A modern nihilism: A chronological web log exploring core philosophical and psychological problems

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Abstract

Presents the author's evolving views of the best current positions on certain core philosophical and psychological problems as they developed over time. These positions together suggest a skeptical or nihilist perspective modified by evolutionary psychology and contemporary philosophy that embraces our desire to live as best we can and the relative and psychological reality of values, free will and other phenomena while recognizing limitations on their foundations and our understanding. The below makes no claims to originality for most of the ideas expressed, drawing on a range of mostly unreferenced texts that will be familiar to philosophers and psychologists working in this area.

(June, 2005)

1. The origin of the universe cannot be understood.

We can see no reason why the universe exists, and it doesn't seem we could ever find one. Any explanation would become part of what has to be explained. This is the familiar but no less profound possibility of always asking "why?": any explanation becomes part of what is to be explained. Given the way our minds are constructed, no final satisfactory explanation seems possible. Even a newly discovered law of physics would pose the question as to why that should be the case -- why anything should exist at all or ever come into existence (see, for example, Nozick, 1981, or Krellenstein, 1995).

1.1 The Big Bang is not a complete explanation for the origin of the universe.

The Big Bang may explain the origin of the universe but it only provides an explanation up to a certain point in time...or perhaps to the beginning of time itself. It does not explain why there should be space-time or laws of physics that might allow a Big Bang and a universe to emerge from nothing at all. Some object that the question of an explanation or prior cause for the Big Bang is meaningless -- how could there be a cause prior in time when there isn't even time itself? In that case the creation of the universe from nothing, or an equally mysterious infinite sequence of a universe being born and dying (or an infinity of universes), is itself the final answer. But if it is the answer it is one that seems

complete or literally incomprehensible. Wittgenstein said: "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical but that it exists" (1961, p. 149).

1.2 An incomprehensible explanation for the universe is possible.

It's possible that a final explanation for the origin of the universe exists but cannot be known by us. Such an explanation, even if incomprehensible, seems more likely and more desirable than a universe that came into being from simply nothing. Perhaps this is because the explanation at least satisfies the deep-seated belief that everything has an explanation. The existence of this incomprehensible explanation might be confirmed by meeting an alien species that convinces us there is more to the brute existence of the universe than we ourselves can comprehend. Or maybe our minds will someday evolve (or just be sufficiently educated/modified?) to the point where other forms of satisfactory explanation are possible. Perhaps those who are already satisfied that the ultimate origin of the universe is a meaningless or a fully answered question already have such minds.

1.3 A theory of the universe that compels its own existence is unlikely.

It's been suggested that an explanation or theory for the origin of the universe could be found that compels it own existence and leaves no further question. But we have no idea what such a theory might look like and no reason to think such a theory is possible.

2. Morality has no absolute rational foundation.

There is no successful chain of reasoning that has been offered as to why we must adopt any fundamental moral obligation or value over another, or any at all...the very concept of an objective moral truth that commands obedience is, to use Mackie's term, 'queer' (1977). That people often do or seem to act this way is clear, as it is that many values and behaviors are shared and others are not. But there is no knockdown argument we can offer someone who believes deeply in a fundamental value we do not share, or in its greater importance than another value (cf. some arguments over abortion that set the sanctity of any form of unique human life against the right of control over one's own body). The variation in moral beliefs across people/cultures and time (despite attempts to rationalize such differences) argues against the possibility that, despite their queerness, there simply do exist common moral obligations (this is Mackie's 'argument from relativity'). (It might be argued that the belief that there are no absolute foundations is itself an absolute foundational belief. It may be foundational but, rather than absolute, it is an observation that no rational argument has established such values, and it leaves open at least the possibility that an argument could be offered that proves otherwise.)

