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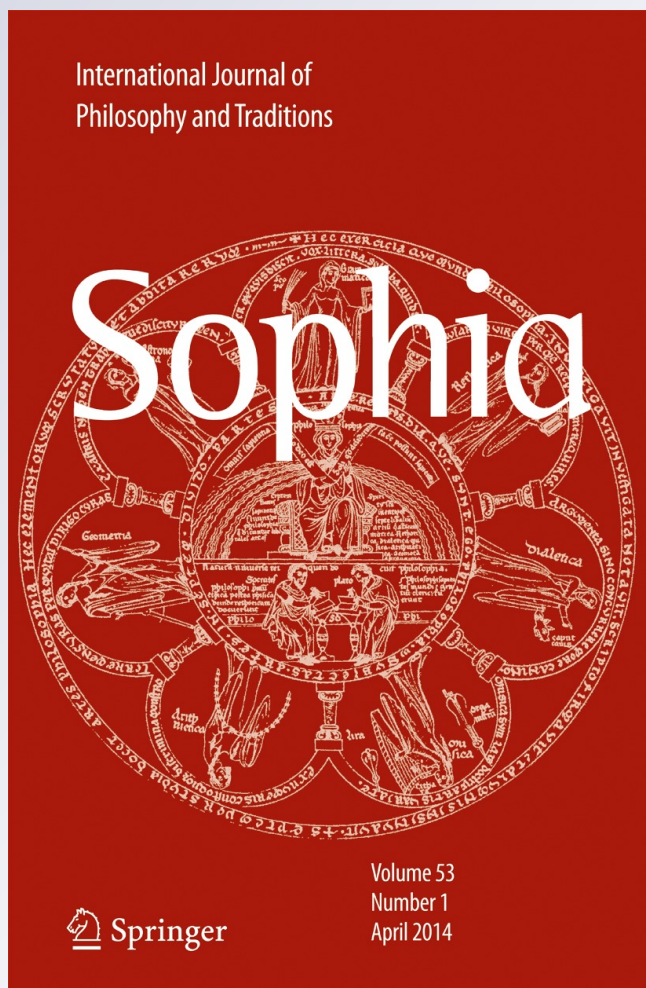
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All Philosophers Go to Hell: Dante and the Problem of Infernal Punishment

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Abstract: We discuss the philosophical problems attendant to the justice of eternal punishments in Hell, particularly those portrayed in Dante's *Inferno*. We conclude that, under Dante's description, a unique version of the problem of Hell (and Heaven) can be posed.

Keywords: *Theodicy, Divine Punishment, Damnation, Dante, Hell, Inferno, Divine Comedy*

I. Introduction

Dante famously provides the following inscription over the gates of Hell.

Through me the way into the grieving city;
Through me the way into eternal sorrow;
Through me the way among the lost people.
Justice moved my high maker;
Divine power made me,
Highest wisdom, and primal love.
Before me were no things created
Except eternal ones, and I endure eternal.
Abandon every hope you who enter.
(*Inferno* 3.1-9)

The problem we will address concerns the conjunction of three features of infernal punishment mentioned in this inscription: First, Hell is a place in which justice and eternal suffering are linked. Second, Hell is not simply an expression of God's justice, but of "primal love." Finally, Hell is a place where there is no hope.

In offering our reflections on the problems posed by the justice of Hell, we will borrow heavily from Dante's *Inferno* to argue our case. However, at the outset, a caveat is in order. Our appropriation of Dante's imagery is not here offered as an interpretation of what Dante himself thought about the justice of Hell. Dante's depictions of the punishments of the damned may be intended as illustrations of his theological convictions, but they may also be intended primarily as a means of revealing important dimensions of the nature of *temporal* justice. Our point in this essay is not to adjudicate debates within the field of Dante studies regarding interpretations of *l'altissimo poeta*. Rather, since Dante's depictions of the damned are both famous and evocative, we will draw upon his images in order to discuss problems that we see in the alleged justice of the eternality of infernal punishment.

With this caveat in mind, the theological conception upon which Dante's figurations of infernal suffering depends is captured by the following five propositions about the nature of infernal punishment:

1. The sins of the damned are a product of free will (though the damned may have "lost the good of the intellect" [3.18]).
2. The sins of the damned are infinite.¹
3. The sufferings of the damned in Hell are infinite, in the sense that the damned suffer eternally (or, at least, perduringly) and unchangingly.²
4. The sufferings of the damned in Hell are proportionate to their crimes.
5. The punishments of the damned are warranted under a retributive conception of justice.

