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A World of Goods

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Contemporary moral philosophers often divide moral theories into three main types: consequentialism (of which utilitarianism is the most famous and popular example), deontology (closely associated with the ethics of Immanuel Kant), and virtue ethics (a more amorphous category, associated with Aristotle's ethical writings). In *Finite and Infinite Goods*, Robert Merrihew Adams presents an ethical framework that fits none of these categories. It is founded on a fundamental commitment to the idea that there is a Transcendent Good, to be understood philosophically in realist, non-naturalist terms. As I prefer to put it, Adams starts with a conviction that we live in a World of Goods. In developing and elaborating a perspective on ethics built around this conviction, Adams shows his appreciation of the traditions to which his ethical framework is an alternative, his sensitivity to human psychology, and his embrace of a diversity of values. The result is one of the most original and profound books on ethics I have seen in decades.

Because his framework is theistic, and because Adams is known to have a divine command view of obligation, nonreligious philosophers might assume that it is not worth their time to read so long and tightly argued a book as this. Perhaps the avowed links of his ethical views to those of Plato will not do much for his popularity either. But it would be a great mistake for serious moral philosophers to pass this book by.

The idea of a transcendent good

The thesis Adams is "most concerned to commend in this book," he writes in Chapter Two, is that "the realm of value is organized around the idea of a transcendent Good" (50). Although I shall raise questions about whether it is necessary or useful to talk about *the* realm of value, and about how fully organized our evaluative lives can or ought to be, I wish mainly to applaud Adams's defense of a framework that takes the idea of a transcendent good seriously. However large are the problems the idea carries with it, the fact remains that it captures a great deal of ordinary thought and experience of value that no anthropocentric, subjectivist, or naturalist conception of value can.

Adams writes "the Good is transcendent in the sense that it vastly surpasses all other good things, and all our conceptions of the good." (50) The Good, in other words, transcends our experience. The idea seems to be that the Good is out there, independently of our existence and our ideas, for us, in part, to discover and appreciate (if you hear echoes of the X-files, so be it). The good extends beyond what is good *for us* (that is, what makes us or our lives better) and even beyond what is good *to* us (that is, what can be seen to be good from our human point of view). Plato's form of the Good and Adams's brand of theism that identifies the Supreme Good with God represent the most well-known and unambiguously nonnatural and realist conceptions of the Good. On these views, the Good is metaphysically transcendent—it has a supernatural existence. The good things with which we are directly acquainted are good in virtue of their resemblance or "imaging" of the Supreme Good, which is conceived, it seems, as essentially vast and wonderful, "too good for us to have more than a dim and imperfect apprehension of it" (51).

Perhaps the metaphysically ambitious claims of Plato and of Adams's theism are part of what is involved in referring to an account of the Good as transcendent. But I am not sure that the metaphysical commitments, or the references to vastness that may be inextricably connected to it, are important or necessary to the plausibility and appeal of this conception. What *is* important is the view that "we [humans] are not the measure of all things, and have at best a very imperfect appreciation of the full dimensions of the good" (52).

Two consequences of this claim seem to me particularly important. First, the claim implies that (at least some of) what is good is not good *because* we find it so, much less because we make it so. Rather, our finding things good is (at least some of the time) a perception or recognition of their being good independently or prior to our knowledge. Second, the claim implies an open-endedness about what will turn out to be good. Because goodness, in principle, outstrips our conception of it, it is always possible for the good to surprise us.

The position is difficult to state simply. To an unsympathetic ear, it is easily misunderstood. The emphasis on the potential independence of the Good from human decision and judgment, and even from human existence, for example, may mistakenly suggest that the position cannot accommodate the enormous range of goods that clearly are dependent on human existence, on human feeling and human will. Adams's elaboration of his account, however, should quickly banish these concerns. Even if humans are not the measure of what is good, they are among the things that are good, and so what is good for them will be, to some extent, good, *period*. More interesting than this, the open-endedness and unpredictability of the Good allow Adams to appreciate, indeed to celebrate, human creativity in a way rarely found in

philosophical ethics. Of saints, Adams says, "they don't just draw from a standard repertoire of what is natural for humans; they expand the human repertoire" (56). Artistic creation figures prominently in Adams's discussion, too, providing excellent examples of things (e.g., paintings) whose goodness is essentially dependent both on the human faculties and susceptibilities that allow us to appreciate their beauty and on the human creativity and vision that they express, but which nonetheless quite naturally present themselves as objects the goodness (more specifically, the beauty) of which we recognize and submit to rather than create.[1]

