

PROSPECTS FOR A METAETHICAL ARGUMENT FOR THEISM

A Response to Stephen J. Sullivan

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ABSTRACT

Disagreements about the success of any given argument often arise because the suppositions of the critic differ from the suppositions of the author of the argument. In maintaining the plausibility of a metaethical argument for theism against the objections articulated by Stephen J. Sullivan, I will probe our differing suppositions with regard to the relation of theological to naturalistic metaethical theories, the starting point for the metaethical argument for theism, and the relation of the qualities of God's will to our obligation to obey God.

1

STEPHEN SULLIVAN HAS WRITTEN THOUGHTFULLY about my proposal of a theistic "Argument from the Nature of Right and Wrong" (Adams [1979] 1987b, 144). Let me call it now a metaethical argument for theism, both because that is shorter and because I think the argument may well involve theological accounts of other ethical properties besides rightness and wrongness. I should say at once that in the first section of his paper Sullivan identifies a point on which the paper I published over a decade ago needs to be (at least) updated. In taking it almost for granted that it is an advantage of a theological metaethics that it identifies rightness and wrongness as *nonnatural* as well as objective properties, I overlooked the possibility that one of my basic ideas, that of a synthetic rather than analytic theory of the nature of ethical properties, might be developed in a direction that is naturalistic (though perhaps not in precisely the sense in which I defined naturalism, as Sullivan points out). Since then there have appeared very interesting proposals for naturalistic theories of just this sort, which Sullivan cites.

The relation between theological and naturalistic synthetic theories of the nature of ethical properties deserves a thorough examination. Here, however, I will make only three points.

(1) As Sullivan indicates, synthetic versions of metaethical naturalism are sometimes commended by appeal to the explanatory power that is claimed for them. However, their explanatory power can hardly surpass that of a theological metaethics. The hypothesis of an omnipotent, omniscient God is so framed as to have *maximum* explanatory power. Nothing can explain more, and theism can integrate into itself most other explanations that can be found. That is the basis of many arguments for theism.

(2) Sullivan will be quick to point out that theism does not *correctly* explain anything unless it is *true*, and its truth is at issue in the present context. To this I might respond initially that when we are considering the explanatory power of hypotheses in assessing arguments to the best explanation, what the hypotheses would explain *if true* is precisely what is relevant. Nevertheless, explanatory power is not the *only* feature of hypotheses that is rationally relevant to their acceptance or rejection. It might therefore be argued that naturalism provides better explanations, all things considered, even though its explanatory power may be less than theism's and is certainly no greater. In particular, it might be claimed that naturalism's explanations are superior by virtue of appealing only to factors whose existence is known with more certainty than God's is, but this is hardly a decisive advantage. If it were, an inference to the best explanation would rarely provide a good reason for believing in the existence of something not otherwise known to exist. Explanations in terms of things already known to exist can have compensating disadvantages. Sullivan suggests that "moral theorists . . . should be prepared to revise intuitive or commonsensical moral beliefs to achieve such [explanatory] gains" (305). I agree. However, a possibility of providing a desired explanation *without* giving up an intuitive belief can provide a good reason for believing in the existence of something not otherwise known to exist.

(3) If asked to name the most important intuitive belief that is likely to be much better preserved by theism than by naturalism, I would say it is the belief that the good and the right are *above us*. It is important to our sense of morality, or to mine at any rate, that it claims an authority that we should not yield to any merely human society or to any faculty of our own minds—not even when the society or faculty is clothed in a fabric of counterfactual conditionals. I also believe that goodness is most plausibly regarded as superhuman in its fullest nature, and that our most interesting and convincing apprehensions of value present themselves as glimpses or reflections of a value that transcends any finite realization of it and any understanding we may have of it. Naturalists may argue that the appeal these intuitions

have for me is due at least in part to the affinity between these intuitions and my theistic beliefs and that therefore the former cannot reasonably be used to support the latter. I would reply that the ease with which many naturalists reject these intuitions may equally well be due in large part to naturalistic convictions with which the intuitions are incompatible. No doubt our other metaphysical inclinations do affect our intuitions about the nature of ethical properties, but I cannot see that theists have good reason to suppose that intuitions influenced by naturalistic metaphysics are more reliable in such matters than intuitions influenced by theistic beliefs.

This could lead to an impasse in the debate, since we are not likely to be able to settle metaphysical or metaethical issues without appeal to intuition. Though I am not particularly enthusiastic about pulling the wagons into a closed "theological circle," I might point out that from a theistic point of view our relation to God is even more important than our relation to human dialogue-partners. Accordingly, it would be idolatrous, to put it bluntly, to accept, in religious matters, an otherwise unwarranted burden of proof, simply in order to maintain or improve the dialogue.

I am not convinced that the dialogical situation is that hopeless, however. The continuing attraction of the "middle dialogues" of Plato for generations of readers is evidence that belief in the essential transcendence of the good has some intuitive appeal even outside a theistic context—and *some* appeal is all that my argument requires, for reasons that I will explain shortly. The appeal of Plato is, of course, also a reminder that theological theories are not the only historically important way of accommodating intuitions of transcendent value in metaethics. That, however, opens another front, on which I will not try to defend myself here as Sullivan has not focused his critical fire on the advantages that I have claimed for theism as opposed to nontheistic Platonism.

