

of their children's existence. Yet I doubt that this fact would change much to their love for their children. Finally, and in a similar mode, consider love for any of the persons you may currently love, be it your spouse, your child, your friend, or your parent. Why think that these relations are any different from the ones above? Why think that the way in which we love others often involves any attitude whatsoever, besides disregard, about the historical conditions necessary for the existence of the object of our love?

Whether this line of criticism is sound or not, *The View from Here* makes us think hard about a number of important questions in moral theory. We can only thank its author for his contribution.

Raffaele Rodogno
Aarhus University, Denmark
filrr@cas.au.dk

Eric Wielenberg, *Robust Ethics. The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Godless Normative Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 196 pp., £35 (Hardback), ISBN 9780198714323.

1. Introduction

Recently, the metaethical debate has seen a surge in arguments in favour of *robust moral realism*, a position that affords a strong notion of moral objectivity. This development is remarkable, because the ontology of such views was long considered to be fantastical, and the ensuing epistemological problems insurmountable. Robust moral realists have taken to the writing desks to raise their view from the pile of outlandish metaethical positions back into the philosophical mainstream.

Erik Wielenberg's *Robust Ethics* assumes that robust realism is true and defends a non-reductive account of moral knowledge. It is a focused defence against a compounded problem that Wielenberg attributes to J. L. Mackie and Gilbert Harman (cf. Harman 1977; Mackie 1977): how do causally inert moral properties relate to non-moral properties and how can humans acquire knowledge of the former? Wielenberg argues that construing supervenience as a metaphysical causal relation refutes the first challenge and holds that his account of moral knowledge can accommodate the constraint that moral properties are causally inert. His central thesis is that justified moral beliefs can be caused by *non-conscious* cognitive processes, which pick out the non-moral properties that instantiate moral properties.

I found Wielenberg's book intriguing and enjoyable to read. His account of moral knowledge exemplifies a laudable awareness of current empirical research and of the opportunities to put it to constructive use in metaethics. This provides realists with novel options to cope with, for example, anti-realist challenges based on dumbfounding experiments. Wielenberg's consideration of the theistic alternative fills a gap in the literature that other robust realists have not considered thus far. I am less convinced by Wielenberg's view of the non-conscious generation of moral beliefs.

2. *Summary of key arguments*

In the first chapter, Wielenberg establishes his commitment to objective ethical facts and argues for his interpretation of supervenience as 'making', which is a "robust causal relation" (p. 20) that connects moral properties to their non-moral base properties. The former are caused and explained by, but not reducible, to the latter (p. 10). This relation is analogous to the "paradigmatic example" (p. 18) that God's will that x necessarily makes it the case that x obtains (pp. 18–20). The making-relation is, opines Wielenberg, less brute than other interpretations of supervenience and thus pays the explanatory debt demanded by Mackie (p. 35). Just *why* the making-relation exists has no further explanation, as Wielenberg acknowledges. Following fellow robust realists, he insinuates that this is unproblematic because "explanation has to come to an end somewhere" (p. 24). Finally, Wielenberg claims that objections to his making-relation seem to rely on the following principle:

- P: A 'positing a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties' entails B 'the view is epistemically unjustified'.

Wielenberg suggests that P itself posits a brute necessary connection between two discontinuous properties, A and B. Thus, Wielenberg argues that the objection is "self-undermining" (pp. 33–34).

In the second chapter, Wielenberg discusses theism, according to which objective morality is based on supernatural facts about God, instead of being treated as explanatorily basic. Wielenberg chooses to engage a peculiarly strong form of theism, according to which there are no moral obligations without God, and all human striving in life would be futile and meaningless (p. 51). Wielenberg connotes that empirical evidence opposes theistic claims about the dire psychological consequences of atheism (p. 66) and argues, further, that theists themselves rely on certain brute ethical facts, despite their own claims to the contrary (p. 71). Since the theistic account of morality is, as he argues, ultimately based upon irreducible ethical facts, Wielenberg concludes that God is not needed to explain objective morality.

