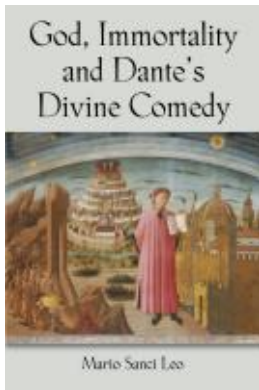


God, Immortality and Dante's Divine Comedy



Mario Sanci Leo



Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living." But, what are we to examine about our lives? Mario Sanci Leo puts forth life's quintessential question: "Is life meaningful or meaningless?" He then suggests a path, the pursuit of virtue and wisdom, that can lead to a noble happy life and spiritual bliss.

God, Immortality and Dante's Divine Comedy

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**God, Immortality and Dante's
Divine Comedy**

A Search for the Meaning of Life

Mario Sanci Leo

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Introduction

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”
Socrates

“Life is a mystery that cannot be solved, but it must be lived.”
Leonardo Da Vinci

“What a piece of work is man!
How noble in reason!
How infinite in faculty!
In form and moving how express and admirable!
In action how like an angel!
In apprehension how like a god~
The beauty of the world!
The paragon of animals!
And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”
– Shakespeare’s Hamlet

“Out, out brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets its hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, Full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”
– Shakespeare’s Macbeth

“Consider your origin; you were not born to live like brutes, but
to pursue virtue and wisdom.”
-Dante Alighieri

“Do you not see that we are all caterpillars, born to form the
angelic butterfly which wings its way to judgment?”
- Dante Alighieri

Our life experience is extremely short, and we have no foreknowledge of when or how it will end. Consider the tragic experiences of the contemporary writer Joan Didion. In mid-2003, her daughter, Quintana, was hospitalized with pneumonia shortly after her marriage. The pneumonia unfortunately led to Quintana's experiencing septic shock and a prolonged coma. While Joan Didion was desperately apprehensive about her daughter's condition, her husband, the writer Dominic Quinn, suddenly suffered a massive heart attack and died on December 30, 2003. Several months later, notwithstanding extensive medical treatment by the best doctors, Quintana also died.

After living through these heart-rending tragedies, Joan Didion tried to deal with her profound grief by writing about them in The Year of Magical Thinking. In that book, she poignantly remarks:

“Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life, as you know it, ends.”

Our lives can change traumatically in an instant, but we, like Joan Didion, cannot know when the instant of such traumatic change will occur. Of course, the most traumatic changes in our life occur at birth and at death. We do not know the pre-existence source of our birth. And, except for those who commit suicide, we do not know precisely when our death will occur, However, obviously, we do know that it definitely will die at some time. Because death is life's final act, we want it to be a good act. That requires that we live a good life. Only a good life will assure us of a good death – a tranquil acceptance of life's termination and a hope for our continuance in some sublimated form hereafter.

Should we fear death? No, at least not according to three of Western Civilizations' most profound thinkers:

- Socrates (469 – 399 B.C.), the Greek Philosopher regarded as the father of philosophy, the incarnation of human wisdom;
- St. Paul (5 B.C. – 67 A.D.), the most important intellectual figure in Christianity, after Christ himself; and
- John Donne (1572 – 1631), the British Transcendentalist poet.

In The Apology, Plato's account of Socrates' trial for purportedly "corrupting" the youth of Athens, Socrates explains to the jurors why, if found guilty by them, he does not fear the likely sentence of death:

"Death is one of two things; either the dead man is nothing, and has no consciousness of anything at all, or it is, as people say, a change and a migration for the soul from this place here to another place. If there is no consciousness and it is like a sleep, when one sleeping sees nothing, not even in dreams, death would be a wonderful blessing...But if, again, death is a migration from this world into another place, and if what they say is true, that there all the dead are, what greater good can there be than this, judges of the court?...But you also, judges of the court, must have good hopes towards death, and this one thing you must take as true – no evil can happen to a good man either living or dead...And now it is time to go, I to die, and you to live, but which of us goes to a better thing is unknown to all but God." (Underlining added)

Note, in particular, Socrates' contention that "no evil can happen to a good man either living or dead." A good life is insurance for a good fearless death, a Socratic equanimity as death approaches. What more essential insurance can we purchase for ourselves?

