Moral Nihilism and its Implications

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Abstract

Philosophers have identified a number of principles that characterize morality and underlie moral judgments. However, philosophy has failed to establish any widely agreed-upon justification for these judgments, and an "error theory" that views moral judgments as without justification has not been successfully refuted. Evolutionary psychologists have had success in explaining the likely origins and mechanisms of morality but have also not established any justification for adopting particular values. As a result, we are left with moral nihilism -- the absence of any unarguable values or behaviors we must or should adopt. The philosophical and psychological implications of this nihilism suggest accepting shared, non-absolute values as "good enough"; a revised, humbler view of moral and other value judgments; and the possible acceptance of the hard truth of a value nihilism.

Keywords: ethical nihilism, moral psychology, psychological philosophy

Crisply defining morality has proven difficult, though there's some consensus among philosophers that it applies to impartial, universal judgments about what is right or obligatory to do (e.g., Loeb, 2008; Singer, 1993; Williams, 1985). Finding a basis for these judgments has been even more difficult. As Singer (1993) states:

> Can we use this universal aspect of ethics to derive an ethical theory that will give us guidance about right and wrong? Philosophers from the Stoics to Hare and Rawls have attempted this. No attempt has met with general acceptance. (p. 12)

Mackie (1977) has presented an "error theory" that tries to show that no attempt at justification can ever succeed -- that making a moral judgment is always an error. Many have adopted this view, including Gill and Nichols (2008), Greene (2002), Joyce (2001), Rosenberg (2011) and others (see the contributors to Joyce and Kirchin, 2010). Psychologists and some philosophers (e.g., Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Joyce, 2006) have moved to explain morality psychologically -- rooted in evolution, shaped by culture and providing benefits for human cooperation. Greene (2013) refers to this view as "… a consensus that's been building since Darwin: morality is a set of psychological adaptations that allow [sic] otherwise selfish individuals to recap the benefits of cooperation" (p. 185). But understanding morality and moral differences as mostly psychological still leaves us with Mackie's moral nihilism -- the lack of any objective basis for grounding our beliefs and actions. We are left with the questions of what to believe and how to live given the absence of foundations that have historically endured.

What follows briefly reviews the failure in refuting moral nihilism (or, alternatively, the success in establishing it) and its implications. These implications may include the acceptance of mostly shared non-absolute values as good enough and a correspondingly revised view of moral

judgment and responsibility. They may also include resisting the appeal of false beliefs or experiences and accepting the hard truth of a value nihilism.

Moral Nihilism

There is no successful chain of reasoning that has been offered as to why we must adopt any fundamental value or moral obligation over another, or any at all … the very concept of an objective moral truth that *commands* obedience is, while familiar, unlike any other concept. Mackie (1977) has dubbed moral obligation "queer" (in the original sense of the term). Hume (1738/1969) observed that any attempt to somehow deduce an "ought" from any observation or fact about the world is self-evidently impossible: one can't arrive at the idea of obligation from a description of objective facts without first introducing obligation as some sort of fact.

That people often act as if there are valid moral commands 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. Consider, for example, arguments over abortion that set the absolute sanctity of any form of unique human life against the absolute right of control over one's own body, or debates in "trolley" problems over diverting a runaway trolley to kill one person in order to save the five in its path (e.g., Thomson, 1985). The variation in moral beliefs across and within cultures also argues against the possibility that there exist absolute moral obligations that all people recognize (this is the argument from relativity in Mackie, 1977). No attempt to rationalize these differences has succeeded.

It could be argued that the belief that there are no absolute foundations is itself an absolute belief. But, rather than being absolute, it is an observation that no rational argument has

established absolute values. It leaves open the possibility that evidence may yet be offered that proves otherwise.

Moral Agreement and Disagreement are Arbitrary

We may judge another's behavior morally wrong to indicate its inconsistency with what we perceive as moral commands, or at least with our deepest feelings and principles about how people should treat each other -- principles 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 (see Rachels, 1993, for a survey of moral principles).

We may assert underlying principles of morality but they remain arbitrary in the absence of agreement about their overriding value. This does not prevent us from reasoning with those with whom we share values to show that a behavior is in fact consistent or inconsistent with those values. These discussions occupy much of what counts as moral debate. Some disagreements can also be seen as disagreements over purported facts, such as whether a 24-week-old fetus can feel pain. Other disagreements may be over predictions of what will result from a particular behavior: will allowing euthanasia, for example, start us down a slippery slope to allowing other behaviors we consider unacceptable. However, it is when the facts or likely outcomes are not in dispute and discussion breaks down that we are faced with a conflict that debate cannot resolve because of the absence of common fundamental values.

