No Point of View Except Ours?

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Abstract. I argue that it's quite comprehensible to get upset about metaethical nihilism, to indulge what I call *nihilistic despair*. When we lose the objective moral point of view, we lose the promise of luck-immune guidance and categorical importance, things many of us hope for. Though this is all quite Williams-friendly, I reject his (puzzling but suggestive) remarks that nihilistic despair must be a self-pitying muddle. Finally, I argue that internalism about reasons is even more depressing than outright nihilism.

I think nothing matters, and I'm quite upset about it. JL Mackie also famously saw that error theory can be a bit of a downer, that 'denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all, that life has lost its purpose'. But he thought this reaction symptomatic of endowing our subjective 'concerns and purposes' with a 'fictitious external authority' (Mackie 1977, 34).

Like Mackie, Bernard Williams rejected strongly objective values. He embraced a relativistic stance-dependence where we have (only) *our* ethical concepts and point of view. Williams acknowledged that the positions he thereby rejected—Kantianism and the 'morality system' in particular—had consoling aspects, not least in their insulation from luck and unfairness. He was no stranger to pessimism, so we might expect him to sympathise with upset at the loss of that consolation, the consolation that luck-immune objective justification would offer. Indeed, in a posthumously-published but widely-cited paper, he wrote that a metaethically irrealist view 'can make people feel that human activities are absurd, because we invest them with an importance they do not really possess' (Williams 2006, 137).

But Williams was scathing about such feelings, calling them a 'muddle'. His polemical powers are on full display, not so much responding to as mocking his target, Bertrand Russell. **In this paper, I'll argue that Williams was wrong. There need be no muddle in mourning the loss of absolute importance and objective moral justification.**

In the next section, I'll distinguish several different ways we might lose those things. Later, I'll argue that surprisingly, Williams-style internalism about reasons is even more depressing than stark global nihilism, before concluding with some practical responses to such feelings.

1 Nihilism and Error Theory

The subtle differences between metaethical views matter, though Williams would probably dismiss the following taxonomy as tedious or plodding. It's a mark of how powerful Williams's polemics were that I—who never met him—am almost afraid of what he might have to say post-mortem.

I'm a nihilist. More precisely, I accept

> **Global Normative Nihilism.** There are no normative reasons for either belief or action.

Normativity—the crucial ingredient in normative or justifying reasons—is not a feature of the world. We can describe whether someone's beliefs, desires, and actions are coherent, truthful, and systematic, but what we say lacks normative content. She has no *reason* to be coherent, truthful, or systematic, and there is no justification to be found. Such nihilism can be restricted in scope: (merely) Practical Normative Nihilism rules out reasons for action but permits reasons for belief and other attitudes. But I'll focus on the global version, avoiding the complications of restricted scope.

Williams's somewhat skeptical attitude to reasons doesn't go as far as Nihilism. His 'Humeanism' or 'internalism' accepts that we have genuinely normative reasons, but ties them to our motivations:

> **Austere Internalism.** An agent has a reason to A iff Aing would promote one of her desires, perhaps subject to procedural purification. All such reasons are agent-relative.

Austere internalism says that our reasons track our desires, without any particular restrictions on their content: we only have reason against committing murder insofar as that's the better option with respect to our desires. Our desires can make murder what we have most reason to do, because there are no categorical (desire-independent) reasons, so none against murder. Williams is the most famous defender of austere internalism, but he is far from alone.[1]

I use 'austere' to distinguish this view from 'moderate' internalism—see famously Schroeder (2007) and Markovits (2014)—which accepts that all reasons are tied to desires but nevertheless exploits the 'procedural purification' proviso to revive categorical or agent-neutral reasons, normally corresponding to moral reasons. From now on I'll drop the qualification, because the austere is my focus.

