Moral Nihilism: The Good, the Bad, and the Skeptical

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Abstract

Morality is a contested phenomenon. Deeply committed partisans have fought over its meaning for millennia. Nevertheless, no enduring consensus has been reached. Some thinkers, including social scientists, have sought a way out of this predicament by positing that no answer is possible. Those here designated “moral nihilists” argue that morality is either unnecessary or impossible. Arrayed into three groups that may be distinguished as either “good,” “bad,” or “skeptical,” they present a variety of reasons for purging morality from our thought categories. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, John Dewey, and Michele Foucault may all be counted as within their ranks. And yet, if morality is understood as a tripartite process in which people participate, their objections prove misleading. Morality is real and continues to be a vital part of the human experience. To contend otherwise is to embrace the prospect of anarchy.

An Enduring Problem

Almost everyone has an opinion about morality. Laypersons and specialists alike are prepared to tell us what is right or wrong. The problem is that they regularly disagree with one another. This has been the case not just for decades, but millennia. More than this, there is no agreement about the nature of morality. Theologians, philosophers, politicians, and scientists have all weighed in with different answers. As often as not, these partisans have been confident that their own solution is correct. Nevertheless, those who differ tend to be equally adamant.

More remarkably, over the long history during which morality has been intellectually scrutinized, our understanding of the enterprise has made few advances. Rather than producing an array of cumulative insights, we today know little more about how morality operates than did Aristotle (1941). Remarkably, although many thousands of intelligent people have set their minds to the matter, we have little to show for their concerted efforts. Despite their good will and penetrating analyses, no enduring consensus has emerged.
If anything, moral opinions seem to succeed each other much as fashions do. What is in style to today is therefore likely to be out of style tomorrow; its assertions not so much disproved as replaced. Those who dispute these issues simply move on to a next set without so much as a backward glance. Then these too are shouldered aside by the succeeding generation, which creates a different set of answers to the same old questions.

The situation is similar to that which exists within philosophy in general. As Randall Collins (1998) has explained, philosophical schools routinely contend for precedence and then are supplanted by other schools that do the same. Materialists do battle with Idealists, Rationalists struggle against Nominalists, and Absolutists argue with Relativists. During each generation the combat is intense, with each side certain that it will eventually emerge victorious, but none does with definitive certainty. In the process, the two camps stake out diametrically opposed positions as they seek to demolish their opponents, yet they produce only mutual exhaustion.

As often as not, however, some of the players throw up their arms in despair. They conclude that there is no conceivable answer to the issue at hand and hence that none should be sought. Skeptical about the possibility of success, they opt for not pursuing it. But they do more. They typically reject the quest of the primary contenders as ill advised. It is not merely that they have failed to beat their respective rivals; they were wrong to try. The correct stance is that of passive uncertainty. One must simply accept what is as it is, without searching for the impossible.

This situation extends well past the bounds of ethical theory. It is also on display in the social sciences. Sociologists, for instance, are often more prescriptive than descriptive. Max Weber argued that the discipline should be value-neutral (Gerth & Mills, 1946), but this is frequently more honored in the breach. Many practitioners, in order to escape this dilemma, have maintained that being moralistic is impossible because morality is a chimera. They, however, have indulged in an unacknowledged moralism. This is a real danger that can be averted by understanding the implications of moral nihilism. Simply asserting that there is no answer, when there is, does not solve the problem. What is needed is a more accurate analysis of morality and its pitfalls.
The Nihilist Alternative

During the nineteenth century one of these quasi-skeptical camps arose with respect to politics (Gatrell, 1986). As capitalists lined up against socialist revolutionaries, these activists were less sanguine than the primary partisans. As a result, rather than propose a concrete alternative to social conditions they abhorred, they were determined to destroy the status quo. Often referred to as nihilists, they intended to pull down existing political regimes so that something better could emerge. As literal bomb-throwers, they specialized in assassination and rebellion; not presenting a coherent plan for improving matters. They simply assumed that once the Tsar or Kaiser was gone, iniquities would automatically be corrected.

In the larger intellectual context, philosophical nihilists tend to deny the existence of truth itself. They characteristically regard customary beliefs concerning morality, religion and politics as without merit. For them, there is no meaning to existence, except that it exists. But more than this, they assume that there is no central purpose, no guiding force, in the universe. What is best, or correct, cannot be known because it is basically unknowable. As a consequence, their violence, such as it is, is of the cerebral sort. The bombs they throw are directed at the conventional wisdom.

Within the realm of morality, nihilism comes in three primary guises. These may be designated: The good, the bad, and the skeptical. Their respective adherents conclude either that morality does not exist or that it is fundamentally incomprehensible. For them, it is either impossible or unnecessary. The reasons provided for reaching this conclusion differ, but their professed opposition to a rule-based morality is relatively constant. Indeed, for most of them, moral rules are irrelevant. In some cases, these are thought to make no sense, while in others they are rejected as inherently injurious. Either way, investigations into the nature of morality are spurned as absurd.

Among the “good” nihilists are those who believe that we human beings are essentially nice. We do not need to be controlled by the external constraints of morality because we naturally engage in positive behaviors. Left to our own devices, we are spontaneously kind to one another. If we are not, it is because external pressures have
corrupted us. Ironically, one of these is often thought to be conventional morality. It is frequently alleged to be the source of whatever nastiness survives.