St. Paul, also tells us not to fear death as long as we lead a Good Life. He assures us that death is not an ending, a loss,

but rather a transition through resurrection to an everlasting existence in Hell, Purgatory or Heaven. Only those who lead evil lives need be apprehensive, need tremble, as death approaches. The Good need not be fearful. St. Paul confident that he like Socrates has led a Good Life, proclaims:

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

Similarly, John Donne in his Sonnet, Death Be Not Proud, asserts that death is a welcome transition for those who lead a Good Life. Only individuals whose behaviors are evil need fear death. Post-mortem punishment in Purgatory or Hell (or some equivalent thereof) is, in effect, the spiritual punishment for those who choose a life of immorality. For those who choose a life devoted to good works, sacrifice, compassion and charity, death holds no fear.

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think’st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.

Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poyson, warre and sicknesse dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better than thy stroake; why swell’st thou then;

One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death thou shall die.”

Clearly, if we lead a good life, we should not fear death. However, the quintessential question that faces us as human beings does not relate to the day of our death, but rather is whether our very temporary life experience is terminal or transitional, relevant or irrelevant. Does our life have any meaning at all or is it completely meaningless? Is life significant or entirely insignificant, trivial? Although we can have beliefs about these possibilities, we cannot know with certitude which represents truth. We can speculate and believe, but we cannot know for certain. Anyone who claims otherwise is a mountebank, charlatan or a fool. And though we cannot know, if we think at all seriously, we cannot avoid thinking about what life seems to be all about. What, if meaningful, is the Meaning of Life? We should heed Socrates' exhortation: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

If we believe that our experience here on Earth though ephemeral is transitional, relevant, meaningful and significant, then we should examine how best to conduct our lives during our stay here. After all, we have no way of knowing our ultimate fate, "Life is a mystery that cannot be solved, but it must be lived." We cannot know for certain, but how we comport ourselves during our lifetime may affect what, if anything, happens to us after our death. If our existence in some form continues after our death, then the choices we make during our brief visit to Earth may have eternal consequences, good or bad, temporary or eternal, for you, for me, for each of us. At the very least, we should consider Hamlet's "who knows what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil." Our key consideration should not be when and how we will face death, but, rather, how we should cope with life.

Dante's main message to us is that every decision we make during our lifespan is really a life/afterlife decision. And its consequences will affect us in our afterlife as well as here on Earth. Of course, the life and afterlife consequences of our

behavioral choices may be totally different. During life, an individual may escape punishment for hubristic arrogance, avarice, crimes, even the crimes of mass murders. However, Dante confidently assures us that just rewards and punishments will follow in our afterlife. Eternal Divine Justice, God's Justice, will reward us for each of our good deeds, substantial or modest, and punish us for each of our sins, grievous or venial. We cannot escape the Karmic consequences of our good and evil deeds. We have Free Will to make good or bad behavioral choices, and we will be held accountable for those we make.

To any reader who dogmatically believes that life is utterly devoid of meaning and value, that it "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," read no further. Dante will fail to convince you otherwise. To all others, those with a ceaselessly inquiring mind, those who believe that "The unexamined life is not worth living," you will find Dante to be a friend, an insightful genius, a comfort to you as you puzzle about life's meaning. You may even decide to adopt Dante's reason for being: "to pursue virtue and wisdom."

Dante begins his epic poem *La Commedia*:

"Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che' la diritta via era smarrita"

When I had journeyed half of our life's way
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.

