

Article

“Where Are We Going?” Dante’s *Inferno* or Richard Rorty’s “Liberal Ironist”

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Abstract: This paper elucidates the structure of moral action by arguing that Dante’s explanation in the *Inferno* of why people end up in their respective circles of hell is superior in terms of accounting for the structure of moral reasoning to Richard Rorty’s promotion of the “liberal ironist.” The latter suffers an internal contradiction—it wants a well-lived life without any overriding aims, but such a life is understandable only in light of affirming life-aims. The former convincingly shows that the structure of action reveals the truth of the well-known apothegm—“we reap what we sow.” The main point for Dante is not who is rational (for even the rational can be vicious, as depicted in the *Inferno*), but whose aims actually fulfill the practical life. This comparison of Dante and Rorty can have larger pedagogical aims, helping students to understand better what Albert William Levi calls “the moral imagination” and deepening their appreciation of how metaphors and paradigms of moral excellence provide, or fail to provide, an overriding unity and purpose to our actions.

Keywords: Dante; Richard Rorty; ethics; philosophy; interdisciplinary; pedagogy

My aims in this essay are twofold. First, I want to show that Dante’s *Inferno* exemplifies an important point about the relationship among human nature, moral order, and the vices—that is, people can be what the University of Chicago philosopher Candice Vogler calls “reasonably vicious” (Vogler 2002). Dante’s *Inferno* is not filled with ignorant people or the pathologically insane (no Charles Manson-type people are there). It is filled with people who deliberately and intentionally aim for goals that contradict human nature, and thus suffer the natural consequences of seeking perverted aims.¹

To highlight this lesson from the *Inferno*, I contrast Dante’s story with the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty and his account of the contingency of language, selfhood, and community. Rorty claims that what he calls the “liberal ironist” represents the truly modern person, one who is emancipated from traditional problems of truth, God, and natural law, and who continually remakes her or himself by adopting new metaphors for living. However, as I hope to show, in comparison to Dante’s story, Rorty has no way to prevent or correct the “reasonable vicious” person.

Moreover, it is also my aim to use this contrast between Dante and Rorty as a pedagogical lesson to elucidate the development of what Albert William Levi calls “the moral imagination.” Behind every attempt to explain and justify our moral actions is the “moral phenomena,” the experience of the morally ideal, of what we ought to be. These phenomena are pervasive and influential throughout a culture, though not quantifiable and measurable in the way the objects of natural science are. This ideal indicates our sense of when we as humans are at our moral best. Levi says, “the moral imagination is what produces the ideals dominating vast historical epochs and it always seems to require both a

¹ For a contemporary rendition of this point from a professional psychological point of view, see (Schimmel 1992). Although the seven deadly sins are more explicitly the topics of Dante’s journey through purgatory, Schimmel’s insights help to explain Dante’s journey through the inferno. “The deadly sins are not arbitrary, irrational restrictions on human behavior, imposed by a remote deity indifferent to human needs . . . [They] concern the core of what we are, of what we can become, and most importantly, of what we should aspire to be” (Schimmel 1992, p. 5).

subjective factor of individual philosophical thought and an objective reference to the characteristic details of actual social living" (Levi 1995, p. 16). The most fruitful cognitive capability we have to express this conjunction of "thought" and "actual social living" is the imagination—that is, the forming of metaphors and paradigms of moral excellence that both highlight concrete actions of our lives and picture an overriding unity of those actions.

In comparing and contrasting Dante and Rorty, we see conflicting metaphors and paradigms (i.e., the "pilgrim" versus the "liberal ironist") attempting to elucidate the moral phenomena of our lives. My plan is by the end to show that Dante's imagination, as opposed to Rorty's, better explains the moral phenomena understood in terms of the inherent necessities of moral action, and that, by this exercise, we can help our students to understand more deeply how the moral imagination shapes and directs their lives.