Neither Nihilism nor Austere Internalism says anything about morality without is a linking principle such as

> **Moral Rationalism.** Moral obligations constitute or entail reasons for action.[2]

Together with Moral Rationalism, either of Internalism and Nihilism almost forces us into

> **Moral Error Theory.** All positive moral claims are false.

[1] Williams (1981a); Williams (1995); Sobel (2016).

[2] The phrasing is from Shafer-Landau (2003), p. 190.

Error Theory says that torturing puppies for fun is not wrong. Moral obligations would entail categorical reasons for action, but Internalism and Nihilism deny that such reasons exist. And similarly for moral theories that don't trade in obligations. An appeal to Moral Rationalism is a natural interpretation of Mackie's queerness argument, for example: if torturing puppies were wrong then we'd have categorical reason not to torture puppies, but there are no such reasons, which would be queer.

It only *almost* forces us in the case of Internalism, because we might escape by appeal to Harman-style moral relativism. On that view, morality provides reasons, but they are not categorical, because the content of morality depends on what we desire, construed very broadly (Harman 1975). But as we'll see, in dropping an absolute or objective moral perspective, such relativism loses much of what is consoling about morality.

All of which is to say that there is a cluster of views resiling from the traditional objective picture of morality—of an absolute moral stance issuing categorical reasons—in subtly different and confusing ways. Despite their differences, views in this cluster agree that some kind of objectivity, whether absolute moral obligations or categorical reasons, is lost.

Moving away from narrow morality, we might also worry that we lack absolute importance, that our lives are meaningless, and that there is no purpose or point to our existence. The connections between these theses run deep. For example, an absolute moral obligation to promote the well-being of our fellow humans would give us categorical reason to do just that. Their welfare (and hence ours) would matter—it would be absolutely important—because it would provide a reason for any agent capable of having such a thing. Williams sees the connection between betterness and importance, regarding the judgement that something is 'just *better*' as an instance of the notion of 'absolute importance, that last relic of the still enchanted world' (Williams 2006, 141, emphasis in original).

To deny any of these claims is to say that we lack some kind of absolute or stance-independent importance or significance.

Meaning looks like it could be the odd one out. It could be a stretch to say that normative reasons could provide a 'purpose or point' to our lives.[3] If 'purpose' is interpreted literally as involving intentionality—as it is by (Benatar 2017, 46)—then indeed categorical reasons might not bring meaning. But in a broader sense, our lives aren't *really* pointless if we have normative reasons for action, if there are certain things we ought to do. Especially if our reasons are categorical, the to-be-doneness of those actions is somehow built into them. They call out to us. Though it might not be the purpose or point we were hoping for it is *some* kind of purpose. The teleology is there: if we don't act in accord with those reasons, we are not functioning correctly.

So despite the differences in detail, these several skeptical metaethical theses agree the some absolute or objective standard is missing. But does it make sense to get upset about that?

[3] I'm indebted to (removed for review) for pushing me to tease apart meaning and morality.

2 The Coherence of Nihilistic Despair

I find the views just surveyed depressing. Insofar as I accept one of them, I am saddened or depressed by what I take to be true. I'll call such an attitude 'nihilistic despair', a slightly overblown name that encompasses weaker negative emotions such as discomfort or angst.

Many of most of us find moral error theory and its cousins a little unsettling. In conversation I've often been told that error theory would be a sad truth, perhaps with the implication that accepting error theory is somewhat disreputable, revealing a defective character or cast of mind. Error theorists may respond that they are simply facing the unpalatable truth. Regardless of which side we take here, an emotional reaction to the error theory (and thus to Nihilism) *is* common.

We saw Mackie acknowledge such a reaction, at least at a first pass. Another error theorist, Jonas Olson writes that for many people 'error theory is *emotionally* difficult to accept […] it may feel sickening to accept that none of [the past century's atrocities] were in fact morally wrong' (Olson 2014, 143). He suggests an explanation rooted in the affective origin of belief in the moral wrongness of such atrocities. But my aesthetic beliefs also probably have an affective origin, and I don't find an aesthetic error theory sickening—or not so sickening as the moral version—so what's special about the moral case? As I'll discuss below, some people *are* made uneasy by the lack of aesthetic and similar objectivity, but not to 'sickening' levels.

