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# ROBUST ETHICS

Metaphysics and Epistemology  
of Godless Normative Realism

ERIK J. WIELENBERG

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*The Metaphysics and  
Epistemology of Godless  
Normative Realism*

Erik J. Wielenberg

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*In memory of my father*

*Norbert J. Wielenberg (1946–1989)*

*First-generation college student, mathematician,  
bedtime reader*



# Preface

In 1977, two events that would significantly impact my life took place. First, the film *Star Wars* was released. Second, two prominent philosophers, J.L. Mackie and Gilbert Harman, unleashed some influential arguments against moral realism. This book is about the second of these two events. More precisely, it is, at least in large part, an attempt to answer some of the arguments that Mackie and Harman put forward when I was a child.

In his famous argument from queerness, Mackie listed various respects in which objective values, if they existed, would be “queer.” Mackie took the apparent queerness of such values to be evidence against their existence. One feature of objective values that he found to be particularly queer was the alleged connection between a thing’s objective moral qualities and its natural features:

What is the connection between the natural fact that an action is a piece of deliberate cruelty—say, causing pain just for fun—and the moral fact that it is wrong? . . . The wrongness must somehow be ‘consequential’ or ‘supervenient’; it is wrong because it is a piece of deliberate cruelty. But just what *in the world* is signified by this ‘because?’ (1977, 41)

Mackie was also dubious of the view that we could come to have knowledge of the objective moral qualities of things, even assuming that such queer entities are out there in the world. He wrote:

[N]one of our ordinary accounts of sensory perception or introspection or the framing and confirming of explanatory hypotheses or inference or logical construction or conceptual analysis, or any combination of these, will provide a satisfactory answer [to the question of how we could acquire knowledge of objective values]; ‘a special sort of intuition’ is a lame answer, but it is the one to which the clear-headed objectivist is compelled to resort. (1977, 39)

Harman, for his part, noted an apparent contrast between ethics and science. He compared a case in which a physicist observes a vapor trail in a cloud chamber and forms the belief “there goes a proton” with a case in which you observe some hoodlums setting a cat on fire and form the belief “what they’re doing is wrong” (1977, 4–6). Harman was happy to classify both of these as cases of observation (scientific observation in the first



case, moral observation in the second), but he noted the following difference between the two cases:

Facts about protons can affect what you observe, since a proton passing through the cloud chamber can cause a vapor trail that reflects light to your eye in a way that, given your scientific training and psychological set, leads you to judge that what you see is a proton. But there does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus. In this respect, ethics seems to differ from science. (1977, 7–8)

Harman's central point here is that the moral features of things, supposing that they exist at all, seem to be *causally inert*, unlike the physical features of things. Harman himself thought that this feature of moral properties suggested that we ought to take seriously the possible truth of nihilism, the view that no moral properties are instantiated (1977, 23). But others have drawn on Harman's premise to support not nihilism but rather moral skepticism, the view that we do not (and perhaps cannot) possess moral knowledge. It is the latter kind of argument with which I will be concerned in this book.

Some have suggested that theism provides the resources to answer these challenges (see, for example, Evans 2013, 119–23). Interestingly, Mackie himself, although an atheist, suggested that theism might be able to answer his worries about the queerness of the alleged supervenience relation between moral and natural properties. In his 1982 book *The Miracle of Theism*, he wrote:

[W]e might well argue...that objective intrinsically prescriptive features, supervening upon natural ones, constitute so odd a cluster of qualities and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful God to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them. (1982, 115–16; see also Wainwright 2005, 66)

More recently, the theistic philosopher Robert Adams suggests that the epistemological worries that arise from Harman's contrast between science and ethics can be put to rest by bringing God into the picture (1999, 62–70).

Thus, an interesting dialectic presents itself. Mackie and Harman, who do not believe that God exists, see their arguments as posing serious challenges for moral realism. Some theistic philosophers reflect on these challenges and argue this way: if we suppose that God does exist, then we

can answer these challenges to moral realism. Without God, these challenges cannot be answered. Since moral realism is a plausible view, the fact that we can answer such challenges only by positing the existence of God gives us reason to believe that God exists.

I accept moral realism yet I believe that God does not exist. I also find it unsatisfying, perhaps even “lame” as Mackie would have it, to posit mysterious, quasi-mystical cognitive faculties that are somehow able to make contact with causally inert moral features of the world and provide us with knowledge of them. The central goal of this book is to defend the plausibility of a robust brand of moral realism without appealing to God or any weird cognitive faculties.

A lot has happened since 1977. A number of increasingly mediocre sequels and prequels to the original *Star Wars* have been released; disco, mercifully, has died. But there have also been some important developments in philosophy and psychology that bear on the arguments of Mackie and Harman sketched above. In philosophy, a brand of moral realism that hearkens back to G.E. Moore (1903) has found new life, championed by, among others, Colin McGinn (1997), Russ Shafer-Landau (2003), Michael Huemer (2005), William FitzPatrick (2008), David Enoch (2011), and Derek Parfit (2011a, 2011b). In psychology, there has been a flurry of activity in moral psychology, the empirical investigation of the nature of the cognitive processes that generate human moral beliefs, emotions, and actions. As a result of these developments the challenges from Mackie and Harman sketched above can be given better answers than they have received so far—without appealing to God or weird cognitive faculties. That, at any rate, is what I will attempt to do in this book. There are other important challenges to moral realism that I will not address in this book. I have selected the challenges described above because I think they are among the most interesting, and I think that they have yet to receive fully adequate responses from contemporary defenders of moral realism. Among the primary aims of this book is to rectify that lacuna. However, answering objections is not my sole aim here. Another central aim is to develop a coherent view of the metaphysics and epistemology of morality that is both empirically and philosophically plausible. Thus, I seek to defend a robust approach to ethics (without appealing to God or weird cognitive faculties) by developing positive accounts of the nature of moral facts and knowledge and by defending these accounts against challenging objections.

In recent years many moral philosophers have started paying closer attention to what is happening in psychology, thereby moving moral philosophy closer to how it was done in the old days (i.e. the days of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and indeed most moral philosophers prior to the twentieth century). In my view, this is a welcome development, and this book is part of this recent return to an ancient interface between moral philosophy and psychology.

The rest of this book consists of four chapters. The basic plan of the book is as follows. In the first chapter, I lay out the central elements of my version of moral realism, “non-theistic robust normative realism.” I explicate the sense in which my version of moral realism is robust. I pay particular attention to the supervenience of moral properties upon non-moral properties, and, in the second half of the chapter, I seek to answer Mackie’s supervenience challenge as well as a number of other related challenges that are also based on supervenience. At the heart of my approach to such challenges is Michael DePaul’s (1987) view that we must distinguish between supervenience (understood as a certain sort of modal correlation) and a more robust sort of dependence relation, which I call *making*. I build on DePaul’s work by suggesting that the making relation is best understood as a robust sort of causation. In the final section of that chapter, I begin to contrast my view with God-based approaches to moral realism: whereas proponents of theistic approaches to moral realism seek to make God the foundation of objective moral truth, I argue that it is at least as plausible to construe objective moral truth as not needing an external foundation at all. This discussion sets up the dialectic of chapter two.

Much of the second chapter is devoted to explicating and responding to a slew of challenges to my sort of view posed by theistic philosophers, most notably William Craig. Craig claims that if God does not exist, then (i) nothing is truly good or bad; (ii) all human lives are meaningless; (iii) moral obligations and rights do not exist, and (iv) even if moral obligations do exist, we have no reason to care about fulfilling them. Although these kinds of claims have been critically discussed previously (e.g. Wielenberg 2005, Sinnott-Armstrong 2009), I offer some new insights into why Craig’s defenses of such claims are unconvincing. This chapter sees the first significant appearance of empirical research in the book when I consider the oft-made claim that religious believers tend to be more moral than non-believers. I carefully examine the relevant available empirical evidence and argue that it does not bear out the aforementioned

claim. In the later sections of the chapter, I broaden my focus and discuss various contemporary theistic versions of moral realism, including a type of divine command theory defended by Robert Adams (1999) and Stephen Evans (2004 and 2013), Mark Murphy's (2011) natural law theory, and assorted other theories as well. I identify some important challenges that such views face; my aim here is to provide indirect support for my own view by describing weaknesses in some of its theistic competitors.

