

Defending heaven's desirability

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Abstract: Bernard Williams famously argued that immortality would lead to intolerable tedium. If his conclusion is true, then we ought not desire any sort of blissful-type afterlife (heaven) that precludes death. I reconstruct Williams's argument and examine three possible defeaters for his premises: the possibility of infinite activity kinds, the inability to prefer justifiably non-existence over the enduring of suffering, and the existence of inexhaustible pleasures such as the deepening love relationship between family, friends, and God, if God exists. I will show that further attempts to reboot Williams's argument also fail to rule out the desirability of heaven.

Introduction

Bernard Williams famously argued that immortality would lead to intolerable tedium.¹ If his conclusion is true, then we ought not desire any sort of blissful-type afterlife (heaven) that precludes death. Of course, there are possible worlds where the afterlife is quite blissful for a finite amount of time, even a very long time. Yet of interest here, and of interest to many religious enquirers, is whether the heaven hoped for, in which denizens reside indefinitely into eternity, is in fact desirable at all. I will argue in this article that Williams's argument, while valid, has several objectionable premises. Moreover, further attempts to reboot his argument also fail to rule out decisively the desirability of heaven.

The argument

Why think that heaven would be undesirable? According to Williams, the troubling feature of heaven is that its inhabitants have immortality. Immortality sometimes can refer to the inability to undergo physical death, but this is not what is at stake. Rather, the worrisome aspect of immortality is that the individual

will not undergo *personal* death. Whereas physical death marks the end of a biological life, personal death marks the end of a person's existence. Thus, in the heavenly state of interest to most human religious enquirers, denizens of heaven enjoy the privileged position of immortality, i.e. they will not experience personal death, though they may have experienced physical death.

To be sure, Williams is not opposed to the notion that people might survive their physical death and enjoy a kind of afterlife where immortality was optional. His argument concedes that it may be desirable to live as long as one wishes in a non-immortal afterlife, and upon reaching or approaching the unyielding boredom that Williams predicts, the individual may choose to cease to exist. This is to affirm that his argument does not attack the notion of post-mortem existence *per se*, rather only the kinds that involve immortality.

So, to put Williams's complaint simply, it is the lack of personal death that he finds problematic, 'I am going to suggest that . . . an endless life would be a meaningless one; and that we could have no reason for living eternally a human life. There is no desirable or significant property which life would have more of, or have more unqualifiedly, if we lasted for ever.'² Indeed, he argues that given enough time in the heavenly state, any activity that a person could spend their time doing would become *unyieldingly* boring and tedious – and, therefore, such an existence is undesirable.³ Thankfully, Williams does not expect us to just take his word for it. Here is his argument reconstructed:

1. There are only a finite number of pleasurable activities.
2. Every activity after a long time eventually becomes unyieldingly boring.
3. If there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities and every activity after a long time eventually becomes unyieldingly boring, then there would exist a moment after which it would be undesirable to continue existing.
4. If there were to exist a moment after which it would be undesirable to continue existing, then heaven is necessarily undesirable.
5. Therefore, heaven is necessarily undesirable.⁴

This argument is valid. However, each premise faces considerable objections that undermine the cogency of the argument. I will address the main flaws of each premise, but I will primarily be contesting premise 2 through a discussion of the possibility of renewable and inexhaustible pleasures.

Flaws in the argument

The points offered below are not meant to be decisive criticisms of Williams's argument. Admittedly, much of the cogency of his argument and the counterarguments offered here will turn on whether someone finds it intuitive that our activities, projects, and loves will eventually bore us. I present some

ideas and examples that may cause reasonable doubt in Williams's argument and strengthen the desire to pursue potential evidence concerning the existence of a heaven-like place.

Premise 1: The possibility of an infinite amount of activity kinds

Premise 1 states that we only have a finite number of activities. Clearly, Williams needs this in his argument because if there were an infinite number of activities to enjoy, then it becomes quite plausible to suppose that we would not become unyieldingly bored; there would always be some new adventure to pursue. Yet, it seems that human beings, in this earthly life at least, only have a finite number of activities to pursue, and an even smaller subset of those would be pleasurable. Or more precisely, there are a finite number of *kinds* of pleasurable activities.⁵ There may be disagreement about how exactly to carve up all of our activities into distinct kinds, but it is plausible that the set of kinds is indeed finite.

