How to Argue with Moral Nihilists without Strawmanning more than a Cornfield 101 aka Common Misconceptions About Moral Nihilism

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Have you ever been walking down the street in your "I heart moral nihilism" purple tank top with the black stripes and that really annoyingly itchy tag label thing and someone sees it and goes "Woah there buddy! You don't believe in morality? You must think murder is morally justified!" Have you ever been shunned by your family and friends and society and even your pet rock because they think you're evil because you don't have morals? Have people ever assumed that you wouldn't help that one drowning child because you didn't feel like you were morally obligated to? Do you find it particularly difficult to explain your beliefs without sounding like a really big meanie head without empathy? Look no further‼ For $[insert funny number of your choice that isn't 420 or 69] you can purchase our free limited edition membership only box set along with a tote bag and receive a special and exclusive offer where you buy one and get two for the price of two and-

Yeah you get the idea. In short, this essay will explore various reactions to, and arguments "against" moral nihilism that don't seem to directly engage with or arise due to a misunderstanding of it.

What's generally meant by moral nihilism?

There are of course multiple definitions that people use and different implications, but I'll be using it in more of a practical sense. I make a distinction between the recognition of the lack of truth of morality (moral anti-realism) and the applied negation of these "truths" through the use of moral anti-realism (moral nihilism).

The most common moral anti-realist theories are that moral claims are neither true nor false because true and false require the existence of morality, or that all of them are false because none of them are true. Not to get too much into meta ethics because the main purpose of this essay is to clarify misconceptions about it, not argue for it, it arrives at a conclusion that rejects the usage of moral categorization.

Jumping straight into the practical implications of moral nihilism

Not only does this not disprove moral anti-realism, and not only is it painfully deterministic, but it misses the point of moral nihilism. Moral nihilism is not an ideology. It is not a dogmatic set of beliefs. It does not prescribe the rejection of morality nor does it advocate for other moral frameworks whilst recognizing their lack of truth; it simply is when you reject morality, when you apply the descriptive critique that is moral anti-realism.

Because it's a negation, there are many different conceptions of it. For example, those who take a "philosophical" approach could say that they don't see a reason to follow an imperative that isn't True in an Objective, universal law way. People who apply anarchistic, especially lifestylist (non-derogatory) or egoist analysis to this approach could say it's restrictive in terms of what it prescribes and rejects. Those who take a more sociocultural approach could say morality is constructed and also lack a reason to follow it, or apply it to other cultures. A marxist could say that societal morality is that of the ruling class, or that it arises from class difference and isn't a metaphysical truth. Other avid anarchy enjoyers could say something similar, albeit with the state or normative social standards.

Moral subjectivism

Some act like moral subjectivism and moral nihilism are the same thing; others act like they're exact opposites. They're neither. Moral subjectivism doesn't reject the truth of all moral claims, only their universal, objective truth; moral claims can be true (to certain people, groups, cultures etc) to a moral subjectivist but not to a moral nihilist. This isn't to say that moral nihilists don't acknowledge that others have moral beliefs; it's a meta ethical difference that means different conceptions of morality itself. On a practical level, speaking from personal experience, moral subjectivism is also primarily a belief before it's an application.

"If you think x isn't unjust, you think it's just"

This statement subsumes everything under the moral metrics of good/bad, right/wrong, just/unjust. The only way something that isn't just necessarily means it's unjust is if everything can be categorized as one or the other. Because the metric depends on morality, by rejecting morality, the moral nihilist also rejects the truth and use of these moral metrics. Picture asking someone who doesn't know what color is if their shirt is red and they say no. Regardless of whether or not you perceive the shirt as red, it wouldn't be accurate to draw the conclusion that they believe their shirt is a different color, because they don't see color (haha). Judging the color (just/unjust) of something relies on the accepted existence of color (morality). It would therefore be nonsensical to ask someone to personally judge something according to a metric that arises from a concept they don't believe in.

Let's talk murder

I'll admit this part is a bit nitpicky but it's an incredibly common line of argumentation to say that a moral nihilist thinks murder is morally justified. Murder, in philosophical and not legal terms, has moral implications which differentiates it from killing. The question "Do you think murder is unjust?" is the equivalent to saying "Do you think unjust killing is unjust?" (It's also worth noting that the majority of people don't even believe killing to be inherently unjust, eg: self defense)

No, moral nihilists do not support rape please bro

The opposition to rape, defined as sex without consent, does not necessarily need to come from a moral viewpoint. For example, on an empathetic level, it's due to the constructed value that sex has in modern society as well as how it's posited as something that requires consent. There is no Objective meaning of sex; even in modern times, it differs vastly between cultures. Furthermore, there's no metaphysical aspect of it that requires consent. For example, an alien who views sex in a similar way to how you view waving at someone else wouldn't morally, empathetically, personally etc oppose sex without consent because they don't view it as something that requires consent in the first place. The lack of objectivity or universality doesn't mean a moral nihilist cannot oppose it; contextually, one can still obviously recognize how repulsive and abhorrent it is due to the societally accepted meaning and implications that surround sex and consent.

