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“WHY ADAMS NEEDS TO MODIFY HIS DIVINE-COMMAND THEORY ONE MORE TIME”*

Stephen J. Sullivan

Robert Merrihew Adams has twice modified the divine-command theory of morality in interesting and plausible ways. The resulting theory says that rightness and wrongness consist respectively in agreement and disagreement with the commands of a loving God, and that a causal/historical account of the reference of moral terms is correct. I argue, first, that Adams's theory must face up to the objection that it depicts morality—implausibly—as arbitrary; second, that the account of reference he accepts does not permit him to adopt either of two natural strategies for rebutting the objection; and finally, that this account does allow him recourse to a third, somewhat less natural strategy which requires modifying the theory one more time.

For the last two decades Robert Merrihew Adams has been one of the ablest defenders of the divine-command theory of morality, which he has modified in interesting and plausible ways. In its unqualified forms the theory says that morality depends *entirely* on the will or commands of God: an action is obligatory just in case and just because God commands it, wrong just in case and just because God forbids it, and permissible just in case and just because He neither commands nor forbids it.¹ In his 1973 paper “A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness” Adams proposes a version of the theory according to which it is part of the meaning of (e.g.) ‘(ethically) wrong’ in Judeo-Christian discourse that an action is wrong if and only if it is contrary to God’s commands, but only on the assumption that God is *loving*.² In this way, he emphasizes, the divine-command theory no longer has the counterintuitive implication that if God were to command cruelty for its own sake then it would be wrong to disobey Him.³ In later writings Adams retains this emphasis on divine love: he identifies rightness with the property of being in agreement with the commands of a loving God and wrongness with the property of being contrary to those commands.⁴ But he adopts a very different semantic apparatus—primarily in his 1979 paper “Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again”—in defending the theory. Influenced by the work of Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, and Keith Donnellan on causal/historical accounts of the reference of proper names and natural kind terms, Adams maintains (a) that (e.g.) ‘(ethically) wrong’ refers in the language of nonbelievers as well as Judeo-Christian believers to the property of contrariety to



the commands of a loving God; (b) that it does so not in virtue of the meaning of the term but because this property best fills the partly causal role specified by our concept of wrongness; and (c) that it is metaphysically rather than analytically necessary that an action is wrong if and only if it contravenes the commands of a loving God.⁵

I think Adams's second modification of the divine-command theory significantly improves it in certain respects. For one thing, the theory avoids the implausible implication that when believers and nonbelievers seem to be in moral disagreement they are actually talking past one another.⁶ For another, there are both related and independent reasons for thinking that a causal/historical account of the reference of moral terms is indeed correct.⁷ But I shall argue that these improvements come at a certain price: they leave Adams's twice-modified divine-command theory exposed to the venerable objection that morality is *arbitrary* if it depends on God's will.

Section I explains this arbitrariness objection and its relevance to Adams's theory. Section II considers two natural ways for him to answer the objection and argues that the causal/historical account of reference he accepts will not allow him these means of escape. Finally, Section III suggests a somewhat less natural way out which would require him to modify his theory one more time.

Section I

In its simplest form, the arbitrariness objection to the divine-command theory is that by affirming the thoroughgoing dependence of right and wrong on what God *happens* to command, the theory implausibly depicts them as completely arbitrary, a matter of divine caprice.⁸ Perhaps some moral requirements are indeed arbitrary—for example, the requirement to worship God on this day rather than that one. But many others—such as the duty to avoid gratuitous cruelty—do not seem to be arbitrary at all. The point of the objection is that the divine-command theory ascribes to morality intuitively *unacceptable* forms of arbitrariness.

Put this way, the objection may appear to have no bearing on Adams's version of the theory. For his version explains right and wrong in terms of the commands of a *loving* God, and therefore⁹ seems to save both His commands and morality from any objectionable arbitrariness.

But things are not so simple. It is at least arguable that love itself—even divine love—is insufficient to account for all or even most of what God is supposed to command and of what morality seems intuitively to require.¹⁰ The difficulty is one which John Rawls, among others, has raised in connection with the ideal-observer or impartial-sympathetic-spectator theory of morality:

...[L]ove and benevolence are second-order notions: they seek to further the good of beloved individuals that is already given. If the claims of these goods clash, benevolence is at a loss as to how to proceed, *as long anyway as it*

treats these individuals as separate persons. These higher-order sentiments do not include principles of right to adjudicate these conflicts.¹¹

If this is correct, then although God's love will constrain His commands to some extent (e.g., by precluding His commanding cruelty for its own sake), it will also leave considerable room for objectionable forms of arbitrariness.