But for Williams's argument to work, there must also be a finite number of kinds of activities in heaven as there are during our earthly lives. On some prominent accounts of a heavenly life, particularly certain Christian conceptions, citizens of heaven are given a resurrection body, which presumably has certain features that our earthly bodies do not.⁶ Perhaps such a body affords new and limitless kinds of activities unfamiliar to earth dwellers. Now, one may think it implausible to suppose that even a heavenly body would unlock an infinite number of new kinds of activities, but it is logically possible. Another tack open to the critic of Williams's thesis is to point out that human ingenuity and creativity could usher in new and unique types of activities, particularly in the environment of heaven that would lack certain earthly drawbacks such as deadlines, endpoints, and perhaps things like resource scarcity.⁷ Though these do not serve as a strong defeater for premise 1, they undercut the overall persuasiveness of the argument. That is, it is not beyond reasonable doubt that there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities open to some people in some possible heavens – and this is enough to lower the cogency of Williams's argument.

Premises 3 and 4: Is boredom a fate worse than death?

Premise 3 of Williams's argument first asks us to suppose premise 1 and 2 are true; that is, suppose there are only a finite number of pleasurable activities and eventually all such activities become unyieldingly boring. If we grant these two ideas, Williams says that it follows that there will come a time when continuing to live would be undesirable. Let's take a look at some responses to this premise.

One might argue that the premise is only plausible if you eliminate certain strategies to stave off boredom. Even if we grant that *each* individual activity will eventually become boring for a time, this does not guarantee that *all* activities will eventually become always boring, due to the possibility of creative activity scheduling. We can imagine a varied schedule of activities where a heaven-dweller

would participate in activities until a hint of boredom is detected and then move on to the next activity. Armed with an astonishingly wide array of different activities, the passing of time can sometimes refresh the newness and excitement of an activity. Williams must stipulate that no such recombination and ordering of activities will stave off boredom in the heavenly realm. But this stipulation is not so egregious as it might seem. After all, the power of his argument comes from the infinitude of heaven. Any schedule of activities or combination of schedules designed to prevent boredom will eventually be repeated many times; in fact, the number of repetitions would continually approach infinity. There is certainly some initial persuasiveness to the idea that eventually all activities would become unyieldingly boring given this immense repetition of combinations of creative activity schedules.

A critic of Williams may respond to this claim by saying that humans return to activities they have performed many times in the past after a long break and often find great pleasure in them. A reason for this, they may suggest, is that human memory can often forget the full phenomenal texture of an experience. Thus, even though activity x may have been overdone in the past and become boring to me, after a twenty-year hiatus, that same activity may have a renewed freshness, allure, and mystique given my own lack of memory of the phenomenal quality in my initial performance of the activity. Yet, here, our imagined case of the resurrection body may cut against Williams's critic. It seems plausible that the new and improved resurrection body would shore up the noetic deficiencies in our earthly bodies. Perhaps it is unreasonable that heavenly citizens would have such forgetfulness of phenomenal texture. After all, the lack of perfect phenomenal recall is the cause of much grief in this earthly life, particularly for those who have lost a loved one and desperately want to remember more vividly the what-it-was-like of being with that person. It is not unreasonable to think that the kind of heaven human religious enquirers are interested in is the kind that does not include such deficiencies. Thus, I am not sure this is a strong argumentative manoeuvre for Williams's critic.

However, there is a dubious implication of Williams's claim in premise 3. Again, if we grant premises 1 and 2, Williams claims that life in heaven would then become undesirable. There is of course a myopic view one can take when assessing the desirability of an activity or situation, where one only looks at the properties of the thing under examination. But maybe what we are really looking for is whether something is desirable *all things considered*. That is, to know if something is in fact undesirable, it would be important to know if the other alternatives are more desirable or less desirable than the status quo. In Williams's imagined case, there are only two choices: continue living in heaven while enduring unyielding boredom or cease to exist and undergo personal death. We may clearly see how the former would be undesirable, but it is not immediately clear that it would be worse than the latter.

It ought to be noted that typically, when we wonder if there are fates worse than death, we run a thought experiment which contrasts the experience of a current suffering with the alternative of undergoing physical death. Usually the alternative of ceasing to exist altogether is not under consideration. Indeed, it is much easier to entertain the idea that there are cases where physical death, with continued personal existence afterwards, is preferable to a current earthly suffering, than to affirm that ceasing to exist is sometimes better than enduring suffering. Yet, it is this latter affirmation that we might question. How are we to be sure that continuing to live in heaven while enduring unyielding boredom is *more* undesirable than ceasing to exist? Here we run into a difficulty of the human mind's ability to analyse whether existing would be preferable to not existing – it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the what-it's-like of non-existence, since of course, there would not be an existent being to have phenomenal experiences!

Affirming premise 3 requires that one be able to assign a value to the path leading to non-existence that is higher than the one with continued existence in a state of immense suffering. But, one cannot justifiably assign such a value; human beings are unable to make this comparison properly. Thus, one cannot reasonably affirm premise 3. This is enough to cause reasonable doubt in the cogency of Williams's argument, but there are more potent objections to explore.

Premise 2: Are there renewable and inexhaustible pleasures?

Premise 2 makes the very strong claim that every activity, even the pleasurable ones, will eventually result in unyielding boredom. It is important to note that Williams must include the 'unyielding' attribution. For instance, if the claim were merely that every activity becomes boring, this would not be very troubling or problematic. After all, boredom from our routine activities is not uncommon in our earthly lives. We generally either switch to another activity to distract us from the boredom, or we use the times of boredom for valuable reflective thinking about our lives. Yet, this boredom does not make our earthly lives undesirable. If this kind of boredom were the kind in heaven, it would not undermine heaven's desirability, just as it doesn't undermine the desirability of earthly life. Williams needs the claim that eventually a given activity, or combination of activities will never not be boring.⁸

Brian Ribeiro, a defender of Williams's argument, champions this idea, 'There's no earthly experience, activity, or project that you – remaining more or less as you now are – would enjoy, were you allowed to do it forever' (Ribeiro (2011), 51). The clause 'remaining more or less as you are now' concedes some ground to the critic of Williams. It allows for the possibility of a certain souped-up resurrection body and mind that could assist in staving off boredom indefinitely. So, our response to Ribeiro should not lean on such versions of a heavenly state.

A potential direct counterexample to Ribeiro's claim can be found in John Martin Fischer's notion of an inexhaustible pleasure.⁹ That is, if there are some

pleasures that are forever renewable, then heaven would never become unyieldingly boring, for there would always be a set of activities with a bottomless well of pleasure to draw from. Ribeiro strongly rejects this idea: 'I find the claim that there is any pleasure which will remain pleasurable regardless of how many times you have enjoyed it previously to be, if not a conceptual falsehood, at any rate an obvious empirical one' (Ribeiro (2011), 52). I will address both of these charges in turn. Let's examine the concepts involved in affirming the existence of inexhaustible pleasures.

A renewable pleasure is one that is *in principle* capable of providing pleasure on multiple occasions. Act-types are the kind of things that can provide renewable pleasures. Some act-tokens are of course non-renewable. For example, eating this slice of watermelon in front of me is a non-renewable pleasure. Once I consume the watermelon and my mouth has been cleansed of all watermelon-molecules that could allow me to detect its taste, then the taste of that watermelon is a non-renewable pleasure. After all, my body has dramatically transformed the particles that made up the watermelon, some going to fuel my body and others going to waste. In fact, one might argue that any activity becomes non-renewable if it is indexed to a time. But even act-types that are renewable pleasures will not be enough to rebut Williams's and Ribeiro's claims; after all a renewable pleasure just admits of more than one occasion of pleasure. What we need are inexhaustible pleasures – pleasures that are renewable and will not be exhausted, no matter how many times one partakes in them.

What about affirming the existence of inexhaustible pleasures is a conceptual falsehood? I cannot locate the conceptual confusion. If we are committed to the existence of renewable pleasures, it is not a conceptual stretch to imagine that there might be some that are always renewable. Ribeiro's charge falls flat here. Yet, his primary claim was that it is obvious that the notion of an inexhaustible pleasure defies empirical data. What empirical data does he have in mind? He claims that life is filled with the 'wearing out of friends and loves and interests' (Ribeiro (2011), 53). But this is simply not true for all human beings. There are plenty of people who experience the near opposite of Ribeiro's remark; their relationships and interests have an upward trajectory that shows no signs of plateauing. To be sure, there are certain people for whom Ribeiro's sentiment rings true. Yet, there is no evidence that the wearing-out of friends, loves, and interests is a fundamental part of the human predicament.