2

I disagree with the major thesis of the second section of Sullivan's paper. Sullivan claims that if a divine command theory in metaethics depends for its justification on the argument of my paper "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," it "cannot without blatant circularity be used to support theism" (307). This claim is based on the fact that crucial claims in my argument in that paper are introduced with the proviso, "given typical Christian beliefs about God" (Adams [1979] 1987a, 139). Now in that paper I was not arguing for the existence of God; rather, I was trying to show how a divine command the-

ory in metaethics could be true if other theistic beliefs are true. I take that to be a central topic in recent discussions of theological metaethics. Sullivan is right, however, in assuming that my metaethical argument for theism was intended to be combined with the sort of theory developed in "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again." I simply think there is no vicious circularity in the combination.

In "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again" I was trying to show that if other theistic beliefs are accepted, a divine command theory is an attractive metaethical view. Suppose we think in fact that it is *more* attractive, given those beliefs, than any alternative metaethical theory is, given nontheistic beliefs. I believe that is true, though I would not claim to have proved it. Those who agree with me on this must count it an advantage of theism that it makes available a more attractive theory of the nature of right and wrong than would otherwise be available. That is a reason for believing theism to be true—a noncircular reason, I think, and exactly the sort of reason that should be offered by a metaethical argument for theism.

It is certainly not a conclusive proof of theism, but I do not believe in "knock-down" arguments for large metaphysical conclusions, such as theism or atheism. Normally the best we can do is to articulate reasons and arguments of some force, and weigh them reflectively. I would not claim more for a metaethical argument than a role in such reasoning.

So I did not intend my divine command theory to be simply posterior to other theistic beliefs. I did not emphasize that in "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again," however, and my actual intention could escape notice because it is contrary to an assumption so widespread in modern thought that it is easily taken for granted in the absence of an explicit disclaimer.¹ There has been much talk about whether it is ever legitimate to "infer an 'is' from an 'ought'." But much more unpopular than that inference is the one from 'ought' to 'is'. It is often assumed, explicitly or (more often) tacitly, that evaluative and normative judgments must be absolutely posterior to (nonevaluative and nonnormative) judgments of existence. First we must decide what there is, and we must take that into account in thinking about what would be good or right; the inference in the opposite direction seems to many to be tender-minded to the point of soft-headedness.

This assumption must be rejected in any moral argument for theism, unless it is simply an argument to the best causal explanation of

¹ I should emphasize, however, that Sullivan's paper does *not* commit him to this assumption.

the phenomenon of moral concepts and their role in human life. More broadly, I think the assumption should be seriously questioned by any "moral realist" who holds that there are ethical facts that must have an ontological basis. For an ontological realism about ethics implies that ethical judgments have ontological implications. So if moral judgments are allowed to be *starting points* for ethical thinking, we will be accepting reasoning that starts with normative or evaluative judgments and implies something about what there is. However, if we do not allow moral judgments to be starting points (grounded perhaps in moral intuition or moral feeling)—if we accept no 'ought' that is not actually inferred from an 'is'—we lose something that I think is very important to the kind of critical judgment that ethical reflection can bring to bear.² In fact most of us could identify some moral judgments of which we are at least as confident as we are of any of the broadly metaphysical beliefs that come into play here; so why should the moral judgments not be starting points for argument, and for metaphysical argument if we think that moral facts have metaphysical implications?

3

The issues raised in Sullivan's third section are subtle. I agree with him that in the human relationships of authority and subjection that provide the model for any reasonable conception of divine commands, there are aspects of the relationship besides the existence of the parties and the commanding of the commander that contribute importantly to the significance of commanding and authority. I emphasize that, analogously, there are aspects of the nature of God and God's relation to us, as seen by believers, that contribute importantly to the significance of divine commanding and authority.

Sullivan says that on my view, however, "the fact (if it is a fact) that God is our creator and benefactor, or that some of us are bound to God by a covenant, *by itself* contributes *nothing* to our obligation to conform to the divine will, though it may help to *motivate* us . . . to do so" (309–10). I do not think my view implies that, though I am not sure I can convince Sullivan that it does not. Creation, benefaction, and covenant, on my view, are among the factors that make the commands of God a good candidate for the role of constitutive standard of right and wrong. Why should we not say that what contributes to making God's will a good candidate for that role contributes something very impor-

² At this point I think I am at least broadly in agreement with Kant's "critical" philosophy of religion, and the point is one that is very important to him.

tant to our obligation to obey God? Sullivan's insistence that believers are motivated to obey God "by the belief that they *owe* God obedience *because* God is related to them" in the relevant ways (310) suggests that perhaps he simply refuses to recognize anything as "contributing to an obligation" unless it so contributes by virtue of a *prior* and *independent* moral principle. This seems to rule out *a priori* the possibility that creation, benefaction, covenant, and so on, might contribute to God's will's being a *constitutive* rather than a *derivative* moral standard. Can I fairly complain at this point that the question is being begged against me?

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