

Conceiving Heaven as a Dynamic Rather than Static Existence

Eric J. Silverman

Across history and diverse religious traditions there have been varying portrayals of heaven, but one recurring assumption in both popular and academic literature is that various types of change—such as moral, aesthetic, epistemic, and/or relational progress—are no longer possible for the blessed in paradise. Against these conceptions I argue that posthumous moral, aesthetic, epistemic, and relational progress in paradise is compatible with traditional commitments within both Western religion and philosophy concerning the concept of heaven and, furthermore, that there are important advantages in conceiving heaven in this dynamic way.

Dynamic conceptions of paradise have at least the following advantages. First, dynamic views can explain how an eternal existence in paradise could be meaningful and engaging. Accordingly, they address a major concern about heaven raised by Bernard Williams (1973) and others: the fear that an eternal immortal existence would be unbearably tedious. One of the great-making features of heaven would be the ongoing possibility of pursuing and achieving good new moral, aesthetic, epistemic, and relational goals. Third, these views are more coherent with already existent assumptions about life and the afterlife across a variety of Western traditions than static views. Finally, such views can postulate an important continuity uniting both the earthly and heavenly modes of existence: the goal of life in both modes of existence could be to know, unite with, and enjoy God and other humans in ever more perfect ways. The combination of these advantages provides good *prima facie* reason for preferring dynamic views of paradise.

This thesis is relevant for several other chapters in this volume that presuppose a dynamic rather than static account of the heavenly existence. If there are no reasons for favoring dynamic views over static views, then their arguments—or at least important portions of them—are undermined. For

example, Ryan Byerly's argument (Chapter 8) that the inhabitants of heaven possess the virtue of forgiveness depicts the blessed as potentially resting from contemplating the sublime on occasion as well as growing in virtue. Yet, if heaven is a static existence that fact would entail that growing in virtue is conceptually impossible. Similarly, in Tim Pawl and Kevin Timpe's contribution to this volume (Chapter 6) "Growing in Virtue," heaven is depicted as a place of moral progress, where new moral insights are gained. Robert Audi (Chapter 10) portrays heaven as a place where deeper human forgiveness for and repentance of earthly vices may occur. Furthermore, he portrays the heavenly existence as one where creativity exists and is utilized. Richard Tamburro's discussion (Chapter 15) of the possibility of free will in heaven presupposes a dynamic view. After all, if heaven is static there are no new choices, and if there are no new choices then it is hardly sensible to ask whether there are free choices. The chapter in this volume which comes closest to offering a static view of the afterlife is Katherine Rogers's discussion concerning "Anselmian Meditations on Heaven" (Chapter 2) since Anselm's afterlife consists in the permanent ongoing activity of contemplating the beatific vision. However, she provides good reasons for resisting a strictly static interpretation of Anselm's heaven as participation in the beatific vision may not be incompatible with simultaneously engaging in other ongoing dynamic activities.

1.1. THE STATIC VIEW

What I will refer to as "static views" of heaven are: *conceptions of heaven that portray paradise as a place or state of existence where there is no further moral, aesthetic, epistemological, relational, and other change or progress for the inhabitants of heaven*. The blessed in heaven are as virtuous, happy, and wise as they will ever be. While there are also conceptions of heaven with limited particular static aspects—such as static moral character—that allow for other types of change, in a fully static account of heaven this principle of "no change or progress" in heaven applies not only to moral progress, happiness, and personal fulfillment, but also to epistemic, aesthetic, and even relational progress.¹

¹ Most of my arguments focus specifically on whether progress from good to better is possible in paradise rather than change more generally. I take it as true by definition that change from better to worse is impossible in paradise. It is likely that change involving no increase or loss of value is possible in the afterlife, but most of my interest is in the possibility of whether progress—positive change representing an improvement in overall value—is possible in heaven. In demonstrating specifically that progress—positive change—is possible in paradise, there is an implicit proof that at least one type of general change is possible in paradise.