The good life

The conviction that we live in a world of goods (or in Adams's more ambitious version, a world touched by a transcendent Good) allows Adams to develop a conception of a good life markedly different not only from hedonism but from an Aristotelian account that is grounded exclusively on a conception of human functioning. Having explained that the sense of "good" with which he is concerned may be construed as nearly synonymous with "excellent", Adams offers "the idea that what is good for a person is a life characterized by *enjoyment of the excellent*" (93). There is stress both on the "enjoyment" and on the "of the excellent." Connected to this is Adams's claim that it is good to love the Good. This means, at one level, that one should be *for* the good. One should, as it were, be allied with the Good, one should support the Good, or at least not go against it in any or all of its forms.[2] The kind of love with which Adams is chiefly concerned, however, is Eros, which, in paradigm cases, is "a passionate desiring or prizing of a personal relationship for its own sake" (137). It is neither selfless and disinterested nor cool and purely cognitive. For those of us who are neither Platonists nor Adams's kind of theist, "The Good" is too abstract, unclear, and metaphysically suspect to serve as an object of Eros, and even Platonists and theists who do love The Good, on Adams's account, tend to love it through or by loving more concrete and specific manifestations of it. "It is mainly particular objects that are excellent," Adams writes, "and that are to be respected and cherished by one who loves the excellent" (17). A good life, then, a life characterized by enjoyment of the excellent, will be a life in which Eros for *some* excellent things will play a central role. People, of

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1 It is interesting to note that artists as well as viewers frequently describe themselves as responding to something outside themselves, and trying to capture it, whether on canvas, in music, or in words.

2 This is not to say that the varieties of good are nicely harmonious, that one will not have to choose among goods, or even among evils. Still, being *for* the Good has a range of expressions. One can be for goods that one knows one cannot realize; one can even be for goods, I think, that, in order to realize other goods, one must in some sense act against.

course, are the most obvious and typical examples of 'excellent things' toward which we appropriately feel Eros, but we may properly experience Eros in connection with impersonal objects as well. "Among the possible objects of an excellent Eros, besides persons, are particular animals, plants, and other natural objects; species and other natural kinds; arts and sciences (mathematics or philosophy, for example), and particular artistic creations" (147).

This conception of a good life, simple and common-sensical as it may sound, is remarkably and wonderfully different from the conceptions afforded by any of the more popular ethical frameworks in contemporary moral philosophy. It gives a central role to the kinds of "projects" that, as Bernard Williams has frequently pointed out, utilitarians and Kantians have difficulty fully accommodating. Unlike Kantian and rights-based frameworks that abstract from any conception of or commitment to the idea of the Good, Adams's framework offers an answer to the question "What should one *do* with one's life (other than be moral)?" Unlike consequentialist frameworks and Christian accounts that take *agape* to be the model of love to which one should aspire, its answer recognizes the legitimacy, indeed, the desirability of the need for personal fulfillment and the variety of activities and types of life that may properly answer to that need. Its answer, as I understand it, amounts roughly to the advice to find some excellent things to love and go on and love them—that is, develop the kind of loving relationships appropriate to the kinds of objects they are. Because the answer gives weight both to the need for a personal engagement with or passionate attachment to something and to the idea that the object of the attachment must have a worth or an excellence the standard for which comes from outside the agent herself, this conception of a good life seems to me to be one that can answer to our interest in a life that is not just happy but meaningful as well.

