

IF NOTHING MATTERS

1. HOW NIHILISM MIGHT BE TRUE

Some of us, at some points in our lives, are struck by a vision of the universe as devoid of value. In such a state of mind, all human striving appears absurd, and the grandest achievements seem worthless. One feels that nothing matters.

It is possible that such feelings have always been around, but they appear in their most acute form in the disenchanting modern era, with the rise of natural science and the decline of religious belief and traditional forms of life. Nietzsche famously announced that “nihilism stands at the door,”¹ and many European thinkers thought that philosophy’s most urgent task is to [refute or overcome or] face up to this crisis—the impression that science has shown value to be an illusion.

It is a remarkable fact about recent metaethics that one can find in it none of this anxiety, even though it has long been dominated by naturalism. Until fairly recently, this was because most metaethicists assumed that fear of nihilism is due to a simple confusion, [the failure to distinguish, as Bernard Williams puts it,

between thinking that our activities fail some test of cosmic significance, and... recognizing that there... is no other point of view except ours in which our activities can have or lack a significance.²] [Blackburn, ‘Errors’]

[..] Richard Hare tells the story of a guest of his, a young Swiss student, [who?] after reading Camus, concluded in despair that nothing matters.³ Hare suggested that his guest should ask ‘What was the meaning or function of the word ‘matters’ in our language; what is it to be important?’ Hare soon convinced the Swiss student that

when we say something matters... [we] express our concern about that something... If the function of the expression ‘matters’ is to express concern, and if concern is always somebody’s concern, we can always ask, when it is said that something matters... ‘Whose concern?’⁴

Hare got his guest to admit that he was in fact concerned about many things, and the crisis was over—or at least so Hare reports.

If some antirealist view [explain not only non-cog, and mention that error-t also taken to be antirealist] gives the correct account of evaluative discourse, then it’s false to conclude that, because there are no mind-independent facts about value, then nothing matters. Things do matter, and in the only way they can—by being the objects of our subjective concerns, or by meeting certain standards we adopt, and so forth. On this diagnosis, the Swiss student didn’t make any mistake about the world—he made a simple mistake about language. [fn. on FN, Williams, and Blackburn here?]

It’s by no means obvious, however, that antirealism gives the correct account of evaluative discourse. Remarking on Hare’s story, Derek Parfit writes that

¹ 1976, XII: 129.

² 2006. Nietzsche similarly remarks that “[o]ne interpretation was destroyed: but because it passed for *the* interpretation, existence seems meaningless, all seems futile...” 1968, 55.

³ 1972, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

Hare accept[s] [a] non-cognitivist view. That is why, when Hare's friend concluded that nothing mattered, Hare didn't try to remind him that some things, such as suffering, do matter.⁵

There are plenty of philosophers who will agree with Parfit that the student didn't make any mistake about our evaluative discourse. It was Hare who got that wrong, and if his therapy was effective, then it was conceptual confusion that *cured* the student's despair. The student did make a mistake, but this was a mistake about the world: there really are things, like suffering, that objectively matter.

But as Mackie pointed out a long time ago, there is also a third alternative.⁶ Parfit and other realists might be right about our evaluative discourse, and Williams and Hare might be right about the world. And if to matter is to matter *objectively*, as realists claim, then if nothing matters objectively then nothing matters *simpliciter*. That various things subjectively matter to us would be irrelevant. Evaluative nihilism would be true. [Sympathy with the idea that simple mistake. But distinguish thought that can't accept conclusion from implausible view that simple mistake.]

When Hare confronted the Swiss student, few metaethicists took this form of argument for nihilism seriously. The realist commitments it attributed to evaluative discourse seemed, at the time, implausible strong. But this is no longer true. Robustly realist accounts of evaluative discourse have since received vigorous defence.⁷ At the same time, it can hardly be said that all metaphysical and epistemic worries about realism have been fully addressed. And there is a growing minority of metaethicists who follow Mackie—error theorists who agree that our discourse has these realist commitments, but who doubt that there is anything out there that satisfies them.⁸

Now some of these error theorists restrict their claims to morality; they are not nihilists in the relevant sense. Others (and that includes Mackie in some passages) write as if the scope of their claims is wider than mere morality.⁹ But we can set this exegetical issue aside. With other antirealists, error theorists argue that

(1) Nothing matters objectively.

Some of them think that only moral discourse is committed to such robust objectivity. But many realists (and perhaps some error theorists) defend the claim that that evaluative and practical normative discourse has robustly realist commitments quite generally.¹⁰ These metaethicists hold that

(2) For something to matter just is for it to matter objectively. [If rejected (1), would be reason to reject (2); Blackburn. Or: if our beliefs deeply out of synch with supposed objective ones, we'll just dismiss the latter, stick to subjective concern.

Or: since (3) clearly false, if (1) true then (2) must be false; or vice versa. (Though worry about metaphysics->semantics.

Another (Strawsonian?) reading is: we'll hold on to our eval beliefs whatever the arguments, won't care about such a conclusion. But that just begs the q.]

And from (1) and (2), it simply follows that

(3) Nothing matters.

⁵ 2006, 326.

⁶ Mackie, 1977, ch. 1.

⁷ Shafer-Landau, 2003; Huemer, 2006; Parfit, 2011.

⁸ Joyce, 2001; Joyce and Kirchin, 2010. OLSON. Struemer?

⁹ Streumer, 2013.

¹⁰ Parfit, 2011.

It's not particularly surprising that few metaethicists explicitly endorse both (1) and (2). But each of these claims has been supported by powerful and independent arguments, and has been endorsed by some of our best philosophers. And if both are true, then the Swiss student *was* right, and nothing really matters.

A sober assessment of the state of play in current metaethics therefore suggests that unqualified evaluative nihilism is not a crazy view, and may even be true. In fact, I'm inclined to think that a sober assessment of the current state of play suggests that nihilism is **fairly** likely to be true.¹¹ Nihilism may no longer grip the St. Petersburg underground or Parisian cafés, but its prospects have never seemed brighter. [Perhaps emphasise more than now that realist semantics just one route; that compatible with Street, Blackburn etc. and that needn't be based on a metaethical argument]

It would be hard, however, to find much anxiety about these developments. This is because many contemporary philosophers also appear to disagree with Camus and the Swiss student on a further issue. They disagree about what *follows* from the truth of nihilism. They appear to think that the real confusion is to think that anything very exciting follows from nihilism, let alone grounds for despair or suicide. Nihilism is seen as a second-order, metaethical view, which needn't make any difference to the substance of evaluative practice. Even if nothing matters, everything would, and perhaps even should, go on pretty much the same as before.

My aim here is to clarify what is at stake in the question of nihilism. I will argue that the complacency about it in current metaethics is misguided. It is very unlikely, at best, that things would go on as before, if we came to believe in nihilism without reservation. And although familiar forms of existentialist anxiety are indeed confused, this doesn't mean that there is nothing to fear in nihilism.

I shall proceed as follows. I shall begin by clarifying what it would mean for nihilism to be true. I'll then consider what would follow from the truth of nihilism and, in particular, whether we have reason to fear nihilism, or to feel despair if we conclude that nothing matter. I will next turn to consider what it would mean to literally *believe* that nihilism is true, and what is likely to follow from such a belief. I conclude by explaining what it is that we should fear about nihilism. [State argument more clearly, esp. sec. 4.5; and even earlier than above?]

2. WHAT NIHILISTS DENY

When someone feels, or fears, that nothing matters, they rarely have any terribly precise metaethical position in mind. But the basic idea is clear enough.

To think that nothing matters isn't, of course, to deny that very many things matter, and matter greatly, *to* very many people: pain and happiness, death, prosperity, kindness, cancer, and genocide, to name just a few. To think that nothing matter is to deny that any of these things—or anything else—*really* matters, that any of these things actually objectively deserves our attention or concern. Nothing is worth doing or caring about.

