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Finite and Infinite Goods by Robert Merrihew Adams

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Obligation, Good Motives, and the Good

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In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Robert Adams brings back a strongly Platonistic form of the metaphysics of value. I applaud most of the theory's main features: the primacy of the good; the idea that the excellent is more central than the desirable, the derivative status of well-being, the transcendence of the good, the idea that excellence is resemblance to God, the importance of such non-moral goods as beauty, the particularity of persons and their ways of imitating God, and the use of direct reference theory in understanding how "good" functions semantically. All of these features I wholeheartedly endorse and use in different ways in my own theory. Throughout his book Adams is generous to competing points of view, and his thoroughness and attention to detail make his presentation persuasive without the defensive quality of so much philosophical polemic. With this book, Christian neoplatonism has emerged in a sophisticated contemporary form.

As is customary in commentaries, I will focus attention on a couple of aspects of Adams's theory that I find problematic. One is the account of obligation; the other is the account of the evaluation of motives.

(1) The account of obligation

According to Adams, obligation plays a role in our ethical thinking distinct from, and non-reducible to, the good, although the good is basic. The nexus of ideas marking out the role of the obligatory in moral discourse focuses on the idea that obligation arises within a social context. Adams maintains that what is obligatory is something actually demanded by another person in a relationship we value. When we violate the obligation we alienate ourselves from that person, who is on that account appropriately angry, and we are thereby guilty and blamed by others. Adams argues that the best candidate for filling the role he describes is the demands of God. Only God is good enough to make demands that are morally binding, and only God can give obligation the objectivity expected by most ethicists. Adams's theory of obligation is

therefore a form of Divine Command Theory. In brief, what is morally obligatory is what God actually commands us to do.

It is clear that Adams not only thinks of God as loving, but he thinks of the divine love as having a particularly salient relation to the obligatoriness of what God demands. But why would a loving person make demands at all? *Prima facie*, making demands is not a loving thing to do; hence, to do so needs a reason. The reason must be either moral or non-moral. It is hard to see how any non-moral reason can be sufficient in strength and kind to justify making demands. On the other hand, if the reason refers to a moral good, what good is that? Does God demand something because it is good for us? Is it good for the relationship? Is it good *simpliciter*, perhaps excellent? The good in one of these forms may provide a reason for the demand, but that is still not sufficient to explain the obligatory because, according to Adams, obligation goes beyond the goodness upon which it rests. That is, it is important to Adams that the *moral* quality of obligation is something in addition to the good, something that is not derivable from the good. So even if the good provides a moral reason for making demands, there is still the problem that by making demands God has decided to transform a moral good into an obligation. As far as I can see, the metaphysical source of the moral aspect of obligation in addition to the good is still unexplained.

I am actually raising two questions here—one is metaphysical, one is about the motive for making demands. The first is the problem of how we get obligation out of the good plus demands if the moral quality of obligation is more than the good in any form. The second is that making demands is not something we would expect out of a loving God anyway.

I find commands metaphysically mysterious. The command “Do X” surely does not amount to “If you don’t do X, I won’t love you anymore,” or “If you don’t do X, you will be punished.” That reduces commands to assertions about consequences, and I know that is not Adams’s view. Presumably, then, commands are irreducible. And that leads me back to my original question: Why should anybody go around making commands? Commands are acts and acts need reasons. Commands are harsh acts and they need reasons proportional to the severity of the act. As far as I can see, no reasons push us from the level of good to the level of obligation.

Another problem is why the demander should be angry when his demands are not met. This way of thinking makes God sound petulant. It is reasonable for God to be unhappy, perhaps even angry, that his relationship with us has been wounded, that we are alienated from him. But it does not take a demand to create the conditions for such alienation. In any case, I think it is important that the anger be over the alienation, not over the fact that he made a demand that was not met.

