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Response to Erik J. Wielenberg

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Erik J. Wielenberg's rich and nuanced chapter offers an explanation of evil, building on his previous work in metaethics—a view he calls *robust normative realism* ((128) hereafter, RNR).¹ According to RNR, evil is a normative, nonphysical property that can be exemplified by “states of affairs, actions, intentions, and persons” (123). Although it is an objective feature of our universe, *being evil* is neither a natural property (e.g., *being painful*) nor a supernatural property (e.g., *being prohibited by God*). Evil exists because it stands in a “robust causal relation” to certain “underlying non-ethical properties” (132).

In addition to what he takes to be RNR's internal virtues, Wielenberg also cites an external theoretical advantage: RNR's consistency with naturalism. Like Ruse, he endorses the causal closure of the physical but with a *caveat*:

I endorse the existence of non-physical properties but do not reject the causal closure of the physical or deny that the physical sciences are entirely successful in their own domains. If naturalistic dualists [like David Chalmers] can get by without invoking the forces of darkness, then so can robust normative realists. (128)

The overall position, then, is RNR *plus*: the conjunction of RNR (with its nonnatural properties) and naturalism (N)—defined sparsely as the view that (quoting Chalmers) “everything is a consequence of a network of basic [physical] properties and laws” (ibid.). And since Wielenberg holds both RNR and N, he is of course thinking of them as perfectly compatible.

Here it is helpful to note that these two theses are distinct. RNR neither entails (nor is it entailed by) N. So while RNR&N is obviously incompatible with theism, it is by no means clear that

RNR is. Indeed, something very like RNR was defended by the Christian philosopher Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) in his Boyle Lectures of 1705.² So the “Godless Normative Realism” Wielenberg refers to in the subtitle of *Robust Ethics* is almost certainly derived from N alone. There is nothing in RNR, so far as I can see, that need trouble a Christian theist.

In what follows, I want to raise a couple of concerns about RNR, and then surface a slightly deeper worry about the compatibility of RNR and N. But let’s start with what Wielenberg says about evil. He proposes that something is evil just if there is “a reason to avoid or eliminate the thing” (123). This isn’t all there is to evil, but “it is one important element,” in which case “evil has a normative component” (*ibid.*). And since on his view normative reasons are objective, we can say that (on RNR) the property of being evil (E) includes the property of there being an objective normative reason to avoid such-and-such (A). The fact that E includes A is then used to show (“from the armchair” (127) as it were) that E can’t be identified with either a natural property (NP) or a supernatural property (SP):

There being an objective normative reason to avoid or eliminate such-and-such is of a fundamentally different type than any natural or supernatural property and hence being evil is neither a natural nor a supernatural property. (*ibid.*)

So the idea is that you can’t turn E into an NP or an SP, since it includes A—a “fundamentally different type” of property from either. The assumption here seems to be that, for example, A and SP properties are incompatible. But *whether* they are, I think, is surely going to depend on how we frame the relevant properties. Consider the evil of *depriving myself of the use of reason*—however you look at it, an evil for any philosopher. If you’re a theist, you might think this evil includes the following A property:

A*: Having been commanded by God to avoid “great intemperance and ungoverned passions”³ lest I deprive myself of the use of reason.

Now A* is arguably objective. It also constitutes a normative reason to avoid depriving myself of my reason, since it “count(s) in favor of [my] having some attitude, or acting in some way” (124).⁴

Still further, it is almost certainly a supernatural property, since it involves God's having commanded something. So here we have an A property that isn't of a "fundamentally different type" than an SP property. In fact, it *is* an SP property. So there is no incompatibility between A and SP properties at all.

Another feature of RNR is its commitment to basic ethical facts. These are necessarily obtaining states of affairs, involving ethical properties like *being evil*. Following Plantinga, Wielenberg takes states of affairs to be "necessarily existing abstract entities" (128). The important thing to note about basic ethical facts is they are *brute facts*: their "obtaining is not explained by the obtaining of other states of affairs" (129). Like the state of affairs 7 and 5's *equaling 12*, there is "no external explanation" (138) for why they are actual. They simply are. Thus Wielenberg says,

To ask of such facts, "Where do they come from?" or "On what foundation do they rest?" is misguided in much the way that, according to many theists, it is misguided to ask of God, "Where does He come from?" or "On what foundation does He rest?" (130)

Now I certainly agree that there are states of affairs, that some of them involve ethical properties, and that some of these obtain necessarily. It's less clear to me that the obtaining of basic ethical facts requires "no external explanation." For one thing, if we're following Plantinga, a fact is still an abstract state of affairs. To be sure, nothing explains the *existence* of a fact; it exists by a necessity of its own nature. It doesn't follow that nothing explains its *being actual* or *obtaining*.

Consider the RNR explanation of evil in the world. It proceeds by way of an example. The nonnatural property

E: Being evil

is "directly robustly caused," (138)⁵ we are told, by the natural property

F: Being an instance of causing pain for the fun of it.

The connection here is brute. There is "no intervening mechanism" or explanation for why it obtains. Rather, "the causal connection is

direct and immediate" (133). Let's say that's right. What that means is that *E's being caused by F* is a necessary state of affairs—an uninstantiated abstract object at best. It's not a fact, however, until it is *made actual* by something—something external to the state of affairs itself. Wielenberg himself seems to recognize this when he notes that "one important element of the explanation of evil in the world is that the relevant non-moral properties are *instantiated*" (134; emphasis added).

I think Wielenberg is correct here. Thinking just of the case at hand, given the necessary one-way causal connection between E and F, E will be instantiated only if *F's causing E* obtains or is actual. But that will be the case only if F is instantiated. There has to be a trope or property instance of F. What we require, in other words, is the very thing Wielenberg says we don't need: an external explanation or actuality-maker. And this takes us to the heart of the matter, but also I fear the heart of the difficulties. Just how is a nonmoral property like F to be instantiated? *Who* instantiates it? If no one can or does, then *being evil* simply won't be instantiated; evil won't exist.

If we think about F carefully, I think we can see that only a conscious rational agent with the power of choice could bring it about that F is instantiated in such a way that the evil that was thereby brought into the world was something for which she was responsible. Here the explanatory resources of RNR wind up, and Wielenberg must at last find an ally in Ruse:

Let us suppose that in the early stages of the universe there was no life or consciousness; accordingly, goodness, evil, moral rightness and wrongness were all uninstantiated. Through various natural processes life and eventually human beings arose; with human beings came the occurrence of inflicting suffering just for fun. The occurrence of such acts brought evil into the world by way of the robust causation I described earlier. In this way, evil is both objective and real in our godless universe. (138)

Let's suppose that I've supposed that originally there was no God, but somehow there was a universe. (That's a rather big ask, but okay.) And then in that universe—naturally enough, since there was no God—"there was no life or consciousness." That seems right.

What should I expect from that point? Consciousness, agency, rationality, and choice? I don't see it. I'm afraid I'm with Clarke on this:⁶

If there ever was a time when there was nothing in the universe but matter and motion, there never could have been anything else therein but matter and motion. And it would have been as impossible there should ever have existed any such thing as intelligence, or consciousness . . . as it is now impossible for motion to be blue or red, or for a triangle to be transformed into a sound. (1705 [1998], 42)

And then it would have been just as impossible that there should ever have been evil. But there is.