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Source: *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Globalization and the Ethics of Business (Jan., 2000), pp. 255-268

Published by: [Philosophy Documentation Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3857711>

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## TRAVERSING THE *INFERNO*: A NEW DIRECTION FOR BUSINESS ETHICS

Daryl Koehn

**Abstract:** The discipline of business ethics traditionally has paid too much attention to articulating and applying the moral law and has devoted too little thinking to the nature and consequences of evil for our souls. For purposes of this discussion, I shall limit myself to Dante's vision of evil as a diminution of human being. On his journey through hell, Dante encounters the shades—people who, through their own actions, have rendered themselves less than fully human. This paper concentrates especially on the various types of *fraud and their psychic effects* as portrayed by Dante in his book *Inferno*.

**I**t would be a brave soul indeed who would dare to forecast the direction in which business ethics will evolve. I cannot divine the future, nor do I think we should be attempting to do so for reasons that will become clear shortly. It is worthwhile, though, to think about overlooked dimensions of business practices. So, while I will not attempt to lay out a scheme for the future of the discipline of business ethics, I do wish, in this short paper, to suggest a line of inquiry that business ethicists might find fruitful.

The discipline of business ethics traditionally has paid too much attention to articulating and applying the moral law and has devoted too little thinking to the nature and consequences of evil for our souls. For purposes of this discussion, I shall limit myself to Dante's vision of evil as a diminution of human being. On his journey through hell, Dante encounters the shades—people who, through their own actions, have rendered themselves less than fully human. This paper concentrates especially on the various types of *fraud and their psychic effects* as portrayed by Dante in his book *Inferno*.<sup>1</sup> The various frauds include the types of wrongdoing most common within the business world—hypocrisy, flattery, pandering, and seduction. These sins are perhaps the most wearing. They also are, in Dante's view, extremely serious. According to the geography of the *Inferno*, the deeper one penetrates into the darkness, the more evil the sin. The sins of fraud are only one remove from those of betrayal, the sin that leaves a man or woman frozen in the icy center of hell, a place completely devoid of human warmth.

Dante shatters the myth that we will be punished for our sins. This notion leads us to think that perhaps we can sin and still escape the consequences of our actions. That never occurs. *We are not punished for our sins because our sins are our punishment.* They deform our lives in the here and now and in the ever

after of human history and memory. Dante explicitly states that he is drawing upon memory to immortalize those he encounters. In the outer circles of the lesser frauds, the sinners retain enough of their humanity to be somewhat ashamed of what they have done. Thus the panderers and seducers try to hide their faces and stories from Dante (XVIII 43; 50). Nevertheless, they are naked (XVIII, 24) and visible to those who, like Dante and Virgil, seek to uncover the truth about themselves and their fellow man. Dante recognizes one of the men and returns to question him concerning those offenses that have consigned the man to hell.

### *Panderers and Seducers*

Throughout the *Inferno*, we learn of people's histories. But, as we shall see, the sinners are not always reliable narrators. Indeed, the greater their sin, the less the sinner is able to see the enormity of what he or she has done and suffered. It takes humanity to discern the loss of one's soul, and it is precisely this humanity the sinner has lost. We cannot understand sin through the confessions of sinners. We must learn indirectly, through the shape and expression of their suffering. In each case, the sinner's punishment/suffering is a reenactment or distillation of the essence of what the person did during his or her life. Thus, both the panderers, who prostituted others for gain or favor, and the seducers, who took their pleasure with others and who used and then abandoned their victims, move forever in a circle, travelling *en masse*, lashed by demons with scourges. Like all the sinners in Malebolge—Dante's name for the concentric moats or pits containing the fraudulent—the panderers and seducers are condemned to traverse the same ground repeatedly. Dante and Virgil can journey forward because they can see the sins for what they are. Each encounter with a new set of sinners brings insight. The defrauders, by contrast, are neurotics who reproduce the same behavior, stuck in habits whose destructive force they cannot discern.

