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BOOK REVIEWS

A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good, by Robert Adams. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 256 pages. \$35 (paperback).

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Adams proposes a theory of virtue, or a theory about what it is to be a morally good person—he uses the term “virtue” to refer to good moral character and good traits of character. He contrasts his theory with what he calls “virtue ethics.” Virtue ethics holds that “a theory of virtue provides the right foundation for all of ethics, and that the ethics of duty should be reduced to, or replaced by, the ethics of virtue” (6). Adams offers brief but forceful arguments against defining right and wrong actions in terms of what a virtuous person would do. The book consists of three parts. In part I, Adams states his theory of virtue. Part II discusses the relationship between self and others. Part III addresses recent findings in social psychology, which according to some, show “that there really are no virtues and vices, and indeed no traits of character” (12).

Adams defines moral virtue as “persisting excellence in being for the good” (14). Being virtuous involves being for the good and against the bad. According to Adams,

There are many ways of being for something. They include: loving it, liking it, respecting it, wanting it, wishing for it, appreciating it, thinking highly of it, speaking in favor of it, and otherwise intentionally standing for it symbolically, acting to promote or protect it, and being disposed to do such things. (15–16)

Adams holds that there are a wide variety of goods that virtue can be for. Virtue can be for the good/welfare of others and oneself; it can also be for intellectual and aesthetic values.

Virtue involves being for the good, but:

Not every way of being for something good is virtuous or a virtue. One can seek goods selfishly, only for oneself; or unjustly, only for one’s friends, without regard for the rights of strangers. . . . What distinguishes virtuous ways of being for something from other ways? The criterion I propose is that virtuous ways of being for the good must be excellent. (23–24)



Adams does not provide criteria for determining presence or absence of the kind of excellence in question. “The grounds for judgments of excellence of ways of being for the good are too varied, and often too subtle, I believe, for any algorithmic treatment” (26). Nonetheless, Adams has a theory about the nature of excellence—things are excellent to the extent that they resemble God. He defends this view in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and reaffirms it in the present book. Some readers of this journal will be disappointed that he says very little about his divine resemblance theory of excellence and good and bad and his divine command theory of right and wrong in the present book.¹

As Adams notes, his theory about the nature of virtue is very similar to the theory Thomas Hurka defends in his book *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Very roughly, Hurka holds that virtue consists in loving goods and hating evils. Unlike Adams, Hurka proposes a formula for determining whether or not a person’s attitude about something is virtuous. According to Hurka, love/hate for something is virtuous to the extent that it is proportional to the goodness/badness of the thing in question. This view seems to imply that having special concern for one’s own friends and family and for one’s own projects and endeavors is contrary to virtue, since it is false that our own personal friends and family have much greater intrinsic value than other people (and it is false that our own endeavors have greater value than other people’s). Hurka attempts to answer this objection by claiming that there are “agent-relative values, ones that are good or evil only or to a greater degree from some people’s points of view than from others” (Hurka, 199; quoted by Adams on 27). But Adams argues that Hurka’s theory commits him to an indefensible view about what things are intrinsically valuable.

Hurka makes clear that the values he is talking about in this context are . . . “intrinsic” values. By one thing’s being better than another from some person’s point of view he does not mean just that the person subjectively values the former more than the latter. But while it is quite appropriate, and normally virtuous, to care more intensely about a life partner’s health than about most other people’s, it would be repulsively self-centered to think that one’s partner’s health is intrinsically more important than other people’s. (27)

Another attempt to formulate a standard for ascriptions of virtue is Julia Driver’s “trait consequentialism” which holds roughly that virtues are

¹There are serious problems involved in basing a theory of human virtue on resemblance to God. Many of the moral virtues, such as courage and self-control, essentially involve human limitations. It seems untenable to hold that excellence in these matters ultimately consists in resembling a perfect God who is not subject to human fears, and vulnerabilities, and appetites. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation may afford Adams an answer to these problems. Adams could say that we are virtuous to the extent that our relevant attitudes, emotions, actions, and dispositions resemble those of God in the human person of Christ. For a very detailed development of this view, see Linda Zagzebski’s *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Adams doesn’t talk about the idea of the imitation of Christ in the present book, but see his review of Zagzebski in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73 (2006): 493–497.