The “bad” moral nihilists are not nearly as upbeat. When they look out upon the world, they perceive a dog-eat-dog battlefield. But this does not disturb them. To the contrary, they celebrate these endemic conflicts. As far as they are concerned, let the victors take what they can, while the devil is left to take the hindmost.

Lastly, the truly skeptical moral nihilists assert that morality is nonsense. For them, it is meaningless because its purported truths can never be fully established. Its prescriptions literally have no truth-value. If they seem to be substantial, this is either an illusion or a con-job. In the view of the skeptics, many of us have been fooled into believing that morality is real because unscrupulous people have manipulated us into doing as they desire. We, however, must be honest enough to resist this fantasy. We must deal with the world as it is if we hope to avoid exploitation.

It might seem that these outlooks are too pessimistic to attract many followers, but this would be mistaken. Moral nihilism is very widespread. In the contemporary scene the good varieties of nihilism are especially popular. Most of those who subscribe to these rarely perceive themselves as nihilists, but this is because they regard themselves as more moral than most others. That they deny the necessity of morality while at the same time perceiving themselves as particularly moral may seem contradictory, but it follows from the way they understand the nature of morality.

**The Good Nihilists**

The patron saint of the good moralists is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1984, 1993). Many of his acolytes have never heard his name, nevertheless, as noted by John Maynard Keynes (1936), they are in bondage to this long dead philosopher. Born the son of improvident Genevan Protestants during the eighteenth century, Rousseau made his way to the French capital in hopes of achieving success—which he did (Rousseau, 1996). But Rousseau was also appalled by what he found. This was the high-water mark of the French aristocracy. Living in splendor while surrounded by unspeakable poverty, they assumed that the ancien régime would last forever.
Though himself fond of high-living, Rousseau was not so sure they were right. In fact, he was dedicated to tearing down what he perceived as a rotten and tottering edifice. Thus, in his writings, Rousseau (1984) proposed a counterpoint. He argued that once upon a time people lived in a glorious state of nature. Organically disposed to be benevolent to one another, they were “noble savages.” It was only the subsequent creation of civilization that undermined their innate disposition to be kind and loving. By bestowing greater benefits on some rather than others, social advancements encouraged sustained conflicts that ultimately resulted in social oppression. Under these circumstances, conventional morality merely rationalized tyranny. It perpetuated unfairness rather than eliminated it. Far better was the original human condition in which people were good to each other without the intervention of moral strictures. Thus, for Rousseau, the central social question was how to return to our previous state of bliss.

The way Rousseau explained our fall was this. Long ago, people lived in harmony with nature. They took what they needed from its limitless bounty without interfering with the livelihoods of their neighbors. Neither jealousy, nor conflict existed, because no one possessed more than anyone else. Then some nameless individual took a fateful step. He fenced off a piece of land and declared it his. His neighbors then made an equally momentous decision when they decided to respect this innovation. Thus, were born property rights. And from property rights flowed inequality. Once it became possible for some people to own more than others, it also became possible to treat the latter disrespectfully. Their relative poverty enabled their more prosperous betters to take advantage of this disparity—and increase it.

Rousseau believed that the answer to this predicament was several fold. First, it would be necessary to abolish the institution of property. Once everything was owned in common, social inequities could no longer develop. The rich would no longer steal from the poor, nor lord it over them. Second, it was important to break the cycle of oppression by ceasing to corrupt the young. Children, who were indoctrinated into the unscrupulous moral standards of the present, should be allowed to return to their instinctive state. If allowed to choose their own lessons, they would automatically make good decisions. Free to frolic unhindered in nature, they would once again be in harmony with its dictates (Rousseau, 1993).
But it would also be necessary to overhaul the character of governing bodies. Rousseau recognized that large-scale societies required central administrations, but he insisted that these be removed from elite control. Those assigned to be in charge must not automatically come from the nobility. Rather, they must be individuals who were in touch with The General Will and were prepared to follow it. If social leaders did what the people desired, they would thereby improve the living conditions of all. They would also eliminate social conflicts by instituting policies that benefited everyone equally. This way morality would once again be unnecessary. People would spontaneously do what was right.

This was a seductive vision. So beguiling was it that when the French Revolution broke out many of its leaders assumed that a Rousseau-style paradise would shortly come into being (Schama, 1989). As we today know, it did not. What intervened were a bloody terror and a Napoleonic dictatorship. This occurred because their spiritual guide was mistaken on many crucial points. He did not accurately analyze the human condition; hence his recommendations were deficient.

To begin with Rousseau was wrong about property-rights. The notion of property was not the artificial creation of an historical figure. Moreover, it is not intrinsically connected with land ownership. Even our pre-human ancestors possessed a version of ownership rights. They were very clear in asserting their control over various material objects. Among the most important of these were their weapons and foodstuffs. If they could not effectively guard these, others might make away with them, with the result that their erstwhile owners would perish from starvation. So imperative was this propensity that it is incorporated in our genetic code. Even today children protect their toys against outside interference without being instructed to do so.