Furthermore, the panderers and seducers, like the other frauds, are depressingly similar to each other in their neuroses. Genuine insight always develops and simultaneously individuates the soul. Each of us makes the truth present to us in the way that we find most meaningful. We appeal to past unique experiences and may even forge a language all our own. Although the defrauder may be quite cunning, her actions do not reveal the world to us in a thought-provoking and unique fashion. On the contrary, these sinners are so self-absorbed that they are literally "world-less." It takes a thinker like Dante to create some place for them to be. For our part, we can recognize and "read" their sins because we already know, roughly, what counts as pandering or seducing. What we do not always grasp is the way in which these sins shape the sinner. Dante's unique insight lies in seeing, first, that the sins do have a "readable" manifestation or distinctive form (hence, his book the *Inferno*); second, that the sin always victimizes the sinner, and third, that the sins can be ranked according to the extent to which they diminish the sinner as well as the world.

Dante suggests that the panderers and seducers are two birds of a feather. Both groups use or trade in the flesh of others. In the *Inferno*, the only difference between the two is in the direction they are moving. Dante and Virgil, who position themselves between the lines, need only shift their perspective slightly to get a clear view of each group (XVIII, 70–80). The two groups of sinners, however, are completely unaware of the direction in which they are moving or the identity of their conditions.

One does not have to read much about the business world to know how common such trafficking in flesh is. Businessmen are bussed into Houston to ogle the women in the topless bars. In the Orient, children are provided to clients as part of closing a deal. Employees are treated as “human resources” to be put in the service of whatever plans management devises. In hell, everything, including human beings, is reduced to having “use value.” One of the credos is “we can convert ‘no’ to ‘yes’” or, in American lingo, “whatever it takes to win the business.” The “drive” to succeed has become so compelling that the panderers and seducers have lost control of their own lives. They respond only to this inner drive, which Dante portrays as a demon whipping them from behind. The image of the demon is entirely appropriate, for these sinners have relinquished their judgment to a kind of inhuman force. Although others may judge them to be sinners, they simply do not care. On the contrary, they rationalize their dealings by claiming that there are many others exactly like them (XVIII, 57). In effect, these deal makers become part of a mass movement. They are willing to do whatever everyone else appears to be doing. Although Dante never explicitly names the demon, we can now read between his lines: The demons driving the sinners forward are none other than the panderers and seducers who succeed them in the eternally circling, nameless, faceless line. It takes a Dante to break into the line, to single out a particular soul for questioning, and to thereby put a face and name to those who would hide among the crowd.

### *Flatterers*

Like most of the other shades in hell, the flatterers do not speak to each other. Some sinners are silent; others must struggle to find any voice; still others rant in a completely unintelligible way. The flatterers scream (XVIII, 95) and howl (XVIII, 109) as they continually strike or scratch themselves. They are befouled, wallowing in human excrement. Each time they touch themselves, they dirty themselves further. The air in this trench stinks because, when they speak, the flatterers exhale foul words.

Again, Dante’s portrayal is a mixture of the commonplace and the brilliant. We know that the flatterer is someone who tells us only “the shit” we want to hear. Business leaders often complain that they cannot lead effectively because they are surrounded by employees and board members who are afraid to say anything displeasing. What is less obvious is the way in which this prostituted

speech entraps the speaker. The flatterer condemns herself to live with falsehood. For those whom she has pleased will want to hear more of the same the next time they meet with this false friend. The flatterer soon finds herself damned to live in accordance with her lying speech and false image of herself. Small wonder that the flatterers are frantically touching themselves in a vain effort to be assured of their “real” existence. Yet what they really are is flatterers whose worldly presence is the lying images they offer the world.

When confronted with their lies, all they can dish up is more crap. When Dante singles out one man for inspection, the shade beats his head and rails against the injustice of Dante’s curiosity: Why should he be examined when others are just as filthy as he (XVIII, 110)? This attempt to rationalize away guilt is patently transparent, yet Dante is so bewitched by this man’s appearance and words that he can neither answer him nor tear his eyes away. Dante recognizes the flatterer as a fellow Florentine and perhaps Dante hopes the man will return the favor by acknowledging Dante’s fame. The more thoughtful and clear-sighted Virgil breaks the spell, directing Dante to look still deeper into the pit. There he will see the whore Thais who was famous for telling each of her paramours that he was the best. Although Dante is inclined to question and then to heed every flatterer in this stinking trench, Virgil sees that flattery is the same among Italian men and Greek whores. Virgil interposes his true speech, and the two men move on in their journey of self-discovery.