In mid-life, Dante finds himself morally lost in the plethora of life's seemingly directionless phenomena, in the frequent apparent victory of vice over virtue, and in the frequency of man-made and natural disasters that kill and maim indifferently,

and seemingly unjustly, the world's innocents as well as its evildoers. Dante is thoroughly lost and confused. He does not know how he should lead his life, which forks in the available behavioral roads he should wander down. He knows that he has not led a particularly virtuous life, having "lost the path that does not stray." He ponders life's seeming injustices. Catastrophes indiscriminately afflict the Just as well as the Unjust, the Young as well as the Old, Believers as well as Nonbelievers. Why?

Dante was well aware of the arbitrary deprivations, punishments and deaths inflicted by plagues, famines, volcanic eruptions and brutal decimating wars. Today, we witness the millions of innocent beings killed in the many wars that incessantly plague our world, of murderous dictators like Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pat, Saddam Hussein and Mugabe of Zimbabwe, evil men who kill millions outright or permit millions within their control to starve to death, of the recent tsunami that killed 200,000 worldwide, of earthquakes that kill indiscriminately, of Hutu terrorists in Ruanda killing 800,000 Tutsis and their allies over just 100 days, of the 9/11 destruction of the Twin Towers and more than 3,000 of their innocent occupants in New York City. What are we to think of all these volitional or natural horrors? If a benevolent God created us, why does God tolerate such mind-confounding indiscriminate sufferings and killings?

Because Dante was confronted by these same perceived violations of belief in God's love for humanity, God's compassion and Divine Justice, Dante, like most of us, struggled to find moral clarity in a world suffused with moral confusion. He admits that he has lost his way in life. He does not know how to proceed. He, as do we, has trouble deciding where to begin to make some spiritual sense of patent injustices that defy rational explanation, are beyond scientific inquiry and even seem to defy a religious explanation. These

injustices challenge even the most profound religious faith. Dante confronts this problem head on, as should we, and wants to share his conjectural answers with us. His answers are necessarily conjectural as Life offers no certitudes in this area of cognitive impenetrability, this area where all of us may feel that we “have lost our way.” We have been given the power to think, but the epistemological reach of our thinking power, our ability to understand, is extremely limited. Like Dante, we should consider the possible reasons our epistemological knowledge-reach is so frustratingly limited.

When Dante Alighieri wrote his masterpiece, The Divine Comedy, almost seven centuries ago, he struggled with the answers to the eternal questions previously noted. He offers possible answers that are as relevant today as they were then. To understand Dante’s answers and relate them to our lives today requires that we first put ourselves in a mental framework similar to Dante’s. In this quest for knowledge of life’s meaning. Each of us should begin where Dante began – lost, bewildered, seeking to find guidance from whom and from where. We should begin, and continue to pursue throughout our lifetimes, what the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, in his Science in the Modern World, referred to as “an adventure of the spirit.” Because this is Life’s most exciting and quintessentially important adventure, we should proceed judiciously, seeking as much assistance as we can gain from our life experiences and all of the wisdom sources available to us, our invaluable legacy of human knowledge.

Dante began his search for answers with his doctrinaire Catholic belief in God as consisting of the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, more basic and important than this Catholic Dogma was his manifest belief in a more foundational and ecumenical “Holy Quartet”: the existence of a benevolent God, Free Will, the certainty of Personal Immortality and the inexorability of Divine Justice.

These are the bedrock beliefs on which The Divine Comedy was built. And these beliefs are where we begin our exploration of Dante's and my own search for answers. You may decide to reject these proffered answers, but you can at least explore them before making your decision. A good place to start that exploration, our own personal "adventure of the spirit," is a review of reasons why belief in God, Free Will, Personal Immortality and Divine Justice seems at least plausible and how Dante's The Divine Comedy attempts to guide our belief/behavioral decisions in the direction of a Good Life, a life devoted to "pursue virtue and wisdom."

