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Foundations II

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### The Plan of Hell

Dante's *Inferno* is a landmark work of the middle ages, inspiring generations of writers, artists, dramatists, and filmmakers all the way up to the 21st century. The plan of hell, as given in paragraph 3 of Canto XI (145-147) in the form of a monologue by Virgil to Dante, provides the reader a visual map of the landscape and hence serves as one of the most important parts of the book. I will be deep-diving into the division between the sins of violence and fraud as explained in this paragraph and how they connect to *Inferno's* broad level themes.

Right at the beginning, Virgil asserts the idea of a division existing in lower hell. "Within these cliffs are three lesser circles, one below another, like those thou art leaving; all are full of spirits accursed"(145), these lines as spoken to Dante, create a mood for a deeper level of understanding of hell. Hell is not a monochrome world where souls are just thrown for eternal torment irrespective of their misdemeanors. Nor is it a place where all are judged equally. The idea of three lesser circles, one below the other, brings to the mind a possible division between sins themselves. In turn, this makes the reader think that certain sins may be more offensive in the eyes of God than others. This division is a striking piece of literary creativity transforming hell from a generic torture house to a place with its own character.

The division between sins of flesh and will is a recurring theme in *Inferno* and is made most pellucid in this paragraph. Virgil states that every injustice "afflicts someone either by force or fraud"(145), giving us the idea of two of the most offensive sins in the eyes of Heaven. Though there are several other sins discussed in the cantos preceding this one, namely lust, gluttony, etc., they are all due to the weakness of flesh. The inability of self-restraint is a failing but due to the inner compulsions or baser nature of humans. These sins are not carried out consciously and hence part of the upper hell. On the other hand, violence and fraud are more serious transgressions against God as they corrupt the will. Performing an act of violence or fraud is more about choice than instincts for humans. Hence, the guilty souls who indulge in these sins are punished lower in hell. The special focus on the sins of will serves as a departure from the upper hell (sins of flesh) to a grimmer lower part.

The division between sins, particularly violence and fraud, is further accentuated by bringing in the concept of perversion of reason. When speaking to Dante, Virgil creates a distinction between violence and fraud when he states that "but because fraud is a sin peculiar to man it is more offensive to God"(145). The stress on 'peculiar to man' indicates that the sin of fraud is committed using an ability present only in humans as animals are devoid of this gift. This ability is the power of reasoning bestowed on humans by the almighty. The abuse of intelligence makes it condemnable in the eyes of God that the blessing given to humanity for its betterment is being used to cause suffering. Violence is also a crime against humanity and God, but it is more of a brute force approach to cause harm than the use of cunning. Virgil asserts that "fraudulent have their place lower and more pain assails them"(145) to drive the point home that there exists a difference between the violent and fraudulent. This difference depends on whether

the crime is committed as an act of aggression or a well-planned deception. The corruption of rationality and its deliberate misuse in fraud make it punished lower in hell than violence.

The three sections of violence are explained in great detail as the monologue of Virgil continues. Here again, the literary device of using comparison to talk about the severity of sin is brought into play. The first round of condemned in the circle of violence are the ones that hurt fellow human beings. People that commit "homicides and everyone that wounds in malice, pillagers and plunderers"(147) are punished here. It's not a stretch to imagine that killers who commit murder for personal gains and despotic rulers who massacre and conquer in the name of glory are targeted here. They let their animal nature get better of their Christian values and hence damned to hell. These acts are still lower in the potency of evil than the people who commit suicide or are spendthrifts as stated in the line: "man may lay violent hand on himself or on his own possessions, and therefore in the second round must repent"(147). These acts are graver than regular violence because suicide is considered a defilement of God's gift of life. It is a complete surrender to despair and loss of faith in God and his ability to alleviate human suffering. Spendthrifts who deliberately waste their resources also fall into the category of people who undervalue their blessings. Only one more thing can be further down from belittling God's glory, and that is blasphemy itself. Disrespecting God or God-ordained natural laws, as Virgil explains, forms the third round of violence: "Violence may be done to the Godhead by denying and blaspheming Him in the heart and by despising nature and her bounty"(147). Being disrespectful or denying God's existence is unacceptable when the least humans can do is be grateful for God's bounties. Sodomites and Usurers' serve as examples to explain crimes against nature: "the smallest round stamps with its seal both Sodom and Cahors"(147) as sodomy is considered unnatural in the eyes of God and lending money to make a profit is disobeying God's

diktat. With their collection of murderous, suicidal, and blasphemous souls, the three sections paint a complete picture of the sin of violence.

Simple fraud has its own circle in hell, and it impacts society in the form of sins like flattery, hypocrisy, theft, and sorcery. From the explanation provided in the paragraph, these type of frauds "destroys simply the bond of love which nature makes"(147). The idea behind simple fraud is breaking trust, social contracts, and moral decrees of a community. For example, flattery is a deliberate psychological manipulation of someone, usually higher in power or authority, to gain favors. On the other hand, hypocrisy is a pretense of abiding by a higher moral authority while performing activities precisely opposite in nature. Both flattery and hypocrisy are active engagements in fooling people to believe in a false reality about themselves or the practitioner. Another harmful practice, but probably more deliberate in intention, is thievery. By stealing from someone, a thief not only causes material loss to a person but also a loss of trust towards society. Sorcery, in general, is the evil art of dishonest practices to trick others. Especially in the form of alchemy, it is intentionally duping a person of their property by making false claims of turning it into Gold. Both theft and sorcery rely on exploiting human frailties like innocence and greed, using guile to serve man's frivolous nature for worldly gains. As repeated in later cantos, these sins result in corruption of the soul and spread insecurity, fear, and mistrust in the general populace.

The fraud of treachery is the lowest low of humanity (being right at the bottom of hell), with treacherous seen as the scourge of society, friends, and family. Fraud in general "stings the conscience" and its effect cannot be seen more acutely than in acts of treachery. A treacherous person breaks the trust of a man "who confides in him"(147). Unlike simple fraud, it's not impartial but a very personal act of deceiving or cheating a person who can be a confidant,

friend, or family. The conscience of the betrayed is always troubled by such a personal breach of trust and they may never recover fully for the rest of their life. It also corrupts the conscience of the betrayer, alienating them from their own humanity, and eternally condemns the soul to a place in hell reserved for the most wicked. Towards the end of the journey through hell, treachery takes center stage in the narrative, and Virgil's introduction of the concept here in paragraph 3 of Canto XI, makes us see why it is considered the worst sin. The evil of treachery is captured in its essence by elucidating its effect on both society and personal relations in the following lines: "By the other way (treachery) both that love which nature makes is forgotten and that also which is added to it and which creates a special trust"(147). Not only the foundations of a community like reliance and dependability are destroyed by the act of treachery, but the emotional bonds of trust and faith between two individuals are irreparably severed. Treachery is the worst kind of fraud as it destroys society's moral fabric by backstabbing near and dear ones.

Virgil's monologue on division of lower hell is one of the most descriptive and revealing of the entire *Inferno*. Though it spans just a page, it touches upon the most critical themes explored in the book. The mechanism of division, with its emphasis on the type of sinners that reside in lower hell, makes it a fascinating read and remains in the reader's mind long after the book has ended.