

Article

Theological Utilitarianism, Supervenience, and Intrinsic Value

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Abstract: Erik Wielenberg has argued that robust realism can account for the “common-sense moral belief” that “some things distinct from God are intrinsically good”. By contrast, theological stateism cannot account for this belief. Hence, robust realism has a theoretical advantage over all forms of theological stateism. This article criticizes Wielenberg’s argument. Wielenberg distinguishes between R and D-supervenience. The coherence of Wielenberg’s robust realism depends upon this distinction. I argue that this distinction undermines his critique of theological stateism. I will make three points. First, once you utilize the distinction between R and D-supervenience, his argument for the incompatibility of theological stateism and intrinsic value fails. Second, theological stateism is compatible with intrinsic value. The historical example of theological utilitarianism, expounded by thinkers George Berkeley and William Paley, shows someone can accept that moral properties simultaneously R supervene upon God’s will and D supervene upon the natural properties of actions. Third, robust realism and theological stateism are in the same boat regarding intrinsic value once we distinguish between R and D-supervenience.

Keywords: supervenience; intrinsic value; god and morality; theological utilitarianism; Erik Wielenberg; George Berkeley; William Paley; theological voluntarism



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1. Introduction

Can objective moral requirements exist independently of God? [Wielenberg \(2014\)](#) defends an affirmative answer to this question. He defends a position called “robust realism”, the thesis that the property of being morally required is a sui generis non-natural property that supervenes upon natural properties.

In recent years robust realism has received several important defenses from philosophers such as [Shafer-Landau \(2003\)](#), [Parfit \(2011\)](#), and [Enoch \(2011\)](#). According to Wielenberg, robust realism implies that moral properties do not depend upon God’s will. However, this implication has received “very little attention, much less defense from its most prominent defenders”. ([Wielenberg 2014](#), p. 41) “Engagement with theistic approaches to morality is almost entirely absent from recent book-length defenses of robust normative realism”. (p. 41) This is problematic because “both worthwhile theistic theories of morality and challenging arguments against secular moral realism” (p. 41) exist.

In the last few decades, many contemporary theists have embraced and defended a divine command theory of ethics whereby moral requirements depend immediately upon God’s will or commands (See, for example ([Adams 1999](#); [Alston 1990](#); [Baggett and Walls 2011](#); [Craig 2003](#); [Evans 2013](#); [Forrest 1989](#); [Flannagan and Copan 2014](#); [Wierenga 1989](#); [Wainwright 2005](#))). Others, such as [Zagzebski \(2004\)](#), [Murphy \(2011\)](#), and [Carson \(1990\)](#), have developed accounts of central moral concepts such as virtues, rights, and goodness, in which God plays a central ontological role. Wielenberg uses the umbrella term “theological stateism” (TS) to refer to these theories.

The problem is that “to the extent that such theistic theories are plausible, “they constitute a viable alternative to robust normative realism” ([Wielenberg 2014](#), p. 42) and “present a challenge to this view” (p. 42). Consequently, “an important part of providing a full defense of robust normative realism is addressing these theories and challenges (p. 41)”.

Wielenberg (2014) is an attempt to address this problem. Wielenberg contends that robust realism is preferable to TS. This is because, unlike TS, Robust realism is consistent with the intuition that certain things apart from God have intrinsic value.

This paper challenges this contention. I will offer three responses. First, Wielenberg's argument that TS cannot accommodate intrinsic value is unsound. Second, an important historical example of TS, theological utilitarianism, shows that TS is compatible with intrinsic value. Third, robust realism is in no better position regarding intrinsic value than TS.

2. Wielenberg's Metaethical Theory

Before doing this, let me briefly elaborate on Wielenberg's metaethical theory. Wielenberg contends that moral properties are *sui generis*. They are not identical with or reducible to any natural property, such as the property of causing pain. Nor are they supernatural properties, such as being commanded or willed by God. However, moral properties supervene upon natural properties, and acts have the moral properties they have "because" of their natural properties.

Consider Francis of Assisi;¹ if we judge him to be a good person, it will be because of the natural features of his actions. He has refrained from killing and lying, avoided harming others, and devoted himself to benefiting them. He is good because his actions have consistently had these properties. Suppose Francis's twin Dominic of Milan, performs the same kinds of actions as Francis. Dominic also refrains from killing and lying, has avoided harming others, and has devoted himself to benefiting them. He does so with the same motives and intentions, and his actions have the same consequences. Francis and Dominic do not differ in any other way. In such a situation, judging Dominic as not a good person but a bad person would be incomprehensible.

