

Review of Erik J. Wielenberg: Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism

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ABSTRACT: Erik Wielenberg's new book *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* aims at defending a non-theistic of 'robust normative realism': the metaethical view that normative properties exist, and have four features: (1) objectivity, (2) non-naturalness, (3) irreducibility, and (4) causal inertness. In my review I criticize that Wielenberg does not address semantic issues which are crucial both to defending robust normative realism, and to assessing the empirical claims he makes. Moreover, and relatedly, I suggest that Wielenberg's main psychological and evolutionary claims may be less well-founded than suggested. Despite these worries, however, *Robust Ethics* is a highly valuable contribution to metaethics. Wielenberg's writing is extremely accessible, engaging, witty, and clear, he develops various fascinating novel arguments, and skilfully links analytic reflections with the consideration of empirical data.

The cover of Erik Wielenberg's new book *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* shows a tree growing out of the middle of an opaque lake. Presumably, this tree symbolizes the objective normative properties, whose existence Wielenberg sets out to defend. Anchored solidly to the ground, the tree allows us to orientate ourselves. There is one thing, at least, that promises to give us security. But is this beautiful scene real? Having read *Robust Ethics*, I am still not convinced of the existence of objective normative properties. That said, even those who doubt its conclusions must acknowledge that Wielenberg's book is excellent. His writing is extremely accessible, engaging, witty, and clear, he develops various fascinating novel arguments, and skilfully links analytic reflections with the consideration of empirical data. Consequently, *Robust Ethics* is a highly valuable

contribution to metaethics, and in particular ranks among the best defences of robust normative realism so far.

Wielenberg's aim in *Robust Ethics* is to develop and defend a non-theistic version of a metaethical view that has come to be known as 'robust normative realism' (x). According to robust normative realism, normative properties exist, and have four features: (1) objectivity (i.e., they are independent from certain mental attitudes or reactions of observers), (2) non-naturalness (i.e., they are non-physical), (3) irreducibility (i.e., they are not identical to or entirely constituted by non-normative properties), and (4) causal inertness (i.e., they do not have causal effects). In recent years robust normative realism has become increasingly popular. Following other prominent advocates, (e.g., Russ Shafer-Landau. *Moral Realism: A Defense*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; Michael Huemer. *Ethical Intuitionism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005; David Enoch. *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) Wielenberg attempts to support robust normative realism by showing how various objections against it fail (ix, 14). The first and the second chapter of the book discuss metaphysical objections, and the third and the fourth chapter focus on epistemological ones. What distinguishes *Robust Ethics* from other well-known defences of robust normative realism is mainly its approach. Wielenberg does not only employ classic methods of analytic philosophy, but he also extensively appeals to scientific data.

The first chapter of the book mainly addresses the notion of supervenience. Metaethicists widely agree that normative properties supervene upon non-normative properties. By this they mean that it is impossible for two things to have different normative properties without also having different non-normative properties. But why does this modal relation hold? According to a common objection, (non-theistic) robust normative realism cannot provide an adequate answer to this question. Wielenberg concedes that the supervenience of normative upon non-normative properties cannot be explained in terms of reduction or a certain form of resemblance. Following Michael DePaul, however, he argues that there is another explanation that does withstand scrutiny. The reason why it is impossible for two things to have different normative properties without also having different non-normative properties is that the instantiation of non-normative properties 'makes' normative properties be instantiated (11). In his discussion of a number of more particular supervenience-based objections against robust normative realism, it becomes clear that Wielenberg understands making as a particularly robust form of causation. For non-normative properties to 'make' normative properties means

for them to metaphysically necessarily and immediately bring the latter about, in a way that does not depend on the existence of laws of nature (18-20).

