

Robust Ethics and the Autonomy Thesis A Reply to Erik Wielenberg

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“If God does not exist, everything is permitted.”¹ This phrase from Dostoyevsky’s novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, sums up a common intuition held by many people: that in the absence of God, there cannot be things like moral requirements or obligations. This idea has been widely held historically with thinkers as diverse as Berkeley, Locke, Kant, Jean Paul Sartre, and J. L. Mackie defending versions of it.² However, most contemporary western ethicists today would dismiss it out of hand. Instead, they hold to what is called the autonomy thesis: The thesis that there can be moral requirements to ϕ regardless of whether God commands, desires, or wills that people ϕ .

A prominent example includes a position dubbed “robust normative realism” in contemporary secular metaethics. Robust normative realism is the thesis that moral requirements exist as *sui generis* nonnatural properties that supervene upon natural properties. Robust normative realism has received

ABSTRACT: In his monograph, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, Erik Wielenberg offers arguably one of the most sophisticated defenses of the autonomy thesis to date. Wielenberg argues that (I) the divine command theory is problematic because it cannot account for the moral obligations of reasonable unbelievers; (II) Godless normative robust realism (GRNR) can be formulated in a way that avoids the standard objections to the autonomy thesis; and (III) GRNR provides a better account of intrinsic value. In this paper, I will argue Wielenberg’s defenses of the autonomy thesis fails. I will argue that his objection to divine command theories fails, that he fails to address two standard challenges to the autonomy thesis adequately, and, finally, that Wielenberg fails to show that GRNR better accounts for the intuition that certain things are intrinsically good than various forms of theistic alternatives.

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco, CA: North Point, 1990), 589.

2. William Bristow, e.g., contends that in the eighteenth century “most Enlightenment thinkers hold that morality requires religion, in the sense that morality requires belief in a transcendent law-giver and in an after-life”; see “Enlightenment,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, accessed June 25, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/#Eth>.

several important defenses in recent years from philosophers such as Shafer-Landau and Derek Parfit.³

Erik Wielenberg maintains, correctly, that these recent defenses contain an important blind spot. Wielenberg observes that “the most prominent defenders of robust normative realism intend their theories to be secular, at least to the extent of implying that moral reality does not depend on God for its existence. Yet that aspect of robust normative realism has been given very little attention, much less defense from its most prominent defenders.”⁴ In fact, “Engagement with theistic approaches to morality is almost entirely absent from recent book-length defenses of robust normative realism.”⁵ This lacuna is problematic because there exist “both worthwhile theistic theories of morality and challenging arguments against secular moral realism.”⁶ A significant number of contemporary theists have, in the last few decades, embraced and defended the divine command theory of ethics, whereby moral requirements depend immediately upon God. Others such as Linda Zagzebski, Mark Murphy, and Nicholas Wolterstorff have developed accounts of central moral concepts such as virtues, rights, and goodness in which God plays a central ontological role. To the extent that such theistic theories are plausible, “they constitute a viable alternative to robust normative realism” and “present a challenge to this view.”⁷ Consequently, “an important part of providing a full defense of robust normative realism is addressing these theories and challenges.”⁸

Wielenberg’s book *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, is an attempt to offer such a defense. It offers an up-to-date discussion of contemporary theistic approaches to ethics and responses to arguments against the autonomy thesis and arguably constitutes the most sophisticated defense of the autonomy to date. Wielenberg defends three conclusions: (I) the most plausible alternative to the autonomy thesis, the divine command theory, is problematic because it cannot account for the moral obligations of reasonable unbelievers; (II) robust normative realism, the thesis that moral requirements are *sui generis* nonnatural properties that supervene upon natural properties, can be formulated in a way that avoids the standard objections to the autonomy thesis; and (III) robust normative realism provides a better account of intrinsic value than any metaethical theory that identifies moral goodness with states of God. In this paper, I will argue Wielenberg’s defense of the autonomy thesis fails.

3. Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4. Erik Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5. *Ibid.*, 41.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

8. *Ibid.*, 41.

Wielenberg's Criticism of Divine Command Metaethics

Let's look at the first conclusion Wielenberg defends, that the divine command theory is problematic because it cannot account for the moral obligations of reasonable unbelievers.

By divine command theory, Wielenberg has in mind the divine command metaethics (DCM) defended by Robert Adams, William Lane Craig, William Alston, and C. Stephen Evans.⁹ This version of DCM holds that the property of being morally required is identical with the property of being commanded by God.