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 by many people is clear, and some claim to have found meaning this way. But others may resist the pragmatism of wholeheartedly adopting relatively arbitrary principles.

Evolution is the Origin of Morality

It appears that our moral sense has its origins in evolution (see, for example, Joyce, 2006, and Street, 2006). This includes both the very existence and "ought" of moral judgments as well as many of our intuitively powerful moral precepts. As many evolutionary psychologists have argued, 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 similar shared characteristics (though the idea of group selection remains controversial). Evidence for this includes the nearly universal presence of good/bad judgments of some kind, even in infants (e.g., Bloom, 2013). 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 morality far beyond what was determined by evolution. Deeply rooted norms become efficient ways for biology and culture to maintain the benefits of coordinated behavior -- we do not need to reason through every situation -- and norms may reinforce overall beneficial behavior when reasoning alone would not suffice. Examples of this include situations where individuals do better only if both cooperate rather than act in their apparent self-interest (see Nozick, 2001, on these Prisoner's Dilemma situations).

But while certain values are likely built in through evolution, produce pleasure and lead to our survival, this does not justify particular behaviors without agreement on the underlying value of what is innate or productive of survival or pleasure. Values may be shared, and we may jointly agree to pursue them. But the fact that they are shared does not compel any obligation to pursue them.

It is no surprise that specific moral intuitions and developed practices built on them have not yielded to a single principle of explanation, such as 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 clear to rational examination. Only net survival benefit counts for evolution.

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 -- the position known as moral realism -- seems unlikely. Joyce (2001) has suggested that most moral philosophers -- though not most philosophers overall -- are probably moral realists or they would have been unlikely to pursue moral philosophy. That may skew the philosophical literature to that position, but a broader reading, as Joyce suggests, shows that most philosophers consider moral realism speculative at best.

A more practical moral realism might mean some principles exist that provide a path to a life that most individuals, even if maybe not all, would choose if informed and freely able to choose … or they would likely be better off if they made such a choice. However, literary theorist Terry Eagleton (2003) reminds us that "people who are brutal and violent can be happy" (p. 122), and any principles it would be prudent to follow are still short of obligations one is commanded to follow. It is also unlikely that there are moral truths that apply to all behaviors considered morally relevant given the complex way our psychological nature develops as a result of biology and environment. 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 (and perhaps many more than just two groups if Haidt, 2012, is correct).

The Source of Moral Disagreement is Psychological

A purely philosophical discussion cannot establish irrefutable moral principles. These discussions ultimately rely on the intuitive acceptance or rejection of premises that simply seem reasonable or not. Haidt (2001, 2012) has persuasively argued that morality is primarily driven by a range of intuitions and emotions. He believes moral discourse plays a role in persuading others what to do but only a secondary one in determining what is moral in the first place. Similarly, Caputo (2000) has observed that ethical reasoning usually starts with conclusions, not premises. This resonates both with traditional philosophical intuitionism -- morality grounded on directly perceived intuitions -- and with emotivism -- that morality is more a matter of emotional approval/disapproval than specific principles.

A better way to understand moral judgments would be to view them psychologically. Cushman and Young (2009) demonstrated how "the conflict between psychological mechanisms is paralleled by prominent philosophical debates between different moral theories" (p. 9), giving rise to moral dilemmas among different people and within one person. The role of personality in philosophers' judgments has been demonstrated by Schulz, Cokely, and Feltz (2011), and Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2015) have shown how common biases affect philosophers' judgments. Eisenberg and others (e.g., Athota et al., 2009; Eisenberg, 1986, 2010; Miller and Eisenberg, 1988) have written about the role of empathy and other personality factors in determining moral reasoning and behavior.[1]

The Absence of Free Will Undercuts Moral Responsibility

Though debates about free will continue, compatibilism is a consensus position among philosophers (Bourget and Chalmers, 2014): we appear to have free will -- to have been able to

[1] See Krellenstein (1995) for a discussion on the possible role of individual differences in explaining diverse beliefs on difficult problems such as the origin of the universe.

have chosen otherwise and be subject to (or subject others to) persuasion or deterrence -- but the appearance of free will is actually an illusion, since everything is physically determined. This determinism is the result of the chemical and ultimately physical processes that underlie our thoughts and behavior. The materialist worldview herein assumed does not allow for any other causes.

