

In Defence of Inactivity: Boredom, Serenity, and Rest in Heaven

The oldest stories in the world are stories about how man once had just nothing to do, and was as happy as he could be. – Northrop Frye¹

Abstract

“Dynamic” views of heaven are currently popular, in which the blessed spend eternity progressing and developing, as opposed to “static” views, in which they do not. This is, in part, because dynamic views supposedly offer a plausible solution to the “Boredom Problem”, i.e. the claim that, given an infinite amount of time, existence would necessarily become so tedious as to be unbearable. I argue that static views actually deal with this problem more successfully than dynamic views do. I argue that the Boredom Problem itself rests on the assumption that, without activity to keep us interested, we slip into boredom by default. I examine the phenomenon of boredom itself to evaluate that assumption, and argue that it is false. It follows that a person in a state of “serenity” – who desires only to continue as they are – cannot become bored. I relate this to the Christian tradition of conceiving of heaven in terms of rest and inactivity, argue that it is consistent with the claim that the blessed in heaven are embodied, communal, and virtuous (in some sense), and conclude that boredom poses no more problem to this conception of heaven than exhaustion does to the dynamic conception.

heaven; boredom; infinity; desire; rest

Paper

There is a currently fashionable view of life after death, sometimes referred to as the *dynamic* view.² For proponents of this view, life after death is characterised by constant *progression* or change. The blessed in heaven, they say, are constantly advancing in their relationship to God.³ They are not unsatisfied, since every advance brings new closeness to God or understanding of God, but they are never content to rest, because every advance also opens up new directions to follow. They are like mountaineers who, upon scaling a peak with immense satisfaction and sense of achievement, see a new peak rising before them and a new phase of their journey.

This view of heaven goes back to Gregory of Nyssa and his famous doctrine of ἐπέκτασις or constant striving.⁴ And for some recent writers, such as Eric

¹ In Denham (2002: 221)

² In introducing the dynamic view in his edited volume on the topic, Eric Silverman points out that most of his co-authors presuppose such a view. See Silverman (2017: 13-14).

³ Throughout this paper, I use “heaven” in the vernacular sense to refer to the final, eternal destination of those who are saved, whether it be physical or non-physical; and I use “the blessed” to refer to its human occupants.

⁴ See e.g. *Life of Moses* II.239, in Malherbe and Ferguson (1978: 116). On the modern use of Gregory of Nyssa in formulating an answer to the Boredom Problem, see Ludlow (2007: 132-34).

Silverman, this view of heaven is so self-evidently superior to the alternative “static” view – where there is no change or progression at all for the blessed – that they are surprised to find the latter articulated outside the popular sphere at all.⁵

Those who defend the dynamic view do so, in part, because it seems to offer an answer to one of the key problems facing belief in an eternal afterlife: that of boredom.⁶ Given a genuinely infinite amount of time, some argue, people would inevitably become bored to the point of preferring annihilation. Clearly, this Boredom Problem, as I shall refer to it, threatens to undermine the whole point of religion, traditionally conceived. Proponents of the dynamic view of heaven reply that because the blessed are always progressing in their journey into the divine, they enjoy constant novelty and therefore will never become bored. Silverman, for example, writes:

...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.⁷

But while this vision may sound inspiring, on closer inspection it offers very little of substance. We are told that “paradise can be eternally meaningful *because* there is always more that can be known and experienced” of God (my italics). But why would the fact that there is always more of God to experience, in itself, make being with God meaningful? If I am painting a wall, the activity does not become more worthwhile if the wall is infinitely large. And what does it mean to say, as Silverman does here, that God has an “infinitely rich being”? Does God, like Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, have an “infinite variety” that custom cannot stale?⁸ Presumably not in quite the same way – but then what does it consist of? Are there an infinite number of activities we can enjoy with God? Can we talk to God about an infinite variety of subjects? Can God adopt an infinite number of personalities when conversing with us? As soon as we ask questions like this, the shallowness of vague assertions of “infinitely rich being”, without any explanation of what that involves or entails for our interactions with God, becomes apparent.

In this passage, Silverman does hint at some possible explanations. The first is to say that “there is always more union with God to be experienced”.⁹ But this is not

⁵ Silverman (2017: 16).

⁶ Silverman (2017: 13) presents this as the *first* reason for preferring a dynamic view of heaven.

⁷ Silverman (2017: 24)

⁸ *Antony and Cleopatra* Act II scene 2

⁹ Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe offer a similar conception of heaven when they suggest that “through the everlasting years that the blessed spend with God, they are neverendingly coming ever closer to Him, who is Goodness itself, ever clinging more tenaciously to Him” (2009: 418).

very helpful either. Assuming we can give some meaning to the term “union with God” at all, it is very hard to see how it could be the case that there is always *more* union with God to be experienced. The closest kind of union there could be is simple numerical identity. If the blessed are always becoming more and more united to God, and if they are never actually becoming identical with God, then they must presumably approach union with God asymptotically – the closer they get to God, the slower their approach becomes. It is not clear to me why this would be eternally satisfying. On the contrary, it sounds more like the fate of Tantalus.

Silverman also appeals to the “infinite amount of knowledge” of God that the blessed may enjoy. This is a common claim among defenders of the dynamic view of heaven.¹⁰ But this cognitive conception of heaven as consisting of infinite learning does not solve the problem either. *What* exactly will the blessed learn about God? We are never given any details or examples. Classically, God is supposed to be perfectly simple; how can this generate infinite facts about God for the blessed to learn? One might appeal to the fact that God’s unlimited nature means that there are an infinite number of things God can do or know. But while this may be true, it does not follow that an eternity spent enumerating them would be interesting, any more than an eternity spent listing all numbers would be interesting.

Perhaps there are satisfying answers to these questions, and an account can be given of what the blessed would learn about God, why it would take them forever, and why that would remain interesting.¹¹ But no-one, to my knowledge, has provided such an account. Instead, proponents of the dynamic view seem to assume that merely asserting this view, without spelling out its details, is explanation enough. Despite its popularity, then, no version of the dynamic view of heaven yet provided offers a satisfactory answer to the Boredom Problem.