### *Diviners*

The flatterers are more evil, more diminished, than the seducers and panders because the flatterers not only prostitute human flesh but also the human language, the speech responsible for binding us into a community.<sup>2</sup> The diviners—the men and women who presume to know and to foretell the future—act still more badly. They move at a liturgical pace, weeping but mute (XX, 8–10). Although they proceed forward, their bodies are grotesquely distorted. Their heads are turned completely backward, so they are unable to see where they are moving. They have made themselves purposeless.

Dante’s point is not that these diviners are being punished by being stripped of their ability to know the future. Rather these “diviners” have never been able to foresee the future or to exercise the “divine” freedom granted to each of us. Their obsession with foretelling the future prevents them from attending to what really matters in their lives—namely what sort of life and character they are creating for themselves through their actions and choices. In our modern world, diviners abound. We are surrounded by what Gore Vidal has termed the “chattering classes”—the journalists, corporate strategists, and economic forecasters who predict doom and gloom and who advise us how to forestall disaster. Each of us is a diviner as well. We experience anxiety as we worry about whether we will keep our jobs under the new CEO or whether the stock market will increase at a

rate sufficient to fund a comfortable retirement. By agonizing about the “evils” in store, we fail to grasp the real task at hand—discerning the human meaning of suffering. Not all suffering is bad. It serves to make us pay attention to what we are doing and can lead us to explore why we are doing these things that cause us such pain. However, in order to engage in this journey of self-exploration, we must delve into the nature of suffering. When we presume to know that certain events are bad and to prophesy that these awful outcomes will come to pass, we are “impious” (XX, 30) and “mute” about the things that matter most. We locate all evil in the events instead of critically assessing our own soul’s response to these representations. As a result, we defraud ourselves of meaning in the here and now.

Dante himself succumbs to this error. When he weeps over the torments of the twisted diviners, he, too, assumes a misshapen form. He hangs his head in sorrow until Virgil tells him to raise his eyes and take in all of the other diviners in the vicinity. Dante keeps trying to twist around to gaze back on the equally distorted diviners until Virgil leads him forward by reminding him of the passing hours and the limited time allotted to each of us to discover who we are and what is truly worth knowing.

### *Barrators*

The next circle contains those who are guilty of barratry or the selling of offices. Almost every day we hear about this sin. The International Olympics Committee stands accused of awarding contracts on the basis of bribes. During the 1980s and early 90s, Honda did not award franchises based on the merits of the case made by the would-be franchisee. Instead, they sold franchises to those who were willing to grease their palms. Whenever an office is awarded to someone on the basis of a favor rather than on merit, the sin of barratry has been committed.

The barrators occupy the trenches or pits in the middle of the eighth circle of hell. They arrive in this pit draped over the shoulders of a black demon. The demon throws them into a mass of boiling, black pitch. The barrators strive to keep themselves completely submerged in the pitch. If and when their rumps rise to the surface, they are struck at by the Malebranche, demons with evil hooked claws. Those who buy and sell public offices must do their deeds in the darkness. In public everyone professes to deal in a fair and above-board manner. People do not proclaim their corruptness.

This dirty dealing ensnares both those who sell and those who buy offices. Those businesses that pay bribes to get their goods through customs or to win a contract often find that the demands escalate with each successive deal. Those who extort the bribes themselves become vulnerable to blackmail because they have revealed themselves to be corrupt. While the public may not see the barrators’ faces, the defrauders know each other perfectly well. One unlucky party who is hooked from the pitch is only too willing to name his co-conspirators in order to save his own skin (XXII, 30–120). These sinners “burn” from the constant fear

of having their sin exposed and always must remember to “cover their butts.” They seek occasional relief by exposing their backsides but they are never safe. There are Malebranche-style “backstabbers” everywhere.

What should we think about the evil demons who hook the sinners, haul them out of the pitch and then torment them? The Malebranche, although technically above the dirty dealings going on in the dark ooze, are pitch-black and utterly lacking in humanity. Perhaps they represent those of us who delight in exposing the sins of others and ripping them limb from limb (XXII, 67–70). Barratry includes not just the bartering of offices but also the practice of encouraging lawsuits and quarrels. As the recent Congressional impeachment hearings have demonstrated, there are always plenty of mean-spirited souls who are only too eager to ensnare and torture those they deem guilty of abuse of office. It is only fitting that, in their frantic pursuit of one who has evaded their claws, the Malebranche themselves fall into the pitch and bake (XXII, 130–150).