Wielenberg takes for granted the existence of "reasonable non-believers."¹⁰ These are people who "have been brought up in nontheistic religious communities, and quite naturally operate in terms of the assumptions of their own traditions."¹¹ Similarly, "many western philosophers, have explicitly considered what is to be said in favour God's existence, but have not found it sufficiently persuasive." Wielenberg assumes that many people in these groups are "reasonable non-believers, at least in the sense that their lack of belief cannot be attributed to the violation of any epistemic duty on their part."¹²

Wielenberg argues that if the property of being morally required is identical with the property of being commanded by God, then these people would have no moral obligations. Seeing that reasonable nonbelievers clearly do have moral obligations, it follows that DCM is false.

Why do reasonable nonbelievers lack moral obligations, given DCM? Wielenberg cites the following exposition of the problem from Wes Morriston:¹³

9. Robert Adams first defended the view that "ethical wrongness is (i.e., is identical with) the property of being contrary to the commands of a loving God," in "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Delaney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 116–40. This position was later articulated and defended in more detail in Robert Adams, "Divine Command Meta-Ethics Modified Again," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7 (1979): 66–79; and *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Adams's position was subsequently defended by William Alston, "Some Suggestions for Divine Command Theorists," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 303–26, and by William Lane Craig. See in particular William Lane Craig, "This Most Gruesome of Guests," in *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism and Ethics*, ed. Robert K. Garcia and Nathan L. King (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2009), 172; also William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 529–32. More recently Adams's position has been adapted and defended by C. Stephen Evans, in *God and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

10. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 77.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Interestingly, Morriston states, "This example is adapted from Wielenberg." So Wielenberg is citing an example from Morriston, which Morriston cites as an example from Wielenberg. See Wes Morriston, "The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-Believers: A Special

Even if he is aware of a “sign” that he somehow manages to interpret as a “command” not to steal, how can he [a reasonable nonbeliever] be subject to that command if he doesn’t know who issued it, or that it was issued by a competent authority? To appreciate the force of this question, imagine that you have received a note saying, “Let me borrow your car. Leave it unlocked with the key in the ignition, and I will pick it up soon.” If you know that the note is from your spouse, or that it is from a friend to whom you owe a favor, you may perhaps have an obligation to obey this instruction. But if the note is unsigned, the handwriting is unfamiliar, and you have no idea who the author might be, then it is as clear as day that you have no such obligation. In the same way, it seems that even if our reasonable non-believer gets as far as to interpret one of Adams’s “signs” as conveying the message, “Do not steal,” he will be under no obligation to comply with this instruction unless and until he discovers the divine source of the message.¹⁴

Morrison’s argument contains a subtle equivocation. In the first line above he expresses a disjunction: a person is not subject to a command if he does not know (*a*) who issued it, *or* (*b*) that it has an authoritative source. The example he cites, the case of an anonymous note to borrow one’s car, is a case where *neither* of these disjuncts holds. The owner of the car knows neither who the author of the note is *nor* whether its source is authoritative.

However, the conclusion Morrison apparently draws is that failure to know who the author is, by itself, is sufficient to exempt someone from being subject to the command. This inference does not follow.¹⁵

The mistake can be illustrated, by reflecting on examples where, a person does not know who the author of a command is, but does recognize that it has an authoritative source. Suppose I am walking down what I take to be a public right of way to Orewa Beach, New Zealand. I come across a locked gate with a sign that says: “private property, do not enter, trespassers will be prosecuted.” In such a situation, I recognize that the owner of the property has written the sign, though I have no idea who the owner is. Does it follow I am not subject to the command? That seems false. In order to be subject to the command, a person does not need to know who the author of the command is. All they need to know is that the command is authoritative over their conduct.

In fact, being subject to a command is compatible with having mistaken beliefs about who the author of the command is. Suppose I believe that the beach property I am in front of is owned by Holly Holmes, after having read about her purchase of it in the *New Zealand Herald*. In fact, the *Herald* has gotten details wrong, and the house has been sold to Kim Schmidt. In this

Problem for Divine Command Metaethics,” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 65 (2009): 5.

14. Morrison, “The Moral Obligations of Reasonable Non-Believers,” 5–6.

15. The inference here would be as follows: if *P*, then (*Q* or *R*); not *R*; therefore, not *P*.

situation, it is still the case that when I read the sign, “private property trespassers will be prosecuted,” I am subject to the command. The fact I have all sorts of mistaken beliefs about the identity of the command’s author does not seem to make any difference.¹⁶

Wielenberg concedes the problem and concludes that a reasonable unbeliever does not need to recognize moral obligations as God’s commands to be subject to them. Instead, all that is required is that he recognize these commands as coming from “some authority or other.” However, he thinks this rejoinder “doesn’t address the central worry” Morrision raises. Taking Robert Adams’s version of DCM as paradigmatic, Wielenberg notes: “An important part of Adams’s strategy for accounting for the moral obligations of non-theists is the idea that some divine commands are issued by way of “moral impulses and sensibilities common to practically all human beings since some (not too recent) point in the evolution of our species.”¹⁷ The problem is that “reasonable non-theists’ lack of belief prevents them from recognizing any divine signs they receive—including their own “moral impulses and sensibilities”—as commands issued by someone who has authority over them.”¹⁸ While they will recognize certain actions as obligatory, “some reasonable non-believers do not construe the deliverance of their consciences as commands at all.”¹⁹

There are two problems with Wielenberg’s objection.