This leads to the issue of why we *have* to do what God demands. Clearly, if we love God, we will be motivated to do so. But what turns the good into obligation cannot be motivation. That follows from the point made above that nothing non-moral seems to be in the right metaphysical category to transform the category of good into the category of obligation. In discussing our reasons for following a divine command, Adams observes that it is important that we care about complying with it (235). Yes, and failure to comply might even make us feel guilty. But the issue is not whether we would *want* to comply with the demands of a loving God, or whether we would feel guilty if we didn't, but why we should *have* to. Why should we not instead feel resentful because the demands have been made in the first place? In the human case a wife is likely to feel resentful if her husband makes demands, however loving, even though she may be motivated to comply. Of course, there is the reply that unlike other humans, God has natural authority over us as our creator, but it is not obvious that this answers my question.

Adams remarks that if one fails to act on what one loves, the appropriate response emotion is shame rather than guilt (240). Perhaps he thinks, then, that anything less than a demand will not result in the emotion of guilt, one of the defining characteristics of obligation. That point deserves much more attention than I can give here, and it is possible it will answer my question. But even if it does, that just moves the query one level back: Why is guilt so important? What is the point of the complex institution of obligation, guilt, blame, and anger in addition to love, the good, fear of alienation, and the desire to please?

Obligation is essentially a legalistic notion and Adams has made a valiant attempt to understand it—perhaps replace it—with one based on personal relations. I doubt that the attempt can succeed because the good fundamentally is something that attracts, whereas obligation is force. If the strategy Adams employs results in something less than force, and hence, something less than obligation, I would have no objections. So my point in expressing skepticism over Adams's account of obligation in terms of the demands of a good God is not to criticize him for probable failure, but to say that I'm not sure why success is so important.

Here is an idea, although I am not prepared to call it a proposal. Perhaps God never really makes demands at all. Obligation is a fiction to get us motivated to do what is for our own good. Consider the fact that sometimes people try to fool themselves into doing something they value but which they have trouble doing due to moral weakness: losing weight, getting the paper done on time, etc. So they threaten themselves with a picture of an obese person on the refrigerator, or tell themselves that if they don't work *now*, they'll make a fool of themselves in front of the assembled luminaries

at the conference. They don't really believe it; they just want to get going. Maybe obligation is a fiction of that kind. It's not really true that we're obligated to do anything, but it's good if we think so in order to compensate for our laxity and stupidity. It's for our own good to believe there is obligation. On this view, God commands out of desperation to motivate us, but he doesn't really mean to be inventing obligation; he just wants to get our attention. This suggestion softens obligation into the good plus motivational intensity. I could probably live with that, but I don't think Adams can.

In short, why not a divine preference theory or a divine request theory or a theory of divine calling? The latter naturally leads to a theory of vocation, a neglected topic that Adams illuminatingly discusses in Chapter 13. Granted, any such theory is weaker, but if the only reason for preferring command is that it is motivationally stronger, there is no reason why the command has to be real. It just has to be whatever it takes to motivate us.

(2) The value of motives

Adams rightly distinguishes evaluating motives by their consequences from evaluating them by their aims. He says, "...the instrumental value, or utility, of motives, does not yield an adequate criterion of the ethical value of motives. The most obvious alternative to utility as a general criterion of the value of motives, I have suggested, is to appeal to the value of their objects, the value of the ends they seek." (183). Adams also says that good motives are different ways of loving the good, different forms of love for God (185). I find the conjunction of these two points confusing because I would think that the motive of love for God should be evaluated neither by its consequences nor by its ends. A motive is an emotion with an intentional structure. The intentional object of an emotional state such as love is not an end. By an intentional object of an emotion I mean whatever has the place of "x" in "A pities x," "A is angry at x," "A fears x," "A admires x," "A hates x," "A loves x." Nobody would confuse an intentional object with an end in the case of the first five emotions mentioned. It is only because love of x almost always involves treating x a certain way—as an end, that it is easy to confuse ends with intentional objects in the particular case of love. This distinction raises the possibility that in addition to any value love of God has because of ends and consequences, it also has value because it is the kind of intentional state that it is. Love of God could be intrinsically good, or it could be extrinsically good because it derives its goodness from the goodness of God, its intentional object, but in neither case would it get its goodness from an end. At least, that is how I look at the matter.

