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Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism, by Erik J. Wielenberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 196 pages. \$65.00 (hardback).

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Erik Wielenberg espouses an interesting position in metaethics—godless normative realism—which maintains that objective moral properties exist and are knowable, whether or not God exists. Wielenberg claims that moral properties supervene on non-moral properties, but he agrees with G. E. Moore that moral properties are non-natural: they are not identical to, reducible to, or constituted by non-moral properties. Wielenberg also agrees with the many critics of supervenience that it asserts, without explaining, a “weird” (16) form of covariation between non-moral and moral properties (11–12). This motivates his metaphysical project (chapter 1) of providing a non-theistic account of why this covariation obtains.

The core of Wielenberg’s account is the *making* relation. For example, “the natural fact that an act is a piece of deliberate cruelty makes that act morally wrong” (16). Of course, we then want to know what “making” means. Wielenberg suggests it is a “particularly robust” type of causation (18), which does not require cause and effect to be linked by a natural law, where cause and effect are simultaneous, and where the cause metaphysically necessitates the effect. Thus the making relation provides some explanation of the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral. However, if one asks why the making relation obtains, Wielenberg asserts that it is a brute fact, and points out that every account appeals to brute facts sooner or later (24).

An obvious objection is that the making relation is at least as mysterious as supervenience. Consider one of Mother Teresa’s supreme acts of kindness and a supreme act of cruelty by one of the Romanian communists that tortured Richard Wurmbrand. If we inspect the natural properties of these acts (those properties studied by the natural sciences), there seems to be no connection with any moral properties. In a godless world, there is no underlying *telos* according to which some natural properties conform to the way the world is supposed to be, while others do not. Rather, these properties simply *are* distributed in a certain way: there is no reason to think that the distribution underlying Mother Teresa’s act of kindness is morally good, or that the distribution underlying the communist torturer’s act of cruelty is morally bad.

Further, it does not seem that Wielenberg’s account is sufficient to answer a number of skeptical challenges. Suppose the communist torturer asserts that the cruelty of his act *makes* it right, and that the kindness of



Mother Teresa's act *makes* it wrong. If the making relation is a brute fact, there are no resources to refute immoralists and psychopaths who simply assert that the specific brute relations are different from those that a nice guy like Wielenberg assumes to obtain. The problem is that the making relation does not explain the *particular* patterns of covariance between non-moral and moral properties we may hope for. We need to know *what it is* about the natural properties of Mother Teresa's act of kindness that makes it good, and *what it is* about the natural properties of the torturer's act that makes it bad.

Wielenberg is aware that many will see an obvious advantage in a theistic foundation for ethics, according to which the moral properties of human actions are rooted in the nature of God. In chapter 2, he responds to this challenge and his main strategy is a *tu quoque* argument. Wherever the theist claims that godless normative realism appeals to unexplained brute facts, Wielenberg shows that the theist makes similar appeals. For example, on Robert Adams's version of divine command theory (DCT), Good = God, which implies that there are "ethical facts that are substantive, metaphysically necessary and brute" (43).

Wielenberg is right that DCT appeals to brute ethical facts about God. But not all brute facts are equal: they can be "at home" or "not at home" in a worldview. Since theism already postulates the existence of a necessary being who is perfectly good, brute moral facts about God are not surprising and they do ground explanations of the morality of human actions. For example, God makes it the case that human beings have special value because He makes them in His image—the image of a supremely valuable being. But without God, there is no obvious reason to expect the emergence of any moral properties, because the natural base properties are valueless. So Wielenberg needs to explain what it is about the configuration of certain valueless properties that necessitates the emergence of value.

William Lane Craig has argued that in a godless world, human beings are no more valuable than dogs or lumps of slime. Wielenberg replies by appealing to special features of human beings: they "can reason, suffer, fall in love, [and] set goals for themselves" (51). However, this riposte is insufficient, because from a godless point of view, these abilities simply reflect the particular way *human* adaptations have been shaped by natural selection, and there is no naturalistic reason to say that our mode of adaptation is superior to that of other creatures. As James Rachels pointed out, "We are not entitled—not on evolutionary grounds, at any rate—to regard our own adaptive behavior as 'better' or 'higher' than that of a cockroach, who, after all, is adapted equally well to life in its own environmental niche" (*Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* [Oxford University Press, 1990], 70).

There are further problems with Wielenberg's assertion that "evolutionary processes have endowed us with certain unalienable rights and duties" by giving us the "right cognitive capacities" (56). The account conflicts with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which

speaks of “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>). The problem is that cognitive capacities are not uniformly distributed (some humans lack them altogether) and they come in degrees. So, as J. P. Moreland asks, “Why should we treat all people equally in any respect in the face of manifest inequalities among them?” (*The Recalcitrant Imago Dei* [SCM Press, 2009], 144) Just how can universal and equal moral rights be necessitated by natural capacities not all humans have and which come in varying degrees?

