

Human Morality in *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma*

As naturally curious beings, humans have long hypothesized about what happens after death. While some believe that the actions someone takes throughout their life will impact this result, others take a more pessimistic perspective, claiming that one's fate is predetermined. The artist Frans Francken (1581-1642) is an example of the latter, prescribing to the Calvinist branch of Protestantism which believes that God chooses whether each person goes to Heaven or Hell before they are born. In his oil painting *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma*, Francken depicts these two realms. Heaven is at the top center of the canvas, Hell spans the bottom, and Earth takes up the space between them. In their composition, structure, and interactions, Francken puts forth his more extreme Calvinist belief that as a result of God's choices, the vast majority of ordinary humans are destined to end up in Hell, suggesting that they are inherently evil creatures with the inability to change their fate.

In *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma*, Francken is able to create a basis for his argument with the physical structure of the painting. As Earth splits both Heaven and Hell — which represent good and evil respectively — the land that humans are most familiar with acts as a moral middle ground, not completely good and not completely evil. But curiously, these three regions do not take up equal space in the canvas. Barely a ninth of Francken's work, Heaven can easily be overlooked by a casual viewer. It is thus made to feel exclusive, not large enough to fit humankind. As Earth fills in the remainder of the top half, Hell is left to consume the bottom half. Acting in direct contrast with Heaven then, it becomes impossible to ignore and is the place where viewers — and therefore humans — gravitate towards; as it is not exclusive in nature, Francken indicates that there are more wicked humans than virtuous.

In the structure of the painting also lies details about the interactions between the three areas of interest. Despite Earth and Heaven being in close proximity to each other, there is nothing that connects the two. To show this, Francken includes a cherub on the lowermost cloud of Heaven who extends his leg out towards Earth but ultimately fails to reach it. As even a winged creature cannot bridge this gap, Francken suggests that it is impossible for enough goodness to reach humankind for people to become honorable creatures and overcome their fate as chosen by God. Upon first glance, it appears as though a similar divide exists between Earth and Hell — displayed with a sharp, dark line that separates the two — insinuating that Hell is a sort of forbidden land, as off-limits as Heaven is up in the clouds. But once one looks to the far left and far right of the painting, they become aware of stairs on either side, linking the world of the living to the world of the damned. With this addition, Francken depicts his Calvinist interpretation of predestination: it is only natural for humans to go to Hell when they die, as God has already decided they are to be evil. By including a skeleton on the left stairs that holds a downward pointing arrow, Francken furthers this idea, demonstrating that the dead naturally tend toward Hell. In the same vein, Father Time's presence on the right stairs suggests that when one runs out of time, they too will descend the stairs into Hell. And once there, each creature faces and walks towards the center and thus towards the Devil; everyone gravitates towards the symbol of truest evil, as he is the one who represents humans best.

Mankind's Eternal Dilemma is — visually — a very crowded painting; it is muddled with creatures, both human and not, but each works together to depict the intricacies of each realm. In Heaven, for instance, the only beings that are present don angelic wings, implying that people from Earth do not have the capabilities (i.e., innocence) to reach Heaven. On Earth, although there are more human-like figures present, each one who appears has an elevated status to that of

an ordinary person. For example, Francken includes warriors and royals to the left, and a woman holding a cross in the center. In doing so, he demonstrates his belief that the individuals God predetermines to be neither good nor evil are the people that humans revere the most, whether they be noble or devout citizens. By also including pagan gods on Earth (such as Hermes with his Caduceus and Hercules with his lion skin cape), Francken simultaneously attacks the beliefs of people who are not Christians, as even their Gods are not good enough to go to Heaven, according to the Christian God.