This static view has appeared overtly and implicitly in both academic and popular culture. One culturally important popular reference to a static view of heaven occurs in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. The young Huck is taught this unattractive static view of heaven during his conversations with the widow Miss Watson. He explains,

All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular. She [Miss Watson] said... she was going to live so as to go to the good place [heaven]. Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it... she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. (Twain 1994: 2)

Some contemporary thinkers such as Bernard Williams (1973) agree with Huck Finn's intuition: whether or not they believe in the possibility of heaven they do not find the idea to be particularly attractive. Their conception of heaven brings to mind a blandly pleasant, but unchanging existence that would be boring, tedious, and unsatisfying. Like Huck they value having new places to explore, variety in life, and the personal engagement allowed by interesting changes; therefore, they are repulsed by the idea of engaging in the same monotonous activity for eternity. On Huck's conception of heaven, nothing ever changes, no new goals are reached, no new mysteries are ever resolved, personal growth, and dynamic interpersonal relationships are impossible. Unsurprisingly, Huck—like many in our culture—finds the static conception of heaven to be thoroughly unattractive and judges that there is no advantage in pursuing such an existence.

Another relatively recent reference to a static view of heaven in popular culture is found in the song "Heaven" by the Talking Heads. Its chorus explicitly depicts heaven as a place where nothing ever happens. In an interview with Lisa Miller, David Byrne—a lyricist for the Talking Heads—explains the song's inspiration:

The traditional Christian imagery we get handed is that no one is ever doing anything. People are lying around on clouds listening to a kind of boring harp music. Even in more Eastern concepts of Enlightenment or Nirvana, in those concepts it's also a thing where nothing really matters. You become disengaged and time stands still. The goal seems to be to attain a state where nothing happens. (Miller 2010: 209)

Miller, a religion columnist for the *Washington Post* expands his point. "All of this seeing God and praising God may be wondrous, but it's static. It doesn't 'get' you anywhere. Christian theologians might argue that in heaven, ambition, competitiveness, drive—and time itself, in which such notions make sense—cease to exist" (Miller 2010: 230). Accordingly, like Byrne, many in contemporary culture seem to believe that heaven would be boring, static, and

pointless because nothing really happens. Without dynamic activity, change, and goals the heavenly existence would be unfulfilling and tedious.

Both Mark Twain's and David Byrne's depictions of heaven as an existence of static unchanging eternal worship, singing, or praise of God appear to come from an influential New Testament image of the afterlife. The *Book of Revelations* offers this depiction of heaven:

And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say,

"HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME."

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever ... (Rev. 4:8-11 NASB)

This passage, along with similar biblical images, seems to be a major cultural source of the image of heaven as static participation in the ongoing worship of God. A popular assumption shared by Twain and Byrne is that the blessed in heaven simply join a crowd of eternal worshippers while all other interests, activities, and relationships cease.

If static views of heaven were limited to popular culture it would be easy to dismiss them as crass metaphors for the afterlife that would never be endorsed by the sophisticated theologian or philosopher. Yet a static view of heaven appears to be held by the influential theologian John Hick. At a critical juncture in his explanation for the existence of evil—the soul-making theodicy—Hick argues that character building in earthly existence requires a dynamic existence in which goals, challenges, setbacks, pain, and suffering occur because paradise must not include such things. He claims:

Perhaps most important of all, the capacity to love would never be developed, except in a very limited sense of the word, in a world in which there was no such thing as suffering ... love perhaps expresses itself most fully in mutual giving and helping and sharing in times of difficulty. And it is hard to see how such love could ever be developed in human life, in this its deepest and most valuable form of mutual caring and sharing, except in an environment that has much in common with our own world. It is, in particular, difficult to see how it could ever grow to any extent in a paradise that excluded all suffering. For such love presupposes a 'real life' in which there are obstacles to be overcome, tasks to be performed, goals to be achieved, setbacks to be endured, problems to be solved, dangers to be met; and if the world did not contain the particular obstacles, difficulties, problems and dangers that it does contain, then it would have to contain others instead. (Hick 2010: 325-6)

Some of Hick's claims concerning paradise are uncontroversial. The concept of paradise surely excludes difficulties, suffering, and dangers. Yet his claims

are farther reaching and controversial than they may initially appear. Not only does he claim that paradise would exclude moral progress, but that any existence without suffering necessarily lacks a "real life," "tasks to be performed," "obstacles," or "goals to be achieved." In other words, paradise must be static, without tasks, goals, a real life, or changes of any kind.

For Hick, important types of moral progress cannot occur in heaven since the greater good of allowing superior types of moral progress in this world justifies the existence of evil. If such progress were possible in a paradise the current world's inclusion of evil could not be justified. Furthermore, in order to conceive of heaven as a place where moral progress does not occur, he goes so far as to claim that no goals or tasks of any kind at all would be possible in paradise—that it must not be a "real life"—thereby implying that not only moral progress, but also relational, epistemic, aesthetic, religious, and every other kind of progress is impossible.

