

# IF NOTHING MATTERS

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## 1. HOW NIHILISM MIGHT BE TRUE

Some of us, at some points in our lives, are struck by a vision of the universe as devoid of value. In such a state of mind, all human striving appears absurd, and the grandest achievements seem worthless. One feels that nothing matters.

It is possible that such feelings have always been around, but they appear in their most acute form in the disenchanting modern era, with the rise of natural science and the decline of religious belief and traditional forms of life. Nietzsche famously announced that “nihilism stands at the door,”<sup>1</sup> and many European thinkers thought that philosophy’s most urgent task is to face up to this crisis—the impression that science has shown value to be an illusion.

It is a remarkable fact about recent metaethics that one can find in it none of this anxiety, even though it has long been dominated by naturalism. Until fairly recently, this was because most metaethicists assumed that fear of nihilism is due to mere confusion. Hare, for example, offered the following therapy to a young Swiss guest of his who, after reading Camus, was gripped by despair at the thought that nothing mattered.<sup>2</sup> Hare suggested that his guest should ask ‘What was the meaning or function of the word ‘matters’ in our language; what is it to be important?’ Hare soon convinced the young Swiss that

when we say something matters... [we] express our concern about that something... If the function of the expression ‘matters’ is to express concern, and if concern is always somebody’s concern, we can always ask, when it is said that something matters... ‘Whose concern?’<sup>3</sup>

Hare got his guest to admit that he was in fact concerned about many things, and the crisis was over—or at least so Hare reports.

If some antirealist view gives the correct account of evaluative discourse, then it’s false to conclude that, because there are no mind-independent facts about value, then nothing matters. Things do matter, and in the only way they can—by being the objects of our subjective concerns, or by meeting certain standards we adopt, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> On this diagnosis, the Swiss student didn’t make any mistake about the world—he made a simple mistake about language.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1976, XII: 129.

<sup>2</sup> 1972, 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

<sup>4</sup> I’ll use ‘antirealism’ to refer to metaethical views—cognitivist and noncognitivist—that deny the existence of objective evaluative facts and properties while still holding that some things matter (I’ll ignore the sense in which expressivists can claim that, on their view, value is mind-independent). Antirealism in this sense is to be contrasted not only with realism but also with nihilism.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche (1968) similarly writes that “[o]ne interpretation was destroyed: but because it passed for *the* interpretation, existence seems meaningless, all seems futile...” (55); Williams (2008, 137) echoes these remarks. See also Blackburn (1985).

It's by no means obvious, however, that antirealism gives the correct account of evaluative discourse. Remarking on Hare's story, Parfit writes that

Hare accept[s] [a] non-cognitivist view. That is why, when Hare's friend concluded that nothing mattered, Hare didn't try to remind him that some things, such as suffering, do matter.<sup>6</sup>

There are plenty of philosophers who will agree with Parfit that the student didn't make any mistake about our evaluative discourse. It was Hare who got that wrong, and if his therapy was effective, then it was conceptual confusion that *cured* the student's despair. The student did make a mistake, but this was a mistake about the world: there really are things, like suffering, that objectively matter.

But as Mackie pointed out a long time ago, there is also a third alternative.<sup>7</sup> Parfit and other realists might be right about our evaluative discourse, and Hare and other antirealists might be right about the world. And if to matter is to matter *objectively*, as realists claim, then if nothing matters objectively then nothing matters *simpliciter*. That various things subjectively matter to us would be irrelevant. Evaluative nihilism would be true.

When Hare confronted his Swiss guest, few metaethicists took this form of argument for nihilism seriously. The realist commitments it attributed to evaluative discourse seemed, at the time, implausibly strong. But this is no longer true. Robustly realist accounts of evaluative discourse have since received vigorous defence.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it can hardly be said that all metaphysical and epistemic worries about realism have been fully addressed. And there is a growing minority of metaethicists who follow Mackie—error theorists who agree that our discourse has these realist commitments, but who doubt that there is anything out there that satisfies them.<sup>9</sup>

Now some of these error theorists restrict their claims to morality; they are not nihilists in the relevant sense. Others (and that includes Mackie in some passages) write as if the scope of their claims is wider than mere morality. But we can set this exegetical issue aside. With antirealists, error theorists argue that

(1) Nothing matters objectively.

Some of them think that only moral discourse is committed to such robust objectivity. But many realists (and perhaps some error theorists) defend the claim that that evaluative and practical normative discourse has robustly realist commitments quite generally. They argue that even prudential requirements are strongly objective, and that our subjective attitudes never generate practical reasons on their own.<sup>10</sup> Some even hold that instrumental rationality needs objective input to possess genuine normativity.<sup>11</sup>

These metaethicists hold that

(2) For something to matter just is for it to matter objectively.

And from (1) and (2), it simply follows that

(3) Nothing matters.

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<sup>6</sup> 2006, 326.

<sup>7</sup> Mackie, 1977, ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Shafer-Landau, 2003; Huemer, 2006; Enoch, 2011. Parfit 2011 defends similar claims, although he would prefer not to be described as a realist.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Joyce, 2001; Joyce and Kirchin, 2010; Streumer, 2013; Olson, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Bedke, 2010; Parfit, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Korsgaard, 1996; Broome, 1999; Raz, 2005.

It's not particularly surprising that few metaethicists explicitly endorse both (1) and (2). But each of these claims has been supported by powerful and independent arguments. And if both are correct, then the Swiss guest *was* right, and nothing really matters.<sup>12</sup>

To make things worse (if that's the right word), the error-theoretical argument for nihilism outlined above is merely one way in which nihilism might be true. There are others: for example, perhaps our evaluative discourse commits us to agreement in ideal conditions, but no such agreement is forthcoming.<sup>13</sup> And nihilism may be a possibility even on some antirealist views,<sup>14</sup> and can also be endorsed on purely substantive grounds.

A sober assessment of the state of play in current metaethics therefore suggests that unqualified evaluative nihilism is not a crazy view, and may even be true. Nihilism may no longer grip the St. Petersburg underground or Parisian cafés, but its prospects have never seemed brighter.

It would be hard, however, to find much anxiety about these developments. This is because many contemporary philosophers also appear to disagree with Camus and the Swiss student on a further issue. They disagree about what *follows* from the truth of nihilism. They appear to think that the real confusion is to think that anything very exciting follows from nihilism, let alone grounds for despair. Nihilism is seen as a second-order view, which needn't make any difference to the substance of evaluative practice. Even if nothing matters, everything would, and perhaps even should, go on pretty much the same as before.

My aim here is to clarify what is at stake in the question of nihilism. I will argue that the complacency about it in current metaethics is misguided. It is very unlikely, at best, that things would go on as before, if we came to believe in nihilism without reservation. And although familiar forms of existentialist anxiety are indeed confused, this doesn't mean that there is nothing to fear in nihilism.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some would reply: 'If accepting (2) would entail (3), then, since some things clearly *do* matter, then there's no reason to worry about nihilism. We should reject (2), and go antirealist.' Since I'm not arguing that nihilism *is* true, I needn't show that this response fails. But I don't think we can be confident enough that it works to simply rule out nihilism. To begin with, (2) is a claim about our discourse, a claim that might be supported by strong conceptual evidence. But that something matters surely isn't a conceptual claim and it is unclear how it could overturn the direct evidence for (2) (though perhaps it could overturn the arguments for (1)). Moreover, this argument assumes that we *are* confident that some things matter, or more confident than in the arguments for (1) and (2). This may be true of some of us but it obviously isn't true of some error theorists, or those in the grip of an existentialist crisis. As for those who are confident in this way there are, as Olson (2014, 139-148) points out, debunking explanations of such convictions. I should add, however, that the core argument I'll be developing doesn't even require that nihilism might be true; it just requires that it's possible for us to believe it is (or likely to be) true.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, 2006, 101; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) explains how (moral) nihilism is compatible with both expressivism and constructivism (56-56). Blackburn (1996) comes close to conceding that nihilism is possible on his expressivist view but suggests we can rule it out on pragmatic grounds because it will cause 'paralysis' (94). While I don't think we can rule out nihilism in this way, I'll later develop a similar pragmatic argument.

