Climate Change Inaction and Moral Nihilism

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ABSTRACT: The effects of anthropogenic climate change may be devastating. Nevertheless, most people do not seem to be seriously concerned. We consume as much as we always did, drive as much as we always did, eat as much meat as we always did. What can we do to overcome this collective apathy? In order to be able to develop effective measures, we must first get clear about the causes of climate change inaction. In this paper I ask whether moral nihilism (the denial of moral truths) is a significant cause of climate change inaction. The answer to this question depends mainly on the extent to which being a moral nihilist reduces one's likelihood of taking action against climate change. At first sight, the extent seems to be considerable. I argue, however, that this assumption is false. Only slightly more non-nihilists than nihilists are led to climate-friendly actions by moral considerations. And in absolute terms, morality plays such a minor role in leading people to act that the difference is barely noticeable.

KEYWORDS: climate ethics; moral motivation; moral nihilism; moral error theory; moral non-cognitivism

Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change has already caused tremendous harm (Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009, pp. 9-11). Without large-scale mitigative and adaptive measures, the current situation will prove to be even only a weak foretaste of what is to come. Heat waves, storms, floods and droughts may be the death of millions of humans and non-human beings. Many coastal areas and islands may become uninhabitable. There may be migration movements across the globe, mass starvation and wars over water. Plant and animal species may die out. In the remote future, even the human race may become extinct (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014; Webber, 2011).

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In the face of scenarios such as these one would expect people to be seriously concerned, to do everything they can, to pull together. This is not what one finds, though. All around the world people hold on to their ecologically poisonous lifestyles. We consume too much, we drive too much, we have too many children — we treat nature as if it was our property, as if we had the right to do with it whatever we want. What can we do to overcome this collective apathy? How can we encourage more climate-friendly ways of living? In order to be able to develop effective measures it is necessary to get clear about the causes of climate change inaction, first. We have to figure out *why* people are so reluctant to take action. In recent years, scholars from various disciplines have begun to address this question (for psychological approaches see, e.g., Markowitz, 2012; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012; Weber, 2006; for philosophical approaches see, e.g., Gardiner, 2006; Jamieson, 2010; and for a sociological approach see, e.g., Norgaard, 2009, 2011). A number of contributing factors have been identified. In this paper my focus will be on a factor that hasn't gotten any attention yet: on moral nihilism.

Moral nihilism, as it is understood here, denotes the specifically metaethical claim that there are no moral truths. One natural response to the question of whether moral nihilism in this sense contributes to climate change inaction is to say that it trivially doesn't, because only very few people (outside of philosophy departments, that is) actually are moral nihilists. In particular, the prevalence of moral nihilism might be considered low for three reasons (Pölzler, 2014, pp. 77-79). One might object that ordinary people do not have any intuitions about the existence of moral truths at all. One might object that although ordinary people have intuitions about the existence of moral truths, these intuitions are so vague and confused that they cannot be legitimately ascribed to any of the sophisticated nihilist and non-nihilist positions held by metaethicists. Or one might object that although ordinary people have intuitions about the existence of moral truths and these intuitions are determinate and non-confused, the overwhelming majority of them are non-nihilists, i.e., they *affirm* the existence of such truths.

While we cannot draw any definitive conclusion at this time, initial psychological studies on folk metaethics suggest that all three versions of the above objection may fail. When subjects in these studies were presented questions that allow inferences to their metaethical intuitions, the patterns and verbal explanations of their responses suggested that many of them had a sufficient understanding of the issue. Subjects who had been ascribed the view that there are objective moral truths, for example, tended to explain their responses by noting that the action at issue was "just wrong," was "always bad," or that by performing the action, "you're

not hurting anyone else" (Wright, Grandjean & McWhite, 2013, p. 355). Those who had denied the existence of objective moral truths, in contrast, explained that they responded as they did because "whatever people feel is right," or because the statement at issue is "a matter of opinion, not fact" (Wright et al., 2013, p. 349). Moreover, in addition to suggesting that ordinary people have determinate and non-confused intuitions about the existence of moral truths, research on folk metaethics also suggests that their metaethical intuitions vary strongly, and that a considerable proportion of ordinary people are drawn to nihilism with regard to many or at least some moral issues (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Wright et al., 2013, p. 349).[1]

