

“Nihilism”

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“Nihilism” (from the Latin “nihil” meaning *nothing*) is not a well-defined term. Generally, one may be called a “nihilist” about X if one denies the existence of X (usually in circumstances where belief in X is widespread). For example, someone who does not believe in the existence of knowledge might be called an “epistemological nihilist”; someone who does not believe in gods might be called a “religious nihilist”; and so on. This entry is focused on *moral nihilism*, but, in the interests of clarifying, it will also touch on existential nihilism and political nihilism.

Moral nihilism may be taken to be the view that there are no moral facts or moral truths. This characterization masks an important distinction, depending on whether one thinks that moral discourse is even in the business of attempting to state moral facts and truths in the first place. The moral *error theorist* maintains that when one makes a moral judgment—like, say, “Stealing is morally wrong”—one is *purporting* to state a fact: one is asserting that stealing has the property of moral wrongness. But, the moral error theorist thinks, no such property exists, thus stealing does not have that property (and nor does anything else), thus one has asserted something false (*see* ERROR THEORY). The *non-cognitivist* agrees with the error theorist that there are no moral facts or moral truths, but contrasts in maintaining that when one makes a moral judgment one is not even *purporting* to state a fact; rather, moral judgments function to perform some non-assertoric role, such as making commands or expressing the speaker’s attitudes (*see* NON-COGNITIVISM). According to classic non-cognitivism, then, moral judgments are not false, but rather are not truth-evaluable at all. (In characterizing non-cognitivism in this manner, I am sidelining various linguistic permissions that may be earned via the quasi-realist program [*see* QUASI-REALISM].)

Thus if moral nihilism is defined as the view that there are no moral facts or moral truths, then both the error theorist and the non-cognitivist will count as nihilists. However, as a matter of fact few contemporary non-cognitivists would be happy to label themselves “nihilists,” and, to the extent that the term “nihilism” is used in modern meta-ethics, it is generally reserved for the error theorist. An entry that said only “Nihilism (*see* ERROR THEORY)” would not be a badly misleading indication of current usage.

Characterizing moral nihilism as the view that there are no moral facts or truths is to classify it as a purely metaphysical thesis, but moral nihilism is also widely associated with various recommendations concerning what we ought to *do*. Suppose that one is an error theorist, holding that all moral claims misdescribe the world (analogous to the atheist’s view of religion). One then faces a practical decision concerning what to do with the flawed moral conceptual framework. One option—recommended by the moral *abolitionist*—would be to eliminate all moral talk and thought: to do away with it in much the same way as we have done away with talk of bodily humors or phlogiston. Another option—recommended by the moral *fictionalist*—would be to retain moral discourse, even while knowing (at some level) that it is false. (For discussion of these options, see Garner & Joyce 2019.) The term “moral nihilism” might well be used for the first option: for the claim that we should do away with moral discourse. The moral abolitionist, then, may be considered to be a moral nihilist twice

over: first in endorsing a kind of meta-ethical nihilism (in virtue of being an error theorist), second in endorsing a kind of practical nihilism (in virtue of recommending abolition).

Moral nihilism is also often associated—though somewhat vaguely—with proposals concerning how we should act in the more everyday sphere. According to one strand of thought, if there were no moral facts or truths, then all restrictions on our behavior would be lifted: we'd all be free to become selfish villains if the whim took us and we could get away with it. But this is not the view typically advocated by philosophers who recommend either fictionalism or abolitionism. While it is true that according to error theory there are no *moral* restrictions on our behavior, what effect this would have on our overall practical lives and motivations (if we all believed it) is far from obvious. There may well still be reliable practical considerations of a *non-moral* kind that speak in favor of cooperation, altruism, kindness, loyalty, and so on. In a similar vein, although moral nihilism is often associated with the claim that “nothing really matters,” the entailment between the two is doubtful. While it is true that according to error theory nothing *morally* matters, all sorts of things might nevertheless matter in a non-moral manner. After all, what it takes for something to “matter” to someone is simply that the person cares about it, and it would seem that people care about all sorts of things independently of moral considerations (Hare 1972). Typically, for example, people care deeply about their children not only because of a sense of moral duty to do so.

The thought that “nothing really matters” may also be expressed by the nihilistic dictum that “life has no meaning or purpose”—a claim associated more with *existential* nihilism than with moral nihilism. Since the belief that life has no meaning may sometimes lead to depression, despair, and a loss of motivation, existential nihilism is associated with the idea of the nihilist as prone to a kind of morbid anomie—an idea that gives rise to the image from popular culture of the nihilist as someone who, say, dresses in black and ostentatiously reads *Also Sprach Zarathustra* at their local café.

Existential nihilism crystallized as an intellectual movement in France in the postwar period, especially in 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. Neither Camus nor Sartre, however, recommended succumbing to despair and emotional emptiness in response to this predicament. Both devoted their intellectual energies to exploring how there could be a satisfying human response to nihilism.

That existential nihilism has any necessary link to moral nihilism is dubious. Certainly, one can be a moral error theorist while affirming that life has meaning and purpose (just not *moral* meaning or *moral* purpose). Conversely, one can be a moral realist while denying that life has meaning or purpose, since the existence of moral goodness and badness does not obviously confer meaning and purpose to our lives. For example, comprehending that humans have evolved through a process of Darwinian natural selection is often accompanied by the acceptance that our lives are, in a sense, “without purpose,” yet few who accept such a conclusion are also inclined to claim that nothing is morally right or wrong.

Before leaving existential nihilism, something should be said about the relationship between nihilism and Dostoyevsky's famous maxim (as voiced by the character Mitya in *The*

Brothers 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*], 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” (2000 [1953]: 13). And Sartre declared that “everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without” (2007 [1946]: 29). In fact, these “... then-everything-is-permissible” claims tend to be confused. Certainly, the error theorist has no business claiming that “everything is morally permissible.” If moral nihilism is true, then nothing is morally obligatory, nothing is morally prohibited, and *nothing is morally permissible* either. If one thinks that the existence of God is required to underwrite morality, then it would be more sensible to claim that if God does not exist then *nothing* is permissible (as Jacques Lacan once observed [1991: 139]). Thus, one who claims that the non-existence of God implies moral nihilism, and that this in turn implies that everything is permissible, must intend to denote some kind of permissibility other than *moral*—yet those who wield this maxim have never developed any such argument.

Political nihilism stands in contrast to both moral nihilism and existential 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 popularized this use of “nihilism” when he wrote “A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority” (2008 [1862]: 26). The Russian Nihilist movement was not based on any philosophically rigorous 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 they deny that these institutions 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 moral 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.

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 difficult to classify (*see* NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH). In certain moods, he seems to be clearly advocating error theory (moral nihilism). For example, 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. (2005 [1889]: 182-83)

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 discussion, see Rowe 2019; Hassan 2021.)

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

See also: CAMUS, ALBERT; ERROR THEORY; EXISTENTIALISM; NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH; NON-COGNITIVISM; QUASI-REALISM; SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL

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