# Précis of *Finite and Infinite Goods*[1]

ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS
*Yale University*

The subtitle of the book, *A Framework for Ethics*, expresses an intention to offer a theory of fundamental features of ethics that may be seen as structuring ethical thought and life. The framework "is organized around a transcendent Good and its relation to the many finite goods of our experience" (3). The transcendent Good is conceived as God, and one of my main aims in the book is to give comprehensive philosophical development to a theistic theory of ethics, and in the process to show some of the ways in which conceptions drawn from theistic ethics can enrich moral thought.

A second main theme of the book is the centrality of the good. I believe that being for the good is even more central to ethical life than doing the right, and that conceptions of value have a more fundamental and more pervasive role in ethical thinking than conceptions of obligation. This is not to say that the right is to be simply reduced to the good; rather I try to show that obligation has a distinctive place in ethics that is best understood against the background of a view of the good.

In this précis I summarize some (not all) of the book's main claims, first, about metaethics; second, about the good and the right; and third, about being for the good.

## Metaethics

Metaethics is a central concern of the book, though by no means its only concern. The metaethical aspects of my theory comprise, so to speak, a semantics, a metaphysics, and an epistemology of morals.

My *semantics* of morals, my account of the meaning of basic ethical terms, is analogous to some recent treatments of natural kind terms, of which Hilary Putnam's is a good example.[2] I take it that ethical statements are generally intended to state facts, facts that obtain independently of the prefer-

ences, feelings, and beliefs of speaker and hearer, and that terms such as 'good' and 'right' are meant to signify properties of persons, actions, and other objects. I do not suppose, however, that the meanings of the terms are sufficient to determine what properties (if any) they signify. What is determined by the meaning—by what must in general be understood by competent users of the term—is, as I put it, a *role* that must be filled by the property (if any) that is signified by term. The role is indicated by such facts as that the property signified by 'morally wrong', for example, must be such that well-informed, appropriately motivated people will have reason to avoid actions that have it, and that reactions of remorse, resentment, and indignation toward actions that have it will be intelligible.

It is not the aim of this semantics of morals to introduce ethical terms to people who do not already have a working understanding of them, nor to reduce them to nonethical or nonevaluative terms. The role of an ethical term will typically be indicated (as in the example just given) in terms at least partly evaluative. I argue that this is inevitable because the role of evaluation in our thought is so pervasive (23-25).

This semantics of morals leaves room for a *metaphysics* of morals which is distinct from it, and which proposes, and seeks to justify, hypotheses as to what properties are signified by the ethical terms—hypotheses as to the *nature* of the ethical properties, as distinct from the *meaning* of the ethical terms. The semantics is compatible with quite different metaphysical accounts, and (in chapter 2) I compare my theistic metaphysics of morals with a naturalistic account developed by Richard Boyd on the basis of a semantical theory very similar to mine,[3] arguing, of course, that the theistic account is superior in certain ways.

In the metaphysics of the good (developed, along with the semantical account, in chapters 1 and 2) I ascribe to God a role similar to that of the Form of the Good in some classic readings of Plato's middle dialogues, and identify the goodness—or more precisely the excellence—of other things with the property of resembling or faithfully imaging God. I argue that this gives us, at least in a theistic context, the most plausible candidate for the role of the property of goodness or excellence, and that even apart from a presupposition of theism, it may be commended by the way in which it accommodates such intuitions (widely if not universally shared) as that all the excellence we experience seems to be pointing in some way to a standard of value that transcends it. In the metaphysics of the right (in chapters 10-12) I develop and defend a view of moral obligation as constituted by commands of a supremely good and loving God, so that moral wrongness, for example, is the property of being contrary to the commands of such a deity.

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[3]    Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 181-228.

My *epistemology* of morals is not one that seeks to ground ethical beliefs in prior, nonethical principles; nor do I suppose that one needs to hold correct metaethical beliefs in order to have correct and well justified beliefs on substantive ethical issues. I assume that we come to ethical theory—and indeed to any adult inquiry—already possessing ethical and other evaluative concepts and beliefs, and with a developed capacity to form new ethical beliefs. The idea of just abandoning this intellectual apparatus is no more viable, I think, than that of just abandoning our physical or our psychological concepts and beliefs. All of these ways of thinking are too importantly and pervasively involved in our developed human ways of making our way in life.

I offer (in chapter 15) a "doxastic practice" account of the formation of ethical beliefs. Ethical belief requires ethical concepts, which have a cultural history and are transmitted through social practices of speech and related behavior. In this context we not only acquire (from our parents and others) some initial ethical beliefs; we also develop a capacity to form and revise ethical beliefs for ourselves, in ways that may lead us to disagree with other people. I believe that a developed ethical sensibility of this sort is necessary for responding well to ethical situations; and I argue that in a view, like mine, that links theology intimately with ethics, theological judgments need to be controlled, in part, by such an ethical sensibility (78-79, 263-64, 284-91, 306-9, 365-66, 368).

The epistemology of morals is closely connected with the semantics and metaphysics of morals. Given the priority of ethical doxastic practice to metaethical theorizing, in my view, it is a constraint on a plausible semantics and metaphysics of morals that the roles they assign ethical properties, and the candidates they assign to the roles, should not require too much revision of the most confident ethical beliefs that we bring to the metaethical inquiry. On the other hand, a theistic metaphysics of morals yields, happily, a way of satisfying the epistemological desideratum that there should be more than an accidental connection between justified belief and truth. The obvious theological suggestion is that because of divine purposes at work in the world it is no accident that ethical beliefs tend to be, in some significant approximation, responsive to true values and true obligations. This brings sound ethical doxastic practices in general within the scope of what may be thought of in terms of divine *revelation*. This can apply to practices that invoke the authority of sacred scriptures or historic religious traditions, but it applies in a more general way to any ethical doxastic practice insofar as it is reliable (363-72).

