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Robert Adams, FINITE AND INFINITE GOODS

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this were to curtail some freedom and soul making, it would be worth it. While process and open theism largely agree on temporalistic omniscience, they part company, as we have seen, with respect to divine power. Although appreciating divine persuasion, open theists insist upon omnipotence as the norm, even if it is self-limited in most cases. Besides Hasker and Griffin, who debate the major differences, Rice, Howell, and Wheeler take up more mediating positions.

Wheeler in particular explores what elements an evangelical can learn from process theism. His finely nuanced essay suggests further ways in which the discussion may be taken. He presents the evangelical position in terms of National Association of Evangelicals 1942 statement of faith (p. 111), and explores its ramifications in terms of process theism, including the question of Biblical authority. He indicates other areas such as the Body of Christ, the earth community, and eschatology where dialogue could be especially fruitful.

Finite and Infinite Goods, by Robert Adams. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. 424. \$45.00 (hardcover).

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This remarkable book is a milestone in ethics and in philosophy of religion. Directly, it is the fruit of thought and reflection on ethics over at least ten years— from Robert Adams' Wilde Lectures in Oxford in 1989, to its publication in 1999. Equally but less directly, it represents, co-ordinates and systematises Adams' writings on ethics over the whole of the last quarter-century. Those who know Adams' distinguished work at the cutting edge of analytical philosophy of religion will come to this book with high expectations. I believe they will not be disappointed. Anyone who thinks that there is nothing new in philosophy of religion, or that secular-minded ethicists need know no more about theistic ethics than the Euthyphro Dilemma, had better think again.

If I were requested to sum up *Finite and Infinite Goods* in a single sound-bite, I think the sound-bite would have to be "generosity of intellect and imagination". One of Adams' chief gifts is his Bach-like ability to take a simple theme and show how much can be done with it: how widely and how differently different variations on that theme can be applied and reapplied. It is this intellectual generosity and imagination that holds together what would otherwise be an unwieldy and inchoate variety collection. The book is vast in its ambition and its scope, covering everything from the semantics and metaphysics of value to eros, idolatry and martyrdom. It is only Adams' exceptional ability to keep a grip on his "big picture" that enables him to tell a coherent story about so many different regions of our life and thought.

The book is divided into four sections. Part I, "The Nature of the Good,"

contends that the goodness of any finite good consists in its resemblance to God, the infinite good; and that the kinds of goodness that chiefly matter ethically are what Adams calls "excellence," and the enjoyment of excellence. Part II, "Loving the Good", is concerned with God's love for us (Chapter 6 is called "Grace"), with our love for God (Chapters 7 and 8 are called "Devotion" and "Idolatry"), and with the mutual love of God and creature (Chapter 5 is called "Eros"). Part III, "The Good and the Right," argues for a view of obligation that intrinsically relates it to the guilt that fractured relationships cause. On the basis of this view Adams states a divine command theory of obligation which, importantly, does not presuppose a divine command theory of the nature of the *good*. In what I thought was the best chapter in the book, Adams then addresses a celebrated difficulty for the divine command theory of ethics: this is the chapter "Abraham's Dilemma." This is followed by another outstanding chapter, on the notion of "Vocation," and by a chapter arguing that legitimate political deliberation in a liberal democracy can and should presuppose "considerations of excellence" (p.320). Part IV of the book, "The Epistemology of Value," discusses revelation and "moral faith".

Almost every page of Adams' text has something worth discussing; and there are 386 of them. In this review I shall focus, with unavoidable selectiveness, on what I shall call Adams' *Platonism*.

What is it to be a Platonist? The term is highly, indeed notoriously, flexible. In Adams' case "Platonism" means partly an affection for, and interest in, the Platonic texts themselves, with the famous speech of Diotima in the *Symposium* perhaps occupying the central place in his reading of Plato. Adams' Platonism also involves his adoption of a number of interesting and controversial theses. I shall discuss three.

First thesis: The sort of goodness that has primary moral importance is *excellence*. "Excellence" seems to be intended roughly to capture what Plato meant by *to kalon* :

The [ethical] theory developed here... gives a primary place [not to well-being or welfare, but] to *excellence*— the type of goodness exemplified by the beauty of a sunset, a painting, or a mathematical proof, or by the greatness of a novel, the nobility of an unselfish deed, or the quality of an athletic or a philosophical performance. It is the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration, honour or worship, rather than the good (for herself) that is possessed by one who is fortunate or happy... Excellence is obviously an important topic for theism, inasmuch as a god must be worthy of worship, and it lies equally at the heart of Platonic conceptions of the good (p. 83).

This striking and (I think) potentially very fruitful proposal of Adams' is likely to meet with opposition from those who take welfare, or human well-being, or utility, or pleasure-and-avoidance-of-pain to be of primary moral importance. It will seem to them that Adams must think that what's good about e.g. feeding the starving is not that they're *starving*, but that feeding the starving is *noble*, and therefore excellent. But this, welfarists will say, radically mislocates the importance of feeding the starving. It also

suggests a kind of moral complacency or smugness in the famine-reliever, a bit like the “reflexive deformation” found in the (apocryphal?) Aristotelian who does great-souled acts *because those acts are great-souled*. (Perhaps it even suggests the Nietzschean thought that, if you can’t feed the starving *with style*, then it’s not worth doing at all.)

