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A Time to Choose
*Finitude, Freedom, and Eternity in Dante's "Commedia" and
Lewis's "The Great Divorce"*

Matthew Swift

Honorable Mention, Student Essay Contest

**A Time to Choose:
Finitude, Freedom, and Eternity in Dante's *Commedia* and
Lewis's *The Great Divorce***

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Scholars have made many comparisons of C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and to Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. Dominic Manganiello, who teaches English literature at the University of Ottawa, writes about the importance of *The Great Divorce* as a direct reply to Blake's satirical version of eternity and ethics in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Manganiello 476). Andrzej Wicher joins Manganiello in proposing that Lewis's dismissal of *The Great Divorce* as a response to Blake may not be entirely straightforward (Wicher 86). This assessment seems accurate, especially given Lewis's description of his project in the novel's preface: while avoiding necessarily conjectural descriptions of the physical framework of the afterlife, he employs an allegorical description of Heaven and Hell, with a focus on the decisions leading to each, to debunk the belief that one can retain any vestige of evil in Heaven (Lewis v-viii).

At least partially because Blake's work does address a Dantean presentation of the afterlife, many scholars rightly note the use of Dantean imagery and ideas in *The Great Divorce*, but they do not focus primarily on the relationship between Lewis's and Dante's presentations of some central themes. Lewis, like Dante, is deeply concerned with human nature and decisions, especially as they relate to eternity. I propose that Lewis's *The Great Divorce* presents views on the intertwining issues of finitude, freedom, and eternity which closely reflect those presented by

Dante in his *Commedia*. An examination of each author's full treatment of these three themes is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief comparison of their messages in these works certainly merits consideration.

Dante explicates the three topics of finite nature, free choice, and eternity throughout the *Commedia* as he witnesses the infernal, purgatorial, and paradisiacal situations of souls. He mentions the importance of finitude throughout the *Commedia*, but the theme becomes particularly salient in Paradise as he laments his inability to describe it. Dante never fully resolves this struggle with transcendence, but instead of despairing, he uses the apparent conflict to reveal truths about free will and eternal destination. His definition of true freedom develops as he travels toward Paradise, ending with a radical thought for modern man—that freedom may lie in complete conformity to the will of God. His presentations of eternal death and life, both of which affirm the centrality of human choice, may also oppose modern ideas of freedom, but explanations from the souls in Paradise disclose the truth behind Dante's conception of liberty.

Similarly, Lewis develops these three themes through the narrator's description of his experiences in the Grey Town and "the Valley of the Shadow of Life" (Lewis 63). As the narrator watches fellow travelers such as the Big Ghost, the Episcopal Ghost, and the Tragedian, he learns about the choices they have made (or perhaps, the choices they make); he struggles as a temporal being to comprehend the adamant Reality and to relay his experience through language. Lewis provides explicit accounts of the complex relationships between finitude, choice, and eternity primarily through the character George MacDonald. In fact, most of MacDonald's explanations of transcendent truth specifically address the narrator's finite understanding. Knowing one's abilities and limitations becomes vital to Lewis's presentation of

freedom and, therefore, his presentation of eternity. As Lewis approaches each of these issues, Dantean ideas provide a philosophical and literary background for *The Great Divorce*.