<sup>15</sup> Blackburn (1985) famously argues that if after concluding that our moral discourse suffers from systematic error we will nevertheless still go on as before, as Mackie thought, then this casts doubt on the idea that our discourse is really in error. I disagree: if someone persuaded by solipsism concluded that he should nevertheless keep treating the (mindless) people around him as before, this won't show that our discourse isn't committed to the existence of other minds. But in any event, if the argument I will develop here is correct, then the antecedent of Blackburn's conditional is false: we *won't* go on as before, if we came to believe that nothing matters.

I shall proceed as follows. I shall begin by clarifying what it would mean for nihilism to be true (§2). I'll then consider what would follow from the truth of nihilism. I'll argue that it makes no sense to think that we *should* feel despair if we conclude that nothing matters, and little reason to think we *would* feel such despair (§3). I will then turn to consider what is likely to follow from genuinely *believing* that nothing matter. I will argue that if widely held assumptions about our normative psychology are correct, we will not go on as before after coming to believe in nihilism. Instead, such belief is likely to have a dramatic effect on our subjective concerns (§4). I will then briefly explore what impact this would have on our lives (§5). This, then, is what we should really fear: not nihilism itself, but (mistaken) belief in nihilism. I will conclude by arguing that, in Pascalian fashion, this gives us reason to avoid believing in nihilism (§6).

## 2. NIHILISM EXPLAINED

When someone feels, or fears, that nothing matters, they rarely have any terribly precise metaethical position in mind. But the basic idea is clear enough.

To think that nothing matters isn't, of course, to deny that many things matter, and matter greatly, *to* many people: pain and happiness, death, prosperity, kindness, cancer, and genocide, to name just a few. To think that nothing matter is to deny that any of these things—or anything else—*really* matters, that any of these things actually deserves our attention or concern. Nothing is worth doing or caring about.

In the first instance, we can understand this as a claim about value: *evaluative nihilism* is the claim that

(4) Nothing is good or bad.

On this view, we cannot truly ascribe value properties—properties such as being valuable, good, bad, better or worse—to anything. Put differently, evaluative nihilism is the claim that

(5) All evaluative propositions are false.

By value, I mean final value—whether something is desirable or worth caring about as an end—as well as whatever instrumental value would derive from it.<sup>16</sup> This sense of value has an inherent normative dimension: if something has final value, then there are normative *reasons* to value it (by promoting or respecting it, etc.). Thus, if pleasure is good, then we have reason to seek pleasure. But if pleasure *isn't* good (if it has no value), then we don't have such reasons. Now if *all* practical reasons have their source in value (as is claimed, for example, by some consequentialists) then *no* practical reasons would remain. Evaluative nihilism would imply *practical nihilism*—the view that

(6) We have no reasons to do, want, or feel anything.

There are, however, views of practical reason that recognize reasons for action that don't have their source in value—think of common ways of understanding deontological constraints. To the extent that such value-independent reasons exist, then evaluative nihilism won't imply practical nihilism.

On one influential view, claims about value are to be understood, not as

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<sup>16</sup> There are also other senses of value. Many things have merely *functional* value. Some forks are better than others. They would still be better, as forks, even in a world in which nothing had final value. But when someone worries that nothing matters, they are not lamenting the lack of good cutlery.

generating claims about reasons, but as reducible to such claims.<sup>17</sup> If this fitting attitude view of value is correct, then evaluative nihilism doesn't only imply a negative claim about reasons but is such a claim. On this view, practical nihilism would imply evaluative nihilism. But the reverse still won't be true: even if value can be reduced to reasons, evaluative nihilism won't imply practical nihilism so long as there are value-independent practical reasons.

So evaluative nihilism and practical nihilism are at least in principle independent views. In what follows, however, I will set this aside: when I speak of nihilism, I will mean both the view that nothing has final value, and that there are no reasons to want, do or feel anything. I think that this best captures what worries about nihilism typically involve. It's not by accident that Nietzsche describes nihilism both as the "repudiation of value"<sup>18</sup> and as the view that "[t]he aim is lacking: 'Why?' finds no answer."<sup>19</sup> After all, if there remained even some reasons to act in certain ways then it would matter whether we act in these ways; something would still matter. Moreover, the central metaphysical worries about objective value are best understood as worries about objective *reasons*. Mackie's worries, for example, focus on the notion of *objective prescriptivity*—worries that Joyce develops into an explicit argument against authoritative, desire-independent reasons.

### 3. NOTHING TO FEAR

#### 3.1. Gloom and Doom?

It might be true that nothing matters. This is a prospect that many dread. It drove Hare's Swiss guest to despair. Nietzsche thought that "the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science ... would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead us to nausea and suicide."<sup>20</sup> Maria von Herbert, an 18<sup>th</sup> century follower of Kant, is described by Rae Langton as coming to believe that nothing has value. As Langton puts it, "[t]he emptiness all around, and the emptiness inside, are intolerable. That is why she wonders whether her life is worth living at all."<sup>21</sup> Von Herbert eventually ended her life.

But is nihilism really something to fear? If we conclude that nihilism is true, should that drive us to despair or even suicide?

Consider first what it would mean for nihilism to be true. If we take evaluative nihilism seriously enough, then anxiety about it makes little sense. For if *nothing* matters, how could it *matter* that nothing matters? That is to say, how could it be unbearably *bad* that there's absolutely nothing that is either good *or* bad?

When we feel fear or despair, we are normally responding to the perceived badness or harm associated with the object of our fear or despair. On some views, such feelings also presuppose, or even involve, evaluative judgments. But if evaluative nihilism is true, such responses make no sense. As Thomas Hardy's Tess remarks, 'If all were only vanity, who would mind it?'<sup>22</sup>

In other words,

(7) If nothing matters, this couldn't make things *bad*, or *worse*.

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<sup>17</sup> Scanlon, 1998, 195-198.

<sup>18</sup> 1968, 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> 1882/1974, §107.

<sup>21</sup> Langton, 2007, 160.

<sup>22</sup> 1891/2008.

There's nothing to get upset about. If Hare's Swiss guest suffered from a muddle, this was his most egregious confusion.

And if in thinking nothing matters we also endorse practical nihilism, then it is incoherent to think that, because nothing matters, we have *reason* to feel despair, or to end our lives. We can perhaps say that if nothing matters then life is not worth living, that there is no reason to go on living. But it would also be true that life is not worth *not* living—there is no reason *not* to go on living, because there are no practical reasons of *any* kind. That is,

- (8) If nothing matters, there couldn't be reasons to respond to this fact with any emotion or act.<sup>23</sup>

So it seems that the poor soul who would follow an argument from nihilism to a morbid conclusion would have violently ended his life because he failed to detect a simple contradiction. (Though if nothing matters, this of course wouldn't matter either...)

That such reasoning involves a muddle is an old point. Nietzsche wrote that

According to 'nihilism', our existence... has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos—at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.<sup>24</sup>

And Nagel similarly criticizes Camus's suggestion that we should respond to the absurdity of life with proud defiance:

Such dramatics, even if carried out in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either...<sup>25</sup>

Nagel however oddly adds that we can therefore approach our absurd lives with irony rather than heroism or despair—a suggestion that would fall into the same trap if meant as a recommendation.

### 3.2. Worry Without Reason?

It might be objected that when we feel depressed, and find everything pointless, this feeling may persist even if we believe that many things do matter, and that we have no reason to feel depressed. Couldn't we, in a similar way, feel depressed even if we believe that nothing matters, and that there is no reason to feel depressed? Couldn't this still matter *to us*, even if it doesn't matter in itself?

In considering this question, we should distinguish feeling that nothing matters *because* one is depressed and feeling depressed *because* one *believes* that nothing matters. It is only the latter that concerns us here.