First, he misconstrues Adams’s position. Consider Adams’s reference to “moral impulses and sensibilities common to practically all human beings” the full quotation is as follows:

Principles of moral obligation constituted by divine commands are not timeless truths because the commands are given by signs that appear in time. People who are not in the region of space-time in which a sign can be known are not subject to the command given by it. Of course, *if* the signs by which divine commands are given are moral impulses and sensibilities common to practically all human beings since some (not too recent) point in human evolution, all of us can be fairly counted as subject to those commands. *But* the conception of a divine command allows for divine commands with historically restricted audiences.²⁰

Adams’s words “if” and “but” here suggest that he is not claiming that divine commands are “given through, moral impulses and sensibilities common to

16. C. Stephen Evans gives a similar counterexample; see C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 113–14. See also Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 157.

17. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 76.

18. *Ibid.*, 79.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, 270 (emphasis added).

practically all human beings.” Adams is alluding to a hypothetical possibility to which he thinks there are alternatives.

Moreover, in fact, Adams, elsewhere explains he thinks that “divine commands are revealed” largely “through human social requirements,”²¹ that is, through requirements and demands other people make on our conduct and blame us for not complying with. He states, “a divine command against murder” has “been made known very widely to the human race,” and “dissemination of such prohibitions has surely taken place largely through human systems of social requirement.”²² He elaborates:

On this view, divine ethical requirements will not form an entirely separate system, parallel and superior to systems of social requirement. Rather human moral will be imperfect expressions of divine commands, and the question of their relation to God’s commanding will be whether and how far they are authorized or backed by God’s authority, not whether they agree with an eternal divine command laid up in the heaven.²³

This takes the sting out of Wielenberg’s criticism. Even though reasonable nontheists do not construe their own “moral impulses and sensibilities” as commands issued by someone who has authority over them, they will inhabit social relationships where other people, parents, teachers, spouses, children, employees, courts, governments make demands upon them that they recognize as authoritative. Such demands will clearly be understood as real commands.

Second, it is not clear that Wielenberg is correct that “reasonable believers” do not perceive the deliverances of their conscience as authoritative commands.

Consider John Hare’s recent analysis of a divine command.²⁴ Hare starts by noting that commands are a type of speech act, and in particular they are prescriptive speech acts that involve imperatives. However, commands differ from other imperatives such as exhortations, advice, warnings, requests, and “instructions for cooking omelets or operating vacuum cleaners”²⁵ in certain important respects. Commands differ from advice or exhortations, in that commands presuppose authority on the part of the commander; additionally, “in command there is standardly some expectation of condemnation if the command is not carried out.”²⁶ Moreover, one is not permitted or given consent by the commander to not follow the command. Similarly, commands, unlike say, cooking instructions, are not “conditional, or, in Kant’s

21. *Ibid.*, 264.

22. *Ibid.*, 264–5.

23. *Ibid.*

24. John E. Hare, *God’s Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32–44.

25. *Ibid.*, 37.

26. *Ibid.*, 44.

term, ‘hypothetical.’”²⁷ Commands then are categorical prescriptions “with which the person commanded is not permitted not to comply, and a prescription in which there is an internal reference, by the meaning of this kind of speech act, to the authority of the speaker, and to some kind of condemnation if the command is not carried out.”²⁸

It is striking how these features of a command are also features of moral obligations. Moral requirements are prescriptive, telling us what to do, and purport to be not just advice but authoritative, telling us what we must do and are not permitted to do. Similarly, moral requirements are categorical in that their applicability is not contingent on some goal or end those subject to them have. Similarly, moral requirements condemn our behavior and our failure to comply without an adequate excuse, and render us guilty and blameworthy. Furthermore, others can justifiably censure us, rebuke us, and even punish us.

So, while reasonable nonbelievers will not construe the deliverances of conscience as a speech act by a person, it is not implausible that their pretheoretical concept of a moral requirement is something very much like a command in all other respects.

This fact, I think, undermines Wielenberg’s objection because it is plausible to suggest that a person who is aware of all aspects of a command, while not recognizing it as a speech act from a person, is still subject to the command.