1. Overview

The first three chapters of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* are titled "The Contingency of Language," "The Contingency of Selfhood," and "The Contingency of a Liberal Community" (Rorty 1989). Although Rorty writes readably about many subjects and many authors, these chapters express the kernel of his thinking.

According to Rorty, language is contingent because truth is not out there. Because words are not pictorial images of reality, we cannot mirror nature, and, consequently, we lose the habits of using certain words because they no longer interest us, words like "truth," "God," and "nature." We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that reality is indifferent to us and our linguistic efforts, and instead of worrying about truth, we should worry about apt metaphors expressive of our desires. Thus, we should be more like poets than physicists or theologians. Poets create realities with words, rather than attempt to find one-to-one words to objects. Truth, subsequently, becomes uninteresting and not a deep matter. Hence, Rorty says, we should think of "intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (Rorty 1989, p. 9). Language is a tool without ontological connections and without teleology, and thus malleable enough for whatever creative use it takes to both de-divinize the world and to promote the self-created person, who worships nothing. Rorty often quotes Nietzsche at this point: "truth as a mobile army of metaphors" (Rorty 1989, p. 17). Our vocabulary, then, must be forceful enough to resist any extraneous impositions of how life ought to be lived, but formative enough to express our desires to live authentically without presupposing any conceptual or ontological realism.

The self is also utterly contingent. If, as Rorty claims, truth is only the creative use of metaphors, then self-knowledge leads to self-creation, and if we still want certainty in our search for truth, we should not look to the world but to the fact that "we willed it." Even though this sounds like a traditional promotion of autonomy, it is not Kant's idea of it, because Kant sought to secure the moral self in an indifferent world by divinizing the self's moral sense. However, if we are utterly contingent, we are also not divine in any way. The distinctively human is what each person's idiosyncratic fantasy reveals about each person, not in the sense that everyone dreams of a fantastical end of human pursuits, but in the sense of having a project of continual recreation. Yet, for a society of such projects to continue, there is only one primary disposition in respect to others: "the realization that at a certain point one has to trust to the good will of those who will live other lives and write other poems" (Rorty 1989, p. 42). This trust does not require any strong moral tradition or divine command to make it sensible for the "liberal ironist." It is just what emancipated, self-creating modern persons do.

The best society in which poets can flourish is a liberal community and, not surprisingly, this is thoroughly contingent as well. A genuine liberal community has moved beyond even the Enlightenment model of social scientists molding people into progressive citizens based upon scientific rationality. There is not a rational foundation on which to build such a society. We are poetically free only in a community without foundations in science, philosophy, or religion. This is why "freedom is the recognition of contingency" (Rorty 1989, p. 46). Consequently, we do not need to guide society

rationally, for the distinction between rationality and irrationality is archaic and uninteresting. Rather, to have a community of many paradigms of humanity freely living together, we should accept only one social value: “one can come at it from the point of view of an ethics of kindness, and ask whether cruelty and injustice will be diminished if we all stopped worrying about ‘absolute validity’ or whether, on the contrary, only such worries keep our characters firm enough to defend unflinchingly the weak against the strong” (Rorty 1989, p. 51). For Rorty, if we all accept the utter contingencies of language, selfhood, and community, then we would naturally eschew cruelty and seek kindness as a necessary condition to live as strong poets, recreating ourselves. Moreover, to keep us from slipping into any foundationalism and thus finding ways to be unkind and cruel to those not like us, we should be a “liberal ironist” (Rorty 1989, p. 61), constantly exposing the vacuity of all foundational theology, philosophy, and politics and, hence, making more social room for free people.²

The world of Rorty thus consists of self-created people, that is, the “liberal ironists,” who adopt opportune metaphors so as to live freely alongside other poetically-fashioned people, while all along committed to tolerance, kindness, and the avoidance of cruelty.³ Any introduction of an overriding telos or metaphysical foundation to the contingent language, selfhood, or liberal community would lead to their demise. Contingency without telos: that is Rorty’s world.⁴

