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## Adams, THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Virtue of Faith*, by **Robert M. Adams**. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Pages, 270. Cloth \$29.95, Paper \$12.95.

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This impressive volume collects sixteen essays in philosophical theology by Robert Merrihew Adams. They are on four topics: faith, the problem of evil, God and ethics, and the metaphysics of theism. All but two of them have previously appeared in print. Some helpful notes have been added to the reprinted essays, but they have not been extensively revised. Only one of the essays makes use of symbolic logic. The rest should be accessible to a wide audience interested in questions about religion. Adams is a master of the art of treating complex philosophical issues with economy and clarity. His writing displays a nice combination of plain diction and subtle thought.

It is convenient to have these essays together in one volume, but having them collected is useful in a way that goes beyond mere convenience. In his Introduction, Adams expresses the conviction that theism is to be given philosophical support by the cumulative force of many considerations. The individual essays in the volume may be thought of as parts of such a cumulative case for theism. When they are considered together, the breadth and coherence of the case are highlighted. This emergent unity adds to the appeal of the case as a whole.

In a review of moderate length it is not possible to give a full account of the contents of all these essays. Nor is it possible to consider all the issues they raise that merit detailed critical scrutiny. But it is feasible to undertake the modest task of whetting the reader's appetite, and that is what I shall try to do. I shall give some attention to each of the book's four parts in order to indicate something about its scope. After giving a thumbnail sketch of the contents of a part, I shall focus my discussion on the essay I found the most stimulating in it. I shall try to convey something of the provocative flavor of these essays by suggesting ways in which their arguments can be challenged or extended. I hope thereby to entice others into joining the enterprise of advancing discussion of those arguments.

Part One of the book is on the topic of faith. It contains two essays on Kierkegaardian themes. In the first, "Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion," Adams criticizes three arguments he finds in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. According to the Approximation Argument, objective historical reasoning cannot justify faith which decisively excludes doubt because the greatest degree of justification that such reasoning can confer on a

belief is only an approximation to certainty. According to the Postponement Argument, the total commitment of faith can never be based on objective historical reasoning since such reasoning always yields only tentative conclusions that are open to subsequent revision. And, according to the Passion Argument, the intense passionate concern essential to faith cannot be grounded on what objective historical reasoning shows is probable because infinite passion requires objective improbability. In "The Leap of Faith," which has not previously been published, Adams discusses a version of the Approximation Argument that focuses attention on degrees of belief rather than degrees of justification. According to this argument, objective historical reasoning cannot justify faith because the greatest degree of belief that can be justified by such reasoning falls short of complete conviction. Adams finds faults in all four of these arguments. He is disposed to allow that ideally the believer's emotional confidence in what is believed in faith will be greater than is strictly proportionate to the degree to which objective reasoning renders the belief probable, but he urges that faith includes an interest in having objectively probable theological beliefs.

Part One also includes the title essay of the volume, "The Virtue of Faith," which is reprinted from this journal. In it Adams defends the view that unbelief is often a sin even when it is involuntary and suggests that it is in such cases an ethical or moral fault for which one is blameworthy. The method of defense is to cite analogous cases of doxastic sins, among them heinous ethical opinions, such as belief in the principles of Nazism, and beliefs that manifest bad desires, such as an excessively high opinion of oneself that bespeaks a desire to aggrandize oneself at the expense of others. Adam takes the central form of the sin of unbelief in Christian life to be a failure to trust in truths to which one assents and not a refusal to assent intellectually to theological truths. He observes that this failure of trust often springs from such bad motives as fear or lust for complete control over the course of one's life. And he suggests that the practical purpose of identifying unbelief as a sin is to get us to acknowledge what is wrong with us and to set about changing our minds and lives.