I argue that, in fact, there is plausible evidence to the contrary of Ribeiro's claim. Consider the following examples of sources of inexhaustible joys:

1. Competition: The desire to be the best at an activity and maintain one's place on the leader boards is a potentially unending source of a certain kind of pleasure. Imagine a heaven populated with many like-minded individuals who share one's passions and hobbies where healthy competition and improvement in one's own performance never ceases.

Even once one has reached the top and has become the best at an activity, there is a great deal of pleasure that could be had by defending the title from challengers.¹⁰

2. Raising Children: Does it ever get old and boring to see one's offspring mature and flourish in their lives? Our empirical data do not, as Ribeiro claims, obviously suggest that it does. Many parents remain engaged and excited to have a front-row seat to their children's lives and enjoy watching them become flourishing adults. And further, it is not unreasonable to think that a heavenly realm might include the creation of new children. One could enjoy the pleasures of mentoring and raising children into eternity, forever enjoying the flourishing of new beings.
3. Marriage: Many couples who have been married decades and are nearing the end of their lives report a closeness, affection, and companionship that is on an upward trajectory. It is not at all clear that the passing of time would necessarily transform a state of genuine, agapic love into unbearable tedium.
4. Knowing God: On many conceptions of God, God is a person who has profound and perhaps infinite wisdom and goodness and was causally responsible for our existence. Having a deep knowledge of such a being could provide a limitless source of pleasure, fulfilment, and joy for human beings.
5. Friendship and Family: Though strife can arise between friends and family, it is often external circumstances that promote conflict. Presumably, such occasions for strife would be few or non-existent in heaven, and thus there could be an ever-deepening bond between our friends and family.

Of course, some of these examples may or may not be persuasive to the reader.¹¹ Yet, I think these are enough to refute Ribeiro's ambitious claim that our empirical data make the denial of inexhaustible pleasures obvious, and indeed, they serve as a defeater for Williams's argument. Some might worry that even if there are new experiences and adventures to be had within the above categories, repetition of an activity kind will inevitably lead to boredom due to a lack of freshness or newness. Shelly Kagan nicely illustrates this idea:

Or, you go through all the great art museums in the world (or the galaxy) and you say, 'Yes, I've seen dozens of Picassos. I've seen Rembrandts and Van Goghs, and more. I've seen thousands, millions, billions of incredible works of art. I've gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn't there anything new?' And the problem is that there isn't. There are, of course, things that you haven't seen before - but they are not new in a way that can still engage you afresh.¹²

Kagan's point is important. Consider the experience of being engaged in a loving friendship. And now take a moment to consider being in that friendship for decades, centuries, millennia and beyond! Admittedly, there might be particular

experiences along the way that are strictly speaking new, but the entire enterprise might lose its freshness and appeal. The activities in friendship like collaborative efforts, mutual respect and admiration, and unselfish love are played out in various circumstances over and over and over again. Kagan asks us if this is really something that could still engage us and keep us wanting more.

John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin give a resounding yes. They argue that, ‘the richness, beauty, and meaningfulness of friendships and deep personal relationships cannot be reduced to factors that can “run out,” as it were’ (Fischer & Mitchell-Yellin (2014), 359–360). The resources available in these relationships are not the kinds of things that expire or exhaust. It is not entirely clear what it would mean to have harvested all of the beauty or meaning out of a friendship. Yet, this is what one would have to hold if one thought there were no inexhaustible pleasures. What I take to have shown from the above discussion is that inexhaustible pleasures are not conceptually impossible and it is reasonable to think that such pleasures on earth could continue indefinitely in a blissful type of afterlife, if such a thing exists. Not only does this undermine premise 2 in Williams’s argument, it challenges the modal claim in premise 4 – that in all possible worlds where heaven exists, heaven is undesirable. That is, there seem to be possible worlds where certain joys and pleasures are inexhaustible for at least some people. This is enough to render a heavenly existence desirable for those people and undermine Williams’s argument.