Rousseau was also wrong about how children need to be educated. Were they left to choose their own lessons; there is no guarantee that they would make wise selections. But more than this, the notion that the young generation should be hermetically sealed off from the older generation lest it be corrupted is absurd. This would prevent the accumulation of knowledge over time and therefore would condemn people to a life as improvident as isolated clams. Instead of increasing strength by pooling knowledge, each
cohort of children would grow up as ignorant as the preceding one. Nor would they grow up intrinsically moral. Not long ago many social workers insisted that we should “believe the children” when they told stories about having been violated by nursery school teachers. Young children, it was said, do not lie. Yet this is ridiculous. As every parent knows, children lie and do so without instruction. Only moral prescriptions limit the extent to which they do so.

Finally, Rousseau was disastrously mistaken about The General Will. This assumed that there is always an underlying consensus among the members of any given society. Yet real human beings have divergent interests. What will benefit one may injure another. As a result, there are always interpersonal conflicts. To imagine that these rifts inevitably heal themselves is to believe in fairytales. So is to suppose that some individuals are endowed with an ability to perceive what everyone wants and needs. This was what Adolf Hitler believed. He regarded himself as the rightful fuehrer of the German people because he was in touch with the nation’s historical mission. Only he fully understood the greatness of the Aryan peoples or could bring it to fruition.

These are important shortcomings, but the good nihilists generally fail to recognize them. They are so transfixed by the promise of paradise on earth that they overlook impediments to its realization. Oddly, one of these was Karl Marx (1967). Although Marx regarded himself as a hardheaded realist, his critical faculties deserted him when he projected his communist utopia forward. With respect to capitalism, he was a no-nonsense opponent of the status quo. Moral denunciations of business owners routinely thundered from his pen. They were regularly condemned as selfish bullies who parasitically stole the rightful possessions of the proletariat. Yet when it came to envisioning what would happen after they were toppled from power, he was every bit as sentimental as Rousseau.

In Marx’s imagination, once the proletarian revolution abolished property-ownership, people would change. Instead of being greedy, their natural disposition to help one another would come to the fore. They would then contribute to the common store of goods according to their abilities, and take from it only what they needed. No external authorities would be necessary to supervise their beneficent activities because
these would emerge from the goodness of their souls. Marx’s vision may not always be linked with that of Rousseau, nevertheless they were equally artless in their depictions of human nature. They both propose a non-existent natural morality that makes externally imposed standards redundant.

A less grandiose proponent of the same tradition was the twentieth century psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954). Rather than being a social activist, he was concerned with explaining human motivations. To this end, he postulated a hierarchy of human needs. At its base were such biological necessities as air, water, and food. At its apex, however, was “self actualization.” According to Maslow, once our primary needs were satisfied, this is what we were primed to pursue. We humans were thus inherently motivated to become the best individuals that we can personally be. And when this occurred, we would be morally superior; so superior we would no longer require external prompting to do what is right.

The problem with this vision is that it is as innocent as those of Rousseau and Marx. Few of its adherents ask themselves what self-actualization actually means. Nevertheless, this is the crucial question. The assumption seems to be that each individual possesses an innate plan for what to become. It is as if we are all born with a tiny homunculus embedded within us that when properly nourished grows to its predetermined size and shape. Much as a seed may be thought to contain a tiny potential tree at its center, so the human embryo contains a fully functioning human being within it. Only what are the qualities intrinsic to this human-in-waiting? Is there really a particular “self” ready to be actualized? And would this same self emerge under different social conditions? Furthermore, would this self always be “good”? There is no guarantee that any of these questions can be answered in the affirmative. Yet if they cannot, what happens to the postulated, fully realized human being who does not require moral supervision to do what is right?

At about the same time that Maslow was perfecting his scheme, another American psychologist was developing a novel form of psychotherapy. Carl Rogers (1951, 1961), while working in a college setting, created what he called “client-centered” therapy. He was not going to be as oppressively directive as the Freudian analysts who preceded him
(Freud, 1953-1974). Instead of interpreting what was wrong with a client and then imposing this theory, Rogerians would allow their patrons to solve their own problems. Much as did Maslow, they assumed that people were innately motivated to become the best persons they could be. All that was necessary was to encourage them to do what they were capable of doing. This was accomplished by reflecting back to them what they were already thinking. They then picked up this thread and ran with it.

The Rogerian method has, in fact, proved very productive. But its scope turns out to be limited (Glasser, 1965). It works fairly well with college students, but has been an arrant failure with prison inmates. To assume the best of college students, who are typically there to learn, is not much of a stretch. But to make the same assumption about criminals is absurd. They are in prison because they resist social conventions; hence it is not surprising that they resist Rogerian blandishments. In the real world, they tend to be hostile to therapists who expect them to provide their own answers. In the real world, given current recidivism rates, it is also unlikely that they will become good people in the conventional sense. To imagine that being nice to them will liberate a better self that has been suppressed by insensitive social demands is foolish. Time and again, clinical experience demonstrates this is a misplaced hope (Fein, 1992).