I am not completely happy with this way of thinking about involuntary unbelief. No doubt unbelief is a deplorable state to be in, regardless of whether one gets there as a result of voluntary action. And I grant that there are theological considerations to which one might appeal in support of classifying even involuntary unbelief as sin. Many Christian theologians have held that, because original sin is inherited by the merely human descendants of Adam and Eve, it is wholly involuntary in them. Conceiving of involuntary unbelief as analogous to original sin seems to me to give us all the incentives we need to set about changing our minds and lives. I think we need not also suppose for this purpose that involuntary unbelief is a moral fault for which one is blameworthy. This supposition suggests that involuntary unbelief is properly compared to personal sin rather than to

original sin. But I do not see how it is possible for a personal sin to be wholly involuntary. It appears to me that Aquinas was right in claiming that if something is such that it renders a subsequent act wholly involuntary it entirely excuses from sin.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it seems to me that only personal sin, and not also original sin, is morally blameworthy in the descendants of Adam and Eve. So I am led to the conclusion that wholly involuntary unbelief is not morally blameworthy. This is not to say that involuntary unbelief is ethically insignificant. Since it is a deplorable state to be in, one who acknowledges being in it ought to try to get out of it. But, as the example of original sin indicates, there are states it is ethically bad to be in such that one is not accountable for being in them and so is not morally blameworthy for being in them. I believe that wholly involuntary unbelief is just such a state. Of course one may be responsible and so accountable for not trying to get out of the state of involuntary unbelief. However, in this case what is morally blameworthy is not the initial state of unbelief but is rather failing to take steps to get out of it. So, although one can be morally blameworthy for not struggling against involuntary unbelief, one is not to blame, morally speaking, for being in that state in the first place. Thus I believe we should resist the temptation to think that the sin of unbelief is morally blameworthy even when it is wholly involuntary.

Part Two of the book deals with various responses to the problem of evil. In the well-known essay "Must God Create the Best?" Adams argues that divine perfect goodness does not require that God create the best of all logically possible worlds. He supposes that God wrongs no creature and treats no creature with less than perfect kindness if he creates a world such that (i) none of the creatures in it would exist in the best of all possible worlds, (ii) none of the creatures in it has a life so miserable on the whole that it would be better for that creature if it had never existed, and (iii) every creature in it is at least as happy as it would have been in any other possible world in which it exists. Creating such a world would not necessarily result from a defect or imperfection in God's character. It might be understood, Adams suggests, in terms of God's gracious love for the creatures of the world. Unlike Leibniz, Adams thinks a Christian ethics of creation does not oblige God to maximize good consequences in creating. If this is so, the mere fact that the actual world is not the best of all possible worlds, if indeed this is a fact, does not count against the claim that God is perfectly good. In "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil" Adams attacks the Molinist doctrine that God has middle knowledge of counterfactuals of freedom which specify what free creatures would do in various circumstances. He considers it reasonable to hold that counterfactuals of freedom are not true because he is skeptical about there being anything that could serve to ground their truth. This allows him to deny that, if God had acted differently in certain ways, he would have had creatures who made free choices all of which were

right, and thereby to block one familiar reply to the free-will defense. However, he thinks it very plausible to suppose that, if God had acted differently in certain ways, he would *probably* have had better behaved free creatures than he actually has. But if God is not obliged to maximize even the expected goodness of the consequences of his actions that pertain to the behavior of his creatures, this supposition by itself yields no grounds for denying that God is perfectly good.

All this leaves open, of course, such questions as whether any of God's actual creatures has a life so miserable on the whole that it would be better for it if it had never existed. It is plausible to suppose that, if there are any such creatures, God wronged them by creating them. It is also tempting to think that the immense evils recorded in human history render it highly probable that there are such creatures. And the gruesome theological doctrine that the wicked are tormented everlastingly in hell comes close to entailing that there are such creatures. Adams takes up some of these issues in "Existence, Self-Interest, and the Problem of Evil," which I found a fascinating essay. In the final analysis, his position appears to be that they are not to be resolved conclusively by research into human history and that only an eschatological faith can really sustain the claim that there are no such miserable creatures. But he also thinks philosophical argument can contribute to theodicy by diminishing the temptation to think that the acknowledged evils of human history do render it highly probable that there are creatures God wronged by causing or permitting those evils.

One such contribution is an argument that God has not wronged us by causing or permitting most of the evils that preceded our coming to be, if our lives are going to be worth living on the whole. The reason is that we would not have existed without past evils that have had a profound impact on the course of history, because something about our biological origins, perhaps having the parents we do or maybe even being produced from particular sperm and egg cells, is essential to us, and in the absence of those evils such things would not have been appropriately conjoined.