Suppose, for example, that an owner of one of the beachfront properties in Orewa puts up a sign that states “private property do not enter, trespassers will be prosecuted” and that John sees the sign and clearly understands what it says. He understands the sign as issuing an imperative to “not enter the property.” John recognizes this imperative is categorical and is telling him to not trespass; he also recognizes this imperative as having authority over his conduct, he also recognizes that he will be blameworthy if he does not comply with this imperative. However, because of a strange metaphysical theory, he does not believe any person issued this imperative and so it is not strictly speaking a command. He thinks it is just a brute fact that this imperative exists. Does this metaphysical idiosyncrasy mean that the command does not apply to him and that he has not heard or received the command the owner issued? That seems to me to be false. While John does not realize who the source of the command is, he knows enough to know that the imperative the command expresses applies authoritatively to him and that he is accountable to it.

27. John E. Hare, “What Is a Divine Command?” (Wilde Lectures, University of Oxford, February 8, 2012).

28. Hare, *Divine Command*, 49.

Standard Objections to the Autonomy Thesis

Wielenberg's rebuttal of DCM therefore fails. This brings me to the second major conclusion he defends, which was noted in the introduction as II. As an alternative to DCM, Wielenberg proposes a position he labels "robust normative realism," the thesis that moral requirements are *sui generis* non-natural properties that supervene upon natural properties. By itself, robust normative realism is compatible with both theism and atheism. Wielenberg refers to the conjunction of robust normative realism and atheism as Godless robust normative realism (GRNR). Wielenberg contends that GRNR can be formulated in a way that avoids the standard objections to the autonomy thesis. Here I will look at two.

Reasons for Being Moral without God

One objection Wielenberg discusses is the perennial concern that, in the absence of God, people lack compelling reasons to comply with morality's demands. Wielenberg takes the following comments by Craig as representative of this objection.

Even if there were objective moral values and duties under naturalism, they are irrelevant because there is no moral accountability. If life ends at the grave, it makes no difference whether one lives as a Stalin or as a saint Why should you sacrifice your self-interest and especially your life for the sake of someone else? There can be no good reason for adopting such a self-negating course of action on the naturalistic worldview. . . . Life is too short to jeopardize it by acting out of anything but pure self-interest.²⁹

Wielenberg initially suggests that Craig is arguing that "if people had moral obligations but God did not exist, then people would have no normative reason to carry out their obligations."³⁰ He rejoins, plausibly, that people often do have normative reasons to refrain from wrongdoing: "the fact rape harms its victims is a compelling reason for *me* not to rape, regardless of whether refraining from rape benefits *me*."³¹

Wielenberg then suggests that Craig might be offering a different argument. He might be contending that "if God does not exist, then people lack *self-interested* normative reasons to perform their moral obligations." Wielenberg suggests that taken this way, there are two problems with the argument. First, even if it were true, it would not follow that people lack *any*

29. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 56–7, the citation is from William Lane Craig, "The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality," accessed July 25, 2017, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/meta-eth.html>.

30. *Ibid.*, 57.

31. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

normative reasons to perform their obligations. Second, this claim is not true since “people often do have powerful self-interested normative reasons for caring about fulfilling their obligations.”³² Wielenberg cites various empirical studies that show that immorality tends to disrupt and damage people’s social relationships and harm meaningful connections.³³

However, it seems implausible to me that Craig is maintaining either of these positions. Elsewhere, Craig clarifies his position as follows: “If God does not exist, then prudential reason and moral reason can and often do come into conflict, in which case there is no reason to act morally rather than in one’s self-interest. That’s consistent with saying that in other cases it is, indeed, prudent to act morally.”³⁴ Here Craig affirms that if atheism is true, people often can have *both* moral and prudential normative reasons to carry out their moral obligations. So he does not affirm either of the positions Wielenberg attributes to him. He is not saying that no one ever has reasons to refrain from wrongdoing, nor is he claiming that no one ever has prudential reasons to refrain from wrongdoing. Craig’s objection is rather that, if atheism is true, moral and prudential reasons can and do on occasion come into conflict. When they do, people lack any reason to comply with what morality demands. “One has moral value pulling in one direction and prudential value tugging in the opposite, and no way to decide rationally which choice to make.”³⁵

Later Wielenberg suggests a different way of formulating the argument:

- (1) If GRNR is true, then morality and self-interest sometimes diverge in the long run.
- (2) But morality and self-interest never diverge in the long run.
- (3) Therefore, GRNR is false.³⁶

Wielenberg grants the truth of (1); the empirical studies he earlier cited show only that people “often” have powerful prudential reasons to do what is right, not that they always or necessarily do. Wielenberg states that “an important difference between a theistic universe and a godless universe” is that “without God, there is always the possibility that we will face a deep conflict between what is in our own self-interest and what morality requires of us.” On the other hand, if God ex-

32. *Ibid.*

33. Wielenberg’s examples all deal with Hume’s idea of the sensible knave, the *individual* who has a reputation for morality but engages in undetected wrongdoing when it is in his self-interest. They do not however address Kai Nielsen’s example of a “classist amoralist” who forms deep and genuine relationship to others within his class, but ruthlessly exploits the lower classes. See Kai Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 295–6.