Whereas the first two chapters deal primarily with the metaphysics of morals, chapters three and four focus on moral epistemology. In chapter three I take up Mackie's worry about weird or "lame" cognitive faculties and Harman's worry about the causal inertness of moral features. It is here that recent work in moral psychology most directly enters the picture. I think that by exposing the nature of the cognitive processes that generate human moral judgments such work goes a long way toward defusing Mackie's worry about positing a mysterious black box cognitive faculty that can grasp moral truths. The contemporary philosopher who pays attention to moral psychology will have a lot to say about how our moral beliefs are actually formed. One widely held view among contemporary moral psychologists is that there are some important similarities between the cognitive processes that generate our moral judgments and the processes that generate our linguistic judgments. In particular, it is widely held that in both domains our conscious judgments conform to general principles to which we may lack direct conscious access. As a result, people are often at a loss to justify the conscious judgments they make—but it can nevertheless be the case that such judgments are appropriately sensitive to relevant distinctions and may constitute knowledge. To flesh out that basic idea, I connect the distinction in psychology between System 1 and System 2 cognitive processing with the philosophical debate between access internalists and externalists to motivate a plausible sufficient condition for epistemic justification for beliefs produced by System 1 cognition. By combining that condition with work from moral psychology, I develop an account of how moral knowledge can be acquired even if moral facts and properties are causally inert.

It turns out that some of the central figures in moral psychology (e.g. Joshua Greene) argue that as we lay bare the inner workings of moral cognition we should become more rather than less skeptical of at least some of its deliverances. One argument along these lines has it that uncovering the tremendous influence of emotion on moral cognition provides grounds

for moral skepticism. I examine this worry in connection with the emotion of disgust, which many regard as a particularly morally unreliable emotion. Drawing on the account of moral knowledge developed earlier in the chapter, I seek to assuage worries that the role of the emotions in moral cognition undermines moral knowledge. Finally, I consider two important arguments put forward by Greene for the view that discoveries in moral psychology should lead us to be skeptical of our deontological moral judgments in particular, concluding that neither argument establishes the intended conclusion.

In chapter four I revisit Harman's contrast between science and ethics. A number of prominent evolutionary debunking of morality arguments have their roots in Harman's worry described earlier in this Preface. I explain the role of Harman's thought in these arguments and seek to expand the account of moral knowledge presented in the preceding chapter to respond to these arguments. I consider Harman-esque evolutionary debunking arguments presented by Michael Ruse (1986), Sharon Street (2006), and Richard Joyce (2006). Finally, I address the worry that my account implies that our possession of moral knowledge requires that we be inordinately lucky and that this leads to trouble for my view. I argue that there is no compelling reason to think that my view requires us to be luckier in possessing moral knowledge than in possessing many other kinds of knowledge, and that my view does not generate a special luck-related problem for moral knowledge in particular.

When all is said and done, I hope that I will have provided a plausible account of the metaphysics and epistemology of a robust brand of moral realism that draws on both analytic philosophy and contemporary empirical moral psychology, connecting recent developments in both fields in a distinctive way. I have no illusions that this book will be the final word on these topics. I do hope, however, to advance the debate on these topics. Let's get to it.

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26:1 (January 2009): 23–41 is included in chapters one and two. Chapter two also includes material from “An Inconsistency in Craig’s Defense of the Moral Argument,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4:4 (2012): 49–58 and “Atheism and Morality,” in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Chapter three incorporates material from “Disgust, Moral Knowledge, and Virtue,” in Nancy Snow and Franco Trivigno (eds.), *The Philosophy and Psychology of Character and Happiness* (New York: Routledge, 2014); some of that material was also presented at the meeting of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Colorado, Boulder in June 2012. Other material from chapter three was presented at Baylor University in November 2013. Chapter four incorporates material from “On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality,” *Ethics* 120 (April 2010): 441–64; some of that material was also presented at the Second Annual Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress at the University of Colorado, Boulder in August 2009 and at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in San Francisco, March 31–April 4, 2010. I am thankful for permission to use this material here and I thank my commentators and audiences for their helpful questions and criticism.