On the face of it, these commitments seem consistent, though we will have to provide at least a brief explanation as to how the sins of the damned could be considered "infinite." Moreover, if the sins of the damned are infinite, it is plausible that the punishments of the

¹ Despite the fact that this seems a counter-intuitive commitment, it is a requirement for a theodicy of Hell based on retribution. As James Wetzel (2002) notes, without the commitment of infinite harm or sin committed by the sinners, "a retributively conceived Hell would be a theological disaster area" (377).

² Or, to be precise, the sufferings are unchanging prior to the general resurrection. In fact, in *Inferno* 6.103-11, Virgil reminds the pilgrim (with an oblique reference to Aristotelian metaphysics) that the intensity of infernal suffering will increase after the general resurrection, at which "time" even sinners will get their bodies back and so be forced to endure a greater intensity of suffering than is possible for their shades. See also *Purgatorio* 25 for Statius' explanation of the quasi-embodiment of souls as "shades" prior to the general resurrection.

1 damned, as being eternal, are proportionate to their crimes, as demanded by the
2 requirements of retributive proportionality. These we will concede for the sake of
3 argument.³ However, we will show that, because the sins of the damned must also be a
4 consequence of choice, infernal punishment is nevertheless inconsistent with the demands
5 on retributive punishment. Dante's imagery in the *Divine Comedy* occasions this
6 argument, and the poignancy of this trouble is on display in the way the damned
7 themselves are depicted as suffering.
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9

10 **II. Reciprocity in Kind and Severity**

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12
13 Let us begin with the *nature* of the punishments depicted in Dante's Hell and how they
14 would seem to fit with a retributive model of justice. Dante's depictions of infernal
15 punishments follow the *lex talionis*, or, using a famous *hapax legomenon* from the
16 *Inferno* itself, they each involve a *contrapasso* or "counter-suffering" (28.142).
17 Therefore, the punishments of the damned seem to be just because they are *proportionate*
18 *to* and *in the kind* of sins chosen by the sinner.
19

20 Let us briefly look at three examples from the *Inferno*. First, here is how Dante
21 depicts the *contrapasso* of those in the second circle of Hell:

22 I came into a place where all light is silent,
23 that groans like the sea in a storm,
24 when it is lashed by conflicting winds.
25 The infernal whirlwind, which never rests,
26 drives the spirits before its violence;
27 turning and striking it tortures them.
28 When they come before the landslide,
29 there the shrieks, the wailing, the lamenting;
30 there they curse God's power.
31 *I understood that to this torment*
32 *were damned the carnal sinners,*
33 *who subject their reason to their lust.*
34 And as their wings carry off the starlings
35 in the cold season, in large full flocks,
36 so does that breath carry the evil spirits
37 Here, there, down, up;
38 no hope ever comforts them,
39 not of lessened suffering, much less of rest.
40 (5.28-45, emphasis added)

41
42
43 Second, consider a figuration that might seem oblique at first, but captures the
44 nature of the sin. In this case we are in the second *bolgia* of the eighth circle of Hell.⁴

45 ...I saw, down in the ditch,
46 people immersed in dung
47 that seemed to have come from human privies.
48 And while I am searching with my eyes down there,
49 I saw one with his head so filthy with shit
50
51

52
53
54 ³ We should note that, in fact, we do not ourselves accept these commitments to the infinity of sin
55 and the proportionality of punishment. See Adams (1975) for a survey of the now standard reasons
56 for rejection, and see Aikin and Talisse's appendix on the Problem of Hell in *Reasonable Atheism*
57 (2011) for a brief review of those reasons. Those who reject the notion that there can be an infinite
58 sin worthy of infinite punishment are committed to what Jerry Walls (1992 and 2010) calls the
59 "proportionality objection."

60 ⁴ The eighth circle is for the crime of "simple" fraud, but Dante subdivides fraud into ten
61 subcategories each punished in its own *bolgia* or "pocket" within this circle.
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1 that whether he was lay or clerk did not show.
2 He scolded me: "Why are you so hungry
3 to look more at me than the other filthy ones?"
4 And I to him: "Because, if I recall well,
5 I have seen you before with dry hair,
6 and you are Alessio Interminai of Lucca;
7 therefore I eye you more than all the others."
8 And he again, beating his noggin:
9 "*I am submerged down here by the flatteries*
10 *with which my tongue was never cloyed.*"
11 (18.112-126, emphasis added)

12 Finally, Dante depicts the punishments of the treacherous in the ninth (and final)
13 circle of Hell. Traditionally, commentators have maintained that, whereas the eighth
14 circle punishes "simple fraud," the ninth circle punishes treacherous fraud in which a
15 specific implied covenant is betrayed. In the case following, both of the depicted sinners
16 have betrayed their "neighborly" duties to party or city as well as to each other.