# The Good and the Right

**The Good:** I am not claiming that *every* sort of goodness is to be under-stood as a sort of resemblance to God. No such claim is made about useful-ness or instrumental value, for instance. It is made rather about "the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration," a sort of *intrinsic* goodness which I call *excellence*, for want of a better name (13-14). This is a natural focus for a theistic conception of the good, since the goodness of God is certainly conceived as an intrinsic excellence—an excellence that has dimen-sions richly analogous to the aesthetic as well as the moral. I try to show that excellence is also of central importance for ethics, though rather out of fashion in contemporary ethical theory. The most popular sort of good in moral philosophy today is probably *well-being*, a person's good, the property of being good *for* a person. I try (in chapter 3) to show that, far from provid-ing a viable alternative to excellence as the primary sort of good, well-being is best understood in terms of excellence, as "a life characterized by enjoy-ment of the excellent" (93).

I do not accept the rather Manichean idea that evil is to be understood in terms of a Bad itself that would be most abysmally bad as God is supremely good. Rather I think the bad is to be understood in terms of its relation to the good. In chapter 4 I offer an account of the gravest sort of badness in terms of "violation of the sacred." This involves development of the conceptions of violation and of the *sacred*. The latter, I suggest, is the sort of imaging of God that, in a high degree, constitutes the special value of persons as persons. The badness of violation of the sacred, I believe, deserves special consideration in moral and political decision making (326-29, 335-39, 343, 347).

**The Right:** The concept of the right that is most important for ethics has a more specific context than the concept of the good or excellent. It is the concept of what is in accord with one's ethical *obligations*, and I believe the concept of obligation has a force that goes beyond that of judgments of good and bad. To say that one is morally obliged to do something, or that it would be morally wrong not to do it, is to say more than that it would be good, or even best, to do it. It is to say that one *has* to do it, and the problem of understanding the force of that claim is the central problem in understanding obligation concepts.

I argue (in chapter 10) that the role of obligation properties is further defined, in part, by the appropriateness of reactions of remorse and anger when obligations are violated; and that the features I discuss of the role of obligation support the view that obligation is to be understood in a *social* context, in terms of what is actually demanded of us by another person (or persons) in a relationship that there is reason to value. This view faces the obvious objection that actual human demands are not good enough to define

morally binding obligation. The obvious response to this objection, for a theistic ethical theory, is that God's demands are good enough and can constitute ethically valid obligation; and in chapters 11 and 12 I develop and defend this solution of the problem.

## Being for the Good

It is a central feature of the semantically indicated role of the good, and particularly of the excellent, in my account of it, that it is an object of love. Loving the good, and more broadly being for the good, is an important recurring topic of the book, and the main subject of chapters 5-9.

What makes a motive ethically good? This question has sometimes been answered in terms of the utility of the motive, the value of the consequences it has or is likely to have. I argue that "the known utility of a motive does not of itself suffice to make the motive a credit to its possessor," and that the ethical value of a motive depends heavily on the value of the end at which it aims, and on the intrinsic excellence of the way in which it aims at it. In the context of a theistic ethical framework, traditional ideals of devotion to God suggest "organizing the ethics of motives around an ideal of love for the good as such" (178-79).

This ideal has an integrative character, which is attractive but is also in tension with considerations favoring diversity and particularity of objects of love. Indeed, I argue that persons, and other good objects of love, if loved at all, must be loved with particularity, for their own sake, and not just for the sake of the degree of value that they exemplify (chapter 6); and that an ideal of love should make ample room for caring, for their own sake, not only for the objects of most obviously moral concern, but also for aesthetic and intellectual goods (chapter 5). What is most important, I believe, in integrating our motives while respecting the particularity and diversity of good loves and concerns, is not to try to subordinate particular goods *teleologically* as mere means or ways to some larger or more general good. I try to show how that can be avoided while still integrating motives around love for the good as such (indeed, at least implicitly, for God) as an organizing principle (chapter 7).

Because of our finitude, our loving the good can only be quite fragmentary at best. This is an important concern reflected in the title, *Finite and Infinite Goods*. We can truly love, or even care seriously about, only a limited number and variety of the goods that are worth loving or caring about. If we are to be sane and focused lovers of good, it will be important to us to be able to see some particular goods as particularly ours to love. I argue (in chapter 13) that theistic ethics can offer at this point a valuable resource in a conception of *vocation* in terms of goods that are given, by God's invitation or command, to us to love.

It is not only that our finitude allows us seriously to love only a limited range of goods. We are also apt to find ourselves sometimes helpless to do anything to promote or defend the goods we rightly care most about. Unlike much religious ethics, and the ethics of the ancient Stoics and Epicureans, recent ethical theory has little to say about how to deal with our helplessness. Those who love the good may find at this point an important resource in the fact that standing *symbolically* for a good or against an evil is a way of *being for* the good, even when the limits of one's knowledge or power will keep one from achieving much in the way of good *consequences*. In a theistic context this can be part of the ethical significance of *worship*, and it is more generally among the reasons why it is important that not only what we cause but also what we stand for symbolically contributes to the ethical significance of our lives (chapter 9).

It is controversial what place being for the good should have in *politics*. Some liberal political theorists have wanted to limit in one way or another the role that conceptions of the good, and especially of excellence, as distinct from conceptions of right and justice, should be allowed to have in political decisions. I argue (in chapter 14) that a reasonable political order must allow a place for judgments of value in public policy, and that even liberal commitments (which I share) to civil liberties and their priority are best seen as grounded in a sense of the importance of certain goods to be protected.