This is an empirical question about what would be *caused* by belief in nihilism, simply taking for granted that this belief couldn't justify any such response. Now belief in nihilism could in principle cause despair—just as it could in principle cause a strong case of the hiccups. It's hard, however, to see why despair and depression *would* causally follow the belief that nothing matters. Such emotions typically appear in response either to the value judgment that things are bad in some way or, in certain

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<sup>23</sup> If nihilism is false, then we could in principle have reasons to fear it, if we don't know it's false. But such reasons are odd since we could have them only if the object of our fear *isn't* realized. And it's anyway hard to see why we would have these reasons if nihilism couldn't make things worse for us or anyone.

<sup>24</sup> 1968, 585.

<sup>25</sup> Nagel, 1971, 727.

cases, to the mere appearance of badness. But why should one respond in this way to the belief that nothing whatsoever is bad or worse? Sure, some things aren't as good as they had seemed. But it's not as if they had *lost* their value—they never really had, or could have had, such value. And if nihilism is true, that 'loss' of value couldn't itself be bad, or make things worse.

Nihilism couldn't be bad, nor is it easy to see why it should even *appear* bad, not unless one fails to properly think through what it would actually mean. (And it's not as if evolution had selected us to react with fear and despair to nihilism as we instinctively fear snakes...)

So again, there's really nothing to be upset about—even if we understand the step to despair in a merely causal sense.

We saw that since evaluative nihilism rules out all value, there could be no grounds to feel despair because nothing matters. And if practical nihilism is true, there could anyway be no reasons for any such response. Worse, some of the responses that have been associated with nihilism may actually presuppose or at least normally rely on evaluative judgments or appearances, and are therefore either incompatible with or unlikely to causally follow belief in nihilism.

All of this may seem to support the complacency of recent metaethics. There really is nothing to worry about. But this conclusion would be premature. For as we shall now see, these last points about what would causally follow from belief in nihilism don't apply only to evaluative attitudes *towards* nihilism. They have far broader application.

#### 4. MIGHT NIHILISM MAKE NO DIFFERENCE?

If there is no reason to fear nihilism, what difference does it make? To the extent that recent philosophers have considered this question, they have tended to arrive at an implausibly conservative answer: that the truth of (and belief in) nihilism would have little to no effect—that, for all practical purposes, life would continue exactly as before. The basic idea seems to be this. It's true that for things to matter isn't just for them to matter *to* us, as Hare thought. But even if nothing matters, things *could* still matter to us. We will go on. And if the *same* things will matter to us, we would go on as before.

This is what is implied, for example, when Nagel remarks that “we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out,”<sup>26</sup> and Mackie and most other error theorists defend something like this view, at least in the moral domain.<sup>27</sup>

If this is correct, it would make a further mockery of the existential despair of those terrified by nihilism. Not only isn't there anything bad about nothing mattering, it actually doesn't even make the slightest *practical difference* whether anything matters!

At first sight the question of nihilism can appear to be immensely important, perhaps the most important question we can ask. But now it begins to seem as if nothing at all is at stake in nihilism.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 724.

<sup>27</sup> Joyce (2001) argues that we could go on as before by treating morality as a useful fiction. Olson (2014) suggests that even this isn't needed: we can simply hold on to our erroneous moral beliefs. Streumer (2013) thinks we will go on as before because it's not even possible to believe in the error theory. I'll return to these views below.

## 4.1. Nihilism and Conservatism

When we discover that some sector of discourse suffers from systematic error, it's natural to think that we should give it up, or at least radically revise it. But as many error theorists insist, this isn't a necessary implication. It's a substantive question what we ought to do in light of such a discovery. For we might, as Kalderon notes "... decide to retain the domain of inquiry despite the error involved because it is good, or useful, or interesting to do so."<sup>28</sup>

And Mackie and most other moral error theorists indeed argue that we have good reasons to hold on to morality, even though it's merely a myth. Thus Mackie writes that he has shown how morality is something we make and maintain, and which "there is some real point in making,"<sup>29</sup> and Joyce similarly writes that morality, although based in erroneous belief, is nevertheless "a justified practice in light of its usefulness."<sup>30</sup>

In other words, there might be pragmatic justification to holding on to morality. Whether this is the case depends on whether

- (9) We have sufficient *non-moral reasons* to hold on to moral discourse and practice.

Such reasons might derive from the usefulness of morality, as Mackie and Joyce hold—that is to say, from morality's *non-moral value*.

Now to claim that morality is a *useful* fiction to which it might be *justified* to hold on is to invoke evaluative and normative notions.<sup>31</sup> Since these philosophers reject objective values and reasons, these phrases cannot refer to objective values or prescriptions. If morality is a myth because there are no objective values and reasons, then if there still are non-moral reasons and values, these couldn't be objective. These philosophers must assume, then, that at least *some* values and reasons survive the argument against the existence of objective ones. They are evaluating morality from the standpoint of *antirealist* non-moral values and reasons.

The situation, however, is rather different when we consider, not moral nihilism, but unqualified evaluative nihilism. There is at least one passage where Mackie writes as if his argument might encompass all value. He writes that the

tendency to objectify values—and *not only moral ones*—is confirmed by a pattern of thinking that we find in existentialists... The denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all... Of course this does not follow; the lack of objective values is not a good reason for abandoning subjective concern... But the abandonment of a belief in objective values can cause, at least temporarily, a decay of subjective concern and sense of purpose.<sup>32</sup>

Mackie's response to existentialist angst is peculiar. If his complaint was simply that nihilism warrants no such anxiety, and could give no reasons to abandon our subjective concerns, then he would of course be right. But Mackie writes that there would be no *good* reasons to do so, seemingly implying that we *shouldn't* abandon our subjective concerns. But if practical nihilism is true, then, just as there could be no reasons for despair, there could be no reasons to hold on to our subjective concerns or evaluative practice. Nor could it be useful to hold on to our evaluative discourse, or

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<sup>28</sup> 2005, 6. Kalderon, however, rejects the error theory.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce, 2001, 173. See also Lillehammer, 2004; Hussain, 2007, 169ff; Olson, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> For other explicitly evaluative claims by Mackie, see 124, 173, 239.

<sup>32</sup> 1977, 34 [my italics].



to revise it in some antirealist direction.<sup>33</sup>

As we saw, if nothing matters, and we believed that, then there would just be our psychological reactions to that belief. There would be no space left to either criticize or recommend these reactions.

## 4.2. Carry on as Before, If Nothing Really Matters?

We started by asking what would follow from the truth of nihilism. As we saw, the truth of nihilism has no normative implications. It cannot make the world bad or worse, or give anyone reasons to do or feel anything—or, for that matter, *not* to do or feel something. It gives us no reasons to feel despair, or to go on as before. Not even to be indifferent.

The truth of nihilism, the total absence of all value, makes no normative difference. Nor could it make any causal difference. In this sense, it does leave things exactly as they are.

What might make a difference, a dramatic difference, is *belief* in nihilism.<sup>34</sup> Since

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<sup>33</sup> Köhler and Ridge (2013) aim to find a way around this by setting out a purely motivational route from belief in nihilism to revolutionary antirealism. They argue that evaluative discourse has a function—namely that of playing “a regulative role for our behavior and emotional economy” (433), for example by guiding decision-making and increasing coherence. As they concede, even if normative discourse had this function, this would be merely a descriptive claim. To show that we’d still care about this function if we endorsed nihilism, they appeal to two considerations. The first is that practical deliberation enabled by normative discourse helps advance our interests. But claims about our interests and well-being are evaluative claims that won’t survive nihilism. If so then, as I’ll argue below, it’s unlikely that we will care about our interests following belief in nihilism. The second consideration is that deliberation and therefore normative discourse is inescapable for us humans: we are essentially deliberative creatures. But, while this is often asserted, it’s hard to see why, if there is no reason to do anything (including to deliberate), we would persist in the hopeless activity of figuring out what we have reason to do. Moreover, as we shall see below, there are *actual* (if unusual) humans who cease to deliberate despite possessing full cognitive capacities. However, even if Köhler and Ridge are right and following belief in nihilism we would adopt some antirealist view, this still won’t affect the core of my argument. For whether we’ll go on as before will depend on whether our current subjective concerns would survive belief in nihilism. And they won’t.

