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REPLY TO ERIK WIELENBERG

David Baggett

Let me begin by saying what an unmitigated pleasure and privilege it is to have a friendly dialogue with so gracious a fellow and so clear a thinker as Erik Wielenberg. I have long appreciated his clear exposition and intriguing analysis, and this exchange has only served to enhance my appreciation. The substance of his reply makes it difficult to do it justice, so I will simply try to respond, albeit too briefly, to the two main issues Wielenberg raises: first, whether Robert Adams’s moral theory supports Lewis’s moral argument for God’s existence; and, second, what best explains moral truth, including necessary moral truth.

It is important to spend some time discussing Adams’s development of the idea that God is the Good, which is, by Wielenberg’s lights, at least broadly Lewisian in spirit. Let me quickly interject that Lewis wrote quite a bit about issues of moral goodness, and he was not always concerned to connect it explicitly with God. In *The Abolition of Man*, for instance, he referred to the Tao—the moral law—while referring to moral resources other than theism. Although this may seem initially puzzling, perhaps at least part of his rationale was his conviction that believers and unbelievers alike can apprehend foundational moral truths. Nor did Lewis always sound like a theistic Platonist (or something in that vicinity) by equating God with goodness. He often sounded more like a Thomist and natural law theorist who connected moral goodness with what conduces to the deepest human flourishing. These pictures of goodness are not necessarily at odds, though, since God, on traditional Christian understandings, has often been thought of as the ultimate good, and union with him the ultimate end for human beings. Regarding the identity of God with the Good, though, Adams tries to articulate one way this might be explicable.

Wielenberg does a fine job summarizing Adams on this issue, including the way Adams deployed insights from contemporary philosophy of language to defend an identity of God and the Good without requiring synonymy of the words “God” and “good.” Wielenberg notes that Adams’s identification of the Good with a necessarily existing God would, if successful, (1) yield Lewis’s claim that the Good is uncreated, could not have been otherwise, and features no shadow of contingency; (2) make sense of the dependence of morality on God without reducing God to a principle or an object; and (3) avoid the obscurity of Lewis’s remarks on the relation between God and the moral law.
We can refer to these three issues, respectively, as the *necessity criterion*, the *dependence relation*, and the *obscenity problem*.

1. **Is Lewis’s Account Too Obscure?**

A word on the last of these first. On the issue of whether “God as moral law” is objectionably obscure, Wielenberg is right to say that Lewis admitted that his proposal of God as the Good is not altogether easy to understand. Lewis likened it to an attempt to grasp the nature of the Trinity, or a Flatlander’s attempt to grasp the nature of a cube. I am less inclined than Wielenberg, though, to read Lewis’s analogy as a concession to what we might call “problematic obscurity.” It seems to me rather an admission, or perhaps insistence, that the ultimate truth here is to some degree beyond our current understandings and ways of envisioning things. In light of standard categories and prevailing views, the truth of the matter—historical, scientific, and otherwise—often challenges prevailing paradigms. The deeper understandings are not a matter of going contrary to reason—though they are often a matter of going contrary to *expectations*—but truth can and often does stretch our understanding in new and surprising directions, some of which remain in certain respects inchoate and only partially illumined. This is a problematic epistemic deficiency, however, only if we have good reason to expect otherwise. In the current discussion, I see no good reason to believe that the large and difficult questions at issue yield answers that neatly fit into our preexisting categories. In fact, truth often tends to be more iconoclastic and less domesticated than we initially suspect. So, as for me and my house, I do not count Lewis’s concession here as problematic for his view, but rather in accordance with properly humbled epistemic expectations.

2. **The Necessity and Ontological Foundations of Moral Truth**

Let me turn next to the necessity criterion and the dependence relation. In terms of the former, equating the Good with God himself (or perhaps with God’s character) would make good sense of moral propositions that appear to be necessarily true. In fact, on this score theists and Platonists are kindred spirits—in contrast with many contrary prevailing views among contemporary ethicists. In his well-known piece “Religion and the Queerness of Morality,” George Mavrodes once suggested that a Platonic understanding of objective morality—central somehow both to reality and human knowledge—held much in common with classical theism, but had for its main deficiency that it provided more assertion than principled argument (Mavrodes, 1986). Most theists are not inclined to disagree with Platonists’ nonnegotiable ethical convictions. They simply argue, as Lewis does, that theism provides a more