17 ...I saw two frozen in one hole
18 so that one head was a hat to the other;
19 And as bread is eaten by the starving,
20 so the one above put his teeth to the other,
21 there where the brain joins the nape:
22 Not otherwise did Tydeus gnaw
23 Menalippus' temples in his rage,
24 than this one did the skull and the other things.
25 [...]
26 That sinner lifted up his mouth from his
27 savage meal, wiping it on the hairs
28 of the head he had wasted from behind.
29 Then he began: "You wish me to renew
30 desperate grief that already presses my heart
31 merely thinking, before I speak of it.
32 But if my words will be seed
33 to bear the fruit of infamy for the traitor I gnaw,
34 you will see me speak and weep together....
35 You are to know that I was Count Ugolino
36 and this is the Archbishop Ruggieri:
37 now I will tell you why I am such a neighbor to him.
38 That by effect of his evil thoughts,
39 trusting him, I was taken
40 and then killed, there is no need to say;
41 But what you cannot have heard,
42 that is, how cruel my death was,
43 you shall hear, and you shall know if he has injured me...."
44 (32.125-33.21)

45 In each of these cases—of the lustful, the flatterers, and the treacherous—it should be
46 clear that Dante depicts his sinners as receiving punishments coordinate with the nature of
47 their sins. In short, *the punishments fit the kind of crime committed*: the lustful are
48 tormented by a whirlwind of their own making; flatterers are covered in the shit that they
49 would heap on others; and the treacherous are depicted as cannibals and so deserving of
50 being cannibalized by others.

51 Although the appropriateness of the punishments to the kinds of crimes
52 committed should be obvious, the notion of the eternity of the sinners' suffering is more
53 complicated. In Dante's figurations, Hell involves eternal suffering. People go to Hell,
54 but (with the exceptions of Jesus, the righteous Jews who died prior to Christ's
55

1 resurrection, the Pilgrim, and a handful of other unique exceptions such as Ripheus and
2 the Emperor Trajan) they do not come out again.⁵ Also, except for Virgil (the Pilgrim's
3 guide), the damned seem unable to move from their specific circle or subcircle within
4 Hell.⁶ Indeed, it is significant that Dante depicts the geographies of both Hell and
5 Paradise as (generally) involving concentric circles with perfect, unchanging motion. The
6 Pilgrim and his guides (Virgil in Hell; Beatrice in Heaven) have to cut across these
7 circles, and they thereby acquire a sense of the intensification of punishment in Hell or
8 the apparent⁷ intensification of blessedness in Heaven. Indeed, the contrast between these
9 geographies and that of Purgatory is also instructive. For although Dante depicts the
10 shades of Purgatory as suffering something akin to the *contrapassi* of the damned,
11 penitential suffering in Purgatory is temporal in that it allows shades to purge themselves
12 of sin so that they might *become* worthy of blessedness. Thus, whereas the suffering of
13 the damned expresses the inescapable nature of their unrepented sins, the suffering of the
14 penitent tends to involve an undoing or a suffering of the contrary of the sins that they are
15 repenting. For example, whereas lust is punished by a whirlwind so that there is an
16 evident metaphorical *resemblance* between the sin and the punishment, in *Purgatorio*,
17 Dante represents the envious as having their eyes sewn shut, the slothful as constantly
18 running, gluttons as starving, and so on. In short, in Dante's depiction of Purgatory, the
19 relationship between the sin and the suffering is both retributive and *rehabilitative*. Thus,
20 unlike in Hell where the suffering is unending, the motion of the penitents in Purgatory is
21 the mixed motion of an ascending spiral such that their redemption through divine grace
22 is facilitated through their temporal penances. Indeed, the geography of the mountain
23 itself underscores this point, since, as Virgil explains to the Pilgrim early in their ascent:

24 "This mountain is such
25 that it is always more difficult at the bottom, at the beginning;
26 and the further up one goes, the less it gives pain.
27 Thus, when it shall seem so easy to you
28 that going up will be
29 like floating downstream in a boat,
30 Then you will be at the end of this path;
31 wait to rest your weariness there."
32
33
34 (*Purgatorio* 4.88-95)