But the Rogerians have been even more critical of conventional morality. Rogers made it quite plain that judging a client is inimical to successful counseling. Once a person is criticized for behaving in ways he/she already finds uncomfortable, little else is liable to be said. The person becomes defensive and refuses to engage in self-discovery. The proper therapeutic attitude is therefore to be “non-judgmental.” Clients are to be accepted for what they are, not raked over the coals for a failure to become what they could. Therapists have to learn to separate the person from his or her behaviors. The latter may be rejected as inappropriate, but the former must always be held in high esteem. In this case, the proper stance is “unconditional positive regard.” Not only does everyone want to be loved; everyone deserves to be loved. It is therefore up to the counselor to provide reliable social support. When this is done, individuals blossom and their goodness comes to the surface.
Oddly, these therapeutic recommendations have migrated out into the community at large. What was designed to be applied in the consulting room is now recommended for society in toto. It has become conventional for ordinary people, not just Rogerians, to be told they should be non-judgmental and treat those with whom they come in contact with unconditional positive regard. These attitudes are thought to promote universal, personal growth. It is presumed that if they are widely applied, society will become more just and loving, thereby fostering further niceness. In this way moral structures will once more become irrelevant. People who are never pestered to do good will voluntarily decide to be warm and compassionate human beings.

Unfortunately, once again these good nihilists have wandered into fantasyland. To be non-judgmental in ordinary life would mean to be unruffled when others do the most horrendous things. It literally recommends that people shrug their shoulders when murder is committed before their eyes. Likewise, it tells parents that they should be quiet when their children tell lies. Obviously, were this advice to be followed, disaster would ensue. Since no moral rules would be enforced, their violation would increase exponentially. With nary an eyebrow raised, nasty characters would no longer fear social ostracism. Indeed, morality would cease to exist. Morality, after all, is all about judging and sanctioning. It is about controlling social transgressions, not abdicating the right to control them.

In fact, even advocates of being non-judgmental regularly engage in making moral judgments. In the very act of condemning others for being judgmental, they are making a judgment. Similarly, in ordinary life they are as apt to be as upset by lies, violence, and theft as most others. By the same token, they too have difficulty in separating persons from their acts. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? Bad acts do not float untethered in the atmosphere. Particular persons always commit them. It is they who do what they shouldn’t and therefore they who must be reprimanded. Simply to accept them in an unconditional way, no matter what they do, is an invitation to do whatever they wish. Unconditional positive regard tells a person that he or she is good no matter what evil is perpetrated. But would this apply to a person who gratuitously drove a nail through your hand? I expect not. Yet if it did, wouldn’t there be a lot of nails driven through a multitude of hands? That this is not the case is testimony to our
collective common sense. Those of us who are not caught up in theorizing about good nihilism regularly condemn people who cause injury to others. We do not regard them positively. Nor should we if we wish them to look upon their own behaviors with a jaundiced eye.

Next in line among the good nihilists was John Dewey (1943). He took Rousseau’s recommendations about education and updated them. His contribution to nihilism was progressive education. Supposedly designed to enable children to prepare for modern economic and political conditions, it methods achieved neither. Dewy merely imported Rousseau’s permissiveness into the contemporary schoolroom. Like Rousseau, Marx, Maslow, and Rogers, he assumed that children left to their own devises would make the best possible choices. His technique for accomplishing this was the project method. It worked by encouraging students to select, and implement, learning ventures on their own. The teacher was there to assist, not control. The student was the one who decided to pursue the study of central African rain forests and then compile a scrapbook based on her discoveries. There would no longer be rote lessons during which the teacher lectured to a room full of passive recipients. Learning would now be active and directed toward student interests.

Progressive education was expected to expand what students learned and make them more tolerant of human diversity. In being treated with respect, they would generalize this attitude outside the classroom. Yet his is not exactly what has occurred (Rochester, 2002). The scores on academic achievement tests did not go up as promised. To the contrary, they went down. Many children graduated from school unable so much as to locate the Atlantic Ocean on a map. Nor did universal tolerance become the norm. In many schools—especially in inner city neighborhoods—merely maintaining classroom discipline became a significant achievement. Permissiveness gone to extremes did not breed niceness, but a lack of personal controls.

For children coming from middle class families, this did not matter very much. They came from environments in which moral rules were enforced and where learning was encouraged (Lareau, 2003). Their parents tended to be fairly directive and aimed them toward what was thought they needed to learn. Meanwhile the children of lower
class families were left adrift. Unlucky enough to come from families that frequently did not support academic pursuits, they looked elsewhere for social success. As a result, fewer lived up to their potential. They did not become the moral or academic exemplars the progressives imagined.

Science too has been complicit in the spread of good nihilism. Sociobiology (Wilson, 1975), primatology (de Waal, 1996, 2006), and ethology, in particular, have addressed these matters. They have documented the parallels between animal and human behavior, including moral and pre-moral behavior. Animals such as chimpanzees apparently have mechanisms for maintaining order within their groups and many of these have counterparts in human communities. Among the most important of these devices are sympathy and altruism (Trivers, 1971). Individual animals often take care of others because they evidently feel compassion for them. They sometimes even sacrifice themselves on behalf of another. Much of this, it is speculated, is on behalf of perpetuating the gene pool to which the benefactor belongs. By, for instance, helping a sibling in trouble, genes similar to the helpers are forwarded into the next generation.

