



Heaven Ungained

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Abstract

There has been quite a bit of literature on heaven of late. In this paper I state some claims that theistic philosophers and theologians have made about heaven, and make the concept of heaven incoherent. I maintain that it is possible for a rational individual to prefer not to go to heaven. Finally, I argue that it may be preferable for a person of moral integrity to decide that they want to go to hell given the immoral nature of many passages in the Bible.

Keywords

Heaven, Hell, Inconsistency

Subject Areas: Philosophy

1. Introduction

The Christian Bible tells us quite a bit about heaven. Recently, several books have appeared on the subject, telling us what heaven is and is not like¹. In this paper, we shall focus on a discussion by Richard Swinburne, and some passages from the Bible, and argue that the conception of heaven contained therein is incoherent. That is, we want to show that these beliefs cannot all be true together; hence they make this concept of heaven incoherent. Second, we shall maintain that it is possible for a rational agent to prefer not to go to heaven. Third, a person of moral integrity may decide that hell is preferable given the immoral nature of some passages in the Bible that are often forced on one.

First, the inconsistent beliefs. The first belief that Christians entertain about heaven is that once we are in paradise all of our wants will be satisfied². Swinburne says

¹Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, (Tyndale Publishing House, Inc., 2004), Henry Blamires, *About Heaven and Hell*, (Servant, 1988), Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Ch. 11, (InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 257-279, Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Hearts Deepest Longing*, 2nd edition, (Ignatius Press, 1989), Peter Kreeft, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven*, 2nd edition, (Ignatius Press, 1989), C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Ch. 10, (Harper Collins, 1940), Jerry Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2002). We do not wish to critique the extant literature. We only cite some of it to give evidence of the popularity of writings on heaven. We want to point to just a couple of problems.

²Psalms 145: 4 "Take delight in your Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." Psalms 145: 16 "Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing." Finally, Psalms 145: 19 says "He fulfills the desire of all who fear him, he also knowest their cry, and saves them."

“Heaven is a place where people enjoy eternally a supremely worthwhile happiness... . Basically a man’s happiness consists in doing what he wants to be doing and having things happen that he wants to have happen” [1].

Again

“A man will only be happy if he has no conflicting wants; if he is doing what he wants to be doing and wants in no way to be doing anything else.” Thus we will be perfectly happy in heaven; in that all our wants will be met. The second belief that Christians entertain about heaven is that they will not be the only person there, but that there will be an indefinite number of people there, and we will be reunited with our loved ones (presuming they manage to go to heaven also)³. Swinburne says

“According to Christian tradition heaven will also comprise friendship with good finite beings, including those who have been our companions on earth”⁴.

2. Case of Conflicting Wants

We maintain that these two beliefs lead to an inconsistency. The inconsistency is based on the idea that rational people will inevitably have some conflicting wants, thus everyone cannot have all of their wants met. Consider the following case.

Joe DiMaggio was famously married to Marilyn Monroe, and he had exclusive access to her love and affection. Eventually, they became divorced. Later, Arthur Miller married Marilyn Monroe, and he had exclusive access to her love and affection. They also got divorced. Now suppose that Joe DiMaggio, Arthur Miller, and Marilyn Monroe are all saved, and all go to heaven. In such a situation it would be rational and natural for Joe DiMaggio to want to be reunited with his loved ones. That would no doubt include a rational desire to be reunited with Marilyn Monroe, his former wife. This want will be a want to have exclusive access to Marilyn’s full love and affection for eternity. However, Arthur Miller will rationally want the same thing. Now Joltin’ Joe and Artie cannot both have exclusive access to Marilyn’s love and affection for all of eternity⁵. Therefore, not both Joe and Arthur cannot have their rational wants met, even in paradise. Since anyone with a little imagination can multiply such examples indefinitely, we conclude that the concept of a heaven or paradise where everyone’s rational wants are met is incoherent.

It is inconsistent because the theologian holds 1) that everyone in heaven will have all their wants satisfied there, 2) there can be conflicts between the wants of people in heaven, and 3) some people in heaven will not be able to have all their wants satisfied there. These statements are clearly inconsistent. They cannot all be true together.