At first sight, it seems obvious that nihilist metaethical intuitions affect our actions with regard to climate change. Being a moral nihilist seems to significantly decrease our motivation to respond to climate change. If I believe that there are no truths about what is right or wrong, that "everything is permitted," why should I care about the harm I cause by emitting greenhouse gases? And why should I consequently try to avoid actions that have this side-effect, or accept costs that incur in shielding others against the negative effects of climate change — consume less, say, take the bus instead of the car, or give money to environmental organizations? In what follows I will argue, however, that this natural way of thinking about the relation between moral nihilism and climate change inaction is false. Moral nihilism has some negative effect on our taking action against climate change. Under present circumstances this effect is very small, almost negligible, though.

Moral Nihilism

The answer to the question "How does a person's commitment to moral nihilism affect his/her actions with regard to climate change?" obviously depends very much on what one understands by "moral nihilism." Various positions have been identified with the label; various nebulous associations are evoked by it (Joyce, 2013). Let me thus begin by explaining more precisely what I mean by "moral nihilism."

The term 'nihilism' comes from the Latin 'nihil,' meaning 'nothing.' One natural way of interpreting nihilism's relation to nothingness is to conceive of it as a position of denial. Nihilists believe that certain phenomena simply are nothing: that they do not exist, or do not have any legitimacy. Probably the most prominent variant of nihilism is "existential nihilism," the denial of life's having objective meaning or purpose (Camus, 2005; Sartre 1949). However, nihilistic stances have also been taken toward many other subject matters. Epistemological nihilists (or sceptics) deny the possibility of knowledge; religious nihilists (or athe-

ists) deny God; political nihilists (closely related to anarchism) deny the legitimacy of political authority. As a matter of fact, many or even most moral nihilists may be nihilists about these other subject matters as well. It is important to notice, however, that such a connection would be purely contingent. By itself, moral nihilism in the sense in which this position is understood here does not tell us anything about the meaning of life, the possibility of knowledge, the existence of God or the legitimacy of political authority. It is exclusively concerned with morality (Joyce, 2013).

What does moral nihilism claim about morality, then? Starting from our above general conception, moral nihilism seems to be most naturally conceived of as the view that morality does not exist. This formulation needs to be specified, though. Moral nihilists need not — and actually do not — deny the existence of morality as an empirical phenomenon. They acknowledge that people are making judgements about right and wrong, that these judgements have an influence on how they act, that people sometimes feel guilty, and so on. The sense of morality that moral nihilists are opposed to is rather its *normative* sense. Roughly speaking, moral nihilists deny the existence of moral truths, or true moral judgements.[2] There is no truth about whether we are obliged to care for our children, there is no truth about whether Hitler was morally depraved, there is no truth about whether seeing old ladies across the street is good — according to moral nihilists, there is no truth about *any* moral issue (for this understanding of nihilism see, e.g., Harman, 1977, p. 9; Rachels, 1991, p. 434; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 37).