¹¹ To make things worse (if that's the right word), the error-theoretical argument for nihilism outlined above is merely one way in which nihilism might be true. There are others: for example, perhaps our evaluative discourse commits us rather to agreement in ideal conditions, but no such agreement will be achieved (cf. Smith, 2006). And nihilism may be a possibility even on some antirealist views (see e.g. Blackburn, 1996), and could also be defended on purely substantive grounds. Put together, these considerations suggest an even higher probability that nihilism is true. //And if Parfit 2011 is right in thinking that if robust realism is false, then this essentially means that nothing really matters, then it would be *very* likely that nihilism is true (many would reject this conditional, but even more would accept its antecedent).// [Move up?]

2.1. Evaluative Nihilism

In the first instance, we can understand this as a claim about value: *evaluative nihilism* is the claim that

(4) Nothing is good or bad.

On this view, we cannot truly ascribe value properties—properties such as being valuable, good, bad, better or worse—to anything. Put differently, evaluative nihilism is the claim that

(5) All positive evaluative propositions are false. [drop positive or explain?]

By value, I mean here final value—[[whether something is desirable or valuable as an end]]—as well as whatever instrumental value would derive from it. There are also other senses of value. Many things have merely *functional* value. Some forks are better than others. They would still be better, as forks, even in a world in which nothing had final value. But when someone worries that nothing matters, they are not lamenting the lack of good cutlery. [consider as fn.?]

2.2. Practical Nihilism

To have final value is to be desirable, and worth caring about. This sense of value has an inherent normative dimension: if something has final value, then there are normative *reasons* to value it (by promoting or respecting it, etc.). Thus, if pleasure is good, then we have reason to seek pleasure. But if pleasure *isn't* good (if it has no value), then we don't have such reasons. Now if *all* practical reasons have their source in value (as is claimed, for example, by some consequentialists) then *no* practical reasons would remain. Evaluative nihilism would imply *practical nihilism*—the view that

(6) We have no reasons to do, want, or feel anything.

There are, however, views of practical reason that recognize reasons for action that *don't* have their source in value—think of common ways of understanding deontological constraints. To the extent that such value-independent reasons exist, then evaluative nihilism won't imply practical nihilism.

On one popular view of the concept of value, claims about value are to be understood, not as *generating* claims about reasons, but as *reducible* to such claims.¹² If this fitting attitude view of value is correct, then evaluative nihilism doesn't only imply a negative claim about reasons but is such a claim. On this view, practical nihilism would imply evaluative nihilism. But the reverse still won't be true: even if value can be reduced to reasons, evaluative nihilism won't imply practical nihilism so long as there are value-independent practical reasons.

So evaluative nihilism and practical nihilism are at least in principle independent views. In what follows, however, I will set this aside: when I speak of nihilism, I will mean *both* the view that nothing has final value, and that there are no reasons to want, do or feel anything. I think that this best captures what worries about nihilism typically involve. It's not by accident that Nietzsche describes nihilism both as the "repudiation of value"¹³ and as the view that "[t]he aim is lacking: 'Why?' finds no answer."¹⁴ After all, if there remained even some reasons to act in certain ways then it would matter whether we act in these ways; something would still matter. Moreover,

¹² Scanlon, 1998. [pp.?]

¹³ 1968, 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

the central metaphysical worries about objective value are best understood as worries about objective *reasons*. Mackie's worries, for example, focus on the notion of *objective prescriptivity*—worries that Joyce develops into an explicit argument against authoritative, desire-independent reasons.¹⁵

2.3. Moral Nihilism [delete?]

It's worth also clarifying the relation between nihilism in the sense considered here and moral error theory, or moral nihilism, as I will refer to it. If evaluative nihilism is true, then

(7) There are no moral values.

If practical nihilism is true, then

(8) There are no moral reasons, obligations and requirements.

Nihilism, as I understand it, therefore implies moral nihilism. But clearly the converse isn't true, not unless all values and reasons are moral. Even if morality is a myth, rational egoism might still be true. Even if there are no moral values and reasons, there may still be prudential values and reasons. It won't be true that nothing at all matters.

Mackie and some more recent error theorists sometimes appear to be endorsing the claim that nothing really matters. But many statements of the error theory are really statements of moral nihilism, a far weaker view. This is how Mackie is now usually interpreted,¹⁶ although he also makes remarks—explicitly commenting, for example, about existentialist angst—that suggest he has something more radical in mind.

To the extent that an author denies the existence of objective values and reasons, but ends up defending only this weaker form of nihilism, then this author holds a hybrid metaethical view on which

(9) Only claims about moral obligations or values make the kind of demanding commitment to objectivity that nothing out there can satisfy; other normative and evaluative claims don't have this commitment, and are therefore exempt from error.

In other words, only part of our evaluative discourse needs to be understood in a robustly realist way. The rest is best understood in antirealist terms. [what is 'antirealist terms' here – non-cognitivist terms? I think it would strengthen the paper here to take into account some of the things Jonas Olson says in his 2014 book. Olson argues that reasons for belief and hypothetical reasons can be understood in a reductive way, so in a way that is neither antirealist nor non-cognitivist. Joyce makes similar claims.]

[[Keep this para somewhere??]] When Mackie first proposed his moral error theory, few agreed that moral discourse is strongly realist in the sense he described—

¹⁵ It has been argued that doubts about practical reasons also commit us to doubts about epistemic reasons, and that such general normative nihilism is self-stultifying (Cuneo, 2007) or even impossible to believe (Streumer, 2013). These arguments are beyond the scope of this paper (though see Olson 2014 and Lillehammer and Moller 2014 for criticism). Notice, however, that even if evaluative nihilism implies that we have no reasons to believe it, it may remain the case that there is conclusive evidence for its truth. And *once* one has arrived at the nihilistic conclusion that there are no reasons, including reasons to believe this very conclusion, this doesn't matter, since at this point one no longer recognizes reasons of any kind, including reasons to care about consistency, or reasons *not* to believe in nihilism. [too quick. If Streumer 2013 is right, we cannot arrive "at the nihilistic conclusion that there are no reasons" since we cannot believe that there are no reasons for belief.]

¹⁶ See e.g. Joyce, *ibid.* [add numbers?]

and virtually no one thought that this is true of claims about one's own interests. But, as we saw, things have changed. Many now defend the view that even prudential requirements are strongly objective, and that our subjective attitudes never generate practical reasons on their own.¹⁷ Some even hold that instrumental rationality needs an objective input to have any genuine normative authority.¹⁸

We needn't enter into these debates here. For my purposes here, it suffices to note that nihilism in the sense that generates existential anxiety is a rather different view from mere moral nihilism, and far more radical, and that such unqualified nihilism is both intelligible and has a non-negligible (and perhaps even considerable) chance of being true.

2.4. Second-order Nihilism?

It might be objected that in setting out the relation between nihilism and the error theory, I have been overlooking an important distinction. The error theory, Mackie insists, is a *second-order*, metaethical view. Even if it were to be extended to encompass not just moral value, but value quite generally, it still shouldn't be confused with the logically independent first-order 'practical stand' that nothing matters.¹⁹

However, while we could draw this distinction, if we wish to, for our purposes here this distinction makes no difference.

Recall that evaluative nihilism claims that

(4) Nothing is good or bad.

Notice first that this claim makes no mention of anything to do with semantics, metaphysics or any other metaethical issue. In fact in one good sense this is surely just a general claim about value, entirely continuous with the substantive claims that *almost* nothing has value, that *few* things have value, that only *one* thing has value...²⁰

What is true, however, is that one way to *support* evaluative nihilism—perhaps (but not obviously) the most plausible way to do so—is through the conjunction of semantic and metaphysical claims of the kind associated with Mackie's error theory. But this is a point about our *grounds* for accepting nihilism, not about *its* content. In principle you could also accept evaluative nihilism on substantive grounds—you might, for example, just *see* or *intuit* that nothing matters.²¹

[[Start here? Perhaps move later?]]