traits of character that produce good effects. Adams offers several criticisms of her view. Imagine people who are such that beating one's child when s/he is exactly 5.57 years old greatly increases the life expectancy of the child. Some of these people have an intense desire to beat children when they are exactly 5.57 years old and take intense pleasure in doing so. Driver regards this special trait as a virtue. Adams finds this extremely counterintuitive. He also thinks it very counterintuitive that Driver would have to count competitiveness as a virtue if it is generally a beneficial trait, as defenders of capitalism have sometimes claimed. Adams argues:

Competitiveness, as normally understood, involves hostility to the interests of other people (a hostility limited to certain contexts, to be sure). That can hardly be a virtue, even if it has good consequences. (56)

Adams categorizes different kinds of virtues:

Some virtues are defined by motives which in turn are defined by goods that one is for in having them, as benevolence, for example, is defined by the motive of desiring or willing the good of others. We may call these *motivational* virtues. . . . Other virtues—courage, for example, and also self-control and patience—are not defined in that way, by particular motives or by one's aims, but are rather structural features of the way one organizes and manages whatever motives one has. (33)

Some virtues such as practical wisdom do not fit neatly into either category and certain kinds of physical and psychological strengths, e.g., good memory and physical vigor, can enhance one's virtues, although they are not virtues themselves.

Adams defines a vice as "a trait of character that is bad in such a way that if you have it, that counts (not necessarily decisively) against your having a good moral character" (36). His classification of vices is most illuminating. Vices of weakness, such as cowardice and incontinence, are structural vices and are not defined by goods and bads that they are for or against. Vices of excess, for example, avarice, sensuality, workaholism, and chauvinism, involve being too much for certain goods. The vices of self preference consist in excessive concern for one's own good. The vice of ruthlessness consists in excessive willingness to sacrifice the good of others. Motivational vices corresponding to motivational virtues are vices of opposition or indifference to the good. Chief among these vices are malice, cruelty, envy, vindictiveness, and *Schadenfreude*. "No vice seems more appalling to me than *cruelty*. It attacks great goods of personal life—its enjoyment and sometimes its persistence and even its meaning—and takes satisfaction in doing so" (41). Adams qualifies this statement; he thinks that desiring that others be punished because one thinks that they deserve to be punished is compatible with being virtuous. Desiring retributive punishment can be construed as a case of being for the good—one might desire that someone be punished to remove the evil of his "having gotten away with" an unjust act.

The second part of the book asks whether moral goodness is good for those who are morally good. Does moral goodness enhance the welfare of those who are morally good? Adams has much to say about this question. Plato and the Stoics contend that being morally virtuous is both necessary and sufficient for flourishing. Aristotle holds that moral excellence is an important and necessary constituent of human welfare but rejects the view that it is sufficient for personal welfare. Many modern philosophers think that it is possible for morally bad people to flourish, and Nietzsche holds that some of the virtues lauded by Christian morality are harmful to their possessors. Adams holds that moral virtues are intrinsically good and at least partly constitutive our well being. He says that “virtue is not a sufficient condition of well-being for its possessors, but . . . it is a necessary condition of the best sort of happiness or well-being” (61).

Adams defines altruism as other-regarding benevolence: “It signifies any motive that takes as its end or goal the good or well-being of one or more persons other than oneself” (65). Altruism has enormous instrumental value. According to Adams, altruism is also intrinsically valuable. It is reasonable for me, not only to desire the good of other people, but to desire that *I* help promote their good. Loving parents can desire that their children be altruistic and want them to be prepared to act altruistically, even when doing so is contrary to the children’s self-interest.

[A] person’s good or well-being is not the only thing one can want or favor or support for that person’s sake. In many cases, if you have asked me to do something, I can do it *for you* even if I don’t think it will be good for you. That can be an expression of my *respect* or *friendship* for you. . . . Another thing you can want *for* people you love is that they should be *worthy* of love and esteem. (69)

Adams offers a very illuminating discussion of friendship and the virtue of caring for common projects, e.g., being a good teammate or good colleague. He stresses that friendship involves more than an altruistic desire for the good of the other person. It also requires that one desire and prize the relationship with the other person.

The third part of the book addresses recent work in psychology that, according to many people, shows that the kinds of strong, causally-efficacious, enduring traits of character that constitute virtues and vices don’t exist. One well-known study of helping behavior is often cited in support of this view. The study observed subjects who emerged from a phone booth to witness someone (who was part of the research team) drop and scatter her papers on the floor in front of them. The study sought to determine which people would attempt to help the person who dropped her papers. A dime was planted in the phone booth before some of the subjects entered. Fourteen of the sixteen people who found a dime stopped to help the stranger. Only one of twenty-five who didn’t find a dime in the phone booth stopped to help. This is a very striking result and shows that seemingly trivial differences in situations can make a huge difference in people’s behavior.