34. William Lane Craig, “Q&A 230 Is Life Absurd without God?,” accessed February 6, 2017, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/is-life-absurd-without-god>.

35. Craig, “This Most Gruesome of Guests,” 182–3.

36. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 59.

ists “there is a perfect correlation between morality and self-interest.”³⁷ Wielenberg’s rebuttal, therefore, focuses on denying (2). His treatment of (2) consists of a single paragraph:

It is hard to imagine a convincing non-question begging rationale for (2) that wouldn’t at the same time tell against (1). One might appeal to the existence of God to support (2), but this obviously begs the question. Alternatively, one might find a secular ground for (2) but to the extent that such a ground is convincing it undermines the first premise. . . . Craig often proceeds as if (2) were a datum for which any plausible moral theory must account. But such an approach has nothing to commend it. It is no more plausible than the falsity of (2) as a datum and arguing against Craig’s view. Such arguments get us nowhere.³⁸

Here Wielenberg provides two reasons for rejecting (2). These are (a) that there is no non-question-begging reason for affirming (2) that does not undermine (1), and (b) that (2) is not a datum to be explained by a moral theory. Neither is compelling.

Regarding (a), the problem is that several people, including Craig, have offered reasons for affirming (2) which neither assume theism nor undermines the first premise, that is premise (1).

Robert Adams, for example, has appealed to the intuition that moral judgments “have an action- and preference-guiding force that they could not have unless everyone had reason to follow them in his actions and preferences.”³⁹ Adams argues that “if happiness will, in the long run, be strictly proportioned to moral goodness, that explains how virtually everyone does have an important reason to want to be good.”⁴⁰ However, if this is not the case, it is difficult to justify the conclusion that “everyone does have reason always to be moral.”⁴¹

Adams here focuses on the idea that *everyone* has a reason to be moral, that if an action ϕ is morally wrong for a person P to perform, then P has a reason to not ϕ . Stephen Layman has offered a similar line of argument, focusing instead on the idea that people always have *decisive* reasons to do what morality demands. Layman refers to what he calls the “The Reasons Thesis: The strongest reasons always favor doing what is morally required.” The idea is that if something is obligatory, we not only have *a* reason to do it but that this reason is always decisive. It is not overridden by reasons we may have for not complying, such as reasons of self-interest or economics. Layman provides several examples that suggest that “if there is no God and no life after death, then there are cases in which morality requires that one make

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 158.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

a great sacrifice that confers relatively modest benefits (or prevents relatively modest harms).” He argues that if such cases obtain, whatever moral reasons we have for doing the action in question are overridden by weightier reasons of prudence.⁴²

Neither of these arguments begs the question by assuming God exists. They appeal not to God’s existence, but to theses about the authority of moral requirements, that they provide virtually everyone with decisive reasons for acting. Nor do these arguments give us a reason for questioning (1). Both, of them, in fact, concede and incorporate (1) in their thinking. So, Wielenberg’s claim, that it is hard to imagine a non-question-begging rationale for (2) that does not undermine (1), is false. Several such rationales have been offered in the literature that he does not even mention, let alone address.

Moreover, Craig himself seems to offer similar rationales. As we noted above, his claim was that “if God does not exist, then prudential reason and moral reason can and often do come into conflict, *in which case there is no reason to act morally rather than in one’s self-interest.*”⁴³ Elsewhere, he states: “I agree with Layman that on atheism, what he calls the overriding thesis (namely that moral value always trumps prudential value) is not true, for one can have extremely strong prudential reasons for not acting morally, and there seems to be no common scale in which to weigh moral against prudential considerations.”⁴⁴

This brings us to (b), while it is correct that (2) itself is not a datum of moral theory. The claim that moral demands are authoritative so that everyone always has a reason to be moral and that these reasons are decisive and not trumped by concerns of self-interest is something that, at least *prima facie*, a metaethical theory should account for.⁴⁵ Wielenberg himself seems to accept this. He states “as I suggested in chapter one, to have an obligation just is to have decisive reasons to perform a certain action.”⁴⁶ Therefore, according to Wielenberg, it is a necessary truth that we always have decisive reasons to do what we are morally required to do, and it is impossible for people to not have such reasons or for these reasons to be overridden by other reasons such as self-interest. Adams, Layman, and Craig, therefore, appeal to something that is, on Wielenberg’s own view, a datum must be accounted for.