Consider next Mackie's claim that the belief that nothing matters is by itself compatible with any kind of practical stance—with any pattern of behaviour and concern.²² Now it's true that if you have no reason to care about anything, it doesn't follow that you have reason to be *indifferent*. This is true, but still fails to distinguish 'substantive' and 'metaethical' nihilism. This point follows from the content of nihilism, and has nothing whatsoever to do with what grounds it. It would follow even if we endorsed nihilism on substantive grounds.

More important for my purposes, however, is what follows from belief in nihilism. Now if nothing matters, then it doesn't even matter whether or not we

¹⁷ See again Parfit, 2011. [Bedke, 'Might all normativity?]

¹⁸ See Korsgaard, 1996; Broome, 1999; Raz, 2005. [mention replies?]

¹⁹ 1977, 16. See also Joyce and Kirchin, 2007, 422-423. who says this in that collection??

²⁰ See Sinnott-Armstrong, 1997. pp.

²¹ If we focus on the moral domain, it's true that there is a difference between claiming that everything is permitted and claiming that nothing is either permitted or forbidden. But there is no parallel distinction relating to value or practical reasons.

²² *Ibid.*, 1977. pp.

believe that nothing matters. It doesn't matter—but for our purposes, this doesn't matter, since what we are asking now is simply *what it is* to believe that nothing matter, what is *logically required* for someone to genuinely have that belief. And to believe that nothing matters simply is to believe that *no* thing matters—to withdraw *all* of one's evaluative beliefs about various specific things.²³ You cannot genuinely believe that all positive evaluative propositions are false while *still* believing that

- (10) Pain is bad; death is bad; justice is good; virtue and knowledge are valuable, etc. etc.

[It seems much to quick to say that “if you have any of these substantive evaluative beliefs, then you don't really believe in evaluative nihilism”. Can't we have inconsistent beliefs? If the author is here assuming that we only believe that p if we do not also believe something that is inconsistent with p, then it will follow that few of us believe anything at all (so this assumption can't be right). And can't we believe one thing in the seminar room while our actions make it clear that we believe something else outside the seminar room? Joyce 2001 and Olson 2014 make many relevant remarks about this that the author needs to take into account here.]

or any of the numerous first-order evaluative beliefs we have about particular things. Conversely, if you have any of these substantive evaluative beliefs, then you *don't* really believe in evaluative nihilism. (Compare: to come to believe that there are no witches is of necessity *also* to come to believe that Sarah Good and Elizabeth Proctor aren't witches, that epileptic fits in young girls aren't due to witchcraft, etc.)

Just to be clear: the point isn't that, if we believe that nothing matters, we also have *reasons* to also believe that various particular things don't matter, or that it matters where we have these particular evaluative beliefs. The point is that it is a *logical requirement* of genuine belief in nihilism that one can no longer have [most??] these particular beliefs.²⁴ And, again, it makes no difference to this point whether we believe in nihilism on substantive or on metaethical grounds.

To believe that nothing matters is, well, to believe that nothing matters. It doesn't matter whether you believe that on the basis of an elaborate 'second-order' metaphysical argument or because it just strikes you so. And to believe that nothing matters *just is* not to have any positive evaluative beliefs. [No, not if we can have inconsistent beliefs!] is, so far, only a claim about what belief in nihilism implies with respect to our other evaluative beliefs. As we shall see below, things get more complicated when we turn to our 'practical stance', to emotion, motivation and behaviour. [Shorten up to here]

[Suppose that we start out as cognitivists. Then we conclude that there are no objective values, so we become nihilists. **But then we find that we continue to care about things.** As a result, we revise our thoughts about the nature of our evaluative judgments, and become non-cognitivists about these judgments. And this changes the nature of these judgments: these judgments are then no longer beliefs about objective value, and become non-cognitive attitudes instead.” For something like this line of thought, see Mike Ridge and Sebastian Kohler, “Revolutionary Expressivism”. Blackburn also develops thoughts along these lines in “Errors and the Phenomenology of Value”. This might not only be relevant here but might also provide a response to the author's argument in section 4.5.]

²³ If I believed that there is a cat in a box, but then you tell me that this box is empty, and I believe you, then how can I still believe that there is a cat in the box? To believe that the box is empty just is to come to believe that my belief that there is a cat in the box was false—it just is to come to lose that belief.

²⁴ Though the argument I will develop below required only the weaker claim that this is true of most particular evaluative beliefs, most of the time.

3. NOTHING TO FEAR

3.1. Gloom and Doom?

It might be true that nothing matters. This is a prospect that many dread. It drove Hare's Swiss student to despair. Nietzsche thought that "the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science ... would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead us to nausea and suicide."²⁵ Maria von Herbert, an 18th century follower of Kant, is described by Rae Langton as coming to believe that nothing has value. As Langton puts it, "[t]he emptiness all around, and the emptiness inside, are intolerable. That is why she wonders whether her life is worth living at all."²⁶ Von Herbert eventually ended her life.

But is nihilism really something to fear? If we conclude that nihilism is true, should that drive us to despair or even suicide?

Consider first what it would mean for nihilism to be true. If we take evaluative nihilism seriously enough, then anxiety about it makes little sense. For if *nothing* matters, how could it ...? *matter* that nothing matters? [could matter subjectively?] How could it be unbearably *bad* that there's absolutely nothing that is either good *or* bad?

When we feel fear or despair, we are normally responding to the perceived badness or harm associated with the object of our fear or despair. On some views, such feelings also presuppose, or even involve, evaluative judgments about badness or harm. But if evaluative nihilism is true, such responses make no sense. When Sinatra sings 'I cry my heart out it's bound to break, Since nothing matters, let it break,'²⁷ one wants to ask, why then is he crying his heart out? As Thomas Hardy's Tess remarks, 'If all were only vanity, who would mind it?'²⁸

In other words,

(11) If nothing matters, this couldn't make things *bad*, or *worse*.

There is nothing to get upset about. If Hare's Swiss guest suffered from a muddle, this was his most egregious confusion.

And if in thinking nothing matters we also endorse practical nihilism, then it is incoherent to think that, because nothing matters, we have *reason* to feel despair, or to end our lives. We can perhaps say that if nothing matters then life is not worth living, that there is no reason to go on living. But it would also be true that life is not worth *not* living—there is no reason *not* to go on living, because there are no practical reasons of *any* kind. That is,

(12) If nothing matters, there couldn't be reasons to respond to this fact with any **attitude** or act. [Perhaps there couldn't be reasons to respond to this fact, but it would still be the case that we could have a belief that accurately represents this fact. And if beliefs aim at truth (and if this can be unpacked in a non-normative way), then we will form the belief that nothing matters when we become aware of the fact that nothing matters. Nothing evaluative may be needed for this.]

So it seems that the poor soul who would follow an argument from nihilism to a morbid conclusion would have violently ended his life because he failed to detect a simple contradiction. (Though if nothing matters, this of course wouldn't matter

²⁵ 1882/1974, §107.

²⁶ Langton, 2007. x

²⁷ *In the Wee Small Hours*.

²⁸ 1891/2008.

either...²⁹)

That such reasoning involves a muddle is an old point. Nietzsche wrote that

According to ‘nihilism’, our existence... has no meaning: the pathos of ‘in vain’ is the nihilists’ pathos—at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.³⁰

And Nagel similarly criticizes Camus’s suggestion that we should respond to the absurdity of life with proud defiance:

Such dramatics, even if carried out in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn’t matter either...³¹

Nagel however immediately oddly adds that we can therefore approach our absurd lives with irony rather than heroism or despair—a suggestion that would fall into the same trap if meant as a recommendation.