I am not persuaded by this argument. My doubts center on the claim that something about our biological origins is essential to us. It is not that I see clearly that it is false or know how to argue effectively against it. But neither do I see clearly that it is true or know of any convincing argument for it. So it seems to me that suspending judgment on it is better than either accepting or rejecting it.

Another contribution to theodicy in this essay is an argument that, provided our actual lives are worth living, God has not wronged us by letting evils befall us after we begin to exist, if the better lives we would have had without those evils contain little enough of the concrete content we care about in our actual lives. Consider the case of Helen Keller. Despite having been rendered blind and deaf by a fever at the age of nineteen months, she led a productive and apparently happy life. Would it have been reasonable for her, as an adult, to wish for her own sake that

she had never been blind or deaf? Adams thinks not. He supposes such a wish would be much like wishing she had never existed. He thinks it would be unreasonable for her to have such a wish if she retrospectively affirms the content of her actual life and prefers it to better lives she might have had.

But I fail to see the bearing of these considerations on the question of whether God wronged Helen Keller by allowing those evils to happen to her. Consider an analogous case. A negligent guardian loses the inheritance of his infant ward through irresponsible investments. However, she struggles bravely through life and finds happiness as a seamstress. In retrospect, she honestly prefers her actual life to better lives she would have led if she had received her inheritance intact. Does this have any tendency to show that her guardian did her no wrong? I think not. So I remain unconvinced that the case of Helen Keller provides any intuitive support for the argument Adams sets forth.

Part Three contains six essays on topics in theological ethics. It opens with the influential piece "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness." There Adams defends the metaethical view that in Judeo-Christian ethical discourse at least part of what 'wrong' means is 'contrary to God's commands.' But this claim is subject to the qualification that the statement that something is wrong says something about the commands of God only on the presupposition that certain conditions for the applicability of the believer's concepts of right and wrong are satisfied, among them that God loves his human creatures. In "Autonomy and Theological Ethics," Adams responds to the charge that acting from obedience to divine commands is incompatible with acting autonomously. One form this objection takes is the claim that moral good is to be prized and pursued for its own sake and not because its pursuit has been commanded by God. Adams argues that a theonomous person quite properly pursues the good both for its own sake and out of loyalty to God and thereby has the motivational goods of both autonomy and obedience. "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again" records a fairly radical shift in the way Adams favors thinking of divine command theory. Here he construes it as the metaphysical thesis that the property of ethical wrongness is identical with the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God. This identity is taken to be metaphysically necessary but not an analytic or conceptual truth knowable by us *a priori*.

"Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief" begins with the observation that divine command theory provides the basis of an argument for theism for those who suppose that morality is objective. It goes on to discuss other moral arguments for theistic belief, particularly Kantian arguments which claim moral advantages for theistic belief. One such advantage is that the assurances theism gives of a moral order in the universe may motivate moral endeavor. Another is that theism harmonizes self-interest and morality. Adams emphasizes that it might well be very difficult, psychologically speaking, to get ourselves to respect morality as

we believe we should if we believed in an evil or amoral God. He thinks this shows that there is a special moral advantage in believing that, if there is a God, he is morally very good. "Pure Love" is an essay that comes to grips with a subtle question about the proper moral attitudes of creatures toward God. It criticizes the extreme ideal of disinterested love embodied by Fenelon's account of holy indifference. According to that rather inhuman ideal, the soul should want God's will to be done for its own sake and should be indifferent to all else, including its own salvation, except insofar as such other things are willed by God. It excludes altogether the motive of self-interest and even self-concern. Adams contends that Christian love for God must leave room for self-concern and even for self-interest. If we love one another as we should, we will be self-concerned in wanting our own actions to express our love. And if we are properly grateful to God for his goodness to us, we will have a self-interested preference for the promotion of our own good.