2.1 Moral agreement and disagreement are ultimately arbitrary.

We may judge another's behavior morally wrong to indicate its inconsistency with our deepest feelings and principles about how people should treat each other, principles (if principles are articulated rather than only feelings/behavior expressed) such as respect for an individual's rights, maximizing the greatest good, acceptance of a social contract, a particular sense of justice, the word of God or whatever we believe comprises and justifies that belief (some will also count as within the purview of morality behaviors aimed only or primarily at ourselves, such as suicide or drug use). Moral obligations are also experienced as commands (if not always absolute commands) that apply equally to everyone. But any underlying emotion or principle we assert to another as primary is arbitrary in the absence of agreement over its overriding value. We may claim that certain values are built in through evolution, are consistent with our survival as individuals or a species or tend to maximize pleasure or happiness of the individual or group. But none of those justify particular values without agreement on the underlying value of what is innate or productive of survival or pleasure, and agreement on values does not by itself imply obligations (vs. desirability) regarding them. This does not prevent us from reasoning with those with whom we share at least some values (or perceived obligations) to show that a behavior (or what results from it) is in fact consistent or inconsistent with those shared values, and such arguments occupy much of what counts as moral debate. Some disagreements can also be seen as disagreements over the purported facts of the matter -- whether animals are conscious, whether one group of people represents an inherent danger to others -- or over predictions of what will result from a particular behavior, e.g., will allowing euthanasia start us down a slippery slope to allowing other forms of taking a life. However, it is when the facts or likely outcomes are not in dispute and discussion breaks down -- over abortion, competing religious and political dogma, certain animal rights -- that we are faced with a conflict between competing fundamental values (or with the denial of moral values altogether) that debate alone cannot resolve. (Singer, 1993, recommends we accept at least some moral point of view because it can give meaning to our lives, something beyond ourselves. The quest for meaning seems clear, but it seems questionable whether we can set out to give meaning to our life by embracing morality if it does not already fill that role.)

2.2 The origin of morality probably lies in evolution.

It seems likely that our moral sense -- the very existence and 'ought' of moral judgments as well as many of the particular moral precepts that exist -- has its origins in evolution. An innate sense of sympathy, tit-for-tat reciprocity and other similar traits probably provided evolutionary advantages when they first appeared, increasing the likelihood of the survival of the individual or perhaps a group with such shared characteristics. Individual choice, culture and, more generally, the sort of human brain given by evolution that allows for our apparent ability to choose and the creation of cultures can then take such morality far beyond what was given in evolution. As Nozick (2001) explains, deeply rooted norms become efficient ways for biology and/or culture to maintain the benefits of

coordinated behavior...we don't need to reason through every situation, and norms may reinforce overall beneficial behavior when reasoning alone wouldn't get there (e.g., in 'Prisoner's Dilemma' situations where individuals do better only if both cooperate rather than act in their apparent self-interest).

2.3 There isn't one moral theory.

It's no surprise that specific moral intuitions and developed practices built on them have not yielded to a single principle of explanation (e.g., the greatest good). There is little reason for evolution to have crafted us (to the extent we are shaped by evolution) in a way that is simple, consistent or even clear to rational examination (let alone productive of our greatest overall happiness). Only net survival benefit counts for evolution. A behavior or rationale that provides a survival benefit in one situation may not in another situation, for which a different or even contrary behavior may be more appropriate. Some behaviors may also be the accidental consequence of something of great adaptive value, even if that by-product is itself not useful or even counter-productive.

2.4 A complete moral realism is unlikely.

Could it yet be possible that there are moral truths even if we cannot establish them by reason alone? The existence of transcendent, objective moral truths that we might somehow discover seems unlikely, though many or most believe in their existence (Joyce, 2010 has suggested that most moral philosophers -- though not most of all philosophers -- are probably believers, or they would have been unlikely to pursue moral philosophy). A more practical moral realism might mean that at least some principles exist which provide a path to a life which any one would choose if informed and freely able to choose (or they would at least be better off if they made such a choice). Such a morality might provide a key less to external nature than to the internal nature of a person (or perhaps all persons) -- to psychology. It seems at least possible that some prohibitions -- e.g., that it is wrong to murder innocents -- could fit this description given how widely shared are both the prohibitions and the belief of the effect on the individual of violating them; or, conversely, that some positive principles really exist, given the broad and cross-cultural desirability of certain character virtues such as courage. But prohibitions and principles it would be irrational not to follow are still short of moral obligations one is commanded to follow (though some feel otherwise). It also seems unlikely that there are moral truths of any kind that apply to all behaviors considered morally relevant given what we can see of the complex way psychological nature unfolds through biology and environment and the range of opinion on and apparent effects of various behaviors. Nietzsche for one thought authenticity and the exercise of the will more important than compassion. More conventionally, the split between conservative and liberal attitudes found in so many societies suggests at least a bifurcated set of moral principles and possible root psychology.