However, this is not Dante’s world.⁵ The *Inferno* is an imaginary descent (told by a philosophical poet) into the natural outcomes of certain choices people make and the actions they take. Even though the inhabitants of each of the nine circles are there because they deliberately and voluntarily acted upon their aims, they create consequences they must endure. They act, but a destiny (resulting from their actions) determines their future. Each step down, as depicted by Dante’s aesthetic imagination, indicates a greater depravity awaiting those who enter it. Dante creates an imaginary space beckoning readers to position themselves in whatever circle and then to wonder, “there but by the grace of God go I.”⁶

For instance, the second and third circles, lust and gluttony, are sins of the flesh, which obviously lead to great sorrow and self-made quagmires, but, with Dante, we are sympathetic and realize that “there but by the grace of God go I.” No doubt a life of lust and gluttony cannot bring fulfillment, and cannot complete our fundamental human aims for happiness and joy, but their root causes are something everyone struggles with—intemperance in romantic love and the eating of fine food. The sinners in these circles err because they fail to recognize that we desire romance and eating, not as ends in themselves but as means to more comprehensive and fulfilling aims, like love and health.

The fourth circle is more troubling to our sense of a well-lived life. There, Dante sees people circling each other, screaming and cursing each other for not fulfilling what each seeks. The greedy persons realize that what they have is never enough and despise themselves for not finding contentment in their state of life. The luxurious persons resent that part of themselves that cannot keep feeding the insatiable desire for more consumption. The desire driving greed and wastefulness is not a natural, physical desire like sex and eating, but it is a misconstruing of ownership. It is a

² Rorty consequently adds that because we have disinvested the world of any metaphysic or religious basis, we must “disenchant” it, i.e., treat it as though it is only boringly contingent, not offering to us any mysteries of life or utopian or eschatological hopes. See (Rorty 1991, p. 193).

³ For what Rorty thinks about bullies and oligarchs, see (Nystrom et al. 2002).

⁴ Rorty likens the society of “liberal ironists”, to functioning as though they were bargaining in a “Kuwaiti bazaar”, in which no price is normative or established. Everything (for example, the meaning of life, truth, semantics, and ethics) is open to negotiations. See (Rorty 1989, pp. 96–97).

⁵ A teleology defines the world for Dante, even language, and Dante always attempts to express faithfully that teleology. T. S. Eliot recognizes this faithfulness in the way Dante is a poet. “The whole study and practice of Dante seems to me to teach that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it . . . [The] great master of a language should be the great servant of it.” See (Eliot 1961, pp. 116–17).

⁶ Albert William Levi correctly interprets Dante according to what he calls “the teleological imagination”—that is, Dante envisions a great cosmic and moral order. Levi says, “for *The Inferno* is no empirical journey mythologized, but a constructed artificial space in which the furniture of the imaginary landscape becomes the living symbol of a moral hierarchy” (Levi 1962, p. 70).

failure to see rightly that possessions are always transitory and contingent, and it wants them to be permanent and to satisfy the longing of the soul for a final aim, for what would be the comprehensive and self-sufficient aim of life. Such people, Dante warns us, begin to believe a falsehood.

Although it deals with a natural fact as do the other circles, the fifth circle, wrath, once again shows us sinners believing a falsehood. People in this level of hell put themselves in ignorance, due to their rage over what they do to others and thus believe that they can fashion a moral law to accommodate their natural anger. Anger per se is not the problem. Everyone gets angry, but when it turns to wrath, people become deluded into thinking they can suspend the natural order of peace and respect among friends and others. They become so obsessed with their rage, they put themselves into another moral order and expect to be excused for their cruelty and harm. However, this supposed moral order contradicts the true order, and whether one diabolically opposes that order or whether one makes oneself ignorant of it due to one's rage, the consequences are self-inflicted, a constant tearing of one's soul. Curiously, Dante conjoins sullenness to the vice of wrath. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante separates the deadly sin of acedia from wrath, but in the *Inferno* they occur together. Perhaps Dante reasons that the conclusion to a life of wrath is exhaustion, a defeated and hopeless disposition, depleted of energy and commitment.