This example illustrates a feature deeply ingrained in our moral thought and practice. Even if moral properties are not identical to natural properties, the former supervene upon the latter: Two actions can't have the same non-moral or descriptive properties and not have the same moral properties. Actions have the moral properties they do because of their natural descriptive properties.

The supervenience relationship between natural and moral properties has seemed to some philosophers to be obscure. Mackie (1977) states:

Another way of bringing out this queerness is to ask, about anything that is supposed to have some objective moral quality, how this is linked with 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? It cannot be an entailment, a logical or semantic necessity. Yet it is not merely that the two features occur together. 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'? And how do we know the relation that it signifies (Mackie 1977, p. 41)

Mackie's concern is not just that moral and natural features are modally co-variant: any action with the same natural properties necessarily has the same moral ones. It is that there is some "because" relationship that holds between them. Actions have the moral properties they do *because* they have certain natural properties. But what is the nature of this sort of explanatory relationship? It isn't the kind of physical causation that occurs when an apple falls to the ground, and it isn't a logical or analytic entailment. What is it?²

Wielenberg answers that the supervenience relationship consists of what he calls "robust causation". Natural properties directly cause moral properties to be instantiated unmediated by any laws of nature. This causal relationship is metaphysically necessary, so it holds in all possible worlds. He explicates robust causation by noting the relationship theists believe holds between God and the created world. His proposal is that:

[O]n the theistic view, there is a distinctive and robust causal relation that holds between divine willing and its effects, and that *this same sort of causal relation holds between non-moral and moral properties* . . . Secular views often ascribe to the natural world powers that theists are inclined to ascribe to God. By ascribing to non-moral properties rather than God the power to make moral properties be instantiated, *my view does this as well*. (Wielenberg 2014, p. 20) (emphasis added)

3. Wielenberg's Argument

Having clarified Wielenberg's metaethics, I turn to his argument against TS. Wielenberg argues that robust realism is preferable to TS. Why? Because, unlike TS, robust realism 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", . . . "[B]ecause 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". (Wielenberg 2014, p. 84)

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 "is the value it has in virtue of how it is related to things apart from itself (p. 2)".

Why can't TS accommodate the commonsense view that some things have intrinsic value? Because theological stateists make the moral value of finite objects depend upon their relationship with God:

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 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. (Wielenberg 2014, p. 44) (Emphasis mine)

Later he refers to (Murphy 2011);

Back in Section 2.2, I noted that Adams's theory implies that 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 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 a certain relationship to God; their goodness is thus extrinsic rather than intrinsic because it is explained not merely by their intrinsic properties but also by certain properties of God. (Wielenberg 2014, pp. 83–84)

Wielenberg's argument then is as follows: Something has intrinsic value if it is valuable "in virtue of its intrinsic properties" and not "in virtue of how it is related to things apart from itself". However, TS entails that "the value of all finite things is *dependent* upon their relationship to God" (emphasis mine) (p. 44). Consequently, TS entails "nothing distinct from God is intrinsically good".

Below, I will make three responses to this argument.

4. Is the Argument Sound?

My first response is that the argument is unsound. For Wielenberg's argument to be valid, the phrase "in virtue" in Wielenberg's definition of intrinsic value must refer to the same kind of dependence relationship that theological stateists postulate holds between God and the value of finite things. However, this is not the case.³

Wielenberg spends some time elaborating on what he means when he says that intrinsic value is the value something has *in virtue* of its intrinsic properties. In doing so, he distinguishes between two different kinds of supervenience relationship. One is "reductive supervenience" (or R-supervenience). This is where a moral property M supervenes upon

a base property B because the moral property is *identical* to the base property. The second is “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”. (Wielenberg 2014, pp. 9–15)

D-supervenience and R-supervenience are distinct relationships. A person can consistently deny that moral properties R supervene upon a base property and affirm they do D supervene upon that property. This is implicit in the thesis of Robust Realism itself. Robust realists deny that moral properties R-supervene upon natural properties and hold that moral properties are *sui generis*. So, Moral properties are not identical or reducible to any natural property. However, moral properties do D-supervene upon natural properties. In Wielenberg’s view, natural properties make or “robustly cause” moral properties to be instantiated.⁴

When Wielenberg says something’s intrinsic value is its value *in virtue of its* intrinsic properties and its extrinsic value “is the value it has *in virtue of* how it is related to things apart from itself”, the phrase “in virtue” is shorthand for a relationship of D-supervenience.