Understood in the above way, moral nihilism can take two forms. Proponents of both variants agree that there are no true moral judgements. They disagree, however, about *why* this is the case (Driver, 2007, pp. 171-172; Shafer-Landau, 2003, p. 9).[3]

Non-Cognitivism

According to moral non-cognitivists (Ayer, 1988; Blackburn, 2000; Gibbard 1990), there are no true moral judgements because moral judgements are not even truth-apt. In making such judgements we do not express moral beliefs; we do not say how things actually are, morally speaking. Rather, we are expressing desires. A. J. Ayer, for example, famously argued that to say that "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," is akin to saying "Stealing money is wrong" in "a peculiar tone of horror," or to saying "Stealing Money: Boo!" (Ayer, 1988, p. 30). Contrary to beliefs, desires cannot be meaningfully said to be true or false. Thus, non-

cognitivists argue, moral judgements are not true or false either, and thus none of them is true.[4]

Error Theory

According to moral error theorists (Joyce, 2001; Mackie, 2011; Pigden, 2007), the reason for no moral judgement being true is not that moral judgements are not truth-apt, but simply that they are all false. Most of us are error theorists with regard to at least some areas of discourse. For example, we grant that the judgements of astrological discourse express beliefs, and are thus truth-apt, but we nevertheless have the feeling that there is something problematic about them. What would make these judgements true (special relations between astronomic and human events) simply does not exist. Much in the same way, moral error theorists maintain that moral judgements are truth-apt, but that the facts that would make these judgements true (for example, moral facts that are objectively prescriptive, or that presuppose unrestricted autonomy) do not exist. All moral judgements are false, and thus none of them is true.[5]

Practical Effectiveness

As mentioned in the introduction, there is strong *prima facie* reason to believe that a person's being committed to moral nihilism in any of the above two senses reduces her/his likelihood of taking action against climate change. Moral non-nihilists are often led to take such actions by moral considerations. Those drawn to nihilism, however, deny that any moral judgement about anthropogenic climate change is true. They deny that it is true that we have a moral duty to consume less, they deny that it is true that it would be a morally good thing to take the bus instead of the car, they deny that it is true that we are obliged to give money to environmental organizations, and so on. As a result, it seems that moral considerations cannot exert any motivational influence on moral nihilists and that these persons are therefore significantly less likely to actually consume less, take the bus instead of the car, give money to environmental organizations, and so on than non-nihilists.

In what follows I will try to show that this natural line of reasoning is unconvincing. First, I will establish criteria for when a moral judgement leads to action in general, i.e., for when it is practically effective (this section). Then I will show that under present circumstances moral non-nihilists fulfil these criteria only to a negligibly higher degree than nihilists (the following two sections).

Moral judgements do not automatically lead their addressees to act in conformity with them. Suppose, for example, you judge that Jane's torturing of puppies for fun is morally wrong. In no way does this guarantee that Jane will actually refrain from torturing puppies for fun. In order for the addressee of a moral judgement to act according to it, certain conditions must be met. The first and most obvious condition is that the addressee actually accepts the judgement, i.e., that s/he has the mental state that the judgement expresses (Birnbacher, 2009, p. 274). If Jane does not have the belief that torturing puppies for fun is wrong (on the assumption that cognitivism is true) or a specifically moral desire that puppies are not to be tortured for fun (on the assumption that non-cognitivism is true), then we can hardly say that it is this moral judgement that leads her to refrain from torturing puppies for fun.

At least conceptually, however, acceptance is only a necessary, and not also a sufficient condition for a moral judgement's being practically effective. Philosophical discussions about moral motivation are dominated by the debate between motivational internalists and externalists. Motivational internalism is the view that if a person accepts a moral judgement, s/he conceptually necessarily has a motive to act in conformity with it (Joyce, 2002, p. 337; Smith, 1994, pp. 60-62). According to a very strong variant of motivational internalism, the motive implied by acceptance is overriding, i.e., stronger than any conflicting motive. If this was true, then accepting a moral judgement would be conceptually sufficient for its being practically effective. However, this strong version of motivational internalism very likely fails. People regularly have conflicting non-moral motives that prove to be stronger than their moral motives. For example, while they genuinely judge that they ought to give money to the poor, they also want to buy a new car, or travel to Thailand, or save for their retirement — and these motives are often so strong that in the end people keep their money to themselves. Moreover, we are sometimes prevented from doing what we judge to be right by various kinds of mental maladies as well, e.g., weakness of will, depression or emotional exhaustion (Shafer-Landau, 2005, p. 147).