This sort of behavior is also encountered in human beings. We too are more disposed to help relatives than strangers. Furthermore, doing so, it is hypothesized, is the underlying source of morality. People are theoretically kind to others because this tends to preserve their own genes. This is not outlandish, for even David Hume (1739) more than two and a half centuries ago, attributed morality to our tendency to feel sympathy for others. And yet, this too is a nihilistic stance. Although these observations may be accurate, they imply that external controls are not necessary to keep individuals from harming others. They do not require moral rules to impose pro-social conduct because the impetus to assist others is biologically imposed. Morality is about making sure that people do what they may not want to, but according to the sociobiologists, they are pre-programmed to do good. In other words, morality conceived of as an external control is superfluous.

The degree to which these various “good” nihilistic perspectives resonate with people has been on display in recent entertainments. Americans, at least, but apparently a good many of those who reside in other communities, want to believe that we human
beings are fundamentally nice. It is this, in part, that accounts for the enormous success of the highest grossing movie of all time: Avatar. It posits a far distant society of human-like creatures who live in complete harmony with each other and nature. The film literally portrays them as physically connected to many other creatures. As a consequence, they treat all other life forms respectfully because they are essential part of a single inter-dependent ecosystem. Existence on their planet is idyllic, without the intervention moral prescriptions, because these are unwarranted. The protagonists behave morally because this is who they are.

**The Bad Nihilists**

Bad nihilism is much less attractive than the good. It has had its partisans, but not nearly as many. Perhaps the most influential of these was Friedrich Nietzsche (1989), who prided himself on being a no-nonsense advocate of human progress. As the son of a protestant minister, it might be supposed that he would defend Christian theology. But he did not. Far from it, he attacked Christianity as a slave religion. According to him, weak people developed it for other weak people. They sought to excuse their impotence by making a virtue out of subservience. In complying with the many rules imposed by a supernaturally powerful being (God), they associated themselves with his strength. This, however, was an illusion. Their reflexive compliance made them weaker, not stronger.

Nietzsche wanted the genuinely strong to prevail. They should not have to bow down to the mandates of a fictional being. Rather, they should take fate into their own hands. They must compete for supremacy and achieve it. In Nietzsche’s words, they were ubermensch, i.e., supermen, who deserved to come out on top. They must therefore live by their own rules and force others to comply. This too was nihilism, but not of a human-friendly sort—that is, for ordinary people. In Nietzsche’s universe, conventional morality was a fraud. It was to be replaced by arbitrary commandments created and enforced by humans who had the power to do so. Whether or not this injured most people was immaterial to him.

This is not most people’s idea of morality. Nor was it Nietzsche’s. He thought of this as a substitute for morality, not an alternate to it. And yet for most of us, Nietzsche’s universe is far from congenial. It comes much too close to Thomas Hobbes (1956)
Moral Nihilism 14

depiction of a state of nature. Supermen, each fighting to be superior to everyone else, provide a reasonable facsimile of Hobbes war of all against all. This then would seem to be the antithesis of a moral situation. Nor might it be supposed that the ubermensch would themselves always prevail. Lined up against each other, as well as their inferiors, at some point they might be expected to lose their battles. This is nihilism with a hard edge.

Satanism provides bad nihilism with an even nastier face. If some people believe that morality was dictated by a deity, others are prepared to resist His dictates. They insist that the traditional Western God is not genuinely moral. Rules against sexual promiscuity or robbery strike them as arbitrary and destructive to human freedom. As a result, they are attracted to God’s rival—the devil. For the Satanists, morality may be possible, but is less than useless. It is inimical to the lifestyle they wish to follow. Ultimately, they reject it as invalid. From their perspective there is no authentic morality.

But here too there is a problem. As with Nietzsche’s universe, unregulated conflict may be expected to become rife in the Satanist version. Without rules to control the aggression in which they revel, what is to stop the devil’s devotees from destroying each other’s gratifications? Couldn’t the evil they celebrate be turned against them?

A final form of bad nihilism is found in Social Darwinism (Bannister, 1979). This philosophy, which is often mistakenly conflated with Charles Darwin’s ideas about evolution, had a brief florescence at the end of the nineteenth century. It took the notion of “the survival of the fittest” and applied it to human communities. Evolution was used to explain the human condition. Individual people were understood as in competition, with only some emerging on top. They were the survivors of the human struggle to succeed. But the Social Darwinists went further. They proclaimed that this is the way it “should” be. Moreover, they further prescribed that the losers deserved to be eliminated. They must be allowed to lose so that the species can be strengthened. In other words, they turned a description of how species evolve into a prescription of how human societies should operate.

Much as with Nietzsche, they gloried in allowing the strong to prevail. Then they went further and decreed that moral rules which encouraged people to help the weak were
illegitimate. If, let us say, the Irish were dying of starvation from a potato famine, they must not be rescued by weak-kneed exhortations to send them relief packages. Moral rules that directed people to succor the frail were, in essence, immoral. Nature herself decreed that those who could not win battles to survive were to be eliminated. A misguided moralism must not be allowed to prevent evolution from taking its course and producing ever-stronger human beings.