<sup>34</sup> Streumer (2013) argues that belief in global normative nihilism is impossible. While, as Streumer emphasizes, this wouldn’t show nihilism to be false, it would undercut my claims about what would follow from belief in nihilism. Streumer’s argument is based on two key assumptions. The first is that if we deny the existence of moral (or generally practical) reasons because of doubts about irreducible normative properties, then this also commits us to denying the existence of epistemic reasons. The second is that it’s impossible to believe what we believe we have no reason to believe. Both assumptions are highly controversial. Doubts about practical reasons won’t carry over to epistemic reasons if, as Olson (2014, 155-172) argues at length, the latter can be given a reductive account (see also Crowe 2014). Moreover, as mentioned above, error-theoretical doubts about irreducible normativity are only one way to defend nihilism; other ways of defending nihilism needn’t raise doubts about epistemic reasons. As for the claim about belief, it seems implausible strong. As Lillehammer and Möller (2015) point out, it seems, for example, that one *can* believe that God exists even when this isn’t supported by one’s reasons. Our beliefs aim at both truth and justification, but surely truth has the primacy. In most cases, when we are in a position to see that *p* is true, we are also justified in believing it. But if global normative nihilism is true then these will come apart. And it seems to me that we can, and will, come to believe what the data and argument *show to be true* even if there is no reason to thus believe *because the very idea of such reasons is a myth*. In any event, if, in such circumstances, we will form a mental state that functions like a belief in all other respects, then it doesn’t matter, for my purposes, whether we call it a belief. Moreover, Streumer’s argument can only show that it’s impossible to believe in nihilism if one also believes there is no reason to believe it. But even if both of Streumer’s assumptions are correct, we could still come to believe in nihilism because we mistakenly deny one or both of them. In fact, it *is* possible to believe in nihilism in the sense relevant to my argument given that, as we shall see later, there *are* actual people (albeit with exotic

nihilism has no normative implications, neither does belief in nihilism. It doesn't commit you to accepting (or rejecting) any (practical) reasons. It doesn't even require that we stop valuing things.

What is at issue, then, is not whether belief in nihilism gives us reasons to abandon or keep our subjective concerns (it clearly doesn't), but what *causal* impact it will have on these concerns. Many philosophers who discuss nihilism seem to assume with Nagel that even if we came to believe that nihilism is true, our various subjective concerns would remain pretty much as they were. Thus McGinn tells us not to worry that our desires and ambitions will “crumble under the objective gaze,” because they are “resilient enough to take care of themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Even if we have no *reason* to go on as before, this might still be *what we would do anyway*.

But two things need to be true if we are to go on as before in this way, after coming to believe in nihilism. First, we must retain roughly the same set of subjective concerns we had before believing in nihilism, and second, these concerns must guide our action in some vaguely intelligent way—that is, we must continue to conform to instrumental rationality. I now turn to examine these two assumptions, starting, briefly, with the second.<sup>36</sup>

### 4.3. Instrumental Reason After Nihilism

Nagel writes that if we concluded that practical reason is an illusion, we would have to “limit the practical employment of reason to an instrumental role.”<sup>37</sup> Even if our (practical) normative beliefs have objective content, it might be claimed that once we realize that no such reasons exist, we would still be saddled with various ends, and, consequently, with instrumental reasons to take the means to achieving them. And if so, then we have essentially moved from an objectivist to a desire-based conception of practical reason. We don't need *reasons* to revise our discourse; a simple form of desire-based practical reason is simply what's *left* once objectivism *drops out*.

One problem with this suggestion is that it assumes an understanding of instrumental reason that has been challenged.<sup>38</sup> On some recent views, instrumental rationality depends for its normativity on the existence of prior objective reasons: we have no reasons to take the means to our ends if these ends are themselves worthless. To conform to instrumental rationality, we don't need to pursue these worthless ends—we could simply give them up. But even if we did keep these ends, this might not matter, on some views, since without objective reasons we would have no *reason* to be rational. Instrumental rationality would no longer have any normative force. After all, if nothing matters, one thing that doesn't matter is whether we are rational. Finally, if it's not objective norms but normativity itself that is metaphysically problematic, then, so long as the normativity involved in instrumental reason cannot be given a reductive understanding, it should be just as problematic. If any of these views is correct, then even instrumental reason won't survive practical nihilism.

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neural disorders) who believe that nothing matters. Finally, although the argument I'll develop is largely focused on belief in nihilism, I'll highlight a weaker variant that assumes only strong suspicion that nihilism is true—a mental state immune to Streumer's argument.

<sup>35</sup> McGinn, *ibid.* Though if nothing matters, why worry?

<sup>36</sup> To save words, I'll use 'evaluative beliefs' to refer to beliefs both about value and about practical reasons.

<sup>37</sup> Nagel, 1997, 116.

<sup>38</sup> See Korsgaard, 1996; Broome, 1999; Raz, 2005; Bedke, 2010.

Now these are controversial claims.<sup>39</sup> But for our purposes it doesn't really matter whether these claims about instrumental reason are correct. What matters is how a person's *psychology* would respond to belief in nihilism. If she will continue to intelligently pursue the means to her contingent ends, then she will still be *conforming* to instrumental rationality, whether or not such conformity deserves the honorific of genuine normativity.

The relevant question is therefore whether our normative psychology *reflects* these claims about instrumental reason, so that, in the absence of (belief in) objective reasons, we will simply stop seeking the means to our ends even if all of our subjective concerns remain in place—our subjective concerns just won't *move* us. I don't think that this can be ruled out. But I don't know anyone who has defended this strong claim about our psychology, so I won't assume it in what follows. I'll simply grant that even if we come to believe in nihilism, we will continue to intelligently pursue our subjective concerns.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4.4. Subjective Concerns After Nihilism

Whether or not genuine instrumental normativity would survive nihilism, some degree of conformity to instrumental rationality is a necessary condition for going on in *any* way. However, even if we granted such conformity, *how* we would go on, and whether we would go on *as* before, clearly depends on what subjective concerns will survive belief in nihilism. We would go on largely as before after converting to nihilism *only* if our current pattern of subjective concerns survives this shift.

Now error theorists rightly point out that

- (10) Believing in nihilism is *logically compatible* with having exactly the same pattern of subjective concerns that one had before one came to believe this.

This, however, is not what is now at issue. The question we are considering is whether

- (11) Although our evaluative beliefs have realist, objective content, our current pattern of subjective concerns *will in fact* survive our coming to believe that all these beliefs are false.

This is a question, not about what is logically possible, but about what, given the structure of our psychology, is likely to actually happen to us, if we came to believe in an uncompromising evaluative nihilism.

This is in one sense an empirical question. But the consequences of belief in nihilism depend on our normative psychology: on different views of normative psychology, it would have different consequences. I will argue that the suggestion that we will go on as before is plausible only if we reject familiar truisms about the relation between evaluative belief and subjective concern. And I will draw attention to several other influential claims about normative psychology that make this suggestion even less plausible.

#### 4.5 Evaluative Belief After Nihilism

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<sup>39</sup> See in particular Olson (2014) for a forceful attempt to give a reductive account of instrumental rationality (152-155).

<sup>40</sup> Korsgaard similarly concedes that, although the 'practical normative skeptic' cannot follow hypothetical imperatives, such a skeptic would still take the means to her ends (1996, 163).

Before we can address the question of the impact of belief in nihilism on our subjective concerns, we need to address a prior question about belief. When one comes to believe that nothing matters, what happens to one's numerous substantive beliefs about this or that mattering?

As we saw, nihilism can be understood as the claim that

(5) All evaluative propositions are false.

It's a straightforward implication of that claim that

(12) All of our evaluative beliefs are false.

If nothing matters, then we were deeply mistaken in believing that suffering is bad, justice good, and so forth.<sup>41</sup> To be sure, if nothing matters, it also doesn't matter whether we believe that nothing matters, or whether or not we would continue to believe that suffering is bad. But we are not asking now what we should believe, if we come to believe that nothing matters. We are asking what effect such a belief would have on our substantive evaluative beliefs.