Taking these problems into account, this paper assumes a weak version of motivational internalism. If a person accepts a moral judgement, then s/he conceptually necessarily must have only *some* motive to act in conformity with it, and only *if s/he is not in some abnormal mental condition*. The actual strength of this motive is an empirical matter. However, as people often have strong non-moral motives for acting against their moral judgements, it can safely be assumed that the moral motive implied by the acceptance of a moral judgement will often be too weak to effect corresponding action by itself (even if this moral motive may be rather strong). In order for a moral judgement to be practically effective it is therefore often

the case that a second condition must be fulfilled as well: the addressee must not only accept the judgement, but must also have non-moral motives pointing in its direction (Birnbacher, 2009, p. 282). Only if our moral motive for giving money to the poor is supported by sympathy for them, or a desire for self-respect or for appearing as a good person, for example, do they together trump our conflicting non-moral motives and lead us to act according to our moral judgement.

Whether our moral motive must be supported by non-moral motives, and if yes, how strong this support must be in order for a moral judgement to lead to action depends on two factors: first, on the strength of our moral motive (the stronger it is, the less non-moral support is required); and second, on the presence and strength of the conflicting non-moral motives (the stronger they are, the more non-moral support is required). While the presence and strength of conflicting non-moral motives strongly varies from person to person and judgement to judgement, recent psychological findings allow for important general claims about the strength of our moral motives. In particular, they suggest that the strength of these motives strongly depend on what *causes* us to accept a moral judgement.

Moral acceptance has been found to arise from either of two kinds of mental processes. Traditionally, it has been thought to be mainly the result of reasoning (Kant, 1993; Kohlberg, 1969). People hold a number of general moral principles (e.g., it is wrong to cause harm to other living beings), recognize that a principle applies to a given situation (e.g., Jane's torturing puppies for fun) and arrive at a certain moral assessment (e.g., it is wrong for Jane to torture puppies for fun). In recent years more and more psychologists have come to the view, however, that more often moral acceptance is due to affective reactions or "moral intuitions." We see a person torturing puppies and quickly, without any effort or conscious deliberation, know: This is wrong. Only *after* we arrived at our assessment do we search for reasons in its favour (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010).

Acceptance arising from this "hot," affective system typically provides us with a much stronger moral motive than acceptance arising from the "cold," reasoning system. It motivates us more strongly to act according to our moral judgement (Haidt, 2001, p. 824; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010, p. 806). This means that in order for a reason-caused moral judgement to become practically effective (to lead us to act according to it), this judgement typically has to be supported by much stronger non-moral motives pointing in its direction than affect-caused moral judgements.

Let us sum up what we learned in this section. There are two conditions for a moral judgement's leading its addressee to act in conformity with it: first, the addressee must accept

it; and second (at least in many cases) s/he also must have non-moral motives pointing in its direction. Other things being equal, these non-moral motives must be stronger when the person's acceptance is due to reasoned than when it is due to affective mental processes. In the following sections I will apply this general account of practical effectiveness to the moral judgement that we ought to take action against climate change — first with regard to non-nihilists, and then with regard to nihilists.

Effectiveness for Non-Nihilists

The judgement that we ought to take action against climate change is not very effective with regard to non-nihilists. First, consider acceptance. Non-nihilistic persons typically accept at least some moral judgements. Most of them, for example, accept that Hitler was morally depraved or that helping others is good. Contrary to what is sometimes suggested (Birnbacher, 2009, p. 276), however, rather few people in general — and thus rather few non-nihilists — can be expected to accept their obligations with regard to climate change. Most directly, this hypothesis is supported by two recent psychological studies (Markowitz, 2012). As many as 58/49% of the participants of these studies did not regard climate change as a moral issue. They either thought it was a non-moral issue or indicated that they weren't sure about its moral status (see Figure 1).