As many philosophers have observed (e.g., Greene, 2013; Greene and Cohen, 2004; Rosenberg, 2011), the lack of true free will has implications for our notions of responsibility and punishment. We already consider those with conventionally understood diminished capacity -- children, the mentally unfit, the legally "insane" -- as having only limited responsibility for their actions and upon whom it is not fair to impose punishment. But if we accept, as it seems we must, that no one has intrinsic freedom to do as they want, then accepting punishment as a "just desert" for anyone seems questionable. This position is strengthened by the lack of objective moral value.

This does not mean we need to surrender the concept of responsibility. It is useful to enact laws and interpret individuals as responsible for behavior they could in fact be deterred from performing (or encouraged to do). We can also isolate them for their or our protection or to deter them or others from future undesirable behavior, or to engage in their "rehabilitation" -- ultimately a form of adjusting (the causes of) their behavior to produce behavior we prefer. But that is a narrower concept of responsibility that we generally entertain.

Moral Nihilism is Hard to Accept

Steven Pinker (2002) acknowledges that there is an evolutionary basis for moral nihilism: the view that there are no objective moral truths and no resulting guaranteed path to a meaningful

and happy life. This is because evolutionary adaptation happens only by chance and persists only because of its survival value. Pinker believes (and seems to hope) this 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 -- the fact that we benefit overall from certain behaviors and that it is hard to argue that someone has an obligation without being similarly obliged. Pinker adds that even if there is not an objective morality, our moral sense is "real for us" and cannot 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 does not imply you have an obligation not to hurt me (Harman and 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 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 moral 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, enforce, and defend those practices. The narrator of John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956/1988) concludes his ruminations on life's futility this way: "I considered … whether, in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute might not be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by" (p. 252). But those values cannot be *grounded* in more than our individual or community determination to pursue certain goals and adhere to certain norms of conduct. That lack of grounding makes our choice to adhere strongly to our values both tenuous and momentous.

Dennett (1996) also tries to avoid the fundamental moral nihilism implied by the materialist, evolutionary viewpoint he so forcefully endorses. Sommers and Rosenberg (2003) have observed that the Darwinian banishment of a higher purpose should have made Darwinians not only into "metaphysical nihilists" but also "ethical nihilists," and that seeing ethics so "exuberantly defended by no less a steely eyed Darwinian than Dennett is something of a surprise" (p. 653). Similarly, Joshua Greene (2013) has not exactly renounced his earlier conclusion (in Greene, 2002) about the impossibility of moral truth but now doubts its certainty, and certainly its importance compared to what he sees as the more practical question of how to cope with the moral "morass" in which we find ourselves (p. 189). He now looks to ground things on the widely shared goals of being happy and avoiding suffering. Sommers (2009) backs away from a position that was once more similar to Rosenberg's and states that Rosenberg's views no more "undermine" our moral judgments than the position could undermine Sommers' love for his daughter (which Rosenberg, 2009, assures him he is not trying to do). Harris (2010) thinks that the very science that leads to this nihilism can somehow still salvage objective moral truth, while Thagard (2012) thinks neuroscience can show life is objectively meaningful and that it grounds what he considers to be our primary interests of work, play, and love.[2]

But current science, while not denying these moral judgments, cannot *ground* them despite our strong desire to do so; the is-ought divide remains. The desire for grounding leads to sometimes forced attempts to avoid nihilist conclusions that follow from one's own work and that may arise from innate needs to explain what we feel, or for compelling stories in general (Rosenberg makes much of this last point). Perhaps the desire to avoid nihilism in enhanced by having children, as suggested by the exchange between Sommers and Rosenberg.

[2] Landau (2013) responds specifically to Thagard on this and on the contingency of any particular set of interests.

In fact, many philosophers view moral nihilism as obviously wrong, an absolutist position against all value as unattractive as a harshly stated absolutism in favor of a particular morality. Eagleton (2003) says the nihilist is a "disenchanted absolutist" (p. 214). But a lack of objective moral truths does not imply the rejection of (relative) value or human happiness, or attempts to better achieve certain shared values (and as science-based is open to revision as scientific facts develop or change). Rather, rejecting or waffling on the truth of moral nihilism distorts our knowledge of how things are and can encourage the uncompromising behaviors that make it difficult to live together harmoniously.