Another static account of heaven is offered by the German theologian Ladislaus Boros. Boros's view of the afterlife involves humanity taking on a timeless and therefore changeless existence. As human life culminates in a final decision to embrace or reject God at death an individual enters a timeless and changeless state. He explains:

The entire movement of our being appears thus to sweep towards a single point of identity. Only at this point where all the threads spun by the strivings of our existence are joined in one tight knot of being, only at this point that we are never allowed to reach except in death—never in life—... (Boros 1965: 29)

Part of what explains the permanence of heaven and hell for Boros is that these states represent a final choice expressing the deepest desires of a person's self. It is an ultimate, irrevocable decision through which a person enters her permanent unchanging state. David Brown explains the logic and metaphysics of Boros's view:

Heaven ... involves a totally different perspective on time. Man can there partake in God's timelessness, and so it is meaningless to speak of any temporal measure of change ... All a man's life will be instantaneously and simultaneously present to him. So all the necessary [moral] correctives can be present to him in that same instant. (Brown 1985: 448)

According to such "temporally static" views of heaven, the eternal mode of existence in the afterlife involves a radically different experience of time. In heaven the blessed take on an eternal perspective in that they experience all of life in the eternal present. Accordingly, all their life is eternally and immediately present to them in a way that is incompatible with the temporal experience of sequential ordering. Since temporal sequential ordering is necessary for change, no change of any kind can occur in the timelessness of heaven. After death the blessed become changeless and static in their eternal bliss.

1.2. THE DYNAMIC VIEW OF PARADISE

The alternative to the static view of paradise is the dynamic view. Dynamic views of paradise are: *conceptions of heaven that depict paradise as a place or state of existence where moral, aesthetic, epistemological, relational, and other changes or progress takes place*.² Influential thinkers such as Lutheran theologian Henry Eyster Jacobs hold dynamic views of paradise:

The eternal world is not one of simple attainment, without the prospect of progress. When the Children of God are said to 'rest from their labors,' it is the toil and trouble of this life that are referred to, and not the cessation of works of love or of constant progress in ever new enjoyments of Life Everlasting. . . . But the state into which man is then ushered is one of expectancy of still greater blessings. . . . With man's constantly expanding capacity to know and love and admire, there will be incessant revelations of what Christ, and of what God in Christ is; and with every new revelation, there will be the development within man of new capacities for knowing and loving and admiring. Thus, while the negative side of holiness, freedom from sin, is complete with his entrance into another world, its positive side, or the ever-increasing growth of capacities for new bestowals of grace, ever advances. (Jacobs 2011: 181–2)

Jacobs's view includes at least three dynamic elements in the afterlife. First, the afterlife is dynamic in terms of an ongoing change in the improving exercise of one's moral service centered in love due to "man's constantly expanding capacity to . . . love." Second, there is ongoing improvement in the quality of one's joy of paradise due to an "ever-increasing growth of capacities for new bestowals of grace." And finally, there is the acquisition of new knowledge from "man's constantly expanding capacity to know . . . incessant revelations of . . . what Christ . . . is." Thus, the afterlife is dynamic in multiple ways.

Similarly, Dante Alighieri's famous Thomistic account of paradise includes at least one very important dynamic element. While the central activity in heaven consists in the ongoing meditation upon the divine essence the blessed in heaven are continually changed through that meditation, which in turn allows continual new insights into the divine nature and new experiences of

² Someone might mistakenly think that some depiction of heaven might be neither static nor dynamic. For example, Paul Griffiths portrays heaven as a repetitive stasis, wherein the blessed continually repeat the same identical sequence of events as in a song perfectly performed and repeated. Yet, since the static and dynamic categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, there is no third possible category. The puzzle posed by a view such as Griffiths's is which category to place it within. Should it be described as "static," since the individual continually experiences the same non-varied sequence of events, which never progresses beyond itself? Or should the view be categorized as "dynamic," since the individual experiences a progressive, yet repetitive and cyclical, sequence of the exact events eternally? I categorize Griffiths's view as dynamic in a minimalist sense. It is technically dynamic, but lacks the benefits of a more fully dynamic account since it includes serious limitations to its dynamic and progressive potential. See Griffiths (2014).

joy. Near the conclusion of Dante's journey into paradise, the poet offers this description of the dynamic and profound joy of heaven:

Shorter henceforward will my language fall
Of what I yet remember, than an infant's
Who still his tongue doth moisten at the breast.
Not because more than one unmingled semblance
Was in the living light on which I looked,
For it is always what it was before;
But through the sight, that fortified itself
In me by looking, one appearance only
To me was ever changing as I changed. (Alighieri 1997: XXXIII).