Barratry is worse than the prior frauds because it threatens to bring down the entire polity. People become cynical, believing that there is no honesty anywhere. They lose trust in their public officials and see hypocrisy everywhere. It is no accident that the next circle of fraud contains the hypocrites. Unable to cooperate, people begin to do battle. War imagery abounds in Dante’s description of this particular hell, and everyone who participates in these battles winds up with “wounds” (XXI–XXII).

Dante and Virgil find they must run for their lives to escape the Malebranche. The simple act of trying to look into the pitch, to understand this sin, and to honestly convey its nature threatens the barrators’ shady existence. In a sense, the poets are a threat because their office is not for sale. This fact enrages those who pass their existence quarreling about dirty deals. Barrators will go so far as to lie to and about honest men in an effort to ensnare them. Dante himself was accused of this particular sin and expelled from Florence. When we are falsely accused, we may be tempted to fight the charge and to do battle with our tormentors on their own turf. That, of course, is exactly what these quarrelsome men and women desire. It takes a strong soul to stay above the fray, to avoid a fight and to move on.<sup>3</sup>

### *Hypocrites*

Virgil runs from the Malebranche, carrying Dante like a mother carries her child. The two slide down into the next ring occupied by a mass of painted people (XXIII). These hypocrites slowly and despairingly make their rounds, weeping and burdened by heavy capes. The capes glitter on the outside, dazzling the eye, but they are lined with lead. The hypocrites try to keep their faces covered by the gilded cowl, so that no one can ascertain who they really are.

In order to speak with these men and women, Dante must slow his pace to match theirs. The hypocrites are willing to speak with Dante and Virgil but do not directly approach the poets to ask their identity. Instead, the hypocrites prefer to judge by

appearances: “This one appears to be alive,/Judging by how his throat moves; but if, rather,/These two are dead, what privilege can they have,/To go unencumbered by the heavy stole?” (XXIII, 84–88). Having spent their lives judging only by appearance, these hypocrites are ill equipped to even imagine who the strange-looking poets might be. Unable to generate any hypotheses, they finally ask Dante who he is. Dante responds briefly, stating only where he was born and grew up. Having boasted that he has always had only the one body he wears now (XXIII, 93–94), he quizzes them as to their identities. Two of the men confess to having been “Jovial Friars,” an order known for professing noble purposes but living in luxury.

Dante begins to scold these friars for being evil, only to fall silent when he sees the high priest Caiphaz lying crucified on the ground. Caiphaz, who argued that the one—Jesus—should die for the sake of the many, finds himself to be the one who is eternally trod upon by the hypocritical many. Virgil, too, becomes silent, soberly regarding this crucified soul. This silence is fitting. Like the high priest, we all are frequently quite willing to declare principles that lead others to suffer but not willing to have these same principles applied to us. We judge hypocritically and then find ourselves subjected to the equally hypocritical judgments of our peers. Such turnaround should not surprise us, for, by definition, hypocrites have little regard for the truth of the matter. They are content to live by what looks or sounds good and do not stop to carefully investigate accusations or supposed evidence of wrongdoing.

Hypocrisy is rampant in the business world. Some companies claim to give large charitable donations but, in reality, give less than many other businesses. Managers are all for “trimming away the fat” until it turns out that they are part of the corpulence to be excised. Appearance sometimes seems to be everything. When Harvard Business School studied its alumnae with a view to determining which factors made people successful, the only significant variable was height. The taller and more physically imposing a person appears, the greater the money and power he or she obtains.