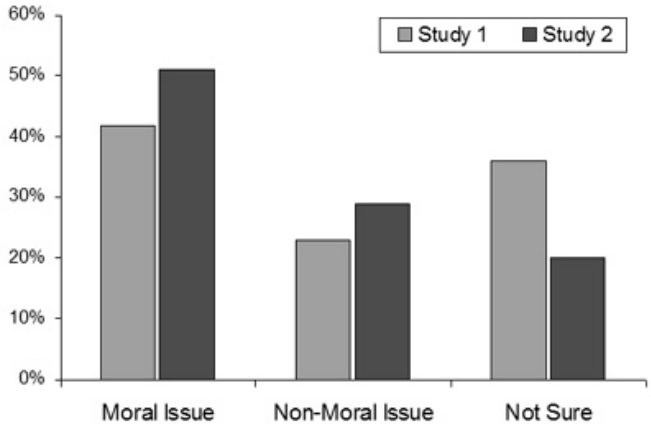

Figure 1: Percentage of responses to the question 'Do you consider 'climate change' to be an ethical or moral issue?' in the first and second study of Markowitz 2012 (pp. 486, 488).

Most participants who responded "not a moral issue" and "not sure" probably do not consider themselves morally obliged to take action against climate change. What is more, even some

of the participants who did regard climate change as a moral issue may deny any such obligation. This is so because climate change cannot only be moralized in the sense of its involving various kinds of injustices, its implying obligations to do something about it, and so on, but also in a very different way. Some people believe that *taking* action, and not *not* taking action, would be a wrong thing to do — say, because it would damper economic growth, or (at the level of states) imply government regulation and thus "lead into communism" (Devine, 2011; Rochlin, 2009).

That many non-nihilists do not accept their climate-related obligations is suggested by more indirect considerations as well. A significant proportion of people (for example, around 51% of Americans, 57% of Britons and 48% of Canadians; Angus Reid, 2011, p. 3) do not even believe that anthropogenic climate change is real. Another significant proportion acknowledge the reality of climate change, but are ignorant about some of its morally relevant features. For example, they do not know that it has been caused mainly by the rich and is affecting mainly the poor, or that it is going to have the catastrophic consequences that it is going to have (Sterman & Sweeney, 2002).

Finally, even many well-informed people can be expected not to accept that they ought to take action. Climate change lacks many of the features that trigger affective reactions. Most importantly, it has not been caused intentionally, it does not mainly affect people who are similar to us (people who are close to us in space and time), and it is not a simple, concrete and non-probabilistic problem. Unlike an old lady's being robbed of her purse, or a pupil's being marked unfairly by his/her teacher, climate change is thus difficult to identify as a moral issue. Recognizing its moral dimension requires conscious moral reasoning, and many people can be expected not to have yet engaged in such reasoning (Jamieson, 2010, p. 436; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012, pp. 243-245).

What about those non-nihilists who do accept that they ought to take action against climate change? Is the judgement likely to be effective in their case? Assuming the account developed in the last section, this may not only depend on whether these non-nihilists have moral, but also on whether they have sufficiently strong non-moral motives for taking action against climate change. In the particular case of climate change the level of non-moral support clearly has to be *very* strong. As explained above, accepting that we ought to take action against climate change typically arises from reasoning rather than from affective reactions. The moral motive coming along with the acceptance that we ought to take action against climate change is thus typically very weak. Moreover, people typically have strong non-moral motives *not* to take action against climate change as well. Responding as we ought to would

probably require drastically limiting our amount of consumption, not going on vacation, switching to a meat-free, or largely meat-free diet, and so on. Most people are not particularly eager to make such drastic changes to their ways of life.