I argue instead that the much-maligned static view of heaven offers a superior answer to the Boredom Problem. The answer can be summarised like this. Proponents of the Boredom Problem claim that there is no activity, or set of activities, which could remain interesting for an infinite duration. Proponents of dynamic views of heaven reply by trying to identify an activity, or set of activities, which *could* remain interesting for an infinite duration – normally by appealing in some way to the infinity of God. But an alternative, and in my view superior, strategy is to accept that no such activity, or set of activities, exists – but to reject the assumption that, in their absence, boredom must set in. In this

¹⁰ See e.g. Vaughan (1922: 73); Vardy (1995: 23-24); Ward (1998: 309); Jenson (1999: 354-55); Brown (2000: 122); Pawl and Timpe (2017: 99); Swinburne (2017: 355). The idea that *learning* is an essential element of heaven is so entrenched that Jonathan Kvanvig argues that a major problem with the beatific vision, as traditionally conceived, is that it would make the blessed omniscient and therefore there would be “nothing left to learn” (2017: 64).

¹¹ Perhaps one way of doing this would be to take the knowledge gained by the blessed to be personal, rather than propositional. Ted Poston (2017) and Jonathan Kvanvig (2017: 71-77), both building on the work of Eleanore Stump (2010: 39-63), have developed such a view of knowledge in heaven, but in response to quite different problems. Whether it could form the basis of an adequate response to the Boredom Problem remains to be seen.

paper, I do this by examining the Boredom Problem in more detail and showing how it rests upon an assumed principle, which I call Boredom By Default (BBD). I then consider the nature of boredom itself and its causes, concluding that the Boredom By Default principle is false (or, at best, only contingently true). I build upon this discussion to develop an alternative concept of heaven as marked by *serenity* instead, which could never become boring, even if there were no activity at all. I argue that this concept is deeply embedded in the Christian conception of heaven as eternal *rest*.

Boredom by default

Contemporary treatments of the Boredom Problem usually begin with Bernard Williams' much-discussed 1973 paper on the subject. In that paper, Williams presented an argument which might be summarised like this:

- (1) A state of boredom, continued indefinitely, would eventually become intolerable.
- (2) There is only a finite number of kinds of activities a person can engage in.
- (3) To be meaningful, immortality must involve stability of character.
- (4) Given enough time, any set of activities will become boring to a person who has stability of character.
- (5) Therefore, any meaningful immortal existence would eventually become intolerable.

But I suggest that there is another, suppressed premise, which not only Williams himself but most of his critics have taken for granted. This is:

(SP) Given enough time, a *lack* of activity will become boring to a person who has stability of character.

Once stated, the necessity of this premise for the argument to work is clear. Williams assumes that the blessed *must engage in some activity or other*, either because an activity-less state is impossible, or because it would be boring. This suppressed premise derives its plausibility from a more fundamental principle, which I will call Boredom By Default (BBD):

BBD: our default state is one of boredom.

If BBD is true, then human beings have an overall tendency to become bored, rather as Aristotle thought that objects in motion have a tendency to come to a standstill unless actively kept in motion by something else. Boredom, on this view, is our natural resting state, to which we inevitably return – against our desires – unless something actively prevents us. So to avoid becoming bored, we must constantly act to keep life interesting. For some, such a task is impossible. Lars Svendsen, for example, describes boredom as “life’s own gravity”, exerting a pull that can never be fully resisted.¹²

¹² Svendsen (2005: 154)

For those who, like Svendsen, hold BBD, the natural question to ask concerning heaven – or any prolonged situation – is: what will we do to avoid becoming bored? In the absence of a satisfactory answer to that question, they conclude that boredom is unavoidable.

But if BBD is false, then the fact that there seems to be no activity that would prevent the blessed from becoming bored does not entail that they *will* become bored. If BBD is false, then a person who is in a non-bored state might continue in that non-bored state even in the absence of anything to keep her in it, just as, in Newtonian physics, an object in motion will remain in motion unless something stops it.

We can see how BBD underlies Williams' version of the Boredom Problem by analysing the structure of his argument more deeply. He argues for premise (4) – the claim that, given enough time, any activity will become boring – by appealing to the notion of “categorical desires”. These are desires which are not conditional upon remaining alive – rather, they are the desires in virtue of which we want to remain alive, in order to fulfil them.¹³ Williams introduces this concept in the first (and less discussed) part of his paper, where his target is Lucretius' claim that we have no reason to fear death. As long as we have categorical desires, Williams contends, we do have such a reason, because we want to live in order to see these desires fulfilled. But in the second part of the paper, where his target is the opposite claim that we should want to avoid death indefinitely, Williams tells us that a person who lacks categorical desires will not want to remain alive. Williams speaks, for example, of a man's need “for categorical desire to keep him going, and to resist the desire for death”.¹⁴

This is an illegitimate shift. Williams has argued in the first part of the paper that having categorical desires is *sufficient* to wish to remain alive; he assumes in the second part that having categorical desires is *necessary* to wish to remain alive. But clearly, even if it is true that having categorical desires would cause one to want to remain alive, it does not follow that lacking categorical desires would cause one to want to die.

In the line quoted above, Williams assumes that there is a desire for death lurking beneath our other desires, and once our categorical desires have been fulfilled, this morbid wish will take over and we will want our own destruction. This is an example of BBD, framed here in terms of “the desire for death”. Later in the paper, Williams speaks explicitly of boredom in similar terms, as when he asks what features of heaven “would stave off... boredom”.¹⁵ The assumption that boredom is something that must be “staved off” – that in the absence of some answer to the question *what* will stave it off, boredom is inevitable – rests upon BBD.¹⁶

¹³ Williams (1973: 86)

¹⁴ Williams (1973: 91)

¹⁵ Williams (1973: 94)

¹⁶ The very language of “staving off” boredom is revealing, suggesting as it does that boredom is constantly waiting to engulf us and must be constantly fought. The “staving off” language is found

Williams' discussion of categorical desires has come under heavy fire, but his critics all seem to agree with his acceptance of BBD, or at least to leave it unremarked and unchallenged. For example, Donald Bruckner argues that even in an immortal life, there could be unending variety of activity, because in an infinite stretch of time new kinds of activities could come into being.¹⁷ But he does not question the assumption that activity is required to avoid boredom in the first place. J. Jeremy Wisnewski, similarly, argues that even if one's categorical desires were all to be exhausted, one might still avoid fatal boredom because they could be reignited by external circumstances. One might have a desire to master every existing musical instrument, but even after this is achieved, new ones might always be invented.¹⁸ Burley rejects this argument on the grounds that any desire that could be rekindled in such a way would be an intrinsically shallow one, the pursuit of which would become boring anyway, and which cannot be considered a categorical desire.¹⁹ But again, both Wisnewski and Burley seem to agree with each other and with Williams that categorical desires are the only thing standing between the blessed and boredom. They focus on the problem of whether the blessed will run out of categorical desires, but do not question the assumption that, without categorical desires, the blessed will necessarily become bored.

