and intimate relationships is uninspiring. (But could such a life still be worth living?)

Third, we must conjure a substantive vision of the character we aspire to become, in full awareness that final attainment is impossible and undesirable. However, we need a trajectory, an arc of self-making, to pursue. In conjuring such a vision, we should accept that our choices and actions define who we are becoming. Literally, our virtues and vices manifest and maintain our characters. In that sense, virtue is its own reward and vice is its own punishment. Although the judgments and perceptions of others will inevitably have some effect on our self-image, we are much more than merely the image other people project upon us. What substantive image of

the self should we choose? This must vary with individual temperament and potential. Surely, though, we should be wary of the wiles of the seven deadly vices.

Fourth, the project of self-crafting should be undertaken in full awareness. We must carve out time to take stock of our efforts and to evaluate our progress. The more we proceed unreflectively, the easier it is to take solace in social conformity and in the external validation gained from accepting received "wisdom."

Fifth, we should cast aside the consolation of facile excuses. Although the Sartrean slogan "No excuses!" is not literally true, we can all benefit from adopting it. The human proclivity for casting responsibility on everything and everybody other than the self is notorious. Here the existentialist warning that we must live in the ambiguity between our facticity and our possibilities for transcendence glows brightly.

Sixth, in general, we should try to see possibility where conventional wisdom declares inevitability. Perhaps generated by the need for order and fixed understandings, a strong social proclivity exists for proclaiming that certain creeds, institutions, and practices are necessary and beyond revision. We should be suspicious of such declarations and examine matters more closely, in order to detect the presence of false necessity.

Seventh, we must not sink into everyday-ness, a life of habit and routine punctuated by diversions and entertainments. Too much is at stake – the construction of our very selves. Only the antidote of reflection and awareness can counter the disease.

Eighth, and this is the most difficult one, we should learn how to turn suffering, pain, and adversity to practical advantage. In most cases, meaning and value can be wrenched, admirable character can be forged, and worthwhile responses can be conjured from difficult situations. Adversity is irredeemably bad only if we collaborate in its intrigue.

Ninth, we should believe in the power of self-transformation, at least within practical limits. We are never fixed entities, frozen in facticity. To think otherwise is a colossal self-defeating excuse. Where the will is resolute and discipline is firm, we have the power to change.

Tenth, contra Nietzsche, we should enthusiastically welcome a piece of conventional wisdom: factual inequality should not translate into moral inequality. We should straightforwardly reject Nietzsche's fatuous fantasy that the human species is justified only by its highest exemplars and the rest of us gain value only derivatively – by serving the needs and wants of our factual superiors. Yes, some of us are mentally and physically more talented

than others, but we can all strive to actualize and maximize our greatest potentials. Insofar as we earnestly pursue that task – and not at the expense of others – we can measure our success by how closely we approximate our personal ideal. Accepting this bromide of conventional morality will promote salutary human relationships and help prevent a preening individualism that takes self-making to be a purely egoistic project. We craft our souls in a social context. We must respect the similar freedom of others to pursue the same purpose vigorously. Working out the implications of this creed produces a thin but substantive veneer on the general existential framework.

Finally, we should not forget that time is precious and the Grim Reaper stalks all of us. Worse, the Grim Reaper always wins. We can only delay his triumph. The meaning of our deaths hinges on the quality of our lives. As we project toward the future, we can become more aware of the processes – not merely the outcomes – that constitute our lives. To make our activities more fulfilling, to focus our creative interest on the act of creation instead of only on the result, speeds us toward a robustly meaningful and valuable life.

Living with adequate recognition of mortality, yet responding zestfully, can vivify meaning in our lives and elevate death beyond meaningless termination. Mortality is our context, not necessarily our defeat. We need not glorify death, we need not pretend we do not fear death, but we should temper the Grim Reaper's victory by living and dying meaningfully. The narrative of human lives often continues beyond our deaths. Most human beings recognize this by consciously nurturing legacies, images, creative works, children, and projects that flourish beyond their deaths. We are aware, however, that our projects cannot endure forever, and we pursue them in that light. Death, then, does not supervene on life; it provides a context for it.

Leaving a rich legacy is not a way of achieving immortality, even though the advice “plant a tree, beget children, build a house, write a book” is sometimes taken in that vein. We are finished at death if no afterlife awaits us. But generating a legacy is a way of enriching the meaning of our lives now. Some of our projects should reach beyond our lifetimes. Guiding the next generation, creating something that has a life and identity outside of ourselves, transmitting a culture and an heritage, attending to enduring yet finite projects, and influencing the future are not ways of halting the Grim Reaper, but they are paths to meaning. This does not amount to immortality, but it does mark a life well lived. Generating rich legacies energizes faith in life, binds us to something beyond ourselves, and nurtures meaning above

narrow self-fulfillment. Approaching our life and death in such a way may even ground an accurate, positive self-appraisal of our lives, which exudes worthwhile happiness. If no afterlife or personal immortality awaits us, this must be enough to stoke the fires of our hearts and rekindle the sparks of our souls.

Secular existentialists must struggle to craft their souls in a thoroughly indeterminate world, as they manufacture meaning, significance, and value while being conscious of an uncertain destiny. Theists take solace in their faith that an ultimate culmination awaits us; a connection to enduring value is possible; and a rational, just cosmos will reveal itself. However, religious believers and nonbelievers alike must imagine Dante Alighieri smiling in Paradise, united with Beatrice and saturated with the beatific vision.

Notes and References

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Letters of Dante*, trans. and ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), "Letter to Can Grande della Scala," para. 15.
2. This chapter has been informed by Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966); Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
3. Sartre, *No Exit*.
4. *Ibid.*, 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 39.
7. *Ibid.*, 45.
8. *Ibid.*, 38.
9. *Ibid.*, 45.
10. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, "On the Three Metamorphoses."

11. Raymond Angelo Belliotti, *What Is the Meaning of Human Life?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 51–56.
12. Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
13. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, “On the Thousand and One Goals”; Part II, “On Self-Overcoming”; Part II, “On Redemption.”
14. Belliotti, *What Is the Meaning of Human Life?*, 34–35, 39, 84–85.
15. *Ibid.*, 144–146.

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