Now if we persuade someone that there aren't (and never were) any witches—that the whole thing is a myth—then we would expect that person to no longer believe, for example, that Sarah Goode and Elizabeth Proctor are witches. If he went on describing these women as witches, or explained epileptic fits in young women as due to their witchcraft, we would conclude that we had failed to persuade him, or that he doesn't understand what 'myth' is, or that he's only pretending that these women are witches. But could he come to believe that there are no witches without this leading him to revise his prior belief that Sarah Goode is a witch? It's hard to make sense of this suggestion.

This is a general point about belief. If you come to believe that there is no one in the room, you will no longer believe that there is someone in the room, let alone that the doctor is in the room. Similarly, if you come to believe that nothing matters, you will no longer believe that some things matter, or that suffering—or any other specific thing—matters. That is to say,

**Belief Loss.** Coming to believe in nihilism will result in our coming to lose our substantive evaluative beliefs.<sup>42</sup>

I'm not denying that we can have inconsistent beliefs. We obviously can, and often enough do. But inconsistent beliefs require special explanation, explanation that typically adverts to failure (perhaps even motivated failure) to notice the incompatibility of one belief with another, or to confusion or forgetfulness, etc. It's hard to see how such explanations would apply in our case. Could someone fail to see that their belief that nothing matters is incompatible with believing that suffering matters? And it's not as if the truth of nihilism is something one might forget, as one can forget being told no one is in the room...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> To simplify things, I set aside here our prior beliefs that various things *don't* have value—nihilism of course vindicates *these* beliefs.

<sup>42</sup> This claim is endorsed by Smith (2006, 101) and, in the narrower context of moral belief, by Joyce (2001, 176, 191-193) and Suikkanen (2013), who argues at length that rejecting something like Belief Loss is incompatible with dominant accounts of the nature of belief.

<sup>43</sup> Some implications of nihilism are harder to spot. For example, as I pointed out earlier, some authors fail to notice that nihilism applies to itself. And if thick concepts such as cruelty have substantive evaluative commitments, this may not be obvious. But most of our evaluative beliefs are pretty explicit.

It's natural to think of Belief Loss as reflecting a constitutive constraint on belief: that if you believe that *p*, you can't also believe what you can easily see to be inconsistent with *p*.<sup>44</sup> But while such a constraint seems plausible, the argument I'll develop requires only a much weaker claim: the merely causal claim that belief in nihilism *will* lead to the loss of most (or even just many of) our substantive evaluative beliefs. This seems just a truism about the way our psychology works, the kind of effect we routinely observe when someone becomes an atheist, or comes to believe that there is no such thing as phlogiston, or when you reveal to them that the elaborate anecdote you have been telling is made up.

Belief Loss seems to me eminently plausible. Some error theorists, however, appear to reject it. Jonas Olson argues that if the moral error theory is correct, we shouldn't abandon or revise our moral discourse, but should leave it as it is. On this 'conservationist' view, we should avow the error theory in the seminar room or in our more reflective moments, but maintain our moral beliefs about the wrongness or rightness of various acts in other contexts.<sup>45</sup>

Stated in this way, conservationism is a normative claim: the claim that we should hold on to our moral beliefs because doing so would be useful. As such it is compatible with Belief Loss which isn't a normative claim but a prediction. And anyway, as we saw, if nothing matters, we could have no such pragmatic reasons to hold on to our evaluative beliefs. We would have no reasons to do anything.<sup>46</sup>

But Olson obviously assumes not only that we should hold on to our moral beliefs, but that we would, at least if we accept his conservationism. Yet if Belief Loss is correct, then this may also commit us to expecting belief in the narrower moral error theory to lead to loss of substantive moral belief. This, however, needn't be incompatible with conservationism if the latter merely involves the claim that, after coming to believe in the error theory, we should try to act in ways that would *revive* our flagging moral beliefs.<sup>47</sup>

Olson may intend conservationism to mean that coming to believe moral error theory needn't lead to any loss of moral belief in the first place. Even this, however, needn't be incompatible with Belief Loss. If we recognize the pragmatic reasons that Olson defends, perhaps this may prevent us from losing our moral beliefs despite coming to see them as false. But again, we could have no such pragmatic reasons if nihilism is true.

Olson also suggests that the emotional effect of morally-loaded situations would temporarily give rise to the corresponding moral beliefs even in a moral error theorist. But this, he adds, is compatible with being disposed to believe that all moral propositions are false in the seminar room and similarly detached contexts.<sup>48</sup>

These claims seem to more directly challenge Belief Loss. Notice first, however, that they revolve around an empirical claim that is far from obvious. If we conclude that something is worthless, we usually begin to treat it with indifference. It's

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<sup>44</sup> Streumer (2013, 195) defends the much stronger claim that we cannot fail to believe what we believe to be entailed by our own beliefs.

<sup>45</sup> Olson, 2014, 190ff. For further criticism of Olson's claims about belief, see again Suikkanen (2013).

<sup>46</sup> Olson sees himself as just making instrumental claims about what would be the most efficient means to achieve our ends (see 183). But if irreducible normativity is also implicated in our non-moral concerns and projects, as nihilism claims, then the argument I'll develop below means that we *won't* have the ends which these means are meant to serve.

<sup>47</sup> Something like this is suggested by Olson's reference to Pascal's recommendation that we should act as if we believe in God in order to come to thus believe (191-192).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

certainly not generally the case that we are inevitably assailed by beliefs about the worth of things we have come to regard as having no value.

Setting this aside, even this way of understanding conservatism isn't incompatible with Belief Loss. If, on seeing a cat being set on fire by hooligans, a moral error theorist can't help but judge that this act is deeply wrong, it's hard to see how they could fail to go on and conclude that some acts *are* wrong, and the error theory is false (again it's not as if they might somehow forget that morality is supposed to be a myth). To be sure, as the memory of the bonfire fades and the arguments for the error theory are rehearsed in a cooler moment, belief in the error theory may re-emerge—presumably followed by corresponding loss of substantive moral belief, as Belief Loss predicts. So what we have here, it would seem, isn't concurrent belief in the moral error theory and the substantive moral views it asserts to be false, but a shift between moral and skeptical modes.<sup>49</sup>

Still, might belief in nihilism be restricted to the seminar room in this way? This is implausible. We can see how belief in the narrower moral error theory might be confined to the seminar room. Not all seminars contain hooligans, let alone cats. Nothing morally-loaded need be present. But nihilism is all encompassing. If nothing matters, it also doesn't matter whether one's meticulous argument for nihilism is sound, or what you may add to your manuscript, which, of course, is also worthless. Nor would it matter when and why you need to leave the seminar room. If the argument I will develop next is correct then even if belief in nihilism arises only in the seminar room, its effects may be such that one would never leave it.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4.6. Evaluative Belief and Subjective Concern

At present, we have numerous beliefs ascribing values to things. We also have numerous beliefs about what reasons we have to want or do various things. We often (though hardly always) value what we take to have value, and act in light of what we take ourselves to have reason to do. The question is what will remain of this pattern of concern, motivation and behaviour once we cut out all (or most) of these evaluative beliefs. The conservative view we're considering is that it will simply stay in place.

Now it's something of a truism that

- (13) Our subjective concerns (and consequent motivation and behaviour) covary fairly closely with our evaluative beliefs.

We normally seek what we value, avoid what we disvalue, and just ignore what we take to have no value. As our evaluative beliefs change, so do our corresponding concerns.

These points are sometimes cited in support of some conceptual connection between evaluative belief and motivation. But importantly, it doesn't matter, for our purposes, whether there is such a necessary connection or whether this covariance is merely contingent. It is enough that there actually is such covariance.

This covariance has more specific implications. In particular, it means that if someone *doesn't* believe that something *is* valuable in any way, then it's unlikely that

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 192, where Olson writes of having “an occurrent belief that *p* and a disposition to believe not-*p* in certain contexts” (192).

