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Omnibus V Primary Section B

Ever since Dante penned his *Divine Comedy* in 1310, scholars have used his work to support their own historical, eschatological, theological, philosophical, and essentially anthological opinions. Dante’s analysis of the human being through ‘hellish’ lenses poises information in an accessible, clever, and intriguing format.

Yet, despite the detailed biographies, marvelous poetry, and drawn-out eschatology, Dante has a solid Christian underlying principle that is made abundantly clear by his illustrative metaphor. Sin and evil separate man from God; righteousness draws man to Him.

This paper will explore Dante’s development of this concept by firstly describing Hell and Lucifer, then explaining it. It will then continue by describing Paradise and God, followed by another explanation. The essay will conclude with a comparison and contrast of the two positions.

To begin, Lucifer – the fallen archangel and sworn enemy of God, is trapped in Hell, forced to contribute to his own demise. Two large, sinewy wings sprouting from his back blow up a wind that freezes the river Cocytus. The resulting ice holds Lucifer and his minions captive in the frozen underworld. In the devil’s three mouths are held three prisoners – Judas, Brutus, and Cassius – representing the height of treachery.

Dante opens his last canto on the Inferno with the words *Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni*, or, “the banners of the king of Hell go forth.” Apparently Dante is putting a devilish twist on the opening line of a Catholic Hymn, “The Royal Banners Forward Go” with the addition of ‘inferni.” Indirectly, then, Dante is contrasting the frozen, tattered banners of Hell with the shining myriads of angels he will show us in Paradise.

The presence of Judas, Brutus, and Cassius in the three mouths of Lucifer illustrates the fact that deception and deceit are the worst forms of sin. Essentially, they are rooted in pride – a pride that shakes its fist at God and hence separates itself from God. Dante demonstrates this with three well-known traitors – Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Judas, of course, was the apostle who betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ. Brutus and Cassius, however, betrayed Julius Caesar – the founder of the Holy Roman Empire. To Dante, a Florentine and die-hard Roman, Julius Caesar stood for worldly power, and Brutus and Cassius – his murderers – were guilty of a crime near equal to Judas’s.

Paradise is different. Dante uses all of his astronomical knowledge to paint an astrological picture of the heavens. Positioned between God himself and the celestial Solar System is a Rose comprised of Old and New Testament saints, positioned in a circle with Old Testament saints on the right and New Testament saints on the left. Above the rose is God, surrounded by nine orders of shining angels, who also surround the seven planets. Each planet contains a category of those who love God – the lovers of glory, the lovers, the theologians, the martyrs, the righteous rulers, and the contemplatives. Above these are the stars, representing the triumph of Christ. Inside the nine circles of angels are three circles:

“I saw the Great Light shine into three circles   
in three clear colors bound in one same space;  
  
the first seemed to reflect the next like rainbow  
on rainbow, and the third was like a flame  
equally breathed forth by the other two.” (Dante, p. 393)

Clearly the three circles represent the Father (from which the next two circles go forth), the Son (from which the third circle goes forth, and the Holy Spirit (which goes forth from the previous two). These circles – God – make the whole of Paradise move. They are unified – “in one same space.” Dante speaks continually about the “Great Light” and the “Ray,” which shines into all of Paradise and illuminates and vitalizes it. This Light, or Love, moves the sun and all the other stars in the Solar System, showing that God is directing the praise of his people towards himself.

Given this wealth of information, what does it all mean? Why do we care? Well, Dante is making an important point that can’t be stressed enough. God is the essence of goodness and existence. Thomas Aquinas says, “It is said of God that He is life itself, and not only that He is a living thing: *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (Jo. xiv. 6). Now the relation between the Godhead and God is the same as the relation between life and a living thing. Therefore God is His very Godhead.” (Aquinas, p. 29)

What Aquinas is saying is that God is the only being on earth for which His existence is tied to his essence. Part of what he is, is his existence. God is the fountainhead of goodness and truth (cf. John 14:6, Aquinas). For this reason John says “Anyone who does not know love does not know God, because God is love.” (1st John 4:8) God is love – and love is God.