2.5 Moral and philosophical disagreement is mostly psychological in origin.

Purely philosophical discussion of morality cannot explain it, especially attempts to reduce it to a single principle. The most technical philosophical discussions often hinge on the intuitive acceptance or rejection of premises that simply seem reasonable or not to someone. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) has persuasively argued that morality is primarily driven by a range of intuitions and emotions, though moral discourse plays a role in persuading others if not a fundamental one in actually generating moral behavior. (This resonates both with traditional philosophical intuitionism -- morality grounded on directly perceived intuitions -- as well as with emotivism -- that morality is more a matter of emotional approval/disapproval than specific principles. See Miller, 2003, for a discussion of recent philosophical attempts to ground morality.) Similarly, Caputo (2000) has observed that ethical reasoning usually starts with conclusions, not premises. A better way to understand a moral judgment (or even the embrace of an entire moral philosophy) might be to look at the individual's temperament, upbringing, historical context, etc. and, for an entire philosophy, to recognize the tendencies to both over-generalize from one's own perspective and to broaden judgments and theories to encompass phenomena for which they may not be applicable. *Ad hominem* arguments don't refute facts or premises but can provide useful insights as to why someone's core beliefs, intuitions and speculations are what they are when there is little objective basis (or discernible progress) in deciding between competing points of view. (The same can be said about this author and the views expressed here. One can only be aware of some of the pitfalls and be as careful as possible.)

3. Some people have unquestioned beliefs they view as absolute

Some have an unquestioned and, for them, unquestionable conviction in the origin or purpose of the universe or in the way people must be treated, a conviction beyond reason that others cannot be persuaded of. We might broadly label all such convictions as religious. For such people tolerance of other views may not be acceptable or make sense.

3.1 Unquestioned beliefs may benefit those who believe them.

It could be argued that an unquestioned belief in the origin of the universe or the foundation of morality is a benefit to those who have it. Maybe such individuals possess a certain biological disposition to religious belief that is itself the result of evolution, e.g., people susceptible to such beliefs might be more inclined to sacrifice themselves in situations where it furthers the survival of those same genes in offspring and related group members. There is some evidence that religious belief is correlated with longer life expectancy. Similarly, there is evidence that people fare better with an optimistic or exaggerated, rather than

realistic, sense of their own abilities or importance. In all these cases beliefs congruent with a rational examination of reality do not serve the individual as well as other beliefs (or an absence of beliefs, if 'ignorance is bliss'). This is not so surprising from an evolutionary viewpoint. Knowledge and realistic beliefs presumably provide certain evolutionary benefits, but perhaps not all the time and in all situations.

3.2 Choosing to acquire an unquestioned belief is problematic.

If there are benefits to unquestioned beliefs about the universe or morality should we then attempt to become such believers -- or optimists, or selectively ignorant -- if we are not? Perhaps, if people are able to and so inclined. For many, setting out to believe in something without question is not attractive, and probably difficult to achieve, even if it can happen more or less unintended. It is also hard and unappealing to go back to a state in which one is ignorant of a problem or of the adequacy of a supposed solution. We might recognize such a state as providing greater happiness after it is attained but still reject it because choosing it is inconsistent with what currently makes us happy, such as valuing what we consider to be more (rather than less) knowledge of the world as it really is, or valuing the autonomy that such a state would seem to reduce.

3.3 Experience machines, drugs and psychotherapy.

Nozick (1974) says why we might not choose to hook ourselves up to 'experience machines' that could deliver any kind of reality we chose (e.g., the experience of writing a great novel) because we value our experience being real in addition to the experiences themselves. Something like this is probably part of some people's uneasiness about certain forms of psychopharmacology. Psychotherapy seems preferable for many because they think it effects its improvements by 'really' transforming us -- our beliefs, behaviors and emotions -- rather than by giving us a drug-induced experience. But it's not clear from the evidence that psychotherapy always works this way, or that some drugs may not be as transformational (Kramer, 1993; some people report that the prescribed drugs allowed them to be their 'real selves'). There remain knotty problems here, though, in the end, drugs are not all that different from psychotherapy or any other form of personality manipulation (including religious conversion), all of which, if successful, ultimately result in changes in the brain that produce the desired effects with greater or less difficulty, with fewer or more undesirable side-effects and with varying degrees of permanence and related changes (and the ability to deliberately reverse them). (Medication or therapy might also produce effects that we didn't explicitly want but with which we are happy, or at least newly tolerant. These might include effects that we not only didn't choose but would have avoided if we knew they would occur. Kramer reports that few patients he's aware of discontinue SSRI-type anti-depressants despite experiencing the not so uncommon sexual side-effect of delayed, or the inability to attain, orgasm, suggesting it's because patients so value the benefits of the

medication. Reduced libido has also been reported with such drugs. However, it may be that some patients do not simply tolerate these unwanted side-effects but no longer experience them as undesirable in the same way. This fits with Kramer's idea that the drugs effect a broader transformation than simply addressing symptoms.)