35 Hell, on the other hand, must only be retributive, as again, no one ever leaves. No one in
36 Hell is ever redeemed by the punishments there. They only suffer.⁸

37 With this distinction between temporal and eternal suffering in mind, let us turn
38 to the question of squaring eternal suffering with divine justice. We maintain that such a
39 squaring has at least two conditions for its success.
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42

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44 ⁵ We should note that our exception of Jesus is only that he went below and was at least in
45 proximity to Hell proper, as a place of eternal punishment. We are merely invoking the harrowing
46 of Hell as mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, Matthew 12:40, Acts 2:27, and the apocryphal
47 Gospel of Nicodemus.
48

49 ⁶ There is, arguably, an interesting exception to this in Limbo, for Virgil and the Pilgrim encounter
50 four classical poets (Homer, Ovid, Lucan, and Horace) in a subcircle within Limbo before
51 traveling with them inside the castle in which are housed the great shades of the noble pagans.
52

53 ⁷ As it turns out, Beatrice explains to the Pilgrim in *Paradiso* 4 that all souls in heaven are equally
54 blessed and reside in the Empyrean heaven outside space and time. Thus, their reflected
55 appearances to the Pilgrim in the hierarchically arranged celestial spheres according the qualities
56 that they represent is accommodated to his intellectual needs rather than an indication of any true
57 ranking of those souls.

58 ⁸ Consider that if punishment in Hell, like punishment in Purgatory, were rehabilitative, then there
59 would eventually be good people being punished in Hell. That would be theologically
60 unacceptable. Consequently, for those in Hell to deserve to be there for eternity, they either must
61 not be remediable, or Hell's punishments themselves must not be imposed for that purpose.
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1 The first condition is that the eternity of the punishment must be a consequence
2 of the nature of sin. But how can a temporal crime deserve infinite/eternal punishment?
3 The answer to this question seems to be a consequence of the most basic tenets of
4 monotheistic theology: *all* sins are crimes against an infinite being that is infinitely good.
5 Therefore, even though no sin can harm God, all sins may *deserve* infinite punishment,
6 because they are all cases of humans defrauding God of their obedience and devotion.
7 They ruin their relationship with their creator. In this sense, Dante's depictions are wholly
8 in keeping with the medieval Roman Catholic understanding of mortal sin.⁹

9 Of course, this understanding of divine justice has been reasonably criticized as
10 being contrary to the notion of divine beneficence.¹⁰ And, even leaving aside the attribute
11 of beneficence, there also seems to be an intuitive problem in thinking that an omnipotent
12 being would have any reason to be petty enough to care about the human propensity to
13 defraud it of the honor it deserves.¹¹ But, since we are here concerned only with the
14 question of the retributive justice of Hell, let us leave aside the question of whether divine
15 beneficence and/or omnipotence can be squared with divine justice.¹² Again, for the sake
16 of argument, we will concede the possibility of an infinite sin.

17 The second condition which must be met is that, if we are to square eternal
18 suffering with the justice of infernal retribution, the punishment must be reflective of a
19 *choice* made by an agent. So far, we have conceded that the crimes of the damned are,
20 indeed, infinite. This makes it possible for an infinite or eternal punishment to be
21 proportionate to the crime. But there is one assumption behind the scenes that must be
22 made explicit for the connection between sin and punishment to be appropriate: *the sin*
23 *must be deliberate for the full measure of punishment to be appropriate.* That is, one must
24 freely and knowingly choose to sin in order to deserve punishment proportionate to that
25 sin's extremity. Those who do not knowingly sin do not deserve such proportionate
26 punishments. However, we have not yet assessed *whether or how it would be possible for*
27 *a person freely to choose to commit an infinite crime.* It seems clear that if it is not
28 possible, then Hell cannot be a place of divine justice.