Dante often laments the finite mind's failed attempts to understand, describe, or act in relation to the eternal. Barbara Newman, in her examination of medieval presentations of heaven, cites Dante's creation of new, bizarre language as a symptom of the disparity between his lingual faculties and their object (8-9). However, she also notes that, although Dante may rightly acknowledge ineffability, personal poetic failings do not necessitate a total linguistic failure as such; Dante may be trying to accentuate the reality of his experience rather than the limits of language (Newman 9-10). This explanation does not adequately account for his own expressed opinion on the nature of Heaven, which seems to correspond to the complete ineffability claimed in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10: "And what I am now summoned to portray / no ink's been known to write, or voice to speak, / or any fantasy to comprehend" (*New Revised Standard Version; Par.* 19.7-9). Especially in Paradise, Dante repeatedly requires divine grace not only to describe Heaven, but also simply to see it and to remember it (*Par.* 1.4-9, 52-54, 70-73; 14.76-82; 15.37-54; 33.121-123). This inadequacy is based on human limitation as well as on divine ineffability (*Par.* 19.52-57). For example, Beatrice explains that Dante, as a man, must view Paradise within the apparent organization which the souls present, and the Eagle notes humanity's inability to comprehend predestination (*Par.* 4.37-42, 20.130-135). Christine Baur argues that Dante's human limitation is rooted in the problem of using inherently relational, temporal language to describe transcendent eternity (24, 26). Therefore, Baur explains that Dante's objectives include a demonstration of the rift between experience, especially that of eternity, and description, which depends on fallen human memory and language (20, 24). This lingual finitude becomes

problematic when humans attempt to define the afterlife, but when it is properly understood, it clarifies the need for humility and revelation (Baur 26-27, 40).

Lewis's perceptions of human limitation reflect Dante's, although Lewis relies more on explicit means than on implicit ones to present them. Early in the story, the narrator steps out of the bus to "the Valley of the Shadow of Life" and unequivocally states that a complete, real description of his experience is unattainable: "It is the impossibility of communicating that feeling, or even of inducing you to remember it as I proceed, which makes me despair of conveying the real quality of what I saw and heard" (Lewis 18). Lewis's language here and in other situations does not portray the narrator's problem as an individual linguistic failure; it suggests a universal problem of perception (Lewis 21, 43; Loney 29). From the novel's preface to its end, many statements clearly deny any full human understanding of the eternal (Lewis viii, 63, 65-66, 131). Interestingly, both *The Great Divorce* and the *Commedia* conclude with an overpowering light that brings the narrator's vision to an end (Lewis 132; *Par.* 33.139-142). Lewis seems to echo Dante's warning against the inaccuracies that inevitably arise from attempts to reduce eternity to finite terms (Lewis vii, 65, 128-129). Lee Alan Brewer proposes that according to Lewis, as Baur suggests of Dante, the key issue is one of perspective. Humanity, because it functions within time, cannot see time as God does, as an eternally present whole (Brewer 64-65, Cox 6). Shari Cox, in "Free Will and Foreknowledge in *The Great Divorce*," describes Lewis's emphasis on the need to recognize temporal finitude in any attempt to understand human choice (6, 8-9). Lewis explicitly links the problem of perception to eternity and choice near the end of the book, stating through MacDonald that "every attempt to see the shape of eternity except through the lens of Time destroys your knowledge of Freedom" (128-129). People lose their sense of choice if they try to operate without a proper perspective of the

relationship between past, present, and future; they must accept the mystery of God's gift and of His perspective of time to remain free (Cox 8-9; Brewer 65-67).

This raises the rather complicated question of Dante's and Lewis's respective definitions of freedom. Before answering this positively, I will offer a few arguments by negation from each author's perspective. Dante's examples of those who truly lack freedom are the souls enslaved by their own sin. He repeatedly demonstrates their fitting entrapments: the wrathful stuck in the black scum of the Styx, the simonists upended in baptismal fonts, the hypocrites trapped under gilded cloaks, and Satan frozen in ice formed by the beating of his wings (*Inf.* 7.103-124, 19.16-27, 23.61-92, 34.28-52; Baur 52). For Dante, submitting to one's sinful passions causes one to devolve away from one's humanity, and since freedom of will is what separates humanity from other earthbound creatures, losing that freedom, "the good of the intellect," is intrinsically tied to sin (*Inf.* 3.16-18; *Par.* 5.19-24, 7.73-81; Smith 8). Baur suggests that condemned souls are not free precisely because of their mentality; they believe that their surroundings completely control their actions (34-36). Francesca's portrayal of love as an unavoidable force exemplifies an enslaved soul's mentality (*Inf.* 5.100-106; Baur 40-41). Eventually, the souls which choose to abandon the *ordo amoris* lose their ability to choose at all.