3.2. Worry Without Reason?

It might be objected that when we feel depressed, and find everything pointless, this feeling may persist even if we believe that many things do matter, and that we have no reason to feel depressed. Couldn’t we, in a similar way, feel depressed even if we believe that nothing matters, and that there is no reason to feel depressed?

[Perhaps better: if nothing matters O, still matters S?]

In considering this question, we should distinguish feeling that nothing matters *because* one is depressed and feeling depressed *because* one *believes* that nothing matters. It is only the latter that concerns us here.

This is an empirical question about what would be *caused* by belief in nihilism, simply taking for granted that this belief couldn’t ground or justify any such response. Now belief in nihilism could in principle cause despair—just as it could in principle cause a strong case of the hiccups. It is hard, however, to see why despair and depression *would* causally follow the belief that nothing matters. Such emotions typically appear in response either to the value judgment that things are bad in some way or, in certain cases, to the appearance of such badness, independently of belief. But why should one respond in this way to the belief that nothing whatsoever is bad or worse? Sure, some things are not as good as they had seemed. But it’s not as if they had *lost* their value—they never really had, or could have had, such value. And if nihilism is true, that ‘loss’ of value couldn’t itself be bad, or make things worse. [This seems to be moving too quickly. I might currently think that there are values, and I might therefore think that if nihilism is true this would be a ‘loss’ in a certain sense -- what I thought was there would turn out not to be really there. And I might (**from my current standpoint**) fear this possibility, even while also recognizing that this would not matter from the standpoint of someone who already believes that nihilism is true.]

Nihilism couldn’t be bad, nor is it easy to see why it should even *appear* bad, not unless one fails to properly think through what it would actually mean. (And it’s not as if evolution had selected us to react with fear and despair to nihilism as we instinctively fear snakes...)

²⁹ Though if in resolving to commit suicide an agent reveals himself to hold that something *does* have value, then the premise from which he argues to suicide is false, and his suicide doubly unnecessary.

³⁰ 1968, 585.

³¹ Nagel, 1971, 727.

So again, there is really nothing to be upset about—even if we understand the step to depression in a merely causal sense.

We saw that since evaluative nihilism rules out all value, there could be no grounds to **fear the possibility** that nihilism is true. And if practical nihilism is true, there could anyway be no reasons for any such response. Worse, some of the responses that have been associated with nihilism may actually presuppose or at least normally rely on evaluative judgments or appearances, and are therefore either incompatible with or unlikely to causally follow belief in nihilism.

All of this may seem to support the complacency of recent metaethics. There really is nothing to worry about. But this conclusion would be premature. For as we shall now see, these [last?] points about what would causally follow from belief in nihilism don't apply only to evaluative attitudes *towards* nihilism. They have far broader application.

4. MIGHT NIHILISM MAKE NO DIFFERENCE?

If there is no reason to fear nihilism, what difference does it make? To the extent that recent philosophers have considered this question, they have tended to arrive at an implausibly conservative answer: that the truth of (and belief in) nihilism would have little to no effect—that, for all practical purposes, life would continue exactly as before. The basic idea seems to be this. It's true that for things to matter isn't just for them to matter *to* us, as Hare thought. But even if nothing matters, things *could* still matter to us. We will go on. And if the *same* things will matter to us, we would go on as before.

This is what is implied, for example, when Nagel remarks that “we go on in the same way even after we are convinced that the reasons have given out,”³² and Mackie and most other error theorists defend **something like this view**, at least for **moral nihilism**. [It is also worth mentioning Joyce's fictionalism and Olson conversvationism here, and it is worth noting that Streumer takes a very different line: he also thinks that we will go on, but in his case this is because he thinks that we cannot believe the kind of general nihilism he defends.]

If this is correct, that would make a further mockery of the existential despair of those terrified by nihilism. Not only isn't there anything bad about nothing mattering, it actually doesn't even make the slightest *practical difference* whether anything matters!

At first sight the question of nihilism can appear to be immensely important, perhaps the most important question we can ask. But now it begins to seem as if nothing at all is at stake in nihilism, as if it's no more than a technical matter, of interest only to dedicated metaethicists.

4.1. Nihilism and Conservatism

When we discover that some sector of discourse suffers from systematic error, it's natural to think that we should give it up, or at least radically revise it. But as many error theorists insist, this isn't a necessary implication. It's a substantive question what we ought to do in light of such a discovery. For we might, as Kalderon notes “... decide to retain the domain of inquiry despite the error involved because it is good, or useful, or interesting to do so.”³³

And Mackie and most other moral error theorists **indeed** argue that we have good

³² Ibid., 724. Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, who flirts with nihilism, says that “some human deeds are dear to me, which one has perhaps long ceased believing in, but still honors with one's heart, out of old habit...” (1880/2008, II, 5, 3).

³³ 2005, x. [Kalderon himself no error theorist but noncog of kind.]

reasons to hold on to morality, even though it's merely a myth. Thus Mackie writes that he has shown how morality is something we make and maintain, and which "there is some real point in making,"³⁴ and Joyce similarly writes that morality, although based in erroneous belief, is nevertheless "a justified practice in light of its usefulness."³⁵

In other words, there might be pragmatic justification to holding on to morality. Whether this is the case depends on whether

- (13) We have sufficient *non-moral reasons* to hold on to moral discourse and practice.

[Such?] These reasons might derive from the benefit and usefulness of morality, as Mackie and Joyce hold—that is to say, from morality's *non-moral value*.

Now to claim that morality is a *useful* fiction to which it might be *justified* to hold on is to invoke **evaluative and normative notions**. [fn. on more explicit eval claims by Mackie] Since these philosophers reject objective values and reasons, these phrases cannot refer to objective values or prescriptions. If morality is a myth because there are no objective values and reasons, then if there still are non-moral reasons and values, these couldn't be objective. These philosophers must assume, then, that at least *some* values and reasons survive the argument against the existence of objective ones. They are evaluating morality from the standpoint of *antirealist* values and reasons.³⁶

The situation, however, is rather different when we consider, not moral nihilism, but unqualified evaluative nihilism. There is at least one passage where Mackie writes as if his argument might encompass all value. He writes that the

tendency to objectify values—and *not only moral ones*—is confirmed by a pattern of thinking that we find in existentialists... The denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all... Of course this does not follow; the lack of objective values is not a good reason for abandoning subjective concern... But the abandonment of a belief in objective values can **cause, at least temporarily**, a decay of subjective concern and sense of purpose.³⁷ [Blackburn agrees]

Mackie's response to existentialist angst is peculiar. If his complaint was simply that nihilism warrants no such anxiety, and could give no reasons to abandon our subjective concerns, then he would of course be right. But Mackie writes that there would be no *good* reasons to do so, implying a contrast which makes no sense if practical nihilism is true. [isn't he using 'good reasons' to just mean 'reasons'? so what contrast makes no sense?] If practical nihilism is true, then, just as there could be no reasons for despair, there could be no reasons to hold on to our subjective concerns or evaluative practice. Nor could it be good or useful or beneficial to hold on to our evaluative discourse, or to revise it in some antirealist direction. [cite Ridge & X?]

As we saw, if nothing matters, and we believed that, then there would just be our psychological reactions to that belief. There would be no space left to either criticize

³⁴ Ibid., 227. For other explicitly evaluative claims by Mackie, see 124, 173, 239.

³⁵ Joyce, 2001, 173, 177. See also Lillehammer, 2004; Hussain, 2007, 169ff; Olson, 2014.

³⁶ When Joyce says that we ought to adopt a fictionalist understanding of morality, he tells us he is referring merely to 'a straightforward, common-or-garden, *practical* 'ought'' (2001, 177). But it won't be enough that this is a non-moral ought; it also needs to be an ought that **lacks** external, desire-independent authority. [cut?]

³⁷ 1977 [my italics].

or recommend these reactions.