In such a world, it is hard not to become a hypocrite oneself. Dante presumes to condemn these painted beings, yet he is only too willing to seek the hypocrites’ help in escaping from their circle of hell. He stands mute while Virgil appeals to one of the Jovial Friars for aid: “Be it allowed/And if it pleases you (*note the appeal to what the hypocrite finds pleasing*), could you explain/What passage there may be on the right-hand side/By which we two can journey away from here. . . ?” (XXIII, 123–125). Showing his noble “glittering” side, the hypocritical friar does give them directions for departing. At last, Virgil breaks away from the slow and tedious pace he and Dante were forced to assume when speaking with the hypocrites. They no longer have to fit their speech to what hypocrites find pleasing. Relying on the advice of the friar, Virgil departs with mighty, free, and open strides, walking to the edge of the circle where an avalanche of stones forms a rocky ladder out of this circle.

Although Dante has boasted of his own upright strength, Virgil must once again laboriously carry him up the treacherous slope and out of harm’s way. Dante’s



own “heavy body” impedes their progress. Apparently it is not as easy as Dante believes to free oneself of the sin of hypocrisy. Dante’s fraudulent belief that he is completely devoid of this sin is precisely what makes him into a burden every bit as heavy as the cloaks worn by the hypocrites. Instead of railing against other people’s hypocrisy, we would be well advised to look at our own if we want to progress in insight and to save our soul.

### *Thieves*

Barratry leads to hypocrisy as the selling of offices in private destroys trust. Although officials may appear to be virtuous, the citizen body and their representatives start to believe that all nobility is a sham. If officials speak eloquently, everyone knows that the high-sounding rhetoric is only as a cover for their cutting backroom deals. Such hypocrisy gives rise, in turn, to theft.

In the circle of thieves, Dante and Virgil see a dark and moving swarm of serpents. The serpents came in all sorts of shapes. Amidst the serpents are terrified people, running hither and thither with no place to hide and never knowing when they will be struck again. These sinners are so preoccupied with avoiding the serpents that, for the most part, they do not even notice Dante and Virgil. As the two poets watch, a serpent bites a man and he ignites and withers away. But then his ashes gather together and reconstitute him. Under questioning by Virgil, the shape-shifter explains that he had lived a bestial life as a thief (XXIV, 124). He blushes from shame when Dante recognizes him, but his shame comes only from having been caught suffering among other thieves. He is not ashamed of his deeds, but rather of being surprised, so to speak, in the middle of his crime.

Like a serpent, he lashes out at Dante, foretelling Dante’s banishment from Florence. In doing so, he aims to *steal* Dante’s peace of mind. In other words, he wishes to harm Dante’s soul so as to make it as disturbed and tormented as his own. Dante suggests that theft is not so much a crime against material property but more of a fraud perpetrated upon the human soul of thief and victim alike. The thief converts his victim’s peace to fear. Just as the thief lives in constant fear of being surprised, so, too, the victim can no longer feel secure. She lives in terror, anticipating danger but unable to predict exactly when or whether the thief will strike again. The theft qualifies as a *fraud* because the thief pretends that all he has done is stolen things (see XXIV, 135–140). In reality, however, he has imposed his own fear and uncertainty on those he victimizes and then has sought to avoid any responsibility and punishment for his action. In effect, the thief tries to change places with his victim, converting their security into his and leaving them with his massive insecurity. In this circle, the snakes—all of them thieves—latch on to the bodies of their fellow thieves. They wrap themselves around the thief, immobilizing his grasping hands. Then the snake assumes the form of his victim, while the victim transmutes into a snake (XXV, 40–138).

If we understand theft as a fraud against the substance and peace of another person, many actions of businesspersons border on theft. Any action that strikes

a blow at the substance of another person—at his or her ability to live a reasonably secure existence—qualifies as a theft, even though it may not be considered as such by the law. When managers lay off people with little warning; when they imitate other firms in their industry who relocate just to save a bit on labor costs; when they then attempt to evade responsibility by claiming they had no choice—they are not acting that differently from the thieves who live in hell. In some cases, managers genuinely may have no alternative but to close down factories or to eliminate product lines. However, the sin of theft does not lie in these actions *per se*. It consists instead in 1) in failing to see what the ordered layoff has done to the terminated worker; 2) not wanting to learn about the fate of those traumatized by the loss of employment, and 3) seeking to avoid being in any way publicly accountable for the effects of one's actions. One of the scenes in Michael Moore's film *Roger and Me* captures Dante's insight perfectly. Roger Smith, the former CEO of General Motors, has ordered the closing of GM's Flint, Michigan, automobile plant at Christmas time. Smith is being paid millions of dollars, while hundreds of laid-off workers are evicted from their homes. When Moore tries to tell Smith about these people and urges Smith to go to Flint and see the devastation for himself, Smith responds that he has nothing to do with the workers' unhappiness. While Smith may not legally be a thief, his attitude suggests otherwise.