I found "Saints" the most suggestive essay in Part Three. In it Adams reacts to Susan Wolf's disturbing portrait of moral sainthood.<sup>2</sup> He takes Wolf to hold that a moral saint would be a person who (i) acts always in a way that is as morally good as possible, (ii) is as morally worthy as can be, and (iii) leads a life dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or society. Wolf thinks moral sainthood excludes too many human excellences to be an attractive ideal for all of us. This seems quite right. But, as Adams points out, real saints are typically rather unlike the hypothetical moral saint. Their lives are dominated by devotion to God, and they are possessed by God's love for them. Since they love what God loves, it is open to them to take an interest in any of the forms of human excellence that interest God. They commonly do not strive to make their every action as morally good as possible but have time to do things that do not have to be done. Nor do they all make improving the welfare of others the dominant project of their lives or an object of maximal devotion, for doing this can be idolatrous. Trust in divine providence allows a real saint to leave some of the work of improving society in God's hands.

I consider this a significant line of thought for theistic ethics, and I believe it may be possible to extend it in illuminating ways. There is something attractive but dangerous about moral theories such as utilitarianism which demand of us that we always do the best we can. A life single-mindedly devoted to living up to such strenuous demands can seem to be possessed by something of awe-inspiring purity. By contrast, commonsense morality is apt to look lax and flabby, its less heroic demands an unwarranted concession to human weaknesses. Much ingenuity has recently been displayed in arguing that commonsense morality is right to hold that we need not always do the best we can. Williams and Scheffler, for example, have tried to show that we may sometimes advance personal projects rather than producing consequences that are best from an impersonal point of

view.<sup>3</sup> But it is striking that Scheffler does not also endorse the claim that sometimes we must not act to produce consequences that are impersonally best, for the view that there are absolute prohibitions which limit what we may do to promote the good is pretty deeply rooted in commonsense morality too. I take it to be a theoretical advantage of theism that it can vindicate commonsense morality on both scores and do so in a manner that manifests a fairly tight unity. It is because we may trust God's providence that we need not always strive to produce the best consequences we can. And it is because the responsibility for the welfare of others rests ultimately with God and not with us that there are limits on what we may do to promote the good beyond which we would be interfering with his business instead of tending to our own. Indeed, it may be, as Gilbert Meilaender has recently suggested in this journal, that it is a mark of pride to imagine that the fate of moral value in the universe is wholly our responsibility and can thus merit our total devotion.<sup>4</sup> The danger lurking in the ideal of moral sainthood may be not only, as Adams puts it, making a religion out of morality but also attempting to play God.

Part Four is devoted to the metaphysics of theism. Three of its essays concern various aspects of the doctrine of divine necessity. "Has It Been Proved That All Real Existence Is Contingent?" discusses three types of argument against the possibility of the existence of any real thing being logically necessary. One is the Humean argument that the nonexistence of any real thing is distinctly conceivable and so is logically possible; another is the argument that there is no way in which an affirmative existential proposition could be logically necessary; and the third is the argument that real existence would not be independent of the conventions of human languages if there were logically necessary real things. Adams tries to show that each of these arguments is inconclusive and, hence, that it would be question-begging to suppose, in advance of considering in detail particular arguments for the necessary existence of real things on their own merits, that all of them are bound to fail. "Divine Necessity" rebuts two objections to the doctrine of divine necessity. One is the claim that there cannot be affirmative existential propositions which are necessary because necessity must be understood as analyticity and no existential proposition can be analytic. The other is that God, if he exists, is a powerful cause and so is concretely real in a way that precludes being necessary, since necessity is logical or conceptual in a sense that restricts it to an abstract or mental realm. Adams also suggests that it is an explanatory advantage of theism that it can explain our knowledge of necessary truths, which he believes is left a mystery by accounts of evolution, in terms of some sort of divine illumination. "The Logical Structure of Anselm's Arguments" is a fairly technical piece which formalizes Anselm's arguments for the existence of God in the *Proslogion* and in his reply to Guanilo. A noteworthy feature of this reconstruction is that Adams extracts from the reply to Guanilo a modal



argument for the existence of God that is slightly more economical of means than Hartshorne's modal argument, because it replaces the characteristic axiom of *S5* with the somewhat weaker Brouwerian Axiom.