In the sixth circle, where the heretics dwell in torment, we see clearly the cause of the deadly sins. The issue is truth about God and the world, and the heretics reject the truth and instead believe an idolatrous account of God and the world. The heretics may be eloquent in the defense of a false doctrine, may be piously sincere, and may even be representatives of ecclesiastical authority, however, the heretics believe and teach a falsehood against God and the world and, thus, promulgate a perverse understanding of reality, erroneously turning a penultimate reality into an object of ultimate concern. Using language this way is a sin, according to Dante, because language is a divine gift, structured in a way to represent correctly and to communicate the true glory of God and the goodness of creation.

The seventh circle is filled with people who use violence against themselves, their neighbors, nature, art, and God. Because they seem primarily concerned with their own narcissistic aims, they render apart what God had created to be whole. Violence is more than the scarring of an object or person. It is an assault against God's created order. This is why "sodomites" are loathed by Dante, because they try to adjust nature to their desires, rather than the other way around, and consequently harm and mar the natural sexual order. The violent against art do the same. Art, for Dante, is an offspring of God's beautiful and moral ordering of the world, and thus can and should be done to witness God and nature's glory. Some people, however, can fraudulently make objects, labelled as art but, in truth, these sinners grotesquely depict nature and the human experience for profit. Instead of imitating the underlying order of nature, these violent artists assault nature with works depicting an inverse ordering of nature: lust, greed, and cynicism become the aims of art.

It is in the eighth and ninth circles of hell that we see clearly the fullest expression of sin: deceit and treachery. Those in the eighth and ninth circles are worse than the heretics, because a heretic may mistakenly worship a false doctrine, but the deceitful and treacherous deliberately and rationally contradict the truth. It is because of their rational viciousness to the truth that God hates their fraudulent thoughts and actions the most of all the vices. It is understandable that Dante would put Judas in one of the mouths of Lucifer, but it is not as clear why the Roman traitors Cassius and Brutus are in the other mouths. Frankly, Judas' rejection of the truth clearly revealed in Jesus Christ seems more rebellious than Cassius and Brutus' rebellion against Caesar. Regardless, Dante sees these rationally vicious people experiencing the full extent of perverting and corrupting the rational order of nature and the proper order of human pursuits and loves. They are eternally devoured without being consumed by Lucifer, the perverse archetype of rebellion against the great chain of being and divine holiness. Lucifer, who in a macabre way attracts the reader because of his self-imposed damnation and his boundless desire without any aim or restraint, epitomizes the end result of rejection and rebellion against the truth of nature and God.

2. The Choice

I know of no place where Rorty wrote on Dante. Maybe he lectured on him, but it is no surprise that he did not find Dante instructive for his agenda. Dante's pilgrimage through the *Inferno* is opposite to Rorty's "liberal ironist," and, frankly, would not be interesting to one totally committed to the contingency of language, selfhood, and a liberal community. The "liberal ironist" has to reject what the pilgrim has learned as essential to the quest for human fulfillment. Yet, why the "liberal ironist" has to ignore and dismiss the pilgrim shows the vacuity of Rorty's agenda.