The Inferno

***Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita***

**When I had journeyed half of our life's way
I found myself within a shadowed forest
for I had lost the path that does not stray**

In the first lines of The Divine Comedy, we learn that Dante has wandered off a familiar path, metaphorically speaking. He has walked aimlessly for a long time and has become completely lost. He falls into a deep sleep, induced by his mental anxiety and physical exhaustion. His anxiety and exhaustion, it turns out, are manifestations of his spiritual anxiety and concomitant mental exhaustion. Dante tells us that he is in the middle of his life, "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*," and suddenly finds himself lost in a dark foreboding forest, "*una selva oscura*." It really is a frightening forest in a spiritual sense. Dante has been searching for Truth on Earth, "had lost the path," and has failed to rediscover it. He is thoroughly confused, bewildered and perplexed. He doesn't know where to look. He is hopelessly alone and lost geographically, intellectually and spiritually.

Dante reasonably assumes that man has Free Will so is capable of Good or Evil. He realizes that his life thus far has not been free of sin. He has been imperfect morally because he has sought material wealth, celebrity status through his writings, and Earthly pleasures. Dante realizes that although he is quite intelligent and well educated, he lacks spiritual light and

edification. We soon surmise he is about to confront our quintessential existential questions:

- What is life all about?
- Is life a meaningful experience?
- If so, what is its meaning and what am I supposed to be doing here?
- What, if anything, happens to me after death?
- Do the behavioral choices I freely make while here on Earth have consequences for me after death?

Understandably, Dante is thoroughly frightened by the strange surroundings in which he finds himself. Lost and afraid, he comments:

“When I had journeyed half of our life’s way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.

Ah. It is hard to speak of what it was,
that savage forest, dense and difficult,
which even in recall renews my fear:

so bitter – death is hardly more severe!
But to retell the good discovered there,
I’ll also tell the other things I saw.

I cannot clearly see how I had entered
the wood; I was so full of sleep just at
the point where I lost the true path.”

Dante begins by saying that he has journeyed half “our life’s way...” And then Dante goes on to say that he, not necessarily all of us, finds himself lost in a forest. The use of “we” is to suggest that all of us should think sometime, and more frequently, about life, why we were born, why we must die and

what we are supposed to be doing while we are here. Dante suggests that he may be dreaming: "I was so full of sleep just at the point where I had lost the true path."

If we seriously heed Socrates exhortation: "The unexamined life is not worth living," and examine how we are living our lives, we too may find ourselves to be "lost," in need of some guidance. Dante offers his guidance to all of us. We are free to accept or reject the messages of The Divine Comedy. However, we should at least consider this great work that has survived for many centuries and will continue to do so, as a possible contribution to our education/edification. After all, if we think seriously about life, if our thinking is free of infant-learned religious dogmatisms, we too may feel "lost" in the metaphorical sense Dante uses the term here.

Notice that Dante "had lost the path that does not stray." He has not led a life of moral rectitude. He is not sure where to turn for enlightenment. And, most fearful of all, he considers moral uncertainty to be even more frightful than the fear of death or rather what may happen to him after he dies. How is he to escape this predicament? Dante indicates that the dark forest, the place where he recognizes that he is "lost," symbolizes his ignorance of "where he is" in his life. From that admission of profound ignorance, he will begin a transformative spiritual journey in which he is to discover many things – evil as well as good. The admission of ignorance is a necessary prerequisite for learning. An arrogant, self-satisfied, stupid mind closes the mind's door and precludes, without obviating the critical need for, learning.

Dante now gazes around him, seeking some clue as to how he can emerge from this foreboding forest of spiritual darkness. Off in the distance, he spots a towering mountain. Thinking he can ascertain his whereabouts by ascending to its apex, he begins the long arduous climb up its slope. His progress soon

is halted by the appearance of three threatening wild animals. They symbolize three moral pitfalls, obstacles to the attainment of our worthiest goals: virtue and wisdom. Dante also associates these symbolic animals with different stages in our lives:

- Leopard: Dante first encounters a leopard:

“And almost where the hillside starts to rise -
look there! – A leopard, very quick and very lithe,
a leopard covered with a spotted hide.

He did not disappear from sight, but stayed;
indeed, he so impeded my ascent
that I had often to turn back again.