The second chapter of *Robust Ethics* turns to theistic metaethical views. Wielenberg first defends his version of robust normative realism against several objections put forward by philosophers such as William Craig. In particular, he attempts to refute objections according to which the non-existence of God implies that (1) nothing is truly good or bad (there are entities distinct from God that possess intrinsic value), (2) all human lives lack meaning (engaging in intrinsically valuable activities or enabling such activities gives our lives non-ultimate meaning), (3) moral obligations and rights do not exist (normative properties are ‘made’ by non-normative properties of human beings, such as their reasoning, suffering, or setting themselves goals), (4) we have no normative reason to meet our moral obligations (the properties that make actions obligatory also provide decisive normative reasons to perform them, even self-interested reasons), and (5) non-theistic robust normative realism should be rejected because it must posit logically necessary relations without adequately explaining them (theists posit such relations as well). In the last part of the chapter Wielenberg goes on the offensive. He considers two prominent contemporary theistic metaethical views, and raises several objections against them.

Chapter three begins by addressing the objection that because robust normative realism conceives of normative properties as non-natural and causally inert, it is unable to explain how we can come to know about these properties. In recent years this objection has been claimed to be supported by psychological studies, according to which much of our moral cognition is ‘System 1’ cognition, i.e., it happens fast, automatically, effortlessly, and is closely associated with emotions. Wielenberg’s response, therefore, mainly attempts to show that even System 1 moral judgements can ground moral knowledge. In doing so he develops what he calls his ‘Morphological Reliabilism Model’ (100). Empirically, this model claims that our conscious moral judgements often arise from the non-conscious application of moral principles that are “hidden” from us (96-107). Epistemologically, it claims that in order for a person to be justified to make a System 1 moral judgement, it suffices that the judgement arises from the non-conscious application of moral principles which are generally likely to produce true moral judgements (91-96). As the Morphological Reliabilism Model does not imply that anyone actually does have moral knowledge, Wielenberg then goes on to respond to various sceptical objections. First, he considers objections that are based on the hypotheses that all/deontological moral judgements are significantly causally influenced by emotions.

Wielenberg claims these hypotheses to fall short of undermining our justification for all/deontological moral judgements, given the Morphological Reliabilism Model, because conscious moral reflection can form emotions, and thereby make these emotions sensitive to the objective moral truth; and, because the fact that deontological moral judgements are significantly causally influenced by emotions does not give us reason to consider them mere rationalizations or based on morally irrelevant factors.

Chapter four continues the book's engagement with empirically motivated sceptical objections, moving from the proximate to the ultimate causes of moral judgements. In particular, Wielenberg considers several so called 'evolutionary debunking arguments,' as they have recently been put forward by Michael Ruse, Sharon Street, and Richard Joyce. Many arguments of this kind attempt to undermine our justification for making moral judgements by showing that in view of these judgements being significantly causally influenced by evolution, we would be extremely lucky if the judgements reliably correlated with the objective moral facts. Wielenberg's main response to this objection appeals to both his Morphological Reliabilism Model and to what has come to be known as a 'third factor explanation'. According to third factor explanations, the reason for moral judgements reliably correlating with moral truths is not that these judgements are made because they are true, but some third factor. In Wielenberg's case, this factor is supposed to be the fact that humans have certain cognitive capacities (145-146, 155-156). Not only does Wielenberg claim this fact to be part of the causal explanation of why humans (implicitly) judge that they themselves and others are surrounded by a moral barrier that it is wrong for others to cross (our disposition to judge so is a product of evolution), but also of the metaphysical or logical explanation of why this judgement is true. Possessing certain cognitive capacities 'makes' an individual surrounded by a moral barrier. Wielenberg closes his final chapter by arguing that we are no luckier to possess moral knowledge than we are to possess other kinds of knowledge, and raises the suspicion that the appeal of evolutionary debunking arguments is partly due to their exploiting pre-existing sceptical tendencies.

How convincing is Wielenberg's defence of robust normative realism? *Robust Ethics* provides some intriguing novel considerations in favour of this position. It also contrasts pleasantly with much other work in metaethics in that it seriously considers scientific evidence, and mostly does so in a cautious and reflective way. As suggested in the introduction, however, metaethical views other than robust normative realism, in particular anti-realist ones, still appear more well-founded to me.