3.4 Do unquestioned beliefs imply anything about their truth?

Does the conviction of people with deeply held religious or moral beliefs imply anything about the truth of those beliefs? To the extent that education tends to offset the inclinations of true believers, or that there is a correlation between non-belief and education or intelligence -- both of which appear to be true -- such conviction does not provide strong support for the reality of beliefs that cannot be demonstrated but only seen as self-evident by those who so perceive them. Of course, humans are as fundamentally irrational as they are sometimes rational.

4. We don't really have free will but can act as if we do

The so-called compatibilist position embraced by some philosophers seems hard to refute: namely, that we seem to have free will (it is the only world we know), and might as well act as if we do (and treat people as responsible for their actions), but no, not really -- everything is physically determined. The only exception to complete physical determinism arises from quantum uncertainties -- the probabilistic nature of behavior at the level of elementary particles. In principle this uncertainty continues all the way up to our macro reality, but is so rare at that level as to be safely ignored. Some have argued that these quantum uncertainties are nonetheless what give us freely chosen human behavior, but the arguments for this are so far unconvincing. Still, the puzzle of how conscious observation of a physical state resolves these quantum uncertainties remains.

5. Brains are conscious but we don't know how.

Consciousness is a puzzle. It seems the brain alone gives rise to consciousness -- there is no good evidence for a soul or for irreducible pieces of consciousness making us self-aware -- but we don't understand how the brain does it and probably never will, as least as it applies to our experience of qualia, the particular sensations of sound, color, pain, etc. No matter how much brain function we can imagine understanding, and no matter how tightly correlated that function is shown to be with the minutiae of these experiences, there appears to be an irreducible 'explanatory gap' between the most we can ever say about neurons or electrical fields in the brain and the tangible experience of reality. How does anything we can learn or theorize about the brain explain the particularities of the raw sensations we feel? Suggestions that certain physical or structural states are simply identical with these experiences and explain them as completely as they can be explained are as unsatisfactory and seem as incomplete as claims that the universe originated from nothing and there is no

more to be said about the matter. (This 'mysterian' position regarding consciousness was first discussed at length in McGinn, 1989. See also Krellenstein, 1995.)

5.1 We're unlikely to be able to explain consciousness.

As with the origin of the universe, it's conceivable to imagine the discovery of concepts so different from those we now possess that a solution to the problem of explaining qualia will somehow be possible. But we have no reason to believe it for this problem either. It's true that other past scientific problems -- what makes something alive, for example -- seemed unsolvable but were later solved. But no such scientific problem (other than, indeed, the problem of the ultimate origin of the universe) seems (or seemed) to have quite the conceptual difficulties of the consciousness problem.

5.2 Machines can be conscious but we don't know how.

If the brain alone produces consciousness then it seems possible that an artificial machine could be built that would be conscious. In this view we are ourselves just such a machine. Based on what we understand about the brain as an information processing engine it's reasonable to believe that a computer with the rights sorts of inputs and outputs from and to the real world, and possibly made of the right materials, could power the brain part of a conscious machine. Arguments that a particular limitation of computers makes it impossible for such a machine to be built can't always be conclusively refuted but are not really relevant, since we can't see how the physiology of the brain could produce consciousness and could produce similar arguments showing it to be impossible, though in the case of the human brain we have the brute fact that it happens. If it turns out we are never able to understand how that happens for a brain then we may never be able to know how to construct such a conscious machine (except, perhaps, as an indirect or accidental consequence of some construction), but that will not make it any less possible in principle.

6. We live by personal values, biological dispositions, upbringing, habit and choice.

The existentialist accepts nihilism but aims to counter it with acts of will and choice, creating value where none exists to start. This may be a good strategy for a nihilist to try to live by, though what will work for one may not for another. More significantly, a modern nihilism forces us in the end to reject the claim that the existentialist can necessarily create value in more than a personal sense through acts of will...some may experience that, others not...and these acts will not necessarily persuade others of the value of a particular course of action. As a practical matter, we have deep-rooted beliefs, or at least deeply felt emotions about what we want or believe is or isn't acceptable even if we can't offer completely convincing explanations to ourselves or others and don't view them

