

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 27 | Issue 4

Article 7

---

10-1-2010

## In Defense of Non-Natural Theistic Realism: A Response to Wielenberg

William J. Wainwright

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wainwright, William J. (2010) "In Defense of Non-Natural Theistic Realism: A Response to Wielenberg," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.  
DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201027446  
Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol27/iss4/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# IN DEFENSE OF NON-NATURAL *THEISTIC* REALISM: A RESPONSE TO WIELENBERG

William J. Wainwright

Eric Wielenberg and I agree that basic moral truths are necessarily true. But Wielenberg thinks that, *because* these truths are necessary, they require no explanation, and I do not: some basic moral truths are not self-explanatory. I argue that Wielenberg's reasons for thinking that my justification of that claim is inadequate are ultimately unconvincing.

J. L. Mackie has persuasively argued that a belief in the objectivity of moral values is deeply embedded in most mainstream moral philosophy, and presupposed in ordinary moral thought and discourse.<sup>1</sup> Mackie himself regards moral realism as mistaken and offers an error theory of the belief in morality's objectivity. But given that the appearance of objectivity *is* a feature of ordinary moral experience and practice, a belief in its objectivity appears to be the default position. Other things being equal, their apparent objectivity is a good reason for thinking that moral values really *are* objective. So if theists can provide an explanation of moral values which respects the appearance of objectivity, and is at least as good an explanation of their apparent objectivity as Mackie's, then their apparent objectivity is a sufficient reason for preferring the theist's account to Mackie's.

In *Religion and Morality*,<sup>2</sup> I argued that a suitably qualified divine command theory fills the bill, although I conceded that Linda Zagzebski's Divine Motivation Theory, and other religious theories such as Neoplatonism, might do so as well. Of course even if this is correct, theists<sup>3</sup> aren't home free since there are non-religious alternatives which preserve at least some of the appearances. Richard Boyd's ethical naturalism and Christine Korsgaard's constructivism are examples. I argued, however, that a divine command theory which incorporates the claims that God necessarily exists and necessarily forbids such things as lying or the torture of innocents does a better job of preserving the appearances than either Boyd's or Korsgaard's.

---

<sup>1</sup>J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth & New York: Penguin, 1977), chap. 1.

<sup>2</sup>William J. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>And other religious believers.



Even so, there is a formidable difficulty. Four conditions must be met if values are to be objective in my and Mackie's sense. First, value claims are true or false. Second, values are universal. If something is *prima facie* good or right it is *prima facie* good or right at all times and places. Third, values aren't artifacts of our desires and preferences. And, fourth, values are part of the "furniture of the universe." Goodness and rightness, for example, are real properties of the things that have them. If I am correct, though, basic moral facts are necessary facts. "Lying is *prima facie* wrong," for instance, or "Loyalty is a moral excellence" are true in all possible worlds. Yet if they are, moral values meet all four criteria of objectivity *simply in virtue of their necessity*. Claims about basic moral values are either necessarily *true* or necessarily *false*. The values in question are also universal. Since propositions expressing basic value facts are necessarily true, they are true in all possible worlds. Our third criterion is met as well. Necessary facts such as the facts of logic or mathematics aren't constituted by our willing or desiring them. Finally, if basic value claims are necessarily true, the facts that they express are as much part of the structure of reality as the facts of logic and mathematics. The objection is therefore this. If basic value claims are necessarily true, their objectivity is assured, and there is no reason to bring God into the picture. An appeal to theistic metaphysics is thus otiose. Like facts of logic and mathematics, basic value facts are necessary and need no further explanation.

However, in my opinion, there is an important difference between logical or mathematical facts and necessary value facts. The former are analytic; their logical necessity is a consequence of definitions and logical or syntactic rules. Some necessary facts, on the other hand, are synthetic. While they hold in all possible worlds, they can't be deduced from definitions and logical rules. The constraints that truths like these impose are substantive and not merely formal. While analytic or "narrowly" necessary truths stand in no need of explanation, many synthetic or "broadly" necessary truths would appear to do so. Because necessary basic moral truths aren't analytic, it wouldn't be too surprising, then, if they too stood in need of explanation.<sup>4</sup>

Eric Wielenberg disagrees. In an excellent article in this journal,<sup>5</sup> Wielenberg shows that it is not as easy to construct a compelling case for God's