The Implications of Moral Nihilism

The existentialist accepts a form of moral (and broader) nihilism but aims to counter it with acts of will and choice, creating value where none existed before:

> … existentialists tend to emphasize the conventionality or groundlessness of values, their "ideality," the fact that they arise entirely through the projects of human beings against the background of an otherwise meaningless and indifferent world…. For Sartre, "values derive their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world." (Existentialism, 2004/2015)

This may be a good strategy to try to live by, though what will work for one may not work for another. More significantly, the sort of nihilism presented here forces us in the end to reject any claim that the existentialist can create value through acts of will in more than a personal sense. Some people may experience this, others not, and these acts will not necessarily persuade anyone of the value of a particular course of action.

Moral choices, unlike others, are considered obligatory. The absence of actual obligations puts morality and other goals and pleasures on a more level playing field. The arguments against absolute moral value can be applied to the claimed dominance of any other value and in support of a broader value nihilism. Is seeking truth, or the presence or pursuit of beauty, less (or more)

important than showing great kindness? All may largely be the accidents of birth, and provide pleasure to an individual or society that, if different, are not intrinsically "better" than one another. One or another may be judged to provide more benefits to more people. Someone may embrace them as better for that reason, and many people may share that viewpoint. But it is not a view that can be rigorously defended against those who hold a contrary view.

As a practical matter, most of us have deep-rooted beliefs, or at least deeply felt emotions about what we want or believe is or is not acceptable even if we cannot justify those beliefs and do not view them as absolutes. Personal values 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 the beliefs we have and towards the goals we have and choose, to the extent we choose them.

We can choose to be with others with similar values, to express ourselves, to value or love others, to exercise competency or control, to maximize our sensual pleasures … or, more commonly, some combination of these and others. 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 cannot ground that choice in anything beyond dispute. We choose what we do because of innate temperament and the cumulative effects of all we have learned. We do some things simply because they have become habitual.

Most of us strive to be happy and enjoy life one way or another, and the data suggest most succeed (Diener and Diener, 1996). If we examine morality closely we come to accept, or not, the absence of certain foundations, but overwhelming concern about that is rare. Rosenberg (2011) argues that "the notion that we need something to make life meaningful in order to keep

living is another one of those illusions." (p. 280).[3] However, we might add that for those who do need meaning it seems it can usually be found in the particular people, values, or pleasures we embrace.

Similarly, lack of free will may be more a technical issue that could inform public policy on punishment than an everyday operating principle. Sitting back and waiting for non-free-will determined behavior to take place gets boring. The point is captured in the title of an article by Paul Bloom (2012): "Free Will Does Not Exist. So What?"

Still, accepting the lack of real free will may have some personal impact. It may relax the urgency or import of making decisions and feeling complete responsibility for them. This is not to eliminate the useful notion of responsibility as it occurs in law or relationships, or in creating a happier life, but it could soften it. It might humble us. It suggests we not take ourselves too seriously. Humility also follows from value nihilism itself, as Williams (2013) has observed:

> Conceptualizing ourselves from the perspectives of the universe at large is humbling when we consider that our values are just that: *ours.* And we should cherish them and promote them the best we know how. But we shouldn't delude ourselves into thinking these values are imbued with a special intrinsic "goodness" that holds for all rational agents. That's a philosophical pipedream.

Beliefs for Which There is No Evidence

Some people have an unquestioned and, for them, unquestionable conviction in the way people must be treated, or about the purpose of life in general. These unquestioned beliefs may loosely be characterized as religious. For certain people, tolerance of other views may not be acceptable or make sense.

[3] This is contrary to Camus (1955), who accepted "the absurd" but thought meaning and value must and could be found in confronting and rebelling against life's meaninglessness.

It could be argued that unquestioned beliefs are a benefit to those who have them. Perhaps these individuals possess a certain biological disposition to religious belief that is itself the result of evolution, e.g., people susceptible to unquestioned beliefs might have been more inclined to sacrifice themselves in situations where it furthered the survival of those same genes in offspring and related group members. There is some evidence that religious belief is correlated with greater overall happiness and longer life expectancy.[4]

Does the conviction of people with deeply held religious or moral beliefs imply anything about the truth of those beliefs? The positive correlation between a lack of religious belief and education and intelligence (Lynn et al., 2009, Sacerdote and Glaeser, 2001) suggests that conviction alone does not provide support for the truth of beliefs that cannot be demonstrated but only seen as self-evident by those who hold them.

But if there are benefits to certain unquestioned beliefs should we attempt to become believers if we are not? Perhaps, if people are able to and so inclined. For many people, 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. We might recognize having unquestioned beliefs as providing greater happiness but still reject seeking them because doing so is inconsistent with what currently makes us happy, including 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 reduce.

Experiences Which are Not Real

[4] There are many correlational studies confirming these associations. Questions remain about the direction of causation -- does religious belief lead to subjective well-being or do happier people tend to be more religious -- but the effect seems to remain when controlling for confounding variables. See, for example, McCullough et al. (2000) and Myers and Diener (1995).

Similar to choosing beliefs or values that may be false but beneficial is choosing experiences that are pleasurable but somehow not real. Nozick (1974) says we might not choose to hook ourselves up to "experience machines" that could deliver any kind of reality we chose -- maybe the experience of writing a great novel -- because we value our experiences being real in addition to having the experiences themselves. Most of the characters in *The Matrix* (Silver et al., 1999) feel the same way. Something like this is probably part of some people's uneasiness about certain forms of psychopharmacology. Psychotherapy seems preferable for many individuals seeking relief from their problems because they think it produces its improvements by "really" transforming us — our beliefs, behaviors and emotions — rather than by giving us a more temporary drug-induced experience. But it is not clear from the evidence that psychotherapy always works this way, or that some drugs may not be more transformational. Peter Kramer (1993) reports that some people believe the prescribed drugs allowed them to be their "real selves" and that the effects of these drugs may continue after their discontinuance. This is not surprising. From a materialist perspective, drugs are not fundamentally different from psychotherapy or any other form of personality manipulation, including religious conversion. All of these, if successful, must work through changes in the brain that produce the desired effects with greater or less difficulty, with fewer or more undesirable side effects (and the risk of future side effects as yet unknown) and with varying degrees of permanence and related changes (or the ability to deliberately reverse them).

Medication or therapy can also produce effects that we did not explicitly want but with which we are happy, or at least newly tolerant. These might include effects that we not only did not 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 common sexual

side effect of delayed, or the inability to attain, orgasm. 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.

Curtailing Biologically Based Tendencies

Human nature has evolved and has 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, including sexual jealousy and modesty (see Brown, 1991, and Pinker, 1997). However, what is natural or culturally produced (and they are often at odds) still has no automatic claim to being of paramount value, of making us happy or of being unchangeable. But just how changeable are we?

Curtailing an evolved biological tendency tends to result in frustration. This is especially true for the deeply felt motivations (and pleasures), including those involving food and sex, which are most directly needed for survival and reproduction.[5] This frustration may be reduced or not experienced as negatively if in exchange we perceive a personal benefit, or a social benefit that returns an indirect personal benefit (as with 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 (1930/1961) thought our biological instincts could be transformed, and needed to be for the sake of civilization, though he did not think satisfaction of the

[5] It is a long-discussed question whether a life devoted mostly to sensual pleasures can be a (maximally?) happy one … or, if not, what the right balance of these versus other pleasures is, at least for a given individual. Such discussion is outside the scope of this work, but it can be noted that the lack of objective moral principles and values undercuts any distinction between so-called "lower" and "higher" pleasures, making the question a clearly empirical one.

transformed (sublimated) instincts could be as pleasurable as satisfaction of the original. Few theorists today believe 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.

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 is possible. Most people can learn to control urges for revenge. Some people choose celibacy, while for some monogamy is difficult to sustain. Pinker (1997) casts doubt on the 1960's ambitions of free love and an egalitarian society, arguing for the widespread existence, evolutionary origins, and great difficulty in overcoming sexual jealousy and competition. Modern day capitalism has lately run rampant over alternative economic models in its appeal to a view of human nature based on universal and mostly unmodifiable self-interest. But just how desirable (or undesirable) and unchangeable are these and other tendencies? These questions remain mostly open.

Changing Moral Intuitions

Greene (2008) wonders which innate moral tendencies we might choose to change. He says "if science tells me that I love my children more than other children only because they share my genes … should I feel uneasy about loving them extra?" (p. 76). Greene does not directly answer this question but states that "consequentialist principles [i.e., some form of greatest good

reasoning], while not true, provide the best available standard for public decision making and for determining which aspects of human nature it is reasonable to change and which ones we would be wise to leave alone" (p. 77). Greene's choice of consequentialist principles for public decision-making is pragmatic, reflecting the fact that increasing the common good benefits us in ways most of us want even if we cannot argue decisively for those principles. His suggestion that we might use the same principles to determine what to change for an individual is less clear and more problematic. In his early work, Greene (2002) recognized some utility in preserving individual responses such as the desire to punish a wrongdoer, while in the above example (Greene, 2008) he suggested it could be worth working towards individual change. Pinker (2002, p. 182) argues that the very non-consequentialist, seeming irrationality of some behaviors — he refers to the "implacable need for retribution" — provides an indirect consequentialist contribution: there will be punishment even if it is not for the greatest good in a particular situation, deterring individuals more strongly than a consequentialist calculus could alone. Immediate, irrational reactions are also less open to gaming. Greene might respond that, if true, the behaviors should be preserved by the very consequentialist standard he is advocating.