If there are entities distinct from God that possess intrinsic value, then Craig’s claim is mistaken. I think that there are such entities. As I suggested in chapter one, some finite things pass the isolation and annihilation tests, which suggests that 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.* (Wielenberg 2014, p. 44) . . . I will call the supervenience of M upon the base properties due to the fact that the base properties being instantiated makes M be instantiated D-supervenience (“D” for “DePaul”). In my view, the most plausible way of understanding the “in virtue of” relation that I earlier claimed holds between the intrinsic properties of certain things and their intrinsic value is as making. To claim that a given thing is intrinsically valuable is to claim that some of that thing’s intrinsic properties make it valuable, and the intrinsic value of a given thing is whatever value it has that is explained by its intrinsic properties. More generally, I think that moral properties—indeed all normative properties—D-supervene upon non-normative properties. (Wielenberg 2014, p. 13) (Emphasis mine)

The problem is that proponents of TS do not deny that moral properties *D supervene* upon the intrinsic properties of finite objects. Nor are they committed to this claim. When theological stateists like Murphy, Adams, or Craig contend that the goodness of all finite things depends upon their relationship with God, they claim only that goodness *R supervenes* upon this relationship. Consider what Wielenberg said when he criticized Craig and Adams:

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...* (Emphasis mine) (Wielenberg 2014, p. 44)

Wielenberg points out that Adams and Craig hold that the goodness of finite things *depends* on their relationship with God. This is correct. However, in the highlighted sentence, Wielenberg spells out the kind of dependence relationship they are referring to. A relationship whereby “finite goodness = resemblance to the necessarily existing divine nature”. Adams believes goodness is identical to this relationship.

Wielenberg makes this explicit when he offers further criticism of Craig and Adams:

It might be thought that Adams’s theory provides a foundation for such ethical facts; doesn’t the theory tell us, for instance, that the fact that the Good exists is grounded in the fact that God exists? The answer is no; 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 that 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. (Wielenberg 2014, p. 43)

Here Wielenberg explains that Adams's (and Craig's) position is that goodness *just is* a relationship between finite objects and God. The relationship between God and the good is the kind of relationship that holds between water and H₂O, a relationship of synthetic identity. Consequently, their position is the goodness of finite objects *R-supervenes* upon their relationship with God.

The upshot is this: If we use the word "in virtue" in the way that Wielenberg does, then TS does not entail that things distinct from God cannot have value *in virtue* of their intrinsic properties. TS entails the goodness of created things R supervenes upon their relationship to God. However, this does not entail that their goodness D supervenes upon God. Consequently, Wielenberg has not shown that TS is incompatible with the commonsense intuition that finite objects can have intrinsic value.

5. Is Theological Stateism Compatible with Intrinsic Value?

If the above argument succeeds, Wielenberg has failed to demonstrate an incompatibility between TS and the commonsense idea that some things have intrinsic value. My second response is to argue that the two are logically compatible.

The method here is like that used by Plantinga regarding the problem of evil. Mackie (1955) argued that the existence of God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil. In response, Plantinga pointed out that to prove two propositions are consistent, one needs only to come up with a logically possible situation where both would be true. (Plantinga 1986, pp. 122–23). I will follow a similar method. I suggest a logically possible or coherent model which, if true, would entail both that TS is true and actions can be good, bad, right, or wrong in virtue of their intrinsic properties. While I do believe something like the model I sketch is correct. I will assume only that it is possible and that this model of the relationship between God's commands and morality is coherent. If I am correct, a theological stateist can consistently accept the commonsense belief that some things distinct from God have intrinsic value.

5.1. Theological Utilitarianism

The model I will utilize is known to intellectual historians as theological utilitarianism⁵. Hayry (2012) defines theological utilitarianism as: "a doctrine according to which we must promote the good of humanity because God, our universally benevolent creator, wants us to do so". (p. 3). It represents a standard way theists thought about God's commands and morality in the 18th and 19th centuries. I will look at two representative examples.