29 One further condition must be added here, which is the connection between
30 recognizing the enormity of a sin and knowing what the sin's punishment (or at least the
31 degree of it) should be. That is, it seems that, on a retributive model, an agent's
32 comprehension of the degree of wrong of a morally wrong act entails acknowledgment of
33 the degree of punishment the act could justly occasion. And so for any agent that honestly
34 says, "I knew it was wrong, but I don't think I deserve *this* for doing it," there are two
35 options: either (a) the agent did not know the degree of the wrong done, or (b) the
36 punishment is disproportionate to the crime. We will see that many in Hell find their
37 punishments too great or are surprised at their severity. The thought is that either way
38 (that is, if either the agent did not comprehend the enormity of the crime or that the
39 punishment is disproportionate), Hell is too much. This will be trouble for theodicy.
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47 ⁹ See, for instance, Saint Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, I.11-15 and 19-25 and Saint Thomas, ST I-II,
48 q74-76, q82-83, and q87. It is important to note that this account of sin is distinct from that of
49 venial sin, which, though still a failure of obedience to God, is not destructive of the relationship
50 between the sinner and the creator. See Aquinas ST I-II, q87, a5.

51
52 ¹⁰ For the case that Hell is inconsistent with divine love, see Hick (1966), pp. 337-53 and Bell
53 (2010). Further, the demand that the theodicy of Hell be consistent with the traditional notions of
54 divine nature is required by Kvanvig (1993) as the *issuant conception of Hell*.

55
56 ¹¹ See (Reference removed for blind review) for the development of this line of argument.

57
58 ¹² We should note, further, that if this theory of the infinite moral harm of sin is true, then we must
59 re-open the question of Purgatory. How, if all sin is infinite moral error, could some pay finitely
60 for one infinite sin, but others must pay infinitely? There are, of course, possible answers to this in,
61 for instance, St. Thomas' distinction between venial and mortal sins mentioned above, but how
62 applicable these are to Dante's depictions remains to be seen.
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III. The Challenge Posed by the Requirement that Sin Must Be by Choice

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3 There are reasons to be suspicious of the claim that sinners in Hell have *chosen* infinite
4 sins and, accordingly, deserve to suffer these punishments *eternally*. The challenge here
5 may be stated as follows: the only way in which a person could choose deeds worthy of
6 the consequence of eternal suffering would be to choose *to commit an infinite crime as an*
7 *infinite crime*. But it seems the only way in which a person could choose an action that
8 deserves eternal punishment would also seem to require that the person be able to
9 understand why his or her own action is an infinite crime. But, because the damned were
10 and are unable to acknowledge that their suffering is a consequence of their own choices,
11 there is a gap between what these sinners think they have chosen and what they have in
12 reality chosen. This, indeed, is how Dante represents many of the sinners of Hell: unable
13 to acknowledge the propriety of their suffering. Consider the examples of Francesca in
14 the second circle (lust) and Farinata in the sixth circle (heresy). In Francesca's case,
15 Dante represents Francesca's misprision by giving her the following speech:

16 "Oh gracious and benign living creature
17 who through the black air go visiting
18 us who stained the world blood red,
19 If the king of the universe were friendly,
20 we would pray to him for your peace,
21 since you have pity on our pain."
22
23 (5.88-93)

24
25 And from here, Francesca goes on to insist that she and her husband's brother simply
26 couldn't help falling into an adulterous affair when they were reading a story about
27 Lancelot and Guinevere, a story that is, of course, *supposed* to be a morality tale about
28 how adultery can destroy a kingdom. But Francesca, who here blames God for her
29 torments and insists that Love would not have excused any other course of action than to
30 fall into adultery, clearly misses the point of the story and so is unable to understand the
31 appropriateness of her chosen *contrapasso*.

32 Farinata degli Uberti's case, is even more revealing. The Pilgrim encounters this
33 *magnanimo* in an open sepulcher in the sixth circle of Hell, from whence Farinata is
34 described as "rising up with his breast and forehead as if he had Hell in great disdain"
35 (10.35-36). The precise nature of Farinata's crime has been the subject of perennial
36 discussion in the interpretation of *Inferno* 10. Without wading too far into the murky
37 waters of these debates, we'll simply mention that Virgil has told the Pilgrim that the
38 sixth circle is reserved for "Epicurus and his followers...who make the soul die with the
39 body" (*Inferno* 10.13-15). The salient point for our purposes, though, is not Farinata's
40 crime, but the misprision he suggests applies to all of the damned:

41 "We see, as does one in bad light,
42 the things," he said, "that are distant from us:
43 so much the highest Leader still shines for us.
44 When they approach or are present,
45 our intellect is utterly empty; and if another does not bring news,
46 we know nothing of your human state.
47 Thus you can comprehend that our knowledge
48 will be entirely dead from that point
49 when the door of the future will be closed."
50
51 (10.100-108)

