DISCUSSION NOTE

STILL NO REDUNDANT PROPERTIES: REPLY TO WIELENBERG

BY CAMPBELL BROWN

Still No Redundant Properties: Reply to Wielenberg
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In previous work (Brown 2011), I proposed an argument for Ethical Naturalism, the view that there are no non-natural ethical properties.[1] A premise in my argument was the principle that no properties are redundant. (Below I call this principle "NRP," short for "No Redundant Properties.") A property is redundant, in the relevant sense, if it does not enhance our ability to distinguish possibilities: Any possibilities that are distinguishable with this property are equally distinguishable without it. I showed that if ethical properties supervene on natural properties, then any non-natural ethical properties are in this way redundant. NRP implies, therefore, that ethical properties cannot supervene on natural properties unless they *are* natural properties. Erik J. Wielenberg has criticized my argument, and NRP in particular (Wielenberg 2011). Below I respond.

Wielenberg begins by arguing directly against NRP. Here is his argument:

> Consider the following line of reasoning. Suppose that the God of traditional monotheism exists. This God exists in every possible world and is essentially omniscient (for any proposition p, if p is true, then p is known [and hence believed] by God) and essentially infallible (for any proposition p, if God believes that p, then p is true), which implies that necessarily, for any proposition p, p is true if and only if God believes p. Thus, for every pair of possible worlds w1 and w2 that are indistinguishable with respect to at least all properties except being believed by God, it is also the case that w1 and w2 are indistinguishable with respect to all properties. Consequently, the property of being believed by God is redundant in Brown's sense. By similar reasoning, the property of being true is also redundant. If there are no redundant properties, then at least one of these properties (being true or being believed by God) does not exist. Thus, [NRP] implies that the existence of the God of traditional monotheism is incompatible with there being some truths, from which it surely follows that this God does not exist. This argument seems too fast (Wielenberg 2011: 2–3).

By "this argument," in the last sentence, I assume that Wielenberg means this argument: There are no redundant properties; therefore, there is no God. I am unsure, however, what he means by saying that it is "too fast." Normally, I would have thought, to call an argument "too fast" is just to say, in a colorful way, that it is invalid. The conclusion has been drawn prematurely – the premises are not yet strong enough to rule out all possibilities in which the conclusion is false and thus the argument moves too hastily from premises to conclusion.

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[1] Strictly, my argument concerned "descriptive" properties. Here I switch to "natural" because this seems the more common terminology.

Were this Wielenberg's meaning, I would happily agree. As I show below, the argument is indeed invalid. However, I do not think this can be what he means. First, he seems to think the argument is valid: He says that the premise implies the conclusion.[2] More importantly, the invalidity of the argument would not in any way impugn the premise. Everyone knows that invalid arguments may have true premises. Yet it is the premise that is in dispute.[3]

What Wielenberg wants to say, I think, is the following: Atheism – the view that there is no God – is controversial, and, since NRP entails atheism, it is no less controversial. The point is to highlight how strong a premise NRP is by revealing one of its contentious consequences.

This objection is intelligible. If NRP did indeed imply atheism, then that would, I grant, be a mark against my argument, though not necessarily a decisive one. However, NRP does not imply atheism. To show this, it will be helpful to set out Wielenberg's argument more precisely. So far as I can tell, it goes like this:

P1. If God exists, then the predicate "true" is necessarily coextensive with another predicate, "believed by God."

P2. If "true" is necessarily coextensive with another predicate, then any property denoted by "true" is redundant.

P3. If "true" does not denote a property, then nothing is true.

P4. Something is true.

C. If God exists, there is at least one redundant property.

This is valid. Premises (P3) and (P4) together imply that "true" denotes a property, and (P1) and (P2) imply that this property is redundant if God exists. However, (P2) and (P3) are dubious.

