For more than a decade, Erik Wielenberg has been among the foremost defenders of a robust nontheistic moral realism. Wielenberg maintains that there are objective moral values and objective moral duties, that we can have knowledge of these values and duties, and that neither the existence of these values and duties nor our knowledge of them requires a supernaturalistic explanation. These claims are defended in his *Robust Ethics*, an excellent book that largely accomplishes the modest (but important) goal of demonstrating that Wielenberg’s brand of realism is a serious rival to other versions of moral realism, naturalistic and theistic alike.

Chapter 1, “The Metaphysics of Morals,” focuses primarily on the relationship between the moral and the nonmoral. Taking for granted a number of intuitively plausible assertions about intrinsic value and our reasons for acting—most importantly, that some things are intrinsically good, and that we have normative reason to act in ways that are intrinsically good—Wielenberg notes that the supervenience of the moral on the nonmoral, though uncontroversial, needs to be explained. Indeed, as Wielenberg understands it, this is the heart of J.L. Mackie’s “queerness argument” against moral realism. Everyone agrees that moral properties (if there are moral properties) supervene on nonmoral properties: if a thing has moral property M, it has this property in virtue of having nonmoral property N. But what is the nature of the connection between the two? What are we saying when we say that X is M because X is N? Wielenberg argues that the best answer to these questions involves understanding the supervenience relation as making: “The natural fact that an act is a piece of deliberate cruelty [for example] makes that act morally wrong” (p. 16). Making can be itself further elaborated in causal terms. Though moral properties are themselves epiphenomenal, their instantiation is caused by the presence of salient nonmoral properties. For Wielenberg, this is the terminus of moral explanation; being N makes X M, and the fact that N causes M to be instantiated is itself a brute fact.

Wielenberg argues that this appeal to brute moral facts is not in and of itself an objectionable feature of his account, but he notes that a rival theory which could offer an explanation of all moral facts might, for that reason, be considered superior. Some philosophers have thought that theism has the resources to provide explanations of the requisite kind, so Chapter 2 is devoted...
to a discussion of theistic metaethics. Several topics are addressed, including the meaningfulness of life in a theistic versus an atheistic universe, reasons to be moral, and the consequences of atheism for moral practice. The core argument of this chapter, however, and in keeping with Wielenberg’s relatively modest ambitions, is a *tu quoque* argument: Wielenberg argues (successfully, in my view) that the most philosophically impressive theistic account of ethics itself requires the existence of at least some brute moral facts. Thus there is no theoretical advantage to be won by bringing God into the picture, and no reason (of this sort) to favor a theistic account over Wielenberg’s.

In Chapters 3 and 4, which constitute the remainder of the book, Wielenberg turns his attention to matters epistemological. Chapter 3 develops a reliabilist model of moral knowledge that incorporates findings from contemporary psychology. Of particular importance is the distinction between “System 1” cognition (the quick, automatic mental activities also referred to as “the adaptive unconscious”) and “System 2” cognition (the relatively slow and demanding work of the conscious mind). On Wielenberg’s model, crucially important aspects of our moral thinking occur at the subconscious level of System 1. Moral cognition is similar in this way to grammatical cognition; nearly all of us learn and use the rules of grammar far more efficiently and effectively than we are able to articulate them, and in the same way, our ability to form moral judgments routinely outpaces our ability to explain and defend the moral principles that guide those judgments. In a standard case of moral judgment, System 1 classifies an X as N, and the classification of X as N causes the agent to believe that X is M. Consider Gilbert Harman’s famous Cat Ignition case as an illustration: you see a group of hoodlums pouring gasoline on a cat and preparing to light it, and without any conscious reflection at all, you form the belief “that’s wrong!” (or something along these lines). What has happened in this event is that your System 1 cognition has classified the act you are witnessing as an instance of deliberate cruelty (or as some other salient N) and thereby caused you to believe that the act is wrong. Roughly speaking, if events of type X are indeed N, and your System 1 cognition reliably classifies events of type X as N, and if it is true that events of type N are normally M, and your System 1 cognition reliably causes you to believe that events of type N are M, then, in the absence of defeaters, your belief that X is M is both true and justified: you have moral knowledge.

The most pressing challenge to a view like this is based on the evolutionary origins of our cognitive apparatus. Given that we have the minds we do because our brains have been shaped by the forces of natural selection, it seems that there is reason to doubt that our minds are reliable producers of true moral