The thief is a greater sinner than the hypocrite or barrator. The barrator and hypocrite merely put on a false show for others. The thief transgresses against the person of those she victimizes. She does not merely want to *appear* different than she is. She will steal another's substance and peace in order to try to secure a life more pleasing and satisfying than her current existence. The thief longs to *be* different than she actually is. This fraud knows no boundaries. Human and beast freely transform into one another. The changeling does not notice the alteration because, for her, the distinction between human and bestial no longer exists. As the first thief proudly boasts, he chose a beastly life of preying upon his fellow citizens.

This encounter prompts Dante to exclaim that: "In all the circles of Hell, I saw no spirit so arrogant to God" (XXV, 13–14). At one level, this judgment is just. Each of our human sins does seem to possess and manifest an inner logic. It is this logic that allows Dante to imaginatively rank the sins and to discern a structure to hell. Insofar as the thief cares nothing for the effect of his choices upon his soul, he has no reason to think about the possible existence of the divine, much less to heed its voice. Such an attitude is extremely hubristic. On the other hand, we must guard against self-righteousness. Dante comes close to stealing God's place, presuming to know which attitudes and behavior God finds most offensive. Since Dante feels himself much superior to the thieves, he may be tempted to play God and to assign these souls to a more hellish region that they deserve.

Indeed, Dante the poet is not as unlike the thief as he imagines. In describing this circle of hell, Dante boasts that he is more skilled than Ovid,

the master of metamorphoses, when it comes to describing the transformations the thieves initiate and suffer (XXV, 90–100). We justly may wonder: Is there not some danger of stealing another's substance through a false representation of one's enemies? Each of us must remember this central truth—We can only judge from our human perspective. As human beings, our business is not to decide who should suffer most, but to learn from such suffering as there is. People's lives are penalty enough. Our primary concern should be to take care that we ourselves do not slip unawares into a bestial existence.

### *Schismatics*

The schismatics, the ones who intentionally sow discord and hatred in order to reap some advantage for themselves, lie still deeper in hell. The office gossips who keep track of who is up and who is down, the rumor-mongers who hint of firings to come in order to force exactly these dismissals, the academics who jockey to have their candidate selected for a position—the schismatic is a type only too familiar to us. Dante's great achievement lies in being able to look beyond the discord created by these souls and to discern the effect of this divisiveness upon the speaker himself. The schismatics who separate brother from brother and father from son are themselves cleaved from the crown of the head to their crotch by a sword-wielding devil (XXVIII, 20–50). As they travel around the circle, their grieving causes the wound to heal. When they pass the devil again, he cleaves them once more.

The act of destroying love and affection among others is an act of self-mutilation. The schismatic winds up dividing himself in two because he cuts himself off from the love he so badly craves. Feeling that he has not received the honor or love he deserves, he is determined that no one else should receive these either. More precisely, he is so preoccupied with his own sorrow that others have ceased to exist for him. The thief knows that others exist—they have the substance he wants for himself. The schismatic, by contrast, feels his own existence only insofar as he is a destructive force—of things, people, the world. His behavior drives him still further into isolation, severing him from all that is humanizing. He can neither give nor receive love.

Each schismatic thinks he suffers more than anyone else does. The mutilated beings cry out to Dante to record their especial hurt—"Look how I tear myself!" (XXVII, 32). The man with his hands chopped off shouts "Also remember Mosca!" and then moves around the circle "utterly undone/By sorrow heaped upon his sorrow" (XXVII, 101). Still another boasts that no one has a harder punishment than he (XXVII, 118). Unlike the sinners in the previous circles, the schismatics willingly confide their sins. It is not enough to destroy those around them. They need their sins to be known in order to feel that they have lived. The schismatics have only one passion—to have their suffering remembered in order that they might feel that they exist. Hence, their constant refrain "Carry the word, and know me!" (XXVIII, 119).