3. Attempts to Reconcile the Inconsistency

I will now consider various ways that one might try to wriggle out of this inconsistency. First, it might be said that Marilyn Monroe should decide which husband she wants. But that will still leave us with either Joe or Arthur with an unsatisfied want⁶.

Second, it might be suggested that God could so arrange things that this would not happen. Maybe he could produce a Marilyn doppelganger, or a twin Marilyn. In fact, if anyone else wanted Marilyn, God could produce several simulacra of the diva. The trouble with this suggestion is that it is rational for both Joe and Arthur to

³There is not much explicitly about this belief that one can be reunited with their loved ones in heaven in the scriptures. In Hebrews 11: 35 it says “Women received their dead by resurrection, but other (men) were tortured because they will accept their release by some ransom, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection.” The phrase about a women receiving her dead can mean her family members or loved ones. From this, it is reasonable to believe that it is not restricted to a single gender. In addition, there is plenty of scriptural evidence that are often saved, and presumably such people can be reunited with their family members who are saved.

⁴Swinburne, [1], p. 301.

⁵For a good discussion of what it takes for wants to be rational, one can consult Richard B. Brandt, *The Theory of the Right and the Good*, especially Chapters 7 and 8, (Prometheus Books, 1998). Following Brandt, we shall take it as an approximation that a desire is “rational” when it survives maximal criticism by facts and logic. An agent has a “rational desire” taking into account would have a desire to have that desire taking into account all the relevant in their specific situation. That is, the agent is cognitively mature, fully informed logically consistent, and prefers that want, all things considered.

⁶I am assuming the “love and affection” Joe and Arthur have toward Marilyn is not necessarily “carnal desire”, although Marilyn was no doubt a sex symbol; thus the disadvantage of the example. It is worth noting that eros need not mean sexual or carnal desire, although it does indicate a physical attraction that flares up quickly, and is passionate. It also indicates wanting to know more and share more, to have a soul mate. It need not be erotic. So the reader need not assume there is sex in heaven.

want and love the original Marilyn, and not to want an exactly similar duplicate Marilyn⁷. This seems contrary to what really loving someone involves.

A third suggestion is that an all knowing, all powerful, and all good God could arrange our psyches so it is not the case that two people ever want the same thing exclusively when both cannot have it. The world of paradise would be so arranged by God that people never had conflicting wants, and never wanted the same thing when this was impossible to attain.

Now this sounds like a very good world indeed. However, we are not sure that many Christians would like the idea that God causes all or some of our rational wants. This seems to give God too much control and authority over how we should live our lives. By causing us to have and not have certain rational wants God seems to be too paternalistic.

Another suggestion is that maybe we would be all-knowing in heaven so we can know what to want and what not to want so that no two people would ever have conflicting wants. This would make us perfect beings, like God himself. And that is exactly the trouble. I do not think that Christians who believe that we would be perfect human beings in paradise, also believe that we would be gods, or that we would share one of God's properties. We are quite certain that no one knows what a perfect human being is, but whatever it may be, it is not one that can be all-knowing⁸.

Of course, we could take a hard line and say that everyone will have to learn to get along in heaven, otherwise God will kick them out. But this does little to satisfy both wants when both wants cannot be satisfied. It only says that we are vicious people if our wants continue to conflict with the wants of others. It does not remove the incoherence.

Ben DeVan has suggested the possibility that what we mean by a "rational want" is not what a rational want will be in heaven. In heaven everything will be all right because there will be a new sense of "want" that we cannot now understand.

This is the old saw that when in trouble say that it is beyond our understanding. We agree that we really do not know what we are talking about when we say what heaven will be like, but why all the books telling us what heaven is like? We may not be able to say what heaven is like or make any sense out of it. It seems to follow that we should be silent. But people are not going to be silent about heaven, so they are going to have to use language that we can understand. If not, heaven mongers are going to have to admit that we cannot have any idea what we are talking about.