<sup>50</sup> Conversely, if the mere sight of the blackboard or one's elaborate argument inevitably triggers corresponding beliefs in worth even in the seminar, then no space left for talking about genuine belief in nihilism at all, as opposed to completely bloodless intellectual endorsement of a proposition (see Schwitzgebel 2010, and fn. 63). But I see no reason for thinking that belief in nihilism is psychologically impossible in this way.

he cares about it. An even clearer truism is that if someone believes that something is *not* valuable, then this makes it likely that he *doesn't* care about it.

For our purposes, we can consider only an even weaker claim: that if we previously believed that something is valuable, and therefore cared about it, but have now come to believe that it's utterly worthless, then normally the result is that we *stop* caring about that thing. For example, If you used to think that bird-watching is a most valuable activity, but now suddenly find it completely pointless, something you have no reason at all to do, then you really aren't likely to care about bird-watching in the same way. You aren't likely to care about it at all.

This covariance has obvious exceptions. Few would deny that motivation and evaluative belief sometimes come apart. We are, for example, sometimes weak willed, and fail to do what we believe we ought to. However, even here, the temptations that overtake us are often temptations for what we take to be valuable in *some* respect. Even weakness of the will, then, is often driven by evaluative belief. In any case, it's sufficient for my argument that this covariance holds in *most* (or even just many) cases.

Now this normal covariance of evaluative belief and subjective concern doesn't yet show that evaluative belief has the causal *priority*. Subjective concern might be prior to evaluative belief, or the two might be co-extensive. We are now, however, assuming a realist account of evaluative discourse. And there are two plausible ways of explaining this covariance on such a realist account, both of which make subjective concern causally dependent on evaluative belief. If we reject a Humean view of motivation, as many realists do, then our evaluative beliefs might simply generate the corresponding subjective concerns. Without this causal antecedent, these concerns would just fade away. But such dependence could hold even on a Humean view. Although on such a view our evaluative beliefs are, on their own, motivationally inert, there could still be a background desire (or disposition) to desire what has value, which generates subjective concerns that reflect our evaluative beliefs.<sup>51</sup> In the absence of these beliefs, this desire would be inert, and many of our corresponding subjective concerns would again fade away. On either view, it would be true that when some subjective concern is correlated with an evaluative belief, we normally have this concern *because* we have that belief.

These are claims about the relation between subjective concern and specific evaluative beliefs, or sets of such beliefs. But it's hard to see why these claims about our normative psychology wouldn't apply with equal force when we turn to consider our entire body of evaluative belief. As we saw, to believe that evaluative nihilism is true is to come to believe that all our specific evaluative beliefs are false: to no longer hold that suffering is bad, virtue good, freedom desirable, etc. But if there is a covariance between evaluative belief and subjective concern, then once we conclude that all of our evaluative beliefs are false, we should also largely lose the corresponding subjective concerns and motivations.

And if our evaluative beliefs even *partly* shape our current desires and concerns, then it follows from this that we will *not* go on as before if we believe that nothing matters.

The argument runs as follows:

- (A) To go on as before after coming to believe in nihilism, our current subjective concerns need to survive belief in nihilism.

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<sup>51</sup> See Zangwill 2003 for such a picture of moral motivation.

- (B) To come to believe in evaluative nihilism is to come to believe that all evaluative propositions are false, and therefore that all of our prior evaluative beliefs are false.
- (C) Belief Loss: Coming to believe in nihilism will result in our coming to lose our substantive evaluative beliefs. [from B]
- (D) Our subjective concerns (and consequent motivation and behaviour) covary fairly closely with our evaluative beliefs.
- (E) If we previously believed that something is valuable, and therefore cared about it, but have now come to believe that it's worthless, then normally the result is that we stop caring about that thing. [from D]

Therefore

- (F) If we come to believe in evaluative nihilism, it's likely that we will stop caring about most (or at least many) of the things that we now take to be valuable. [from C, E]

Therefore

- (G) It is very unlikely that if we come to believe in evaluative nihilism, we would go on as before. [from A, F]

To resist this conclusion, one must hold, not merely that believing that nothing matters makes no causal difference, but that believing that things *do* matter, or that *this* or *that* thing matters, make *no* causal difference to our pattern of subjective concern and motivation. In effect, it's to hold,

**Epiphenomenalism about evaluative belief.** Our evaluative beliefs (and beliefs about practical reasons) make no causal difference to our pattern of concerns.<sup>52</sup>

Notice that these questions about our normative psychology are largely independent of questions about the truth of evaluative nihilism. We are asking what would causally follow from belief in nihilism. This is what would follow *even if nihilism is false*. To hold that belief in nihilism would make no difference to our subjective concerns, and that we would go on as before, is therefore to be committed to an ambitious general claim about normative psychology, a deeply implausible view that is in tension with familiar truisms. And such a view is especially implausible if a strongly realist account of evaluative discourse is correct, as we now assume.

I've stated this argument in terms of the consequences of belief in nihilism. But a parallel argument could be made in terms of mental states weaker than belief. In particular, strong suspicion that nihilism is true is likely to have a similar though weaker effect on our subjective concern. It's after all also a truism that when we come to strongly suspect that something is worthless, we usually no longer value it wholeheartedly, or care about it as strongly. While mere suspicion that nihilism is true will have a considerably weaker effect on our subjective concern, such an effect is still likely to be significant. And while some may doubt that a philosophical argument could get us to genuinely believe in nihilism, surely such an argument *can* get us to strongly suspect that nothing matters.

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<sup>52</sup> As explained above, our evaluative beliefs can make a causal difference even on the Humean picture of motivation, through a background desire to care about the good. The epiphenomenalist claim above goes *far* beyond that Humean view.



#### 4.7. Subjective Concern and Value

There are further problems with the idea that our subjective concerns would survive belief in nihilism. To begin with, there is the old view, which is now again influential, that it's inherent to the notion of subjective concern, understood as a conative state of a being with sufficient intellectual capacities, that it aims at the good.<sup>53</sup> On this view, it's not just that evaluative belief plays a causal role in sustaining at least some of our subjective concerns, but rather that *all* of our subjective concerns are *dependent* on evaluative belief. If this view is correct, then the consequences of belief in nihilism would be even more extreme.

The psychological stakes in nihilism would be even higher if we also tied intentional action to explanation in terms of evaluative belief<sup>54</sup> or normative reasons,<sup>55</sup> or if we understood emotions as constituted by evaluative judgments.<sup>56</sup> On these further views, an agent who believes in nihilism couldn't act intentionally, or have emotions.

There is thus a range of influential views about normative psychology that imply a radical deflation of subjective concern, and worse, when coupled with belief in evaluative nihilism. Those who hold that we would go on as before must also deny these further views.

### 5. LIFE WITHOUT VALUE

If we believe that nothing matters, then we no longer believe that any thing matters, or that we have any practical reasons. And this means that all the motivation, affect, intention or action that was causally sustained by such beliefs will be gone too. You come to believe that nothing matters, and practical reason just stops—it's as if the normative electricity has been shut off.

What, if anything, will remain? Philosophers sometimes describe a condition where one lives by inclination instead of by reason. This is the view that is suggested, for example, when Michael Smith writes that

Desires well up and confidence levels rise without reason or justification and, when they do, we go for it... In this way we move forward in the only way we can given that rational action has become impossible.<sup>57</sup>

This is an image of a life without practical reason, though presumably still in broad conformity to instrumental rationality. Unfortunately, this passage tells us nothing about the kind of concerns that would still propel such an agent forward. What these will be depends, as we saw, on the relation between subjective concerns and evaluative belief. The argument so far suggests that when our subjective concerns and evaluative beliefs are broadly in correspondence, these subjective concerns are often causally dependent on the evaluative beliefs, and will largely fade away when these beliefs are gone. So things will not go on as before. How things *will* go on

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<sup>53</sup> This view was held by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and others. For contemporary versions, see Scanlon, *ibid.*, 7-8, 39; Tenenbaum, 2007. On some views, desire is itself understood as a kind of evaluative belief.

<sup>54</sup> Platts, 1991.