---

<sup>4</sup>Note, too, that on objectivist moral accounts, the property of moral rightness necessarily supervenes on such things as truth telling and moral goodness necessarily supervenes on certain character types. The connection between the supervenient and subvenient properties can seem mysterious, however. For in the absence of further explanation, the (necessary) connection between such radically different sorts of properties (the psychological properties constituting Socrates' character, say, and the "non-natural" [that is, non-empirical] property of moral goodness) is just an inexplicable brute fact. Theistic metaphysics can mitigate the problem because "the theist has a suitably 'queer' world-view into which to fit these 'queer' objects." (Robert Gay, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," *Modern Theology* 3 [1987], p. 123.) Metaphysical naturalists have no corresponding recourse.

<sup>5</sup>Eric J. Wielenberg, "In Defense of Non-natural, Non-theistic Moral Realism," *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009), pp. 23–41. Parenthetical page references are to this text.

existence on the basis of the existence of objective moral facts as theists like William Craig and J. P. Moreland suppose. I am not persuaded by his criticisms of me, however.

Wielenberg's and my views on morality are similar in a number of important respects. We are both ethical realists; we agree that there are objective moral facts. We also agree that propositions expressing basic ethical facts (e.g., "It is *prima facie* wrong to inflict pain on the innocent") are necessarily true. Nor do either of our commitments to moral realism rest upon theism. Wielenberg rejects any form of supernaturalism and embraces a view of ethics like G. E. Moore's. As for me, I am at least as firmly convinced of the objective truth and necessity of "It is *prima facie* wrong to inflict pain upon the innocent" as I am of the truth of theism.

Where then do we differ? Wielenberg thinks that at least some "ethical states of affairs that obtain necessarily . . . are brute facts. . . . To ask of such facts, 'where do they come from?' or 'on what foundation do they rest?' is misguided in much the same way that, according to many theists, it is misguided to ask of God 'where does He come from?' or 'on what foundation does He rest?'" (p. 26). I disagree with Wielenberg on this point. But before explaining why, a couple of clarifications might prove helpful.

First—though I have not always been as clear about this as I should—the ethical facts which most obviously cry out for explanation are facts about moral *obligation*, and divine command theories like Robert Adams's and Philip Quinn's were specifically designed to explain why benevolence, say, is not just good, but *morally required*. I am sympathetic with views like Adams's which identify Goodness itself with God, and did not mean to suggest that *God's* goodness requires an external explanation. So I agree with Wielenberg that not every value fact cries out for an explanation in terms of something distinct from it. The fact remains that Wielenberg thinks that statements of basic moral obligation stand in no need of explanation and I do. The question expressed by "I agree that truth telling is *prima facie* good but why is it obligatory?" is neither confused nor misguided.

Second (and I am sure Wielenberg would agree), metaphysical questions should be distinguished from epistemic questions. That statements of basic moral obligation like "One has a *prima facie* duty to assist those in distress" are obviously true and stand in no need of *justification* doesn't entail that they don't stand in need of *explanation*.

So what exactly are Wielenberg's objections? "Wainwright offers two reasons for his claim that God's existence does not cry out for explanation but necessary ethical facts do. The first is that God is essentially causeless whereas ethical facts are not. . . . But my view is that at least some ethical facts *are* essentially causeless. For example, it seems to me that there is no possible world in which the state of affairs that pain is intrinsically bad is caused to obtain." And to my claim that "an indication" of the fact that "no ethical facts are essentially causeless" is "that we can coherently *conceive* that moral facts have causes"—"divine command theories, for

example, are not obviously incoherent” —Wielenberg replies that a lack of obvious incoherence isn’t sufficient to establish a thing’s metaphysical possibility. I deny that God’s non-existence is metaphysically possible, for example, even though I recognize that his non-existence isn’t *obviously* incoherent. Wielenberg concludes that his claim that some basic ethical facts are essentially causeless (and hence it is metaphysically impossible that they have causes) is therefore no worse off than my claim that God’s non-existence is metaphysically impossible (p. 29).