42. See C. Stephen Layman, “God and the Moral Order,” *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002): 304–16.

43. Craig, “Q&A 230 Is Life Absurd without God?”

44. Craig, “This Most Gruesome of Guests,” 183.

45. Terence Cuneo makes this point in “Erik J. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics: The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, March 24, 2015, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/56511-robust-ethics-the-metaphysics-and-epistemology-of-godless-normative-realism>.

46. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 57.

Human Rights

A second objection Wielenberg briefly addresses is that without certain theological doctrines, one cannot provide a plausible basis for human rights and dignity. Wielenberg, here again, takes Craig as paradigmatic.

If there is no God, then what's so special about human beings? They're just accidental by-products of nature that have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and that are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time.⁴⁷

Craig's rhetorical question alludes to a serious point, made in more detail by Peter Singer, Louis Pojman, and Nicholas Wolterstorff—that it is hard to plausibly accommodate the thesis that all human beings have equal dignity and rights outside a theistic framework. Wielenberg's response is that human rights are grounded in “non-moral intrinsic properties of human beings” . . . “human beings can reason, suffer, fall in love, set goals for themselves and so on. God or no God, human beings obviously differ when it comes to intrinsic properties than dogs or mere lumps of clay.”⁴⁸ Wielenberg here appeals to certain higher cognitive capacities human beings possess that other animals lack, such things as the capacity to reason, set goals, and fall in love.

This brief response to Craig is central to Wielenberg's rebuttal of evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism later in the book. Sharon Street and others have raised epistemological challenges to moral realism by noting that many of our basic evaluative capacities, our disposition to judge certain types of behavior as morally wrong, have been shaped by naturalistic evolution.⁴⁹ Naturalistic evolution, however, is not guided by considerations of truth in selecting such dispositions, but by adaptability, that is, that these basic evaluative judgments exist because making such judgments enabled our ancestors to reproduce effectively in the environment in which they lived. Street notes, “the striking coincide between independent moral truths posited by the realist and the normative views evolution has pushed us towards” and “challenges the realist to explain this coincidence.”⁵⁰

Wielenberg proposes that “our cognitive capacities” explain the coincidence. Moral rights supervene upon any creature that possesses certain cognitive capacities since these are the same cognitive capacities that produce

47. *Ibid.*, 51; the citation is from William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

48. *Ibid.*, 51.

49. Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006): 109–66. Guy Kahane, “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments,” *Noûs* 45 (2011): 103–25. Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 179–219.

50. *Ibid.*, 155.

moral beliefs. It follows that any being that believes it has moral rights will necessarily have them.⁵¹

Wielenberg specifies that the supervenience relationship here involves both modal covariation, and a form of “robust causation” analogous to the way theists understand God’s relationship to the created universe. Just as theists believe that God immediately sustains the universe in existence moment by moment simply by willing its existence, so those properties that constitute our higher cognitive faculties robustly cause the existence of moral rights, without any intermediary agency or laws of nature.

This answer both to the grounding of human rights and evolutionary debunking arguments has a cost. As Wolterstorff⁵² and Singer⁵³ have pointed out, while it is true that normal adult humans have the cognitive capacities in question, many important categories of human beings do not. Infants and small children cannot reason, fall in love, or set goals for themselves, nor do they have the developed moral cognition that Wielenberg refers to. In fact, David Boonin has noted, “by any plausible measure dogs, and cats, cows, and pigs, chickens and ducks are more intellectually developed than a newborn infant.”⁵⁴

So, Wielenberg’s answer gives us no reason for thinking a child or infant has a rights or dignity over and above any other animal. In fact, seeing moral rights covary modally with the possession of the relevant cognitive faculties, such capacities are necessary and sufficient for the possession of moral rights. Consequently, his position seems to entail that infants small children and mentally impaired human adults have no moral rights.

Robust Ethics and Intrinsic Value

Wielenberg, therefore, fails to show that GRNR avoids some of the standard objections to the autonomy thesis. This brings me to Wielenberg’s defense of his conclusion III. Wielenberg suggests that GRNR is *prima facie* preferable to various theistic accounts of axiological properties. Several authors have defended accounts of the nature of moral goodness that identify goodness with certain types of relationships to God. Robert Adams has defended a Platonic conception of goodness where God is the paradigmatic good and all finite things are good or bad depending on how they resemble God’s nature. Mark Murphy has defended an Aristotelian position whereby

51. *Ibid.*, 134–75.

52. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 325–41.

53. Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 186–7.

