

Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, X + 193 pp.

Reviewed by Marek Pepliński, University of Gdansk, Poland

“Forum Philosophicum” 12(2007), z.1, 196-201.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=25743301&lang=pl&site=ehost-live>
10.5840/forphil200712132

The question of the nature of the relationship between God and morality is one of the most interesting and difficult. Erik J. Wielenberg's book is an attempt to illuminate the contemporary debate concerning that relation from the perspective of naturalism of certain kind. Instead of arguing for the truth of naturalism, he proposes for us to suppose that it is true, and to search for and examine implications, mainly of the ethical sort, that his conditional project has for the meaning of human life, morality, value and virtue. The partial aim of the book is to respond to arguments made by some Christian philosophers seeking to refute naturalism by pointing to its supposedly unacceptable ethical consequences.

The central component of Wielenberg's naturalism is the negative claim, that „no supernatural entities exist, nor (...) existed in the past, nor will they in the future”. Putting this in other words, there is no God, no immortal soul and we came into being solely through a combination of chance and necessity. Our beginning is not the work of Providence, nor is it a result of the operation of intelligent design, and our death marks the permanent end of our conscious life, by which Wielenberg means, I suppose, the end of any kind of human life. There is no afterlife, and no reincarnation. His naturalism is of an ontological kind, not epistemological or methodological. He does not endorse the claim that all facts are scientific, because, as he states it, his version of naturalism leaves open the possibility that there are ethical facts that are not reducible to scientific or physical facts.

The book has five chapters, apart from the important introduction, references and index. The first chapter defends the view that human life can be meaningful even if God does not exist. The second is an examination of two different divine command theories, taken as the explanations or maybe the explications of the morality-God relationship. Chapter three is devoted to other aspects of that

possible relationship - the divine guarantee of perfect justice. In this part Wielenberg examines some responses to the question: why should we be moral? He explores two different positions, the Humean and Kantian accounts of practical reasons to care about what our moral obligations are. Finally, in this chapter, he accepts the Kantian statement that the only correct reason for doing what we should is that we ought to do so. The first three chapters make up the first part of the book, which argues for the possibility of ethics in a godless universe. The second part contains two last chapters and is devoted to the issues of the content of morality in such a universe. Chapter four presents a part of, as we could call it, secular virtue ethics, with an account of the secular equivalents of humility, charity and hope. Wielenberg's investigations are governed by a new assumption made in this chapter, that we know naturalism to be true. The last chapter can be interpreted as a comparison of two competing general views of reality, theism and naturalism, where the version of theism is Christianity and the version of naturalism is Wielenberg's. I will discuss briefly the issues of the last two chapters and then elaborate some of difficulties of the first part of book.

Chapter four investigates the possibility and nature of ethical character in a godless universe. The underlying assumption of that chapter, the knowledge that naturalism is true, is introduced to examine several naturalistic equivalents of Christian virtues, theological and others. Let us turn our attention to humility. After Wielenberg rejects some possible candidates for naturalistic humility based on Aristotle's virtue of high-mindedness, contrasted with J. Driver's account of modesty, he discusses C. S. Lewis's concept of humility from *"The Screwtape Letters"*, and develops an account of naturalistic humility inspired by the views of the author of *„Four Loves"*. Lewis position is that humility is not a matter of underestimating somebody's worth, but is essentially constituted by giving proper credit for one's own worth and accomplishments. A humble person can correctly know her worth but is deeply convinced that God and not she should be given most credit for that worth and her works. This conviction manifests itself in gratefulness towards God. There is a connection between humility and obedience. A humble person recognizes her place in the universe, her dependence on God. But this is impossible in a godless, naturalistic universe, where there is no

hierarchy. This fact doesn't make naturalistic humility impossible, because the thing that makes humility an appropriate attitude is dependence of human beings on God. Both in a theistic and in a naturalistic universe our fate depends upon factors outside of our control. In a theistic universe much of the credit for our accomplishments should go to God, because these relevant factors are under God's control. Accordingly, in a naturalistic universe the relevant factors are under the control of no one. So, naturalistic humility consists in the acceptance of the belief that much of the credit for one's own worth and accomplishments should go to no one. At first, this seems a surprising stance, but it is, I think, understandable when somebody has made the assumptions Wielenberg makes. But is there any reason to desire such a virtue in a godless universe? The reason cannot consist in the fact that it is an equivalent of a Christian, religious virtue, because this doesn't matter for an atheist and unbeliever. Besides, it seems to me, that in a godless universe any comparison of some naturalistic virtue with its religious equivalent has no motivational worth. So, a naturalist should work out his own set of virtues, values and goods. This concerns all the naturalistic virtues Wielenberg explores, and his account could be counted as only a first step toward this goal. And the account of that set should be more convincing than the one we receive in Wielenberg's book. Is there really a place for hope, in a godless universe, when the ground of hope is confidence that science alone can improve and ameliorate our lives and our lot? I assume, that we can think about our universe as a godless one. But in this universe, hope that relies on science alone appears to be vane. Again, from a naturalistic point of view, if my former remark is true, does Wielenberg use a proper method in his work, when he compares naturalistic and Christian virtues?