Interestingly, and to his credit, Adams appears to recognize this point in the course of criticizing an ideal-observer theory according to which rightness consists in what a loving God (whether or not one exists) *would* command. "I do not believe," he says, "that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any loving God. There are some things that a loving God might command and might not command."¹² More specifically, "[v]ery diverse preferences about what things are to be treated as personal *rights* seem compatible with love, certainly with deity."¹³

Equally interestingly, but less commendably, I think, Adams also appears to *accept* a significant degree of arbitrariness built into the nature of morality:

...[A]mong the things that I believe actually to be valid moral demands, there are some that I think might have been arranged differently by a God who would still be loving.... For example, a loving God could have commanded different principles regarding euthanasia from those I believe are actually in force.¹⁴

It is surely counterintuitive to suppose that, say, voluntary, passive euthanasia for a terminally ill, grievously suffering patient whose relatives prefer her to be kept alive just *happens* to have whatever moral status it does. And so the arbitrariness objections poses a challenge even for Adams's modified divine-command theory.

Section II

There are two natural ways, I suggest, in which Adams *could* try to meet the arbitrariness objection (though admittedly each departs so much from his own views that it seems unlikely that he would be very happy with it). One is to give a more determinate account of divine love in order to explain all or most of what God is supposed to command and of what morality intuitively requires. Robert Burch furthers this strategy when he contends that "a loving being wills a maximum of pleasure and happiness, and a minimum of pain and misery, for those he loves," and that therefore "God must be conceived to will that his creatures be maximally happy and minimally miserable."¹⁵ So conceived, evidently, God issues commands that are nonarbitrary because designed to maximize utility (or to be such that individual or general obedience to them would do so).¹⁶ Whether such a utilitarian elaboration of Adams's theory does capture our intuitive moral convictions is no doubt debatable; but in this respect the theory is at any rate no worse off than utilitarianism itself.¹⁷

Alternatively, Adams could argue that God has several reasons or motives *in addition to* love for commanding what He does,¹⁸ and that although (unlike love) these are not built into the *nature* of morality, they do suffice (together with love) to eliminate any objectionable arbitrariness from what He actually commands and what morality actually requires. Admittedly it is possible, on this approach, for God to have had no such reasons, or quite different ones, for His commands, and so it is possible too for moral requirements to have been quite different. But Adams can claim with some plausibility that God doesn't merely *happen* to issue commands for the reasons He does: it is a fact about His *stable, enduring*, albeit contingent character and purposes that He is disposed to issue those commands for those reasons. Thus although morality could indeed have had a different content, it *doesn't* merely happen to have its actual content.¹⁹

What might God's additional reasons be? Some remarks Adams himself makes about "the motivational force of divine commands" are relevant here. This force depends, he says, on "what God's attributes are" and on "how God is related to us." For example, "[i]t matters not only that God is loving but also that he is just."²⁰ And

[i]t matters that God has entered into covenant with us; it matters that there is a history between God and the individual and between God and the religious community—and that the divine commands play a significant role in this history, and are related to divine purposes that we see being worked out in this history and having a certain importance for our lives.²¹

In a different context Adams also suggests that "[a]s the author of all things and of all human capacities, [God] may be regarded as interested in many forms of human excellence...."²²

No doubt this account needs to be given much more detail concerning divine purposes and motives. But its usefulness to the second natural strategy by which Adams might rebut the arbitrariness objection is clear enough. The commands of a loving God who is *also* just, interested in human excellence, and concerned to promote certain personal relationships with human beings seem unlikely to render moral requirements objectionably arbitrary.²³

I very much suspect that Adams would prefer this second strategy to the first, and it is, I think, the more plausible of the two. Nevertheless, both strategies seem to me to fail, and for the same reason. To see why we need to take a closer look at the causal/historical theory of reference Adams adopts for moral terms.

According to this theory, the concept expressed by the term ' (ethically) wrong' tells us that "wrongness will be that property of actions (if there is one) that best fills the role assigned to wrongness by the concept." To fill this role a property must be "able to account for the wrongness of a major portion of the types of action that we have believed to be wrong," and must help to

explain causally our coming to hold these beliefs.²⁴ Adams maintains that the property of contrariety to the commands of a loving God meets both conditions: it is correctly “believed by Christians to belong to all and only wrong actions,” and it “plays a causal role in our classification of actions as wrong, insofar as God has created our moral faculties to reflect his commands.”²⁵ Precisely because of the causal/historical chain linking the commands of a loving God to our use of ‘(ethically) wrong,’ there is reason to regard this property as ultimately explaining or “regulating” this use,²⁶ and thus as constituting the referent of the term.