Susan Wolf writes that the question of a 'purpose or point to human existence' has a depressing answer: there is such a purpose or point only if there is a God to provide one, and the latter is unlikely (Wolf 2007, 1). Sharon Street is a metaethical anti-realist, and claims that things matter, but dependent entirely on us caring about them. So we should think of nihilism 'not as a philosophical position that might, to our dismay, turn out to be correct, independently of what we think or hope—but rather as a state of mind we might fall into—false as long as we don't fall into it, but true as soon as we do' (Street 2017, 148). The prophylaxis is causal, including a good eating and sleeping regime.

Like other emotions, despair has cognitive and conative components. We *feel* despair *about* something. A non-idiosyncratic account of nihilistic despair will identify aspects of nihilism that are recognisably, if contingently, sad. Contingently sad because if nihilism is true there's no reason to find those things sad, as there's no reason for anything.

If nihilism is false then the nihilist has (perhaps blamelessly—metaethics is difficult) gone wrong somewhere and believes a false view. Nevertheless, our mistaken nihilist may face reasons of coherence or rational requirements to be upset about nihilism's putative truth. Our question is what nihilism looks like from the inside.[4]

Despair is cognitively distinguished from other broadly negative emotions by a belief that its target is immutable, a lost cause. Despair at the impending death of a friend would normally be a mistake if we could easily save her. Nihilistic despair certainly qualifies here: whatever the correct metaethical theory is, it is a necessary truth beyond

[4] I am indebted to (removed for review) for forcing me to be clearer about distinction between nihilism's truth and its being believed. This distinction is crucial to the Pascalian argument of Kahane (2017), which I discuss below.

our power to change. (Even on Street's view where we have some power, we are powerless to change the truth of Street's view.)

On the conative side, despair is often marked by infectious hopelessness and the sapping of motivation. I can't bring my friend back to life, so I can't bring myself to get up and go to work. *Grief* is also a reaction to immutable loss. Grief can lead to resignation, where we also recognise our powerlessness, but in a way that mitigates our sadness. We learn to live with it: our emotional reaction is eventually muted, and (the rest of) life goes on. If we don't learn to live with it, then grief may become despair. A lapsed moral realist may experience nihilistic grief, if she's come to think the objective goodness she built her life around was a myth or fiction all along. The sunk costs of religion make converting to atheism fraught.

So despair and grief constitutively involve regarding the putatively immutable fact as somehow bad, sad, or depressing—attaching a negative valence to it. This can make nihilistic despair look incoherent: isn't judging it bad that nothing is bad clearly self-undermining? Indeed, it's surprisingly common to claim that nihilistic despair is nonsensical.

Williams makes such a claim in response to Bertrand Russell, who argued that the modern scientific worldview suggests that we are insignificant, and offers us only a 'firm foundation of unyielding despair' (Russell 1985).

In his wide-ranging *The Human Prejudice*, Williams claims that the titular prejudice (which allegedly underpins meat-eating, for example) is not really a prejudice, but a consequence of the fact that we humans are the only beings who can provide and understand reasons. As a result, being a human being is either a basic ethical concept or very close to one, via the ethical notion of species membership. Moreover, there is no wholly objective moral point of view: 'it is a total illusion to think that this [human] enterprise can be licensed in some respects and condemned in others by credentials that come from another [non-human] source' (Williams 2006, 147). If we try to occupy an objective moral point of view, we fall victim to that illusion.