54. David Boonin, *A Defense of Abortion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 121. The neurological data is summarized in ch. 11 of Michael Tooley, *Abortion and Infanticide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

goodness consists in “being like God in ways that belong to the kind to be like God.”⁵⁵ Linda Zagzebski, by contrast, has appealed to God’s motives, and Thomas Carson has defended an account of goodness whereby goodness is what God prefers.⁵⁶

Wielenberg refers to all these positions under the umbrella term “theological stateism” (TS). Wielenberg argues that *prima facie* GRNR is preferable to TS because, unlike TS, GRNR is consistent with the intuition that certain things have intrinsic value:

I suggest that among our common-sense moral beliefs are the belief that some things distinct from God are intrinsically good: for example, the pleasure of an innocent back rub, or the love between parent and child Because non-theistic robust normative realism allows for the intrinsic goodness of things distinct from God, that theory fares better in this respect than its theistic alternatives.⁵⁷

By “the intrinsic value of a given thing” Wielenberg means the “value it has, if any, in virtue of its intrinsic properties.” Something’s extrinsic value by contrast “is the value it has in virtue of how it is related to things apart from itself.”⁵⁸

Can Theological Stateism Accommodate Intrinsic Value?

Wielenberg’s argument relies, crucially, on the claim that TS entails that nothing distinct from God is intrinsically good. His argument for this claim is as follows:

A second noteworthy aspect of Adams’s view is its implication that no finite thing is intrinsically good (or evil) *since the goodness (and badness of things) of all finite things is dependent upon their relationship to God*. Craig follows Adams in holding that finite goodness = resemblance to the necessarily existing divine nature.⁵⁹

Later he cites Mark Murphy’s view as an example:

Back in section 2.2, I noted that Adams’s theory implies no finite thing is intrinsically good (or evil) since, on Adams’s view, the goodness (and badness) of all finite things is partly determined by how they

55. Mark Murphy, *God and the Moral Law: A Theistic Explanation of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press), 155.

56. Linda Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Thomas Carson, *Value and the Good Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

57. Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics*, 84.

58. *Ibid.*, 2.

59. *Ibid.*, 44 (emphasis added).

are related to God. Consequently, Adams's view entails that nothing distinct from God is intrinsically good. Murphy also holds that the goodness of things distinct from God consists in their standing in certain relationships to God: their goodness is thus extrinsic rather than intrinsic because it is explained not merely by intrinsic properties but also by certain properties of God.⁶⁰

According to Wielenberg, then, TS entails that "the value of all finite things is *dependent* upon their relationship to God."⁶¹ However, if a finite thing has intrinsic value, it is valuable "*in virtue* of its intrinsic properties" and not "*in virtue* of how it is related to things apart from itself." Consequently, TS entails that "nothing distinct from God is intrinsically good."

For this argument to be valid, the kind of dependence that TS postulates between God and the goodness of finite things must be *the same kind* of dependence that Wielenberg's definition of intrinsic value rules out. Consequently, the phrase "in virtue of" in Wielenberg's definition must refer to the same kind of dependence relationship that on TS exists between God and the value of finite things. However, a careful examination of Wielenberg's definition shows this is not the case.

Earlier in *Robust Ethics* Wielenberg spends some time elaborating what he means when he defines the intrinsic value of something as the value it has *in virtue* of its intrinsic properties. On pages 9–15 he distinguishes between two different types of supervenience relationship which can hold between finite things and their evaluative properties.⁶² The first is what Wielenberg calls "reductive supervenience" (or *R-supervenience*), which is where a moral property *M* supervenes upon a base property *B* because the moral property is *identical* with the base property. The second is what Wielenberg refers to as "De-Paul supervenience" (*D-supervenience*). If a moral property *M* *D-supervenes* upon a base property *B*, then "M is not identical with, reducible to or entirely constituted by B"; instead, "B's instantiation makes M be instantiated."

D-supervenience and *R-supervenience* are distinct types of relationship. *M* can *R-supervene* upon *B* without *D-supervening* upon *B*. Conversely, *M* can *D-supervene* upon *B* without *R-supervening* upon *B*. GRNR is itself an example of this distinction. According to GRNR moral properties are *sui generis* irreducible nonnatural properties that *D-supervene* upon natural properties. Consequently, GRNR presupposes that moral properties can *D-supervene* upon natural properties without *R-supervening* upon them.

In fact, *D-* and *R-supervenience* appear to be mutually exclusive relationships. If *B* is reducible to or identical to *M*, then *B* cannot be a distinct

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid. (emphasis added).

62. Wielenberg actually spells out three relationships, but mentioning the third would only complicate this discussion unnecessarily. The preceding argument applies equally well when the third type of supervenience is taken into account.

property from M , which M causes to exist. That would involve self-causation. Similarly, if B is distinct from M and B makes M be instantiated, B is not reducible to or identical with M .