Suppose now—in accordance with the first strategy suggested above—that love (alone) motivates *all* divine commands, and that it thereby explains or regulates our use of moral terms. Then the causal/historical account of reference would seem to imply that contrariety to the dictates of *love* is the property to which ‘(ethically) wrong’ refers. On this approach Adams would simply have failed to follow the causal/historical chain back far enough.²⁷

Does the second strategy fare any better? It is not clear to me that it does. Recall that according to this strategy as elaborated above, what motivates the commands of our loving God is not merely love but also justice, an interest in human excellence, and a desire for certain relationships with human beings. It is this *complex* of factors which would then explain or regulate our use of moral terms, and the wrongness of an action would consist, perhaps, in its contravening the dictates of love tempered by justice *or* its undermining of human excellence *or* of the relationships with God. We might speak here of the existence of several *kinds* of wrongness (much as Putnam speaks of the existence of several kinds of jade²⁸), while leaving it open whether to explain this in terms of a single, *disjunctive* referent or in terms of referential *ambiguity*. In either case the true moral theory would be, not Adams’s, but a rather messy, pluralistic one—which would substantiate the conviction of many contemporary philosophers that morality is just too complex to be captured by any simple, monistic theory.²⁹

Adams, it appears, is caught in the following dilemma. On the one hand, if he retains his twice-modified divine-command theory, then he is vulnerable to the arbitrariness objection. On the other hand, if he adopts either of the two strategies I have considered for meeting the objection, then he gives up the divine-command theory altogether.³⁰

Section III

In the first two sections of this paper I have raised difficulties for Adams’s divine-command theory and for natural elaborations of it. Indeed, I once believed that from these difficulties he had no acceptable means of escape. But it now seems to me that he may be able to salvage the theory if he is willing to modify it in a somewhat less natural way, one which might be

regarded as a refinement of the second strategy suggested earlier for answering the arbitrariness objection.³¹

To see how the refinement works, let's put aside the divine-command theory for a moment and turn to Putnam's causal/historical account of the reference of natural kind terms. In "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" Putnam argues that the nature of the referent of a term such as 'water' consists in a unique "hidden structure" which is shared by paradigmatic members of the extension of the term and which explains the superficial or unhidden features by which we ordinarily identify them.³² He also notes the possibility that there are several such structures, as in the case of 'jade'—a term which

applies to two minerals: jadeite and nephrite. Chemically there is a marked difference. Jadeite is a combination of sodium and aluminum. Nephrite is made of calcium, magnesium, and iron. These two quite different microstructures produce the same unique textural qualities!³³

Finally, and most relevantly for present purposes, Putnam emphasizes that it would be a mistake "to take [his] account...as implying that the members of the extension of a natural-kind word necessarily *have* a common hidden structure," or even a small number of such structures. It may in fact turn out—as it has in the case of certain disease terms—that the paradigmatic instances "have...*so many* [hidden structures] that 'hidden structure' becomes irrelevant, and superficial characteristics become the decisive ones."³⁴

Taking this cue from Putnam, I suggest, Adams might modify his divine-command theory in the following way. There is indeed *some* sort of causal/historical chain stretching back from our use of moral terms to God's reasons or motives for commanding what He does. But God has *so many* such reasons or motives that the first *semantically important* link in the chain is His commands themselves. These provide a *better* causal/historical explanation of our use of moral terms than do His multifarious motives, just as the superficial features of a given natural kind may provide a better explanation of our use of the relevant natural kind term than do the overabundant hidden structures of the kind.³⁵

Admittedly Adams might be reluctant to accept this modification of his theory because it assigns no special role to God's *love*, which it treats as merely one among many motives for His commands rather than as the only one built into the nature of morality. Perhaps this is a price Adams would or should be willing to pay in order to save his theory. Or perhaps the suggested modification is compatible with giving love pride of place after all, as the most central or pervasive of God's motives.

A more serious worry from an epistemological point of view is that the postulation of an overabundance of divine motives seems quite *ad hoc* in the present context. I do not myself find it so very implausible to suppose that if the Judeo-Christian God exists, the motivation for His commands should

be this complex. But I am no theologian, nor even a theist, and no doubt if Adams were to modify his theory in the way I have suggested then it would be incumbent upon him to supply *independent* evidence for such complexity.