Of course, it was the Social Darwinists who were misguided. Evolution does not decree that members of a species cannot help each other to survive. Ethologists have discovered that they do so all the time. Nor does it demand that the weak be left to suffer in isolation. Evolution is morally neutral. It is not a teleological process where the endpoint is known in advance. As a scientific theory, it describes what has happened, and perhaps projects what might happen. But it does not stipulate that individuals must treat others in a specified manner. In fact, were the Social Darwinists true to the theory they supposedly endorse, they would have been more full-blown nihilists and declared that morality is an epiphenomenon. They would have asserted that there are no specific moral rules in nature and hence none it was their duty to advance.

The Skeptical Nihilists

The good and the bad nihilists largely assert that morality is unnecessary. For the most part, they urge people to step back from the moral enterprise and allow others to make decisions based on their natural instincts. The good nihilists generally believe these impulses are virtuous and therefore should not be sidetracked by rules that might be less so. The bad nihilists demand a similar hands-off policy, but because they are convinced that conventionally prohibited conduct should be allowed to proceed. The skeptical nihilists, in contrast, declare that morality is impossible. They consider it an illusion that contains no truth-value. People may act as if morality had substance, but it does not. At best, it is a mirage.

Among the most explicit of the skeptical nihilists are the post-modernists (Foucault, 1972, 1995, 2009). They tell us that there is no such thing as truth. Because the world is devilishly complex, the best we human beings can manage are opinions. We believe some things and not others for reasons that are not always apparent. Individuals
then vie to persuade one another of their opinions. Nevertheless, the underlying reality is that no one can be certain of what is right. This analysis applies to cognitive matters, but also to moral ones. No one can guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow, but neither can we be positive that lying is wrong. Perhaps it is and perhaps it isn’t. All we really have are our private convictions; convictions that can never be independently verified.

This, however, does not prevent the post-modernists from attempting to persuade others of their views. And make no mistake; they expend considerable effort in doing so. By and large, left-wing in their political leanings, they tend to oppose capitalism. Market-based economics are usually portrayed as hard-hearted and self-contradictory. Indeed, much ink has been spilled attempting to “deconstruct” conservative positions. They are unpacked to show that they do not mean what they purport to mean and are therefore unworthy of being persuasive. Meanwhile post-modernists sympathize with the downtrodden and therefore regard themselves as worthy of greater respect. When they recommend that the mentally ill, criminals, and homosexuals be treated with dignity, we are expected to be impressed. Objective moral rules may not exist, but we are asked to treat their prescriptions as if they were.

Related to this perspective is that of the emotivists. As elucidated by A.J. Ayer (1936), morality is alleged to be about emotions. It may seem that moralists are making truth-statements, but they are merely expressing their personal expressive reactions. Thus, when someone declares that lying is wrong, all he is really saying is that he does not approve of lying; that he gets upset when someone tells a fabrication. This is his gut speaking, not the universe underwriting a particular rule as correct. Indeed, no moral rules are correct; they merely have more, or fewer, subscribers. As thoroughgoing skeptics, the emotivists are not as consistent in their personal convictions as the post-modernists. Less likely to portray themselves as paragons of virtue, they generally allow their personal commitments to remain personal.

Many skeptics, however, go beyond allegations that morality lacks truth-value. They assert that the existing rules reflect power arrangements. What is customarily deemed right is what those who have the clout to enforce their own prejudices have decreed to be right. Moreover, they do not issue these fiats on behalf of humanity at
large, but to promote their own interests. Perhaps they are whites seeking to dominate blacks, or men attempting to exploit women, or property owners attempting to get the better of the property-less classes. In any event, they are camouflaging exploitation by making it seem more altruistic than it is. In other words, morality is a con game. It is merely a more comprehensive version of what Marx alleged that capitalists did by promoting religion. If workers could be convinced they would go to heaven by passively accepting maltreatment in the workplace, their bosses would be safe from revolution. And so will whites, men, and heterosexuals, if they can impose their preferred standards of morality.

A particularly candid version of this argument has been used to support affirmative action. When opponents of providing workplace advantages to African-Americans and/or women assert that doing so will lower the quality of those hired, defenders of this policy argue that this is disingenuous. According to them, the characteristics emphasized by employment gatekeepers are self-serving. They are chosen so that individuals who resemble those who do the hiring will pass. So-called merit is declared a fraud. People are all basically the same and pretending otherwise is a scam designed to help those with the power to set the rules.

Cognitive therapists like Albert Ellis (1962, 1977) have also alleged that morality is not what it is thought to be. They contend that it is often used to injure those who cannot defend themselves. Vulnerable people are asked to feel guilty about what they want so they will refrain from doing what affronts those who intend to manipulate them. Ellis maintains that this is essentially to “should” on people and is illegitimate. He would allow people to follow their own desires without being controlled by disguised forms of social influence.

It should be noted that nihilists previously described as falling within the “good” and “bad” camps also disparage morality as illegitimate. They too argue that the enterprise is used by the powerful to control the weak. Thus, they too would interpret conventional morality as a fraud. Rousseau, for one, portrays the pretensions of French aristocrats in these terms. They may have believed they had a divine right to rule, but he argued this was a fiction. Likewise, Marx made an analogous argument when he
portrayed capitalists as inventing a benevolence they did not possess. If they described
themselves as good people protecting the interests of their workers, this was a fabrication
of monumental proportions. Even Nietzsche suggested that morality was manufactured.
In this case, however, it was the lower classes who engaged in mendacity. When they
represented themselves as especially virtuous because they were weak, this was as self-
serving as any elite representation of themselves.

