

“Nihilism”

Entry for *International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013)

Richard Joyce

TITLE: nihilism

WORD COUNT: 1912

“Nihilism” (from the Latin “nihil” meaning *nothing*) is not a well-defined term. One can be a nihilist about just about anything: A philosopher who does not believe in the existence of knowledge, for example, might be called an “epistemological nihilist”; an atheist might be called a “religious nihilist.” In the vicinity of ethics, one should take care to distinguish moral nihilism from political nihilism and from existential nihilism. These last two will be briefly discussed below, only with the aim of clarifying our topic: moral nihilism.

Even restricting attention to “moral nihilism,” matters remain indeterminate. Its most prominent usage in the field of metaethics treats it as a synonym for “error theory,” therefore an entry that said only “Nihilism: *see* ERROR THEORY” would not be badly misleading. This would identify moral nihilism as the metaethical view that moral discourse consists of assertions that systematically fail to secure the truth. (See Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001.)

A broader definition of “nihilism” would be “the view that there are no moral facts.” This is broader because it covers not only the error theory but also noncognitivism (*see* NONCOGNITIVISM). Both these theories deny that there are moral facts—the difference being that the error theorist thinks that in making moral judgments we *try* to state facts (but fail to do so, because there are no facts of the type in question), whereas the noncognitivist thinks that in making moral judgments we do not even try to state facts (because, for example, these judgments are really veiled commands or expressions of desire). (In characterizing noncognitivism in this way, I am sidelining various linguistic permissions that may be earned via the quasi-realist program (*see* QUASI-REALISM).) While it is not uncommon to see “nihilism” defined in this broader way, few contemporary noncognitivists think of themselves as “nihilists,” so it is reasonable to suspect that the extra breadth of the definition is often unintentional.

Both these characterizations see moral nihilism as a purely metaethical thesis. The term is also widely associated with various first-order moral views that make recommendations about how we ought to act. Suppose one is an error theorist, holding all moral language to be deeply flawed (like the attitude that the atheist takes towards religion). One then faces a practical decision concerning what to *do* with the flawed moral language, for eliminating the vocabulary (in the way that the atheist usually eliminates positive religious utterances) is not a forced choice. One might instead become a fictionalist—maintaining moral language with the status of a kind of useful fiction (*see* ERROR THEORY). There is, then, the possibility of using “moral nihilist” as a synonym for “moral eliminativist”: as holding that we should stop using positive moral language. (Moral eliminativists include Hinckfuss 1987 and Garner 2010.) Such a theorist would be nihilistic twice over: endorsing a metaethical nihilism (in virtue of being an error theorist) accompanied by a kind of practical nihilism (in virtue of being an eliminativist).

“Moral nihilism” is also often associated—though somewhat vaguely—with thoughts about how we should act in the more everyday sphere: as advocating a policy of “anything goes,” as holding that with the removal of the moral framework restrictions on our behavior are lifted. It is true that if the error theorist is correct then there are no *moral* restrictions on our behavior, but what effect this would have on our overall practical lives (if we all believed it) is far from obvious. The idea that there would be nothing to stand in the way of our immediately becoming antisocial wantons requires the implausible premise that morality is

the *only* thing that keeps us kind, altruistic, cooperative, and so forth (and the only thing that *could* keep us thus). In this respect the term “nihilist” is rather like “anarchist.” To be an anarchist is simply to believe that there should be no government, which is, of course, consistent with wanting to live in a peaceful cooperative community united by interpersonal duties and collective decision-making. Nevertheless, the image that tends to spring to mind upon hearing the word “anarchist” involves shaven heads and Molotov cocktails. In much the same way, moral nihilists may be loving friends, keen cooperators, and steadfast citizens—and yet the images that tend to spring to mind upon hearing the word “nihilist” involve radical countercultural political affiliations or a kind of morbid anomie. These images have more to do with political nihilism and existential nihilism than with moral nihilism.

Political nihilism was a radical movement in Russia in the 1860s, characterized by the privileging of individual freedom over all traditional authoritative structures such as state, church, and family. The novelist Ivan Turgenev introduced this use of “nihilism” when he wrote: “A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority” (*Otcy i Deti [Fathers and Sons]*, 1861). The Russian Nihilist movement was not based on any carefully worked out intellectual manifesto, and so it is difficult to say what attitude they might have taken to moral nihilism. It is clear that the moral nihilist need not be a political nihilist: The error theorist need not be motivated to overthrow extant political institutions, even if she denies that they have any *moral* legitimacy. It also seems clear that one can be a political nihilist without being a moral nihilist. The Russian Nihilists aimed to violently overthrow the normative status quo, but also hoped to replace it with a new moral order—one in which freedom is the supreme value—and thus were hardly error theorists. The same could be said of various so-called nihilists from the history of philosophy, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Plato’s Thrasymachus: rather than error theorists they were radical revisionists about the content of morality. It may clarify matters to think of the “nihil” in “political nihilism” as having less to do with believing in *nothing* and more to do with actively promoting the “annihilation” of time-honored institutions.

The popular image of the nihilist as suffering from something like “morbid anomie” probably derives from *existential* nihilism rather than moral nihilism. This nihilism is associated with the idea that “life has no meaning or purpose”—a realization that may sometimes lead to a loss of motivation and even depression and despair. Existential nihilism crystallized as an intellectual movement in France in the post-war period, associated especially with the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. (See SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL; CAMUS, ALBERT; EXISTENTIALISM.) For Camus, the absurdity of the human predicament emerges from the tension between our realization that we live in a purposeless and indifferent universe and our ceaseless propensity to continue as if our lives and decisions were meaningful. Camus accepted nihilism as a fact, but far from advocating that we embrace despair and emptiness in response, he devoted most of his intellectual energies to exploring how there could be a satisfying human response to the absurd situation. Sartre is best interpreted as having a rather similar attitude towards nihilism (though offering a rather different solution).