Unfortunately, there are reasons to believe that the required very high level of non-moral support for people's moral motive to take action against climate change typically is not present. One kind of non-moral motive that often supports our moral motives are positive social and moral emotions: emotions like love, compassion or solidarity. Due to their having evolved in small group environments, these motives are mainly evoked by what is close to us. We feel considerable compassion toward the child pinching his/her finger right in front of us, but much less toward people starving in Africa (spatial distance) or three hundred years from now (temporal distance). It so happens, however, that most of the victims of climate change stand in one of the latter relations to us, or even in both. They tend to live in less developed countries, and in the (distant) future (Birnbacher, 2008, pp. 29-30, 2009, pp. 282-283).

Other non-moral motives that often support our moral motives are the anticipation of benefits and the fear of sanctions. In the case of climate change these motives are weak as well. As mentioned above, our obligations to take action against climate change are largely obligations towards people living in the (distant) future. Future generations can hardly reward us for taking action against climate change, however, and they can hardly sanction us for not doing so. The best we can hope for is that future generations honour our efforts by writing favourably about us in their history books, erecting monuments or naming streets and buildings in our memory. The worst we must fear is that they publicly disapprove of what we did (Birnbacher, 2008, p. 30, 2009, pp. 283-284; Meyer 2008).

Finally, developing other strong non-moral motives for taking action against climate change is exacerbated by at least four structural and psychological barriers:

1. In largely disregarding long-term ecological costs, the very rampant form of capitalism that currently guides our economic transactions incentivizes climate-unfriendly, and exacerbates climate-friendly behaviour.
2. In many regions of the world having a good or successful life is closely associated with emission-intensive actions, for example driving around in big cars, having a big house, or being able to 'shop until you drop' (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010, p. 64).
3. People tend to exaggerate the uncertainties associated with climate science, and perceptions of uncertainty increase both self-oriented behaviour and wishful thinking (APA, 2010, p. 65; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012, p. 244).

4. Climate change cannot be mitigated to any significant degree by the actions of one person. This evokes feelings of helplessness; a sense that it does not really matter whether one reduces one's emissions of greenhouse gases or not (APA, 2010, p. 67; Norgaard, 2009, p. 30).

To sum up, the judgement that we are morally obliged to take action against climate change is probably not very effective with regard to the average non-nihilist. Many non-nihilists simply do not accept the judgement. And many of those who do accept it are not led to action by it because of a lack of supporting non-moral motives.

Effectiveness for Nihilists

Let us now look at how effective the judgement that we ought to take action against climate change is with regard to nihilists. The argument sketched at the beginning of section 2 suggests that the judgement is completely ineffective. Moral nihilists deny that any moral judgement is true. They thus do not seem to *accept* any moral judgement. But if they do not accept *any* moral judgement, then they of course cannot accept the moral judgement that we ought to take action against climate change, and the judgement cannot be effective with regard to them. It cannot lead them to actually take action against climate change.

Against this argument, I believe it is plausible to assume that many nihilists do accept moral judgements, and that the proportion of nihilists who accept that we ought to take action against climate change thus is not much lower than the proportion of non-nihilists who accept this judgement. An important first step in establishing this conclusion consists in showing that it is *conceptually possible* for moral nihilists to accept moral judgements. Accepting a moral judgement means being in the mental state that the judgement expresses. If non-cognitivism is true, then accepting a moral judgement means having a certain moral desire. However, having such a desire does not involve any degree of belief in moral truths. For example, I can disapprove of torturing puppies for fun, but at the same time deny that it is true that torturing puppies for fun is wrong. It is therefore not inconsistent for the moral nihilist both to believe that there are no true moral judgements and to accept moral judgements.

If cognitivism is true, accepting a moral judgement means having a certain moral belief: roughly speaking, the belief that the judgement is true. This clearly does contradict the nihilist's belief that no moral judgement is true. But we do not therefore have to conclude that moral nihilists cannot accept moral judgements either. To begin with, it is likely conceptually possible to believe both that no moral judgement is true and that specific moral judgements

are true. A conception of belief that disallows such contradictory beliefs does not seem adequate, especially if not both beliefs are manifest at the same time (which very likely is the case with nihilist acceptance, for our metaethical beliefs tend to be non-manifest most of the time),[6] and if one of the beliefs is to at least some degree vague (which very likely is also the case; for though not very, most people's intuitions in favour of nihilism or non-nihilism can be expected to be at least somewhat vague).