Philosophy and this book’s author being what they are, and despite all the assistance noted above, this book undoubtedly contains an assorted and fascinating variety of flaws. I hereby grudgingly accept responsibility for those flaws—and I even more grudgingly thank in advance those critics who will uncover at least some of them.

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# Abbreviations

DCT	divine command theory
DDE	Doctrine of Double Effect
DN	divine nature
EDA	evolutionary debunking argument
EDT	Evolutionary Debunking Thesis
ES	Extreme Specificity
MES	Metaphysical Extreme Specificity
MoRM	Morphological Reliablism Model
NLW	Napoleon lost Waterloo pill
SFN	St. Francis's natural properties
SIM	social intuitionist model



# 1

## Metaphysics of Morals

### Intrinsic Value, Reasons, and Obligations

#### 1.1 Introduction

Aristotle reports that Thales maintained that everything is water (Barnes 1979, 9; Ring 2000, 20). A number of obvious objections to such a claim leap immediately to mind, such as: what about my cat? To this, Thales seems to have two possible replies: (i) what cat? (cat nihilism);<sup>1</sup> or (ii) your cat is water too (cat reductionism). Thales's claim is just one example of a reductionist tendency that has been a prominent part of western philosophy from its beginnings through the present. Whereas Thales maintained that all is water, many contemporary philosophers are attracted to the view that all is physical, or at least natural—the sort of thing that can be investigated using the methods of empirical science.

One of my undergraduate philosophy professors once remarked that he was inclined to believe that “either G.E. Moore is right, or there's no such field as ethics.”<sup>2</sup> While this comment oversimplifies the relevant philosophical issues just slightly, I've long thought that there was something right about it. Moore maintains that ethical properties are real and *sui generis*; they are non-natural and are not reducible to any other kind of property. To those of a Thalean bent who claim that all is water, or physical, or natural, Moore asks: what about ethical properties? And he rejects the claim that such properties do not exist or that they, too, are nothing more than physical or natural properties.

<sup>1</sup> Felinihilism?

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Ryckman, Lawrence University, sometime during 1990–4.

In this disagreement between Moore and the modern-day Thaleans, I side with Moore. The primary aim of this chapter is to lay out the central elements of my view of the metaphysics of morals—my view concerning the nature of some central ethical properties and of some of the important relationships between them. I begin with the small matter of the meaning of life.

## 1.2 Intrinsic Value and the Meaning of Life

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* begins thusly:

Every art or applied science and every systematic investigation, and similarly every action and choice, seem to aim at some good; the good, therefore, has been well defined as that at which all things aim. But it is clear that there is a difference in the ends at which they aim: in some cases the activity is the end, in others the end is some product beyond the activity. (NE 1094a1–5)

Aristotle here claims that *in some cases the activity is the end*. I take it that at least part of what Aristotle has in mind is that there are some activities that are worth doing for their own sakes. Activities of this sort carry at least part of their value in themselves, independently of any relation they might bear to other things.

Moore devoted much attention to the concept of *intrinsic value*. A slew of moral philosophers since Moore have discussed this concept as well. For my purposes here it will be sufficient to say that the intrinsic value of a given thing is the value it has, if any, solely in virtue of its intrinsic properties.<sup>3</sup> The extrinsic value of a given thing, by contrast, is the value it has in virtue of how it is related to things distinct from itself.<sup>4</sup> In thinking about

<sup>3</sup> I work here with what Thomas Hurka (1998) calls the “strict definition” of intrinsic value according to which “a state’s intrinsic value can depend only on its intrinsic properties” (301).

<sup>4</sup> As Korsgaard points out, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value is distinct from the distinction between being valued as a means and being valued as an end (1983, 170). The latter distinction is a psychological one whereas the former is a distinction about the source of value. It may appear that the claims Aristotle makes in the passage quoted above are merely psychological claims. Despite such appearances, however, I think that Aristotle intends not merely to describe what in fact happens when it comes to applied science, action, and choice, but to make claims about how such things *ought* to work (see Kraut 1989, 200–3). So, when he says that in some cases “the activity is the end,” I take it that he means to say that in some cases it is *appropriate* or *correct* to pursue the activity for its own sake—because the activity carries its value within itself—i.e. it is intrinsically valuable. In any case, I think that the claim that there are intrinsically good activities is plausible independently of the correct interpretation of the passage from Aristotle.

intrinsic and extrinsic value it is important to keep in mind the fact that a given thing may be intrinsically bad (or good) and extrinsically good (or bad) at the same time. Consider, for example, a bad-tasting medicine that cures a serious disease. The nasty sensation produced by taking such a medicine may be intrinsically bad yet also extrinsically good because it results in the curing of the serious disease. The nasty taste of the medicine may be good overall despite being intrinsically bad if the extrinsic goodness of being cured of the disease outweighs the intrinsic badness of the nasty sensation.