But is this true? Should we grant Williams' assumption of BBD? To answer that we need to consider what boredom itself really is.

The nature of boredom

Much has been written on boredom, from multiple disciplines. But there is a bewildering lack of agreement about its nature. Authors on boredom cannot even agree on how prevalent it is. For some, especially in the tradition of continental philosophy, boredom is a fundamental human experience that transcends time and culture. Kierkegaard famously declared boredom to be "the root of all evil",²⁰ while Heidegger rhetorically asked, "Do things ultimately stand in such a way with us that a profound boredom draws back and forth like a silent fog in the abysses of Dasein?"²¹ Some commentators find boredom, or closely related concepts, to be a perennial literary concern in both the ancient and medieval worlds.²² But for others, it is a uniquely modern, western phenomenon, unheard of before the industrial revolution and the modern concept of leisure.²³

elsewhere in the literature on this subject, reflecting a general assumption of BBD. See, for example, Bruckner (2012: 632, 633); Hallett (2001: 286).

¹⁷ Bruckner (2012: 632-34)

¹⁸ Wisnewski (2005: 33-34)

¹⁹ Burley (2009)

²⁰ Kierkegaard (1987: 286)

²¹ Heidegger (1995: 77). On Heidegger and boredom, see Thiele (1997).

²² Kuhn (1976); Toohey (1988: 151); Thiele (1997: 491)

²³ For a list of examples of this approach, see Musharbash (2007: 208).

It is common for writers on boredom to point out both the difficulty of defining the term²⁴ and the vast range of feelings and experiences that it covers.²⁵ A number of authors comment that “boredom” can refer to both a trivial, transitory experience, such as the temporary dullness of an over-long sermon, and something much more profound and long-term, such as the unalleviated existential horror of a meaningless life.²⁶ Nicholas Lombardo, however, claims that the term “boredom” and its derivatives seem to be used univocally no matter what the context. As he puts it, “we talk about finding a conversation boring in the same way that we talk about finding our lives boring”.²⁷ If this is correct – as I think it is – then the difference between trivial, temporary boredom on the one hand and profound, long-term boredom on the other is one of degree, not of kind – rather like the difference between temporary and chronic pain.²⁸

But if “boredom” always refers to the same kind of experience, what precisely is it? Elizabeth Goodstein called it “experience without qualities”,²⁹ but while this captures nicely both the difficulty of describing boredom and its monotonous nature, it cannot be literally true or we could say nothing about boredom at all. At the very least, boredom has the quality of being unpleasant.

A common denominator to the various available theories of boredom is a sense of disconnection with the external environment. We often associate being bored with having nothing to do, but it is perfectly possible to be bored while there is plenty to do, if the only activities available are unattractive.³⁰ Indeed, for Orrin Klapp, boredom comes from having too *much* to do, not too little.³¹ Consequently, Sandi Mann and Andrew Robinson plausibly suggest that boredom is a matter “of having nothing to do *that one likes*”, which causes a lack of stimulation, leading to “low arousal and dissatisfaction”.³² This dissatisfaction leads the bored person to become less responsive to what stimulation there is.³³ As a result, there is a vicious cycle: the bored person, rendered unresponsive to the world, engages less with it, and consequently becomes still more bored and still more unresponsive.³⁴

Some commentators link the concept of boredom to that of “meaning”: boredom is what is experienced in the absence of meaning.³⁵ Lombardo argues that that does not mean that the bored person ascribes to some theory about the meaningless of life; a cheerful nihilist might find life interesting, and a depressed

²⁴ Kuhn (1976: 5); Musharbash (2007: 307)

²⁵ Lombardo (2011: 262); Brissett and Snow (1993: 238)

²⁶ Kuhn (1976: 5-6).

²⁷ Lombardo (2011: 263). See also Kuhn (1976: 6), who cites Sartre as using the term “ennui” to refer to both “the emotion that caused Roquentin’s nausea and... the bother of having to locate a book in the library”.

²⁸ For more on this, see below, pp. 9-10.

²⁹ Goodstein (2005: 1)

³⁰ Raposa (1985: 76)

³¹ Klapp (1986)

³² Mann and Robinson (2009: 243), italics original

³³ Wangh (1975: 538)

³⁴ Thiele (1997: 492) cites Hamlet as an example of this boredom-idleness-boredom cycle.

³⁵ E.g. Raposa (1985: 76); Svendsen (2005: 29-30); Lombardo (2011: 263)

theist might find it boring.³⁶ If this is correct – as it surely is – then we will not understand boredom through an analysis of what the “meaning” of life is.³⁷ Rather, the “meaninglessness” of which the bored person complains is a quality of their experience:

When people say that they find life boring, they are not saying that they have come to the conclusion that life as such has no meaning, no significance, and no purpose. What they are saying is that nothing engages them about life. Their deeper desires somehow fail to latch on to anything that presents itself to their consciousness.³⁸

What are these “deeper desires”? Dennis Brissett and Robert Snow offer an important insight here by focusing on their social and future-oriented nature. For them, boredom is “an experience of the absence of momentum or flow in a person’s life”.³⁹ They liken life to a dance, where the rhythm carries the dancers on from the present into the future. If an individual becomes out of synch with this rhythm, she loses the “flow” and the sense of progression into the future. Alternatively, the individual may be in synch with the dance, but lack any sense of “personal stake or direction” over where it is going.⁴⁰ In such a case, she lacks “intention, choice, and purpose”.⁴¹

On this view, both kinds of boredom – that caused by lacking flow, and that caused by having no personal stake in the flow – are a matter of how the individual *interacts* with the world and, in particular, the rest of human society. To claim one is bored is not simply to report a certain interior feeling – it is “an emphatic complaint of being rendered nonsocial”.⁴² We may note that it is difficult to be bored when one feels part of a social group, even when it is mutual boredom that binds the group together. The most boring lecture, for example, becomes paradoxically less boring when one realises that everyone else is bored by it as well, and consequently feels affinity with them. This antagonism between boredom and sociability has another side to it: a complaint of boredom may be a deliberate distancing of oneself from society, an act of aggression or superiority.⁴³ For the aesthete, to declare oneself bored is to elevate oneself above the common horde and their mundane concerns.⁴⁴

Brissett and Snow’s analysis also helps to explain another feature of boredom, highlighted by Martin Wagh: its relation to the sense of time. He points out that the German word for boredom, *Langeweile*, literally means “long while”.⁴⁵ To be

³⁶ Lombardo (2011: 263)

³⁷ For a useful survey of such analyses, see Metz (2002).