An ethical viewpoint that gives such support to an individual's engagement and focus on a small number of particular relationships will necessarily face the problem of having to set limits both on the way these relationships may be pursued and on the weight they can be given relative to potentially larger or more urgent concerns. Love for one's children, one's art, or for that matter, one's God, can lead one to neglect or even violate the people or parts of the planet on which one is not focused and with which one is not engaged. In Adams's framework, this problem is met, at least in part, by the reminder that the individual goods that it is proper to love are to be understood as instances or aspects of *The* Good. Though enjoyment of the excellent will, for most us, consist primarily in enjoyment of some particular excellent people and things, a healthy and proper enjoyment will recognize the excellence of these things as examples of a larger, pluralistic, and only partly understood realm of excellence. "A human person ...should be, in principle,

for what is good in every context" (200). Ideally, this will keep one's particular loves from becoming idolatrous; it will keep the importance of one's particular loves in proper perspective.

Recognizing the connection between the goodness in our particular objects of love and the vast realm of Goodness does not, however, on Adams's conception, imply that we should transfer or transform our love for the particulars into love for something greater and more abstract and universal. We should not love The Good *instead of* particular goods nor should we love particular goods only insofar as they are good.[3] Most important, there is no suggestion that being *for* The Good is to be understood as urging us to devote ourselves to maximizing the production or preservation of all the good we can. As Adams notes, "The causal consequences of our actions God could secure without our aid..." (220). In other words, as I understand it, God does not need us to bring about as much good as possible. It is not our job. We might add, " and if God does not make it our job, what else possibly could?"

As I have tried to show, Adams's commitment to the existence of a transcendent Good affords a framework in which some of the big ethical questions—how should one live? what should one care about? what should do with one's life?—can be appreciated and addressed in more plausible and appealing ways than most modern ethical theories allow. There are some questions, however, to which Adams's answers seem less satisfactory. And of course, Adams's framework generates some difficult questions of its own.

Problems

Most obviously, there is the question of God and God's role in a framework for ethics. Adams's ethical views are deeply intertwined with his theism, and his book is a demonstration of the power and appeal of a framework in which God, identified with the Supreme Good, provides the metaphysical foundation for all value. For those, like myself, who seek an ethical framework that does not invoke the idea of God, the question of how much of Adams's framework can be given a secular interpretation is pressing.

I have already tried to indicate why I think much of the value of Adams's framework is independent of its theism. The idea that the Good exceeds our grasp, that what is good extends beyond what is good for us and even beyond what is good to us, seems to me plausible independently of any commitment to the existence of a supernatural being, and much of what is distinctive and attractive about Adams's conception of the ethical life depends chiefly on this metaphysically less ambitious claim and on an appreciation of the enormous difference it makes for the question of how to live.

Admittedly, if we do not have an account of goodness, if we cannot say what it is about various individuals, ideas, and activities that make them

[3] See Adams's very interesting chapter on Grace.

good, we are apt to be uncomfortable. We may doubt that there really is such a thing as goodness, that The Good, in other words, is really out there. Plato's Form of the Good and Adams's God seem to offer answers to these doubts, if only we can believe in them. But I am not sure that they are intellectually satisfying answers even for those who do believe. They are certainly of little epistemological help in discovering what is good, and the idea that what is good is good because it resembles or images God is totally baffling if we are to understand the idea of resemblance or imaging literally. In what sense can a good meal, a good basketball game, a good performance of the Brandenburg Concerti, a field of wildflowers, the *Critique of Pure Reason* and my next door neighbor all resemble or image the same thing? How, in any event, can a good meal be said to image God?

Lacking a satisfying account of a goodness of which humans are not the measure, however, does not seem sufficient reason to reject it as a possibility, especially since it seems so naturally to capture many of our experiences of goodness and because a framework that embraces it has so many advantages. Perhaps a satisfying account remains to be developed, or perhaps we are looking for the wrong sort of account. There may be no single property or relation that makes all good things good.

This last possibility, or, more precisely, the possibility that "there is no well-defined point of view from which one can do justice to all the competing values" is one that Adams finds deeply disturbing (182). His theism provides an answer not only to skepticism about the reality of value but also to worries about its unity. Without his theism, or any alternative unified account, the possibility that values are plural "all the way down" remains.