The time was the beginning of the morning;
the sun was rising now in fellowship
with the same stars that had escorted it

when Divine Love first moved those things of beauty;
so that the hour and the gentle season
gave me hopefulness on seeing
that beast before me with his speckled skin;”

In the literature of the Middle Ages, the leopard represents the youthful stages of our life. This animal is associated with youthful lust, immoderate self-indulgence, and immoderate desire for bodily pleasures. Confronted by this fearsome wild animal, Dante is fearful. However, his fear is somewhat allayed at least temporarily because “the sun was rising” and “the gentle season” gave him hope that he would be able to find his way out of his danger and dismay. The sun sheds enlightenment and helps to dispel the darkness of the “shadowed forest...” He was gaining confidence that he could get by the leopard; however, the “hope was hardly able to

prevent the fear I felt when I beheld a lion.” This is the next formidable obstacle to Dante’s ascension of the mountain.

- Lion: Dante describes the fear-inducing sight of a ferocious lion:

“His head held high and ravenous with hunger-
even the air around him seemed to shudder-
this lion seemed to make his way against me.”

In the literature of the Middle Ages, a lion stands for our mid-life lusty manhood. To the medievalists, this wild animal also symbolizes immoderate pride, immoderate self-admiration, hubris and violence. It embodies the emotional resort to force rather than reason to resolve problems or to get what we want. Arrogant pride is the most serious of the seven evil vices. Its origin, of course, is in the Fall of Adam and Eve, of their uncontrolled ambition to be like God. Dante’s fears continue to heighten as he is confronted by the lion as well as the leopard, both life-threatening beasts. But, more perils soon are to confront him!

- Wolf: And now Dante encounters a wild hungry wolf:

“And then a she-wolf showed herself; she seemed
to carry every craving in her leanness;
she had already brought despair to many.

The very sight of her so weighted me
with fearfulness that I abandoned hope
of ever climbing up that mountain slope.”

The wolf symbolizes the sins of our older age. This animal is associated with avarice, greed, insatiability, and the immoderate ambition for power and wealth. Notice that the sins of the leopard and the lion are driven primarily by our

uncontrolled (and some would argue uncontrollable) emotions – lust, hubris, violence, etc. – while those of the wolf are more serious, their source is in our intellects, our Free Will.

The key word in all of these descriptions of moral failings is “immoderate.” Dante was familiar with Aristotle’s ethical philosophy explained in the Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle the Pragmatist, unlike Socrates the Idealist, stressed the Golden Mean, behavior that is moderate, behavior between asceticism and extravagance. It is acceptable to yearn for celebrity status, power and money, provided you place reasonable limits, responsible societal limits, on that ambition. Dante was not an egalitarian, but he opposed excessive disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” He realized that too great a disparity between the economic classes in any society leads to social strife, possibly civil war, a disintegration of peace and stability. At this point, the three ferocious animals – leopard, lion and wolf – seem determined to prevent Dante’s further ascension up the mountain.

Although he is mid-slope, Dante still cannot get his bearings. Help does not seem available from any quarter. He remains hopelessly lost. Because his plight is a profoundly moral one, it seems that only a heavenly intercession can be of help to him. Fortunately for Dante, that intercession shows up in the person of the classical Roman poet, Virgil, author of The Aeneid. Dante, a great poet, naturally seeks as his helper the predecessor poet he most admires, one from whose work he had learned a lot about life as well as poetry.

Virgil explains that that he has been assigned to help Dante find his way out of the spiritual forest in which he has lost himself. With this meeting with Virgil, Dante introduces us to his belief in the immortality of our personal souls (often referred to as “shades” in the poem), for Virgil died some thirteen centuries before Dante’s birth. Belief in personal immortality is critical to

Dante's claim that we will experience Divine Justice. We may not experience it here on Earth, but Dante claims that we surely will do so after death when our souls proceed to God's judgment. ("Do you not see that we all are caterpillars, born to form the angelic butterfly that wings its way to judgement.")

