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## When Hell Freezes Over: Science and Theology in Dante's *Inferno*

It is supposed to be common knowledge that Hell is fiery, well, as Hell. After all, this is why we say referring to a time that never comes as “when Hell freezes over”. And this is why we say of people who have no chance succeeding in something, or indeed, in surviving a dangerous situation, that they have “a snowball’s chance in Hell”. Not so, however, in Dante’s icy Hell, where a snowball would happily continue its otherwise perilous existence. So, what happened to Dante; didn’t he get the memo? Or is it perhaps only our modern Anglo-Saxon imagination that associates hell with “fire and brimstone”? Well, hell no, if I may emphasize the point this way. It is certainly not only Anglo-Saxon imagination, as it can be found in almost any old churches depicting Hell all over Europe. And it is certainly not some modern imagination, witnessed by all sorts of medieval depictions from church frescoes to illuminated codices such as this one:

So, to pose the task of this lecture in one question, we should ask: how come Dante’s *Inferno* is icy, despite the common imagination of a fiery hell? Or to articulate the task a little better: what are Dante’s possible reasons for depicting hell the way he does; are they rooted in his philosophy, science, theology, or mere poetic imagination?

Let us try to address these issues systematically, in the reverse order, starting with what may appear to be the most obvious, the *poetic* explanation. According to this, the punishment of Dis with ice is a sort of “poetic justice”: the greatest punishment fits the greatest crime. Satan, for his arrogant, vain attempt to take the place of God, deserved to be cast the farthest away from that place. Well, obviously, given that God and Satan are both spiritual beings that do not occupy physical space in the way physical bodies do, the talk about places and distances here must be metaphorical. But then the place of Dis is indeed exactly right. For if God’s “place” is where all spiritual light and warmth emanates from, then the place allotted to Dis must be the darkest and coldest, spiritually. But what is this spiritual light and warmth and the opposite dark and cold?

Since metaphors always involve an implicit comparison of what is less known to what is better known, or what is unfamiliar to what is familiar, we should



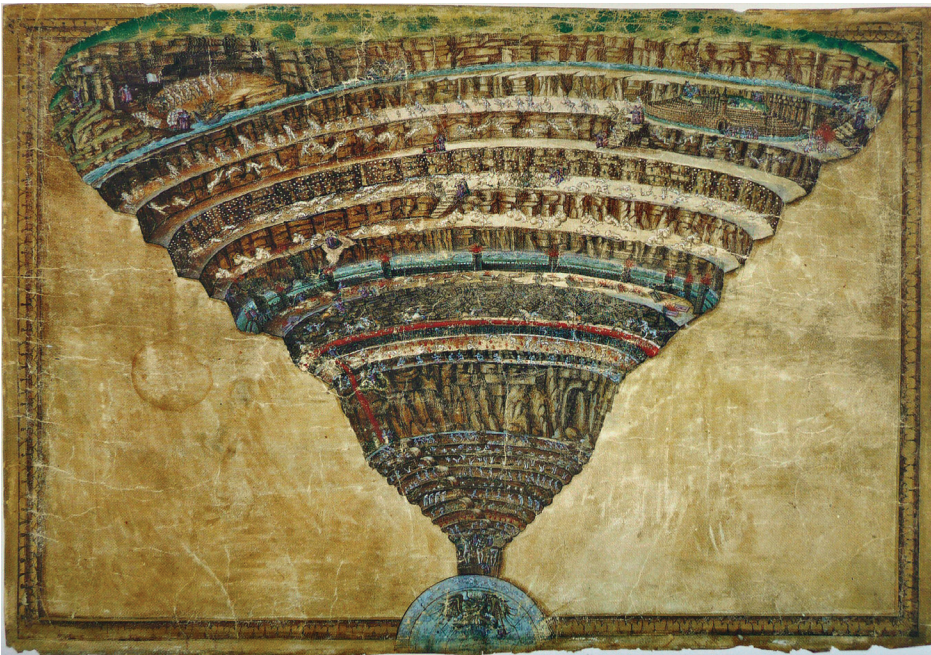
start with what we are familiar with, namely, what is common experience. And common experiences are best articulated in our language's idiomatic expressions, encoding common wisdom. So, what does this common wisdom teach us about the relationship between coldness and warmth and our spiritual, emotional lives? We all know what it's like to "get cold feet" or "give someone the cold shoulder", as opposed to people "warming up to each other" or "feeling warm

and fuzzy inside”. Accordingly, warmth is always strongly associated with positive and, coldness with negative feelings, or to use another, spatial, metaphor: with emotional, and thus, by extension, intellectual closeness, *versus* remoteness, keeping a distance.

Indeed, this poetic idea would also be in keeping with the *theological* consideration of Satan, and generally the wicked, who are suffering the tortures of Hell by being cast the farthest away from God with no hope of returning to Him.

But, however attractive this type of metaphorical/poetic explanation for Dante’s icy Hell may sound, there are several reasons why it may not be fully satisfactory.