In summary, I have argued for three main points in this paper. First, even Adams's twice-modified divine-command theory must fact up to the arbitrariness objection. Second, his own acceptance of a causal/historical account of the reference of moral terms prevents him from adopting either of two natural strategies for rebutting the objection. Finally, that account does give him the resources to meet the objection if he is willing to modify his theory one more time by adopting a somewhat less natural strategy, and if he is able to produce independent support for the extreme complexity of God's motives for His commands.

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NOTES

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1. This characterization of the theory follows William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 28 and John Chandler, "Divine Command Theories and the Appeal to Love," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 22 (1985), pp. 231, 236, among others.

2. In Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., editors, *Religion and Morality* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1973), esp. pp. 320-21.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 320-24.

4. "Moral Arguments For Theistic Belief," in C. F. Delaney, editor, *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), esp. pp. 119-23; "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979); and "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987).

5. "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," esp. Sec. IV.

6. In Sec. VI of "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness," Adams had struggled to reduce this implausibility.

7. See David Zimmerman, "Metaethics Naturalized," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980); Richard W. Miller, "Ways of Moral Learning," *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985); Richard N. Boyd, "How to be a Moral Realist," in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, editor, *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Stephen J. Sullivan, *Moral Realism and Naturalized Metaethics* (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1990), Chs. 2-4.

8. Plato's *Euthyphro* is often interpreted as raising a parallel point about a divine-command theory of piety or holiness. Be that as it may, the objection has been endorsed by many contemporary philosophers (typically with a nod to Plato or Socrates): see, e.g.,

Robert Young, "Theism and Morality," in Paul Helm, editor, *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), esp. pp. 154-56, 163-64; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Atheism and Morals," in MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, editors, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 34-36; and James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), pp. 42-44.

9. As defenders of unqualified divine-command theories have claimed in response to the arbitrariness objection: see Edward Wierenga, "A Defensible Divine Command Theory," *Noûs* 17 (1983), p. 401; Robert Burch, "Objective Values and the Divine Command Theory of Morality," *New Scholasticism* 54 (1980), pp. 289-91; and Patterson Brown, "Religious Morality," *Mind* 73 (1963), pp. 239-40.

10. John Chandler makes essentially this point in "Divine Command Theories and the Appeal to Love," pp. 237-38; see also William E. Mann's review of Adams's *The Virtue of Faith* in *The Philosophical Review* 99 (1990), p. 137. In my own work the point first occurs in an unpublished 1977 paper "On the Relationship Between Theism and Ethics," pp. 06-07.

11. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 190-91, quotation at 191 (emphasis added). Chandler relies heavily, as I do, on these insightful pages in Rawls.

The significance of the italicized qualification will become clear in Sec. II (esp. note 17).

12. "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," p. 273; see also "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," pp. 121-22.

13. "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," p. 122 (emphasis added).

14. "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," p. 273. Only if Adams maintains that there are features *besides* love which are *essential* to morality or to God can he avoid the imputation of arbitrariness made in the text. But unlike Edward Wierenga (*loc. cit.*) he makes no move in this direction. I consider a related move in Sec. II.

15. *Op. cit.*, pp. 293-94. I say 'furthers' rather than 'adopts' because Burch indicates the relevance of what he regards as additional characteristics of God (e.g., fatherliness, benevolence, and omniscience).

16. See Chandler, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

17. Rawls contends that both act utilitarianism and the sort of ideal-observer theory which leads to it neglect the separateness of persons: *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 187-91.

18. Wierenga suggests that these include faithfulness, kindness, and mercifulness: *loc. cit.* And see note 15.

19. I borrow in these last few sentences from my paper "Arbitrariness, Divine Commands, and Morality," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, forthcoming. Robert Nozick appears to make a similar suggestion in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 553.

20. "Divine Commands and the Social Nature of Obligation," p. 272. Adams cites MacIntyre, "Which God Ought We to Obey, and Why?," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986), and adds:

'Just' is to be understood here in a sense that is quite naturalistic and largely procedural. We are applying to God a concept that has its original home in courts of law. *Without any appeal to a standard of fully moral obligation* we can recognize certain truths about justice: A just judge punishes people, if at all, only for things that they have actually done. *Merit* and *demerit* have some relevance to the way it is just to treat people. The just judge is interested in getting out, and acting in accordance with, the truth (emphasis added).