At least two things seem to be wrong with this, however. In the first place, because my concern is only with facts of *basic moral obligation*, we are owed an example of a *basic moral obligation* which is such that there is no possible world in which it has a causal explanation, and Wielenberg doesn’t provide such an example. But second (and more importantly), the two cases (the metaphysical impossibility of God’s non-existence and the metaphysical impossibility of basic moral facts having causes) are relevantly dissimilar. Wielenberg is of course right to insist that a lack of obvious incoherence isn’t sufficient to establish a thing’s metaphysical possibility. Nor is the fact that I can imagine it. I can imagine what backwards time travel is like (by reading H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, for example). Nor is it *obviously* incoherent. Nevertheless, there are plausible arguments purporting to show that backwards time travel *isn’t* metaphysically possible. Similarly, even though the fact that I can imagine “that there is a stone floating in space with nothing else (including God) in existence” (p. 29) and that what I imagine isn’t obviously incoherent isn’t sufficient to show that God’s non-existence is metaphysically possible, the thrust of arguments like Anselm’s, Leibniz’s, Hartshorne’s, and Plantinga’s is that his non-existence is *not* metaphysically possible. By contrast, if divine command theory is true, the facts expressed by statements of moral obligation do have causes or distinct grounds. Hence, if divine command theory is possibly true, it is possible that all facts of moral obligation have causes or external grounds, in which case facts of moral obligation thus are *not* essentially causeless. For the two cases to be genuinely parallel, then, Wielenberg would have to show that there are reasons for thinking that divine command theory isn’t metaphysically possible which are at least as strong as the arguments offered by Leibniz and others for the metaphysical impossibility of God’s non-existence. And Wielenberg hasn’t done that.

As Wielenberg notes my “second reason for the view that God’s existence does not demand an explanation in the way that necessary ethical facts do is that God’s existence is ‘self-explanatory or intrinsically intelligible’ which implies that ‘if we could grasp [God’s] nature we would see *why* it exists’” (p. 29).

Wielenberg finds three things that are wrong with this. First, “it is not at all clear that this notion of a self-explanatory being is coherent.” Second, even if it *is* coherent, “the concept of a self-explanatory God is surely at least as mysterious as the bruteness of the ethical facts it is supposed

to help explain." If so, then, "in the context of worries about the relative 'queerness' of" ethical approaches like Wielenberg's "as compared with a theistic approach" like mine, "the appeal to the obscure notion that God is a self-explanatory being hardly tips the balance in favor of" the latter. Third, "the appeal to God's existence being self-explanatory seems merely to introduce a new non-trivial necessary truth into the picture: that God's nature has whatever mysterious feature(s) explains His existence." And because "the presence of this remarkable feature in the divine nature . . . is not explained by a *distinct* state of affairs," it is just as much a brute fact as ethical facts are on views like Wielenberg's or G. E. Moore's. If it is, then, with respect to the existence of brute non-trivial necessary facts, views like mine offer no advantage over views like Wielenberg's (p. 30).

How strong are these objections? Wielenberg's only support for the first (the suspicion that the concept of a self-explanatory being is incoherent) is a reference to a 1980 essay by John Morreall.<sup>6</sup> Morreall's arguments are less than convincing, however, relying as they do on such highly questionable claims as "Existence [and even necessary existence?] can't be a predicate" and "Individuals possess their essences contingently." Wielenberg's second objection is stronger. The notion of a self-explanatory being is "obscure" and to that extent "mysterious." Whether it is as mysterious as the concept of brute facts of basic moral obligation is another matter. It isn't clear to me that it is, but Wielenberg's and my intuitions on this point differ, and I know of no arguments that would be likely to resolve our conflict of intuitions.

Wielenberg's third argument calls for more discussion. If P is an essential property of something, x, then that x has P isn't mysterious, doesn't cry out for an explanation. Nor is the fact that a thing has the essential properties it does mysterious. Neither the fact that Euclidian triangles are essentially such that their angles sum to 180 degrees nor (if Aristotle is right) the fact that humans are essentially rational cries out for an explanation. But that Euclidian triangles or humans or God or facts of basic moral obligation exist is another matter. And while *God's* existence may be *self-explanatory*, the existence of humans and, arguably, that of basic moral obligations and platonic entities like Euclidian triangles is not.