The 'sources' he considers are absolute importance in the cosmic scheme of things and utilitarianism. Rejecting the former as incompatible with the modern disenchanted worldview, Williams is surprisingly sympathetic to the thought that the size of the universe has a metaethical upshot. I defend this thought elsewhere, but most contemporary philosophers think it a somewhat silly mistake, so Williams is a welcome ally on that point.[5] Utilitarianism he argues has untenable consequences, not least—and memorably—in our dealings with disgusting or conquering aliens.

My concern is with the psychological upshot of rejecting absolute importance. (Williams 2006, 137) distinguishes two claims about such 'cosmic significance'. First, the metaethical claim that absolute importance—of any kind—is a myth, 'a relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted'. If we accept a connection between importance and reasons, as I'm claiming we should, then this corresponds to Internalism (there is no *absolute* importance) or Nihilism (there is no importance of any kind, beyond our psychological state of regarding things as important).

[5]Williams (2006), pp. 136–7. See Nagel (1971). (removed for review)

Second, the first-order claim that though there is such importance to be had, humanity lacks it; 'that humans do have a definite measure of importance in the scheme of things, but that it is very low'.

Williams appeals to this distinction in rejecting nihilistic despair as a muddle. After dismissing Russell's 'self–pitying and at the same time self-glorifying rhetoric' (and Russell's language is indeed a little high-flown), Williams claims the muddle is not even worth engaging with philosophically, because 'the feelings probably come from some place which that comment will not reach' (Williams 2006, 137).

When directed at Bertrand Russell, such dismissive rhetoric had better have solid philosophical backing. It doesn't:

> if the idea of absolute importance in the scheme of things is an illusion, a relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted, then there is no other point of view except ours in which our activities can have or lack a significance. (Williams 2006, 137)

Williams argues that it doesn't make sense to be upset that humanity is cosmically unimportant because the very idea of the latter is an illusion. Since *nothing* is cosmically important, there is no disappointing first-order judgement from the cosmic point of view to take badly. Williams claims that Russell must be conflating *there is no absolute cosmic scale of importance* with *the cosmic scale of importance doesn't think much of us*.

But this is a mistake. If there is no cosmic point of view, then we are not significant from a cosmic point of view. There's nothing muddled in getting upset about that—from our own point of view, of course. The very fact *that there is no test of cosmic significance* is depressing to some of us. Why must 'I wish there were a standard of cosmic significance to measure my activities against' be a muddle? Similarly, there need be no muddle in an atheist regretting that she is not blessed by God: she regrets that there isn't even a God to potentially bless her.

Perhaps the idea is that absolute importance is outright incoherent and so can't sensibly be the target of a (frustrated, in this case) wish? Some of Williams's language does suggest he thinks the absolute is incoherent in this way—a few pages later, he writes that 'we can't get a hold of that idea [absolute betterness] at all' (Williams 2006, 141)—But it's a much stronger claim that metaethical realism is not only false but outright incoherent, and even Mackie doesn't think moral properties akin to round squares. In any case, Williams outlines one seemingly coherent way to vindicate cosmic importance: it's what God cares about. We've learnt that God doesn't exist, not that the very idea of Him is incoherent.

Even if absolute importance is an incoherent idea (perhaps only in the context of our modern disenchanted conceptual scheme), it doesn't follow that it's a muddle to be upset that we lack it. Williams himself argues elsewhere that the impossibility of improvement is a good defence (or theodicy) when demanding a justification from (or of) God for the world's evils. But he also accepts that 'we have many mere wishes that go against possibility', and defends a kind of unhappiness that 'perhaps does presuppose the defeated expectation of something better, but not as a focus of complaint: what has failed is not justification but hope' (Williams 2009, 54 and 55). And a failure of hope is one way of characterising nihilistic despair.

More recently, Guy Kahane has also argued that nihilistic despair is muddled, that if we get upset at the unchangeable truth of evaluative nihilism—which says that nothing is bad—then our attitudes 'make no sense' (Kahane 2017, 331). We regard it as bad that nothing is bad, the two components of this state contradict each other, and the state is a muddle. For Kahane the muddle lies not in the nonexistence of what is missed, but in contradicting oneself by missing it.