However much we may long for unity, though, it seems to me that the absence of an assurance of unity is not sufficient reason to reject the possibility of a realist and nonanthropocentric account of value. Perhaps, again, a plausible unified account of value remains to be developed, or perhaps we should find a way of coming more fully to terms with the possibility that no such account may be forthcoming. As Adams notes, even if the realm of value is integrated at some ultimate level, "we may be faced with hard and painful choices about which we are bound to have conflicting feelings. That is just a fact of life, and no plausible theory will deny it" (182). At the same time, even in the absence of the assurance of ultimate unity in our values, we can, if we choose, make a point of living our lives or of changing the world in ways that will minimize the likelihood that such painful conflicts will arise.

Some conflicts are bound to arise, however, if not within individuals, at least between them. It is traditionally one of the primary tasks of an ethical theory to provide a basis for resolving or adjudicating such conflicts. More generally, it is traditionally a primary task of an ethical theory to provide an

account of moral obligation, an account, that is, of what one is required to do or refrain from doing whatever more personal conception of the good or of the good life one pursues.

That Adams presents his own account of obligation more than halfway through the book may perhaps be taken as an indication that the concept, while important, is neither central nor foundational to the ethical framework he advocates. Recognizing the difference between the question of what it would be good, desirable or commendable to do and what we are required to do brings out the specialized nature of obligations. Adams's understanding of obligation echoes that of John Stuart Mill. Like Mill, Adams connects the notion of duty or obligation with the appropriateness of punishment. In Adams's words, "having an obligation to do something consists in being required (in a certain way, under certain circumstances or conditions), by another person or a group of persons, to do it" (242).

I believe Adams is right to place the question of what obligations we have away from the center of a personal (as opposed to a political) ethical framework, and the identification of obligations with social requirements seems to me to be an association worth retaining. Adams, however, recognizes a dilemma for accounts like his: If we are to understand obligations as actual requirements set by actual human communities, we meet with the problem that societies in fact sometimes require behavior that goes against the good, and that we intuitively recognize as wrong. Moreover, history has shown us some situations in which "none of the existing human communities demanded as much as they should have" (248). Intuitively, it seems, we may be morally required to do things that no humans in fact demand of us. On the other hand, Adams argues that accounts that relate moral obligations to what a community *would* demand under certain counterfactual conditions, are inadequate for other reasons (246). Specifically, he is doubtful that the relevant counterfactual claims are true, and he questions the motivational power they would have even supposing them to be true.

Adams's way out of this dilemma is to identify moral obligations with divine commands. This certainly avoids the problem raised by the fallibility of requirements set by humans, but brings with it other difficulties. If, for example, we are to understand God as potentially requiring us not only to treat others with respect and concern, but to keep our heads covered or to honor the Sabbath, then it seems to me we have failed to capture the notion of distinctively *moral* obligations. Moreover, the more familiar and central moral obligations—obligations, for example, to treat people in certain ways—we seem to owe directly to people themselves, independently of God's endorsement.

These last considerations suggest that what we commonly understand as the sphere of moral obligations and of the associated notions of moral right

and wrong may be better interpreted, as Scanlon does, in terms of what we owe *to each other*, and not as a specialized offshoot of our love or appreciation of a transcendent Good.[4] Accepting such an approach of moral obligation would render Adams's framework less powerful and comprehensive than he might want it to be, if also less competitive with some other ethical theories that take as their central focus an account of moral obligation. But it remains immensely powerful and important even with this concession. It reminds us, first, of how much of what is practically, ethically important in our lives is *not* addressed by a theory of moral obligation, and it shows us, second, that systematic philosophy can address these areas independently. Finally, it does address these areas in a compelling way that has for a long time been neglected in academic philosophy—namely, by urging us to conceive of our lives in potential connection with goods that extend beyond our lives and even beyond our imagination.

[4] The dilemma Adams posed would, in that case, have to be solved or avoided in some other way.