Begin with (P2). As I explained in my earlier paper, what is true is this: If two predicates are necessarily coextensive, and they each denote distinct properties, then these properties are redundant (Brown 2011: 215-16). Wielenberg has overlooked two possibilities. One is that "true" and "believed

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[2] He says that NRP "implies that the existence of the God of traditional monotheism is incompatible with there being some truths, from which it surely follows that this God does not exist" (Wielenberg 2011: 3). I assume that if P surely follows from Q, then Q implies P (and, of course, that implication is transitive).

[3] Wielenberg gives another argument in a similar vein. He points out that NRP is incompatible with views in the philosophy of mind according to which there are "phenomenal properties" that supervene on but are distinct from physical properties; he offers Colin McGuinn's "new mysterianism" as an example (Wielenberg 2011: 3). Again he alleges that this somehow implicates NRP in reasoning that is "too fast." I find this allegation equally obscure.

by God" denote the same property.[4] The other is that only "true" denotes a property; "believed by God" does not. Wielenberg seems to assume that if the property of being true were removed, our ability to distinguish possibilities would not be diminished, because we would still have the property of being believed by God, and anything distinguishable by the former property would be equally distinguishable by the latter. But this is not so if either (a) there is no such property as being believed by God, or (b) there is such a property but it is identical to being true.

The other questionable premise, (P3), seems to assume a general principle that I explicitly rejected in my paper – namely, that "there can be things which satisfy a given predicate only if there's a corresponding property which those things instantiate" (Brown 2011: 214). As a counterexample to this principle, I gave the predicate "non-self-instantiating."[5] Moreover, the view that truth is not a property is already held by some philosophers who endorse a "deflationary" theory of truth.[6] These philosophers do not deny that there are truths.

I do not insist that NRP is entirely innocuous. Any premise strong enough to imply Ethical Naturalism is bound to be contentious. But it is important to be clear on just how strong NRP is, and Wielenberg has significantly overstated its strength.

Wielenberg also challenges the rationale I gave for NRP. This rationale appeals to ontological parsimony. Redundant properties, I argued, are unnecessary; we do not need to posit them, and therefore we should not posit them.

Wielenberg's criticism, however, seems to misunderstand my argument. He says:

> Brown's rationale for [NRP] is adequate only if the only good reason to believe that a particular property is instantiated is that the instantiation of that property would serve to distinguish possibilities (Wielenberg 2011: 3).

But this, I think, is false. I need not deny that there may be reasons to believe in redundant properties. I do say that we *should not* believe in such properties, but that is a different claim. If I told you, for example, that you should not eat poisonous food, I would not thereby imply that the only reason you can have to eat food is that it is non-poisonous. Wielenberg suggests that one reason we have for believing in non-natural ethical properties, despite their redundancy, is that certain events seem to instantiate such properties

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[4] That Wielenberg overlooked this possibility is a little surprising. The question of whether distinct properties can be necessarily coextensive has received much attention in the relevant literature. See, e.g., Jackson (1998: 125-28), Shafer-Landau (2003: 90-92), Streumer (2008: 541-45) and Brown (2011: 215-16).

[5] Here is another counterexample. Many philosophers – including, perhaps, Kant – deny that existence is a property: There is no such property as the property of existing. But they do not thereby believe that nothing exists.

[6] See, e.g., Ayer (2001/1936: 87).

(Wielenberg 2011: 4). I am quite willing to grant that this is such a reason. Still, I maintain, we should not believe in such properties; the reason is out-weighed.

I do claim that we have no *need* to posit redundant properties. Wielenberg's example might be intended as a counterexample to this claim. According to him, perhaps, we need to posit non-natural ethical properties in order to explain why it appears to us that certain events have such properties. But this seems simply false – surely we can explain these appearances in other ways, without committing to the existence of such properties.[7] Similarly, we do not need to posit ghosts in order to explain why some people feel that they can sense the presence of dead relatives. In order to undermine my case for NRP, Wielenberg needs to show not merely that we may have reasons to posit redundant properties but that we need to do so. I do not think he has done this.[8]

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[7] Cf. Harman (1977, ch. 1).

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