The "liberal ironist" contends to model for us how to live as a self-made person in a modernity that has lost interest in pursuits of the truth, the good, natural law, and God.⁷ Such a person is contingent all-the-way-down, but assumes her or himself to be exemplifying how a free person ought to live among other free persons who do not lean on normative claims about human nature, but who find fulfillment in approaching life alone as one who with dexterity always finds the fitting metaphors for self-creation, and who looks upon others in community as a common bargainer in a bazaar of traders and hagglers. It seems that the "liberal ironist" has an aim to be in a perpetual mode of self-creation, as would a poet self-create each new poem, and who must also disenchant the world and de-divinize the self so as to be flexible enough to identify and adopt the next needed metaphor of self-creation relative to the demands of living in a liberal community.⁸

Even though Rorty is an attractive writer of prose and a wide-ranging and acute interpreter of selections of the intellectual makers of modern thought, his agenda is untenable, and Dante's pilgrim shows why. As a writer, Rorty has an agenda, and an agenda assumes a structure based on how to build an argument toward a comprehensive and satisfying aim.⁹ However, in the end, Rorty wants the agenda, but rejects the final aim, but since the structure of having an agenda presupposes an aim, Rorty must do more than simply claim that it is not modern to seek final aims.¹⁰ It is circular reasoning for Rorty to trump every other claim to truth than his own account of contingent language, self, and community, but also dismiss any need to justify such trumping with anything more than the claim that a liberal like him believes this way.¹¹

⁷ For Rorty, we must reject that our language and thoughts can "mirror" reality. In fact, we must reject even a passing interest in such. See (Rorty 1979, p. 7).

⁸ Even though Rorty's "liberal ironist" is a poet, she or he is not a poet like Dante is a poet. As an epic poet, Dante creatively uses language to depict a grand vision of individual and communal destinies, and also a grand scheme of a universe governed by a moral and religious law. Rorty's poet rejects all such epic pretensions and, instead, is concerned with exposing the contingency of language and using language toward the aim of self-creation. Dante poetically uses language to clarify moral and theological realities. Rorty's poet uses language to free her or himself from any holdovers of moral and theological commitments.

⁹ Charles Taylor correctly criticizes Rorty's implicit double standard when he says of Rorty's agenda, "we cannot but operate with a notion of truth; that the way we live our transitions, and struggle with potential re-descriptions, unflinching makes use of these notions of overcoming distortion, seeing through error, coming to reality, and their opposites" (Taylor 1990, p. 272).

¹⁰ Brad Frazier is right when he claims that Rorty actually comes across as parochial with his view that we must reject all forms of realism, primarily because that is what a liberal democracy does and needs (Frazier 2006, pp. 197–200).

¹¹ Even when Rorty tries to explain that the liberal ironist has compelling and self-defining aims, he cannot overcome the internal contradiction to his agenda. For instance, in "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism" he tries to defend his notion of the modern intellectual against the charge that in marginalizing herself from the absolutist and foundationalist claimants of society, she is acting irresponsibly to the community and cultural ethos. Rorty's defense is that the intellectual does not need an ahistorical vantage point to explain her actions as a liberal. Rorty develops this defense by contrasting a Kantian way with a Hegelian way of justifying the ethos of one's community. The Kantian way appeals to an ahistorical moral law that determines the rightness or wrongness of all communities. The Hegelian way looks to what is needed to form solidarity with one's community. The Hegelian thus does not need a metaphysic or metanarrative to justify its loyalty. "I hope thereby to suggest how such liberals might convince our society that loyalty to itself is moral enough, and that such loyalty no longer needs an ahistorical backup. I think they should try to clear themselves of charges of irresponsibility by convincing our society that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well" (Rorty 1991, p. 199). It is enough to appeal to anecdotes and conventions to justify why liberal society would, for example, welcome strangers and not be cruel. Yet, even though Rorty is right to use Hegel to promote a historicism about cultural morality, he misuses Hegel by ignoring the central claim of Hegelianism: history has a teleology, an internal logic towards more comprehensive explanations of human self-understanding, and any denial of this teleology results in decadence of the human-cultural move towards greater freedom. This is Hegel's historicism: "the goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm."

