

THE UNPOPULAR

Nihilist - The Eccentric and The Devil's advocate

Name

"Have you ever thought, 'Why killing plants while harvesting is okay but not killing a big tree?'"
"Why killing a goat for red meat is okay, but not human killing a human?" "Why are medical trials conducted on innocent small animals instead of humans?"

Before answering these questions, let's think about who gave these principles on what to do and when to do. How these are perceived as natural laws? This points to Darwin's theory - survival of the fittest. Humans are adaptable to any situation to ensure their survival. They will coordinate and co-operate in millions inspite of thousands of differences in opinions. They can come together to save the world through international fora - UNFCCC to tackle climate crisis. At the same time conducting genocide through concentration camps by Nazi, it wasn't possible without mass coordination and cooperation. Humans create these principles in order to benefit themselves.

So humans act in ways that benefits themselves; there are no predetermined ethical principles given by an omnipotent. Killing is unethical with respect to animals, but at the same time, no one raises their voice against killing of plants for the same. Or even weeds or insects that harm the beneficial plants in the farm. Can it be termed as irony or hypocrisy?

You can call it both, but it is necessary for humans. It is on the lines of lion on the hunt, which is ignorant about value of deer's life. Humans are no different, they can be called as apex predators as they can take down any living being on the earth. So, if we are accepting the fact of hypocrisy, then why are we critically thinking about the questions? Because this hypocrisy is also the reason for whims and fancies in giving principles and natural laws by human to suppress anyone, anything, anytime. Then how these principles created, and what are they called?

All the things we follow and respect is because of societal norms. These norms are part of our life since our childhood. If we start teaching our younger generation that killing another human is not unethical, then nothing can stop them. A child might kill another child just for a toy. So this depends on the principles prescribed and followed by the society. We refer these principles as 'Ethics'.

Ethics refers to a set of moral principles and values given by society, that guide individuals and society in determining what is right or wrong, good or bad, and just or unjust.

Can we just say- it is always right, just because it is followed by society with some consensus. And we all know the answer, it is clear - "NO". Society isn't perfect just because it has ethical principles; ethical principles themselves can be unethical. Slavery was the norm in 19th Century USA, but now it is considered a crime. This shows ethics are not sacrosanct, they keep changing with time, place, circumstances, or whenever there is a strong opposition to the prevailing ethical principles.

Now it becomes interesting, if they can be changed based on our whims and fancies, how can we believe in them. Also if ethics are so much of importance and creates just society, then why we have different ethics for different societies and why there is no universalistic approach to it. Some tribes like Khasi in India, follow matriarchy which looks radical from mainstream society's point of view.

So the answer for initial questions is - anything can be justified in this world as ethics, till it is validated at deeper levels. But still, deeper evaluation is not enough because society's will to accept the change is necessary. And it's obvious that nobody will accept replacement of humans in place of animals for medical trials.

This is why Nihilism originated, it is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It rejects all religious and moral principles. Nihilism in a nutshell: the belief that nothing in the world has a real existence.

Now the question is - are Nihilists really needed in the society. To some extent yes. Even though they disturb the society, their counter perspective to the unethical norms is much needed.

Let's consider them as 'Devil's Advocate' - someone who pretends, in an argument or discussion, to be against an idea or plan that a lot of people support, in order to make people discuss and consider it in more detail. Argument by Nihilists strengthens and deepens the critical thinking of an idea.

We can also support Nihilists based on J S Mill's views on Freedom of Speech - "He argued that even if an opinion is false, the truth can be better understood by refuting the error. And as most opinions are neither completely true nor completely false, he points out that allowing free expression allows the airing of competing views as a way to preserve partial truth in various opinions."

Nihilists are also eccentrics—people with unconventional and slightly strange views or behavior in relation to the majority of society. Considering the example of Sati practice - historical practice in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre. This practice was considered ethical as it was norm of the society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy can be called as eccentric to raise his voice against Sati practice. With his arguments and opinions, Viceroy Lord William Bentick passed the Sati Act in 1829. His further efforts led to raise in the living standards of women in terms of rights, education etc.

From this we can observe, arguments of Nihilists are no lie. They can be considered as Devil's advocate and eccentric.

This argument is not to negate any religious principles or moral values of any society. It is also not about triumph of Nihilists who are also threat to society as they bring back the 'Chaos' and 'State of war!' It explores the principles we often follow blindly and neglects critical thinking.

Can we negate all the ethical principles?

There is no absoluteness in the world. It's difficult to explain one grand narrative that combines all ethical principles and say they are universalistic in nature. As we read about Khasi tribe and their principle of matriarchy, it cannot be the basis for other societies. Thus we cannot accept all or negate all ethical principles.

So what to do now?

We started the argument with the triumph of humans over other creatures in the name of principles, all to safeguard human race. Then we argued, how the same principles are relative in nature and why principles are just imaginary notions to keep the human race ahead of all other species in the world.

Embrace different view points, encourage freedom of expression, be tolerant. Work on retaining best practices of our society and adapting best practices of other societies. Use the ethnocentric lens to filter out bad practices and harmonize the collected bests to ensure the welfare of all.

In conclusion, the argument explores the relativity of ethics, societal influence on moral principles, and the role of Nihilists as Devil's Advocates challenging norms, emphasizing the importance of ongoing critical thinking.