What is more, even if it was conceptually impossible to believe both that no moral judgement is true and that specific moral judgements are true, there might be a way for moral nihilists to accept moral judgements. Instead of accepting these judgements in the sense of believing them to be true, it has been argued that we may accept them in the sense of merely *thinking* them: endorsing their content while at the same time being disposed to deny their truth in certain critical contexts (for example, when asked: Do you *really* believe that torturing puppies for fun is wrong?) (Joyce, 2001, pp. 206-231).

Of course, that it is conceptually possible to say that moral nihilists accept moral judgements does not guarantee that many of them actually and regularly do in fact accept them. But I think there are reasons to believe that this is the case as well. First, if one looks at philosophy departments, one finds that the overwhelming majority of self-declared moral nihilists do accept moral judgements. This is true for almost all non-cognitivists (see, e.g., Blackburn, 2000; Gibbard, 1990). But even the majority of error theorists advocate a 'fictionalist' stance rather than an 'eliminativist' one. They believe that although all moral judgements are false, we are better off thinking and speaking as if some were true. John Mackie (2011, p. 124), for example, the most famous proponent of error theory, maintained: "it is important that there should be a widespread tendency to act on moral grounds."

A second reason for believing that many moral nihilists accept moral judgements is that often neither philosopher nor non-philosopher moral nihilists will see much reason not to accept moral judgements. This is again most obvious in the case of non-cognitivists. If I believe that morality is not about truth and falsity at all (but rather about practical ends such as how to live, whom to admire, having the right kinds of sentiments, etc.), then why should I be worried by the fact that no moral judgement is true? Why should I be led to refrain from accepting such judgements?

Finally, nihilists can also be expected to often accept moral judgements because even if they want to stop accepting them, they will fail to do so. Most people were raised to think of their own and others' actions in moral terms, and have done so for their whole life. When they try to throw off the "chains of morality," mere habit therefore constitutes a huge obsta-

cle. What is more, seeing the world in moral colours probably had such a positive effect on the biological fitness of our ancestors that humans evolved a strong disposition in its favour. We simply cannot help judging certain things to be morally right or wrong, good or bad. William Lycan (1986, n. 29), for example, claims that only a "steady diet of hard drugs, or some other very powerful alienating force" could silence our moral intuitions. And according to Peter Singer (2011, p. 309), "[e]ven if in grim adherence to some sceptical philosophy we deliberately avoid all moral language, we will find it impossible to prevent ourselves inwardly classifying actions as right and wrong."

As moral nihilists can be expected to have roughly the same factual beliefs about climate change and the same normative-ethical views as non-nihilists, the above considerations suggest that in terms of acceptance the difference between them is probably rather low. Fewer nihilists will accept that they ought to take action against climate change (because at least some of them may try not to accept any moral judgement, and because of the non-affective nature of moral judgements about climate change at least some of those who try may succeed in doing so with regard to these particular judgements), but probably not many fewer.

What about the second condition for a moral judgement's being effective: the support by non-moral motives? As in the case of non-nihilistic persons, non-moral motives for taking action against climate change are generally absent in moral nihilists. There is equally less affection of the emotional system, equally less anticipation of benefits and fear of sanctions, and so on. The only difference to the case of non-nihilists is that nihilists' moral motive to take action against climate change may have to be supported by somewhat stronger non-moral motives in order to lead to action. This is so because moral nihilists' moral motives are likely somewhat weaker than those of non-nihilists. It might easily occur to the moral nihilist that s/he does not *really* have an obligation to take action; that morality is, after all, only the expression of desires (in the case of the non-cognitivist), or a useful fiction (in the case of the error theorist). On balance, however, also with regard to this second condition for acting in conformity with our climate change judgement the difference between nihilists and non-nihilists is rather low.