5.1.1. George Berkeley's Passive Obedience

Berkeley (1712) gives an early exposition of theological utilitarianism in his sermons on *Passive Obedience*. Berkeley states that we "denominate" things "Good or Evil". as they are fitted to augment or impair our Happiness". By contrast, "moral goodness" consists "in conformity to the laws of God". Berkeley appears to use the phrase "good or evil" to refer to the concept of "wellbeing" or "prudential value": what is good or an individual. By "moral goodness", Berkeley had a deontological concept in mind. The term is used synonymously with doing one's "duty" following "natural law", following "moral rules", or "precepts" by which actions are praised or blamed. When Berkeley contends that "Moral Goodness" consists of "Conformity to the Laws of God". He identifies himself as a divine command theorist about deontological properties. (Berkeley 1712).⁶

Berkeley articulated the relationship between moral and non-moral goodness in a dense passage:

Now, as God is a Being of Infinite Goodness, it is plain the end he proposes is *Good*. But God enjoying in himself all possible Perfection, it follows that it is not

his own good, but that of his Creatures. Again, the Moral Actions of Men are entirely terminated within themselves, so as to have no influence on the other orders of Intelligences or reasonable Creatures: The end therefore to be procured by them, can be no other than the good of Men. But as nothing in a natural State can entitle one Man more than another to the favour of God, except only Moral Goodness, which consisting in a Conformity to the Laws of God, doth presuppose the being of such Laws, and Law ever supposing an end, to which it guides our actions, it follows that Antecedent to the end proposed by God, no distinction can be conceived between Men; that end therefore itself or general design of Providence is not determined or limited by any Respect of Persons: It is not therefore the private Good of this or that Man, Nation or Age, but the general wellbeing of all Men, of all Nations, of all Ages of the World, which God designs should be procured by the concurring Actions of each individual. (Berkeley 1712)

Because God is impartial⁷ and benevolent,⁸ his goal in issuing the commands he does is that human beings will collectively promote the happiness of his creatures impartially considered. Berkeley proceeded to identify two ways God could promote this goal. One would be to command that “everyone upon each particular Occasion, to consult the Publick Good” directly “and always to do that, which to him shall seem in the present time and circumstances, most to conduce to it. Without the injunction of any specific universal Rules of Morality” The second is to command “the Observation of some determinate, established Laws, which, if Universally practised, have from the Nature of things an Essential fitness to procure the wellbeing of Mankind”.

Berkeley raised several objections to the first of these options. In doing so, he anticipated the distinction between rule and act utilitarianism and standard self-effacing objections to act utilitarianism. Berkeley argued that anyone committed to promoting the happiness of others would not command people to accept act utilitarianism as a rule or decision procedure. Public endorsement and acceptance of the rule “do whatever maximizes utility” would probably not maximize utility. If fallible people like us attempted to determine what to do on a case-by-case basis based on our assessment of the consequences, we would fail to maximize utility. For this reason, Berkeley concluded that God followed the second method. God promulgated a *deontological* code that would maximize welfare if fallible agents like us attempted to follow and internalize it.

Stephen Darwall (2006) argues that the best way to interpret Berkeley is to distinguish between his metaethical and normative theories. His metaethical theory attempts “to answer metaphysical questions of what goodness and rightness, respectively, are”. (p 314). On the other hand, his normative theory “concerns “what is good and right, respectively”. (p 314). Berkeley proposed a divine command *metaethical* theory; “moral goodness consists” in “Conformity to the Laws of God”. However, Berkeley’s *normative* theory was rule-utilitarian. The property of being morally required is identical to the property of being commanded by God. God commands us to follow a code of rules, the widespread acceptance of which would promote happiness.

5.1.2. William Paley’s Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy

Berkeley had intended to write a systematic defense of his moral theory in Part II of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. But the manuscript of this was lost, and he never re-wrote it (Broad 1953, p. 72). For this reason, we do not get a systematic presentation of theological utilitarianism theory until much later. William Paley’s ([1785] 1998) *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* is the most famous and systematic exposition of theological utilitarianism. Each of the features I just attributed to Berkeley can be found in Paley’s *Principles*.

First, Paley describes virtue as doing “good to mankind” (p. 221). Elsewhere he talks of promoting the “public good” (p. 226). He used these terms to refer to aggregate well-being. Like Berkeley, Paley’s account of well-being is hedonist.