When Wielenberg defines a finite thing's intrinsic value as the value it has *in virtue* of its intrinsic properties, it is clear that he uses the phrase "in virtue of" to refer to a relationship of D -supervenience.

If there are entities distinct from God that possess intrinsic value, then Craig is mistaken. I think there are such entities. As I suggested in chapter one, some finite things pass the isolation and annihilation tests, which suggests such things are intrinsically valuable. *The intrinsic value of such entities D supervenes upon some set of their intrinsic properties and not on how they are related to other things.*⁶³

Earlier he writes:

In my view, the most plausible way of understanding the "in virtue" relationship which I earlier claimed holds between the intrinsic properties of certain things and their intrinsic value is making. To claim that a given thing is intrinsically valuable is to claim that some of that thing's intrinsic properties make it valuable. . . . *More generally, I think that moral properties indeed all moral properties D supervene upon non-moral properties.*⁶⁴

The problem is that proponents of TS are not committed to denying that moral properties D -supervene on the intrinsic properties of finite objects. When people like Mark Murphy or Robert Adams or William Lane Craig contend that the goodness of all finite things is dependent upon their relationship to God, they are not claiming that goodness D -supervenes upon this relationship. They are claiming goodness R -supervenes upon this relationship. Consider how Wielenberg himself describes Adams's position:

A noteworthy feature of Adams's view is its implication that no finite thing is intrinsically good (or evil) since the goodness (and badness of things) of all finite things is dependent upon their relationship to God. Craig follows Adams in holding *that finite goodness = resemblance to the necessarily existing divine nature.* . . . Murphy also holds that the goodness of things distinct from God *consists in* their standing in certain relationships to God: their goodness is extrinsic rather than intrinsic because it is explained not merely by intrinsic properties but also by certain properties of God.⁶⁵

It is true that according to Adams that the goodness of finite things is "dependent" upon their relationship to God. However, in the highlighted sentence, Wielenberg spells out the kind of dependence Adams has in mind. The dependence Adams refers to is one where "finite goodness = resemblance

63. *Ibid.*, 44.

64. *Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis added).

65. *Ibid.*, 44 (emphasis added).

to the necessarily existing divine nature.” This is a relationship of identity. Adams is, therefore, saying that the goodness of finite objects *R-supervenes* upon the divine nature. Wielenberg notes this when a few paragraphs earlier he describes Adams (and Craig) as holding that:

Since the Good *just is* God, the existence of God cannot explain or ground the existence of the good. In the context of Adams’s view, the claim God serves as the *foundation* of the Good is no more sensible than the claim that H₂O serves as the *foundation* of water. 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.⁶⁶

Similarly, when Wielenberg discusses Murphy, he notes that, according to Murphy, the goodness of things distinct from God “*is explained*,” not merely by intrinsic properties, but also by certain properties of God. However, he clarifies that Murphy means the goodness of finite things “*consist in*” their relationship to God. So again, Murphy is talking about *R-supervenience*, not *D-supervenience*.

So, contrary to Wielenberg, TS does not entail that things distinct from God cannot have value *in virtue of* their intrinsic properties. TS entails that the value of something distinct from God *R-supervenes* upon its relationship with God. However, that does not entail its value *D-supervenes* upon this relationship. So TS is not incompatible with the commonsense intuition that finite objects can have intrinsic value.

On the other hand, if the objection is that TS entails that the value of finite things cannot *R-supervene* upon their intrinsic properties, then GRNR fares no better. According to Wielenberg, the proponent of GRNR holds that moral properties are “*real and sui generis*; they are non-natural and *not reducible to any other sort of property*.” If moral properties are not reducible to other properties, then those properties do not *R-supervene* upon the intrinsic properties of finite things. In fact, on GRNR the goodness of every distinct and finite thing will *R-supervene*, not upon its intrinsic properties but on its relationship to distinct irreducible nonnatural properties, and so finite things will have only extrinsic value. This objection, therefore, is a nonstarter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wielenberg’s defense of the autonomy thesis fails. His “reasonable unbelievers” objection to divine command theories is unsuccessful. He fails to address two standard challenges to the autonomy thesis adequately. These are (a) the objection that in the absence of God people lack reasons to always do the right things and (b) the objection that in the absence

66. *Ibid.*, 43.

of God there is no adequate basis for grounding the claim that human beings have equal rights and dignity. Finally, he fails to show that robust realism better accounts for the intuition that certain things are intrinsically good than various forms of theological stateism do. Both GRNR and TS deny that moral properties are reducible to natural properties and both are compatible with the claim that moral properties *D*-supervene upon such properties.