Lewis writes less clearly than Dante does about the loss of freedom due to wrong choices, but correlating Dantean motifs still arise throughout *The Great Divorce*, particularly in the cases of the Dwarf Ghost/Tragedian and the grumbling old woman. The former, like many of Dante's condemned, becomes less and less a decision-making human through his long-term sin, specifically the abuse of pity; he eventually dwindles into nothingness (Lewis 119-121). Lewis seems to emphasize habitual sin's destruction of freedom in the episode involving the old woman too. MacDonald tells the narrator that she may eventually lose her ability to stop grumbling,

reducing herself to nothing but a grumble (Lewis 71-72; Brewer 219). In short, making the wrong choices leads to inescapable oblivion (Brewer 205). Lewis also agrees with Baur's vision of Dante's *Inferno*, stating that infernal destination involves an infernal mentality (Manganiello 479). Through MacDonald, he affirms that being locked in one's own mind is Hell, but he does not deny Hell's objective existence (Lewis 65; Manganiello 478-479).

Given these examples of slavery to sin in each work, isolating Dante's and Lewis's presentations of true freedom becomes an easier project. Dante develops his conception of freedom especially through the examples of the souls in Paradise. Considering the extreme significance placed on the gift of choice, one might be surprised to find Dante's expression of the highest freedom in moral constraint. However, this makes perfect sense in light of the theme of *ordo amoris* and Dante's descriptions of God's freedom (*Inf.* 3.95-96; *Par.* 5.19-24, 7.64-81; Smith 8). If God's will is, as Dante describes it, an expression of His perfect freedom, and if souls bring their wills closer to God's will through obedience, then their obedience brings them closer to true freedom. Justinian's explanation of desires in Paradise seems to express the fulfillment of Psalm 37:4-5; God gives the souls their desires (*Par.* 6.124). Baur describes freedom in the *Commedia* primarily as freedom from "self-imposed bonds" of sin and as freedom for the love of God, not as freedom from external restraints such as finitude (36-37, 52-53). Michael Smith agrees with this assessment of freedom, citing Mark the Lombard's juxtaposition of freedom and subjection in human choice in Purgatory (8; *Purg.* 16.73-83).

Like Dante, Lewis holds the gift and responsibility of free choice in high regard, but the positive examples of holy freedom in *The Great Divorce* appear much less frequently than in the *Commedia*. When the Episcopal Ghost asks a spirit named Dick if Heaven will allow him to think freely or not, Dick answers with a definition of "free" which the Ghost cannot understand.

The spirits in Heaven are not free to flounder in fruitless questions like the souls in the Grey Town or the philosophers in Dante's Limbo; they are free to "drink" from the endless stream of God's truth (Lewis 37-38). The other prominent example of Dantean freedom is that of the only ghost who travels to "the Valley of the Shadow of Life" and chooses not to return to the Grey Town (Manganiello 478; Cox 7). This ghost, after some hesitation, decides to allow an Angel to kill his red lizard of lust, freeing him to travel toward the mountains (Lewis 103-106; Cox 7). In each case, Lewis seems to affirm Dante's approach to freedom as freedom for the love of and obedience to God (Manganiello 486; Brewer 205).

Having noted several important similarities between the representations of finitude and freedom in *The Great Divorce* and the *Commedia*, one might be surprised to see the disparities between their depictions of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. Whereas Dante writes of clear divisions between and within the three areas, Lewis's afterlife appears questionably organized. However, in light of Lewis's and Dante's views of human finitude, time, and choice, it does not seem prudent to examine the physical attributes of the afterlife or the exact time one finally chooses Heaven or Hell. Nonetheless, I will briefly address some aspects of each author's portrayal of the relationship between choice and the soul's eternal future.