<sup>55</sup> Dancy, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Solomon, 1976.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *ibid.* Note however that Smith isn't discussing the condition of believing nothing matters, but of being unable to *rule out* that nothing matters. Korsgaard describes a similar state of following "the desire of the present moment" (1996, 163), and Williams writes about a state of mechanically following one's minimal preferences (1972, 3).

depends on which of our subjective concerns are not tied in this way to our evaluative beliefs. This is partly an empirical question, but the contours of the answer seem clear enough.

### 5.1. Mere Animal Striving

Writing about what she calls the ‘normative sceptic’, Korsgaard suggests that such a sceptic will still have some desires and impulses, since these are ‘supplied by nature’.<sup>58</sup> The idea seems to be that, like animals, we will follow our passing desires and biological drives. And it does seem plausible that our aversion to pain, hunger or cold, or attraction to sensory pleasures, are prior to, and independent of, any sophisticated evaluative belief. These animal drives and motivations are likely to survive belief in nihilism. But our commitment to our moral principles and ideals, and even to our long-term prudential goals, isn’t likely to survive. Nor, I believe, will the subjective concerns associated with our deepest personal projects.

Describing a period of existential crisis, Tolstoy wrote:

My life came to a standstill. I could breath, eat, drink and sleep, and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking and sleeping; but there was no life in me because I had no desires whose gratification I would have deemed reasonable to fulfil.<sup>59</sup>

Religious believers sometimes assume that atheism, thought through to its logical conclusion, must inevitably lead to a kind of amoral, selfish libertinism—a state that these believers sometimes equate with nihilism. Needless to say, this argument is confused. But ironically enough, the causal consequences of belief in nihilism might lead in exactly this direction.

### 5.2. Apathy and Paralysis

Such a life, while not attractive, is at least active. But the contraction of concern and motivation might go further. Think for example of depression. The deeply depressed see little point in doing anything, not even pursuing passing pleasures. They find it hard to even get out of bed.

Still, although the depressed sometimes say that nothing matters, they do seem to value (or rather disvalue) *some* things. They feel unhappy about the way things are, they take things to be pretty *bad*.

A better example is provided by the clinically apathetic, who exhibit an even more radical contraction of concern, but without the sense of gloom and doom. Oliver Sacks describes the case of a jovial brain-damaged patient whose “world has been voided of feeling and meaning... reduced to a facetious insignificance,” and who explained that for her “nothing means anything”.<sup>60</sup>

It’s hard to imagine being reduced to a mere animal state, or to mindless joviality. It’s harder still to imagine remaining conscious, in full possession of one’s faculties and with complete control over one’s limbs, yet completely immobile: perhaps lying in bed, mentally paralysed. There are, however, actual people who are in such a state—patients suffering from the exotic conditions neurologists call abulia and akinetic mutism. Of one abulic patient, it was said that

His general behavior was characterized by a dramatic decrease in spontaneous activity... he made no plans, showed no evidence of needs, will, or desires. He showed obvious

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<sup>58</sup> 1996, 163.

<sup>59</sup> 1882/1987, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Sacks 1990, 112ff.

lack of concern about relatives' as well as his own condition. When questioned about his mood, he reported no sadness or anxiety.<sup>61</sup>

The doctor of a 60-year old, formerly active university professor, described this patient's

capacity to stay motionless and speechless during endless periods, sitting in front of the examiner, waiting for the first question, totally shut in a profound inertia and passivity...

This patient was capable of answering questions. When asked what he is thinking of, all this time, he always answered: "I'm just thinking of nothing, no idea, no question, no thought at all."

Some of these patients recover. On such patient later explained that, when in this state, "she did not talk because she had nothing to say." Her mind, she said, was "empty"—or as she put it, "*Nothing mattered*."<sup>62</sup>

Needless to say, these patients suffer from severe brain damage. They didn't arrive at such a state of paralysis through philosophical argument. I'm not claiming that this is what would follow from genuine belief in nihilism. As I said, this is partly an empirical question, and I intend only to sketch the possibilities. But such radical consequences might actually follow if, for example, the doctrine that desire necessarily aims at the good is correct. At the very least, these actual cases serve as an antidote to the failure of imagination that can make philosophers assume that self-consciousness beings like us *must* be active agents—that we face an inescapable practical predicament, doomed to deliberate, to value things, and to act.

### 5.3. Something Close to Death

I admit that it's hard to imagine that a philosophical argument could take us to anything even close to such states—that a philosopher might offer an argument for nihilism and their audience would simply freeze the moment their brains compute the conclusion of his arguments, or else shed all of their lifelong projects and attachments and lazily sink in their armchairs... But if evaluative belief isn't epiphenomenal then these are at least possible outcomes of genuine unqualified belief in nihilism.<sup>63</sup> If our imagination resists this idea, this might be not because we cannot imagine these consequences following, but because we cannot imagine *really* believing in nihilism.

And whether or not the result would be complete paralysis, or mere animal-like striving, the outcome would be something very close to personal death. Although we would still be alive, our mental lives will have undergone a radical transformation. Our concern for the personal projects that gave sense to our lives will almost certainly dry out, and the psychological continuity that sustains prudential concern would be lost. And on views that identify the self with reason or rational agency, or with endorsement of values, even our selves won't survive this upheaval.

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<sup>61</sup> Habib, 2004.

<sup>62</sup> Damasio and Van Hoesen, 1983, my italics.

<sup>63</sup> It might be objected that since error theorists seem to go on pretty much as before, belief in nihilism couldn't have these implications. Notice that this won't show my argument to be invalid. It would only show that evaluative belief is epiphenomenal, and that widely held views about normative psychology are false. But it's doubtful that the uneventful lives of error theorists support any such conclusion. To begin with, most error theorists only endorse *moral* error theory; they hold that some things *do* matter. Now some may go further. But to assert (even *sincerely* assert) some radical philosophical view isn't yet tantamount to genuinely believing it (Schwizgebel, 2010). Conversely, those who following their conversion to nihilism live lives of unbridled sensuality, or never even get out of bed, are unlikely to report this consequence in peer-reviewed publications; as Valery wrote: "If I feel that all is vanity, the very thought prevents me from writing it down." (Valery, 1930, 96)

Thus, although nihilism gives no *reasons* to commit suicide, that may not really matter, because just by believing it you might in a sense die.

## 6. WHAT WE REALLY OUGHT TO FEAR

Does it really matter whether we would carry on as before or stop in our tracks? After all, if nothing matters, it's not as if going on as before would be a *better* outcome. So why care about the likely consequences of belief in nihilism?<sup>64</sup>

We take ourselves to have reasons to know important facts about the world—we believe that knowledge of such facts is valuable. And the truth of nihilism might seem to be an important fact—you might even think it's the *most* important fact about the world. But if nihilism is true, this could not be a *valuable* fact, or a fact it's valuable to *know*. Nor could there be anything bad in falsely believing that things do matter. If nothing matters, then another thing that doesn't matter is whether or not we believe this. If nothing matters, then all of us live under an illusion. But this illusion could not itself be harmful, or bad in any way.

It couldn't matter, then, whether possibilities (1) or (2) hold:

	Nothing matters	Some things matter
Believe some things matter	(1)	(3)
Believe nothing matters	(2)	(4)

It's not that these possibilities have zero value—they are, we might say, beyond good and evil.

Things, however, are very different if nihilism is *false*, and some things do matter. Consider first (3). It would be good, or is at least a condition for much good, if we recognize and respond to our reasons, and to what matters. Now the mere fact that we believe that some things matter doesn't by itself guarantee that we would recognize and respond to what actually has value. But this would be the case if our substantive evaluative beliefs do track value at least to some extent, and if these beliefs often guide our action.

The crucial possibility, however, is (4). Its value critically depends on what causally follows from belief in nihilism. Now if we believe that nothing matters, then we will no longer recognize the values and reasons out there. However, if we carry on largely as before, then we might at least still largely *conform* to our reasons. But if I am right, and we would lose many of our subjective concerns, then the result will be *very* harmful. It would mean that we would fail to respond to the value around us, and fail to even conform to our reasons. This would lead to many bad consequences, both prudential and moral, and might be bad in itself. And if belief in nihilism would lead to a kind of death of reason, this would be a further great harm, if our existence as rational agents has final value. There is no reason to fear nihilism. What we should fear is *mistaken belief* in nihilism.