Chapter 3 turns the debate from metaphysics to epistemology. Remember that Wielenberg's main challenge is to explain how knowledge of *sui generis* objective ethical facts is possible, on the assumption that these facts are causally inert. His innovative solution is based on three components. First, he draws on psychological research, according to which humans exhibit both conscious (System 2) as well as non-conscious, automatic information processing (System 1, cf. Kahneman 2011). He argues that "System 1 cognition can contribute to the justification of beliefs" (p. 95), provided that the process of classifying stimuli into appropriate categories functions *reliably*. Second, he argues that non-conscious information processing applies in the moral domain. Taking into account moral dumbfounding studies, Wielenberg follows a social intuitionist model of moral judgements (cf. Haidt 2001), to suggest that humans possess certain *moral principles*, which are often (but not always) non-conscious. The possession of and access to unconscious moral principles can be understood in analogy to the tacit understanding of grammar (pp. 96–98). Moral principles dictate the moral beliefs that are caused by one's System 1 cognition, irrespective of whether the moral principles are conscious (p. 98). Finally, and crucially, Wielenberg weaves in the aforementioned robust instantiation of moral properties: non-moral properties can be perceived through a reliable non-conscious process that triggers moral beliefs, and the same non-moral properties instantiate moral properties by way of a causal relation (pp. 105–106). The crux of the matter is that moral knowledge is possible if our moral principles, which determine which descriptive classifications cause which beliefs, are accurate (pp. 106, 145). Wielenberg concludes that Mackie's "list of ways of acquiring knowledge ... is incomplete" (p. 109) because justified moral beliefs can be based on System 1 cognition. Furthermore, Wielenberg argues that emotions, disgust in particular, do not spell trouble for his model because "disgust can be domesticated and put into the service of generating moral knowledge" (p. 122) and, further, that his account can withstand the debunking of moral judgements devised by Greene (cf. Greene 2008).

In the final chapter, Wielenberg attacks the evolutionary debunking arguments of Michael Ruse, James Joyce and Sharon Street. On Wielenberg's reconstructions, their arguments uniformly conclude that moral beliefs lack justification, which rests on the premise that moral belief *M* is undermined if believing *M* can be explained without referring to the truth of *M* (p. 147). In an extended version of his 2010 *Ethics* article, Wielenberg argues that evolutionary pressures favoured those who had a disposition to believe that humans have inalienable rights. In particular, he refers to evolutionary processes that led humans to distinguish between the in-group and the out-group (p. 140) and those that worked on the level of groups within a species (p. 143). Since Wielenberg also assumes that it is an objective ethical fact that humans have rights, he concludes that debunking

arguments fail because moral knowledge and evolutionary theory can plausibly “coexist” (p. 161).

3. Evaluation/assessment

Robust Ethics contains a multitude of arguments that merit further discussion. For instance, Wielenberg leaves open what the non-moral base properties could be in a making-relation. However, it seems as if a conception of properties as very complex, specific instances, such as <being a human being in chains>, will unnecessarily and implausibly multiply the required making-relations that tie such complex properties to moral properties. Moreover, Wielenberg’s discussion of theism is oriented on an extreme position, which invites the question whether his arguments apply to more moderate theists as well. Likewise, his refutation of distinct debunking arguments rests on his unifying analysis, which some might see as an over-generalization of distinct arguments. Furthermore, Wielenberg does not argue that humans possess moral knowledge, which depends on the accuracy of our moral principles, but only how it could work, provided that the moral principles are accurate. Many readers will be interested in an argument that supports the assumption that there is a sufficiently high match between our moral principles and the making-relations that constitute objective ethical facts. However, when Wielenberg touches upon this question, he merely advocates the controversial view that there are no good reasons to doubt that our moral principles reflect the truth (p. 173). Most importantly, however, crucial parts of Wielenberg’s arguments, and his anti-debunking argument, in particular, rest on his appeal to substantive ethical truths. Whether such a move is justified is a much-discussed issue in the debate. In recurrent statements (pp. 87–89, 104, 135, 144, 159–161), Wielenberg emphasizes that he is not trying to defend robust moral realism *tout court*, nor that he seeks to vindicate the accuracy of moral principles. I will thus not engage these points here, although addressing them would be crucial to vindicate moral knowledge.