52
53 In short, as John Freccero has put it, those whom Dante depicts in the *Inferno* only know
54 a present that is granted to them by the presence of the Pilgrim, who, like the drink
55 offered by Odysseus in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, "brings them to 'life' momentarily when
56 their static existence intersects his human time" (2007, 12). Thus, in Dante's
57 representations, the damned see the future only dimly in light of the past, but just as they
58 are cut off from the knowledge of the present, so too are they cut off from the possibility
59 of a redemption which would lay claim to any hope for their own futures.
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1 Lying behind these representations is the notion that the chief cause of damnation
2 is that the inhabitants of Hell lack the good of the intellect. But this only clarifies rather
3 than resolves the problem: if mortal sinners lack the good of the intellect (both in Hell
4 afterward and presumably in the act itself), they do not know fully what actions they've
5 chosen or what they were doing.¹³ If they did not fully know what they were doing, then
6 they cannot be held fully responsible for those sins.

7 To illustrate why we are suspicious of the claim that a person can indeed choose
8 an infinite sin and thereby also deserve its eternal punishment, it is worth examining
9 Dante's depiction of the sufferings of those in Limbo, a depiction which—not
10 incidentally—rests upon a theodicy that seems uniquely Dante's. In Dante's depiction, a
11 portion of Limbo, the first circle of Hell, is reserved for the noble pagans whom the
12 Pilgrim observes occupying a meadow of fresh, bright green grass (4.111 and 118) that is
13 lit by a fire that separates these shades from the darkness of the rest of Hell (4.68-69).¹⁴
14 These shades, it is also suggested, are engaged with each other in an eternal and solemn
15 conversation (4.112-114). According to Virgil, an inhabitant of this realm, the people
16 worthy of being honored in this portion of Limbo (4.72), like the lesser souls in the major
17 portion of Limbo, exist in a state of "grief without torture" (4.28) insofar as "without
18 hope [they] live in desire" (4.42). But unlike even the other relative innocents in Limbo
19 (e.g., unbaptized children), these noble pagans receive a special grace, even in Hell,
20 because of the "honor with which their names resound" in the temporal world (76-78).¹⁵
21 Of these great souls, the chief figure is Aristotle, whom Dante calls "the master of those
22 who know," and he is depicted as if enthroned such that "all gaze at him, all do him
23 honor" (130-133). In general terms, what Dante seems to suggest with this depiction of
24 Limbo is that these individuals are ethically and intellectually perfect, but, because they
25 lack faith, they live in desire for the good that they strive to cognize without the hope of
26 achieving it.¹⁶

27 The depiction of this *contrapasso* also suggests that *all* human beings are severed
28 from God in such a way that no perfection obtainable through temporal efforts alone will
29 be sufficient for overcoming sin. We all, as it were, not only lack the goods of the
30 intellect but also the goods of the will. Dante's depiction of these souls is exemplary of
31 Anselm's account of the necessity of Christ's satisfaction of the atonement for original
32 sin.¹⁷ However, the depiction also reveals a latent problem for the notion of the justice of
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38 ¹³ Thomas Talbott (1990 and 2001) has pressed a similar line in arguing that the knowing and free
39 choice to be away from God is unintelligible. This seems right to us, but our account is that one
40 could not deserve the punishment of an infinite crime if one did not knowingly and freely commit
41 one, and that *by hypothesis* humans do not have that knowledge or freedom.

42 ¹⁴ Generally it is suggested that Dante is drawing upon depictions of the Elysian Fields (especially
43 *Aeneid* VI.753-1070) in representing this portion of Hell.

44 ¹⁵ What Dante seems to mean in this regard is that, because the noble pagans are exemplars of the
45 temporal virtues, they guide others to the possibilities of temporal perfection. Moreover, because
46 spiritual perfection is not fully obtainable without the prior cultivation of temporal virtues, this
47 would make such individuals capable of lighting a path even when they carry "the light behind"
48 them, as Dante puts it in *Purgatorio* 22, where he depicts Statius as explaining his conversion to
49 Christianity (a conversion fabricated by Dante, it seems) as owing to his reading of Virgil's fourth
50 *Eclogue*.