Adams would meet this charge with two different sorts of response. First, in defence of his own ground, he would say that feeding the starving displays concern for other individual humans: such concern is, itself and intrinsically, of the greatest excellence. Second, he would challenge the welfarist on her own ground. How does the welfarist define *welfare*? Adams believes that the usual welfarist answers to this are inadequate, and that the right answer defines welfare by reference to his own notion of excellence: “It is in the enjoyment of excellence that a person’s welfare is primarily to be sought” (p. 101).

We might worry whether the first move here is perhaps gaining its point by diluting the sense of “excellence”; on the other hand, we clearly *do* reserve the highest admiration for famine-relievers, so Adams’ suggestion that they display excellence is perfectly feasible.

The second move is ingenious and plausible. Obviously there is more to welfare than a full stomach. Welfarists of the Singer/ Unger variety have not always seemed to reflect this plain fact in their schedules of moral priorities, and Adams’ thesis that welfare means the enjoyment of excellence goes some way— *some way*— towards explaining why filling stomachs is not our only moral priority, and often not even our main one. (Which is not to say that dealing with starvation is not very important indeed, and probably far more important than most complacent westerners like to admit.)

Second thesis: God is identical with the Good itself:

If God is the Good itself, then the Good is not an abstract object but a concrete (though not a physical) individual. Indeed, it is a *person*... the Good itself is a person and, indeed, a lover... if... there must be a standard of goodness that actually is unsurpassably good, whether it exists or not, and if we are persuaded that it would not be unsurpassably good if it did not exist, we will then have reason to conclude that it really exists (pp. 42-44).

To this thesis I am unsympathetic. Or rather, I don’t know whether I am sympathetic or unsympathetic, because I don’t know what the thesis means. Adams evidently means that God is identical with *the Platonic Form* “the Good itself” (*to auto to kalon*). But I just don’t know what a Platonic Form is meant to be. (I write, by the way, as a professional Plato scholar.)

The problems in making coherent sense of the Platonic Forms are familiar from Plato’s dialogue the *Parmenides*. We can say without incoherence that Plato’s Forms are *universals*, the sort of abstract objects that properties or (perhaps) numbers are, in themselves and apart from their instances. We can say without incoherence that Plato’s Forms are *paradigms*, perfect instances of whatever property they are the Forms of. And we can say without incoherence that Plato’s Forms are *standards*— criteria whereby to judge whether anything has a given property, and to judge the degree to

which the thing has that property if it does have it. What we can't do without incoherence is *say all three*. But unfortunately, that seems to be just what Plato wanted to do.

There are a number of ways to bring out the incoherence of holding that the Forms are paradigms *and* universals *and* standards. One celebrated argument from the *Parmenides* itself, the Third Man, shows that holding that the Forms are paradigms (perfect examples of properties) entails holding that they participate in universals (by exemplifying those properties)—and Plato himself says that whatever participates in a given universal cannot *be* that universal. (On the Third Man, incidentally, Adams claims (p.28, footnote) that his thesis is not vulnerable to it because he is “proposing no theory of the nature of universals as such. The claims about the Good itself... are not meant to explain how things resemble each other or have properties.” I don't think that Adams can escape the difficulties here just by keeping quiet.)

Another way of showing the problem which is closer to Adams' concerns is to think about what it is for a standard, or a paradigm, or a universal, to *exist*. The existence conditions of the three could not be less alike. *Universals* exist when there are things (or possible things) that share a property: the universal is the property, an abstract object. *Paradigms* exist when some particular thing is a perfect or near-perfect example of some property: the paradigm is the thing with the property, a concrete object. Finally, a *standard* exists when there exists a *possible and plausible procedure for measurement* of some alleged property found in things: the standard is the procedure, an *institutionally-determined* abstract object. Presumably Adams' claim that “the Good itself exists” is meant to assert the existence of something which is a paradigm of goodness *and* is the universal goodness *and* is the standard whereby we judge goodness. But if so, then either his claim is incoherent, or else it breaks down into three distinct claims, utterly different from each other, and none of them (so far as I can see) fit to be understood as equivalent to the claim that *God* exists.

I am aware that Adams is not the only Christian philosopher to assert that God is identical with the Good, or goodness, itself. Most famously, of course, Aquinas says the same. I think I have some idea what Aquinas means by the identification: in line with his doctrine of divine simplicity, he means that there is no distinction between properties and essence in God; in line with his doctrine of analogy, he means that God is *pre-eminently* good— the *paradigm* of goodness, as we might say in the present context. *That* I understand (I think); but I don't understand what *Adams* means by saying that God is identical with the Good itself. In any case, I don't think Adams has any indispensable purposes that are served by saying it; so perhaps he would do better not to say it.