Instead, I focus on Wielenberg’s key contribution; his account of how System 1 cognition could generate moral beliefs. In the following I raise some questions to show that Wielenberg’s account is in need of further clarification to avoid some odd implications in thinking about mistaken moral beliefs. Figure 1 illustrates the relation of moral epistemology and metaphysics on Wielenberg’s account. It highlights the two crucial points (marked (1) and (2) in Figure 1) in Wielenberg’s account of moral knowledge.

On Wielenberg’s account, the possibility of moral knowledge depends on the accuracy of our moral principles, i.e. their match with metaphysical reality ((1) in Figure 1), and second, it depends on the functioning of System 1 cognition ((2) in Figure 1). As noted earlier, Wielenberg’s discussion takes some things for granted. First, there is no good reason to doubt that moral principles match metaphysical

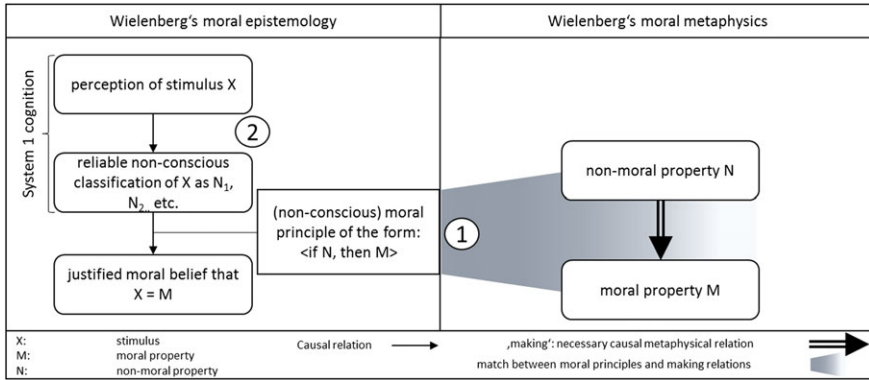


Figure 1. Relation of moral epistemology to moral metaphysics on Wielenberg’s account.

reality. Second, the moral principle <human beings possess inalienable rights> is an objective ethical fact (p. 138). Thus, it matches with one of Wielenberg’s *making*-relations. As a result, the metaphysics in Figure 1 are considered to be fixed. Even granted all these assumptions, I think that the functioning of System 1 cognition in relation to moral beliefs ((2) in Figure 1) needs more clarification to serve as a solid basis for moral knowledge.

As a case-study, consider the historical example of slavery in seventeenth-century America. History gives the impression that the appropriate moral belief has not been triggered reliably in many Americans in the seventeenth century. Of course, it could be that everyone has always believed that slavery is wrong, yet that fear of social oppression, say, barred people from expressing or acting on their belief. This is a theoretical option, but I think that it is very likely that some people believed that slavery is not wrong. Let three of them be Alf, Bert and Cliff. While all three hold the same mistaken belief that slavery is not wrong, their mistakes could have different sources and, as it stands, Wielenberg’s account needs some more clarification to afford a distinction in these cases. It could be that Alf, Bert and Cliff arrived at their belief via three different routes:

- i. Alf non-consciously classifies X as harmful and is caused to believe that it is not-wrong; he is *not* in possession of the moral principle;
- ii. Bert non-consciously classifies X as not-harmful and is caused to believe that it is not-wrong; he is in possession of the moral principle;
- iii. Cliff non-consciously classifies X as not-harmful and is caused to believe that it is not-wrong; he is *not* in possession of the moral principle.

In case (i), Alf’s moral cognition functions properly: he correctly classifies his perception of an instance of slavery as a case of something that is harmful. Alf does not possess the moral principle that we assume to be true, namely that human

beings have rights. Given Alf's failure to share the appropriate moral principle, it is fair to reproach Alf for this lack of character. Alf is wrong, for moral reasons. Thus he should be reproached. Wielenberg does not rule out conscious belief-forming as a form of gaining moral knowledge (p. 100); thus Alf could *learn* that there is some moral principle that prohibits slavery. In any case, Alf makes a moral mistake. Alf's case would be unproblematic for Wielenberg's account of moral knowledge: reproach is, not surprisingly, an appropriate response to those who fail to have correct moral beliefs because of a failure to possess the true moral principles.

