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In *Robust Ethics*, Erik Wielenberg presents a realist theory of moral properties in moral metaphysics and a reliabilist theory of moral knowledge in moral epistemology. The main project of the book is then to defend these views against the most pressing objections to them.

At the foundation of Wielenberg's metaphysics are states of affairs (36). The states of affairs which obtain are facts. Some facts are contingent whereas others obtain necessarily, in all possible worlds. More importantly, some of the obtaining facts are moral facts that are in part constituted by instantiations of moral properties. These moral properties are both objectively real (i.e., not dependant on human attitudes towards them) and *sui generis* (i.e., of their own kind) (8 and 14). They are therefore non-natural properties that are not reducible to any other types of properties. They cannot be investigated by the methods of empirical sciences like natural properties, and they are not divine supernatural properties either.

As an example of moral facts, Wielenberg mentions the fact that some activities such as participating in a loving relationship are intrinsically good (4). The intrinsic qualities of this activity both make the activity good and provide us with reasons to take part in it (7–8). Additionally, some moral facts concerning which non-moral properties *make* different actions right and wrong are also both basic and necessary. One example of such facts is "that a given action is an instance of torturing an innocent being just for fun makes it intrinsically bad" (37). In virtue of this type of basic necessary moral facts, other derivative moral facts obtain contingently. James's action of pushing a button can be bad because it is an instance of

torturing someone for fun. However, that action is only contingently bad given that it only contingently has necessarily bad-making quality of being an instance of torturing someone for fun.

Wielenberg's reliabilist account in moral epistemology has two parts. The first is an account of the actual cognitive processes that typically trigger moral judgments in us (89–107). It is based on the current state of play in the empirical moral psychology. On this view, fast, automatic and effortless mental processes that are inaccessible to our consciousness first classify the actions we face by relying on complex hidden principles that latch on to the natural properties of these actions. These classifications then give rise to emotive reactions of anger, disgust, and outrage (and presumably in other cases also to positive emotive reactions). These emotive reactions finally causally trigger moral beliefs in us about whether the relevant actions are right or wrong.

The second part of the epistemological account begins by assuming that there are at least some moral facts (87). It then follows the reliabilist theories of epistemic justification and claims that the moral beliefs produced by the previous cognitive process are justified in so far as that process is reliable (90-95). This is when the process, when it works in the ordinary way, tends to trigger more often true moral beliefs in us than false ones.

The four chapters of *Robust Ethics* then defend the previous views against different sets of objections. The first chapter explores alternative versions of the claim according to which non-naturalist forms of moral realism cannot make sense of the fact that moral properties supervene on the non-moral properties. This is roughly the idea that non-naturalists cannot tell us why there could not be a difference between the moral properties of two states of affairs without there also being a difference between their non-moral base properties. Furthermore, some critics of non-naturalism (like Frank Jackson and Campbell Brown) have also argued that already the fact that the moral properties supervene on the non-

moral properties enables us to reduce them to the non-moral properties (25–26). And, others (like Mark Schroeder and Tristram McPherson) have claimed that it would be a significant strike against non-naturalism if the view can only take the supervenience relation between the moral and the non-moral to be an inexplicable brute fact (21 and 32–33).

Wielenberg argues that we can make sense of the supervenience relation in terms of the making relation. If it is always a necessary fact that the instantiation of a certain set of non-moral properties *makes* the actions that have those properties right or wrong, then it should not come as a surprise that the moral properties and the non-moral properties co-vary across possibilia (23–24). The making-relation is also why the non-naturalists can reject the idea that supervenience is a brute fact and why they can think that supervening moral properties are distinct from the base-level non-moral properties.

This, of course, leads to J.L. Mackie's original challenge against non-naturalism. He asked: what in the world do we mean by making here (J.L. Mackie, *Ethics – Inventing Right and Wrong* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], 41)? We have made progress only if we have made sense of something we were previously unable to explain (supervenience) in terms of something we understand better (making).