“Situationist” psychology holds that situational factors are generally a much more important factor in determining people’s behavior than their imputed fixed traits of character. In a famous study from the 1920s, Hartshorne and May sought to test honesty in school children. They measured the frequency of lying, cheating, and stealing and correlated them with other variables.

The experimenters found that individual children were fairly consistent, or stable, over time in repeated tests of their honesty or dishonesty, in the *same* type of situation. But they also found, to their surprise, that individual results in *different* types of situations showed low correlations, and thus little cross-situational consistency. (116)

Assuming that the social science in question is sound, what are the implications of these results for theories of virtue? Hurka concludes that virtues construed as traits of character that involve deep-seated behavioral dispositions don’t exist and that we should alter our concepts of virtues and vices and apply them primarily to actions, occurrent attitudes, and mental states in particular situations. A very different response (made by Rachana Kamtekar in “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character,” *Ethics* 114 [2004], 458–491) is to say that the classical conception of virtue is untouched by research work in psychology—virtue is quite rare but still an ideal we should aspire to. Adams rejects both of these responses and argues that the evidence does not require that we abandon the idea that there are enduring traits of character that are central objects of our moral evaluation. However, he thinks that we need to acknowledge that virtues are frail and “modular.” With respect to the virtue of honesty, Adams notes that the English word “honesty” has a very broad meaning. Being honest involves possessing: 1) the disposition not to lie or deceive others, 2) the disposition not to cheat in rule-governed activities, and 3) the disposition not to steal from others. These are very disparate dispositions and there is no reason to think that they are strongly correlated. The Hartshorne-May study would seem to show that it is very rare for people to be consistently honest in all these respects in a wide range of different circumstances. But it also *supports* the view that narrower modules of these virtues (e.g., not cheating in sports, not cheating in one’s academic work, not lying to one’s spouse, not lying to one’s clients, and not stealing from one’s employer) are common and reasonably robust in determining our behavior. Adams thinks that this empirical evidence weighs strongly against Plato’s view about the unity of virtues according to which, in order to have any of the virtues, one must have all of them.

Adams does other things to try to defuse situationist psychology’s challenge to traditional views of the virtues. He stresses that virtues are not simply dispositions to act in certain ways. In the case of experiments that test helping behavior, he argues that the duties to help others are imperfect duties which allow people wide latitude in acting to fulfill them. Each of us has an obligation to help others, but no one has an obligation to help

on every occasion, so not every case of failing to help observed in these experiments is contrary to virtue.

Adams claims that there is a great deal of moral luck in the development of any person's character so that virtue is to a very large measure a gift, rather than an individual achievement; nonetheless, virtue is excellent and admirable.

This is an *outstanding* book, one of the very best books ever written on this most important topic. It is required reading for anyone interested in the virtues or ethical theory. Adams's many examples are very apt and helpful; some of his observations about them are gems—marvels of insight and good sense. Adams's book is also very clear and lucid, unusually clear and accessible for such an important contribution to philosophy. This makes it very suitable for use in upper division undergraduate courses. This book deserves a wide readership by philosophers and students of philosophy.

The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Sceptical Religion, by J. L. Schellenberg. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2009.

AKU VISALA, Oxford University

The Will to Imagine (henceforth *Will*) is the latest installment in J. L. Schellenberg's trilogy on philosophy of religion. In the two previous books, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (2005) and *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Scepticism* (2007), Schellenberg strongly criticised most classical and contemporary arguments for belief in God. In philosophy of religion circles, Schellenberg is probably best known for his earlier work *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (1993), in which he presents his famous argument against theism from the hiddenness of God. The argument from hiddenness has since created a great deal of debate and Schellenberg himself has defended it in several different forums. The reader of these books and his other works might easily get the impression that Schellenberg seeks to abandon all possible forms of religion and advocate some form of naturalism. But this, as *Will* shows, is far from being the case.

The book is basically what the title says it is: an attempt to defend a certain kind of religious attitude—an attitude that is neither belief in some sort of God nor belief in the non-existence of God or gods. Schellenberg has set out to formulate a third position between these two alternatives. This middle position, however, is not strictly speaking an agnostic one as one might first think but a religious one—a sceptical religious attitude. Instead of religious or non-religious *belief*, Schellenberg suggests that *faith* would be a more proper attitude. The proper object of faith is what he calls *ultimism*. Ultimism is what