Case (ii) is more problematic. Bert exemplifies a mistake on his System 1 cognition. He did not correctly classify *x* as a case of slavery, but rather as a case of something considered to be morally benign, perhaps like the trading of cattle. Bert made a factual mistake. While Bert's (non-conscious) classification of a human being as a cow would be abhorrent, it explains just *why* he did not have moral knowledge: he was blind to the relevant non-moral properties of slavery and the affected human beings. Apart from being startled by Bert's cognitive error, an appropriate response would be to point out that slavery involves harm being done to human beings, which should then, given that Bert possesses the relevant moral principle, yield the appropriate moral belief that slavery is wrong. The case is less clear if Bert's error is not as absurd as just suggested, but much more realistic: Bert may not perceive slavery as the trading of cattle, but rather as harm being done to some less-than-fully human beings. Wielenberg mentions the important distinction between in- and out-group, where members of the latter are often viewed as "less than fully human" (p. 141), as well as the process of dehumanization, which he cites as being a frequent precursor of moral exclusion (p. 141). So, Bert might just happen to regard slaves as less than fully human, which causes him to believe that slavery is not wrong. This interpretation still points to a factual mistake, for Bert's misclassification of human beings as less-than-fully human beings was non-conscious, automated, and thus likely out of his control. Mistakes of this sort, I contend, should be considered to be amoral. Intuitively, this implies that Bert should not be morally reproached for his mistaken belief. But this is an odd implication, due to Wielenberg's non-conscious generation of moral beliefs, for it seems that any abhorrent moral belief could be explained as stemming from a factual mistake that originates in a subject's non-conscious information processing and thus be whitewashed.

Cliff, of case (iii), is similar to Bert in failing to classify the wrong-making properties of slavery correctly. His mistake is thus best analysed as a factual mistake, as well, with equally unclear implications for the moral appraisal of his judgement. Yet, Cliff also fails to possess the moral principle about inalienable human rights that we assume to be true. Even if we should not reproach Cliff for the factual mistake, his failure to possess the correct moral principle seems reproachable.

Wielenberg's account raises questions about the appropriate moral appraisal of people's moral beliefs. Alf is wrong, for moral reasons, and should be reproached.

Bert is also wrong, but for non-moral reasons, and whether he should be reproached depends on one's understanding of Bert's influence over, or the general reliability of, System 1 cognition. Wielenberg does point to some criteria to judge whether System 1 cognition is reliable (p. 94), but the implications of his account for moral responsibility demand a detailed discussion of whether this is also the case.

Cliff's false moral belief adds another problem because it could be due to two reasons: First, he failed to perceive the wrong-making properties of slavery and, second, he failed to have the appropriate moral principle. But it is not clear which of the two factors account for his mistake. Is it either, or both? If moral principles were conscious, we could ask Cliff. But they need not be conscious on Wielenberg's model, so Cliff might fail to explain why he thinks that slavery is not wrong. Even upon learning about the wrong-making features of slavery, he might still not be caused to believe that slavery is wrong, by coming across an instance of slavery. Again, the question is whether his System 1 cognition still fails him, or whether he has still not acquired the true moral principle.

4. Conclusion

Robust Ethics is a relevant, worthwhile and well-argued addition to the ongoing debate about robust moral realism and its alleged inability to account for moral knowledge. Moral realists of theist, naturalist and robust inclinations will profit from reading the book, for it provides the outline for a novel way to conceive of the origins of moral beliefs. The more fundamental question is, however, why we should suppose that moral properties and objective ethical facts exist in the first place. Wielenberg does not address this question and, as a result, the book will be of limited interest to those who are not yet convinced of anything like the existence of objective ethical facts.

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Michael Klenk
 Utrecht University
 m.b.o.t.klenk@uu.nl