In strictness, any condition may be denominated happy, in which the amount or aggregate of pleasure exceeds that of pain, and the degree of happiness depends upon the quantity of this excess. And the greatest quantity of it ordinarily attainable in human life, is what we mean by happiness when we inquire or pronounce what human happiness consists in (p. 213)

Second, Like Berkeley, Paley defended a divine command account of moral obligation.⁹ In book II, Paley asks, “what do we mean when we say someone is obliged to do something? He identifies a paradigmatic case; to say someone is obliged to act is to say they are compelled to act by a “violent motive” resulting “from the command of another” (p. 227). (By violent motive, Paley means something like “decisive reason”).¹⁰ Paley argued that the property of being commanded by God fits this description. We are obliged to keep our word “[b]ecause I am urged to do so ‘by a violent motive’ (namely, the expectation of being after this life rewarded, if I do, or punished for it, if I do not), “resulting from the command of another” (namely, of God)”. (p. 228)

Paley also combined these two ideas in a manner analogous to Berkeley. He concluded a chapter on God’s benevolence as follows:

We conclude, therefore, that God wills and wishes the happiness of his creatures. And this conclusion being once established, we are at liberty to go on with the rule built upon it, namely, “that the method of coming at the will of God, concerning any action, by the light of nature, is to inquire into the tendency of that action to promote or diminish the general happiness. (p. 232)

Like Berkeley, Paley is a rule utilitarian.¹¹ In response to the objection that there are cases where assassinating an innocent person would promote utility Paley distinguished between the “general” and “particular consequences” (p. 233) of acts. The particular consequence “is the mischief which that single action directly and immediately occasions. (p. 233)” However, “The general consequence of any action may be estimated by asking what the consequence would be if the same sort of actions were generally permitted” (p. 235). Paley clarified that his theory assesses the morality of actions by the general, not the particular consequences of those actions. The particular consequences of assassinating an innocent person on a given occasion might be beneficial. However, the consequences of adopting a rule permitting “every man to kill anyone he meets, whom he thinks noxious or useless” would be pernicious. (p. 233) For this reason God condemns it.

Paley illustrates this distinction through several examples. Consider counterfeiting money. Paley states that a counterfeiting case’s “particular consequence” is the loss of “a single guinea to the person who receives the counterfeit money” that appears trivial. However, “the general consequence”, i.e., “the consequence that would ensue if the same practice were generally permitted) is to abolish the use of money”. This is much more serious. The immorality of counterfeiting is based on the general consequences, not the particular consequences.

Similarly, the “particular consequence” of horse theft is “a loss to the owner, to the amount horse stolen”. The general consequence is that “the land could not be occupied, nor the market supplied, with this kind of stock”. (p. 235). Paley’s theory is that God commands certain acts because those acts have good *general* consequences. If human beings generally adopted a rule requiring such acts to guide their conduct, good consequences would ensue.

The same distinction is evident in Paley’s answers to several moral questions. Consider Paley’s discussion of religious tolerance. In addressing this question, Paley states that we should not consider whether a particular act of suppressing false religion has good results on a particular occasion. Instead, we should consider what the results would be if “the kind of interference which he [the magistrate] is about to exercise...were adopted as a common maxim amongst states and princes or received as a general rule for the conduct of government in matters of religion”. Paley made a similar argument on the question of sexual morality. In examining the traditional Christian condemnation of fornication,

Paley contended that the question is not whether fornicating on a particular occasion “diminishes marriage”. Instead, the question is what the consequences would be “if the same licentiousness were universal? Or what should hinder it’s becoming universal if it is innocent or allowable in him?”

In both these cases, it is not the consequences of individual actions that determine the rightness or wrongness of an action. Instead, the overall long-term consequences of the general adoption of a rule permitting everyone to perform these actions are determinative.

For these reasons, it is reasonable to construe Paley as offering a divine command metaethical theory and a rule utilitarian normative theory. Paley offers the definition of virtue provided by his associate Edmund Law ([1758] 1998). According to this definition, “the good of mankind is the subject, the will of God the rule” of all virtue. Law thinks moral rules are expressions of God’s will. By contrast, doing good is the “material” part of virtue: what the will of God requires”. So, while moral rules are divine commands or rules laid down by God, those rules direct us to the performance of acts that have good general consequences.

5.1.3. The Implications of Theological Utilitarianism

The positions of Berkeley and Paley are of considerable interest. Both wrote before Bentham. Both anticipated the distinction between rule and act utilitarianism before Richard Brandt made it famous in the 1950s¹². However, for our purposes, two things are noteworthy.

First, as I have read both Paley and Berkeley, their position entails that moral properties *R* supervene upon God’s will or commands. For Berkeley, “Moral Goodness” consists of “Conformity to the Laws of God”. For Paley being morally obligated to do an action just is being commanded or induced by God to do it.