Hell, as opposed to both Heaven and Earth, contains far more normal and far more bestial figures. On its outskirts, various wingless — and therefore human — children can be seen. This indicates that even those who are young and perceived as innocent by society are sinful; the very nature and roots of humanity are evil and Hell-bound according to Francken. Accompanying the children in Hell, though, are far more off-putting and wild creatures, including both animals (like a monkey and dragon) and animal-human hybrids. One may interpret this to mean that following Baptism — which rids someone of their original sin — humans no longer belong in Hell and thus leave only unbaptized children and wild creatures behind. But from a Calvinist perspective, this would not be the case: being baptized would not rid someone of the destiny God chose for them. The animals in Hell therefore symbolize adult humans, warped upon entering Hell to reveal their true, unruly form. As the Devil himself is half human and half beast, Francken suggests that humans have an inherent connection with the man who defines evil, so humans must belong in Hell with their leader.

Alongside the many figures included in *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma*, Francken includes various items that add to his portrayal of Calvinism and predestination. In Heaven, the angels can be seen playing stringed instruments, a symbol of the wealthy class during Francken's time. As

ordinary humans could not afford such luxuries, these instruments — which are typically perceived to have a soothing sound — take on a harsh undertone. They lure people in with promises of prosperity but ultimately act as a taunt as they are unattainable for common folk. This is a direct representation of the land the instruments reside in, as Heaven too is inaccessible for people whom God long ago decided would go to Hell. This idea of inaccessibility is elevated by the two angels in the back of Heaven who read books. Yet another symbol of the upper class during Francken's time, these books imply that Heaven is just a land of stories. It is as viable of an option for malicious humans as owning a book would be for illiterate, lower class people.

In Hell, there is a stark contrast to the items above, as they are clamorous rather than delicate. This is especially noticeable in the instruments present, which include trumpets, a clarinet, and a tambourine. Typically these instruments produce blaring, hard-to-ignore sounds, which is in opposition to the sweet, romantic sounds stringed instruments make. As these instruments are more accessible to the general public of Francken's time than the fine instruments in Heaven, he sends the message that it is easier for humankind to be obnoxious and to belong in Hell, and thus to be evil. Less obnoxious and more terrifying though, is the existence of writhing statues and skulls in Hell. One may argue that the presence of these items contradicts the idea that humans belong in the land of the damned according to predestination, as it is a terrifying and unwelcoming place for such beings. But, as the creatures in Hell embrace even its most horrific parts — and go as far as to celebrate around the statues and reverently hold the skulls — this claim is refuted by Francken. Only a creature as inherently evil as a human could find beauty in such wicked items.

To tie his depiction of Calvinism together, Francken also plays with coloring and emotion in *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma*. Settled between dreary gray clouds, Heaven is comprised of

sullen and expressionless figures engulfed in an eerie yellow glow. The faces of the people and creatures on Earth — like in Heaven — are also expressionless, but Earth is much more vibrant than the domain above it. Underneath Earth and just as vibrant is Hell, containing figures that convey far more emotion than any of the creatures from above. Francken's progression from most to least dull as one looks from Heaven to Hell reveals much about the Calvinist view on human morality. The place that is so admired by humans — Heaven — is made to be unappealing and not at all what it is chalked up to be. On the contrary, Hell appears to be the most lively and friendly place. This territory, with its dragon and Devil, is thus made to be less scary by the many characters' enticing expressions, making Hell an intriguing place for such evil beings as humans, as that is where they are destined to end up by God.

Upon first glance, Frans Francken's *Mankind's Eternal Dilemma* appears to simply be a depiction of Heaven, Earth, and Hell as society views them — a romanticized Heaven, less romantic but still glorious Earth, and wicked Hell. But once a viewer truly looks at the intricacies included in each realm, they become aware of Francken's underlying argument: that Hell, as devilish as it is, is the place best fit for the savagery of humankind. For as magical as the land of the virtuous (Heaven) seems, it is simply a fantastical world not fit for humans; as normal as the morally ambiguous Earth appears to be, it only has room for the most revered parts of humanity. This is the key to the Calvinist perspective, which pushes the belief that God predetermines where people go after death, resulting in the majority of ordinary people ending up in Hell. With these details by Francken in mind, one must ask themselves what the purpose of life truly is. For if humans go through life destined to end up in Hell, what is the point of avoiding sins and attempting to change what is inescapable?