So are God's existence and the existence of facts of basic moral obligation, on a view like Wielenberg's, equally "brute"? In Wielenberg's sense, yes, for he defines a brute fact as a state of affairs whose obtaining "is not explained by a *distinct* state of affairs" (p. 30, cf. p. 25). There are at least two other senses of "brute fact," however. In the first, facts are brute if and only if they are contingent but have no explanation. On some views, the existence of the physical cosmos or the obtaining of the basic laws of nature are brute facts in this sense. In the second, facts are brute if and only if they are susceptible of a distinct explanation yet lack one. Since both

---

<sup>6</sup>John Morreall, "God as Self-Explanatory," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (July 1980), pp. 206–214.

God's existence and facts of basic moral obligation are necessary, neither are brute facts in the first of these senses. But on my view, while God's existence isn't susceptible of a distinct explanation,<sup>7</sup> the existence of facts of basic moral obligation is. The latter, if lacking an external explanation, is thus brute in a way in which the former is not. Moreover, since only facts that are brute in one or the other of these two senses<sup>8</sup> cry out for an explanation, the existence of facts of basic moral obligation on a view like Wielenberg's requires an explanation in a way in which the God of classical theism does not. The two cases, then, aren't really on a par.

There is more to be said, of course. I have suggested "that at least some theistic approaches can explain the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral and that this feature of such approaches gives them an advantage over theories (like [Wielenberg's]) that cannot offer a deeper explanation for the supervenience. . . . Robert Adams's theory in *Finite and Infinite Goods*" is an example of such an approach. Wielenberg thinks that the apparent advantage of theories like Adams's is illusory, however, since those theories, like his, entail "the existence of brute ethical facts" (p. 30). "Among such facts are the following: That the Good exists, that the Good is loving . . . , and that the Good is just. . . . Indeed, once we see that, on Adams's view, the Good = God, we see that Adams's theory entails that the Good has no external foundation, since God has no external foundation. It is not merely that Adams's view fails to specify where the Good comes from;" it "implies that the Good did not come from anywhere"<sup>9</sup> (p. 32, cf. pp. 39–40).

However, if the *explicanda* are facts of *basic moral obligation* rather than value facts in general, then theories like Adams's have a clear advantage over theories like Wielenberg's, for even though both may appeal to the badness of pain, say to justify the claim that we have a *prima facie* duty not to inflict it, the former can explain both the badness of pain *and* its moral forbiddenness while the latter cannot. On a view like Adams's, pain is *bad* because it is the opposite of a quality that resembles a feature of "the necessarily existing divine nature" (p. 31), namely, his unbounded joy, and its infliction is *forbidden* because God prohibits it. On a view like Wielenberg's, the intrinsic badness of pain has no further explanation, and even if pain's intrinsic badness supplies us with a reason not to inflict it, it doesn't follow that we are morally *obligated* not to inflict it. A theory like Adams's can thus explain more than a theory like Wielenberg's and that is a reason for preferring it.

---

<sup>7</sup>God's aseity logically precludes his having a distinct explanation.

<sup>8</sup>And not merely brute in Wielenberg's sense.

<sup>9</sup>Does the fact that God *is the Good*, though, require an explanation? I think it doesn't because "God is the Good" is a statement of identity, and statements of identity don't require explanations. Or in any case, not causal or quasi-causal explanations. There is no causal or quasi-causal explanation of the fact that water = H<sub>2</sub>O, for instance, or that the morning star = the evening star.

I don't pretend that these remarks settle the dispute between us. But to put them in perspective, let me conclude by repeating a remark which I have made elsewhere. In a theistic or Platonic world, the Good lies at the heart of reality. The existence of objective values or of necessary connections between natural (i.e., empirical) properties and the value properties that supervene upon them are surely less surprising in a world of this sort than in a world in which what is deepest is matter, energy, natural law, or chance. While the existence of objective values is formally consistent with a naturalistic metaphysics, it doesn't comport well with it. And, indeed, the unpopularity of moral realism among most committed metaphysical naturalists can be largely attributed to just this sense of incoherence or lack of fit. It is telling, I think, that most metaphysical naturalists share the reaction of theists who believe that the existence of objective values would require an explanation but deny their existence since they see no way of providing one.<sup>10</sup>

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

---

<sup>10</sup>William J. Wainwright, "Response to Maria Antonacci," *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 4 (November 2006), pp. 224–228. Cf. Wainwright, *Religion and Morality*, p. 67.