Dante's account might initially appear to be static in that the sole ongoing activity in paradise is continual contemplation upon the divine nature. However, the account is actually dynamic in one very important way due to the transforming effects meditation upon the divine nature has on the blessed. The blessed are continually, eternally, dynamically, and profoundly changed through their ongoing meditation upon the divine essence. While the divine essence never changes, its appearance to the blessed is "ever changing" in a progressive way as they are continually transformed by their meditation. While external activity in heaven is static, the ongoing internal changes within the person make this existence dynamic.

1.3. TRADITIONAL COMMITMENTS CONCERNING HEAVEN

How can one adjudicate between the static and dynamic views of paradise? Obviously, an empirical study is impossible. An analytic a priori investigation would require a clear, previously agreed upon definition of paradise. However, concepts of paradise vary greatly enough between traditions and even within particular traditions that we cannot proceed by simply analyzing a lexical definition. Furthermore, there is significant risk of biasing the discussion if we simply stipulate a definition of paradise.

In order to argue for a dynamic view of paradise, I proceed by showing that the common central recurring features associated with paradise do not require a static existence and instead provide reason to expect that the heavenly existence would be dynamic. What are the central recurring features in depictions of paradise? First, paradise is universally depicted as an overwhelmingly good eternal existence. For example, we see this trait in Plato, the Jewish Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran. The view that the heavenly afterlife must be unqualifiedly good is so widely held to that it is virtually

uncontroversial. Common metaphors communicating the overwhelming goodness of paradise include: living alongside the Deity or deities (Plato *Apology* 41a1-c7 and Rev. 4), walking upon streets of gold in a beautiful bejeweled city (Rev. 21-22), communing with renowned heroes (Heb. 11 and Plato *Apology* 41a1-c7), the restoration of a peaceful pastoral existence free of conflict or danger (Koran 9:72, Is. 11, and Gen. 3), receiving an ongoing supernatural revelation uniting one with God (Aquinas ST q. I-II.1-5), etc. Furthermore, the overwhelming goodness of heaven is directly connected to the presence of the divine.

Despite the fact that heaven is universally depicted as overwhelmingly good it is not always clear whether various traditions claim that heaven is an absolutely perfect existence or the best of all possible existences. This issue is important because it offers an intuitive way to argue for a static view of heaven. Classical theists such as St Anselm have thought God's existence as a "perfect being" implies an unchanging immutability for God since any change could only be from perfection to imperfection.³ Following a similar line of thinking some theologians seem to intuit—though it is rarely actually argued—that the heavenly existence must also be perfect, and if heaven is perfect then no change is possible without introducing some defect into perfection.⁴

According to such "statically perfect" views of heaven there would be nothing left to be done, no challenges left to face, no knowledge left to uncover, no good goals remaining to be achieved, no new experiences to enjoy. If such activities were not yet completed when humans enter heaven, then heaven must be less than fully perfect at least at its inception. While Anselm himself does not make this sort of argument, in the *Proslogion* he does speak of the goods of heaven and assure that all that is wanted is already there: "O those who enjoy this good: what will be theirs, and what will not be theirs! Truly they will have everything they want and nothing they do not want... whatever you love, whatever you long for, it is there" (1996: XXV). It is unclear whether this commits him to a static view of heaven, but a static view is certainly compatible with this type of thinking.⁵

However, there are reasons to doubt that heaven must be absolutely perfect. The fact that many traditions are simply silent on the matter gives some reason to doubt. Furthermore, the concept of an absolutely perfect existence that could not be improved in any way might not even be a coherent possibility for a human being. No matter how good an existence might be for a human, perhaps it could be always improved by the introduction of an

³ See Anselm (1996), XXV.

⁴ Since this sort of argument is rarely explicitly made, it is hard to find an example. Yet these seem to be the concerns grounding static accounts of heaven such as John Hick's.