Finally, Alan Wolfe (2001) has offered a uniquely American version of morality.
His extension of moral relativism from societies to individuals may be thought of as a
way of defining morality or of implying that it cannot be defined. On its face, Wolfe
declares that what is moral is what individuals decide that it is. If, after careful
consideration, competent adults endorse one moral rule over another, then that is the rule
which applies to them. Some may therefore decide that abortion is moral, while others
come to the opposite conclusion. In any event, both sides have a right to choose and
these choices deserve to be respected. To put the matter simply, moral rules are what
they say they are—for them.

Except that there is a grave difficulty with this interpretation. If everyone gets to
decide morality for him or herself, no one can criticize anyone else. All get to do what
they want without fear of social sanctions. But this amounts to moral anarchy, i.e., to
questioning the legitimacy of morality as a social institution. Exclusively private
moralities are not moralities at all. They are simply individual manifestations of conduct.
Morality—to be morality—implies social standards of acceptance. Were these absent,
there could be no social controls on deviant behavior, in which case the notion of moral
control would be nonsensical. Wolfe’s individual relativism therefore entails a
skepticism regarding morality as an institution. Whether intended or not, he implies that
a genuine morality is impossible.

**Moral Nihilism in Context**

One way or other, the moral nihilists tell us that morality is unnecessary. Their
reasons may differ, but their central conclusions remain. If they are correct, morality can
be thrown overboard. It is an excessive weight that brings no tangible benefits, and may
do serious harm. This implies that nihilists ought to shun moralizing. Rather than judge
others, or enforce particular rules, they should allow others to follow pathways of their own choosing.

Yet as has been noted, almost all of these nihilists, whether good, bad, or skeptical, have strong moral convictions. Whether they acknowledge them or not, they are intent on promulgating specific prescriptions. To be more precise, Rousseau hated the elites of his day. He clearly thought that they were not entitled to the advantages they exercised. But was this not a moral judgment? Didn’t he believe that their alleged selfishness was morally obscene? And didn’t Rousseau also believe they needed to be torn from their high-and-mighty perches? What is more, he was prepared to sanction them by advocating a revolution. In truth, Rousseau was not only a moralist, but an incredibly influential moralist.

Marx, his scientific pretensions aside, cast a jaundiced eye on the capitalists as a class. He considered them parasitic exploiters who deserved to be overthrown. Indeed, the very term exploitation is a moral one. It suggests that those who exploit others are bad; that they are essentially stealing from them. The post-modernists, of course, exhibit a comparable attitude. Unquestionably inspired by the Marxists, they too wish to promote the interests of the underdog. Hence, whether or not they eschew moral language, they are bathed in moral sentiments.

Needless to say, Nietzsche was likewise moralistic. His values might not accord with those favored by most, but they are undoubtedly principled—that is, as he understood principled. Nietzsche wanted his ubermensch to prevail. He wanted them to be able to impose their standards on others. In his view, this betokened a more fundamental justice. Similarly, even Albert Ellis, though very different from Nietzsche, had strong moral convictions. A careful reading of his works reveals him to be a conventional liberal. Unlike Nietzsche, he believes in people being nice to one another.

Yet he is prepared to advocate this by urging that they not advocate anything which might impinge on the prerogatives of others. In general, those who allege that morality is the invention of the powerful are not favorably disposed to those at top of the social hierarchy. But more than this, they heap moral scorn upon them. Far from being nonjudgmental, bringing down the powerful is their central concern.
So why is this? Why do thinkers who allege that morality is either unnecessary or illusory indulge in it with such frequency? And if they do not furnish a third alternative to the principal moral debates, what are they doing? Are they merely hypocritical, or is something else going on?

The way to understand what is occurring is to examine the nature of morality as a social institution. If instead of participating in the enterprise—that is, if instead of attempting to determine what is right or wrong, we engage in a sociological dissection of its mechanisms, what is going on becomes explicable. Morality, it turns out, is a tripartite phenomenon (Fein, 1997, 1999). The nature of its rules, how these are constructed, and how they are enforced determine why it is sometimes employed in the misleading fashion of the various nihilists.

First, moral rules are informal and paradigmatic. They are not the pithy verbal propositions we usually assume them to be. Prescriptions such as “Do not lie” may seem unambiguous, whereas they are anything but. There may indeed be a rule against lying, but it is learned by witnessing the many, variable, instances in which lying is restricted. Moreover, these prohibitions include numerous exceptions, few of which are ever unequivocally explained. In some ways, this makes moral rules like clouds. They do not have exact shapes with precise outlines, and therefore sometimes seem insubstantial. And yet they are real. Despite their constant mutations, their consequences are extensive. Moral rules are factual, despite being ephemeral and indefinite. Recurrently capable of being reinterpreted, they do not consist of an authoritative set of absolute imperatives. Nonetheless, they are bona fide aspects of the human condition.