Against this, Dante's agenda is to show what happens to people who reject the natural order and God, who do not necessarily fail due to their personal weaknesses or due to extenuating circumstances, but who fail because they aim for the wrong aims and rationally direct their lives toward perverse goals. In a similar way, Eric Auerbach correctly summarizes the moral lesson of Dante's *Inferno*: "thus it became necessary that the characters in Dante's other world, in their situation and attitude, should represent the sum of themselves; that they should disclose, in a single act, the character and fate that had filled out their lives" (Bloom 2011, p. 11). Moral action follows a certain life-logic that determines the success or failure of one's life based on the aims one's seeks.

The *Inferno* is like a yearbook of what happened to our not-seen-lately-classmates who had self-destructive habits back in high school, those with whom we lost contact because they lost contact with the proper road towards human fulfillment. By seeing their pictures, their fates, we learn great truths about human experience. We reap what we sow. Their sufferings are not extraneous to their life choices, but the natural consequences of being reasonably vicious. Their actions were not blind choices, but deliberations according to certain aims. Internal to every choice for what is good, for the reward that comes from a well-lived life, is the need to aim for what fulfills the desire for it. But the citizens of the *Inferno* are failures, not because they were insincere or hesitant to choose a life or because they are undeliberate and unreflective in their actions. They suffer their particular circles of hell because they aim for the wrong aims.

For instance, the pitiable Francesca, in her own hell of unrequited lust, seeks happiness and longs for union with her beloved, but she breaks the natural order of marriage to do so, and thus bears the reverberations of a violation of nature and loses all freedom because she "fell in love." Filippo Argenti in the hell of wrath acts as though his unrestrained anger can refashion his theft against Dante into a well-ordered and just situation, but he instead experiences the constant agony of biting himself. Pope Anastasius II, residing among the heretics of level six, thinks that a supreme ecclesiastical authority can redefine the church's dogma of the divine paternity of Christ and thus force heaven to adjust to the demands of the earth, but he now finds himself rotting in a stinking pool of foul words that cause a canker on the conscience. Simon Magus, of the biblical book of Acts, tries with a magical slight-of-hand to use money to buy the Holy Spirit, conferring upon natural money an occultic power, but in the end, he lives in torment perversely upside down with his feet burning. Pope Boniface VIII undergoes the same inevitable result. He thinks his position of protected privilege enables him to belie his spiritual calling and instead to amass great wealth and, thus, to act no differently than any other petty politician and despot who is most ignorant of what he is most assured. And Judas, in the hell of treachery, who has betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, blatantly rejects the manifest revelation of Christ and perhaps devises an alternative reality of God militarily defeating the armies of Rome. He endures the devouring ravaging of a satanic being who refuses to accept the truth of God and the goodness of creation, and in doing so locks himself in eternal hate and rage. Each of these characters experiences the sum of their wrongful lives and reveals the link between moral action and destiny. Harold Bloom insightfully puts the point this way: "as seer, Dante identified character and fate, *ethos* and *daemon*, and what he saw in his contemporaries he transferred precisely to the three final worlds of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Dante's friend and enemies alike are presented . . . as being consistent with themselves, beyond change, their eternal destinies overdetermined by their fixed characters" (Bloom 2011, p. 15). Character, revealed by a life ordered toward final aims, is always destiny.

Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of the philosophically comprehended organization, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance" (Hegel 1977, p. 497). Additionally, "all things have a permanent inward nature, as well as an outward existence. They live and die, arise and pass away; but their essential and universal part is the kind [e.g., humanity for individuals]; and this means much more than something *common* to them all" (Hegel 1975, p. 37). This is a historicism that recognizes that cultural progress rests on more than convention and anecdotes; it occurs because culture evolves by the appeal of a final aim.

The issue all the way down the *Inferno* is the structure of moral action, and this is what is missing from Rorty's construction of the "liberal ironist." The "liberal ironist" rejects any telos, but still seeks the end of self-creation. She rejects any correspondence between language and reality, but changes her life by the evocative power of metaphors to guide her to the kind of person she should be. She rejects any sense of natural or revealed law but wants a democratic community committed to kindness and devoid of cruelty in which people respect and honor each other enough that they are willing to bargain among themselves for the best way to live with each other. The "liberal ironist" directs people but without a final aim. She cultivates a certain way to deliberate about actions, but will not say what actualizes the motivating needs and desires of that deliberation.