as absolutes. Personal values -- the values we have and adopt even if we can't consider them absolute -- play a significant role in living the life we do. To the extent we examine our beliefs (and we may not very much or at all) we may adopt a pragmatic viewpoint, accepting certain things as quasi-foundational. We then reason (or more often rationalize after the fact, if Haidt is correct) from such beliefs as we have and towards such goals as we have and choose (to the extent we choose them). We choose to be with others with similar values...or to express ourselves...or value others...or maximize our sensual pleasures (or, more commonly, some combination of these and others) and perhaps we choose some of these because, for us, there really is no other choice...or some choices work better for us even if we can't ground that choice in anything beyond dispute. Some things we do because of temperament and/or because we were raised that way (learning morality has been likened to learning a particular language: a natural proclivity is elaborated with a certain set of rules, but the specifics can vary...no one rule is absolutely right any more than one language is) -- and choose to so raise others (or just fall into doing so) -- or there was another reason we did them initially but they become habitual (and habits are extremely useful time and effort savers). The psychology of 'functional autonomy' suggests that whatever is habitual may become valued in its own right. We come to accept, or not, the absence of clear foundations and the limitations in our understanding.

7. We don't know how much we can modify ourselves, what makes up happy or what we value.

Human nature has in part evolved and been encoded in biology, at least in the form of underlying tendencies. Our culture also places limitations on us, or makes some choices much harder or easier than others. There is an interesting list of behaviors found in all cultures, e.g., sexual jealousy and modesty. However, what is natural or culturally produced (and they are often at odds), even if found among all people, still has no automatic claim to being of paramount value, of making us happy or of being unchangeable. But just how changeable are we?

7.1 There can be a cost in curtailing biologically based tendencies.

Frustrating a biological tendency can result in (negatively experienced) frustration. This frustration may be reduced or not experienced negatively if in exchange we perceive a personal benefit, or a social benefit that returns an indirect personal benefit (e.g., general prohibitions against violence). It may be possible to further reduce or eliminate frustration if the tendency can be modified through learning or habitual non-practice. Freud thought our biological and primarily sexual 'instincts' could be transformed, and needed to be for the sake of civilization, though he didn't think satisfaction of the transformed ('sublimated') instincts could be as pleasurable as satisfaction of the original. Few believe today that all our pleasures and activities derive their psychic energy from sex or other

basic instincts. But we sometimes perceive connections or experience passionate pleasure from different activities in a similar way, possibly indicating conflated origins and a common neurophysiology.

(August, 2005)

7.2 Deliberate change

We choose to develop interests or acquire tastes but have less control over our personality or what is most important to us. Some changes may be forced on us, or become a part of us through daily routine. We can work towards personal and social transformation and deliberately build some changes in ourselves and others over time, to some extent. Individual variability and external reinforcement play a significant role in what's possible. Most people can learn to control urges for revenge. Some choose celibacy without apparent cost (how many?), while for many monogamy is difficult to sustain or not really embraced in the first place, or exists for a period of time in a state of tension. Pinker (1997) casts doubt on the 1960's ambitions of free love and an egalitarian society, arguing persuasively for the widespread existence, likely evolutionary origins and great difficulty in overcoming sexual jealousy and competition. Modern day capitalism has lately run rampant over any alternative economic model in its appeal to a view of human nature based on universal and mostly unmodifiable self-interest and competition. But just how desirable (or undesirable) and unchangeable are which tendencies?

(January, 2006)

7.3 The significance of sex differences

It's known that the physiology and brains of men and women are different, and there's little doubt that there are some differences between men's and women's average characteristics and behaviors that are primarily the result of these underlying biological differences. There are also differences due mostly to the effects of culture, as well as presumed differences that empirical testing does or might indicate are not really true differences at all. Such differences as have been established are relatively small and of a usually unknown mix of biological and cultural factors. These differences do not seem to determine or limit the characteristics of a given individual, e.g., although men are stronger than women on average (probably partly because of cultural differences but also because men tend to be larger), any given woman may be as strong or stronger than any given man. As a result, these average differences between the sexes are of very limited use in determining what any given individual might or might not be capable of, excel at or find pleasure in. And while characteristics of mostly biological origin may sometimes be more difficult to change, average differences of usually unknown (or even of known) origin don't help much in determining just how hard or easy changing a particular characteristic will be for a given

individual. However, this does not mean that understanding such differences is of no use at all. It's possible to consider stereotypes as primarily empirical claims about the average characteristics of a group. The negative connotation of stereotyping applies mostly to situations where the claims are false or erroneously assumed to apply to all individuals in the group and/or are used in place of (and sometimes despite even knowing) the actual characteristics of the individual. It may also be a problem when stereotyped differences are wrongly assumed to be unchangeable (which is more often attributed to stereotypes believed to be biological in origin). But an accurate stereotype may provide at least some information when more specific or useful information is not available or possible. Forced to choose randomly from a group of men or women for a task requiring great strength one would be better off choosing from the group of men.