Yet, some might worry that not all inexhaustible pleasures are created equal. Some are merely nice to have – that is, including them would certainly make heaven better, but it doesn’t stop being heaven if we don’t have them. However, others are necessary. If people in heaven did not experience them, then a heavenly life would not be desirable. Richard Swinburne offers one such necessary condition:

Above all a good after-life would be one where we can know God the source of all other being, interact with him, and worship him far better than we can on earth, and greatly enjoy doing so, and where this action and all other actions are done in co-operation with others . . . only that sort of life would be worth having forever.¹³

Not only is knowledge and relationship with God an inexhaustible pleasure, but it is a necessary condition for heaven to be a place worth residing in forever. There are two possible implications of Swinburne’s claim: (1) the only inexhaustible pleasures are the God-related ones, and (2) the availability of other inexhaustible pleasures is not sufficient to make heaven desirable. I do not think Swinburne has (1) in mind. He suggests that activities are worth doing forever only if their progression is valuable for its own sake and would take an infinite time to finish. One such set of activities would include the relationships with friends and family, ‘for human well-being consists in growth . . . and to be known and loved by others more and more fully’ (Swinburne (2017), 355). Deepening those love relationships is an intrinsic good and it is not clear that the depths of such

love are finite.¹⁴ So, Swinburne must have in mind (2), that such inexhaustible pleasures, even those of deepening love relationships with others, are not sufficient for heaven's desirability. There is something about the God relationship that would make heaven undesirable were it absent.

I contend that Swinburne is confusing two different ideas: a merely desirable heaven and a best possible version of heaven. Recall, my response to Williams attempts to outline the former idea – that some version of heaven is desirable and immortality would not necessarily lead to unyielding boredom. This is a much lower bar than outlining a best possible blissful-type afterlife. I am open to hearing Swinburne's suggestions about what sort of place that might be. Many theists, including Swinburne, insist that part of human well-being is engaging in a deepening love relationship with God. If we couple this with the idea that the best afterlife would be one where every human's well-being was increased as much as possible, then the best afterlife would include a loving God relationship. This may be true. But it does not follow that any other *lesser* afterlife would be undesirable. Such an existence might still afford people the other inexhaustible pleasures mentioned earlier, and if the pleasures truly are inexhaustible, there is always something desirable worth having. Swinburne is caught in a dilemma: either he admits that only the God-related pleasures are inexhaustible, and we are then in need of an argument for why competition, raising children, marriage, and relationships with friends and family are not potential sources of inexhaustible pleasures, or he claims that these other pleasures are inexhaustible in heaven, but such an existence is undesirable, which betrays some conceptual confusion about what an inexhaustible pleasure is. Fortunately, Swinburne can escape this dilemma by dropping the claim that a loving God relationship is necessary for heaven to be desirable. To be sure, a deepening love relationship with God may be a necessary component of the best possible version of heaven, but this is too strict a condition for mere desirability.

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Notes

1. See Williams (1993).
2. *Ibid.*, 81.
3. Some thinkers point out that it would be *inappropriate* for humans not to get bored of any activity after enough time has passed. See Tanyi & Andric (2017).
4. Williams does not give us a clear presentation of his main argument. This is the most charitable version of it.
5. This avoids the objection that there is a potentially infinite number of activities wherever there are potentially infinite sequences. For instance, one might travel from A to B only in halfway-point increments and count each travel increment as a separate activity. Stipulating that there are *kinds* of activities allows us to lump all of these travel increments into a single kind.
6. See St Paul's discussion of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 to understand the underpinnings of this popular Christian idea.
7. See Bruckner (2012) for a discussion of human ingenuity in this context.
8. Bruckner echoes this concern: 'it would demand too much to require that an eternal life be free of any episodic boredom . . . for we cannot provide a guarantee against chronic boredom even for our finite lives' (Bruckner (2012), 636).
9. See Fischer (1994) for a more detailed account.
10. See the interchange between Wisnewski (2005) and Burley (2009) for a discussion of the merits of this proposed inexhaustible pleasure or, as they put it, 'a re-emerging non-contingent categorical desire'.
11. Some have pointed to our basic drives for thirst, hunger, and sex. Provided that we reside in heaven in some kind of human-like body, satisfying these drives could provide inexhaustible pleasure in virtue of the continued need for satisfaction on these fronts. For further discussion on this, see Lamont (1965).
12. Kagan (2012), 243.
13. Swinburne (2017, 355) mentions a few other necessary conditions, but addressing them would go beyond the scope of the article which is to address Williams's concerns.
14. To be clear, I am not assuming that human relationships can provide inexhaustible pleasures. I am claiming that it is not empirically or conceptually obvious that they can't provide inexhaustible pleasures. This is an open question, and I leave it to the reader to decide whether human love relationships ever become unyieldingly boring.