

THE INCOHERENCE OF SOFT NIHILISM

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As an evaluative view in the philosophy of life, nihilism maintains that no lives are, all things considered, worth living. Prominent defenders of the view hold that, even so, it can be all-things-considered better for us to continue living than for us to cease living, thus endorsing a 'soft' nihilism that appears more palatable than its 'hard' counterpart. In support of an intuitive assumption about what nihilism implies, I argue that soft nihilism is incoherent.

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I. Affirmationism and Nihilism

Our everyday notions of worthwhileness are typically attuned to particular dimensions of evaluation in which we weigh the positive against the negative, as when we consider whether something is financially or politically worthwhile, whether something is worth it health-wise, and so on. In the philosophy of life, a central issue concerns the worthwhileness of (human) life, but there the notion of worthwhileness is an entirely general one, attuned to an overall or all-things-considered dimension of evaluation in which the evaluative significance of judgements involving the more particular notions of worthwhileness can be compared.

Most contributors to the philosophy of life subscribe to a positive view of the worthwhileness of life in that very general sense. According to this view, which I'll call 'affirmationism' just to give it a name, at least some lives are, all things considered, worth living.

Affirmationism of a transcendentalist sort maintains that the lives so worth living are those that bear an appropriate relation to a transcendent (i.e. supernatural) realm or being. Unsurprisingly, theists gravitate towards this sort of affirmationism, though they needn't, I think, as the examples of the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the religious existentialists of the twentieth century demonstrate. (On one plausible interpretation, although Kierkegaard and the religious existentialists believe in a transcendent being, they nonetheless maintain that the overall worthwhileness of life is exclusively a function of subjective human attitudes, and hence allow that there can be lives that are worthwhile overall despite not bearing an appropriate relation to a transcendent being.) Well-known representatives of transcendentalist affirmationism in the past few decades include such figures as Emil Fackenheim, Robert Nozick, Philip Quinn, and John Cottingham.

Immanentist affirmationism, by contrast, eschews appeal to the transcendent and holds that the lives worth living in the relevant sense are so simply by virtue of immanent (i.e. entirely natural) features of life itself, for example the right sorts of interpersonal relations, individual accomplishments, or subjective attitudes. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche is the towering representative of immanentist affirmationism. More recent representatives include the famous logical positivist Moritz Schlick, twentieth-century existentialists generally, Richard Taylor, Irving Singer, Susan Wolf, and Thaddeus Metz.

Against affirmationism of either sort stands nihilism, which denies the overall worthwhileness of all lives. According to nihilism, no lives are, all things considered, worth living.

Although nihilism is a decidedly unpopular view in the philosophy of life, it has some very able defenders. In late modern Western philosophy Arthur Schopenhauer remains the clearest example. The rewards of life, he insists, inevitably fail to cover its costs, and we may regard it as 'a uselessly disturbing episode in the blissful repose of

nothingness'.¹ A more recent defender of nihilism is Thomas Nagel. In an oft-cited essay,² he embraces the view when he maintains that life is generally 'absurd' because it fails a certain condition of reflective evaluation. Another recent defender is David Benatar. In his 2006 book³ he argues for the view that no lives are worth starting, based on a putative asymmetry between the harm and benefit of coming into existence. And in his latest book,⁴ Benatar pushes this view all the way to nihilism. All lives, he maintains in the latest book – even the best of them – are bad in the sense of being regrettable overall.

The broad lines of Schopenhauer's reason for embracing nihilism are clear enough. There isn't (indeed, can't be) in his view any sort of transcendent realm or being by virtue of an appropriate relation to which lives are worth living overall. Once we have set aside any such transcendent source of worthwhileness, he goes on to claim, we can see that the only conceivable immanent source would be a preponderance of happiness (for Schopenhauer, desire satisfaction) over suffering (unfulfilled or frustrated desire) in life. But – and here's where we get some of the most famous arguments from the great pessimist – the nature of life is such that it can't possibly contain a preponderance of happiness over suffering. Hence, nihilism.

Nagel's nihilistic reasoning proceeds along more subtle lines. He first makes the case for the relevant condition of reflective evaluation, according to which for a life to be worthwhile in the overall sense (i.e. for it to 'matter' or to lack 'absurdity'), the value it has from the perspective of the individual who lives it cannot vanish when it is contemplated from a detached, reflective perspective. Nagel then proceeds to argue that because all lives fail this condition, none of them turn out to be truly worth living overall.

An important element of Benatar's case for nihilism is his attempt to disabuse us of the optimistic biases that incline us towards an overly rosy view of our lives. Disabused of these biases, he maintains, we will be able to see clearly that, judged by any relevant measure – whether in terms

of their meaningfulness, their hedonic quality, or their duration – all lives are in fact bad or regrettable – part of a ‘tragic predicament’.

II. Hard and Soft Nihilism

Those presented with nihilism for the first time are apt to gloss it as implying that ‘we might just as well end it all’ or ‘there’s no reason to carry on’. Such remarks reflect an intuitive assumption about nihilism, viz. that if it’s true, it can’t be better (in the relevant all-things-considered sense) for us to continue living in some way. In his deservedly famous essay on life’s value,⁵ Albert Camus makes this assumption. Indeed, he there seems to assume even further that according to nihilism it must be better, all things considered, for us to cease living than for us to continue living in some way; this is why he identifies the problem of whether life is worth living with the problem of ‘suicide’.

The prominent nihilists we’ve considered clearly don’t share this assumption, however, for they all insist that it *can* be better in the relevant all-things-considered sense for us to continue living in a certain way. Benatar maintains that it can be better for us to continue living in keeping with our (however misguided) interest in doing so,⁶ and by allowing ourselves sufficient ‘distractions’ from our abysmal situation.⁷ Nagel tells us that it can be better for us to continue living in an insouciant mode, whereby we take nothing in our lives too seriously – better, as he puts it, to live lives of ‘irony’ than to display ‘such dramatics’ as suicide.⁸ And because he thinks that ‘[o]nly with false illusion does cool dark Orcus lure [us] as a harbor of repose’,⁹ Schopenhauer thinks it’s better for us to continue living with a sort of ongoing diminishment of desire (a ‘denial of the will for life’, to use his term) characteristic of saints and sages.

Still, the mere fact that these nihilists insist that, their nihilism notwithstanding, it can be better overall for us to

continue living in some way doesn't mean that they're right to do so. Perhaps, in an effort to make their nihilism more palatable, they're simply denying a disturbing implication that the view in fact carries. Perhaps nihilism turns out to be coherent only when conjoined with the claim that it can't be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in some way.

So let's distinguish two sorts of nihilism. 'Hard nihilism', as I'll call it, is what you get when you conjoin nihilism with the claim that continuing to live can't be overall better. That is:

Hard nihilism: nihilism and it can't be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether.

And 'soft nihilism' is what I'll call the result of conjoining nihilism and the claim that continuing to live can be so better:

Soft nihilism: nihilism and it can be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether.

Given this terminology, it's clear that Schopenhauer, Nagel, and Benatar are soft nihilists, not hard nihilists. The question is whether it's coherent for them to be so. In support of the intuitive assumption that if nihilism is true then it can't be better (all things considered) for us to continue living in some way, I'll now argue that it isn't coherent for them to be so.

III. The Incoherence of Soft Nihilism

Just by definition soft nihilism entails nihilism, and from nihilism it follows that no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived. That this follows may not be entirely transparent, but it can be established by reminding ourselves of the essentially comparative nature of the notion of something being worthwhile relative to a given

dimension of evaluation. To say that something is worthwhile, relative to a given evaluative dimension, is to say that its being effected is better, relative to that dimension, than its not being effected; and to say something isn't worthwhile, relative to a dimension of evaluation, is to say its being effected isn't better, relative to that dimension, than its failing to be effected. So, for example, to claim that my saving a large sum of money is financially worthwhile is to say that it's better, financially, for me to save that sum than for me not to save it; and to say that my saving merely a very small sum isn't financially worth it is to say that my saving merely that small sum isn't better, financially, than my failing to save it. The claim that no dish offered by a menu is, health-wise, worth eating is equivalent to the claim that none of the dishes is, health-wise, better eaten than not. To claim that the disclosure of certain personal information about a candidate for public office isn't politically worth it is to claim that it isn't better, politically, to disclose the information than to fail to disclose it. And similarly, it seems, for all cases in which we might claim that something is, or isn't, worthwhile relative to a given dimension of evaluation – including ones in which the relevant dimension of evaluation is an all-things-considered one. Hence it really does follow from nihilism that no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not.

By definition, soft nihilism also entails that that it can be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether. And if this is right, it also follows that some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not.

To see why, consider first that, in the present context of discussion, lives are active modes of human existence, characterized by distinctive patterns of activity over periods of time. Lives must of course be capable, at least in principle, of being lived (effected) by us, though we needn't have ever actually lived various lives, which is why we can sensibly consider and evaluate such lives as, say, the Stoic sage's. (Even the ancient Stoics admitted that no one had

ever yet lived the ideal life of the sage.) In the course of her entire existence, moreover, an individual typically lives more than one life. Think, for example, of the change that occurs when an individual starts a new career, begins a new and momentous project within her current career, decides to raise a family, follows through on a reasonable decision to pay more attention to her own needs and interests than before, takes up a demanding hobby, has a religious conversion or a life-changing ethical insight, and so on. Because such changes involve effecting new, distinctive patterns of activity over periods of time, they involve living lives distinct from ones previously lived.

Notice now that for us to continue living in some way – whether it is more or less the same or radically different from our previous mode of active existence – is necessarily for us to live some life; for us to cease living altogether, by contrast, is for us to live no life at all. To maintain that it can be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether, therefore, is to maintain that it can be better, all things considered, for us to live some life than for us to live none at all. But this implies that some lives (perhaps heretofore lived, perhaps not) are, all things considered, better lived than not. So if, as soft nihilism implies, it can be all-things-considered better for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether, it must be that some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not.

We may summarize the foregoing steps in my argument for soft nihilism's incoherence as follows:

1. If soft nihilism is true, then nihilism is true.
2. If nihilism is true, then no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived.
3. If soft nihilism is true, then it can be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether.

4. If it can be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether, then some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived.

The remaining steps of the argument are probably now easy to see. Steps 1 and 2 together yield the lemma that according to soft nihilism no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not. Steps 3 and 4 together yield the lemma that according to soft nihilism some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not. In other words:

5. If soft nihilism is true, then no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived. (From steps 1 and 2.)
6. If soft nihilism is true, then some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived. (From steps 3 and 4.)

And together these two further steps imply that soft nihilism is incoherent. Indeed, they imply that it is incoherent in the strict logical sense that it entails a contradiction, a pair of claims that cannot both be true together. So we can round out the argument as follows:

7. If soft nihilism is true, then no lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived and – contradiction – some lives are, all things considered, better lived than not lived. (From steps 5 and 6.)
8. Soft nihilism is false. (From step 7.)

Because a claim analogous to step 3 is not true of hard nihilism, an analogous argument against it cannot be mounted. Unlike soft nihilism, accordingly, hard nihilism at least seems to have the virtue of being coherent.

IV. Conclusion

The intuitive assumption about nihilism thus turns out to be correct: if nihilism is true, then it simply can't be better, all things considered, for us to continue living in a certain way than for us to cease living altogether. This result is important because it allows us to see more clearly just what's at stake in the choice between affirmationism and nihilism: it's really a choice between affirmationism and a much less palatable version of nihilism than nihilists are typically willing to admit.

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Notes

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1893] 1974), 299.

² Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971).

³ David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴ David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵ Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' and Other Essays, trans. J. O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1942] 1975).

⁶ Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been*, 212.

⁷ *The Human Predicament*, 211.

⁸ Nagel, 'The Absurd', 727.

⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation*, vol. 1, trans. D. Carus and R. Aquila (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, [1819] 2008), 332.