Tom Wedsworth has called our attention to a Biblical passage that has some affinity to the case we gave. It says that there will be no marriages in heaven, and that we will all be (like) angels⁹. I take this at least to mean that people who are married on earth will not have a marriage relationship in heaven. Ben DeVan has told us that, instead of marriage, we will have a much more intimate relationship with everyone in heaven, thus making it a true paradise. Everyone will love everyone equally. Of course, we cannot imagine this, nor do we know what it is like, but we are reassured that everyone will love everyone else and everyone will be happy. There will be no preferential treatment in heaven.

This seems incompatible with the whole concept of the good life here on earth. We marry for a close, intimate relationship, and a lifetime companionship with one person. We give preferential treatment to our family members and the ones we love. For God to make us give this up for "something better" that we cannot now understand, strikes us as untoward in the extreme. A close, intimate, and meaningful relationship with one other person, or family member is much richer, and the same deep, intimate relationship cannot be had with billions of people. It does not even make sense. This is a twisted utilitarian notion of heaven where everyone should be loved and benefited equally by everyone else. One may not want to be in any such "better situation" imposed by

⁷See Robert Kraut, "Love De Re", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, ed. by Peter French, *et al.*, Vol. 10, 1986, who argues that loving someone X entails not wanting any exactly similar X, but wanting the unique individual X as such. Loving X entails regarding X as irreplaceable and nonsubstitutable.

⁸Perhaps Jesus was a perfect human being, and was also the most perfect being possible. We could be morally perfect, in the sense of being without sin. However, it is not clear that a morally perfect being could be less than all-knowing. Being all-knowing is not sufficient to make us divine, but it would share one attribute of God, and this is impossible for us.

⁹(Matthew 22: 23-30) "On that day Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came up to him and asked him 'If any man dies without having children, his brother must take his wife in marriage and raise up offspring for his brother,' Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and deceased, and, not having offspring, he left his wife for his brother. It went on the same way also with the second and third, until through all seven. Last of all the woman died. Consequently, in the resurrection, to which of the seven will she be a wife? For they all got her." In reply Jesus said to them: "YOU are mistaken, because YOU know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God; for in the resurrection neither do men marry nor are women given in marriage, but are angels in heaven."

a divine being. One can love their wife and family more than any other people, and if it is not like this in heaven, and we are like “angels” that do not prefer our wife and family to anyone else, then heaven is not worth wanting.

As a student, William Hood, pointed out, if everyone loved everyone else, then love would be the starting point of our feelings. We would love someone before we even got to know them and appreciate them for their good qualities. In addition, there would be nothing special about loving someone as opposed to just respecting them.

As against this, someone may argue that rationality involves an agent preferring to do what is best, and to so amend their desires as to seek what is best. It follows that if someone now does not desire a marriageless state does not entail anything about what it would be right for a person to desire after death. This does not show that marriage will be the best state in heaven where we have very different desires and occupations.

This argument presupposes that there is a preferable and coherent conception of heaven without marriage, and that this would be better for us whether we now like it or not. It presupposes that our current desires could be replaced by better ones, even though our present wants are rational. The burden of proof is on the heaven monger. Exactly how is it supposed to be better for someone not to love their wife and family more than any other people?

There are other reasons that satisfaction of all wants would not be desirable. If all our wants were satisfied, and we had everything we wanted, there would be nothing we lacked, and nothing to work towards or strive for. Life would be tedious and meaningless, because we would have nothing to live for. If we had everything we wanted, what would be the point of being there? We could only be getting continuous pleasure having all we could ever want. What if we wanted to want something? How would that want be satisfied, if we had everything we wanted? You might say that we’d be satisfied in having a want we couldn’t satisfy, but we still would have an unsatisfied want, and we might have an indefinite number of them if we wanted to. And suppose I wanted conflict or violence, such as the Michigan-Notre Dame football game, or a Rocky boxing match, where someone gets creamed? Would that be paradise for the guy who get beat up? I don’t think so. Suppose we wanted Michigan to win all the time? Would that be fair to Notre Dame? We don’t think so.

Another reason that paradise is impossible is that unless we could find something wrong with our situation, life would be intolerable because some of us might WANT to find things wrong. If all our ills were removed we would have nothing to complain about, and some people enjoy complaining. We could not complain if we wanted to, and that would be very unfair to constant complainers.

Here is another line of reasoning that came out of a conversation with my student Marcus Waters. Either God will satisfy all our wants in heaven or He will not. He logically cannot do both. If he satisfies all of our wants, then, knowing us, we will develop further wants. If a doctor wants money and admiration, and he gets it, then he will tend to want more money and admiration. So, if God satisfies all the wants we develop, this can go on indefinitely, and it appears pointless, and seems to be no less than the continual satisfaction of our selfish desires. On the other hand, God can set a limit on what we want. He can make us such that we do not want some things, or that we have the wants he deems we should have. In that case, we would have to want what God wants us to want. If so, then our wants would be dictated by God, and we could not want what we want to want. That clearly is a restriction on our freedom¹⁰.

There is a way out of this. It is to use prudential and moral considerations to decide for ourselves what we should want, what is reasonable to want, and the like.

However, a divine authority has no place in this decision making process. We do not need Big Daddy to tell us what we should want and not want. Insofar as we are rational, we can realize what wants we ought to have, and ought not to have, all by ourselves. There might be such a thing as being a rational agent.

Here is another take on the issue. Either we would have wants that cannot be satisfied, or someone with dictatorial, authoritative powers would have to so construct our psyches that we would automatically “comply and cooperate”, and not have certain wants. We could only have the wants that God wants us to have. We would be unable to want what we want to want.

One student, James A. Walker, has suggested that we must assume we should do what God wants of us. On earth, it is not possible to satisfy what God wants of us. In this world, we have free will and conflicts. In heaven, we can will to give up our freedom, and let God control what we want, since God knows best. In heaven, God will take care of all of our needs so long as we totally submit to his wishes for us, and obey him to the letter. We would then be better off, and we will experience a wonderful paradise. Our will will be what he wills for us.

¹⁰It is no good to say here that God gives us free will, and we can choose to have wants we shouldn’t have. This is supposed to be heaven, where all our wants are either satisfied or they are not.

Then when we are saved we will begin to develop our understanding. In heaven, we will not be free to want what we want. We will exercise our faith and believe first; only then will we understand. We will be saved, have eternal life, and enjoy the love of God. If we do not find this compelling, we are missing out on something wonderful.

A difficulty I find with this picture is that if our will is the same as the will of God, we could not be individuals. We would renounce all intellectual integrity and freethinking. We would be swallowed up in God, and lose our separateness. We could no longer think for ourselves. We would have to think what God thinks for us, or tells us to think. In Freudian terms, this is like a wish for a second childhood, and a return to the mother's womb, where all our needs are met. There is every reason to believe this is wishful thinking.

In the current dispensation on planet earth where our wants cannot all be satisfied, we are still told that we had better do and want what God wants us to do and want anyway. We find this whole situation ultimately untoward. It is better to give it all up to the dustbin of the primitive thinking of our forefathers. The notion of heaven, as described by Richard Swinburne, and probably quite a few others, is, and should be, nothing but an historical curiosity. We think we can do better. We do not need the notion of heaven to live a good life.

4. Abusive Father

Now we shall argue that it is possible to be a rational agent and prefer not to go to heaven. This is because the notion of being reunited with your loved ones in heaven raises a problem in itself. Suppose a father, who had abused his son and family for 60 years of their lives, goes to heaven. The son, who regards his father as a jerk and never wants to see him again can have this want thwarted if the father wants to see his son. The father may love his son, and want to keep abusing him for eternity. The son never wants to see his father again, and the father wants to be close to his son in heaven. So, as before, the father and son cannot both have their wants satisfied.

Of course, one can argue that in heaven the father would no longer abuse his son, but act like a loving father. However, after 60 years of abuse, it is possible for the son to rationally want not to ever see his father again, while his no longer abusive father wants to see his son in heaven. Both wants can be rational and justified, yet both cannot be met.