They need others to confirm that this destruction was wrought by *them*, yet their behavior prevents them from developing any permanent relations with friends or family who would hold their memory dear. In this sense, they have divided themselves in half, cutting themselves off from the means to achieve their deepest longing. Reason would argue against such a state of affairs, but the self-pitying schismatic has lost his ability to reason objectively about the world. It is entirely appropriate that the schismatic who turned a father against his son now trolls the allotted circle of hell swinging his own severed head like some gruesome lantern (110–120).

Those who incite hatred for the sole pleasure of feeling themselves alive dwell deeper in darkness than the thieves. Although their crimes may be heinous and, one would think, terrifyingly memorable, Dante insists that they are less visible to the world than other sinners. How is this possible? Perhaps the answer lies with Dante's understanding of a world. If the world is the place where human beings love, suffer, and struggle to uncover the meaning and purpose of their lives, then the schismatics, whose only purpose is to destroy the world in a vain attempt to be a part of it, are ultimately not of that much interest to humanity. They provide at best an example of how not to live.

Thus when Dante becomes too fascinated with the destruction and mutilation before him, Virgil issues a rebuke: "What are you staring at? Why let your vision/Linger there down among the disconsolate/And mutilated shades? You found no reason/To delay like this at any other pit./Consider, if counting them is what you plan:/The valley extends along a circular route/For twenty-two miles. And already the moon/Is under our feet; the time we are allowed/Has now grown short" (XXIX, 4–11). Dante responds by picking a fight with his teacher, whining that he wants to see whether a relative of his dwells among the schismatics. By indulging in this special pleading, Dante acts exactly like the schismatics. Dante complains that Virgil does not understand his suffering. He feels deeply for his uncle and only desires to be allowed to share in his uncle's pain if the uncle is, in fact, in hell. However, as Virgil points out, Dante was so entranced and taken in by the self-pitying tales of woe of one of the schismatics, that he completely missed seeing his uncle pass by. What is more, his uncle—like every schismatic—does not want to share anything with anyone. On the contrary, when he went by, he fiercely threatened Dante (XXIX, 46–50). When Dante continues the quarrel, arguing that his uncle's suffering and pain is special (the claim that every schismatic makes!), Virgil simply walks away, unwilling to take the bait. Life is too short to waste time investing one's self in tales of woe from sinners who need to suffer greatly in order to feel alive.<sup>4</sup>

### *Falsifiers*

The falsifiers occupy the last of the circles of fraud. This class includes alchemists who claim to be able to fly through the air, mimics, those who assume another's name in order to mislead or abuse others, and counterfeiters who make

false images. Such beings falsify the world, their identity, and even other images. Dante does not discriminate among the sinners on the basis of which object they choose to falsify. In reality, the falsifiers confuse world, identity, and image. In describing these sinners, Dante invokes the image of Athamas who mistakes his own wife and children for a lioness with cubs and then kills them (XXX, 1–10). The falsifier's punishment is to believe and to act upon his own lies and misrepresentations. In other words, the falsifiers are mad. Athamas did not know who he was (i.e., the husband of the woman he killed). Nor did he accurately perceive his world. He misrepresents his family for animals. Like the schismatic, the falsifier does not really live in the world. However, the schismatic recognizes other people insofar as they can confirm his suffering and ensure that he is remembered. The falsifiers deal only in images and, as a result, are eternally uncertain whether to trust their own eyes (XXIX, 138). Perhaps the two poets they see are just figments of their imagination.

All these shades lie in heaps, toppled over on one another. Some sit back to back in an attempt to support themselves. Others crawl on all fours. None of the falsifiers is upright. The stench emanating from these men and women is overwhelming. They are alive, but they are rotting like the dead. Dante compares the falsifiers to lepers. Covered with scabs, they continually scratch themselves, shaving off the scabs like fish scales (XXIX, 90–95). They are mutilated as are the schismatics, but, in this case, the aspect of self-mutilation is still more explicit and pronounced. Moreover, the emphasis is, not surprisingly, on the falsifiers' obsession with the surface of things. Since the falsifiers deal only in appearances and images, they cannot get beneath the surface, try as they do to dig beneath the scabs to ease their maddening itch.