However, it is consistent with all seeking, guiding, wanting, aiming, and deliberating beings to elucidate their end results. Those end results are intentions, and intentions have an internal directivity toward an external state of affairs. The activities are forms of life that follow certain practices aimed toward a fulfilling state, just as each player on a baseball team acts according to a relevant form of playing aimed to playing and winning the game (Thompson 2008). This is what Dante is describing how the game of life is played. Alasdair MacIntyre rightly describes Dante as "the philosopher *par excellence* of the practical life itself" (MacIntyre 1990, p. 80). Dante allegorically depicts that we "reap what we sow." Consequently, the one who makes more sense of the practical life, that is, the life shaped and determined by formulating fulfilling aims and establishing the proper ways to reach those aims, is the one who can both give a coherent and cogent narrative of a well-lived life and show why the rival views fail at the practical life (just as Dante depicts rival views in the *Inferno*). In fact, according to MacIntyre, Dante's *Divina Commedia* is a challenge to those who reject and ignore the demands of the properly-lived practical life: "tell me your story and I will show you that it only becomes intelligible within the framework provided by the *Commedia*, or rather within some framework provided by that scriptural visions which the *Commedia* allegorizes" (MacIntyre 1990, p. 144). Dante thus sets forth a "form of life" that reveals how peoples' endgames determine their actions, that those who aim to corrupt the natural order through greed, lust, and pride, though they are socially persuasive and influential, suffer the effects of a life poorly-lived. Because they fail to see that a moral order governs the pursuit of human flourishing and well-being, the reasonably vicious people of greed, lust, and pride create their own "inferno".

Even though Rorty wants to dismiss the role of the structure of moral action in his exhortation to become a "liberal ironist," he nonetheless plays the game of exhorting for a particular way of living the fulfilled life and dismisses and belittles other ways of living. Yet, when it comes to being responsible to a final aim, Rorty refuses to acknowledge what he in practice assumes with his exhortations. Consequently, Rorty does not help us to understand why some people can be informed, deliberate, and rationalizing of their behavior but be also committed to cruelty and harm of themselves and others. He may think that modern liberals are welcoming to strangers and not cruel, but he cannot keep a society of liberals committed to such, because if the truth of social progress is only determined by solidarity among its liberals, then those same liberals could evolve into becoming cruel and unwelcoming to illiberal persons. Both human history and our own experiences are replete with examples of educated and cultured people, many of whom would be called progressive liberals according to Rorty's agenda, contributing to catastrophic crimes against humanity. Although Rorty does not advocate for such people and hopes they will not appear among us, because he rejects even considering the structure of moral actions with final aims, he has no way to use his ideas to prevent the reasonably vicious from happening; he gives no basis for a prophetic ethic that would warn us of the "inferno" that awaits all who aim for the wrong aims, even if they are sincere and rational in doing so.¹²

¹² I hope the reader by now understands that I am not merely criticizing Rorty for not being an Aristotelean and thus not reasoning like the Aristoteleans Dante, Thompson, and Vogler. Rorty misses an important aspect about our experience of the moral phenomena (as I explain above), that a logic inheres in our experience of being moral selves. That is, moral actions are based on intentions to fulfill our nature as persons with life-forms definitive of our sense of being human. Although I

Dante does give a prophetic ethic that warns us of the “inferno” that follows from seeking the wrong aims, because in his graphic telling of the lives in the *Inferno*, he depicts in the nine circles of hell the basic structure of moral action. That is, that our rational deliberations are formed by certain aims, and if those aims are a corruption of nature, self, and true worship, then we will find reasons to support the corrupt aims. Moreover, if the moral actions affirm the goodness of the natural order and the rightful praise of God, then practical reason completes its internal drive toward that which fulfills human life and nature. The primary issue is not if we are rational, able to justify our actions, the primary issue is whether we know the proper aims.¹³