⁵ Katherin Rogers argues that Anselm's views do not constitute a static view of heaven. See Chapter 2, this volume.

additional good. Consider Anselm's claim that the addition of another beloved person in heaven doubles the lover's enjoyment of heaven.⁶ If the claim is correct then regardless of how many friends with which one enjoys heaven, paradise might be better still if one more friend were added. And even if all of one's actual friends are present in heaven it is still possible that heaven might have been better if such a person had made more friends during earthly life who went on to share the joy of heaven. Therefore, there may be no such thing as an absolutely perfect heavenly existence for creatures since it might always be the case that heaven could be made even better by the addition of one more blessed friend.⁷

Furthermore, even if heaven is a perfect state or the best of all possible existences for a human, this fact would not necessarily imply that heavenly existence is static. Perhaps the best possible existence includes ongoing enjoyment involving a wide range of creative activities. Therefore, even if heaven is a perfect existence it would not necessarily follow that it would be a static existence. A perfect existence may be compatible with enjoying that existence in a wide variety of ways. Just as people in love typically engage in a wide variety of activities together as part of the ongoing enjoyment of their relationship without suggesting that such variety entails some flaw in their relationship, analogously it is possible that the blessed in heaven enjoy a perfect relationship with God by engaging in a wide variety of activities that are grounded in a relationship with God such as singing, dancing, silent meditation, creating new art dedicated to God, sharing new insights and religious experiences with one another, and so forth. Just as the best existence for a couple in love might be to engage in a wide variety of activities in *each other's presence*, what may distinguish a perfect existence in heaven might be that it is constituted by a wide variety of activities in *the presence of God*. Rather than indicate some flaw within such relationships, variety of activities in both human and divine relationships may indicate a desire to enjoy the many and varied thoroughly good facets of the relationship.

In addition to the great goodness of heaven rooted in the presence of the divine, other important claims about heaven assert that there are extreme limitations on what can enter paradise. Evil, vice, sadness, idolatry, pain, and the like, are all separated from paradise. Various traditions communicate these ideas: "And we shall remove from their breasts any hatred or sense of injury" (Koran 7:43), "They will not hear therein ill speech or commission of sin. But only the saying of 'Peace! Peace'" (Koran 56:25-26), "He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces" (Is. 25:8).

⁶ See Chapter 2, this volume.

⁷ I do not claim that Anselm endorses the view that heaven could always be even better than it is in this way, but only that it is plausible that such a view follows from these other Anselmian commitments.

NASB), "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed" (Col. 3:5 NASB), "They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat" (Rev. 7:16 NASB), and "There will no longer be any curse... they will see His face... there will no longer be any night... and they will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 22:3-5 NASB). Accordingly, along with the affirmation of the overwhelming goodness of paradise due to the presence of the divine two additional themes within concepts of paradise are that nothing morally evil can enter into paradise and that nothing sad, injurious, or painful can enter paradise. These features are among the most central recurring traits associated with depictions of paradise.

1.4. DYNAMIC VIEWS OF HEAVEN AND TRADITIONAL COMMITMENTS

How could an overwhelmingly good eternal existence in the presence of the divinity, which was completely free from evils, harms, or other bad making features occur in a dynamic existence including ongoing change and progress? What sorts of goods or events might constitute a plausible dynamic change during an overwhelmingly good state of affairs, which would not represent an evil state of affairs when unfulfilled?

Dynamic conceptions of paradise can be subdivided into three types: conceptions of paradise depicting it as an existence where changes *external* to the inhabitants of heaven occur, conceptions of heaven depicting it as an existence where changes *internal* to the inhabitants of heaven occur, and conceptions of heaven depicting it as an existence where both types of change occur. For example, consider the good of aesthetic beauty external to the inhabitants of heaven. If no beauty existed within a world, then that lack would constitute a bad state of affairs. Yet a world can possess an abundance of aesthetic goods and be overwhelmingly good without every possible aesthetic good existing. Everything existent in a possible world could be beautiful without every possible beautiful thing existing within that world. Consider a possible world with an abundance of aesthetic goods and nothing ugly, but in which Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* has not yet been created. Such a world could be overwhelmingly good, free from all evil, and much better aesthetically than many possible worlds in which *The Last Supper* exists since the existence of an abundance of other aesthetic goods would outweigh the lack of any one particular painting. Yet such a world could be improved by the creation of *The Last Supper*. Therefore, a paradise world might be overwhelmingly good and completely free from evil, but dynamically improved by the introduction of additional finite goods.

Another type of good is that of close relationships with virtuous friends. Indeed, Aristotle calls such relationships the greatest of the external goods.⁸ Interpersonal relationships in paradise would necessarily be improved as certain sorts of barriers are removed such as selfish desires and the challenge of limited time. Yet these changes do not imply that relationships suddenly become static. While these barriers to interpersonal relationships would be removed in paradise, relationships could still progress in many ways that are similar to virtuous earthly relationships, through shared time, experience, and ever increasing mutually shared intimate knowledge.