"Flavors, Colors, and God" has not been previously published. It argues that theism provides the only promising explanation of the correlations between physical states and phenomenal qualia. According to Adams, it is quite implausible to suppose that there could be an explanation of these correlations in terms of scientific law. Some qualia seem to lack the internal complexity and the several qualitative modalities seem to lack the integration that would have to be present for there to be the kind of detailed mathematical correspondence between qualia and physical states typically expressed by the laws of modern science. Nor is it even faintly plausible to follow the eliminative materialists in denying that there are any phenomenal qualia to be correlated with physical states. But, as Descartes and Locke recognized long ago, it is open to theists to say that such correlations obtain because God wills that they do. And Adams holds that it is a theoretical advantage of theism, and part of a cumulative case for it, that it makes possible such an explanation. The remaining alternative, after all, is that such correlations are brute facts that have no explanation.

I tend to think that this appeal to the will of God has little or no explanatory force in its general form. If we wish to understand, say, why it is that brain states of type B are correlated with phenomenal blues rather than with phenomenal yellows or with no qualia at all, it strikes me that almost no satisfaction is to be derived from being told only that this correlation is a product of, in Locke's phrase, 'the arbitrary Will and good Pleasure of the Wise Architect.' I do grant that in particular cases of this kind the appeal to God's will can have explanatory power. Adams quotes a passage from Descartes that suggests an example. Why is physical damage to the foot correlated with pain in the foot rather than pain somewhere else or with no pain at all? Perhaps it is because God desires that his sentient creatures preserve their bodies and believes, as Descartes puts it, that 'nothing else would have been as conducive to the preservation of the body.' If this is so, it explains the correlation by showing that it is the best means of serving a divine purpose and that the divine action of establishing it is the rational thing to do, given God's beliefs and purposes. And since God's beliefs are all true and his purposes are all good, it shows that this action is also objectively rational in a very strong sense. But, of course, if it is true that such a correlation is the best means to the preservation of the body, then organisms whose physical states and phenomenal qualia are thus correlated will have an edge in the struggle for survival over those whose physical states and phenomenal qualia are otherwise correlated, and so an evolutionary rival to the theistic explanation suggested by Descartes is in the offing.

It may be that all the correlations between physical states and phenomenal

qualia have theistic explanations of this or similar sorts. But if they do, I doubt that we humans will have access to very many of them in this life. I have no idea what divine purpose might be best served by having sugar taste the way it does and not the way salt does, to cite an example Adams gives; and I think it unlikely that this is something we humans are capable of figuring out on our own. So I am skeptical about whether very many of the explanatory advantages theism might in principle have in this domain would in practice be accessible to us without some special revelation.

Or, it may be that some of the correlations between physical states and phenomenal qualia which obtain really are the products of arbitrary divine volitions. For all I know, all the divine purposes served by the correlations that actually obtain would be equally well served if, say, sugar were to taste the way salt actually does and salt were to taste the way sugar actually does. But, if that is so, the brute facticity that the correlation between sugar and its taste has if it is not ordained by God is merely transferred one step up the line, so to speak, and made to reside in the divine will. It is then just a brute fact that God elected the actual correlation between sugar and its taste when another would have done equally well in serving all his purposes and so would have been equally rational for him to institute. I can see very little theoretical gain in such a slight displacement of the locus of brute facticity in our metaphysics. Because the number of things that are left inexplicable is not reduced by this shift, it does not yield a result expected of theoretical unification. Inexplicable correlations are merely traded in for inexplicable divine volitions. So I am left with the suspicion that the theoretical advantages of theism in accounting for psychophysical correlations are either mostly inaccessible to us or largely illusory, even if theism is true and those correlations somehow depend upon God's will.

In order that my doubts and reservations not give rise to any false impressions, let me say in concluding that I consider *The Virtue of Faith* an important collection. I hope I have managed to convey an idea of its richness. It advocates positions that are provocative and will surely prove to be controversial. I have tried to indicate by giving some examples how this can serve to stimulate discussion. No one interested in philosophical theology should remain ignorant of the contents of this book.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 77, a. 7.
2. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy* (1982) 419-39.
3. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), and Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
4. Gilbert Meilaender, "Eritis Sicut Deus: Moral Theory and the Sin of Pride," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 397-415.