Second, moral properties *D* *supervene* upon various natural properties of acts. Theological utilitarianism implies that the property of being morally good modally co-varies with an action’s natural or descriptive properties. Because God is essentially impartial and benevolent, he promulgates rules that promote general happiness. Acts that God prohibits will co-vary with acts with natural or descriptive features that violate those rules. Moreover, these properties do not just co-vary; the instantiation of the latter *depends upon* and is brought about because of the existence of the former. God commands certain acts because of their general consequences. Because the property of being commanded by God is the property of being morally required, it follows that acts are right and wrong *because* of the natural and descriptive features they possess.

This also appears to be a case of “robust causation”. For Wielenberg, God’s bringing about something by willing is a paradigm of the robust causal relationship that holds when something *D* supervenes upon another thing. Is not this what occurs here? God’s commanding or prohibiting are expressions of God’s will. God perceives that an action has certain utilitarian natural properties. He expresses his will that it be done or not be done, and this expression of his will brings a moral property into existence.

One might object as follows: rule utilitarianism cannot account for the intrinsic value of acts. Because the property of being in conformity with a rule whose universal acceptance would maximize well-being is not an intrinsic property of a *singular* action. However, it is not clear to me if this is correct. According to Nathanson, the basic idea of rule utilitarianism has two parts. ““A moral rule is justified if its inclusion into our moral code would create more utility than other possible rules (or no rule at all).” And “a specific action is morally justified if it conforms to a justified moral rule” (emphasis added). (Nathanson 2010, p. 194) If this is correct, then conformity with a rule whose acceptance would maximize well-being is a property of singular actions. God requires certain actions because they fall under a particular description specified by a moral rule. The rule is justified by the consequences, of general acceptance. The act however is not.¹³

Consequently, theological Utilitarianism provides an example of a version of theological Stateism whereby moral properties do D-supervene upon the intrinsic natural features of finite things.

5.1.4. The Influence of Theological Utilitarianism

Nor is this an unrepresentative idiosyncratic position. Paley and Berkley's combination of a divine command meta-ethic with a rule utilitarian normative theory was highly influential. It represents a standard way theists thought about God's commands and morality in the 18th century. (Brogan 1959) argues that this is the position of John Locke. (Louden 1995) finds elements of it in Butler's writings.

Paley published *The Principles* in 1785. However, he based them on lectures he delivered during his tenure at Cambridge between 1766 and 1776. The ideas in these lectures were not original to him. In the preface, Paley describes himself as a compiler of previous writers.¹⁴ His lectures synthesized the work of earlier writers such as Waterland ([1730] 2011), Gay ([1731] 1998), Rutherford ([1744] 2018), Brown ([1751] 1998), and Jenyns (Jenyns [1757] 1998). Law ([1758] 1998), Tucker ([1768] 1998). Paley synthesized and expounded a widespread understanding of the relationship between God's commands and happiness that had been dominant at Cambridge¹⁵ for several decades before Bentham. It continued to be expounded in the 19th century by people like Austin ([1832] 1995).

The Principles was a required text in moral philosophy at Cambridge from 1787 until the 1840s. Required reading at Durham and Sydney Universities until the middle of the nineteenth century and required reading at Manitoba University until the late nineteenth century (Francis 1989). Smith (1954) argues that Paley's writings were once as well known in American colleges as were the readers and spellers of William McGuffey and Noah Webster in elementary schools. For these reasons, *The principles* became the most widely read and cited textbook on moral philosophy in the early nineteenth century. Theological utilitarianism was a significant philosophical undermining of many of the conservative responses to the French revolution, offering a theoretical basis to critique ideas of social contract theory and abstract natural rights of man. (Scofield 1986). *The Principles* were also frequently cited in moral and political debates over the corn law and the poor laws of the nineteenth-century era. (Horne 1985) Schneewind (1977) contends, "utilitarianism first became widely known in England through the work of William Paley" (p. 122). Paley, not Bentham being its most well-known exponent.

This means some of the most paradigmatic influential examples of divine command metaethics entailed both that moral properties R supervene upon God's commands and D supervene upon the natural properties of acts. Divine command metaethics is a form of theological stateism. Consequently, theological stateism is not inconsistent with the existence of intrinsic value.

6. Does Robust Realism Provide a Better Account of Intrinsic Value?

This brings me to my third and last response. Once we understand Wielenberg's distinction between R and D-supervenience, robust realism and theological stateism are in the same boat regarding the existence of intrinsically valuable things.