Dante, an ardent admirer of Virgil's poetry, is delighted when Virgil appears before him. He importunes Virgil:

"You are my master and my author, you –
the only one from whom my writing drew
the noble style for which I have been honored.

You see the beast that made me turn aside;
help me, o famous sage, to stand against her,
for she has made my blood and pulses shudder."

Notice that while praising Virgil, Dante cannot resist self-praise: "the noble style for which I have been honored." Later, Beatrice will rebuke him for this manifestation of prideful immodesty. Virgil indicates that he has been sent by Beatrice (Dante's youthful personification of Love), who appeals to St. Lucy ("luce" is the Italian word for light) and then the two of them importuned the Virgin Mary to lead Dante out of the dark wood of moral uncertainty. Virgil explains that Dante's sole route of escape from his moral danger is to follow Virgil and witness the consequences of wayward lifestyles and the path to redemption and heaven:

"It is another path that you must take'
he answered when he saw my tearfulness,
'if you would leave this savage wilderness;

the beast that is the cause of your outcry
allows no man to pass along her track,
but blocks him even to the point of death.

...

Therefore, I think and judge it best for you
to follow me, and I shall guide you, taking
you from this place through an eternal place,

where you shall hear the howls of desperation
and see the ancient spirits in their pain,
as each of them laments his second death;

and you shall see those souls who are content
within the fire, for they hope to reach -
whenever that may be – the blessed people.

If you would then ascend as high as these;
a soul more worthy than I will guide you;
I'll leave you in her care when I depart,

because that Emperor who reigns above,
since I have been rebellious to His law,
will not allow me entry to His city.”

In other words, Virgil will lead Dante through Hell and Purgatory, but, being a pre-Christian pagan, he cannot take Dante to Heaven. He is forbidden to do so by “that Emperor who reigns above,” God. A more virtuous person (in Christian terms), a Christian, Dante’s first love, Beatrice, will take Dante there. With no alternative route of escape and trusting his hero poet, Dante proceeds to follow Virgil to an opening in the Earth. They are about to descend into Hell, which Dante locates at the center of the Earth.

Why locate Hell at Earth’s center? In the Middle Ages, based on Biblical anthropocentricity and the geocentricity of Ptolemy’s astronomy, Earth was deemed to be the stationary center of the Universe. It was believed that all the other planets

and stars revolved above and around Earth (like our moon), and God resided in Heaven, infinitely far beyond all these bodies. Therefore, the region in the Universe farthest from God's grace, the place for irredeemable sinners, the place for the location of Hell logically was at Earth's center. Of course, this astronomy, and the statement in Genesis that Man was made in God's image, placed all humans at the center of God's Creation and concern.

Dante's Christian religion has taught him that throughout eternity, forever, there is no escape for souls that are condemned to suffer in Hell. Hell is, in effect, an inescapable "second death." An inscription above Hell's entrance, in exceedingly bold lettering, greatly increases Dante's profound fears:

“THROUGH ME THE WAY INTO THE SUFFERING CITY,
THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME THE WAY THAT RUNS AMONG THE
LOST.

JUSTICE URGED ON MY HIGH ARTIFICER;
MY MAKER WAS DIVINE AUTHORITY.
THE HIGHEST WISDOM AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS
WERE MADE, AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER.”

The last words Dante reads on the inscription are the most daunting to Dante: “LASCIA TE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CH' ENTRATE.” These are the most ominous words uttered in all of literature, regardless of language, geography or religious belief: “ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER.” Should Dante abandon every hope of leaving Hell once he enters? Trembling, Dante continues to express fear and bewilderment to Virgil. He

is sure of the meaning of the words he has read, and does not want to chance the possibility that they may apply to his entrance into Hell. Indeed, why should his entry be an exception? Could Virgil be deceiving Dante? Virgil reassures Dante and importunes him to continue to have courage and faith in him and in the heavenly intermediaries who he claims sent him:

“And he to me, as one who comprehends:
‘Here one must leave behind all hesitation;
here every cowardice must meet its death.