Most importantly, the eternal relationship with God could be dynamic. Even if we presuppose a view of God which would be the least compatible with a dynamic paradise—the view of classical theism that God is eternal, perfect, unchanging, and impassible—it would be possible for the blessed in heaven to have a dynamic relationship with an unchanging God. Most notably, humanity's relationship with the divine could improve over time as the limited human perspective was changed through increased experience and knowledge of God over time. Furthermore, it is possible that finite human moral and epistemic capacities could be expanded and developed in ways that would not represent an evil state of affairs when undeveloped.⁹ All these changes would be internal to the individual.

Accordingly, one important goal for the blessed could be to make personal progress in expanding their finite nature to increase the ability to enjoy and understand God. Perhaps, through cooperative grace, time and shared effort with the divine, and service to others human finite abilities to know and enjoy God could be increased even in paradise. Therefore, in addition to pursuing additional finite moral, aesthetic, epistemic, and relational goods, the blessed might seek to increase the capacity to enjoy the infinite source of joy to which they are eternally united.

1.5. THE ADVANTAGES OF DYNAMIC VIEWS

So far we have outlined two families of views of paradise that are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive: static and dynamic accounts. Both views are coherent and are empirically untestable. However, there are important advantages to the dynamic view.

⁸ See Aristotle (1999, 1169b).

⁹ Imagine the difference between the speeds of an ideal perfected runner who is five feet tall and one who is six feet tall. Each runner might truly be perfect relative to his or her own distinct finite nature, but the taller runner would still be the faster of the two. Analogously, it may be possible to expand the finite aspects of human moral and epistemic capacities.

First, consider the superior explanatory power of dynamic views for demonstrating that an eternal existence can be fulfilling and meaningful. On such accounts paradise can be eternally meaningful because there is always more that can be known and experienced of the infinitely rich being of God. There is always more union with God to be experienced and there is always potential to expand our finite ideally functioning capacities for interacting with God. On accounts of paradise that include an ongoing relationship with God, since the afterlife includes at least one infinite good—God—there is an infinite amount of knowledge, experience of God, and enjoyment of union with God that remains to be gained. This principle is central to the account of the afterlife advocated by Dante.

Furthermore, since other humans in paradise are dynamically growing there is always more depth for developing relationships, knowledge of, and experiences with other finite but dynamically developing human beings. The great good of ongoing developing friendship with virtuous friends can continue. Finally, there might also be an infinite number of new finite goods, such as aesthetic and epistemic goods, to pursue in paradise. Ongoing, increasingly accurate, improving pursuit of these goods requires a dynamic existence. Therefore, even accounts of paradise that lack an infinite good to be pursued in God could be improved by dynamic characteristics. There is no reason to fear boredom, tedium, or meaninglessness in a dynamic paradise.

Accordingly, dynamic views of heaven are well positioned to respond to Bernard Williams's argument against the possibility of a meaningful eternity. He argues that an immortal existence would be ultimately meaningless and result in unbearable tedium. "Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless . . . immortality would be, where conceivable at all, intolerable . . ." (Williams 1973: 82). Williams uses an example from the playwright Karel Capek to illustrate his claim. According to Capek's *The Makropulos Affair* Elina Makropulos has lived over 300 years by using an elixir of life. Yet her unnaturally long life is deeply unsatisfying and results in extreme tedium. Williams explains, "Her unending life has come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness. Everything is joyless . . ." (Williams 1973: 82). His concern that it might be impossible to avoid meaninglessness in an eternal existence is significant enough that the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* lists it as one of only two critical issues it engages concerning the concept of heaven.¹⁰

Williams argues that an utterly engaging ongoing activity would be the only plausible way to keep life meaningful enough to avoid misery and suicide in the long term. He argues that "Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*. What could that be? Something that could

be guaranteed at every moment to be utterly absorbing?" (Williams 1973: 87). While he avoids using the terminology of "hell," the concept of an eternal existence that was so empty, tedious, and joyless that one would consider complete self-destruction to be an attractive alternative might be well classified as a type of damnation.

However, the plausibility of some of Williams's requirements for a bearable eternity is hardly self-evident. For example, why must existence be "guaranteed at every moment to be utterly absorbing?" Why would an existence that was only utterly absorbing at most moments rather than at every moment be intolerable? Most humans fare well enough during regular earthly lifespans despite occasional boredom. Similarly, why wouldn't a merely "absorbing" existence be bearable, why must it be *utterly* absorbing? After all, most humans never attempt suicide during lifestyles that are merely "absorbing" or interesting during normal lifespans.