Such a mistake could have disastrous consequences. By contrast, we lose nothing by mistakenly believing that things do matter, if they don't. Nor do we stand to gain anything by believing in nihilism even if it is true. This asymmetry gives us, in

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<sup>64</sup> Hussain 2007 portrays Nietzsche as responding to the threat of 'practical nihilism'—the threat that belief in nihilism would sap the force of our drives and desires. This is very much in line with my argument except that it's not clear how, if nothing matters, this consequence could be a threat.

Pascalian fashion, pragmatic reasons to believe (or to try to make ourselves believe) that nihilism is false.<sup>65</sup>

These reasons of course presuppose the falsity of nihilism. If we have already been persuaded that nihilism is true, then we cannot recognize such reasons. But so long as we *don't* yet believe in nihilism, then these reasons have great force even if the evidence in favour of nihilism was incredibly strong, even if we thought that it's *almost* certainly true.

This Pascalian argument assumes that our evaluative beliefs are broadly on track. But are we entitled to assume that? It might be objected that my argument considers a too narrow range of possibilities. If a view as radical as nihilism is on the table, shouldn't we also consider the sceptical hypothesis that, although some things do matter, our evaluative beliefs are nevertheless deeply wrong? And this means we face a broader range of possibilities:

	Nothing matters	Things matter <i>Our evaluative beliefs are true</i>	Things matter <i>Our evaluative beliefs are false</i>
Believe certain things matter	(1)	(3)	(5)
Believe nothing matters	(2)	(4)	(6)

But now that this sceptical hypothesis is also on the table, my Pascalian argument seems to face a challenge.<sup>66</sup> On a robustly realist view, it's logically possible that pretty much anything might be good, bad, or indifferent: suffering might be a supreme good or matter of indifference, while scratching one's ear might be great evil.<sup>67</sup> But that means it's conceivable that coming to believe that nothing matters and, perhaps, becoming paralyzed, would be an extremely good thing on some scenarios, whereas if our evaluative beliefs are false, acting on them may lead to great harm. Therefore, even if things matter, it needn't be better to believe that certain things matter, and to act on this belief.

This objection can be met. Now it's true that on such a sceptical scenario, (6) might be better than (5). Indeed, on some conceivable possibilities, (6) might even be better than (3). That *might* be so. But it needn't be. We certainly cannot assume that in such a sceptical scenario it would be better to do nothing than to act on mistaken beliefs. The act/omission distinction is itself a substantive claim we of course cannot appeal to here. And there are also many conceivable scenarios on which doing nothing would be far worse than acting on our beliefs, even if these are radically off

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<sup>65</sup> Several authors have made similar points. Adams 1995 argues that we stand nothing to lose by getting morality wrong, but much to lose if we mistakenly take morality to be an illusion. This seems doubtful if we consider only moral nihilism; we could lose much if rational egoism is true yet we mistakenly obey the demands of morality. Smith 2006 makes a closer argument, but he is asking whether we should suspend all of our evaluative beliefs in light of our inability to either confirm or rule out nihilism. And in a way I find puzzling, Smith goes on to describe the resulting state as one of being moved by our desires "without reason and justification" (105). Ross 2006 argues that we have pragmatic reasons to reject nihilism because it doesn't discriminate between options. My point is somewhat different: that *if* after believing in nihilism we *won't* go on as before, then belief in nihilism would be harmful *if* nihilism is false.

<sup>66</sup> I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this ingenious objection.

<sup>67</sup> See Street (2006); though see Cuneo & Shafer-Landau (2014) for criticism.

track. In other words, under this impenetrable sceptical fog, we wouldn't be in a position to evaluate (5) and (6), or indeed any other set of beliefs or courses of action. Thus, while (3) is clearly better than (4), we can't say whether (5) is better than (6) or vice versa. More importantly, we also can't say whether (6) is better than (3), or (5) worse than (3).

Is this enough to address the objection? Not yet, since, if it's *as* likely that our evaluative beliefs are broadly on track as it is that they are off track, and therefore as likely that it would be better to be paralyzed out of nihilist belief than to act on these beliefs, then we would have no ground to single out (3) over those sceptical scenarios where (6) is better, or (5) is much worse.

However, to assume that all these scenarios are equally probable is to assume that we already *are* in a sceptical state—to assume that our evaluative beliefs are just as likely to be false as true, that suffering is just as likely to be a wonderful thing as a great evil. But why should we assume *that*? We are considering, from our *current* perspective, what to make of the prospect that nihilism is true. We are not assuming that nihilism *is* true—which would anyway make such deliberation pointless. We are now also considering the sceptical possibility that things do matter but our beliefs are generally false. But again that isn't the same as assuming this to be true. In fact, since such scepticism would *also* make practical deliberation about these possibilities pointless, our very question assumes at least minimal confidence in our capacity to find out what matters, and what we have reason to do (this assumption fails, of course, if nothing matters, or if we really are clueless about what matters).

The Pascalian argument would go through whether or not nihilism was highly probable or extremely unlikely. For the current objection to be met, probabilities do matter, but only a very weak assumption is needed: that, *if* some things *do* matter, it's somewhat more likely that our evaluative beliefs are broadly on track than that epistemic evaluative scepticism is true. And I think we're certainly entitled to make *this* weak assumption, and even something considerably stronger. This isn't to deny that robust realism faces epistemic challenges. These challenges may mean that the probability of epistemic scepticism is higher on realism than on competing metaethical views. But if we think that we can hold on to realism despite these challenges, then surely one thing that follows is that we're entitled to regard, for example, our conviction that suffering as bad as more likely to be true than the mere logical possibility that suffering is wonderful or that scratching one's ear is a mortal sin.<sup>68</sup>

So I think we have powerful pragmatic reasons to try to believe that things matter. Even more clearly, the negative consequences of belief in nihilism give us reasons to avoid anything that might lead us to believe in nihilism. We even have reasons to suppress any growing *suspicion* that nihilism is true—even if this suspicion could be supported by forceful reasons. In effect, we have pragmatic reasons not to try to *find out* whether nihilism is true. For, as we saw, there is no value in finding out

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<sup>68</sup> To be sure, some argue that *if* robust realism were true then we would face a sceptical predicament (cf. Street, 2006). But even these metaethicists don't conclude that epistemic scepticism is true; they conclude that we must reject realism. Assessing such arguments is beyond the scope of this paper. But even if they succeed, they do not threaten the Pascalian argument. Let us set aside the point that epistemic scepticism is still at least a possibility even on some antirealist views. Suppose that antirealism does rule out such scepticism out. That just means that we're back with the original simpler pragmatic argument. And as I've mentioned earlier, many forms of antirealism *are* compatible with the possibility of nihilism. Still, let us suppose further that antirealism also rules out nihilism. But even if nihilism is false, this doesn't mean we can't wrongly believe (or strongly suspect) that it's true. So the argument gets even simpler: only (3) and (4) remain, and (3) is still surely the better option.

that nihilism is true. There could be no reasons to find out *that* nothing matters. I am now suggesting that there *are* reasons *not* to try to find out *whether* nothing matters.

Isn't there, however, great value in finding out that nihilism is *false*? For wouldn't that be an important truth? But even if it is, it's a truth we implicitly recognize through first-order inquiry into the value of *particular* things—an inquiry which, if successful, implies that that some things do matter.

To conclude. If nothing matters, this doesn't matter either. But if nothing matters, and we believe that, then—although it won't matter *whether* anything would still matter to us—it's likely that far fewer things *would* matter to us. If nothing matters then this result of belief in nihilism of course also won't matter. But it *would* matter, and matter greatly, if we falsely believe in nihilism and stop, in this way, to care about the things that do matter. *That* is what we should fear.<sup>69</sup>

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