³⁸ Lombardo (2011: 264)

³⁹ Brissett and Snow (1993: 238)

⁴⁰ Brissett and Snow (1993: 239)

⁴¹ Brissett and Snow (1993: 240)

⁴² Brissett and Snow (1993: 241)

⁴³ Brissett and Snow (1993: 241-42). Kuhn (1976: 12-13) expresses a similar idea when he argues that “ennui” is characterised by estrangement. We may also connect this anti-social aspect of boredom to its well-known negative effects on society – see Svendsen (2005: 16-17).

⁴⁴ Think, for example, of the veiled aggression of Gwendoline’s claim, made “in a bored manner”, that “Cake is rarely seen at the best houses nowadays,” when offered some, in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act II.

⁴⁵ Wagh (1975: 540)

bored is, in part, to experience “a disturbance in the sense of time”.⁴⁶ For the bored person, time drags; there is no sense of progression into the future, only an endless present. As Evagrius Ponticus famously put it, the sun seems to have stopped in the sky.⁴⁷ We can understand this as a symptom of the loss of “flow” and with it any sense of purposeful movement through time. Time still passes, but it is not going anywhere.

Drawing together these different threads, we can say that boredom has the following features:

- (1) It arises from incongruity between a person’s deeper desires – relating particularly to her role in society and sense of future orientation – and her actual situation.⁴⁸
- (2) It is characterised by a sense of “meaninglessness”, a lack of stimulation, and a feeling of endless present rather than progression into the future.
- (3) It leads to psychological withdrawal from the social world.
- (4) It is self-perpetuating: the more bored one is, the more bored one is likely to become.

What I have called “incongruity” in (1) needs careful explanation. It does not mean simply that the sufferer’s situation differs from how she would like it to be. That, in itself, does not generate boredom. On the contrary, it often generates interest. Whether it be organising a political protest or buying new furniture, the kind of activity undertaken to try to bring the world into closer alignment with one’s desires can be extremely engaging. Rather, “incongruity” means that (a) the world does not match one’s desires, *and* (b) there seems to be no way to bring it closer to matching one’s desires. The sufferer of boredom feels unable to do anything about her situation – either because of her own powerlessness or because she perceives nothing in the external world that provides an opportunity to act to improve things. The political protester, by contrast, sees a world that does not match her desires, but she also sees ways she can act to try to improve it, and becomes engaged as a result. For her, there is “congruity” between her desires and the external world, even though they differ.

Together, these features help to explain why boredom can, in some cases, become so profound. (1) tells us that it has its roots in incongruity between deeper desire and reality; but sometimes we do not know what our deeper desires are. In such cases, when we literally do not know what we want out of life, we cannot do anything about it, and so we inevitably experience incongruity, and consequently boredom. As Lars Svendsen puts it:

⁴⁶ Wangh (1975: 541), quoting Peter Hartocollis

⁴⁷ *Praktikos* 12, in Bamberger (1981: 18-19).

⁴⁸ Boredom, then, is not quite the same thing as the “ennui” Kuhn examines, since he regards this as coming from within the individual and has nothing to do with external circumstances. See Kuhn (1976: 12). We can express this by saying that boredom always has an object – one is bored *with* something, even if it is as non-specific as the current situation as a whole. Also note that our definition makes boredom the precise opposite of “enjoyment”, as defined by Richard Swinburne as being in a situation where one’s desires *do* match the circumstances. See Swinburne (2017: 350).

Boredom normally arises when we cannot do what we want to do, or have to do something we do not want to do. But what about when we have no idea of what we want to do, when we have lost the capacity to get our bearings in life? Then we can find ourselves in a profound boredom that is reminiscent of a lack of willpower, because the will cannot get a firm grip anywhere.⁴⁹

If our analysis is correct, this “profound boredom” is not a fundamentally different kind of experience from everyday boredom. It is simply long-term boredom, exacerbated not only by the self-perpetuating nature of all boredom but by the sufferer’s inability to act to achieve her desires because she does not know what they are. Sometimes, as Svendsen argues, the bored person does not realise she is bored until afterwards, so ingrained has the experience become.⁵⁰

This is the kind of chronic, profound boredom that, according to Williams, would inevitably beset the blessed in heaven and cause them, eventually, to prefer annihilation. But we can now see that “profound boredom” has two root causes: first, incongruity, and second, ignorance. It is because the bored person’s desires lack congruity with reality that she becomes bored, and it is because she does not know what her desires are that she remains bored.

This strongly suggests that BDD is false. If boredom has a specific cause, then in the absence of that cause, boredom will not arise. We do not necessarily need something to interest us if we are to avoid becoming bored. It is, of course, a fact of life that we generally *do* become bored if there is nothing to interest us – but this is a contingent fact, not a necessary one. It is true only because we do, as a matter of fact, desire something to occupy our attention. In particular, we desire to do something purposive that we can envisage progressing into the future. But it is not a necessary truth that we have such a desire. We can see this if we imagine the case of a person with no desires at all, not even subconscious ones. Such a person is, perhaps, conceptually possible, even if one has never actually existed. But it is hard to see how such a person could become bored at all. If boredom arises from incongruity between desire and circumstance, then a person with no desires can never experience that incongruity. Even in the absence of anything to interest her, she will not become bored.

BDD, then, is not necessarily true. It may be contingently true, at least for most of us most of the time. Some of our desires are such that if we cannot act in certain ways we will experience incongruity, and boredom results. But even if this is the case, it is not necessarily the case. We might not have had those desires.

Desire and serenity

If BDD is not true, Williams’ argument falls apart. There is no reason to grant him his suppressed premise:

⁴⁹ Svendsen (2005: 19)

⁵⁰ Svendsen (2005: 119-21)

(SP) Given enough time, a *lack* of activity will become boring to a person who has stability of character.