One can argue that a father who abused his family for 60 years will never end up in heaven. But how do we know this? The father may have hedged his bets and sincerely repented at the end of his life asking for God's forgiveness¹¹. The son can either go to heaven and be stuck with his father for eternity, or choose to not go to heaven. It can be rational for the son to prefer to not go to heaven because he strongly prefers never to see his father again.

One can argue that the son ought to forgive his father, otherwise he is not fit for paradise himself¹². Very well, the son might somehow find the wherewithal to forgive his father, but still prefer to never see him again. Surely one can have a rational want not to see a person who abused them for 60 years. If the father wishes to see the son again, and is in heaven, while the son wishes not to see his father, what is best? Both wants cannot possibly be satisfied. Anyone with a little imagination can multiply this example indefinitely about people they prefer not to be around for all eternity.

We are constantly being reminded by clergy and religious authorities that no matter how bad we have been, no matter how defective our character is, if we can just repent and accept the Lord Jesus into our hearts, and sincerely confess our sins; if we can cover our backs, we can still go to heaven. It follows that there are all kinds of former serial murderers, rapists, child molesters, heartless mothers and fathers, wife batterers, abusive authority figures, death dealing dictators, and the like, who can manage to get into heaven. This group may include the earthly father of the son who, along with everyone else in his extended family, was abused by the former earthly father for sixty years.

It seems that it is rational, in any sense of "rational" that you please (except where it is a necessary truth that it is rational to want to go to heaven), to opt out of heaven for some alternative. One alternative might be total

¹¹Criminals are continually being consoled by priests and ministers that even though they will suffer earthly execution they will be saved if they just accept Christ into their hearts. This is no doubt a source of comfort to them. It follows that there will be a lot of sorry people in heaven. (ambiguity intended)

¹²It is very plausible to argue that some human actions are justifiably unforgivable, such as causing 60 years of misery, but we will let this slide here. A colleague Ben DeVan has suggested that if the son cannot forgive his father for the father's abusive behavior the son cannot expect God to forgive him for his sins either. If this means that God will not let the son into heaven unless the son is willing to forgive his father, so be it. It can be rational for an agent not to want to go to heaven in the first place.

death or eternal annihilation; a permanent loss of consciousness and a merging of your body and brain with the physical environment. The eternal enjoyment of God's presence may just not be worth the conjunctive fact that one would be in eternal contact with such reformed reprobates.

One could agree that if this is the way we feel, we are not ready for heaven. What we need is a "period of intense spiritual growth" where we can learn to forgive others for their earthly shortcomings. It is possible that our wants and preferences will be so transformed by a benevolent god as to make us "fit for heaven" learning to forgive others and live in everlasting harmony with them.

However, I do not think it is a matter of forgiveness. Forgiveness means forgoing resentment and not desiring to punish others for their transgressions. We could forgive the former reprobates, but at the same time rationally prefer not to want to be in contact with these very same (self-identical reformed individuals) for all eternity. This seems to be a rational preference that any good person could rationally adopt.

Let us look at it another way. Such creatures as Sirhan Sirhan, Charles Manson, and O. J. Simpson can still possibly repent their sins, seek the Lord's solace, and wriggle their way into heaven. God is forgiving and a source of comfort to them. All that is necessary is that they be sincerely sorry, that they unquestioningly follow Jesus, and so on.

To bring this into sharper perspective, consider what the famous philosopher of religion John Hick says about heaven¹³.

Third, not only does a theodicy of the Iranæan type require a positive doctrine of life after death but, insofar as the theodicy is to be complete, it also requires that all human beings shall in the end attain the ultimate heavenly state.

If this is so, then what is the point of a "soul making" theodicy? It seems that to tell someone that they are going to heaven is a way of saying that they are leading a worthwhile life, that their life has not been in vain, that they are a good, worthwhile human being who deserves the best for living a good life. It is saying that they will be remembered fondly, that they have meant something to this world, and that they deserve the best for what they have accomplished here and now. It is to give the ultimate stamp of approval by saying that they ought to be rewarded for the kind of person that they are, and for what they have accomplished, for what they have done for others.