In the first place, Dante’s and Virgil’s journey is cast very much like a physical travel, described with geographic precision, indeed, so much so that it allows for a life-like depiction of the entire structure of Hell inside the earth in Botticelli’s famous Map of Dante’s Inferno.



To be sure, one might object here that for a metaphor to be poetically effective it had better be life-like, and so the description of a metaphorical journey, in order to be poetically effective, must be geographically correct, while it is still metaphorical. Therefore, the geographical correctness of the depiction does not have to conclude to the physical character of the journey depicted.

While we may concede this objection and allow the journey’s metaphorical character, leading to places farther and farther “cast away from God”, using a

spatial metaphor, this explanation still may not fully account for the icy character of “the farthest place”, the ninth circle.

After all, theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, dealing with the issue of torments in Hell, regularly considered the question of how the souls of the damned, along with the purely spiritual demons and Lucifer himself can suffer from *corporeal fire*.

So, it would seem that such theologians, following in the footsteps of Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei*, would find Dis, his demons, and the separate souls of the dead condemned to Hell to be tormented by *fire*, indeed, corporeal, *physical fire*, and not by ice, where the only problem is how a purely spiritual, incorporeal entity can be afflicted in any way by a corporeal substance, namely, fire.

Now if we look at the solution of the problem provided by Aquinas, we can see that in a way it is in interesting agreement with the poetic/metaphorical explanation we have just considered, despite the contrast between fire and ice: since physical fire cannot have a physical, corporeal impact on an incorporeal entity, its impact must be of a different nature, consisting in “tying down” these spirits, frustrating their natural yearning to get (using again a spatial metaphor) “closer” to God. To be sure, fire in and of itself does not have this power to detain a spirit, which is a substance of a superior nature, but it does so by virtue of working as God’s instrument of inflicting just punishment, exacerbated by the fact that the instrument in question is of an inferior nature than the one being punished. As Aquinas writes:

To investigate, therefore, how corporeal fire can be harmful to a soul or a demon, we should consider the fact that harm is not brought upon someone by receiving that which perfects it, but rather as it is impeded by its contrary. So, the soul’s affliction by fire is not only by receiving its impact, as the intellect receives the impact of intelligible objects, and the sense that of the sensibles, but in the way in which something is afflicted by something else that is its contrary or impediment. And this takes place in two ways. For something is impeded by its contrary through being altered and corrupted, as when fire burns wood. Other things are impeded by something standing in their way or being contrary to their natural inclination, just as a rock’s natural inclination is to fall downward, but it is impeded by something standing in its way and forcing it violently to stop or move. But neither of these ways is like a punishment for something that lacks cognition. For where there is no pain or sorrow, the idea of inflicting punishment simply does not apply. But in a cognitive subject both ways of affliction import infliction of punishment, but differently. For the affliction of alteration by a contrary object imports the infliction of punishment by sensible pain as when an excessively sensible object destroys the integrity of a sense. This is why excessively sensible objects, especially tangible ones, inflict physical pain, while moderately sensible ones bring about pleasure, because they are agreeable to the senses. But the other kind of affliction does not import the infliction of punishment by sensible

pain, but by sorrow, which arises in man or an animal from the fact that something intrinsic is apprehended by some [cognitive] power as being against the will or some other desire. And thus, those things that are contrary to the will or some other desires do have an impact, and sometimes even more than sensible pain does, for one would rather suffer a beating and being afflicted by sensory pain than suffer vilification or some such things that are against one's will. In the first way, therefore, the soul cannot suffer from corporeal fire; for it is not possible for the soul to be altered or destroyed by it. Thus, the soul is not afflicted by fire so that it would suffer sensible pain from it. However, the soul can suffer from corporeal fire in the second way of suffering, insofar as it is impeded by this sort of fire from its inclination or will. And this is obvious from the following. The soul, just as any other incorporeal substance, is not tied to a place by its own nature but transcends the entire order of corporeal things. Therefore, that it is tied down to something by some necessity is against its nature and contrary to its natural desire. And I say this excepting the case when it is joined to the [human] body, of which it is its natural form, and in which it obtains some perfection. However, when a spiritual substance is tied down to a body, this does not happen by the power of the body that would be able to detain a spirit, but it happens by the power of a superior substance tying the spiritual substance to such a body, just as when by means of magical arts, with divine permission, by the power of superior demons some spirits are tied to certain bodies, such as rings or pictures, etc. And this is how souls and demons are tied down, in punishment, to corporeal fire by divine power. This is why Augustine says in book 21 of *De Civitate Dei*: 'why should we not say that, although in miraculous ways, even the incorporeal spirits being afflicted by corporeal fire, if the spirits of humans, although themselves incorporeal can even now be locked up in bodily members, and then will be tied to the members of their bodies by unbreakable shackles? Thus, although they are incorporeal, these spirits will adhere to corporeal fire to be tormented, receiving punishment from the fire, without giving it life.' And so, it is true that this fire, insofar as it detains the soul tied to it by divine power, is acting on the soul as the instrument of divine justice. And insofar as the soul apprehend the fire as something hurting it, it is afflicted by inner sorrow, which is the most intense when it considers that it is subjected to something inferior to it, whereas it was naturally to be united with God in joy. The greatest affliction of the damned, therefore, derives from the fact that they will be separated from God, and a secondary one results from the fact that they will be subjected to corporeal things in the lowest and most dejected place. (Q. d. de anima, a. 21 co.)