That existential nihilism has any necessary link to moral nihilism is dubious. Certainly one can be an error theorist while affirming that life has purpose (just not *moral* purpose); the error theorist can even affirm that life has value (just not *moral* value). Conversely, one can be a moral realist while denying that life has purpose, since the existence of good and bad doesn’t obviously confer “meaning” upon our lives. For example, accepting that humans have evolved through a process of natural selection is often accompanied by the acknowledgment that our lives are “without purpose,” and yet taking the error theoretic position is usually considered to be entirely optional for the Darwinian.

Before leaving existential nihilism, something should be said about the relationship between nihilism and Dostoyevsky's famous dictum (as voiced by the character Ivan Karamazov) that "if God is dead, then everything is permissible." Advocates of nihilism seem drawn to this claim; opponents seem to fear its repercussions. In *L'Homme révolté* [*The Rebel*] (1951), Camus writes: "If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important." And Sartre declared that "everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to" (1945/1973). In fact, these "...then-everything-is-permissible" claims tend to be confused. Certainly the error theorist has no business claiming that "everything is permissible." If moral nihilism is true, then nothing is moral obligatory, nothing is morally prohibited, and *nothing is morally permissible* either. Thus, one who claims that moral nihilism implies that everything is permissible must intend to denote some kind of permissibility other than *moral*—let's just call it X-permissibility. But then an argument will be needed to show that the failure of moral discourse implies that everything is X-permissible, and those who wield the slogan have never, to my knowledge, developed any such argument. The same can be said of Dostoyevsky's original version. If "permission" means *theistically permitted*, then if God does not exist then *nothing* is permitted (as Jacques Lacan once observed (1991: 139)). It's possible that if God is dead then everything is X-permitted, but, again, an argument would be needed to make the connection. It is reasonable to suspect that most people voicing Dostoyevsky's dictum intend to express the thought that God provides the only viable underpinning for human morality, in which case if God is dead we face moral nihilism. It is possible that this is true, though it is far from widely accepted; most atheists oppose the moral error theory as adamantly as they oppose religion. In any case, even if it were true that atheism leads to moral nihilism, we have seen that it wouldn't follow that everything is *morally* permissible, and no argument has been supplied to show that it would follow that everything is permitted in some other sense.

Various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century continental philosophers (e.g., Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Fichte, Kierkegaard) are associated in one way or another with nihilism, though their nihilistic streaks tend to be each *so sui generis* as to defy easy categorization. Even Nietzsche, who is often treated as a kind of grandfather of European nihilism, is extremely different to classify (see NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH). In certain moods he seems to be clearly advocating an error theory (moral nihilism). In *Twilight of the Idols* he writes:

There are absolutely no moral facts. What moral and religious judgments have in common is the belief in things that are not real. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a misinterpretation. (1889, VIII.1 / 2005: 182)

On other occasions Nietzsche reads more like an intellectual campaigner for political nihilism: aiming to destroy a traditional moral order and replace it with a more muscular and unapologetic alternative moral framework. (For respective interpretative viewpoints, see Pigden 2010 and Schacht 1995.)

In conclusion: The slipperiness of Nietzsche's nihilism is indicative of the indeterminacy of the term "nihilism" in the broader context. The most well-defined usage of "moral nihilism" would treat it as a synonym of "the moral error theory." However, even here one is tempted to think that it would be safer simply to drop the term "nihilism" since it is, as we have seen, pregnant with vague associations—associations that should be kept in abeyance until this imagery can be made more precise and its connection to the moral error theory shown to be justified.

SEE ALSO:

Camus, Albert; Error Theory; Existentialism; Mackie, J. L.; Nietzsche, Friedrich; Noncognitivism; Quasi-Realism; Sartre, Jean-Paul; Skepticism, Moral

REFERENCES:

- Camus, Albert 1951. *L'Homme révolté [The Rebel]*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Garner, Richard 2010. "Abolishing morality," in R. Joyce and S. Kirchin (eds.) *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*. Springer Press.
- Hinckfuss, Ian 1987. "The moral society: Its structure and effects." *Discussion Papers in Environmental Philosophy* 16. Philosophy Program (RSSS), Australian National University.
- Joyce, Richard 2001. *The Myth of Morality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques 1991. *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse, 1969-1970*. Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.). Paris: Seuil.
- Mackie, J.L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Penguin.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1889. *Twilight of the Idols*. In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols: And other writings*, trans. Judith Norman; eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. 2005. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pigden, Charles 2010. "Nihilism, Nietzsche, and the doppelganger problem," in R. Joyce and S. Kirchin (eds.) *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*. Springer Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul [1945] 1973. *Existentialism and Humanism*. London: Eyre Methuen.
- Schacht, Richard 1995. *Making Sense of Nietzsche*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- Dreier, Jamie 2005. "Moral relativism and moral nihilism," in D. Copp (ed.) *Handbook of Ethical Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press: 240-64.
- Garner, Richard 1994. *Beyond Morality*. Temple University Press.
- Gillespie, Michael Allen 1996. *Nihilism before Nietzsche*. University of Chicago Press.
- Joyce, Richard and Kirchin, Simon (eds.) 2010. *A World Without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*. Springer Press.
- Miller, Alexander 2003. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. Polity.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter 2006. *Moral Skepticisms*. Oxford University Press.