4.2. Carry on as Before, If Nothing Really Matters?

We started by asking what would follow from the truth of nihilism. As we saw, the truth of nihilism has no normative implications. It cannot make the world bad or worse, or give anyone reasons to do or feel anything—or, for that matter, *not* to do or feel something. It gives us no reasons to feel despair, or to go on as before. Not even to be indifferent.

The truth of nihilism, the total absence of all value, makes no normative difference. Nor could it make any causal difference. In this sense, it does leave things exactly as they are.³⁸

What might make a difference, a dramatic difference, is *belief* in nihilism. Since nihilism has no normative implications, neither does belief in nihilism. It doesn't commit you to accepting (or rejecting) any (practical) reasons. It doesn't even require that we stop valuing things.

What is at issue, then, is not whether belief in nihilism gives us reasons to abandon or keep our subjective concerns (it clearly doesn't), but what *causal* impact it will have on these concerns. Many philosophers who discuss nihilism seem to assume with Nagel that even if we came to believe that nihilism is true, our various subjective concerns would remain pretty much as they were. Thus McGinn tells us not to worry that our desires and ambitions will “crumble under the objective gaze,” because they are “resilient enough to take care of themselves.”³⁹ Even if we have no *reason* to go on as before, this might still be *what we would do anyway*.

But two things need to be true if we are to go on as before in this way, after coming to believe in nihilism. First, we must retain roughly the same set of subjective concerns we had before believing in nihilism, and second, these concerns must guide our action in some vaguely intelligent way—that is, we must continue to conform to instrumental rationality. I now turn to examine these two assumptions, starting, briefly, with the second.⁴⁰ [Here the author really needs to take into account Jonas Olson's 2014 book. Olson argues that error theorists can give a reductive account of instrumental reason. It would really strengthen the paper if the author engaged with this more, instead of just relying on Korsgaard, Broome and Raz to make the opposite point (and it is not as if no one else has responded to them!).] [below]

4.3. Instrumental Reason After Nihilism

Nagel writes that if we concluded that practical reason is an illusion, we would have to “limit the practical employment of reason to an instrumental role.”⁴¹ Even if our (practical) normative beliefs have objective content, it might be claimed that once we realize that no such reasons exist, we would still be saddled with various ends, and, consequently, with instrumental reasons to take the means to achieving them. And if so, then we have essentially moved from an objectivist to a desire-based conception of practical reason. We don't need *reasons* to revise our discourse; a

³⁸ There is one important exception. If nihilism is true, then nothing good exists. Therefore at least one significant result does follow: the inexistence of God, given that goodness is one of God's essential properties. But we can set this aside, since the standard arguments for nihilism set out from naturalist premises. Thus, even if the hoary inference from atheism or naturalism to nihilism is fallacious, the inference from theism to the falsity of nihilism is clearly correct. [cut??]

³⁹ McGinn, *ibid.* Though if nothing matters, why worry?

⁴⁰ To save words, I'll use 'evaluative beliefs' to refer to beliefs both about value and about practical reasons.

⁴¹ Nagel, 1997, 116.

simple form of desire-based practical reason is simply what's *left* once objectivism *drops out*.

[One?] The problem with this suggestion is that it assumes an understanding of instrumental reason that has been widely challenged.⁴² On some recent views, instrumental rationality depends for its normativity on the existence of prior objective reasons: we have no reasons to take the means to our ends if these ends are themselves worthless. To conform to instrumental rationality, we don't need to pursue these worthless ends—we could simply give them up. But even if we did keep these ends, this might not matter, on some views, since without objective reasons we would have no *reason* to be rational. Instrumental rationality would no longer have any normative force. After all, if nothing matters, one thing that doesn't matter is whether we are rational. Finally, if it's not objective norms but normativity itself that is metaphysically problematic, then, so long as the normativity involved in instrumental reason cannot be given a reductive understanding, it should be just as problematic. If any of these views is correct, then even instrumental reason won't survive practical nihilism.⁴³

It might be objected, however, that for our purposes it doesn't really matter whether these claims about instrumental reason are correct. What matters is how a person's *psychology* would respond to belief in nihilism. If she will continue to intelligently pursue the means to her contingent ends, then she will still be *conforming* to instrumental rationality, whether or not such conformity deserves the honorific of genuine normativity.

This is correct. The relevant question is whether our normative psychology *reflects* these claims about instrumental reason, so that, in the absence of (belief in) objective reasons, we will simply stop seeking the means to our ends even if all of our subjective concerns remain in place—our subjective concerns just won't *move* us. I don't think that this can be ruled out. But I don't know anyone who has defended this strong claim about our psychology, so I won't assume it in what follows. I'll simply grant that even if we come to believe in nihilism, we will continue to intelligently pursue our subjective concerns.⁴⁴

4.4. Subjective Concerns After Nihilism

Whether or not genuine instrumental normativity would survive nihilism, some degree of conformity to instrumental rationality is a necessary condition for going on in *any* way. However, even if we granted such conformity, *how* we would go on, and whether we would go on *as* before, clearly depends on what subjective concerns will survive belief in nihilism. We would go on largely as before after converting to nihilism *only* if our current pattern of subjective concerns survives this shift.

We saw that Mackie assumes that

- (14) Believing in nihilism is *logically compatible* with having exactly the same pattern of subjective concerns that one had before one came to believe this.

This, however, is not what is now at issue. The question we are considering is whether

- (15) Although our evaluative beliefs have realist, objective content, our current

⁴² See again Korsgaard, 1996; Broome, 1999; Raz, 2005. **OLSON for reply.**

⁴³ Notice that the question here is whether these claims about instrumental reason are likely to be correct *if* a realist account of evaluative discourse is correct. [cut?]

⁴⁴ Korsgaard similarly concedes that, although the 'practical normative skeptic' cannot follow hypothetical imperatives, such a skeptic would still take the means to her ends (1996, p. 163).

pattern of subjective concerns *will in fact* survive **our coming to believe that all these beliefs are false.**

This is a question, not about what is logically possible, but about what, given the structure of our psychology, is likely to actually happen to us, if we came to believe in an uncompromising, unqualified evaluative nihilism.

This is in one sense an empirical question. But the consequences of belief in nihilism depend on our normative psychology: on different views of normative psychology, it would have different consequences. I will argue that the suggestion that we will go on as before is plausible only if we reject familiar truisms about the relation between evaluative belief and subjective concern. And I will draw attention to several other influential claims about normative psychology that make this suggestion even less plausible.

4.5. Evaluative Belief and Subjective Concern [Ridge/Blackburn?]

At present, we have numerous beliefs ascribing values to things. We also have numerous beliefs about what reasons we have to want or do various things. We often (though hardly always) value what we take to have value, and act in light of what we take ourselves to have reason to do. The question is what will remain of this pattern of concern, motivation and behaviour once we cut out all of these evaluative beliefs. The conservative view we're considering is that it will simply stay in place.

Now it's something of a truism that

- (16) Our subjective concerns (and consequent motivation and behaviour) covary fairly closely with our evaluative beliefs.

We normally seek what we value, avoid what we disvalue, and just ignore what we take to have no value. As our evaluative beliefs change, so do our corresponding concerns.

These points are sometimes cited in support of some conceptual connection between evaluative belief and motivation. But importantly, it doesn't matter, for our purposes, whether there is such a necessary connection (as judgment internalists hold) or whether this covariance is merely contingent (as judgment externalists hold). It is enough that there actually is such covariance.

This covariance has more specific implications. In particular, it means that if someone *doesn't* believe that something *is* valuable in any way, then it's unlikely that he cares about it. An even clearer truism is that if someone believes that something is *not* valuable, then this makes it likely that he *doesn't* care about it.

For our purposes, we can consider only an even weaker claim: that if we previously believed that something is valuable, and therefore cared about it, but have now come to believe that it's utterly worthless, then normally the result is that we *stop* caring about that thing. For example, If you used to think that bird-watching is a most valuable activity, but now suddenly find it completely pointless, something you have no reason at all to do, then you really aren't likely to care about bird-watching in the same way. You aren't likely to care about it at all.⁴⁵

This covariance has obvious exceptions. Few would deny that motivation and evaluative beliefs sometimes come apart. We are, for example, sometime weak

⁴⁵ Notice that this would be a contingent claim even if we accept the strongest form of (evaluative) judgment internalism. On that view, if we *don't* care about something then this implies that we don't believe it to be valuable. But the converse doesn't follow: that if we do care about something, we can't at the same time hold that this thing has no value.

willed, and fail to do what we believe we ought to. However, even here, the temptations that overtake us are often temptations for what we take to be valuable in *some* respect. Even weakness of the will, then, is often driven by evaluative belief. In any case, it's sufficient for my argument that this covariance holds in *most* (or even just many) cases.

Now this normal covariance of evaluative belief and subjective concern doesn't yet show that evaluative belief has the causal *priority*. Subjective concern might be prior to evaluative belief, or the two might be co-extensive. We are now, however, assuming a realist account of evaluative discourse. And there are two plausible ways of explaining this covariance on such a realist account, both of which make subjective concern causally dependent on evaluative belief. If we reject a Humean view of motivation, as many realists do, then our evaluative beliefs might simply generate the corresponding subjective concerns. Without this causal antecedent, these concerns would just fade away. But such dependence could hold even on a Humean view. Although on such a view our evaluative beliefs are, on their own, motivationally inert, there could still be a background desire (or disposition) to desire what has value, which generates subjective concerns that reflect our evaluative beliefs. In the absence of these beliefs, this desire would be inert, and many of our corresponding subjective concerns would again fade away.⁴⁶ On either view, it would be true that when some subjective concern is correlated with an evaluative belief, we normally have this concern *because* we have that belief.

These are claims about the relation between subjective concern and specific evaluative beliefs, or sets of such beliefs. But it's hard to see why these claims about our normative psychology wouldn't apply with equal force when we turn to consider **all** of our evaluative beliefs [most/entire system/body of..?]. **As we saw**, to believe that evaluative nihilism is true **just is to come to believe that all our specific evaluative beliefs are false**: to no longer hold that pain and death are bad, virtue good, freedom desirable, etc. But if there is a covariance between evaluative belief and subjective concern, then once we conclude that all of our evaluative beliefs are false, we should also largely lose the corresponding subjective concerns and motivations.

And if our evaluative beliefs even *partly* shape our current desires and concerns, then it follows from this that we will *not* go on as before if we believe that nothing matters.

The argument runs as follows:

- (A) To go on as before after coming to believe in nihilism, our current subjective concerns need to survive belief in nihilism.
- (B) To come to believe in evaluative nihilism is to come to believe that all **positive** evaluative propositions are false.
- (C) To come to believe in evaluative nihilism is to come to believe that all of our prior substantive evaluative beliefs are false. [from B]
- (D) Our subjective concerns (and consequent motivation and behaviour) covary fairly closely with our evaluative beliefs.
- (E) If we previously believed that something is valuable, and therefore cared about it, but have now come to believe that it's worthless, then normally the result is that we stop caring about that thing. [from D]

⁴⁶ See Zangwill 2003 for such a picture of moral motivation.

Therefore

- (F) If we come to believe in evaluative nihilism, it's likely that we will stop caring about most (or at least many) of the things that we now take to be valuable. [from C, E]

Therefore

- (G) It is very unlikely that if we come to believe in evaluative nihilism, we would go on as before. [from A, F]

To resist this conclusion, one must hold, not merely that believing that nothing matters makes no causal difference, but that believing that things *do* matter, or that *this* or *that* thing matters, make *no* causal difference to our pattern of subjective concern and motivation. In effect, it's to hold,

Epiphenomenalism about evaluative belief. Our evaluative beliefs (and beliefs about practical reasons) make no causal difference to our pattern of concerns.⁴⁷

Notice that these questions about our normative psychology are largely independent of questions about the truth of evaluative nihilism. We are asking what would causally follow from belief in nihilism. This is what would follow *even if nihilism is false*. To hold that belief in nihilism would make no difference to our subjective concerns, and that we would go on as before, is therefore to be committed to an ambitious general claim about normative psychology, a deeply implausible view that is in tension with familiar truisms. And such a view is especially implausible if a strongly realist account of evaluative discourse is correct, as we now assume.⁴⁸

4.6. Subjective Concern and Value

There are further problems with the idea that our subjective concerns would survive belief in nihilism. To begin with, there is the old view, which is now again influential, that it's inherent to the notion of subjective concern, understood as a conative state of a being with sufficient intellectual capacities, that it aims at the good.⁴⁹ On this view, it's not just that evaluative belief plays a causal role in sustaining at least some of our subjective concerns, but rather that *all* of our subjective concerns are *dependent* on evaluative belief. If this view is correct, then the consequences of belief in nihilism would be even more extreme.

The psychological stakes in nihilism would be even higher if we also tied intentional action to explanation in terms of evaluative belief⁵⁰ or normative reasons,⁵¹ or if we understood emotions as constituted by evaluative judgments.⁵² On these further views, an agent who believes in nihilism couldn't act intentionally, or have

⁴⁷ As explained above, our evaluative beliefs can make a causal difference even on the Humean picture of motivation, through a background desire to care about the good. The epiphenomenalist claim above goes *far* beyond that Humean view.

⁴⁸ Notice that similar considerations could be adduced against the common assumption that we would go on as before if we came to believe in *moral* nihilism—unless moral belief is epiphenomenal, then many of our moral concerns should similarly fade away. One difference is that even if moral nihilism is true, we might still have non-moral reasons to try to revive these subjective concerns or at least to act in ways that conform to morality. [move up?]

⁴⁹ This view was held by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and others. For contemporary versions, see Scanlon, *ibid.*, 7-8, 39; Tenenbaum, 2007. On some views, desire is itself understood as a kind of evaluative belief.

⁵⁰ Platts, 1991.

⁵¹ Dancy, 2000.

⁵² Solomon, 1976.

emotions.

There is thus a range of influential views about normative psychology that imply a radical deflation of subjective concern, and worse, when coupled with belief in evaluative nihilism. Those who hold that we would go on as before must also deny these further views.

5. LIFE WITHOUT VALUE [can we shorten/even drop?]

If we believe that nothing matters, then we no longer have positive beliefs about value or practical reasons. And this means that all the motivation, affect, intention or action that was causally sustained by such beliefs will be gone too. You come to believe that nothing matters, and practical reason just stops—it's as if the normative electricity has been shut off.

What, if anything, will remain? Philosophers sometimes describe a condition where one lives by inclination instead of by reason. This is the view that is suggested, for example, when Michael Smith writes that

Desires well up and confidence levels rise without reason or justification and, when they do, we go for it... In this way we move forward in the only way we can given that rational action has become impossible.⁵³

This is an image of a life without practical reason, though presumably still in broad conformity to instrumental rationality [Olson?]. Unfortunately, this passage tells us nothing about the kind of concerns that would still propel such an agent forward. What these will be depends, as we saw, on the relation between subjective concerns and evaluative belief. The argument so far suggests that when our subjective concerns and evaluative beliefs are broadly in correspondence, these subjective concerns are often causally dependent on the evaluative beliefs, and will largely fade away when these beliefs are gone. So things will not go on as before. How things *will* go on depends on which of our subjective concerns are not tied in this way to our evaluative beliefs. This is partly an empirical question, but the contours of the answer seem clear enough.

5.1. Mere Animal Striving

Writing about what she calls the 'normative sceptic', Korsgaard suggests that such a sceptic will still have some desires and impulses, since these are 'supplied by nature'.⁵⁴ The idea seems to be that, like animals, we will follow our passing desires and biological drives. And it does seem plausible that our aversion to pain, hunger or cold, or attraction to sensory pleasures, are prior to, and independent of, any sophisticated evaluative belief. These animal drives and motivations are likely to survive belief in nihilism. But our commitment to our moral principles and ideals, and even to our long-term prudential goals, isn't likely to survive. Nor, I believe, will the subjective concerns associated with our deepest personal projects.

As Tolstoy wrote, when describing his existential crisis:

My life came to a standstill. I could breath, eat, drink and sleep, and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking and sleeping; but there was no life in me because I had no

⁵³ Smith, *ibid.* Note however that Smith isn't discussing the condition of believing nothing matters, but of being unable to *rule out* that nothing matters. Korsgaard describes a similar state of following "the desire of the present moment" (1996, 163), and Williams writes about a state of mechanically following one's minimal preferences (1972, 3).

⁵⁴ 1996, 163.

desires whose gratification I would have deemed reasonable to fulfil.⁵⁵

Religious believers sometimes assume that atheism, thought through to its logical conclusion, must inevitably lead to a kind of amoral, selfish libertinism—a state that these believers sometimes equate with nihilism. Needless to say, this argument is confused. But ironically enough, the causal consequences of belief in nihilism might lead in exactly this direction.

5.2. Apathy and Paralysis

Such a life, while not attractive, is at least active. But the contraction of concern and motivation might go further. Think for example of depression. The deeply depressed see little point in doing anything, not even pursuing passing pleasures. They find it hard to even get out of bed.

Still, although the depressed sometimes say that nothing matters, they do seem to value (or rather disvalue) *some* things. They feel unhappy about the way things are, they take things to be pretty *bad*.

A better example is provided by the clinically apathetic, who exhibit an even more radical contraction of concern, but without the sense of gloom and doom. Oliver Sacks describes the case of a jovial brain-damaged patient whose “world has been voided of feeling and meaning... reduced to a facetious insignificance,” and who explained that for her “nothing means anything”.⁵⁶

It’s hard to imagine being reduced to a mere animal state, or to mindless joviality. It’s harder still to imagine remaining conscious, in full possession of one’s faculties and with complete control over one’s limbs, yet completely immobile: perhaps lying in bed, mentally paralysed. There are, however, actual people who are in such a state—patients suffering from the exotic conditions neurologists call abulia and akinetic mutism. Of one abulic patient, it was said that

His general behavior was characterized by a dramatic decrease in spontaneous activity... he made no plans, showed no evidence of needs, will, or desires. He showed obvious lack of concern about relatives’ as well as his own condition. When questioned about his mood, he reported no sadness or anxiety.⁵⁷

The doctor of a 60-year old, formerly active university professor, described this patient’s

capacity to stay motionless and speechless during endless periods, sitting in front of the examiner, waiting for the first question, totally shut in a profound inertia and passivity...

This patient was capable of answering questions. When asked what he is thinking of, all this time, he always answered: “I’m just thinking of nothing, no idea, no question, no thought at all.”

Some of these patients recover. On such patient later explained that, when in this state, “she did not talk because she had nothing to say.” Her mind, she said, was “empty”—or as she put it, “*Nothing mattered*.”⁵⁸

Needless to say, these patients suffer from severe brain damage. They didn’t arrive at such a state of paralysis through philosophical argument. I’m not claiming

⁵⁵ 1882/1987, x?.

⁵⁶ Sacks 1990, 112ff.

⁵⁷ Habib, 2004.

⁵⁸ Damasio and Van Hoesen, 1983, x? my italics.

that this is what would follow from genuine belief in nihilism. As I said, this is partly an empirical question, and I intend only to sketch the possibilities. But such radical consequences might actually follow if, for example, the doctrine that desire necessarily aims at the good is correct. At the very least, these actual cases serve as an antidote to the [failure of?] limits on imagination that can make philosophers assume that self-consciousness beings like us *must* be active agents—that we face an inescapable practical predicament, doomed to deliberate, to value things, and to act. [and can't fail to believe some things matter??]

5.3. Something Close to Death

I admit that it's hard to imagine that a philosophical argument could take us to anything even close to such states—that a philosopher might offer an argument for nihilism and their audience would simply freeze the moment their brains compute the conclusion of his arguments, or else shed all of their lifelong projects and attachments and lazily sink in their armchairs... But if evaluative belief isn't epiphenomenal then these are at least possible outcomes of genuine unqualified belief in nihilism.⁵⁹ If our imagination resists this idea, this might be not because we cannot imagine these consequences following, but because we cannot imagine *really* believing in nihilism. [Hume?]

And whether or not the result would be complete paralysis, or mere animal-like striving, the outcome would be something very close to personal death. Although we would still be alive, our mental lives will have undergone a radical transformation. Our concern for the personal projects that gave sense to our lives will almost certainly dry out, and the psychological continuity that sustains prudential concern would be lost. And on views that identify the self with reason or rational agency, or with endorsement of values, even our selves won't survive this upheaval.

Thus, although nihilism gives no *reasons* to commit suicide, that may not really matter, because just by believing it you might in a sense die.

6. WHAT WE REALLY OUGHT TO FEAR

Does it really matter whether we would carry on as before or stop in our tracks? After all, if nothing matters, it's not as if going on as before would be a *better* outcome. So why care about the likely consequences of belief in nihilism?⁶⁰

We take ourselves to have reasons to know important facts about the world—we believe that knowledge of such facts is valuable. And the truth of nihilism might seem to be an important fact—you might even think it's the *most* important fact about the

⁵⁹ It might be objected that since error theorists do seem to go on pretty much as before, so far as we can see, then belief in nihilism couldn't have the implications I spelled out. Notice first that this won't show my argument to be invalid. It would only show that evaluative belief is epiphenomenal, and that some widely held views about normative psychology are false. But it's doubtful that the uneventful lives of error theorists support any such conclusion. To begin with, most error theorists only endorse moral nihilism; these philosophers hold that some things *do* matter. Now some error theorists may go further. But to assert (even *sincerely* assert) some radical philosophical view isn't yet tantamount to genuinely **believing** it (Schwizgebel, 2010). Conversely, those who following their conversion to nihilism live lives of unbridled sensuality, or never even get out of bed, are unlikely to report this consequence in peer-reviewed publications; as Valery wrote: "If I feel that all is vanity, the very thought prevents me from writing it down." (Valery, 1930, 96)

⁶⁰ Hussain 2007 portrays Nietzsche as responding to the threat of 'practical nihilism'—the threat that belief in nihilism would sap the force of our drives and desires. This is a picture of what would follow from belief in nihilism that is very much in line with my argument, although it's not clear how, if nothing matters, this consequence could be a threat.

world. But if nihilism is true, this could not be a *valuable* fact, or a fact it's valuable to *know*. Nor could there be anything bad in falsely believing that things do matter. If nothing matters, then one thing that doesn't matter is whether or not we believe this. If nothing matters, then all of us live under an illusion. But this illusion could not itself be harmful, or bad in any way.

It couldn't matter, then, whether possibilities (1) or (3) hold:

	Nothing matters	Some things matter
Believe some things matter	(1)	(2)
Believe nothing matters	(3)	(4)

It's not that these possibilities have zero value—they are, we might say, beyond good and evil.

Things, however, are very different if nihilism is *false*, and some things do matter. Consider first (2). It would be good, or is at least a condition for much good, if we recognize and respond to our reasons, and to what matters. Now the mere fact that we believe that some things matter doesn't by itself guarantee that we would recognize and respond to what actually has value. But this would be the case if our substantive evaluative beliefs do track value at least to some extent, and if these beliefs often guide our action—two assumptions that virtually everyone accepts. [Street on realism and the range of possible values]

The crucial possibility, however, is (4). Its value critically depends on what causally follows from belief in nihilism. Now if we believe that nothing matters, then we will no longer recognize the values and reasons out there. However, if we carry on largely as before, then we might at least still largely *conform* to our reasons. But if I am right, and we would lose many of our subjective concerns, then the result will be *very* harmful. It would mean that we would fail to respond to the value around us, and fail to even conform to our reasons. This would lead to many bad consequences, both prudential and moral, and might be bad in itself. And if belief in nihilism would lead to a kind of death of reason, this would be a further great harm, if our existence as rational agents has final value. There is no reason to fear nihilism. What we should fear is *mistaken belief* in nihilism.

Such a mistake could have disastrous consequences. By contrast, we lose nothing by mistakenly believing that things do matter, if they don't. Nor do we stand to gain anything by believing in nihilism even if it is true. This asymmetry gives us, in Pascalian fashion, pragmatic reasons to believe (or to try to make ourselves believe) that nihilism is false.⁶¹

These reasons of course presuppose the falsity of nihilism. If we have already been persuaded that nihilism is true, then we cannot recognize such reasons. But so

⁶¹ Several authors have made similar points. Adams 1995 argues that we stand nothing to lose by getting morality wrong, but much to lose if we mistakenly take morality to be an illusion. This seems doubtful if we consider only moral nihilism; we could lose much if rational egoism is true yet we mistakenly obey the demands of morality. Smith 2006 makes a closer argument, but he is asking whether we should suspend all of our evaluative beliefs in light of our inability to either confirm or rule out nihilism. And in a way I find puzzling, Smith goes on to describe the resulting state as one of being moved by our desires “without reason and justification” (105). Ross 2006 argues that we have pragmatic reasons to reject nihilism because it doesn't discriminate between options. My point is somewhat different: that *if* after believing in nihilism we *won't* go on as before, then belief in nihilism would be harmful *if* nihilism is false.

long as we *don't* yet believe in nihilism, then these reasons have great force even if the evidence in favour of nihilism was incredibly strong, even if we thought that it's *almost* certainly true.

So we have pragmatic reasons to try to believe that things matter. Even more clearly, the negative consequences of belief in nihilism give us reasons to avoid anything that might lead us to believe in nihilism. We have reasons to suppress any growing suspicion that nihilism is true—even if this suspicion is supported by forceful reasons. In effect, we have pragmatic reasons not to try to *find out* whether nihilism is true. For, as we saw, there is no value in finding out that nihilism is true. There could be no reasons to find out *that* nothing matters. I am now suggesting that there *are* reasons *not* to try to find out *whether* nothing matters.

Isn't there, however, great value in finding out that nihilism is *false*? For wouldn't that be an important truth? But even if it is, it's a truth we implicitly recognize through first-order inquiry into the value of *particular* things—an inquiry which, if successful, implies that that some things do matter.

To conclude. If nothing matters, this doesn't matter either. But if nothing matters, and we believe that, then—although it won't matter *whether* anything would still matter to us—as a matter of fact it's likely that far fewer things *would* matter to us. If nothing matters then this result of belief in nihilism of course also won't matter. But it *would* matter, and matter greatly, if we falsely believe in nihilism and stop, in this way, to care about the things that do matter. *This* is what we should fear.

Bibliography

- Adams, R. M. 1995. 'Moral Faith'. *Journal of Philosophy*, 92: 75-95.
- Blackburn, S. 1985. 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value', in Ted Honderich (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Blackburn, S. 1996. 'Securing the Nots: Moral Epistemology for the Quasi-Realist', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong, ed., *Moral Epistemology*, OUP.
- Broome, J. 1999. 'Normative requirements', *Ratio* 12, 4:398-419.
- Cuneo, T. 2007. *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*, OUP.
- Damasio A. and Van Hoesen, G. W. 1983, 'Focal Lesions of the Limbic Frontal Lobe', in K. M. Heilman and P. Satz, eds. *Neuropsychology of human emotion*. NY: Guilford Press, 85-110.
- Dancy, J. 2000. *Practical Reality*, OUP.
- Dostoevsky, F. 1880/2008. *The Karamazov Brothers*, OUP.
- Glendinning, V. 2006. *Leonard Woolf: A Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Habib, M. 2004. 'Athymhormia and Disorders of Motivation in Basal Ganglia Disease', *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 16, 4.
- Hardy, T. 1891/2008. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, OUP.
- Hare, R. M. 1972. 'Nothing Matters', in his *Applications of Moral Philosophy*, Macmillan.
- Huemer, M. 2006. *Ethical Intuitionism*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hussain, N. Z. 2007. 'Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits', in B. Leiter and N. Sinhababu, eds., *Nietzsche and Morality*, 157-191. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Joyce, R. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*, Cambridge University Press.

- Joyce, R. and Kirchin, S. 2007. 2010, *A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory*, Springer.
- Kalderon, M. E. 2005. 'Introduction', Kalderon, M. E., ed., *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press.
- Köhler, S., and Ridge, M. 2013. 'Revolutionary Expressivism', *Ratio* 26, 4: 428-449.
- Korsgaard, C. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge University Press.
- . 1977. 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason', in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, ed. Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Langton, R. 2007. 'Objective and Unconditioned Value', *Philosophical Review* 116: 157-185.
- Lillehammer, H. 2004. 'Moral Error Theory', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104:93–109.
- Lillehammer, H and Moller, N. 2014. 'We Can Believe the Error Theory', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*.
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin.
- McGinn, C. 1987. 'The View From Nowhere' (review), *Mind* 96:263-272.
- Nagel, T. 1971. 'The Absurd', *Journal of Philosophy* 68:716-727.
- . 1997. *The Last Word*, OUP.
- Nietzsche, F. 1968. *The Will to Power*, NY: Vintage.
- . 1882/1974. *The Gay Science*, NY: Vintage.
- . 1976- *Oeuvres Philosophiques Completes* (eds. Giorigo Colli and Mazzino Montinari). Paris Gallimard.
- Olson, J. 2014. *Moral Error Theory: History, Critique, Defence*. OUP.
- Parfit, D. 2006. 'Normativity', *Oxford Studies in Meta-Ethics* 1:325-380.
- . 2011. *On What Matters*, OUP.
- Platts, M. 1991. *Moral Realities: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology*, London: Routledge.
- Raz, J. 2005. 'The Myth of Instrumental Rationality', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1, 1.
- Ross, J. 2006. 'Rejecting Ethical Deflationism', *Ethics*, 116: 742-768.
- Sacks, O. 1990. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, Inc.
- Scanlon, T. M. 1999. *What We Owe To Each Other*, Harvard University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. 2003, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, OUP.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. 1997. 'Nihilism and Scepticism about Moral Obligations', *Utilitas* 7:217-236.
- Smith, M. 2006. 'Is That All There Is?', *The Journal of Ethics* 10:75-106.
- Solomon, R. C. 1976. *The Passions*, NY: Doubleday.
- Schwitzgebel, E., 2010, 'Acting Contrary to Our Professed Beliefs, or the Gulf Between Occurrent Judgment and Dispositional Belief', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 91: 531-553.
- Streumer, B. 2013. 'Can we believe the error theory?' *The Journal of Philosophy*, 110: 194-212.

- Taylor, G. 2006. *Deadly Vices*, OUP.
- Tenenbaum, S. 2007. *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tolstoy, 1882/1987, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, Penguin.
- Williams, B. 1972. *Morality*. Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006. 'The Human Prejudice' in his *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press.
- Zangwill, N. 2003. 'Externalist Moral Motivation', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 40: 148–149.
- Valery. 1930/1968. 'Variations on a *Pensee*', in *Masters and Friends*.

Probably add: in one way my argument offers a limited vindication of Hare. Not because he was right to dismiss nihilism as a simple confusion about language, something we shouldn't take seriously. But in pointing out to the various things that the despairing student still cared about or valued, he was providing strong evidence that the student didn't really believe in nihilism.

(However: did perhaps show a reduction in subjective concern, and I leave it open how much would follow?)