CrossMark

HEAVEN

Steven M. Cahn

The concept of Heaven raises innumerable difficulties but is so attractive that many may wish to believe in the idea regardless of any arguments against it. Even though unreasonable, it might play a positive role in some lives.

According to a popular evangelical hymn, 'I'm on my way to Heaven, and the journey gets sweeter every day.' The music is compelling, but we might wonder: where is Heaven, how long until we arrive, who are the inhabitants, what activities occur there, and why, as the song says, does our desire to go increase every day?

For many theists, the importance of believing in God rests on the possibility of a blissful afterlife. After all, if God exists but Heaven does not, how important would God's existence be? Granted, if God exists, then theists are correct in their metaphysical belief, but why would being right about that matter be more important than holding a correct view about any other metaphysical claim, such as whether time flows or mathematical entities are real? In other words, why do so many display deep concern whether God exists?

A popular answer is that if God exists, those who live morally will be rewarded with an afterlife in which they abide forever in a place of joy. In short, they will spend eternity in Heaven.

Yet that notion raises numerous difficulties. To begin, where is Heaven? Those who speak of Heaven often look upward, but would travel to Mars, Jupiter, or the nearest galaxy bring us closer to Heaven? Or is Heaven not in space? Might it have no location? Yet if people go to

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Heaven, they go somewhere. But where do they journey, how long does the trip take, and what might they experience on the way? No one knows.

When we die, our bodies stop functioning and may even be destroyed. What form will they take in Heaven? Will they look as they did when we were ten, forty, or seventy? If a person suffered from diabetes, will the resurrected body suffer from the disease? Indeed, if a person was ill for decades, will the resurrected body suddenly enjoy health that was rarely, if ever, attained in life? No one knows.

If a new body is provided, would the resurrected person be the person who died? If a ship is destroyed and an identical one built, the second is different from the first. Similarly, if a person is destroyed and an identical one created, the second is different from the first. In that case, the original person would be lost.

A way to avoid difficulties about resurrected bodies is to suppose that after death what survives are not bodies but souls. Yet what is a soul? Supposedly, when added to a body, a soul converts that body into a person. Of course, if the soul itself can think and feel, it is a person without a body. How, then, does it become a person when it enters a body? Can two souls inhabit a single body, or is the arrangement only one soul per person? Do non-human animals have souls? How would we know?

A crucial question concerns the personality of the resurrected person. Suppose Smith is charitable, loyal and humorous, and enjoys gardening, listening to classical music, playing golf, and taking trips with friends. After death, will the resurrected Smith have the same character and interests? If not, in what sense is the resurrected person appropriately identified as Smith?

To see an even greater difficulty, consider two acquaintances, Peters and Peterson. Peters looks forward to spending eternity with Peterson, whereas Peterson looks forward to being forever free of Peters. Assuming they retain their fundamental likes and dislikes, how can they both attain heavenly bliss?

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Other problems arise when we try to understand the relationship between those in Heaven and those on Earth. The common supposition is that those who die maintain an interest in events of this world. For example, a loving father who taught his daughter to become a championship swimmer will presumably, after his death, take pride if his daughter wins an Olympic medal. But that supposition, while perhaps comforting to the daughter, turns those in Heaven into spectators of the living, watching intently as events unfold. Yet how can Heaven bring peaceful existence if the triumphs and tragedies of this world remain the focus of attention?

If those in Heaven are unconcerned about events on Earth, however, the relationship between them and those who have died is broken. After all, if the father of the swimming champion no longer cares whether his daughter succeeds, athletically or otherwise, in what sense is he still her loving father?

As we age, we watch members of the next generation take our places. Thus our attention may turn increasingly away from the events of this world and focus increasingly on contemplating the next. Such is the reason why, in the words of the evangelical hymn, the journey to Heaven grows sweeter every day.

Yet the question remains: what will we find in Heaven? Consider the case of Willie Mays, the spectacular baseball player whose greatest joy was to play the game he loved. What does Heaven offer him? Presumably bats, balls and gloves are not found there, so what does Willie Mays do? Assuming he is the same person who made that spectacular catch in the 1954 World Series, how can the pleasures that supposedly await him in Heaven match those he knew on Earth?

One answer is that worldly delights pale in comparison with the delight of experiencing God. But how long can we find ecstasy in sheer contemplation, even if the object of our attention is divine? In the absence of events, even the most passionate love grows dull. Eventually we want to do

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something with or for those we love, not just remain endlessly in their presence.

If those in Heaven have no worldly interests and talents, then they have lost their individuality. Yet if such differences are maintained, why assume everyone will find the same delight in the presence of the divine?

For instance, if someone who was cantankerous in life goes to Heaven, does that person remain cantankerous? If so, what becomes of eternal bliss? If not, what becomes of the individual's distinctive characteristics?

Even granted these innumerable difficulties, the hope for Heaven is understandable. After all, death looms for all. Like boaters riding a long rapids flowing inexorably towards a deadly waterfall, we can take pleasure in the passing scene so long as we do not focus on where we are heading. What we cannot do, however, is stop the current or change its direction. We are caught in the grip of time. Yet Heaven offers us an escape. There we can live forever, surrounded by those for whom we care, and safe in the eternal home, abiding in the light and goodness of God.

The vision is compelling, even if unreasonable. Yet philosophical reflection never forces us to any conclusion. Every argument requires premises, and if the conclusion of an argument is found unacceptable, the premises can be denied.

In this case, the vision of Heaven may be so attractive that many may wish to believe in the idea regardless of any arguments against it. They may consider all questions of who, what, where, why and how to be mere quibbles.

Furthermore, even false beliefs can play a positive role in our lives. Suppose, for example, that as a youngster you were told by your parents that your uncle left the country decades ago and now lives in an inaccessible region of the world. He is an upright man who cares for you deeply and has high hopes for you. He also possesses sizeable resources and in mysterious ways keeps track of your activities.

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As you grow up, your belief in your uncle plays a crucial role in your life. When your hopes are stymied or your confidence wanes, you find renewed strength in the thought that your uncle loves you and wants you to succeed. In short, your belief in your uncle enables you to deal with life's problems and achieve important goals.

If, however, you have been misled and your supposed uncle never existed, would you have been better off learning the truth? Perhaps not.

Analogously, suppose that as a youngster you were told by your parents that your uncle died decades ago but still watches over you from Heaven. Let us assume that this belief plays a crucial role in your life, enabling you to deal with life's problems and achieve important goals.

If Heaven does not exist, would you be better off learning the truth? Again, perhaps not.

Still, we need to remember that the desire to reach Heaven may lead some individuals to commit horrendous crimes and thereby seek to secure a glorious future in the next world. That result, too, may be a consequence of disregarding the canons of reason.

In conclusion, we may wonder whether the concept of Heaven, regardless of its rational justification, does more good or ill. To that question, though, philosophy alone cannot provide any definitive answer.

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