It is perfectly possible for a person to have stability of character without becoming bored if that person has no desires. But this may not seem to be enough to overcome the Boredom Problem. If the only way to ensure that the blessed are not bored is to deprive them of all desire, does this not strip away their humanity? Would anyone *want* to exist in a state with no desire at all?

These objections are strong, but there are other ways around this problem. Boredom, as we have seen, comes about from incongruity between desire and reality: we want to fulfil our desires, but if we are in a situation where this is impossible, we become frustrated. If, conversely, all of our desires were to become fulfilled, we might not become bored, but we might cease to be recognisably human. But there is a third possibility, because desires are not restricted to the two states of fulfilled and unfulfilled.

Many of our desires are desires to achieve something. Once it is achieved, the desire goes away. For example, I might desire to win the lottery. Once I have won it, I no longer have such a desire; it has been satisfied and extinguished no matter what happens in the future. But other desires are not so easily satisfied. Suppose I desire not merely to win the lottery but to remain a millionaire. As long as I am a millionaire, there is a sense in which the desire is satisfied. But it remains satisfied only for as long as I remain a millionaire. If I lose my money, the desire is frustrated.

Call such a desire a *stability desire*. Stability desires are not like those desires that Aristotle puzzled about, such as the desire for one's children to be successful, which cannot be satisfied while one lives.⁵¹ My desire to remain a millionaire *is* satisfied for as long as I retain my money. But it is not thereby extinguished.

We can imagine a person who has desires, but the only desires she has are stability desires. Call such a state one of perfect *serenity*. Provided her situation does not change in any relevant way, a serene person cannot become bored. That incongruence between desire and circumstance which is essential for boredom can never arise. And unlike the case of the person with no desires at all, the serene person does seem conceivable. She certainly has desires, but they are all desires to remain as she is, not desires for something new, and they are therefore continuously satisfied by the maintenance of the current situation.⁵²

Clearly, this state of perfect serenity would be happy. It might, on the face of it, sound boring – but if so, this is because we non-serene people often feel a desire for change and activity. The bored millionaire is bored precisely because,

⁵¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100a. On this topic, see Solomon (1976).

⁵² For simplicity's sake I assume throughout here that "serenity" involves having *only* stability desires, but provided that enough of a person's most fundamental desires are stability desires, perhaps she could still be immune to boredom even if she also has some non-stability desires. If this is so then total serenity may not be necessary for immunity to boredom, but it is surely sufficient. I am grateful to Tim Mawson for raising this point.

subconsciously, she does not want to lead the life she thinks she is enjoying. But this does not apply to the serene person, whose subconscious desires are perfectly aligned with her current situation.

If the argument so far is correct, then we can say, first, that a serene person is conceptually possible; and, second, that a serene person cannot be bored. If divine omnipotence includes the ability to bring about any conceptually possible situation, it seems that God could see to it that the blessed in heaven *are* serene, and therefore that they do not become bored. As a solution to the Boredom Problem, however, this is somewhat empty. In themselves, not all stability desires are desires we would think it *worth* having for all eternity. The man whose sole desire is to stare at the wall will, when provided with the wall, avoid boredom indefinitely – but it does not follow that he is experiencing heavenly bliss, or even that he is particularly happy, or that we would envy him.⁵³

In response to this, we can point out that it is one thing to address the Boredom Problem, quite another to give a description of heaven. If, by ensuring that the blessed have only stability desires, God can see to it that they never become bored, then the Boredom Problem has been overcome – irrespective of precisely *which* stability desires they have. But our account would be more satisfying if we could go beyond this and consider what stability desires they could be, and also what the blessed are supposed to *do* for eternity in their serenity, and how this relates to the religious life on earth.

Fortunately, the Christian tradition contains resources to sketch a possible answer to these questions. It is not a great over-simplification to say that all Christian spiritual writing is intended to help people diminish their desire for created things and increase their desire for God alone. Evagrius Ponticus – cited throughout the boredom literature as one of the first writers to analyse the problem – believed that the purpose of the ascetic lifestyle was to extinguish “the flames of desire”.⁵⁴ This, he thought, would result in *apatheia*, or passionlessness. But *apatheia* was not, for Evagrius, the absence of all desire. It brought about *agape*, or love. Evagrius could, accordingly, write that “*agape* is the daughter of *apatheia*”.⁵⁵ The monk who followed Evagrius’ instructions would find his desires for material things fading away, and his desire for God increasing. This, for Evagrius, was the definitive way to defeat the demon of *acedie*.

Evagrius was just one author in a wider tradition of Christian spirituality that drew, ultimately, on Platonism as much as on the Bible. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, sees the spiritual journey as one of increasing desire for God.⁵⁶ For Augustine, God draws people to him through Christ,⁵⁷ but this is a gradual process in which people’s love for God is kindled and nourished. As Augustine illustrates in his own anguished cry – “I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at

⁵³ I am grateful (again) to Tim Mawson for this point and example.

⁵⁴ Bamberger (1981: 15, 29)

⁵⁵ Bamberger (1981: 81, 84)

⁵⁶ *Life of Moses* II.231-32, in Malherbe and Ferguson (1978: 114-15)

⁵⁷ *Tractates on John’s Gospel* 26.4

once so ancient and so new!”⁵⁸ – the desire for God is something that must increase gradually throughout a person’s life.

Suppose we adopt this conception of the spiritual journey as consisting of cultivating the desire for God, and reducing other desires. It would be reasonable to think that the destination of that journey is a state in which desire for God is maximised and other desires are wholly absent, or as absent as it is possible to be. Such a person would wish only to remain in the presence of God. If that person was actually in the presence of God, her desire to remain there would be a stability desire, and she would be in a state of serenity.⁵⁹ On this view, the state of the blessed in heaven is quite different from their state on earth, but heaven is the culmination of the earthly journey.⁶⁰ And one might add that, to the degree that a person feels both the desire for God and the presence of God in her earthly life, she is participating in a foretaste of heaven.

Inactivity and rest

We have a picture of heaven in which the blessed serenely desire to be in God’s presence and this desire is eternally fulfilled. But what would they actually do?