Equating "should" with "would" and "want"

This type of argumentation usually goes something like "So you wouldn't save that one drowning child?" or "So you don't care about Jeremy the drowning child who is drowning quite drowningly?" Two things to be said here. Morality is not the only source of action. Empathy and morality are not the same thing.

People do things for non moral reasons all the time: because we want to, because we'd feel guilty not doing it, because we feel that it could be beneficial, because we prefer it to the other alternatives, because it could make us happy; this isn't uncommon at all, and a lack of obligation just eliminates one possible reason something could be done. So no, when Richard the moral nihilist says, "I don't have the moral obligation to do something", it isn't a 1:1 equation with "I don't want to do something" or "I wouldn't do something" or "I wouldn't feel like doing something."

If Richard doesn't save Jeremy who's now blue in the face and has a mother who's sacrificed everything for him and loves him more than anything in the world since her husband left her, that's simply because of another factor that influences him, not because moral nihilism restricts him from it; maybe Richard is just a dick or the wicked witch of the west or something. Applying anarchistic analysis (most moral nihilists I've talked to tend to practice anarchy), to not do something simply on the basis that it's deemed socioculturally or conventionally morally correct is to still be confined by morality; you're just restricted by your opposition to it instead. Moral nihilism is not a polemic imperative to be immoral; that belief creates the same impression as egoists who believe egoism prescribes the destruction of all spooks.

Misanthropy and antinatalism

Using the most common philosophical definitions, misanthropy being the belief that humanity is bad in a moral sense, antinatalism being the belief that having children is morally wrong, the two are not nihilistic. These beliefs make use of the moral metric by judging humanity and procreation according to the metric, necessitating the acceptance of said metric. Nihilism does not mean everything is bad; it means bad doesn't exist.

Good and Bad as "amoral" categories

In moral discourse, the majority of moral nihilists use the terms good and bad to refer to moral judgements. Something is good, not because you perceive it to be beneficial or within your interests, but because it's metaphysically good. This isn't even a point I want to bring up because I feel like it's implied (but apparently not because it's had to be clarified multiple times), but good and bad in this context are used non colloquially; we all understand that when someone says their food is good they don't mean it on a metaphysical level. People use good and bad colloquially to mean things we like/dislike, find desirable/undesirable etc quite often so the rejection of these concepts seems like much more of a big deal, as if nihilism is when you're not allowed to enjoy anything or not allowed to like something more than something else. (Spoiler alert, it isn't)

More relevant to this essay is that it also means that people make arguments based on "objective good but not in a moral way." When nihilists reject good and bad, it's also the rejection of universal or inherent or objective value. Some may say that that isn't specific to moral nihilism

and is nihilism in general which just leads to meta ethical questions that lead to differences in moral nihilists' beliefs. I personally don't make the distinction as I view moral prescriptions to be based on value, whether it be universal, inherent value or something considered to be valuable in a certain moral framework; it is moral to do x because x has value. For example, I view (metaphysical) rights as a moral concept. Defining it as something that a group/category deserves simply by virtue of them being part of said group or having specific characteristics that place them in said category, it necessitates a distinction where different (not necessarily more or less as it could also be differing types) meaning or value is assigned to differentiate between what has this right and what doesn't.

Similarly, some people say we should follow morality, not because it's true, but because it'll lead to something good, like a functional society or more happiness. Recognize that the functional society or saving humanity or more lives or happiness or virtue or utility or puppies saved or whatever do not have objective worth (well maybe the last one), especially not to a moral nihilist; their worth is often defined by the moral framework one thinks within, sociocultural norms, biocentrism, anthropocentrism, other common biases one has been enculturated with and often presupposes. It's circular reasoning to say that you should follow this moral framework because we save humanity but also hey by the way, the reason we should save humanity is because this very same moral framework said it was good. "To rely on what we assert is to rely on what we deny; to rely on what we deny is to rely on what we assert."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'm terrible at conclusions so just go read the introduction/definition of moral nihilism again (if you want to) or reread the whole thing and take a shot every time I say metric or moral. Hope this helped. Feel free to throw this at people if they ever ask you if you think murder is morally justified again. Like literally throw it at them. Print it out and laminate it and just hurl it at them like a boomerang (and don't forget to duck) until they pull the stick out of their ass and stop being a scarecrow. (I will not however take responsibility for any papercuts) (or lawsuits)

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