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Review: Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics

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BOOK REVIEWS

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTS*

ELIZABETH C. SHAW AND STAFF

ADAMS, Robert Merrihew. *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*. New York: Oxford, 1999. xiv + 410 pp. Cloth, \$45.00—In this substantive book, Robert Adams distills and crystallizes much of his previous work into an impressive two-tiered ethical framework: a divine nature theory of the Good and a divine command theory of the morally obligatory. The result is an expansive, integrated, and sophisticated ethical theory that merits great attention. Four major parts comprise the book: “The Nature of the Good,” “Loving the Good,” “The Good and the Right,” and “The Epistemology of Value.”

Beginning in part 1 with a theory of the intrinsic Good that is both theistic and Platonic (in terms of standards, not archetypes), Adams offers a bottom-up ethical framework in which the Good is transcendent and infinite. His nonconsequentialist theory is bottom-up because it begins with a semantic analysis of value language, but its eventual focus is on metaphysical questions. Generalizing insights from direct reference theorists, Adams suggests that what is given by the semantic meaning of a moral term is a role that the nature of the referent is to play. Aiming at a measure of both realism and internalism, he argues that the character of our pursuit of excellence determines what would satisfy the pursuit, fixing the signification of our value terminology to an objective property. Adams takes three things, namely skeptical of value-free evaluations, science-inspired epistemology, and the loss of a critical stance, as veridical intimations of a transcendent Good. God best fills the role of the excellent, the appropriate object of Eros. Finite goods are to be understood in terms of their standing in a relation of resemblance to God. In denying the Manichean notion of an analogous transcendent bad, Adams avoids minimizing the gravity that moral horror can have as a violation of the sacred.

Part 2 has for its overarching topic how it is good to love the Good. Adams combats an overmoralized ideal of love as pure benevolence by insisting that God’s loving something other than himself makes sense as the sheer desire for a relationship with the beloved for its own sake. Such particularistic love is motivated by more than just a general love of persons, an impersonal appreciation of the beloved’s qualities, a

*Books received are acknowledged in this section by a brief resume, report, or criticism. Such acknowledgement does not preclude a more detailed examination in a subsequent Critical Study. From time to time, technical books dealing with such fields as mathematics, physics, anthropology, and the social sciences will be reviewed in this section, if it is thought that they might be of special interest to philosophers.

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teleological valuing as a way or means of realizing an ulterior end, or a desire for maximizing average well-being. Celebrating the beloved is motivated instead by qualitative reasons like the excellence in and worth of the beloved. Not only is love the supreme standard of God's excellence, it is also a motivational ideal for human beings. Adams defends love of God as the integrating, comprehensive principle of motives and values consistent with an interest in any good thing for its own sake. Adams devotes a chapter to the symbolic value of martyrdom and worship, by which one, even in relatively helpless situations, can symbolically be for the Good as such.

Part 3 emphasizes moral obligation understood in relation to a social context. Based on the semantic features of obligation, Adams prefers an idealized adaptation of the social requirement model in his divine command theory over natural law, ideal observer theory, or divine will theory. Answering the salient autonomy objection, Adams's theonomy affirms several traits of autonomy while rejecting total inner-directedness and features an invitation to care about a true Good independently of the commands. Responding to arbitrariness objections, Adams's theory dictates that a good God cannot credibly be thought to have commanded Abraham to kill Isaac. After carving out space for individual vocations relevant to moral obligation, he argues that considerations of excellence have a legitimate place in political ethics. He insists that there are distinctly religious reasons to uphold rights that most concern liberals, then he makes lots of interesting applications, not shying away from controversial political topics.

Part 4, which remains sketchy, stresses that we require faith in various moral ends that is flexible, tenacious, and courageous. Adams denies that his theory faces unique epistemic challenges, for it does not require explicit knowledge of God in competent users of value terminology. Indeed, he insists that a wide range of beliefs about what is good comes before sound theorizing about the nature of goodness, beliefs formed through a complex array of social doxastic practices responsive to a range of inputs and culminating in an albeit fragmentary vision of the transcendent Good. Adams considers the subject matter of ethics and the divine activity in making it known to be the most essential points in his favored conception of socially mediated revelation, both general and specific.

Unfortunately, an undue haste to square revelation with prior ethical conviction can result in hasty traversals of the hermeneutical gap and in indifference to important authoritative passages or points of theology. Adams's tendency to characterize as "fundamentalists" scriptural interpreters more conservative than himself will do little to assure readers that his own creative or sensitive interpretations do not result in a thinning of theology. Though the book's biblical exegesis can be questioned at points for conflating interpretation with evaluation, its philosophical contribution is remarkable. It would make an excellent choice for rigorously analytic graduate courses on ethics at seminaries and universities where an interest in theistic ethics survives. Providing reasons why such an interest should survive is the book's most important contribution.—David Baggett, *Wayne State University*.