As we have seen, much of the literature on heaven and the Boredom Problem revolves around trying to identify some activity which could never become boring. I have argued that this is a mistaken strategy. We have already seen that BBD is false, and that if the blessed are serene – having only stability desires – they will not become bored. If this is so then we do not need to assume that they will be engaging in any activity at all. If the desire of the blessed is for God alone, then they wish only to remain in God’s presence. And if they *are* in God’s presence, they are supremely happy. Their desire is satisfied as long as they remain in God’s presence, and they are assured, moreover, that this state of affairs will continue.

It is important to note that this does not require that the blessed exist in some kind of timeless state.⁶¹ There are a number of reasons why a timeless view of

⁵⁸ *Confessions* 10.27, in Pine-Coffin (2012: 231)

⁵⁹ It need not be the case that all the blessed have their desire for God maximised. Presumably all of them desire God, but some might desire God more than others. Thomas Aquinas envisages precisely this situation (ST q. 12 a. 6) when he argues that the blessed have varying degrees of charity, and therefore varying degrees of desire for God, and they all perceive God to the degree that they desire God. This seems to be exactly the kind of stability desire I am discussing. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *TheoLogica* for pointing this out. We may also say that if desire for God can vary in this way, then there is variety among the blessed – they are not all exactly the same as each other, which also seems to be a desirable conclusion.

⁶⁰ This provides an answer to the question: if, in heaven, the blessed have only the desire for God, will they not be fundamentally different from us here on earth? Does this not raise problems of personal identity and continuity? If, however, we conceive of the state of perfect desire for God as a culmination of a growing desire that develops throughout a person’s earthly life, and which they may wish to nurture, as Augustine did, the problem dissolves. I am grateful to Robin LePoidevin for raising this issue.

⁶¹ Silverman (2017: 17) portrays all “static” views of heaven as incorporating the idea that heaven is atemporal, but this is not accurate.

heaven is not plausible.⁶² Certainly a period of time in which nothing happens would be very different from time as we experience it now, but it would not be true timelessness of the kind that God is classically supposed to experience. It might, perhaps, be something like the state Richard Swinburne has attributed to God before creation. For Swinburne, God is temporal, but since no events occurred before creation, God existed at that time in a state very unlike the temporality we experience. In fact, “no period of God’s existence would have been of any particular length, finite or infinite”.⁶³ It is at least conceivable that something like this could apply to the blessed: they are temporal, but lacking change, they experience time very differently from us, and their time in heaven cannot be assigned any particular length.

The notion that heaven is a place of contemplation of God is, of course, deeply embedded within the Christian tradition. It is effectively the “beatific vision” described by Thomas Aquinas and others: a state in which the blessed enjoy God, fully and perfectly.⁶⁴ But the version of this view that I am sketching here, where the blessed may enjoy God’s presence without engaging in any activity, has especially striking similarities to the Orthodox spiritual tradition, with its strong tradition of conceiving the spiritual life as involving stillness in the face of God, as expressed in silent prayer. Theophan the Recluse, for example, stated that “The principal thing is to stand before God with the intellect in the heart, and to go on standing before him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life.”⁶⁵ Kallistos Ware comments that this illustrates how, for the Orthodox spiritual tradition,

to pray is to *stand before God* – not necessarily to ask for things or even to speak in words but to enter into a personal relationship with God, a meeting “face to face,” which at its most profound is expressed not in speech but in silence... It should constitute not so much something that we *do* from time to time as something that we *are* all the time.⁶⁶

The spiritual practices associated with the Orthodox tradition, such as the use of the Jesus Prayer and the breathing techniques of hesychast mysticism, are intended to facilitate this. For the follower of these practices, the verbal repetition of the prayer and the somatic rhythms produce a non-cognitive, non-discursive prayerful state in which she contemplates the divine without words, images, or activity.⁶⁷

⁶² This topic lies outside the scope of this paper, but see Hallett (2001, 280-81), who considers the claim that heaven is atemporal (and therefore cannot become boring) and rejects it. In my view Hallett’s arguments are decisive. There is also no room here for a proper consideration of the related notion that heaven is of finite duration, but approached asymptotically via a series of infinitesimal intervals. Suffice to say, for now, that I am not convinced that this solves the problem because it does not tell us what it is *like* to experience such a heaven. It would surely have to be experienced either *as if* it were of infinite duration, or *as if* it were of finite duration. On the former, the problem of boredom remains. On the latter, the concept of an eternal afterlife is undermined entirely. (I am grateful to Mark Wynn for raising this suggestion.)

⁶³ Swinburne (2016: 230)

⁶⁴ ST Supp. q 92

⁶⁵ Quoted by Ware (1985: 395)

⁶⁶ Ware (1985: 395), italics original

⁶⁷ See e.g. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines etc.* 2, in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1995: 264)

Gregory of Sinai, one of the most important authors in this tradition, emphasises its difficulty and the need for adherents to work hard. The hesychast monk does not lead a life of inactivity: he must toil to focus his mind on prayer.⁶⁸ But Gregory also makes it clear that this hard work is not eternal. Its goal is to produce a state of “stillness”, which is the key to the vision of God:

In whatever work we engage patience gives birth to courage, courage to commitment, commitment to perseverance, and perseverance to an increase in the work done. Such additional labor quells the body’s dissolute impulses and checks the desire for sensual indulgence. Thus checked, desire gives rise to spiritual longing, longing to love, love to aspiration, aspiration to ardor, ardor to self-galvanizing, self-galvanizing to assiduousness, assiduousness to prayer, and prayer to stillness. Stillness gives birth to contemplation, contemplation to spiritual knowledge, and knowledge to the apprehension of the mysteries.⁶⁹

This state of stillness cannot be perfect in this life, but it will be in the next life, when, according to Gregory, human beings will gain “immutability” in a “state of *changeless* deification”.⁷⁰

We now have the resources to reply to one of the arguments in favour of the dynamic view of heaven.⁷¹ This argument can be summarised like this:

- (1) The life of the blessed in heaven should be similar in form to life on earth.
- (2) Life on earth is characterised by activity, work, and development.
- (3) Therefore, the life of the blessed in heaven should be characterised by activity, work, and development.

But for writers such as Theophan and Gregory, premise (1) is false. Although they agree that the spiritual life is characterised by hard work, they hold that this hard work has a purpose beyond itself. If the religious devotee finds that her spiritual labour yields results, and she grows in understanding and devotion to God, this is not because the labour itself constitutes spiritual growth or devotion. Rather, it is only a means to an end, and ultimately the labour will cease, having achieved its end.