One shortcoming of the book is its selection of topics. No book can address all serious objections against a position such as robust normative realism. Given the significance that is widely ascribed to the issue, and even more its impact on several of Wielenberg's main empirical claims, however, it seems fair to say that his book would have benefitted greatly from also addressing moral semantics. Most importantly, Wielenberg might also have discussed the objection that objective, non-natural, irreducible and causally inert normative properties do not exist because when we say or think of something that it is right, wrong, good, bad, etc., we do not even purport to refer to such properties (but rather, say, express desires, or beliefs about what we as individuals or our culture consider right, wrong, good, bad, etc.). In addition, some of the arguments that Wielenberg does put forward in defending robust normative realism do not seem beyond doubt either. This is sometimes due to philosophical reasons, for example with regard to his postulation of the making relation, a claim which his brief explanations do not make sufficiently clear and plausible. Here, however, I will only point out that two of Wielenberg's empirical hypotheses may be less well founded than suggested.

First, consider the hypothesis that humans evolved to judge that they themselves and others are surrounded by a moral barrier. In support of this claim Wielenberg develops an account of how judging so might have been adaptive or a likely consequence of adaptations. In particular, he argues that viewing themselves to be surrounded by a moral barrier increased our ancestors' motivation to resist oppression and exploitation by others (137-139), and viewing others in this way was driven by kin-selection, an innate principle of likeness, and group selection (139-144). There is certainly some intuitive appeal to this account. However, in order for Wielenberg's evolutionary hypothesis to have "some plausibility" (as he claims it has, 144), it would also have to be supported by further empirical evidence. And not only is it difficult to acquire such evidence in the case of psychological traits, it is not even completely clear what would count as it. Evolutionary psychologists considerably disagree, for example, about whether and to what extent the hypothesis that some psychological trait evolved is supported by this trait's being universal or developing irrespectively of environmental stimuli. Finally, the plausibility of the hypothesis that humans evolved to make (certain kinds of) moral judgements also significantly depends on what we mean by a judgement being moral, including whether we take these judgements to purport to refer to objective, non-natural, irreducible and causally inert moral facts (see Richard Joyce. "The many moral nativisms." In

Cooperation and its Evolution. Edited by Kim Sterelny, Richard Joyce, Brett Calcott, Ben Fraser, 549-572. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

A second empirical hypothesis that might be less well supported than suggested is the Morphological Reliabilist Model's claim that our conscious moral judgements often arise from the non-conscious application of moral principles that are "hidden" from us. Wielenberg defends this claim by drawing an analogy to our linguistic capacity, and suggesting that the claim is also consistent with Jonathan Haidt, Fredrik Björklund and Scott Murphy's famous 'moral dumbfounding' research (97-98). However, the similarities and differences between our moral and linguistic capacities are highly contested, and Wielenberg's second argument is incomplete at the very least. Subjects in Haidt et al.'s study were asked to judge the wrongness of disgust-evoking, yet (supposedly) harmless actions, for example consensual safe sex between siblings. Most of the subjects immediately and confidently judged these actions to be wrong. They did not even change their minds when it was pointed out to them that none of the principles they (implicitly) cited in favour of judging so actually applied. According to Wielenberg, this phenomenon can be explained by the subjects not being able to consciously access, and thus articulate, the moral principles on which their judgements were based. But Haidt et al.'s study — though questionable in other respects — is actually designed to rule this explanation out (Jonathan Haidt, Fredrik Björklund, Scott Murphy. *Moral Dumbfounding: When Intuitions Find No Reason*. <http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/articles/manu-scripts/haidt.bjorklund.working-paper.when%20intuition%20finds%20no%20reason.-pub603.doc>. 6). All of the study's subjects were undergraduate students from a US university. Since other research had shown that people belonging to this group primarily justify their moral judgements by reference to harm-related principles, and the actions that subjects were presented with were not supposed to involve any harm, Haidt et al. rightly inferred that subjects' moral condemnations were unlikely to be based on the application of inaccessible principles as well. Finally, the extent to which our moral judgements arise from the non-conscious application of hidden principles also depends significantly on what one understands by a moral judgement.

These worries notwithstanding, let me close by emphasising again that *Robust Ethics* is an excellent book. If not with me, I am sure that at least with some readers, Wielenberg will also finally lead them to see, or to see much more clearly, a robust tree amidst the opaque lake of our practical lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Erik J. WIELENBERG. *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 224 pp.