Dante suggests that the falsifiers can get no relief precisely because they are obsessed with their own suffering. In particular, they are preoccupied with the issue of who caused their misfortunes. Each of the falsifiers makes a point of blaming someone else. The alchemist blames the party who had him burned at the stake (XXIX, 117); the counterfeiter curses the brothers who lured him into their counterfeiting ring (XXX, 70–80). This focus on causation is not in the least bit liberating. In the first place, each of the falsifiers is, at least to some extent, complicit in the fraud. Second, the focus leads to nothing but recriminations and vengeance. In this circle, the various sinners continually attack each other verbally or physically. Instead of examining themselves and identifying obstacles to development and greater insight, they either plot their revenge or spend their days arguing as to who is most to blame (XXX, 100–150).

We find a nice example of the sin of falsification in Michael Lewis's book *Liars' Poker*. Lewis and his friend Alexander invent a new security. After they do so, another Salomon Brothers executive whom Lewis and Alexander have let in on the deal takes credit for the successful invention. Although Alexander advises Lewis not to dwell on the insult, Lewis plots his revenge upon his "enemy." He does a second similar deal and refuses to share the technical details with the

lying executive. At that point, it becomes painfully obvious that the executive was not, in fact, the inventor of the security, and the man is fired. Lewis is gleeful, but his delight is short-lived. He later leaves the firm after he begins to have nightmares in which he finds himself screaming at hotel bellboys because the hotel has not supplied him with the luxurious bathrobe he deserves. Clearly the lying executive is not the only falsifier. Lewis is equally a falsifier to the extent that he has confused the unimportant with the significant. As his friend Alexander observes, there will always be jerks in the wings waiting to take credit for other people's successes. In trying to avenge the fraud, one only gets drawn into the fray.

The point is not that there are no liars in the world. Neither Lewis's friend Alexander, Dante, nor Virgil (who again warns Dante against becoming too fascinated with the appearance of suffering) is claiming that we are immune to injury. Often we may find ourselves defrauded of money and perhaps even of our reputation. But these losses ultimately are not that important. The bigger loss or fraud occurs when we lose sight of the need to plumb the depths of suffering, to put it in perspective and to continue on our journey.

### *Conclusion*

Business ethicists typically have concentrated on disclosing cases of egregious wrongdoing and on identifying the causes of these unethical actions. Too little attention has been paid to the more commonplace frauds that pervade business life—flattery, pandering, seducing, barratry, hypocrisy, the sowing of discord. It is these sins that wear down most employees and that may pose the greatest danger. We all succumb to such sins at various points in our daily dealings. And, while all of the frauds discussed above could be analyzed as forms of disrespect for others, that approach completely misses the many ways in which our sins deform our own souls. In addition, business ethics' fixation on the mistakes and sins of others can prevent us from examining our own less than exemplary lives. Dante is able to leave hell only when he recognizes and acknowledges the extent of his own sinning.

If we business ethicists were to take seriously Dante's twofold idea that we are all sinners and that a sin is its own punishment, we would have far less difficulty in persuading our students that ethical action is in their self-interest. The connection would be obvious.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>All references to Dante's *Inferno* are to Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Noonday Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>No doubt many seducers and panders use flattering speech. Still, the two sins are conceptually distinct. A panderer might tell a victim an outright lie or threaten him or her in order to force compliance with the panderer's will. Flattery need not be involved.

<sup>3</sup>Dante and Virgil have been traversing the circles of fraud by means of a spanning bridge. The bridge over the barrators does not connect with the next circle. Consequently, Dante and

Virgil are forced to spend more time with the Malebranche than they may have liked. The whole time they look upon the barrators, they are “accompanied” by (in reality, pursued by) the Malebranche. This arduous encounter with the barrators and Malebranche beautifully symbolizes Dante’s personal experience of being flung into the pitch by those who accused him of selling offices. He gets no help or insights from those in the pitch. He needs the help of the clear-sighted Virgil to overcome his rage and to find his way forward.

<sup>4</sup>Although it sounds paradoxical to speak of the living dead, these shades are continuing to act out the same neurotic patterns of behavior they exhibited on earth. Their lives are the punishment for these dead. As Dante suggests in later books, many of those still moving about on the face of the earth are actually “dead” insofar as they are incapable of advancing in self-awareness and self-understanding.