The final chapter is concerned with two questions. The first concerns the possible merits of the argument that supernaturalism should be accepted not because of its truth but because of its consequences, when applied to Christianity. Wielenberg suggests that some ideas of the Old Testament, like the commands given by God to invade, kill and sacrifice, are very dangerous, and if they are essential to Christianity, this should count against it. The second part of the last chapter is devoted to exploring the idea that naturalism is a creed by which we

can live. After the detailed discussion of an argument made by Gordon Graham in *Evil and Christian Ethics*, where he argues that if naturalism is true, then there is nothing that can be done to improve the general lot of humanity, Wielenberg states that Graham's arguments are inconclusive and that there is place for the hope that moral improvement through neuroscience is possible. He concludes, that although naturalism is a creed that some can live by and some cannot, the questions whether it is a creed we can live by and whether it is true concern distinct issues. We certainly should agree with him that it may be the case that naturalism is a truth that many people cannot accept. But similarly it may be the case that Christian theism is a truth that many unbelievers cannot accept. So, again, to move the discussion forward will necessarily involve arguments for and against the truth/falsity of these different and competing points of view.

Such arguments may concern the possibility and nature of a meaningful human life, discussed in the first chapter. Wielenberg distinguishes three different meanings that human life can possibly have. It has a supernatural meaning if it has a purpose that is assigned by a supernatural being. Human life has an external meaning, when that life brings goodness into the universe. It has an internal meaning in the case when the life in question is good for the person whose life it is and includes activity that is worthwhile. Wielenberg thinks that it is possible that life has an internal meaning but lacks external meaning, because he accepts the following argument. Some person engages in worthwhile activity that brings her pleasure and gives her life internal meaning. The ground of the worth of the activity is the fact, that it is a way to accomplish some goal. But if the person in question had never lived, the same goal would have been accomplished by some other person. So, in this case, the life of the first person lacks external meaning, because the universe would have been just as good if he had never lived. But her life has internal meaning, therefore external meaning is not a necessary condition of internal meaning. I find this argument unconvincing, because it works only if we remove the real possibility that the worthy aim could be accomplished only by the one person in question and by no other. Personal happiness or making somebody happy are two examples of such an aim, as is an aim which is essentially related to one and only one person. Wielenberg omits this possibility and therefore his

argument establishes the independence of only some kinds of internal and external meaning.

Wielenberg considers and rebuts three arguments for the conclusion, that if there is no God, then no human life has internal meaning. The first is the final outcome argument. He construes it in the following way: if we think of human life as the sum total of all the things that happen to a person, then the value of a series of events depends entirely on the value of the very last state of affairs to which that series causally contributes. Since without God there is no afterlife and an outcome is therefore entirely devoid of value, it follows that human life lacks internal meaning. Wielenberg correctly points out that this kind of argument is inconclusive because it overestimates the value of the last event in a series of events. But he is right only if it is not the case that the last event is more important than all the preceding events. There is another possibility, equally destructive to Wielenberg's reasoning, that the value any event has is essentially linked to the last event as its valuable aim. So, it is possible that Wielenberg is right, and that there is a possible internal meaning that the final outcome argument deal with, but it is unjustified to think that this internal meaning is the kind people have in mind, when they consider whether their life has any worth in the face of impending death.

A second argument is based on the belief that a life has internal meaning only if it has a supernatural meaning, which is possible only in universe with God, who assigns to people an external goal. A life without supernatural meaning is pointless, according to this line of reasoning. Wielenberg calls this the pointless existence argument. The third argument, called the nobody of significance cares argument states that life has internal meaning only if an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being cares about it. I agree that this argument is the weakest of the three. Wielenberg explores different answers to these objections using the argumentation of Richard Taylor, author of *Good and Evil*, Peter Singer's account of „ethical life“, and the Aristotelian view of activities that are intrinsically good.

