

Review of the book *Finite and infinite foods*

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Preprint

Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics, Robert Merrihew Adams, Oxford University Press 1999 (ISBN 0-19-512848), pp. xiv + 410, hb £35.00

This book is the culmination of a renowned scholar's life of work on religious ethics and the philosophy of religion. Adams grew up 'in an atmosphere in which religion and ethics were treated as a single, supremely important aspect of life, grounded in the nature, action and commands of God' (1), and this is what he still believes. A position that is so squarely opposed to the orthodoxy in contemporary philosophical ethics, and especially to that of the 1950s when Adams began to study moral philosophy, will only make itself heard if it is articulated with the utmost precision, clarity and cogency. That is exactly what Robert Adams has done through the years, and continues to do here on a larger scale. Adams presents a *theistic* (not: Christian) framework for ethics. However, he does not directly *argue* for theism (or, for the existence of God); he tries to show that theism enriches our understanding of ethics and metaethics (and that could be called an *indirect* argument for theism). The central concept in Adams's framework is that of the good (in the sense of excellence): the one infinite Good – the transcendent God – and the many finite goods. Finite goods are good by virtue of their relation to the infinite good, the central relation being *Godlikeness* (resembling God); Adams takes great pains to explain what is meant by 'resembling' here. The infinite Good 'is transcendent in the sense that it vastly surpasses all other good things, and all our conceptions of the good' (50). Adams compares this supernaturalistic conception of the good with several naturalistic rivals (Martha Nussbaum, Richard Boyd), and argues that transcendence is vindicated (77-82). By making excellence the intrinsic good that is to be sought for its own sake, Adams gives it the place that well-being has in most rival theories; however, he does not deny the value of well-being, but defines it in terms of 'enjoyment of the excellent' (93-101). Adams's account of 'badness' is not symmetrical with his account of goodness: the bad is not bad by virtue of its relation to some infinite badness, but by lacking goodness or opposing goodness. Like goodness, then, badness is defined by its relation to transcendent goodness – it is the relation that is different, not the point of reference (102-107).

It is good to love the good. God's love for the good is not merely a form of benevolence; it involves *eros* as well. In fact, one cannot be benevolent without *eros*: to be benevolent towards someone means willing the good for that person; and that involves appreciating and desiring the good. Among the good things that God thus desires, relationships with human beings take pride of place, but God loves impersonal objects as well (131-149). God's love, however, is not proportioned to the excellence of its objects; it typically outruns it, and is therefore called *grace* (150-176). By adopting a theistic view of morality we can avoid, according to Adams, an over-emphasis on morality to the neglect of, for instance, excellence in art, athletics or philosophy. The God to whom we should be maximally devoted is the creator and lover of beauty as well as of people, the standard of nonmoral as well as of moral value. Using Harry Frankfurt's idea of higher order preferences, Adams argues that love for God (in non-theistic terms: the good) could be our highest-order preference, and thus the 'integrative organizing principle for our motivational structures, including our loves' (177-198, quot. 191). It is important for Adams that love for the good, even when not explicitly directed towards God, can count as *implicit* love for God. Why, then, does religious teaching attach so much value to *explicit* love for God? This, Adams argues, has to do with our finitude, as a result of which we can be for the good only in imperfect and fragmentary ways. We can extend the reach of our love for the good by being for the good symbolically, i.e. by explicitly loving and worshipping God.

For Adams, the concept of the good is more basic than that of the right. The right (what is obligatory, or forbidden) is constituted by our social relationships: It is the fact that other people demand us to execute certain actions that makes these actions obligatory. How much reason we have to comply with such demands depends upon, e.g., the goodness of the people who are their source, the goodness of our relationship with these people, and the goodness of the commands themselves (231-248). Thus the assessment of goodness is presupposed in the assessment of obligations; supreme goodness is to be found only in the commands of the supremely good being, i.e. God. Here we encounter Adams's well-known defence of the divine commands theory of moral

obligations (249-276), in which he also takes account of the objection: 'What if God commanded something evil?' (277-291). The final section is devoted to the question: How do we come by our moral judgements? Here, Adams discusses the importance of tradition, revelation, and faith; the latter, he argues, is relevant not only because his theory is a theistic theory, but because faith is intrinsic to morality (352-389).

This is a well-argued, comprehensive, original and fascinating study, aimed at specialists in (Christian) ethics and the philosophy of religion rather than at a more general public. It offers much to think about, and much to disagree with; but I've preferred to devote this review to a synopsis of its contents rather than to critical questions. Personally, I am inclined to think that Adams's attempt to define the good in terms of Godlikeness is not entirely successful; but even if such a central part of the argument were unconvincing, the book is a stunning achievement. Apparently this has not been recognized as such by its publisher, which has attempted to publish a 500-page book in 400 pages, with a type setting that wrongs both the book and the publisher's reputation as a result.

Marcel Sarot