I also suspect that Adams would be better off without his third Platonist thesis (pp.28-29):

Third Thesis: “Other things are excellent insofar as they resemble or imitate God.”

This time my objection is not that I don't understand. It is that, understanding, I am completely unconvinced. Resembling God is not sufficient for being excellent or good. There might be a being who was nearly infi-

nite, nearly omniscient, nearly omnipotent, and *wicked*. Such a being would resemble God much more than I do. But such a being would *not* be more excellent or good than me. He would be less excellent, because he is wicked.

Resembling God is not necessary for being excellent or good, either. How like God is a blue whale, or a coral reef? And how much does it *matter* to their goodness, how like God they are? My answer to both questions is "Not at all." When Adams tells me (p.36) that God only loves things that resemble himself, my main reaction is "What a narrow-minded and self-absorbed God." Adams' resemblance thesis seems to make God do no more than *repeat himself*, or alternatively, and even worse, *admire himself*. Surely God's world—surely God himself—is bigger and more interesting than that. Why can't it be that many created things are good because of what Iris Murdoch calls their "sheer surprising variety"? Adams allows that Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi "expanded the human repertoire" by creating possibilities that no human had seen before (p. 56). Why not allow that God too expands his repertoire when he creates, by having the generosity of spirit to create good things that are utterly unlike himself?

Adams' defence of his resemblance thesis is long and ingenious, and no doubt he would have answers ready to meet my objections. It still seems to me that his ingenuity is misplaced, for at least two reasons. First, because it leads Adams into some quite unnecessary absurdities: "excellence in cooking [can] be analysed as resembling God with respect to one's cooking" (p. 30); "human persons are globally more like God than sheep are" (p. 118). Second, because Adams also feels better impulses than the one behind the resemblance thesis, and sometimes follows them. Here is a marvellous passage where he is discussing love of individuals (pp.166-167):

It is an erroneous prejudice to suppose that the appeal a particular good has for us must be explained by our interest in a more general good. Commonly, when something appeals to us... we are reacting to a particular case, and the immediate and primary object of our valuing is something individual and particular. We see something beautiful, and we react to it, valuing that particular thing... Observing birds in the spring, I am thrilled by the brilliant orange of a male Baltimore oriole. I like the bird for its colour; the beauty of the colour is a reason for my liking both the bird and the experience of seeing it. Does that mean that I like them because I value that colour more generally? No; my response to the particular sighting is much more immediate than that... [likewise, Romeo's love for some one of Juliet's character traits] is a very particular interest in Juliet, a delighting in *her* possession of that quality, and a desire for a relationship with her and no other, rather than for a relationship with whoever best manifests that quality (pp. 166-167).

This passage was a revelation to me. It showed me something I hadn't worked out for myself, namely that when we love some person, or some quality of some person, the object of our love is not the universal of that quality, but something like what metaphysicians call a *trope*. It is a particu-

larised 'bit' of a universal: *this* instance of that quality. I enthusiastically endorse this suggestion; but I don't see how it can be endorsed by Adams. How can the Adams who insists on defending the resemblance thesis agree with the Adams who enthuses about one particular Baltimore oriole? The resemblance-thesis Adams says that loving things is finding them excellent; that finding them excellent is seeing how they resemble God; and that God is the Good itself, the Platonic Form of goodness. Since Platonic Forms are universals, nothing could be *less* particular or *more* general than the Good itself. So the resemblance-thesis Adams is committed precisely to the "erroneous prejudice" that the Baltimore-oriole Adams rejects: the view that "the appeal a particular good has for us must be explained by our interest in a more general good."

I think Adams is at his best when he implicitly contradicts the resemblance thesis. I think that he should go further, and explicitly contradict it. In my view it is a deep mistake for a Christian understanding of the nature of goodness to insist on seeing all goodness as God-like. A deep mistake, because—whether we are contemplating or studying nuclear physics, the Eroica Symphony, or each other—it is essential to the intellect's quest for *truthfulness* that we should have the courage to let the things that we contemplate *be what they are*, without imposing on them the pressure to be something else—images of God, or whatever.

A good example of the attitude I am opposing here is this, from a recent essay on being a Christian academic: "in the life of the mind and the explorations of the intellect, we reach beyond the human and begin to appreciate, albeit dimly, the mind that *made* the world." So physics, chemistry, geology, economics, philosophy—these studies are all theology in disguise? Nonsense: chemistry is *chemistry*, and deserves contemplation and study in its own right, and *not* merely as some circuitous detour back to God.

It is not that there is one kind of goodness, which is likeness to God. It is rather that there are *indefinitely many* kinds of goodness, and it is *God-like in us* to see and apprehend that irreducible variety, and to have the intellectual security to accept it: to accept what Louis MacNeice calls "the drunkenness of things being various," without seeking to squash all the different kinds of goodness that God's world offers into the single constricting mould of resemblance to God. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in two different sonnets ("As kingfishers catch fire" and "Dappled beauty"):

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells:
Selves— goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

All things counter, original, spare, strange:
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers—forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.