The Hell which Dante describes has not been constructed as a kind of modern prison, providing compulsory retribution for previous sin; rather, it provides the wages of sin, exemplifying the justice of giving persons over to their own evil behavior (Baur 40-41; Smith 8-10). As I have already noted, the sufferings of the condemned fit well. Baur and Smith agree that the reason these torments are so appropriate is the fact that, at least according to Dante, sin is its own proper punishment (Baur 41; Smith 10, 14; *Inf.* 14.63-66). Baur also suggests that this

version of Hell fits Dante's emphasis on human choice and nature well since it preserves the souls' restraints and decisions for eternity (40).

Dante's presentation of Paradise is much more difficult to ascertain, probably because of the abundance of mystic language. Dante's question of the virtuous pagans also reappears in Paradise, lending yet more ineffability to an already transcendent topic (Newman 11-12). However, one can certainly note that Paradise includes an eternal continuation of the fulfillment of desires, given the souls' emphasis on the alignment of their wills with God's (Smith 7). Their delight depends on grace and choice, but even the ability to choose is God's gift (Smith 8; Baur 191; *Par.* 5.19-25, 28.109-114). Furthermore, grace alone provides the ability to reorder the will toward God (Manganiello 481).

Despite radical structural differences, Lewis's afterlife seems to mirror Dante's afterlife as the direct product of continued choice (Brewer 213-214, 218-219). Loney and Brewer note Lewis's emphasis on momentary, everyday decisions; each choice moves its maker closer to Heaven or Hell (Loney 31; Brewer 204-205). The fact that most Ghosts return to the Grey Town of their own volition seems to be Lewis's primary echo of Dantean Hell, especially since Lewis's Hell might appear largely devoid of punishment. Wicher points out that the continuous gray drizzle may reflect Dante's depiction of the gluttonous in the third circle of Hell (87). Additionally, Wicher asserts that Lewis may use Napoleon's "vicious circle" of movement and speech to refer to the fourth circle of Hell, in which the avaricious and wasteful abuse each other verbally and physically in a "circular, and vicious, movement" (89-90). These two attempts to connect Lewis's Hell to Dante's *Inferno*, though perhaps true, do not seem strong enough to demonstrate punishment in Lewis's Hell. I believe Wicher's most useful observation of Lewis's Hell is one that he actually takes to be a deviation from Dante: the fact that the condemned are

not forced to suffer and are left to do what they will (87). This is precisely Dante's definition of true punishment: ever-increasing abandonment to oneself, becoming a more shadowy nothing. Because *The Great Divorce* reveals so little about what happens in Hell, drawing too many more parallels appears risky at best.

Lewis's presentation of heaven in *The Great Divorce* is even more difficult to analyze, especially since the narrator does not see what MacDonald calls "Deep Heaven" (63). Nonetheless, Heaven for Lewis, like Hell, exists as the continuation of free will through eternity (Brewer 213-214, 218-219). Lewis does clarify that, although eternal destination has everything to do with decisions, heaven has little or nothing to do with what one deserves. One spirit gently reprimands the Big Ghost, who demands to have his rights, precisely because Heaven is completely concerned with "the Bleeding Charity" (Lewis 25-27). Like Dante, Lewis hopes to emphasize the role of human freedom in salvation without minimizing the enabling grace of God. Both authors achieve this partially through the recognition that eternal truths lie beyond complete human comprehension, requiring faith and revelation.

The Great Divorce, like the *Commedia*, certainly focuses on the interplay between human finitude, choice, and eternity. Also, as I have shown, Lewis and Dante present these key issues in very similar ways. The human mind, this side of eternity, cannot fully grasp the ineffable sovereignty, freedom, grace, and love of God, nor should one attempt to reduce such truths to finite terms. God has gifted humanity with free will, a part of His own nature, and true freedom exists in acting according to His will. Every moment is a time to choose, and by His grace, each choice is a chance to bend our loves toward His Love which rules the sun and the other stars.

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