Paradise, then, is a veritable orb of goodness, because at its center – yet indeed, at its most outer regions – is God, radiating his goodness and light throughout Paradise.

C.S Lewis captures this image brilliantly with his story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* Aslan, the lion, is the essence of goodness – warm, rich, royal. The Witch, however, is void of any of that. Her kingdom is cold “always winter and never Christmas” (Lewis, p. 19)

Hell is like the Witch’s castle – cold, void of life, dead. The tears of the damned freeze on their faces, and their souls stand covered by a frozen sheet of ice. (Dante, pp. 280, 285) The image is that of absolute zero – a temperature that, by the definition of the combined gas law, is impossible to reach. At this temperature nothing can exist –all life, energy, and mass have vanished from it. Indeed, that is an apt description, for in Hell God is absent, and where God is absent, love and all good is absent.

Consider also the behavior of the inhabitants of Heaven and Hell. Judas, Cassius, and Brutus are being devoured (yet never die) by Lucifer, who, we noted, contributes to his own demise. In Paradise, however, there is no hatred, no enmity, but only love. Whereas there is in Hell an ironic unity between Lucifer and those held captive in his three mouths, there is in Paradise a lovely, glorifying, mysterious union of the Godhead. Augustine notes, “Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.” (Augustine, p. 477)

The city of man, a lover of self, is evil because it is not of God. The best it can do is a copy of God’s goodness, the worst – nothingness. C.S Lewis, again, explains this marvelously in *The Last Battle*. Those of the city of man – in the Inferno – are trapped in a black, dirty stable, when in reality “there is no black hole, save in [their] own fancy” (Lewis, The Last Battle, p. 166) Without God, we are trapped in a black hole of imagination, serving our own wills with our own loves in our own world without God. But for those of the city of God, there is something greater. Earth was a type of in-between – beginning as an earthly paradise created by God for man, yet tainted by man’s sin. Hell is the fulfillment of sinful man’s natural desire to serve themselves – apart from God – for eternity, thus it is cold, lifeless, and without joy. Heaven and the joys and things there are different – more glorious.

After witnessing the end of Narnia as they knew it and then finding themselves in something very akin to Narnia’s geographical characteristics, the Kings and Queens of Narnia comment,

“‘Why, they’re exactly like. Look, there’s Mount Pire with his forked head, and there’s the pass into Archenland, and everything!’  
 ‘And yet they’re not like,’ said Lucy. ‘They’re different. They have more colors on them and they look further away than I remembered and they’re more…more… oh, I don’t know…’  
 ‘More like the real thing,’ said the Lord Digory softly.” (Lewis, The Last Battle, p. 193)

And later…

“…that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here… All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream.” (Lewis, The Last Battle, p. 195)

Both Hell and Earth are only cold, lifeless shadows of Heaven, because they are, at best, tainted by sin, and at worst, wholly corrupted by it.

Since God is the essence of goodness and righteousness, the laws that he has set in place demand an obedience that defines the law keeper or the lawbreaker. Keeping the law of a righteous God makes the keeper righteous; breaking the law of a righteous God is to say ‘no’ to the essence of righteousness, thus “exchanging the truth about God” – his righteousness and that he is Savior – “for a lie and worship[ping] and serv[ing] the creature rather than the Creator.” (Romans 1:25)

In other words, to sin against God is to place oneself in Hell – the cold nothingness that exists apart from God. That is why Lucifer - why Judas, Brutus, and Cassius – were plunged into Hell – because the sinned against an eternal God. And even though all mankind, by nature, would be plunged to this Inferno, God sent a redeemer to purchase righteous men for himself – for Paradise – where they would be blessed forever with all the goodness and happiness that *is* God.

And as we are plunged into the story where “every chapter is better than the one before,” we can say with the Unicorn, “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-hee-hee! Come further up, come further in!” (Lewis, The Last Battle, p. 196)

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