3. Conclusions

Where are we going? Toward what do our practical lives aim? All of us ask these questions, but as professors we should be particularly attuned to how a good liberal education will make these questions increasingly important, and pressing, to our students. For instance, if it is true, as mentioned in the introduction to this essay, that our ethical principles and justifications are rational expressions of a moral ideal imagined in the moral imagination, by contrasting Dante and Rorty, we compel students to consider the accuracy and effectiveness of their own moral ideals. In the *Inferno*, Dante imagines a journey of a pilgrim guided by reason (that is, Virgil) and aiming for the final aim (that is, paradise with God), witnessing the motives and consequences of failed moral experiments. The pilgrim is more than an idle wanderer through the many and complicated expressions of the human efforts to find fulfillment. The pilgrim understands the full range of the efforts to find happiness, because the pilgrim realizes the inner-logic of the moral life, that desires and intentions are shaped by the goals people have. Does the metaphor of Dante’s pilgrim clarify the moral choices that people must make in their defining and forceful relationships of love, work, faith, and social responsibilities? Does it force our students to examine the most likely practical ends of their own motives and intentions?

The same can be asked of Rorty’s morally ideal person, who as a poet constantly recreates her or himself so as to be self-determining and not manipulated by the social oligarchs and metaphysical bullies, which Rorty fears so much. This image, according to Rorty, must disenchant the world of all theological and metaphysical claims so that, like shopping in a Kuwaiti bazaar in which no prices are fixed, all options are open for a happy and free life. Consequently, Rorty’s poet must explore removing what is serious about serious relationships—that is, the inherent practical logic expressive of the unique lifeform of a relationship (for example, as fidelity and long suffering are necessary for family life to produce fulfillment). However, for Rorty’s poet, this practical logic is negotiable and amenable to the interests of a person’s continual self-creation. Does this imagination of an ideal person force our students to examine their own motives and goals with others and society? Does it present them with the kind of life they want, and are they willing to live with the consequences of having relationships that should not be serious—that is, demanding certain virtues so to reach final aims, and to live in a world disinvested of any ultimate concerns and explanations?

Finally, Rorty’s “liberal ironists” have aims, but they reject any justification for them in terms of the natural structure of moral actions, and thus such ironists cannot prevent the reasonably vicious persons from claiming as much a place in the liberal society as the reasonably virtuous. However, Dante’s *Inferno* poetically and imaginatively presents what happens to people (otherwise intelligent,

do not intend any self-importance in this claim, my argument is in the vein of Elizabeth Anscombe’s criticism of modern moral philosophy (because it lacks a philosophy of psychology, it cannot secure moral concepts on real human experience and thus cannot come up with an argument against harming innocent people (Anscombe 1958)) and Alasdair MacIntyre’s similar criticism of modern moral philosophy (because modern moral philosophy severs moral concepts from the historical reality of the development of virtuous people shaped by final aims, it cannot keep from absolutizing its own individualist morality (MacIntyre 1966)).

¹³ Aristotle’s ethics has been the underpinning of this paper. Especially see *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 2 & 3, on the decisions and deliberations necessary to identify and perform a virtue (Aristotle 1999).

deliberate, and socially important) who contradict this structure of moral action. Learning from Dante's moral imagination can perhaps keep us from going to our own "inferno".

This presentation of the contrast between Dante's *Inferno* and Rorty's "liberal ironist" reminds us of the ancient truth taught by Sophocles in the conclusion to *Oedipus Rex*:

"Behold him, Thebans: Oedipus, great and wise,
Who solved the famous riddle. This is he
Whom all people gazed upon with envious eyes,
Who now is struggling in a stormy sea,
Crushed by the billows of his bitter woes.
Look to the end of mortal life. In vain
We say a person is happy, till he goes
Beyond life's final border, free from pain."

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