It is sometimes thought desirable to make Divine Commands not only the ground of moral obligation, but also a motive for action. A possible problem with this position is that it seems to have the implausible consequence that

only obedience to God is a morally worthy motive.¹ Adams considers this problem (274-75) and denies that the only good motive for obeying God's commands is that they are God's commands. He says, "If our supreme commitment in life is to doing what is right just because it is right, and if what is right is right just because God wills or commands it, then surely our highest allegiance is to God. But my divine command theory seems not to have this advantage, for I emphasize reasons for obeying God that are grounded in other goods that we are to value for their own sake and independently (to some extent) of our beliefs about God's commands. I am therefore not proposing a commitment to obeying God's commands *just* because they are God's commands, but also for other reasons." (275) Adams goes on to say that he is unwilling to accept the view that obedience to whatever God commands ought to be the only thing one values for its own sake. His alternative, proposed in more detail in Chapter 7, is a conception of devotion to God "according to which love for God is an organizing principle into which one integrates genuine love for other goods that one is to prize for their own sake, as God does." (275)

I am not sure I fully grasp what is involved when love for God is an "organizing principle," but it seems to me that Adams can give a shorter answer to this worry. Apart from the distinction I made above between ends and the intentional objects of emotions, there is a distinction between ends and reasons. There is no incompatibility between valuing certain things for their own sakes and valuing them because God has commanded us to do so, or alternatively, to love certain things for their own sakes because we love God and God loves them for their own sakes. Valuing something for its own sake, i.e., as an end, is independent of the metaphysical source of its value, and it is also independent of our reasons for valuing what we value. If everything other than God derives its goodness from God, then nothing other than God is good intrinsically, even though many goods may be valued as ends in themselves. Christine Korsgaard has called attention to the possibility that something can be good as a final end even though it is not intrinsically good.² Furthermore, the non-identity between ends and reasons has the consequence that what we value for its own sake may not be something we value unconditionally. We can value something for its own sake *under the condition* that it is commanded or valued by God. Korsgaard says that happiness is such a value for Kant. It is good as a final end—desired for its own sake, not as a means to something else, but it is good only under the condition that it

¹ An argument that we would ideally want our motives to coincide with our morally justifying reasons is given by Michael Stocker in "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), 453-66.

² Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 91 (1983), 169-95.

is accompanied by a good will.³ In fact, I would think it is possible for an agent, such as Kant himself, to *recognize* that happiness is only conditionally good while simultaneously valuing it for its own sake, although Korsgaard does not mention that possibility.

Similarly, Adams can say that we can love truthfulness for its own sake, as an end in itself, even though its goodness derives from God and is conditioned by God's love for it. And just as Kant could value happiness as an end in itself while recognizing that its value is conditional on a good will, Divine Command theorists can value truthfulness as an end in itself while recognizing that its value comes from God's love for it. God might also command us to adopt a certain stance towards truthfulness—to love or appreciate it for its own sake. It follows that we can value certain things as final ends, but the command of God provides us with a reason to do so. Adams thinks of valuing or loving X for its own sake as a motive. Love of X as an end in itself can be the content of the motive, whereas allegiance to God is the reason for adopting the motive. As long as one's ends are not identical with one's reasons, I don't see why this is not possible.

³ Korsgaard identifies a conditional good with an extrinsic good, and I believe she is mistaken about that, but that is not relevant to my point here. I argue that something can be intrinsically good without being unconditionally good in *Divine Motivation Theory*, chap. 1, manuscript in progress. A short discussion of the difference between conditional/unconditional goods and intrinsic/extrinsic goods also appears in "Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth," forthcoming, *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, Oxford University Press.