One may doubt whether this notion of justice is genuinely nonmoral, and suspect that Adams (as with his first modification) is significantly qualifying the divine-command theory once again. But I will not pursue the matter in this paper.

21. *Ibid.*

22. "Saints," in *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 170.

23. Patterson Brown is one divine-command theorist who explicitly appeals to God's justice (in conjunction with His love and knowledge) in order to meet the arbitrariness objection: *loc. cit.*

24. "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," pp. 74-75. I am omitting further details about the role.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

26. I borrow the notion of *regulation* here from Richard N. Boyd, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 195.

27. It might be objected that the commands of a loving God, though *motivated* by His love, are not *caused* by it, and that therefore the chain stops at or begins with His loving commands. But it does not seem essential, on the causal/historical theory of reference, that *all* the links in the chain be causal. Donnellan, for one, says quite explicitly that they needn't be: "Speaking of Nothing," in Stephen P. Schwartz, editor, *Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 216, n. 3. And though Kripke talks sometimes of *causal* chains (*Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 93, 96), he speaks as often of histories (p. 95), historical connections or chains (pp. 157, 163), or "causal or historical connection[s]" (p. 96, n. 43), and calls his account of proper names "the historical acquisition picture" (p. 164).

28. "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 241. This example is described further in Sec. III.

29. See, e.g., W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930) and Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Like all pluralist theories, this one would face the problem of how to resolve *conflicts* among the basic principles of right and wrong. But it may possess resources in this regard which other such theories lack. For presumably the *relative importance* of various right-and-wrong-making factors will be reflected to some degree in God's commands, and so determinate resolutions of at least some basic moral conflicts will exist (however difficult they may be for us to ascertain).

To be sure, there is another possibility (to which an anonymous referee has called my attention): that only a decision from God could resolve conflicts among the basic moral

considerations. This would certainly allow divine commands to play an important (albeit limited) role in morality. It would also raise the issue of *arbitrariness* all over again. Whether the view suggested would make morality *objectionably* arbitrary is a question I will not try to answer here.

30. I assume here that on any divine-command theory worthy of the name, agreement or disagreement with God's will or commands is at least in part what *makes* actions right or wrong.

It is worth noting that the foregoing dilemma is itself closely related to a version of the arbitrariness objection which is more sophisticated than the simple one presented in Sec. I. As I indicated in "Arbitrariness, Divine Commands, and Morality," this version may be explained as follows:

On the one hand, if God has no reasons for what He commands, then His commands—and hence morality as well, according to the [divine-command] theory—are fundamentally *arbitrary*. On the other hand, if God does have reasons for what He commands, then it is those *reasons* rather than divine commands on which morality ultimately depends. The first horn of the dilemma is said to be too implausible to be acceptable; the second, to abandon the divine-command theory itself.

In the same paper I argued that this objection, as it stands, rests on a kind of category mistake: in particular, on the false assumption that there must be a logical conflict between a "constitutive" explanation of rightness and wrongness in terms of divine commands and a "nonconstitutive," partly motivational explanation of rightness and wrongness in terms of the reasons for those commands. But I suggested in the end, without elaboration, that the objection "succeeds against a combination of the divine-command theory and a *causal* account of the reference of moral terms." The results of the present section so far bear out that suggestion. In Sec. III, however, I shall argue that these results do not quite hold up.

31. Another way out may be to argue that the causal/historical chain stops at God's will because His will (like God Himself) literally *is* His love, His justice, etc. In "Absolute Simplicity," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann defend the doctrine of divine simplicity presupposed here and suggest that it can be used to defuse the arbitrariness objection: "because it is God's whole *nature*, not just his arbitrary decision, which is said to constitute the standard for morality, only things consonant with God's nature could be morally good" (p. 376, emphasis added). I suspect that this doctrine—whose very coherence remains highly controversial—involves more metaphysical baggage than Adams would (or should) wish to carry. In any case, it seems to me that the account of morality Stump and Kretzmann give is more of a *divine-nature* than a *divine-command* theory; I hope to pursue this topic in a later paper.

32. *Op. cit.*, pp. 223ff. Adams himself briefly explains Putnam's treatment of this example in "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," pp. 72-73.

33. *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 240-41 (emphasis added to 'so many'). J. D. Trout tells me that 'schizophrenia' may be such a term.

35. It is an interesting question *why* these shallower explanations are better. Part of the answer, I think, is that they are considerably more *unifying*; but I shall not pursue the question here.