I noted that Wielenberg defines intrinsic value as the value something has "in virtue of its intrinsic properties. We saw that Wielenberg's definition of this locution is in terms of D-supervenience. Let's assume this is correct. Suppose the phrase "in virtue" refers to D-supervenience. In that case, both TS and Robust realism can account for intrinsic value. Robust realism holds that actions have sui generis non-natural properties because they have natural properties. By contrast, TS contends that God has certain relationships to actions because they have certain natural properties. God has the power to issue commands. If God commands that an action be performed, he immediately and directly brings it about that the action in question has been commanded by God. According to Robust realism, natural properties can directly and immediately bring about that non-natural properties exist. The

kind of robust causation in each case is the same, even though one is attributed to God and the other to nature.

Perhaps someone could revise Wielenberg's objection, and they could contend that it can be rerun in a context where the phrase "in virtue" refers instead to R supervenience. If intrinsic value is understood this way, then TS will be incompatible with intrinsic values. TS entails that moral properties are reducible to theological properties or relationships between finite things and God. If they are identical to a theological property, then they are not identical to a natural property distinct from God.

One could rerun Wielenberg's argument this way. The problem is that one can also rerun the same argument to show that Robust realism is incompatible with intrinsic value. Robust realism holds that moral properties are "real and *sui-generis*; they are *non-natural and not reducible to any other sort of property*" (Emphasis added). If moral properties are not reducible to other properties, then they also do not R supervene upon the intrinsic properties of distinct finite things. Robust realism will imply that every finite thing R supervenes, not upon its intrinsic properties, but on its relationship to distinct *sui generis* non-natural properties. No finite thing will have intrinsic value, and everything has extrinsic value.

One might interpret my argument above in the following way. Theological stateism can give an explanation of the D supervenience of moral properties upon non-moral or descriptive properties of action. Robust Realism *à la* Wielenberg cannot. We might ask why do moral properties D supervene upon these non-moral properties? Why do these descriptive or non-moral properties of the action make it the case that these moral properties are instantiated? Theological utilitarianism answers this question; God links them this way. But this is vague and needs more elaboration. We need to answer the question as to why God would establish this relationship, and defences of theological statism would also need to answer the Euthyphro dilemma.¹⁶

However, one should not interpret the argument this way. Wielenberg does give an explanation of the D supervenience of moral properties upon non-moral properties. He contends the former "Robustly" causes the latter, and his understanding of Robust causation is modelled on the kind of answer theists provide when they claim God conserves the universe in being. My argument in this section is that the kind of answer he gives and the answer the theological utilitarian both account for the data. Wielenberg cannot claim that Robust realism has an advantage on this point.

More to the point, however, that theological utilitarianism doesn't simply state that "God links" these properties. It gives an account of why he does this. God is essentially impartial and benevolent. For this reason, he promulgates a moral code that promotes his creatures' well-being (impartially considered). Actions are prohibited because they have descriptive features, which means they violate such rules. This explanation contains much more substantive content than simply saying, "God links them". It also explains why God links them the way he does.

As to the Euthyphro dilemma, a complete defence of theological statism would have to say something about the Euthyphro dilemma. However, this article is not a complete defence of theological statism. It is an attempt to rebut one argument against such theories. To address every objection to these theories or even give a rebuttal of various versions of the Euthyphro dilemma would require a separate paper or papers.¹⁷

7. Conclusions

Wielenberg's thesis is that while moral properties are not identical to natural properties, they do supervene upon these properties. This thesis depends crucially on a distinction between R and D-supervenience. I have argued that this distinction enables a defender of theological stateism to coherently evade the criticisms Wielenberg makes. Theological stateists can maintain that moral properties R supervene upon theological properties. The property of being morally required or morally good is identical to the property of being related to God's commands, nature, or will in a relevant way. However, moral properties

D supervene upon the natural properties of finite things. God relates to those things in virtue of or because they have certain properties, such as promoting human flourishing and happiness. There is no incompatibility between theological stateism and the common-sense moral belief that some things have intrinsic value.

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Notes

¹ Hare (1952, p. 145) inspires this example.

² See (Moberger 2019) for an explanation and clarification about Mackie's challenge.

³ This section will recap the argument of made in (Flanagan 2017).

⁴ Given, Wielenberg's definitions D-supervenience and R supervenience are mutually exclusive relationships. Something R supervenes upon a base property when it is identical to that property. It D supervenes upon it when it is not identical with that property, but its instantiation causes the base property to be instantiated. Obviously, if something is not identical with a base property, then it does not R supervene upon it. Moreover, if something is identical to a base property, then its instantiation t "cause" the base property to exist. That would be a case of self-causation.