But what if the consequentialist argument for retribution, for example, cannot be made? Greene may be right that it is too often at odds with the common good. But the personal, if emotional, satisfaction that retribution provides for someone might still be judged without contradiction as a practical individual benefit of greater personal value than the value for the common good and its indirect individual benefit. Once we are making pragmatic decisions in the absence of absolute standards the value criteria by which judgments are made are inevitably open to different estimations of personal value, though society as a whole may choose to encourage changes (or create certain prohibitions) that a given individual would resist.

We Might be Better Off not Using the Word "Moral"

Given the widespread but apparently false belief that there are true, absolute moral values, it's worth considering if we would be better off eliminating from our vocabulary the words that imply the existence of these values -- words including moral, right, and wrong. Such moral abolitionism has been suggested by others who have denied the existence of moral absolutes, including Burgess (in an early unpublished work finally published in 2007), Garner (2007) and Greene (at least in 2002). It might be better to refer to positions one strongly favors or opposes rather than to 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 particular values, from supporting/condemning certain actions, or choosing to punish 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 and relative (if sometimes strongly held and widely shared) could 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 framed as a practical decision to compromise or not, rather than a decision that allows no compromise by definition.

Some philosophers who hold that moral values are not absolute nevertheless think we would be better retaining the fiction of moral absolutes and continue to speak of right and wrong…and that such talk would better reinforce the shared values a community has, providing a net benefit. Joyce (2001) has championed such moral fictionalism. Whether this would provide an agreed upon net benefit is an empirical question, though one might hope that people could eventually see values for what they are while still respecting their importance. Jerry Coyne observed that the

feared social disintegration that reduced religiosity might bring about appears not to have generally occurred in Scandinavian countries where religious belief has greatly declined.[6]

One exception to eliminating the language of moral realism 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). We could hopefully expect more of adults.

The Angst of Moral Nihilism

Rosenberg's (2011) "nice nihilism" espouses an evolutionary-based moral nihilism (and a broader nihilism he believes follows from a thoroughly naturalistic point of view) that he considers nice because values are mostly shared even if not objectively true. As a result, conflict is minimized and we do not have to worry much about abhorrent people. But worry only enters the picture if we assume we are in Rosenberg's "two standard deviations from the mean" of people who want to be nice and who want to be treated nicely despite there being no objective grounding for that (p. 286). This also implies we are operating on the assumption that people's worries about themselves amount to something. Rosenberg might argue that this is part of our illusory sense of what matters and how things influence us.

If we can't eliminate our worry, Rosenberg suggests drugs: "If you still can't sleep at night, even after accepting science's answers to the persistent questions, you probably just need one more little thing besides Epicurean detachment. Take a Prozac or your favorite serotonin

[6] Coyne made this point in a discussion recorded in Forman (2012, Day 3, second session).

reuptake inhibitor, and keep taking them till they kick in" (p. 315). The worry is ultimately a chemical (brain) problem, so Rosenberg provocatively suggests fixing it chemically.

But the suggestion misses something. It's not pseudo-moral qualms about using drugs to improve our lives. As Rosenberg points out, mental change is all about rewiring the brain, and different methods -- education, therapy, drugs -- may differ in approach (and in effectiveness, permanence, side effects, etc.) but there are no (pseudo-) moral differences.

Rather, the difficulty is that Rosenberg too quickly dismisses the *psychological* significance of a mostly nihilist viewpoint. It is hard to argue with a lack of significance if one starts from nihilist principles. But if Rosenberg is willing to grant our (illusory) worries can and should be minimized, he might also grant that the (illusory) significance that is reduced for us should count for something, even if we do not need absolute values or a complete theory of a meaningful life to be happy. There is a reason so many ardent materialists resist materialism's conclusions about the arbitrary nature of morality and value, even if the reason is itself rooted in our evolved minds. Prozac may or may not help with any persistent anxiety that comes from this realization. It will not, however, dampen our sober appreciation of it. Some of us would also not want it to … no more than we would want to enjoy a perfect life by being attached to Nozick's experience machine.

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