Perhaps Williams's point is that the nature of eternity dramatically multiplies the negative effects of normal tedium somehow, that if we experience five minutes of tedium in the afterlife it will be more like experiencing five years of tedium in ordinary life. If that is his point, it is difficult to verify whether the claim is correct. Why would humans in an eternal state be more vulnerable to the effects of tedium rather than less? It is certainly plausible that an increase in patience and improved perspective on the insignificance of occasional tedium in light of the largeness and great goodness of heavenly eternity would make humans less vulnerable to the negative effects of tedium. In any case, without further argumentation Williams appears to beg the question by asserting that a bearable eternal existence requires an utterly absorbing activity at every moment.

Even if we accept Williams's claim that a bearable eternity requires something guaranteed at every moment to be utterly absorbing, dynamic views of heaven have an excellent candidate for meeting this demand. The quest for ever increasing enjoyment of union with and knowledge of the infinite loving God is the best possible candidate for a continually meaningful eternity that would be completely immune to boredom. As an infinitely long goal the length of interest it can hold is eternal. As a goal involving an infinitely rich, infinitely interesting relationship it is a goal with an utterly absorbing object. It would be as utterly absorbing as finite human nature allows anything to be continually absorbing.

Unlike a static view of the afterlife positing a similar ultimate good in a perfected relationship with God, the good of an ongoing relationship with God in a dynamic heaven is not merely the ongoing enjoyment of union with and contemplation of the Deity. Additionally, dynamic views of the afterlife allow that one's relationship with God can be eternally improving and changing on the basis of the previous experience of union with God and new knowledge of God. Furthermore, the transformed self would not only have new insights into

¹⁰ See Talbott (2014).

God, but would also have new insights into the self's state at previous points in eternity, much as adults can have new insights concerning their younger selves. Williams's claim that eternity would require an activity that was utterly absorbing at every moment to avoid extreme tedium is more intuitive if one stipulates that eternity is fundamentally static and unchanging. For if the sole static activity of eternity is less than utterly absorbing, there is no hope of change or improvement of any kind. Thus, even a vaguely pleasant eternal but static unchanging activity can appear potentially repulsive as we saw in Mark Twain's and David Byrne's accounts of a pleasant, but unattractive static eternity. It is no surprise that all three of these thinkers are religious skeptics, as their views of the goods of paradise implicitly portray heavenly goods as inferior to earthly goods in that earthly goods do not inevitably result in unbearable tedium and boredom.

A third advantage of dynamic views of heaven is that they cohere better with a wider range of beliefs about and metaphors for paradise across a wide range of traditions. While the New Testament's imagery of eternal worship of God in heaven may appear to indicate a static view of the afterlife, this image is outweighed by competing imagery both within the Christian tradition and beyond it. For example, within the Platonic tradition Socrates speaks of looking forward to an afterlife where he expects ongoing improving relationships with and knowledge gained through conversations with heroes such as Odysseus, martyrs such as Palamedes and Ajax, and writers such as Hesiod and Homer. He expects to be able to share his own experiences, learn of their experiences, and pursue knowledge in much the same style of dynamic dialogue he pursued in earthly life.¹¹

Similarly, the Koran's images of Jannah depict the afterlife as a return to an idyllic existence in an active and dynamic garden of good pleasures with activities such as eating, as well as the ongoing development of relationships with family and other residents of heaven.¹² Such an existence is restful and pleasant, but is dynamic since human relationships continue to progress. Or consider the New Testament metaphors for the afterlife which portray the afterlife as an active city (Rev. 22), a wedding banquet (Matt. 22), a place of blessed ongoing uncursed work and responsibilities (Matt. 25). Even when such images are not interpreted literally it is hard to see how they are compatible with a static view of paradise. Accordingly, the New Testament image of heaven is not a timeless, unchanging, or immaterial existence. Instead, it portrays paradise as a glorified physical bodily existence (1 Cor. 15) where the evils, frustrations, and destructive tendencies in this world are removed (Rev. 22:3). One potential way to reconcile the tension between the seemingly static image of heaven as eternal worship with the many dynamic

¹¹ Plato (2002), *Apology*, 41.

¹² See Koran 9:72 and Koran 13:23–24.

images of paradise would be to portray all heavenly activities as an expression of eternal worship through which union with God is experienced.