⁵ The term "theological utilitarianism" originates with (Stephen 1881). See also (Albee 1901) for an early discussion of theological utilitarianism. More recent studies include (Crimmins 1998) (Wainwright 2005) (Cole 1987, 1991) and (O'Flaherty 2018). Heydt (2014) suggests the term "Anglican utilitarianism".

⁶ In distinguishing non-moral and moral goodness the way he did, Berkeley was following Locke (Locke 1689).

⁷ Berkeley's reference to God showing no "respect of persons" alludes to how the kings James Bible describes God's impartiality. See, for example, Deuteronomy 1:17, Deuteronomy 16:19, Chronicles 19:7, Proverbs 24:23, Proverbs 28:21, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25, James 2:1, James 2:9, 1 Peter 1:17.

⁸ The phrase "infinite goodness" is from the 39 articles of the church of England. It is how articles summarize the doctrine of God's essential goodness. (Louden 1995) points out that God's "infinite" goodness was typically understood as "benevolence", a disposition or desire to communicate happiness to his creatures. This understanding of what it means to call God good is found in several seventeenth and eighteenth-century writers such as Locke, William King, Clarke, Edmund Law, John Gay, Butler, Paley, and Adam Smith. In some cases, these authors offer the same line of argument Berkeley makes in this passage when they do so.

⁹ Strictly speaking, Berkeley claims that moral goodness consists in conformity with God's commands. However, Paley offers a divine command theory of moral obligation. However, if I am correct that when Berkeley uses the term "moral goodness", he has a deontological concept in mind, then this difference is largely verbal.

¹⁰ (Tucker [1768] 1998) whom Paley closely followed, used the phrase "violent motive" to refer to a motive, the resistance of which was painful. In other words, a motive is strong compared to any alternative motives to the contrary. (Paley [1785] 1998) earlier (BK I.5) rejected the idea that the "remorse of conscience" and approval of one moral sense was sufficient to ground the authority of morality because " But this remorse may be borne with: and if the sinner choose to bear with it, for the sake of the pleasure or the profit which he expects from his wickedness; or finds the pleasure of the sin to exceed the remorse of conscience, of which he alone is the judge", In (Bk II: 2) He also noted that "gratitude" was not a "violent enough" motive to ground obligation "because the inducement does not rise high enough". He goes on to respond to Hume's account of morality without God with the comment "let them consider, whether any motives there proposed are likely to be found sufficient to withhold men from the gratification of lust, revenge, envy, ambition, avarice; or to prevent the existence of these passions. Unless they rise up from this celebrated essay, with stronger impressions upon their minds than it ever left upon mine, they will acknowledge the necessity of additional sanctions".(Bk II.4). This all suggests that, for Paley, one needed to find a demand that obliged people with motives or reason strong or "violent" enough that the reasons in favor of following the demand were always greater or stronger than the reasons or motives one had for non-compliance.

¹¹ (Crisp 2019, pp. 97–98) argues that Paley was an act utilitarian, who held that rules function as a good way to assess what is right and wrong, but that wrongness does not consist in being in accordance with a rule. Given that Paley understood moral rules as divine laws that God held one accountable for following and defined obligation in terms of God's will, I think this conclusion is doubtful. A good defense of the alternative view, which goes into more detail on rules in Paley's system, is Tuckness (2021, pp. 85–92).

- ¹² (Nathanson 2014) expresses the common wisdom “The contrast between act and rule utilitarianism, though previously noted by some philosophers, was not sharply drawn until the late 1950s when Richard Brandt introduced this terminology. (Other terms that have been used to make this contrast are “direct” and “extreme” for act utilitarianism and “indirect” and “restricted” for rule utilitarianism.) Because the contrast had not been sharply drawn, earlier utilitarians like Bentham and Mill sometimes apply the principle of utility to actions and sometimes apply it to the choice of rules for evaluating action”. Whether or not the distinction is clear in Bentham and Mill, Berkeley explicitly drew the distinction in 1712 and rejected the act utilitarian position.
- ¹³ An anonymous reviewer brought this objection to my attention.
- ¹⁴ Schneewind (2002) states that Paley’s theory was: “an assemblage of ideas developed by others and is presented to be learned by students rather than debated by colleagues”. (p. 446).
- ¹⁵ Waterland, Gay, Jenyns, Law, Rutherford, and Brown were all associated with Cambridge University.
- ¹⁶ I owe an anonymous reviewer for this objection.
- ¹⁷ See (Flannagan 2019, 2022) for a recent response to the Euthyphro dilemma.

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