Wielenberg considers and finally rejects Taylor's proposal, that the internal value of an individual's life is directly proportional to the degree to which that person is engaged in the desired activity. But I am not clear about Wielenberg's

assessment of the responses Taylor could give to the three abovementioned arguments. The plain statement against the pointless existence argument, that we ourselves are qualified to assign purpose to our lives is not enough, as is the answer to the nobody of significance cares argument, that we are sufficiently significant to make our lives meaningful. It is not enough not only because it is not an argument, but also because many people think and feel, and I suppose they are right, that some purposes they assign to their lives have little significance. They lack the significance and value which could fulfill their life's internal meaning and value. But what is possible for some, may be possible for all. The reason why Wielenberg rejects Taylor account of internal meaning is, the very sophisticated and tasty case of the grinning excrement-eater, compared with the pianist, where both are engaged in an activity for which they have a genuine passion. Of course, the first activity is worthless and first person should be an object of pity. But this doesn't apply to the pianist. The internal meaning cannot consist solely in doing what you actually want, but must be a matter of the value of the activity. This is the correct direction. Wielenberg then considers Singer's views that the reduction of avoidable suffering is the most objectively worthwhile goal in our universe and to devote one's life to it bring internal meaning to one's life. But the most promising is, according to him, the Aristotelian doctrine of intrinsically and extrinsically good activities. He thinks that Singer's and Aristotelian views help us to reject the final outcome argument and the pointless existence argument. Again, he is right, but only if we assume the possibility, that there are possible objective worthwhile goals, and that there are extrinsically and intrinsically *good* activities not dependent on the existence of God. But maybe this is not the case. So, Wielenberg's arguments beg the question, since he did not resolve adequately the relationship between God and morality. And this is the aim of the second and third chapters. I will focus the rest of my attention on the content of the former.

The second chapter: *God and morality*, is devoted to explaining the idea of God as the omnipotent creator of morality, or „creator of ethics“, as Wielenberg formulates it. There are many different accounts of the dependence of morality on God, and only some consist in making God's will essential. Wielenberg determines the problem using two theses: the Control Thesis and the Dependency Thesis. The

first states that every logically consistent ethical claim, E, is such that God could make E true. The second states, that every true ethical claim is true in virtue of some act of will on the part of God. I find many of the arguments in the chapter sound and many both sound and cogent. In particular, he correctly concludes that A. Plantinga's free will defense and J. Hick's soul making theodicy, the two answers to the problem of evil, fail if the Control Thesis is true. But I think, that despite the fact that Wielenberg makes his own distinctions of strong and weak positions, both these theses are very strong and are not typically endorsed by many theists. Maybe, they could be accepted by voluntaristic philosophers, and theologians like Ockham and Descartes, but there are plenty of philosophers who endorse theistic morality and do not endorse a voluntaristic divine command ethics. But Wielenberg's formulation and interpretation of the Dependency Thesis is plainly voluntaristic. It is not a necessary interpretation, and we could save the formulation, and reject voluntarism, if we construed the thesis as stating that there are no true ethical claims if there is no created world, and it is in virtue of an act of God's will that any created world exists. But we also accept the view that if God creates morality he cannot, at least in the case of some activities, assign to them values other than the values they have. Moreover, we could enhance the Dependency Thesis by the claim that it is because of the dependence of nature, and creatures, on God the creator, that these natures have value, goodness or perfection. This would be consistent with some interpretations of the Dependency Thesis and with the ethical rejection of ridiculous beliefs, like the conviction that God can make intrinsically evil activities good solely by an act of His will. Unfortunately, Wielenberg doesn't consider any such possible stance and therefore the problems we meet in the chapter on the meaning of life remain unresolved.

Moreover, he is not convincing in his assumption that the strong naturalistic view of reality, where the genesis of all beings is a combination of necessity and chance, is reconcilable with the ethical realism, which he endorses in chapters 2 and 3. As a matter of fact, this is an ethical realism of a really strong kind. He accepts the view that there are many necessary ethical truths, where the type of necessity involved is broadly logical or metaphysical necessity rather than strict

logical necessity. His example is the claim that suffering is intrinsically evil. This is true not only in this universe, in this possible world, but in every possible world. So, this is a necessary truth and the cause of its necessity is the essential nature of the things that this claim is about. But this is an explanation that needs another explanation. Again, why do any of the beings in any of the possible worlds have an essential nature? And why are necessary *ethical* truths, part of the furniture of the universe? It seems to be a kind of naturalistic mystery. Nevertheless, even if there is somewhere a cogent naturalistic explanation of ethical necessity, that part of Wielenberg's naturalism remains unclear. And should that view really be preferred to theism, with its account of the Creator of all things, including values and goodness? After all, even if reject some views of the relation between God and morality, Wielenberg does not show us, that there is no such relation. This is because his account of the relationship seems to be a little bit superficial. What he really shows is that the Control Thesis is false, which is obvious according to a non-voluntaristic theistic account of morality, like the Thomistic one. Wielenberg tacitly assumes a voluntaristic vision of the theism he attacks, and this conjoined with his passing over the intellectualistic tradition of theism, is one of the biggest weaknesses of Wielenberg's book. Of course, this doesn't mean that it is without value. It is written with clarity, is very provocative, and should be read by anyone who is interested in the difficult theme of the God-morality relationship.

MAREK PEPLIŃSKI

University of Gdansk, Poland