To sum up, applying our general account of practical effectiveness to the moral judgement that we ought to take action against climate change, the judgement does turn out to be less effective with regard to nihilists than with regard to non-nihilists, but only to a very low degree.

Conclusion

How does moral nihilism affect our taking action against climate change? If what I said above is roughly correct, then the answer to this question is: "not much." A moral judgement generally translates into action if it is accepted and supported by non-moral motives pointing in its direction. When we look at our obligation to take action against climate change, we find that both conditions are fulfilled to a higher degree with regard to non-nihilists than with regard to nihilists. However, under present circumstances the difference is much smaller than one would initially expect; and in absolute terms so few people (even non-nihilists) are led to take action against climate change by moral considerations that it will probably be barely noticeable. In order to overcome humanity's climate change apathy we therefore probably should not spend any significant amount of resources in fighting moral nihilism.

While this main conclusion of my article is negative, on the way to it we also acquired two interesting positive insights. The first concerns the relation between metaethics and moral motivation more generally. As even moral nihilists can and in fact often do accept moral judgements, it is unlikely that the nature of our metaethical beliefs has any strong bearing on the motivational efficacy of any of these judgements — not only judgements about climate change, but judgements about any other matter as well. And second, our above considerations also suggest some measures that might actually be effective in overcoming climate change apathy. Most importantly, we should educate people about the existence and nature of climate change and its ethical implications; we should make capitalism more sustainable; we should revise our normative-ethical views in ways that make it easier to identify climate change as a moral problem, and that shift people's focus from the outcome of their actions – which often prompts feelings of helplessness – to their character (Jamieson, 2007, 2010); and we should promote positive social and moral emotions with regard to climate change (e.g., appeal to people's love of their children and grandchildren: Birnbacher, 2009, pp. 286-289), and evoke pride for emission-reducing behaviours (Markowitz & Shariff, 2012, p. 245; Norgaard, 2009, p. 46).

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Notes

[1] Note that some studies on folk metaethics are based on inadequate interpretations of their data, and subjects' nihilist metaethical intuitions only emerge on more plausible re-interpretations (Pölzler, 2014, pp. 82-106).

[2] The term "moral judgement" has been used both to refer to moral linguistic utterances, or speech acts, and to moral mental states. Here I will stick with the more common linguistic understanding and assume that moral judgements are a certain kind of linguistic utterances.

[3] Note that this is a common, but not the only way of conceiving of moral nihilism. Often the view is defined more narrowly, as being identical with error theory (Pigden, 2007, p. 442); rarely it is also defined more broadly, as including not only non-cognitivism and error theory, but a third position - subjectivism - as well (Pratt, 2012).

[4] Contemporary non-cognitivists often do allow for moral judgements to be true or false (Blackburn, 2000, p. 79; Gibbard, 2003, p. x). However, they do not allow for them to be true or false in an ordinary, correspondence theoretic sense (according to which truth is correspondence with facts), but only in a deflationist sense (according to which '… is true' does not attribute any property, but serves other purposes, e.g., the purpose of reinforcing one's commitment to the judgement at issue).

[5] Contemporary error theorists often hold weaker versions of this claim. For example, it is argued that not all, but only all positive moral judgements are false, or all positive atomic judgements (with atomic judgements being judgements of the form 'X has moral property M') (Pigden, 2007, p. 451); or that the relevant subset of moral judgements is not false, but only 'untrue' (Joyce, 2001, pp. 6-9).

[6] That our metaethical beliefs tend to be non-manifest most of the time is of course armchair speculation. However, this claim seems very plausible, and there has not yet been any psychological research on how often ordinary people engage in metaethical reflection.

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