This is one of the weaknesses of Wielenberg's position. He claims that we can understand the relevant making-relation as an instance of a special sort of "robust causation", which is different from the ordinary kind of causation (18). The only example of this kind of special causation (that does not depend on the laws of nature and which is both necessary and simultaneous) we get is the case of God willing a state of affairs and that state of affairs obtaining. The problem is that we have no idea of how divine causation is supposed to work and so no explanation is given of how the non-moral properties of actions make them right or wrong. Thus, in the end, Wielenberg's moral metaphysics are built on a shaky foundation,

and yet the critical discussions of Schroeder's, Jackson's, Brown's and McPherson's objections to non-naturalist realism are interesting.

The second chapter discusses objections to non-naturalist realism by philosophers who think that God is the foundation of morality. These objections attempt to show that, without God, nothing could have value, lives would lack meaning, there would not be moral obligations, and we would have no reasons to carry those obligations out even if they existed (42–61).

As Wielenberg notes, standard defences of non-naturalism do not address these religious concerns (41). However, he claims that these objections are important enough to deserve responses. I remain unconvinced. Wielenberg focuses on a number of objections from William Craig, but Craig's objections amount to no more than hopelessly confused rhetorical questions and unsupported statements. Wielenberg does a good job in clarifying what the underlying concerns could perhaps be, and his strategy for responding to these concerns is sensible. He shows convincingly how the theists own ethical theories are equally vulnerable to them: these theories too in the end have to rely on brute moral facts for which no external justification can be given (54–56).

The bulk of chapter 3 explains Wielenberg's reliabilist view in moral epistemology, which I briefly summarised above. I found this chapter's overview of the current scientific moral psychology the most valuable part of the book. Wielenberg describes the most recent developments in this field in a clear, illuminating and appropriately critical way. The model of how ordinary moral cognition often works, which he constructs on the basis of the empirical work, in addition seems plausible.

The main argument of the chapter, however, is that when we combine this view of how we actually make moral judgments with reliabilism we can respond to many epistemological objections to non-naturalism. The claim is that, if moral cognition works in

the presented way, then we can acquire knowledge of the causally inert *sui generis* objective moral facts even if we are unable to perceive these facts directly or come to know them through explicit inferences or conceptual analysis (109). We can know what the moral facts are as long as the principles which our minds implicitly use to classify actions under various categories (which lead to emotional reactions which in turn trigger moral judgments in us) are true moral principles. True principles here are ones that track the genuine right- and wrong-making characteristics of actions (105).

This chapter also addresses the epistemic objections to realism which attempt to show that, if emotions play a significant role in moral cognition like the empirical sciences suggest, this must in itself undermine our moral beliefs (111). After all, there is no reason to assume that the triggers of emotional responses are also morally significant factors. For example, many deontological judgments (you cannot kill a person to save many others) are said to be based on reactions of disgust, which are then claimed to be blind to moral reasons (128).

Wielenberg's Aristotelian strategy to respond to these concerns is to explain how our emotional reactions are malleable and something we can domesticate (117–119). What we are disgusted by depends very much on our moral upbringing and the kind of mental dispositions we acquired through it. Through appropriate moral upbringing our disgust can be calibrated to react to features of states of affairs that are genuinely right- and wrong-making features of our actions (such as unfairness). If this is right, then the presence of disgust in the production of our moral beliefs need not be a distorting factor. This is true even if the morally relevant factors to which disgust is a reaction to are not always transparent to us in explicit reflection.

As already mentioned, this chapter is an excellent overview of the empirical literature in contemporary moral psychology. I also think that Wielenberg's attempts to show that emotions need not be distorting factors in moral cognition are successful. He is right to argue

that very often the attempts to show that emotions get us further away from the moral truth are based on questionable first-order ethical assumptions. This chapter is, however, less good in its discussions of justification and knowledge in epistemology given how controversial and debated these core notions are. A standard reliabilist framework is accepted too quickly and without much explanation or detail. Few problems of the view are mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, but these are left largely unaddressed (92–95). For this reason, we are still quite far away from a satisfactory account in moral epistemology.