These qualities have enabled some nihilists to portray moral rules as virtually non-existent. But this makes sense only if they are required to be solid and consistent. They are not and hence can never be completely pinned down. This may allow some to declare that they have no truth-value, yet this is misleading. Yes, they are not true in the sense that, “the sky is blue,” is, but this does not condemn them to meaninglessness. Despite being elastic, injunctions not to lie are understandable and have substantial consequences. They are decidedly not nonsense, irrespective of their imprecision or lack of descriptive substance.
Second, moral rules are created via polarized, quasi-dialectical, social negotiations. Much as there is a marketplace for economic goods and services (Hayek, 1998), there is one for moral rules. A moving social consensus is gradually hammered out by way of push-pull processes in which millions of individuals partake. These negotiations, however, are not necessarily explicit or orderly. Like moral rules, they too are informal, with no one in charge of keeping them on track. Although they tend to make progress, and do so in a step-by-step progression, there are many confusing twists and turns along the way.

But more than this, moral negotiations are almost always polarized. Typically two sides contend to determine which prescriptions will prevail. A simple example would be the factions currently at odds about the acceptability of abortion. These tend to line up against each other, with each side consumed by a good guy/bad guy mentality. The opposing bloc is routinely regarded as having no redeeming qualities; hence it is assumed that it must be roundly defeated. This, in turn, tends to produce an intolerant extremism. As a consequence, both factions are frequently unrealistically idealistic and self-righteously intransigent. Thus, during the worst of the hostilities it may appear that no solution is possible, but one usually emerges—if perhaps only after centuries of contention. Witness the battles between Catholics and Protestants in early modern Europe over issues such as indulgences.

Given the apparent intractability of moral negotiations, it is not surprising that some should seek a less contentious way out. The nihilistic positions are thought to provide this. These theorists are saying that the conventional moral disputes make no sense and should therefore be abandoned. If only the participants would realize that their disagreement is nonsensical and allow people to be themselves, all would be well.

Or so it seems. But appearances can be misleading. The nihilists are generally not a third force pleading for sanity. To the contrary, they are typically active players in the prevailing moral negotiations. They are not neutral observers, but have particular points of view they wish to promote. The uniqueness of their stance lies in trying to camouflage these goals. In presenting themselves without moral agendas, they seek to lull their opponents into letting down their guard. Failing this, they seek to define their
foes as inherently without merit. This is achieved by dismissing an opponent’s prescriptions as meaningless. These others are being judgmental, whereas being judgmental is illegitimate. But from whence comes their verdict? It too is a moral judgment, but one masquerading as an unbiased observation. Moral nihilists habitually refrain from admitting to their moral predispositions because this might call them into question. Rather, they attempt to appear above the fray so that they can judge others, while barring their opponents from returning the favor.

Third, morality is primarily enforced by our emotions (Fein, 1993). For the most part, we do not sanction rule breakers by physically inflicting injury. We are more likely to control untoward conduct through emotional reactions. Thus, we get angry with rule breakers. We express moral indignation, they get nervous, and then they refrain from violating a moral tenet. Or we induce them to feel guilty about a transgression. Then their guilt disciplines them. They, as it were, get angry with themselves and force themselves into submission. Shame and disgust are also important moral motivators. But these work through a different channel. They induce miscreants to hide from negative social attention. Then when they do so, they cease being models of undesirable conduct. This technique is successful precisely because moral rules are paradigmatically learned. In eliminating bad examples, fewer persons are apt to emulate them.

The emotivists are therefore correct in emphasizing the emotional quality of morality. Where they go wrong is in assuming that this robs it of its substance. Although moral rules are emotionally enforced, this does not, of itself, make them arbitrary or illusory. Morality makes a big difference regardless of its peculiar character. That it is not a compendium of supernaturally decreed rules does not consign it to illegitimate impotence. Morality is a process. It is something that we do, rather than something we discover. Feelings are part of the process, but only a part. They contribute to how its rules are negotiated and enforced, but not in some peculiarly material manner. To dismiss their validity because they do not fit preconceived notions of what they should be is a serious mistake; one that, were it honored, would interfere with vital moral operations.
Conclusion

Moral nihilism is ubiquitous. In many quarters it is the preferred means of understanding morality and moral prescriptions. Nevertheless, it is critically flawed. Morality is a social phenomenon. As such, there can be no question that it exists. The real issue is what sort of phenomenon is it? To claim that morality is meaningless or unnecessary is to short-circuit an investigation that should be at the heart of sociology. Instead of implicitly endorsing some moral positions rather than others, it is essential to assume a more empirical stance. *A priori* insisting there is nothing to learn is a self-defeating policy.

A reflexive moral nihilism is also dangerous. The claim that morality is unnecessary would have tragic consequences were it taken seriously. To assume that people are naturally good is to subscribe to a fairytale. We human beings are often good and many of us are good most of the time, but no one is perfect and some of us are far from faultless. The good nihilists may argue that left to our own instincts people would revert to a primordial innocence, but the evidence for this is nonexistent. In the meantime, we human beings need to be protected from some of our most violent and selfish impulses. Morality is one of the mechanisms we use to control these propensities. It may be an imperfect instrument, but it is one upon which we have historically relied. To jettison it without a reliable substitute is therefore foolhardy.

References:


