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Moral Nihilism, Intellectual Nihilism & Practical Ethics

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Arguments for moral nihilism—the view that there are no moral truths—are criticized by showing that their major premises suggest epistemic or intellectual nihilism—the view that no beliefs are reasonable, justified, ought to be believed, and so on. Insofar as intellectual nihilism ought be rejected, this shows that the major premises of arguments for moral nihilisms ought to be rejected also.

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Philosophical discussions of moral problems seem to be attempts to discern the truth about the morality of abortion, the treatment of animals, the wrongness of racial discrimination, and what we should do regarding other pressing practical ethical issues.

But some people claim that there are no truths about what's right and wrong, good and bad, and just and unjust: there is nothing that, morally, we should do, and nothing we ought not to do either. This view is often called moral or ethical nihilism. In it, morality is "annihilated": the world is said to contain no moral value.

Some influential philosophers have argued for moral nihilism. If their arguments are sound, the implications are significant: nothing is right or wrong, genuine moral progress is impossible, there have never been any moral mistakes, and there really is no reasoning in ethics, since there are no truths to discover or reason towards.

Fortunately, there are no good reasons to accept moral nihilism, and better reasons to deny it. This is because all the common arguments for it have at least one major premise that we have very good reason to reject because these premises suggest not just moral nihilism, but

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intellectual or epistemological nihilism—according to which that there are no ways we ought to reason, that no beliefs are reasonable or justified, that nothing is known, that nothing is intellectually valuable.

If we have good reasons to reject these intellectually nihilistic implications (and most moral nihilists think we do), this provides strong resources to reject moral nihilisms. Insofar as we think that there are ways we ought to reason and conduct our cognitive lives, we have reason to reject arguments for moral nihilism since premises given in its favor have these rationally unacceptable consequences for understanding reasoning itself. Seeing this helps us see at least that there are no good reasons to accept moral nihilism.

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To defend these claims, we can survey the major nihilistic arguments from twentieth-century ethics which are not significant improvements over early arguments.[1]

First, logical positivists were moral nihilists. A.J. Ayer argued that moral judgments are not true because they are neither true nor false. He claimed they are merely emotional expressions, "Boo's!" and "Hooray's!" for and against various actions. Positivists were quite impressed by science, but highly suspicious of anything "metaphysical," including ethics.

Their major premise in their argument against ethical truth, however, was that any claim that isn't true in virtue of meaning or is not empirically verifiable is neither true nor false. While moral judgments are like that, so are judgments about what's reasonable, or justified, or known, or should be believed or rejected.

Judgments like these are made about ordinary beliefs and issues in science, but no scientific experiment can be done to determine whether claims like these are true, and these intellectual qualities are not revealed merely by thinking about the meanings of the words stated in intellectual judgments.

So positivism suggests that intellectually evaluative judgments are never true also. It might suggest an intellectual emotivism on which people are only cheering for believing some claim when they claim it to be reasonable or supported by strong evidence and booing when they claim the opposite. Positivists thought their views were reasonable, but it is doubtful that they thought they were only expressing their positive emotions for their own beliefs. They thought they were saying something that's true, but surprisingly, their own theories imply they were not. Since we have reason to think that logical reasoning is not the expression of emotions, we have reason to reject the premise that motivated positivists to accept moral nihilism.

[1] Any text or anthology on ethical theory provides this history. See, e.g., Terrence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds. The Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006).

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Later ethical emotivists weren't motivated by positivism. C.L. Stevenson's emotivism was first, based on the observations that emotions sometimes get expressed in making moral judgments and that we sometimes use them to try to influence people. But this premise is part of a sound argument for emotivism only if it's true that any judgments that sometimes express emotions and are used to influence people are never true, i.e., are merely emotive. But if that's true, then, since intellectual judgments are like that, they are never true also.

Stevenson claimed that moral judgments have a motivational "magnetism," that sincere moral judgment necessarily motivates people towards action. This is doubtful, but if it's true, then, following Hume's theories of belief and desire, moral judgments are not beliefs since only emotions and desires can motivate in such a way. Emotivism is suggested again, but intellectual judgments also have this kind motivational impact, if moral judgments do. It would be as odd for someone to judge that some belief of his is entirely unreasonable, totally unjustified, and something she ought not accept, yet feel no pull at all towards rejecting that belief. Intellectual emotivism is suggested again.

Finally, Stevenson said that he just can't picture what a "moral fact" would be like, what would make a moral judgment true. But anyone puzzled about this should also be puzzled about what would make an intellectual or epistemological judgment true. It's not at all clear what "in the world" makes it true that something is evidence for some belief, or that some evidence is sufficient evidence, and some beliefs are rational, justified, known, ought to be held (or rejected) and so on. Ontological obscurity is common to both.

The theme that is emerging is this: when moral nihilists argue for their position, they do this by claiming that moral judgments have various features, and since they have these features, they are never true. Some of these claims about what moral judgments are like are quite plausible (e.g., that they are not empirically confirmable), and other times they are doubtful (e.g., that they are necessarily motivational). But any of these claims can be part of a sound argument for moral nihilism only if the (usually unstated) premise validly linking them to the conclusion is true: that any judgment having these features is never true, either because such judgments are neither true nor false or because there is nothing to make them true.

But this premise, as we have seen, has radical implications for judgments beyond morality, most notably intellectual and epistemic judgments that are essential to reasoning and science. It suggests that no judgments like these are ever true. This is a radically irrationalist consequence. If we have reason to think that we sometimes can reason, and that judgments describing how we ought to reason and what we ought to believe (are justified, are rational, and so on) are sometimes true, then we have reason to reject these arguments for moral nihilism.

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Writings of recent moral nihilists, such as R.M. Hare, J.L. Mackie, and Gilbert Harman, confirm this theme that arguments for moral nihilisms have these intellectually nihilistic consequences.

First, they note the existence of moral disagreements and argue that this is best explained, in part, by the hypothesis that there are no moral facts: if there were such facts, then more people would "see" them and there'd be less moral disagreement. But it seems clear that there's quite a lot of intellectual and epistemic disagreement also. Disagreements about what's reasonable, rational, and known, and how we ought to reason, are common. Is the best explanation of these facts that there are no intellectual facts? That's doubtful.

And if it is, what, if anything, would make it true that anyone should accept the best explanation? On intellectual nihilism, nothing makes that true, so it's not true that we should believe what these nihilists say we should believe. Perhaps they have only strong feelings and desire that we agree with them?

Many of these philosophers also claim that moral qualities, like rightness and goodness, do not explain anything in the physical world—they do not have causal influence—and so we should not believe in them. But intellectual and epistemic qualities, if they exist, seem as unexplanatory and causally inert as moral ones. If this is a reason to reject them, then that's a reason to think that the claim that we should believe only in what helps explain the physical world is not true either. Again, these arguments for moral nihilism are unsuccessful.

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This theme can be developed with all the common arguments for moral nihilisms.[2] They all have a premise that suggests a radical intellectual and epistemological nihilism that conflicts with much of what we reasonably believe.

This kind of nihilism could be true: there's no clear reason why it couldn't be. But insofar as we believe, and believe reasonably, that we should have evidence and reasons for our beliefs, we should be consistent in our beliefs, and that we should change our views when pressed by the weight of the evidence, we have good reason to reject these arguments. Rational reflection suggests that judgments about reasoning are sometimes true, after all, they are not always false and are not merely emotive, and rational insight allows us to see what follows from this, including that we should reject the major premises of the arguments for moral nihilism.

[2] I do this in my 2005 University of Rochester Ph.D. dissertation, Truth in Ethics & Epistemology: A Defense of Normative Realism.

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Thus, we can, and should, reject moral nihilism, and reject it for good reasons. And the method to rationally investigate the nature of morality is the same we should use to investigate what is moral. This method is to identify unambiguous and precise moral conclusions and then identify the reasons. If we make all the premises explicit and reveal the assumptions that are too often left tacit, we'll be on the road to making moral progress, first in thought and then in action.

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