The last chapter of Wielenberg's book addresses the common claim that evolutionary explanations of our moral beliefs undermine their epistemic justification (134). The basic crux of this objection is that, if there is an evolutionary explanation for a moral belief, then that belief cannot count as knowledge even if it were true because its truth is in this case irrelevant for whether the subject holds that belief or not (146–149).

Wielenberg begins the chapter from an account of how moral beliefs could have evolved (135–144). He focuses on our beliefs about moral barriers – the belief that we have a right not to be killed, tortured and so on. If we view ourselves and our kin to be protected by these rights, then this provides us with motivation to resist any transgressions. This will in turn lead to fewer transgressions of moral barriers, which improves our prospects of survival. We then extend this thinking to everyone because we assume that they too share our essential nature that gives us our rights. This is an instance of applying the evolutionarily beneficial principle of treating like cases alike (139–142).

Let's accept that our moral beliefs about our basic rights were produced by the previous evolutionary mechanism. We then do not need to use the truth of these beliefs to explain why we have them. Why would they then count as knowledge even if they were true? Wielenberg offers a version of the so-called "third factor" response to this question (144–146). It begins from the thesis that anyone who has evolved to have beliefs about rights

must have certain sophisticated cognitive faculties because already understanding the concept of rights is demanding. The claim then is that we have the relevant rights in virtue of those very cognitive faculties. In other words, having those cognitive faculties itself makes us beings who are protected by moral rights. There is therefore a match between (i) the cognitive faculties that enable us to have beliefs about rights and (ii) the qualities in virtue of which we have those rights. This match then guarantees the truth of the moral beliefs about rights, which we were evolved to have. Furthermore, this is not an accident. The moral facts could not have been different anyway and given how the laws of nature are it is unlikely that we could have evolved to have different moral beliefs (166–175).

Wielenberg does an excellent job in extracting the different forms of the evolutionary debunking argument from Ruse, Street, Joyce and Kahane. He also convincingly argues against the main crux of these arguments. That we can explain what moral beliefs we hold without referring to their truth is not sufficient in itself to undermine the epistemic justification of these beliefs. I do have, however, concerns about the focus on rights in the response. I'm not convinced that we have the central rights in virtue of the cognitive capacities that enable us to hold beliefs about rights. Do we not acquire rights in virtue of being sentient or in virtue of being planning agents? I'm also not sure how this account would extend to our moral beliefs that involve other moral concepts. Do the capacities that enable us to think about what is good also in the same way make things good?

Overall, Wielenberg excels in clearly laying out some of the main objections to non-naturalist realism in moral metaphysics and epistemology. He is also very good at finding the weak spots of these objections and in presenting philosophically and empirically plausible responses to them. Despite this, I have a major concern about how much philosophical progress has been made. There are at least two dimensions on which philosophical views should be evaluated. Being able to respond to objections is, of course, one of them.

However, we must also acknowledge that explanatory power counts: the more a philosophical theory can explain, illuminate and make sense of, the better it is.

Some theories are very easy to defend against objections, but we still tend to reject them because they lack explanatory power. Extreme forms of scepticism are like this. It is downright impossible to make objections to these views such that they would rationally require the sceptics to change their views. Yet, many of us ignore sceptical positions because there is nothing they can help us to understand. I worry that Wielenberg's non-naturalist realism in metaethics is exactly like this. I doubt there are many objections to the view that would rationally require Wielenberg change his views. Yet, when I was reading the book, I kept asking myself: what is the defended position helping me to understand?

The explained empirical science did help me to understand how moral cognition works sometimes and the evolutionary theory how we perhaps came to have our moral beliefs. However, the non-naturalist realist elements of the view seemed to offer very little constructive help for understanding anything at all. Wielenberg does not discuss alternatives such as expressivism or naturalist forms of realism, but if these views turn out to have more explanatory power then we might have sufficient reasons to reject non-naturalism even if it can be defended against many of the traditional objections addressed here.

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