The sixth-century hermit Barsanuphius of Gaza illustrated this when he wrote: “When you arrive at the point of stillness, then you shall find rest with grace”.⁷² This connection between stillness and rest is significant, because it fits with the common conception of heaven as eternal rest. Jürgen Moltmann articulates a similar idea when he states that he believes “that God’s history with our lives will go on after our deaths, until that completion has been reached in which a soul finds rest”.⁷³ And this aspiration to rest is found throughout popular piety and

⁶⁸ See e.g. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines etc.* 14, in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1995: 272-73), my italics

⁶⁹ *Further Texts* 5, in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1995: 254)

⁷⁰ *On Commandments and Doctrines etc.* 8, in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1995: 213) (my italics)

⁷¹ Arguments of this form can be found – implicitly or explicitly – in Silverman (2017: 27) and Swinburne (2017: 355-56).

⁷² *Letter* 789, quoted in Chryssavgis (2012: 267)

⁷³ Moltmann (2001: 66)

liturgy. We do not usually hope that the dead find eternal activity; we do not inscribe *agat in pace* on gravestones. Consider the prayer of John Henry Newman:

Support us, O Lord,
All the day long of this life,
Until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
The busy world is hushed
And the fever of life is done.
Then, Lord, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging,
A holy rest, and peace at the last.⁷⁴

Josef Staudinger, similarly, writes:

Heaven is the great haven of rest when this life is over. The river of time that ran its chequered course amid anguish and suffering, care and worry, has now flowed into the region of eternal calm. A deep peace, gentle, inexpressibly sweet, possesses the soul, a peace such as the world cannot give and which the soul can enjoy only by being absorbed by the ocean of peace which is God himself, to be folded for ever in its embrace... It is the great sabbatical rest of God into which the soul has entered; for "he that is entered into his rest, the same hath rested from his works, as God did from his" (Hebr. 4, 10).⁷⁵

Some have tried to reconcile this language with a dynamic view of heaven. For example, Henry Eyster Jacobs tells us that the language of rest refers only to "the toil and trouble of this life", and does not mean an end to progress and change.⁷⁶ But as we have seen, there is no need for such an assumption, because the happiness of the blessed can be secured without it.

Three objections

But is *happiness* sufficient? There are three elements to the heavenly life which, it might be argued, the view developed here cannot accommodate. These are its bodily nature, its communal aspect, and the need for virtue.

One objection to conceptions of heaven based on the beatific vision is that they offer no role for the body, which seems not to be required simply to contemplate the divine beauty for eternity. But Christian orthodoxy has always held that the blessed will enjoy a bodily existence.⁷⁷ Thus we find Aquinas arguing that the souls of the departed can enjoy the beatific vision fully before being reunited with their bodies, while also insisting, rather feebly, that union with the body is still necessary for perfect happiness because this is the natural state of the soul.⁷⁸ The problem might be thought worse for a conception of heaven that involves no activity on the part of the blessed – if they do nothing, they have even less need for a body.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ from "Wisdom and Innocence", *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*

⁷⁵ Staudinger (1964: 128, 130)

⁷⁶ Quoted in Silverman (2017: 18)

⁷⁷ See e.g. Morreall (1980: 33-34)

⁷⁸ ST I-ii, q. 4 aa. 5-6. See Trabbic (2011: 558-63)

⁷⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *TheoLogica* for raising this objection.

I do not think this is a very strong objection, because it could equally well apply to dynamic conceptions of heaven. If it is possible to contemplate God without a body, it is presumably just as possible to grow in knowledge and wisdom about God without a body too. There is nothing inconsistent about supposing that the blessed can persist in a state of serene inactivity *with* a body, even if it is true that such a state does not *require* a body, and so there is nothing here at odds with Christian orthodoxy. More strongly, we might say that the objection assumes that disembodied existence is possible at all, which is controversial. Perhaps it is not possible, in which case the blessed will require bodies if they are to exist in any state, whether active or not.⁸⁰

The second objection is that heaven is supposed to be communal. Consider, for example, the depiction of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22. But an eternity spent doing nothing does not require the participation of others, removing any role for community in the heavenly life.⁸¹

I do not think it is correct to think that a purely passive experience is unaltered by sharing it with others. Most people prefer to go to the cinema or the theatre in company, even though they may not do anything during the performance, even speak to their companions – at least if they have good manners. The mere fact that the experience is shared with others enhances it. Perhaps this could apply to heaven as well. If so, we might modify the stability desires of the blessed: perhaps they desire not merely to be in the presence of God, but to be in the presence of God *together with others*. It would, after all, be reasonable for the blessed to want other people to enjoy perfect happiness as well. Such a stability desire would require the communal aspect to remain fulfilled.

The most serious objection to this view of heaven, though, is that we would normally want to say that the blessed are virtuous. Following both Augustine and Aquinas, Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe broadly define *virtues* as “dispositions of individuals by means of which they act well”.⁸² If the blessed never act, then they cannot have such dispositions and cannot be thought virtuous.

One might respond by pointing out that a virtuous person is still virtuous even when asleep. A person does not have to be exercising a virtue, or even doing anything at all, to be considered virtuous, because the disposition to act virtuously persists. But a person who is asleep retains that disposition because she might wake up and exercise it. We would be less inclined to call a person in an irreversible coma virtuous, because she has lost that disposition. Similarly, if the blessed are permanently resting, they will never be disposed to act virtuously.

⁸⁰ Morreall (1980: 34) considers and rejects this response, on the grounds that Christian eschatology requires it to be possible for a person’s soul, as her identity-bearer, to exist without the body. Certainly Christian *tradition* supposes this but I do not think it as essential to Christian *orthodoxy* as Morreall claims.

⁸¹ I am grateful to Andrew Roberts, as well as to an anonymous reviewer for *TheoLogica*, for raising this objection.

⁸² Pawl and Timpe (2017: 98)

Nevertheless, we can think of dispositions modally. Even a person who is unable to act can meaningfully be said to have certain dispositions to act in the sense that she *would* act in such a way if she were able. If a virtuous person and a vicious person are both lying in irreversible comas, they may be equally incapable of practising virtue and vice – but we nevertheless would recognise that, if they were able to act, they would not act similarly.