Wielenberg thinks that “to have an obligation just is to have decisive reasons to perform a certain action” (57), but it is hard to see how one can be obligated to a free-standing reason. One needs to recognize an authoritative source for the reason. If someone claiming to be king provides me “decisive reasons” to do something, still I am not obligated to do it unless I recognize that he *is* the king. Indeed Wielenberg seems inconsistent on this matter as he later complains that a problem for DCT is that “*reasonable non-believers*” (77) might discover God’s command revealed in their conscience but have no obligation to obey it because they do not recognize its ultimate source (79). Yet defenders of DCT can note that God delegates authority to faculties (Rom: 2: 14–15) or people (Rom. 13), so unbelievers can recognize secondary authorities He has instituted without recognizing Him.

Chapter 3 shifts to moral epistemology. Earlier in the book, Wielenberg asserts that “moral properties themselves are epiphenomenal” (13–14) which makes it hard to see how we could know them. To address this question Wielenberg draws on the idea that cognition is divided into “System 1” (the adaptive unconscious) and “System 2” (the conscious mind). On this view, if *x*’s instantiation of the non-moral property *N* makes *x* instantiate moral property *M*, *S* can reliably believe that *M*, provided:

- (1) System 1 reliably classifies *x* as *N*;
- (2) This causes *S* to believe that *x* is *M*;
- (3) The process type is reliable;
- (4) *S* has no undefeated defeaters for the belief that *x* is *M*. (94)

There are many worries about this account. Most fundamentally, since *M* is epiphenomenal it is hard to see how *S* can possess the concept of *M*, and without that concept *nothing* can cause *S* to believe that *x* is *M*. But even if *S* does have the concept of *M*, the fact that System 1 reliably classifies *x* as *N* is no reason to expect that *S* will believe that *x* is *M*. In fact, it is not clear why *S* should have a specifically moral belief at all: for example, why should not *x*’s being *N* cause an emotional reaction but no moral judgment? Just because *x*’s being *N* makes *x* to be *M* is no reason to expect that *x*’s being *N* will cause *S* to *believe* that *x* is *M*.

In the last chapter, Wielenberg takes on the “Evolutionary Debunkers” (Gilbert Harman, Michael Ruse, Sharon Street, and Richard Joyce) who

argue that evolution invites moral skepticism because it offers an account of (some) of our moral judgments which nowhere depends on there being any moral facts. Wielenberg does not offer a general response but cites his view of human rights as an example of how this objection might be evaded. He thinks genetic interests account for our understanding of a moral barrier around ourselves and other kin (137–139) and that the barrier could be extended to non-kin by the “Likeness Principle” which, based on people’s known properties, “leads us to attribute to all human beings the same underlying essence” (142). But postulating this essence would not show that belief in universal human rights is *true*. The idea of a human essence might be a useful fiction, but it seems to conflict with naturalistic evolution. Ernst Mayr noted that because no fixed species are recognized, “the essentialist philosophies of Aristotle and Plato are incompatible with evolutionary thinking” (*Population, Species, and Evolution* [Harvard University Press, 1970], 4). And on evolutionary grounds, just why is someone who *can* reliably discriminate between kin and non-kin morally wrong to reject the rights of the latter?

Wielenberg claims knowledge of human rights is compatible with evolution because the same cognitive faculties that make us believe we have these rights also confer those rights (145). But if moral properties are epiphenomenal, they play no role in shaping our moral judgments, and for any given situation there are more adaptive but false moral beliefs than true ones. So it seems unlikely our moral beliefs would be reliable. Wielenberg admits that evolution itself is not truth-tracking but suggests it still might give us faculties that are (164). But how likely is it that it would?

Wielenberg argues that the answer depends on the extent to which natural laws permit species to emerge with radically different moral principles (167). Street suggests alternative evolutionary histories: we might have evolved like lions (males kill offspring that are not their own), or social insects (who sacrifice individuals for the collective good). Wielenberg responds that the same factors that give us the right cognitive capacities to be moral beings make us more protective of offspring (170–172). But surely the same capacity to make moral judgments could coexist with very different social organization. Darwin argued that “If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would . . . think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers” (*The Descent of Man* [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998], 102). And there does not seem to be any incompatibility with having functional moral faculties and making radically different judgments about *who* is valuable. Even in the actual world, we see social organizations that depend on slavery, apartheid, the caste system, tribal warfare and genocide. So why cannot the skeptic urge that it is easy to see how we could *all* evolve to depend on slaves or to build group cohesion by exterminating others in tribal warfare? In such societies many clearly do not believe that all human beings have

the same moral worth. Why, on the basis of natural properties, are they wrong? The answer is not that they lack functional moral faculties.

Wielenberg's book is well-organized, very clearly written and will doubtless engender a very wide-ranging discussion. But in my view, the book does not succeed in developing a plausible metaphysics and epistemology for godless normative realism.