51
52 ¹⁶ On this feature of the punishment for the noble pagans (notably Virgil), Wetzel applauds, "The
53 sin of Virgil and his kind looks remarkably like courage," (385) but then alternately notes that this
54 success occasions his sin, "because of his confidence in his own rectitude has left him without a
55 God to seek" (386). It strikes us as astonishing that the moral courage of those lacking faith thus
56 becomes tantamount to hubris on this account, but this does seem to be the gist of Dante's choice
57 to describe only three souls in the entirety of the *Divine Comedy* as *magnanimi*: Virgil at *Inferno*
58 2.44 and Cavalcante di Cavalcanti and Farinata degli Uberti at *Inferno* 10.73. For a discussion of
59 the classical and medieval valences of magnanimity, see Scott (1962 and 1977).

60
61 ¹⁷ To be more precise, Dante's view—taking now *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* into account as well as
62 *Inferno*—would seem to be a synthesis of the Anselmian theory of satisfaction with the Abelardian

1 infernial punishment: *If no human being is capable of knowing or doing the good without*
2 *an act of divine grace, then no human being deserves either eternal punishment or eternal*
3 *reward.* That is, one deserves eternal punishment only if one has chosen sin as infinite
4 sin, but the state of humans without God’s grace precludes this knowledgeable and free
5 choosing. Humans either do not know better or cannot help but sin. Or, more weakly, if
6 we are born into sin, then the fact that we are inclined toward sin without the help of
7 grace should at least be a mitigating factor in the determinations of what punishments we
8 deserve. One deserves the full measure of punishment for crimes only when they were
9 committed under ideal circumstances, and the fact that humans are born ignorant of the
10 good, inclined toward sin, and live in a world full of sin all should mitigate the blame
11 they deserve for their failures. Put differently, if what is required for salvation is that
12 human beings show a love (charity) that depends upon faith but is perfectible only
13 through grace, then justice would demand either damnation for all or damnation for none.

14 Further, a corollary of this account of desert makes the justice of heaven
15 unintelligible, since overcoming sin (and thereby having done some infinite good in
16 maintaining fidelity to God) is also not a function of what one *knows* to choose, but of
17 grace.¹⁸ It is hard to see this (i.e., grace or heaven as its consequence) as *desert* in any
18 sense that we normally use the term. Consequently, either the eternal suffering of a
19 human being cannot be chosen as eternal because such a choice would require a
20 knowledge that is beyond human capacity or, even if we allow for a notion of will that is
21 wider than intellect (such that a person can assent to otherwise inscrutable doctrines of
22 faith even while striving for understanding), still, heaven would be an excessive reward
23 and Hell would be the just condition for *all* human strivings irrespective of the question
24 of one’s ethical or intellectual perfection. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that
25 even our best actions are so far from perfect that they too indicate only the dimmest
26 imitation of the divine. As such, even the best that human beings merit from an absolutely
27 benevolent creator is still, paradoxically, eternal debt. And so, even in the best of cases,
28 “faith” and “hope” would involve the craving for a morally unintelligible objective—a
29 craving for a good that is beyond what any humans can know or deserve. Faith and hope
30 have objects that, given our account, are morally troubling and cognitively conflicted. In
31 what way, then, could they be coherent? But, more to the point of this discussion, because
32 it is beyond the human capacity to bridge the abyss that separates humans from eternal
33 happiness—which is merely another way of saying that human strivings are necessarily
34 (and hopelessly) beholden to an infinite failure—it is also therefore unjust to punish
35 eternally.

36 However, this might also be an occasion for our reading of Dante to return a
37 bonus with respect to what it reveals about human nature, independent of the truth or
38 falsity of the theology that seems to undergird his representations of the damned. The
39 bonus is that the best that humans can achieve of their own rational initiative would be
40 the peculiar predicament that Dante ascribes to Aristotle: to live in desire without hope of
41 attaining any eternal happiness, even were that to mean that the reward for such a living
42 would be to live in grief without torture. Saint Thomas Aquinas, emphasizes the

43 emphasis on divine love. See, for instance, A. N. Williams’ discussion of the matter (2007, esp. at
44 p. 203).

45 ¹⁸ Elenore Stump’s theodicy for the *Inferno* is that divine punishment in Hell is actually an
46 expression of divine love for the people there, as “God’s love for human persons consists
47 essentially in treating according to their nature” (1986, 192). In the case of sinners, it is their
48 “second nature” to be vicious and live according to that vice, and God allows that life eternally.
49 However, it seems that given this account and the antecedent conditions of fallenness, all deserve
50 Hell. In fairness to Stump, given their natures, God could not save the fallen without violating
51 their free will. But this reasoning generalizes, as by hypothesis, to the view that we all lack the
52 cognitive and moral natures to avoid Hell without grace. In what way then, is grace not a similar
53 violation?

