

# [The portrayal of concepts of reason and emotion in the christian life](https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-concepts-of-reason-and-emotion-in-the-christian-life/)

In the Inferno, Dante teaches readers about the role of reason and emotion in the Christian life. On his journey through Hell, Dante the Pilgrim shows unregulated human emotion through the different reactions he has towards the sinners. Virgil acts as his guide through Hell and teaches Dante that compassion must be within the limits of reason, but on the journey, there are times when reason is not always superior to emotion. Reason was not enough to get Virgil through the gate of Dis and the same reliance on reason, rather than emotion, later causes him to be deceived by the devils. Using Dante the Pilgrim to show human emotion and Virgil as reason, Dante the Poet demonstrates an inconsistency between the need for reason and emotion. Without the regulation of emotion, the Christian soul would stray off the path to God, but if emotion were always subject to reason, it would also be impossible to reach God.

On his journey through Hell, Dante the Pilgrim expresses an unregulated form of human emotion based on personal beliefs and experiences. This can be seen in the varying levels of compassion he shows towards different sinners. As Dante the Pilgrim descends deeper into Hell, the amount of times he shows pity for the sinners being punished declines. Yet Dante is not completely devoid of pity in these lower levels of Hell. In the canto immediately after he thanks the “ highest Wisdom” for the justness of the punishment for the simoniacs (Dante 293), he weeps over the fate of the diviners (Dante 305). This rapid change in emotion, both in reaction to punishments in the circle of simple fraud, shows the randomness of human emotion. Dante harshly rebukes Nicholas II, which seems uncharacteristic of him after showing compassion to many of the sinners in Hell. Since Dante has a negative view of simony, due to his personal beliefs, he is unable to show compassion towards the simoniacs (Dante 293). Seeing the simoniacs in a negative light is what leads to Dante’s angry outburst. When Dante has had a positive experience with someone, however, he shows compassion towards them. In his encounter with Ser Brunetto, Dante addresses him respectfully and shows pity when he says, “ for in my memory is fixed, and now it weighs on my heart, the kind, dear paternal image of [Brunetto]” (Dante 235). It is Dante’s respect and fond memory of Brunetto that causes him to feel sorry for his punishment in Hell. He sees Brunetto as a father and it causes him grief to see someone he looks up to in such a bad place. Even though Nicholas II and Ser Brunetto are both sinners, Dante shows very different emotions towards them because of personal beliefs and experiences.

Virgil is a representation of reason and allows for Dante to understand that, because the punishments in Hell are from God, showing pity for the sinners would mean going against God. Before encountering Virgil, Dante the Pilgrim was lost in a dark wood and encountered several obstacles that prevented him from reaching the top of the hill, where he saw light representing the way towards God (Dante 27-28). The character of Virgil was necessary for Dante the Pilgrim to make it through his journey through Hell, and ultimately, to Heaven. Virgil represents the missing link that Dante needs to reach God. He often has strong reactions to Dante’s compassion towards the sinners. The expression of pity from Dante towards the diviners leads to Virgil rebuking Dante, and he asks him, “ who is more wicked than one who brings passion to God’s judgment?” (Dante 305). Virgil separates emotion from the divine retribution that the sinners are facing because he knows that their punishments are from God, and are therefore just. Without regulation of emotion, the Christian soul would stray off the straight path to God. As Dante demonstrates through the pitying of the sinners, emotion can easily lead to one going against God, and reason is needed to keep this emotion in check.

With regards to divine justice, it is not okay to show compassion to those who sin against God because God chose for them to receive these punishments. Even though it is not always true that Virgil rebukes Dante when he pities the sinners, such as when Dante shows compassion to Ser Brunetto, for the most part, Dante’s human emotions are still regulated by Virgil’s reason on his journey through Hell. These “ regulations” include positive reactions from Virgil, not just the negative ones he shows when Dante expresses compassion towards the sinners. Right after rebuking Nicholas II, Dante is pleased because he “ firmly believe[d] that it pleased my leader, with such a contented smile he listened still to the sound of the true words I spoke” (Dante 295). Dante shows varying emotions towards the different sinners in Hell, but he is learning that being harsh towards sinners garners a positive reaction from Virgil. His reference to Virgil as a leader shows that Dante looks up to him and is pleased to know that he is reacting correctly by harshly rebuking Nicholas II. Just like Dante looks to Virgil for approval, Christians should allow their feelings of compassion to be regulated by reason. They must be able to reason whether showing compassion is appropriate in certain situations.

The purpose of this poem is not to say that all compassion is bad, however. Compassion and other human emotions are natural and can even trump the capacity to reason in some circumstances, depending on one’s relationship to God. An instance of this is when Virgil tries to gain entrance to the gate of Dis and Dante watches as the he proffers the sinners, who almost immediately “ closed the gate, those adversaries of ours, in my lord’s face” (Dante 133). Dante the Pilgrim is reliant on Virgil to lead him through Hell, but this is an instance when Virgil fails him. It is interesting that Dante refers to him as his lord in this situation because Virgil did not have the ability to get through the gate, despite being on a divine mission. Only when an angel sent from Heaven harshly rebukes the sinners are Virgil and Dante allowed through (Dante 145). Both Virgil and the angel were divinely sanctioned to help Dante on his journey, but the angel has something that Virgil lacks, namely the belief in Christ. Unlike the angel, who is on God’s side, Virgil is a pagan. Furthermore, Dante contrasts Virgil’s attempt at reasoning with the sinners, which leads to the gate being closed in his face, and the angel’s emotionally-charged rebuke, which leads to the sinners opening the gate. In this case, it is a combination of the angel’s harsh words and his relationship to God that proves to be more powerful than reason.

Like the angel, Dante the Pilgrim also shows that emotion plays an important role in the Christian life. When Evil Tail tricks Dante and Virgil into being escorted by the devils, Dante tries to convince Virgil not to go with them, seeing the way they were “ grinding their teeth, and how their eyebrows threaten treachery” (Dante 325). Virgil ignores these warning signs, and this proves to be a mistake because the devils had in fact deceived them. Similar to when they were trying to get through the gate of Dis, Virgil fails again at his role as a leader. Due to his reliance on reason, Virgil thinks that there is nothing to fear since the devils are only in Hell to punish the sinners (Dante 325). Dante the Pilgrim, who expresses human emotion based on personal beliefs and experiences, fears the devils because of their threatening appearance. This encounter with the devils shows that reason cannot always keep one safe and can lead to one trusting someone who should not be trusted. Dante is correct in this case, but he still follows Virgil anyway. He succumbs to reason rather than following his natural instinct telling him to doubt Virgil’s choice. This shows that there are times when one should follow emotion rather than reason in order to reach God.

As part of an allegorical journey to God, the Inferno is Dante the Poet’s way of showing the role of emotion and reason in Christian life. Dante chose a pagan poet to be the leader for the first part of Dante the Pilgrim’s journey. This is an interesting choice for a Christian text that shows the universal Christian desire to find the straight path to God. As a representation of reason, Virgil constantly rebukes or praises Dante the Pilgrim for his reactions towards the sinners. This regulation of Dante’s emotion is necessary to understand that compassion should not be shown to those suffering under the divine justice of God. Virgil proves to have flaws, however, indicating that the Christian soul should not rely on reason alone. To make it through Hell, there were instances when emotion proved to be more powerful, rather than reason. Dante the Poet creates an inconsistency between reason and emotion on this journey, but shows that both are ultimately needed in order to reach God.