Furthermore, a dynamic account of heaven would cohere well for the large sub-group of theists who endorse any account of purgatory or ongoing chance of moral progress in a non-paradise state in the afterlife. While it is well known that purgatory is an official view of the one billion member Catholic Church (2012: 1030), similar views are also held by many Muslims and Protestants, and may even appear in Plato (*Republic* 614a–621b). Some sects of Islam teach that after death, during the state of Barzakh between death and the resurrection of judgement, this temporary state offers a possibility of refinement before the ultimate judgment. Notable Protestants endorsing some concept or possibility of purgatory include C. S. Lewis (2015), Rob Bell (2010), and Jerry Walls (2012). A dynamic account of heaven would cohere well with such "purgatory" views as they already portray the afterlife as a place or state that allows for dynamic moral progress and activity. Just as purgatory is a dynamic existence that allows increasing moral progress through the removal of imperfections in one's character, moral progress in paradise is possible through the growing of already refined but finite moral capacities. It might seem that entry into "heaven" could end such a moral journey, but even if moral progress is no longer possible surely there are an infinite number of new ways to live out morally perfected character, which require an ongoing dynamic existence.

A final advantage of dynamic views of the afterlife is they allow for greater commonalities in theories concerning human nature, life, well-being, and happiness or human fulfillment, across both the earthly and heavenly existence, entailing greater theoretical simplicity. For example, in both modes of existence the primary goal of human life might be portrayed as seeking fulfillment in ever more intimate ongoing union with God. Thus, we would expect the next life to be dynamic and similar to the earthly existence in this way. Our expectations concerning the chief end of humanity in both types of existence could be based on the tenants of the Westminster Confession.¹³ The ultimate goal for humanity in both worlds could be to seek to glorify God and enjoy Him forever in increasingly more intimate and perfected ways as we continue to increase our capacities for enjoying Him.

In contrast, postulating a static human existence in paradise entails unnecessary theoretical complexities since the nature of humanity and life in paradise would be more dissimilar to earthly existence than on dynamic theories. For every additional difference between the earthly and heavenly existence static views must explain how and why humans enter this static state of existence, its implications for motivation, human nature, well-being, etc. For example, static

¹³ See Kelly, Rollinson, and Marsh (1986, Q1).

views of paradise based on the claim that humans take on an unchanging timeless existence after death must take pains to explain how it is even possible for humans to enter a radically different non-temporal existence despite every appearance that humans are necessarily temporal beings.

1.6. CONCLUSION

We have discussed a variety of portrayals of heaven with special attention to the distinction between static and dynamic accounts of paradise. While we have seen that both views are found in contemporary philosophy, theology, and popular culture I have argued that dynamic views of the afterlife have a number of important advantages. Dynamic views have superior resources to explain why eternity would be meaningful and engaging. Furthermore, they have excellent resources to address Bernard Williams's concern that eternity would be tedious and empty. Dynamic views also offer better coherence with a wide variety of theological and philosophical commitments than static accounts of heaven. Finally, dynamic views are theoretically simpler than static views. The overall combination of these advantages provides good prima facie reason for preferring dynamic views of paradise over static views.

REFERENCES

- Alighieri, Dante. 1997. *Paradiso*. Trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Etext prepared by Dennis McCarthy. Available at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1003/pg1003-images.html>>.
- Anselm. 1996. *Monologion and Proslogion*. Trans. Thomas Williams. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd edition. Trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1981. *Summa theologiae*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Christian Classics.
- Bell, Robb. 2010. *Love Wins*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Boros, Ladislaus. 1965. *The Moment of Truth*. London: Burns & Oates.
- Brown, David. 1985. "No Heaven without Purgatory." *Religious Studies* 21, 4: 447–56.
- Catholic Church. 2012. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Griffiths, Paul J. 2014. *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Hick, John. 2010. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jacobs, Henry Eyster. 2011. *Elements of Religion*. Bynum, TX: Repristination Press.

- Kelly, Douglas F., Philip B. Rollinson, and Frederick T. Marsh. 1986. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co.
- Koran, trans. Muhammed Mohsin Khan.
- Lewis, Clive S. 2015. *The Great Divorce*. New York: HarperOne.
- Miller, Lisa. 2010. *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Plato. 1992. *Republic*. Second edition. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Revised C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Plato. 2002. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Critio, Meno, and Phaedo*. Trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by John Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Talbott, Thomas. 2014. "Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Available at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heaven-hell/>>.
- Twain, Mark. 1994. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Dover Thrift Edition. Mineola: Dover.
- Walls, Jerry. 2012. *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1973. "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality." In *Problems of the Self*, 82–100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.