A much harder question is to what extent a true stereotype -- of people in general and in all cultures (i.e., a so-called fact or at least statistical claim about mostly biologically determined human nature) or of men or women in particular -- should be used in combination with other available information. Even if the individual in question is oneself or someone else known first-hand there is often insufficient information for making important judgments. If a stereotype is valid and of sufficient magnitude it could be reasonable to consider it as a clue or best guess about the existence or strength of an uncertain characteristic or behavior, though giving it its proper due (and no more) may be difficult. In reality there are few stereotypes of usefulness that are certain or of clearly known strength compared to individual factors we may know directly...the greater parenting drive or capability of women? the greater promiscuity of men? And any such established statistical difference, can, again, make no automatic claim to be being unchangeable (whether mostly biological or cultural), productive of our happiness or of intrinsic value. But it may sometimes be reasonable to assess the evidence for and strength of these purported average differences and see what if any role they might play in the decisions we make.

(October, 2006)

8. Morality is real, but nihilism about its foundations can't be avoided

Steven Pinker (2002) observes that an evolutionary basis for morality invites nihilism (i.e., moral nihilism -- the view that there are no objective moral truths) because of the nature of evolutionary adaptation, which happens by chance and persists because of its survival value. Pinker thinks nihilism can be avoided because moral behavior may have evolved in conformance with an objective morality grounded in the logic and benefits of reciprocal, cooperative behavior -- it's hard to argue someone has an obligation without being similarly obliged, and we benefit overall from certain behaviors. Even if there isn't an objective morality, Pinker argues that our moral sense is 'real for us' and can't simply be dismissed. But the logic of reciprocal obligation only applies if we already accept someone having an obligation to do something rather than just finding it desirable; not

wanting you to hurt me doesn't imply you have an obligation not to hurt me (see Harman in Harman & Thomson, 1996) or what might be the resulting obligation for me not to hurt you. The net benefits of cooperation also do not imply obligations; a given individual (or nation state) at a particular time may well be better served by acting selfishly. While morality is still 'real for us,' this too falls short of the objective grounding of morality needed to refute nihilism. That does not mean that moral practice and discussion are an unimportant part of our lives or that we are not willing to live by, defend and enforce those practices. But our beliefs and their defense cannot be grounded in more than our individual and community determination to pursue certain goals and adhere to certain norms of conduct. (See Krellenstein, 2006.)

(December, 2009)

8.1 We would be better off not using the word 'moral'

Given the widespread but apparently false belief that there are true, absolute moral values we would probably be better off eliminating from our vocabulary the words that imply the existence of such values -- words such as 'moral', 'right' and 'wrong'. Such 'moral abolitionism' has been suggested by others who deny the existence of moral absolutes, including Greene (2002), Burgess (in an early unpublished work finally published in 2007) and Garner (2007). It would likely be better to refer to positions one favors or opposes rather than describe them as 'right' or 'wrong'. This would not prevent us from reasoning about values and their implications. It would also not prevent us from adopting and living by particular values we believe are in our interest, supporting/condemning actions vigorously or choosing to punish or fight those who violate norms we endorse. But it would eliminate language that implies there are values or obligations that command obedience of oneself or another because of their objective truth. Discussing values as personal (if sometimes widely shared) and relative would likely make 'moral' disagreements less intractable and more like other disagreements, increasing the possibilities for compromise. Compromise would not be required (nothing is)...but the choice would be more accurately focused as a practical decision to compromise or not rather than a decision that allows no compromise by definition.

Some who believe that moral values are not absolute (e.g., Joyce, 2001) nevertheless think we might be better retaining the fiction of moral absolutes and continue to speak of 'right' and 'wrong'...that such talk would better reinforce the shared values a community has, providing a net benefit. Whether this is the case is, as Joyce and others have observed, an empirical question, but one might hope that people could see values for what they are and learn to better understand and reason about differences in them while still respecting their importance. (One exception to eliminating the language of moral realism (i.e., that there are objective moral truths) might be for raising children, where a simpler approach may be needed to encourage particular behaviors. Greene

(2002) observes that we might "simply allow or even encourage realist dialogue with those who are too young to handle the meta-ethical truth [that there are no moral absolutes]"(p. 279).)

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