For we have reached the place of which I spoke,
where you will see the miserable people,
those who have lost the good of the intellect.”

Notice that Virgil is here equating evil with a lack of wisdom, loss of “the good of the intellect.” What good is intelligence if it leads one into a life of evil or even moral apathy? This recalls Socrates’ statement that virtue and wisdom are synonymous, as are evil and ignorance.

Virgil again prevails on Dante to trust him. He assures Dante that they will be able to leave Hell after they complete their journey. Virgil then leads a shaking fear-stricken Dante through the dark very wide portal on the road to Hell. Let us summon our courage and join Virgil and Dante as they enter Hell.

At the entrance, Dante comments “the gate is wide,” meaning that entry to Hell is quite easy. Dante believes that we have competing natures within us. Our appetitive desires for wealth, power, and celebrity status can crowd out our more humane proclivities that promise less immediate and less material satisfaction. Avoiding entry to Hell requires that we “walk a straight, narrow path.” Morality is a straight narrow path;

it does not permit deviations from that path. Moreover, morality requires that we “walk” the path; moral neutrality or indifference to evil is not acceptable.

Moral choices need not be predicated on religious beliefs; frequently they are not so motivated. The moral path taken by non-believing altruists is not expected to lead to post-mortem rewards, so that path tends to be particularly difficult and self-denying. For these individuals, sacrifice is actuated by the emotion of empathy for those who suffer in life, or sacrifice may be rationalized as a form of enlightened self-interest. Regardless of the source, morality and sacrifice never are as easy to accept as is self-gratification. Sin often seems to offer more “fun;” virtue frequently seems austere. However, virtue, properly understood, offers “joy,” a sublimated form of “fun.”

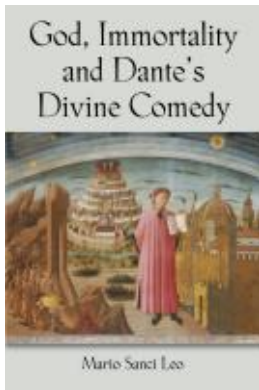
As Dante enters Hell with Virgil as his guide he learns that Hell is shaped like a gigantic descending cone. The cone’s entrance is secretly located on Earth’s surface in the northern hemisphere. Hell has a pre-Inferno chamber called the Ante-Inferno and nine other descending levels. Paths and stairs descend to the ever lower conical sections of Hell. Each conical section is designated for individuals whose sins, increasingly egregious as you move downward, were committed while they lived on Earth:

- The Ante-Inferno
- The Circles:
 - One – Limbo
 - Two – Lust
 - Three – Gluttony
 - Four – Avarice and Waste
 - Five – Wrath and Sullenness
 - Six – Heresy
 - Seven – Violence
 - Eight – Fraud

Nine - Treason

Located at the very top of Hell's cone is a region named Limbo. Limbo has the widest conical diameter so is capable of holding the most sinners. As you descend, the conical sections become increasingly less capacious, more punishing and further from Earth's surface and God's Heaven. Finally, at the cone's pointed base, its nadir, Circle Nine, only Satan and fewer individuals, those who have committed the most appallingly evil sins, are found.

The punishments meted out in each descending section are designed to be appropriate, in kind and severity, for the specific moral transgressions committed by each Circle's inhabitants. Dante keeps emphasizing throughout The Divine Comedy, that what each of us sows on Earth each of us will reap in the Afterworlds of Hell, Purgatory or Heaven. But this rule matters to you only if you believe that we all have immortal souls and that God will subject our human behaviors to Divine Justice, Dante's beliefs.



Socrates: "The unexamined life is not worth living." But, what are we to examine about our lives? Mario Sanci Leo puts forth life's quintessential question: "Is life meaningful or meaningless?" He then suggests a path, the pursuit of virtue and wisdom, that can lead to a noble happy life and spiritual bliss.

God, Immortality and Dante's Divine Comedy

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