By way of illustration, consider whether *God* should be called virtuous. Aquinas comments that virtues associated with the will, such as justice, can be ascribed to God, but others – such as political virtues, and temperance, fortitude, and meekness – cannot.⁸³ And surely it would be odd to suppose that God is virtuous in the same way as human beings. But according to the doctrine of incarnation, God the Son became a human being, and exhibited every virtue perfectly, even those that cannot normally be ascribed to God. It would seem, then, that although God cannot be called virtuous in the same way that human beings can, God can be said to have a disposition such that, were God to become a human being, God would act in a virtuous way. Neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit has become incarnate, and so neither of them has exhibited (say) the virtue of temperance – but we can be confident that if they were to become incarnate, they would exhibit that virtue.

Similarly, we could say that the blessed do not act in a virtuous way – but this is not because they *lack* virtue. Rather, they have gone beyond the kind of existence in which virtues are exhibited at all. Were they to re-enter an earthly human existence – if such a thing were possible – they would exhibit the human virtues, just as the divine Son did.

This, again, finds support in the hesychast tradition. Gregory of Sinai writes:

The principle and source of the virtues is a good disposition of the will, that is to say, an aspiration for goodness and beauty. God is the source and ground of all supernal goodness. Thus the principle of goodness and beauty is faith... it is this for which the monk seeks when he plunges into the depths of stillness and it is this for which he sells all his own desires through obedience to the commandments, so that he may acquire it even in this life.⁸⁴

On this view, then, what we call virtue ultimately derives from having a will perfectly attuned to God. It is *because* the virtuous person has such a will that she has a disposition to act in a certain way. Because the blessed desire only God, their wills are perfectly attuned in such a way. So even though they do not act in a virtuous way, because they do not act, their wills are such that, were they to be in a situation where action were appropriate, they would act in a way we would call virtuous.

The exhaustion problem

⁸³ ST I q 21 a 1

⁸⁴ Gregory of Sinai, *On Stillness and Prayer* 83 in Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware (1995: 228)

For many, the conception of heaven that I have articulated here is an intrinsically repellent one. The notion of an eternity of inactivity is, for some, more like hell than heaven. But I suspect that much of the scholarly fear of inactivity – and of boredom itself – derives more from the personality of the scholars who have written about it than it does from human nature in general. Many academics – particularly the successful ones – are almost driven people, constitutionally incapable of putting work aside even on holiday.⁸⁵ Tellingly, Lars Svendsen states that he found himself writing a book on boredom specifically because he was unable to do nothing at all:

After having completed a lengthy research project, I was going to relax and do... *nothing*. But that turned out to be absolutely impossible to carry out. Obviously, I was unable to do nothing.⁸⁶

But is this typical of human beings in general? Svendsen himself goes on to express a kind of horrified amazement at the majority of people who work all day, spend four hours watching TV in the evening, and then go to sleep. Only boredom, he thinks, could motivate such depressingly passive leisure activity. There is something elitist, even classist, about such denigration of the leisure habits of ordinary people. It is reminiscent of Aristotle's exhausting-sounding dictum that the purpose of relaxation is to restore our energy in order to work, as opposed to the notion that we work in order to be able to afford to relax.⁸⁷ I would say that this tells us more about Aristotle's personality than it does about human nature. To return to Svendsen's example, could it not be the case that so many people devote so much of their leisure time to passive forms of entertainment not just for convenience' sake but because they enjoy them? Is it really plausible to suppose that they would all be happier if they spent their time studying philosophy, or learning new languages, or practising musical instruments – or the other worthy activities that philosophers recommend?

To my mind, at least, the various dynamic conceptions of eternity sound unattractively tiring. Perhaps that says more than I might wish about *my* personality. But it is telling that so much has been written about the problem of boredom in heaven, and the need to ensure that the blessed will be eternally active and progressing, and nothing at all seems to have been written about the opposing problem, that of exhaustion. But we could easily construct an Exhaustion Problem to parallel Williams' Boredom Problem:

⁸⁵ I have, for example, personally known one prominent professor to catch an overnight flight home at the end of an exhausting overseas round of conferences and meetings, land early in the morning, and then travel directly from the airport to his office, declaring himself ready for "another day of work".

⁸⁶ Svendsen (2005: 7-8)

⁸⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1176b28-1177a1. Just a couple of pages later (1177b4-6), Aristotle seems to contradict this when he states that we work in order to have leisure. But for Aristotle, "leisure" (σχολή) is not to be used for idle amusement, but for improving study and contemplation, as he explains in *Politics* 1333a30-b5; 1334a11-40; 1337b29-1338a30. Amusement (παιδιά), by contrast, is a sort of medicine of the mind, to be used sparingly to restore our energies. On Aristotle and leisure, see Owens (1981); on amusement, see Kraut (1989: 164-66).

- (1) A state of exhaustion, continued indefinitely, would eventually become intolerable.
- (2) There are only a finite number of kinds of activities a person can engage in.
- (3) To be meaningful, immortality must involve stability of character.
- (4) Given enough time, any set of activities will become exhausting to a person who has stability of character.
- (5) Therefore, any meaningful immortal existence would eventually become intolerable.

One might seek to undermine such an argument by denying its premise (4): the blessed need not suffer exhaustion at all. They will, in the words of the prophet, soar on wings like eagles, and run and not grow weary.⁸⁸ Such a reply envisages that our natural tendency to become tired in this life is a contingent fact about our current state, something that God can remove to allow us to enjoy eternal activity in the next life. But if it is easy to suppose that God can change people so that they do not become exhausted by endless activity, it is surely just as easy to suppose that God can change people so that they do not become bored by endless inactivity. The fact that the latter seems to be a stumbling block for many writers who accept the former without complaint is, I think, due more to personal taste than to any significant difference between the two cases.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Boredom Argument is a more serious problem for traditional belief in heaven than is commonly realised. The dynamic view of heaven, fashionable today as an answer to this problem, does not succeed, at least not as it has been presented to date. A better strategy for the believer in heaven is to question the Boredom Argument's assumption that human beings tend to become bored by default. A static view of heaven, in which the blessed enjoy the serenity of only having stability desires, can explain how they remain happy and never become bored, even in a state of eternal inactivity.⁸⁹

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⁸⁸ Isaiah 40:31

⁸⁹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion, at Oriel College, Oxford, in September 2017, and to the Department of Theology & Religion, University of Exeter, in November 2017. I would like to thank those present for their very helpful questions and comments.

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