1 inadequacy of such a life in *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.48 when he speaks of the
2 shortcomings of even the most venerable infidels:

3 Alexander and Averroes claimed that man's ultimate felicity does not
4 consist in the human knowledge which comes through the speculative
5 sciences, but through a connection with a separate substance, which they
6 believed to be possible for man in this life. But, since Aristotle saw that
7 there is no other knowledge for man in this life than through the
8 speculative sciences, he maintained that man does not achieve perfect
9 felicity, but only a limited kind. On this point there is abundant evidence
10 of how even the brilliant minds of these men suffered from the
11 narrowness of their viewpoint.

12 But, unlike Thomas' description of the narrowness of this viewpoint, Dante's depiction of
13 infernal justice suggests that there is something to be emulated in the magnanimity of the
14 infidels who inhabit his Limbo. For, regardless of the soundness of the theological
15 underpinnings of his depictions of infernal suffering, Dante's depiction of Limbo seems
16 to suggest that, because human beings must represent the possibility of such happiness to
17 themselves in order to found a moral order, there can be no guarantees that such a
18 representation to ourselves of the good we desire will ever be within our personal grasp.
19 And this, then, is why all philosophers must go to Hell (or, more precisely, live in
20 Limbo).
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25 **V. Only Philosophers in Hell?**

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28 Retributivism with regard to Hell is captured by the following line of reasoning: *Those in*
29 *Hell are sinners, and sin demands punishment. Therefore, Hell is the place for that*
30 *punishment.* Again, the traditional answer is that the sin of sinners isn't in the temporal
31 harm they've done, but rather, the sin is in rejecting God, the greatest good. That is the
32 infinite error. Consequently, sin is infinite, and so deserves eternal (and thereby
33 proportionate) punishment. This seems reasonable as far as it goes, and it does work as a
34 nice counterpoint to the regular complaint that the wicked prosper in this life – they will
35 suffer appropriately in the next. But, again, it is not the punishment *per se* that is
36 troubling here, but the infinite portion served to the damned (and the blessed) that seems
37 objectionable. Sinners can't knowingly do infinite harm, no matter how bad they are. But
38 they get an eternity of torment. Even if Hell's purpose is to exact retribution on those who
39 are guilty, and even if the guilty do get what's coming to them, it seems that making that
40 punishment *eternal* is moral overkill. Punishing someone out of proportion to what
41 they've done is a moral wrong, and Hell is guaranteed to be one for everyone there.
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44 Now, notice that to deserve the full measure of that punishment in Hell, a sinner
45 who rejects God and His commands must know exactly what she's doing. If, say, the
46 person who rejects God does so because she did not understand properly who God was or
47 because she did not know what she was rejecting when she rejected His commands, then
48 she cannot deserve full punishment. She made an error, but it was one not of her
49 character, but of her grasp of the divine. It is for this reason that we do not even consider
50 the most extreme punishments for children or the mentally challenged—they did not
51 know any better. Only the people who understand exactly what they are doing will
52 deserve proportionate retribution.
53

54 It therefore may be fitting that Aristotle, "the master of those who know" (130),
55 holds court in Hell. On our account, only those who know what they've chosen in
56 rejecting God can deserve Hell. It seems clear that only someone with appropriate
57 philosophical acumen could have that kind of understanding. Being familiar with a
58 textual tradition is clearly insufficient, as the art of interpreting those texts is what's
59 required to take them appropriately (for example, nobody takes Solomonic wisdom to be
60 in the threatening to chop up things in contention). With greater understanding comes
61 greater responsibilities, and by hypothesis, the greatest responsibility is of fidelity to God.
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1 Those who do not have this comprehension cannot be held fully morally responsible for
2 failing to understand and properly respond to God's call. Consequently, we are holding
3 that invincible ignorance is widespread, and the only souls who could not have such a
4 state would be philosophers. Only someone with the right cognitive grasp of the situation
5 can deserve the full measure of God's retributive wrath. If Hell makes any sense, then the
6 only people who could go to Hell would be philosophers (and, even in these cases, we
7 have reasons to be doubtful). This is because only someone who understands exactly
8 what she is doing in sinning or rejecting God could deserve such a fate, and to the extent
9 that such an understanding may be possible for a human being, only a philosophical
10 education could provide that understanding. So, it follows, then, only philosophers could
11 go to Hell.

12 13 14 15 **Acknowledgments**

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18 [withheld for purposes of blind review]
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