So, what do we learn from this lengthy quote? In the first place, and most importantly, the souls of the damned in Hell do suffer from corporeal fire. The fire and the suffering are not imaginary: the fire is physical, and the suffering is real, although not physical. Accordingly, the description of the suffering in terms of physical affliction is metaphorical or analogical, as is usually the case when we are describing mental phenomena: we are "grasping" an idea, abstract, that is,

“pull away”, a concept, that is, what we mentally “grasp”, from its individuation conditions, we can “see” someone’s “point” in an argument, etc., etc. But why does the instrument of divine punishment have to be *corporeal fire*? Aquinas provides the reason with reference to, in the *sed contra* argument, immediately preceding the passage just quoted:

it is the same fire by which the bodies and souls and demons will be punished, as is clear from Matthew XXV, 41: ‘depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels’. However, the bodies of the damned will have to be punished by corporeal fire. Therefore, by the same reason, the separated souls are also punished by corporeal fire. (Q. d. de anima, a. 21 s. c.)

But does it *have to be* fire? It is still not clear where Dante’s icy punishment allotted to Dis and those around him is coming from.

Well, we certainly have here the Biblical reference quoting the words of the Lord himself, speaking about fire. However, we can also learn from Aquinas that it really does not matter whether it is fire or ice: what matters is not the element’s physical impact by its active power, whether it be heat or cold, which it cannot have on immaterial entities anyway; rather, what matters is that it functions as a physical instrument of spiritual punishment, which, however, is metaphorically depicted in terms of physical pain, and which in turn is just the impact of an excessive sensible that is harmful to a sense, whether it be the excessive heat of fire or the excessive cold of ice. So, if Dante has his poetic or other reasons for depicting the torments of the damned in terms of the metaphorical description of sensible suffering, he may use ice in these depictions just as he could use fire.

But, perhaps, Dante the great syncretic poet of the age of intellectual as well as stone-built cathedrals, had also some other, namely, *scientific* reasons for depicting an icy Hell. After all, in Aristotelian physics, the sublunary world consists of four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, churned up by the impact of celestial light, producing the cycles of generation and corruption of mixed bodies within this sphere. But the elements themselves, when left alone, tend toward their natural places in the order of their heaviness: the earth in the center, around it water, enveloped by water and then fire. In fact, according to Aquinas, when at the end of the world (as we know it) the celestial motions will stop, the elements will be separated in their natural spheres, and all generation and corruption will stop. However, even while there is generation and corruption on account of celestial movement, some partial separation is possible, and that’s why the greater part of earth, the heaviest element that is naturally cold is at the center of the universe, and of course it is the coldest toward its very center. Add to its coldness the coldness of water partly trapped inside it at the center, and you get the ice entrapping Dis.

To be sure, besides this scientific reason there may have simply been other popular views influencing Dante, some of which provided him with the imagery of an icy Hell. In fact, one of his sources, the Vision of Tundale, provides us with a vision of Hell torturing its inhabitants *both* with fire and ice:

Then they came to a mountain of extraordinary size, a place of great horror and immense solitude. The mountain provided a very narrow path for those wishing to cross. For on one side of the path there was a putrid fire, sulfurous and dark, while on the other side there was icy snow and a horrible hail-ridden wind. On one side and the other, the mountain was ready to punish souls; it was full of torturers, so that no route appeared to be safe to those who wished to cross it. These torturers wielded fiery iron tongs and had very sharp tridents at the ready, with which they pierced any souls trying to cross and dragged them to torment. While those wretched souls suffered punishments enveloped in the flames, they were pierced by the tridents and thrown into the snow. Then they were thrown back once again from the pounding hail into the fiery flames. (Bruce 2018. 88.)

So, in line with the foregoing theological considerations by Aquinas, what matters again is the vivid sensory description of physical pain, metaphorically standing in for the spiritual torment consisting of being cast away from God, and detained by something inferior, indeed, disgustingly foul, and painful. So, whichever form of torment the poet would pick, the spiritual message would be the same: you are in a place of horrors when you are in a place farthest from God.

But of course, even this reference to a place and distance is metaphorical, standing in for the spiritual condition most vividly depicted by Dante in the abject resignation of Dis himself. For even if Hell is a physical location, somewhere in, over, or under (meaning the other side) the earth, what matters is that spiritual condition itself. This why Aquinas, answering to a question about the location of Hell, says: “As to the question of where Hell is, whether around the center of the earth or around its surface, I take it that this has nothing to do with the doctrine of faith, and it is superfluous to get excited about these matters whether affirming or denying such claims.” (De 43 articulis, a. 31 arg.)

And this is because the point is not a scientific truth or falsity, but the spiritual message, which the poet is free to express in the most vivid and forceful sensory imagery he can conjure up, especially for those who understand him well.



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