If heaven does not involve that, then what good is the concept of heaven? If any crook and liar can get to heaven, then what is heaven for? Heaven should be for good mothers, not mothers strung out on crack who let their kids shift for themselves. Heaven is for good fathers, not fathers who abandon their kids and continue to multiply beyond necessity without assuming an iota of responsibility. If heaven is not for good people, but just for anyone who is sorry for their sorry life, then what good is it?

The Bible says "For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. The righteous shall be preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off." (Psalms 37: 28) Passages such as this imply that God will not allow bad people into heaven. At the same time, God is merciful and loving (Exodus 34: 6; 1 John 4: 8, 16), so he will let reprobates into heaven. This inconsistency has bothered many commentators on the Bible. I am arguing that there is little point to heaven or living the morally good life if anyone can get in there. God's justice ought to trump his mercy, otherwise heaven is not worth troubling ourselves over. A just God is better than an unnecessarily merciful one. Heaven ought to be a motive for living the morally good life; for having a good will, as Kant said. Otherwise, what gives meaning to living according to doing the right thing?

The heart of the matter over whether it can be rational to choose not to go to heaven I think is that there is a Christian tradition that maintains that it is possible that our "wants" could be transformed in such a way as to make us "fit for heaven" without compromising our integrity as human beings. I am arguing that it is possible for a good person to rationally prefer not to be so transformed. A rational, fully informed, and responsible moral agent could choose not to spend an eternity with God because there are other individuals in heaven that they prefer not to be around for eternity.

5. Hell and the Bible

Now for our third, and final, objection to heaven. When one actually bothers to read the Bible you cannot help but notice some immoral recommendations contained therein. Rather than hate and kill homosexuals (Lev 20:

¹³John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Fourth Edition, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1990), p. 48. If this is so, why try to become a better person? Later on, Hick rejects the idea of hell, saying "If... hell means a continuation of purgatorial suffering often experienced in this life, and leading eventually to a high good in heaven, it no longer stands in need of a conflict with a theodicy." (p. 125)

12), kill prostitutes (Lev 21: 9), kill children who curse their parents (Lev 20: 9; Mark 7: 10), discriminate unfairly against women (Gen 3: 16; 1 Tim 2: 11-15), have slaves and beat them (Exodus 21: 20; Luke 12: 47, 49), and a host of other moral atrocities, we would rather go to hell. We are not perfect, like the good holy book, but we do have some moral integrity, and we prefer to go to hell than to do some of the things that the good book advocates.

We think the notion of heaven, and the avoidance of hell is often used as a propaganda effort by conservative Christians to force their “moral” agenda and religious faith on an unsuspecting public and to popularize unjustified moral values, such as homophobia and strong anti-abortion views. Saying how others should live their lives based on the promise of heaven can be, and often is, insidious business in the hands of irresponsible, uneducated clergymen whose only moral training is the Bible. They just want us to do what they say without any critical thinking, reflection, or public debate. Instead of public debate on the issues, they act as moral authorities “in the name of God” saying who they think will go to heaven.

Let us pause here at the tail end of this paper to ponder what we have and have not shown. We have shown that to conceive of heaven as a place where all our desires are met, as Richard Swinburne and others do, leads to incoherence because of the fact that people have wants that conflict in the sense that they cannot all be satisfied. One can quibble about our examples, but other examples are easily forthcoming. What we have not shown is that this is the only way to make heaven desirable. We cannot say what makes heaven desirable other than satisfying human wants. However, we do think that it is possible to reconceive what it is that makes heaven preferable to the alternatives. We can go on reconceiving and reinterpreting forever. We do not think that people can agree on what constitutes a paradise or ideal order. But we cannot defend that here¹⁴.

References

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¹⁴William P. Alston has said in correspondence that he thinks it is misleading to conceive of heaven as a “place”. It is more like a condition that constitutes a fulfillment of God’s plan for us. But this needs to be spelled out with much more care. Thanks to William Hasker for some helpful comments. It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a systematic discussion of the tradition of the beliefs about heaven. This is not a book about heaven.