I claim that some activities are intrinsically good. Claims to the effect that a given thing is intrinsically good (or bad) are notoriously difficult to prove (see Davison 2012, 2). The difficulty stems at least in part from the nature of intrinsic value itself. To claim that X is intrinsically good is to claim that X is good solely in virtue of (at least some) of X's intrinsic properties. By the very nature of such a claim, it cannot be supported by appealing to any claims about something distinct from X. In the face of this difficulty, some philosophers have turned to thought experiments as a source of intuitions about which things might be intrinsically valuable. Moore, for example, proposed the *isolation test*, in which one considers "what value we should attach to [something], if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments" (1903, 91). Any value that a thing would have if it existed in complete isolation is presumably intrinsic value. More recently, Scott Davison proposes the *annihilation test*, in which one imagines a given entity being completely annihilated "so that no part of it exists at all" (2012, 35). If the annihilation of a given thing seems to result in the loss of something valuable for its own sake, then the thing in question is intrinsically valuable.<sup>5</sup>

Let us apply these tests to the activity of participating in a loving relationship with another person. Imagine (or if you are lucky, remember) yourself participating in such a relationship. Now imagine removing everything in reality except this activity; imagine this activity in isolation. Of course, you won't be able to remove *everything* else; the other person,

<sup>5</sup> The account of the annihilation test given in the text differs slightly from Davison's own description. As Davison describes it, one should consider whether a fully informed, properly functioning valuer would regard the annihilation of a given thing as the loss of something valuable for its own sake (2012, 35). But I think that the simpler version of the test described in the main text is at least roughly as reliable as Davison's version.

for example, must remain in existence for this activity to occur. Imagine a universe in which the only things that exist are you and the other person participating in a loving relationship. Does it seem to you that something good happens in such a universe? When I conduct this thought experiment it seems to me that the answer to this question is “yes.” Similarly, if I imagine my participation in a loving relationship being annihilated or erased from my life (without the other person being annihilated as well), it seems to me that something valuable for its own sake is lost. Such considerations suggest that participating in a loving relationship is intrinsically good.

What other sorts of activities might be intrinsically good? Following the lead of Freud (see Erikson 1963, 265), we might consider love’s putative partner, work. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt proposes that, along with love, an important element of a happy and meaningful life is *flow* (2006, 219–26). Haidt characterizes flow this way:

[T]he state of total immersion in a task that is challenging yet closely matched to one’s abilities ... There’s a clear challenge that fully engages your attention; you have the skills to meet the challenge; and you get immediate feedback about how you are doing at each step ... You get flash after flash of positive feeling with each turn negotiated, each high note correctly sung, or each brushstroke that falls into the right place. (2006, 95)

It seems to me that flow also passes the isolation and annihilation tests. Accordingly, I offer it as another example of intrinsically valuable activity.

Some may find the concept of intrinsic value described here puzzling: what is this mysterious property, they might wonder, and what is the nature of this “in virtue of” relation that allegedly holds between a given thing’s intrinsic properties and its intrinsic value? (This latter is Mackie’s metaphysical worry described in the Preface.) Later in this chapter, I address these worries by explaining some connections between intrinsic value and certain other ethical concepts, and by saying more about the nature of the “in virtue of” relation (see section 1.4). As already noted, I do not see any way of *proving* that a given thing is intrinsically good (or bad). But I think that the claims I have advanced about intrinsic value so far are at least initially plausible. Thus, we should provisionally accept them unless and until we are given good reason to reject them.

I think that intrinsically valuable activities are closely connected with meaningful lives. However, the concept of a meaningful life appears to be