As Kahane notes, a similar argument was made by R. M. Hare in a broadly emotivist framework: if to think something matters is to care about it, then to think nothing matters is to care about nothing. Since we *do* care about things, things matter to us. Moreover, it would be contradictory to think nothing matters and to be upset about it—given that the latter involves a kind of caring (Hare 1972).

Kahane's intriguing argument doesn't rely on noncognitivism. Nevertheless, I think it must also go wrong. If Kahane is right, then given belief in nihilism *any* emotional reaction to anything, or at least any reaction with an evaluative component, is also senseless. Sadness at the death of a dog makes no sense, because that death is not bad. Responses to nihilism itself simply bring out the latent contradiction.

This follows only if the negative valence in nihilistic despair is precisely the kind of evaluative judgement that nihilism rules out. Nihilistic despair involves an unhappy judgement about the (supposed) fact that nothing is objectively bad. Such despair is structurally muddled if the unhappy judgement is *judging to be objectively bad*. Now this really is a question for theorists of the emotions, but there's no obvious reason to accept such a heavily intellectualised understanding of the attitude constituting despair. Despair can simply rest on the thought that the truth is at odds with what one most deeply desires (or hopes). I *want* to be categorically important, and I'll argue that many of us do.

Indulging in nihilistic despair might not be a good idea. But neither is it necessarily muddled or incoherent.

3 What We Miss About Morality

The real question is a substantive one: what exactly is upsetting about nihilism? It often goes unanswered. We might ask what's wrong with an apparent loss of external authority or why we should take measures to avoid nothing mattering. Whether as philosophical position or state of mind, what exactly is wrong with nihilism—why might it provoke dismay?

Nihilism seems to be special here: the vertigo Street discusses also accompanies more generally nominalist metaphysical views where, at risk of overstatement, chairs exist only insofar as we think they do. Outside ethical antirealism there is less fear or sadness or dismay, though Kieran Setiya has recently argued that they aren't entirely absent in the metaphysical or epistemic case (Setiya 2021, especially pp. 51–52).

I have sometimes been told that nihilistic despair is a foolish overreaction to the falsity of robust metaethical realism: what about more moderate, naturalistic metaethical realist views? But we shouldn't change the question, which is conditional: what follows from nihilism? By seeing what's depressing about nihilism we can also understand whether more moderate views are less glum. We might also ask whether *realist*

metaethical views are also depressing, in other ways of course. If they are, then we face a kind of philosophical pessimism: there are only two options, both bad. But that would take us too far afield.

There are several things we might lose when we lose morality or reasons. Morality—or belief in it—could be a powerful *causal* route to things we value. The 'now what' question for moral error theorists concerns how we can accept that stealing is not wrong, and perhaps have others accept it, without inspiring an epidemic of theft. If there is a casual connection between your believing error theory and your acting in ways I'd prefer you didn't, then if I expect error theory to spread then I may lose some hope for the future.

Morality may also be a source of intrinsic value. For example, if we think that moral virtue is necessarily prudentially valuable—Brad Hooker thinks it isn't, but I think it would be—then when we lose morality we lose a source of prudential value.[6] The nihilist may think that compliance with our reasons *would* have been prudentially valuable. If this would have been intrinsic value, then it's lost and there's no substitute.

Somewhere in the middle, we may think morality constitutively part of something we want. Joshua Blanchard claims that morality can supply meaning to life in the face of poor treatment: 'unjustified harms and oppression cause one's life to go poorly, but one's life is better if one has available an authoritative protest […] moral standing provides the strong with a reason not to harm the weak'.[7] For Blanchard, having such a protest to hand—even when ignored—can provide an irreplaceable sort of meaning. And insofar as meaning is good or desired, its loss is something to regret.

In a similar vein, Williams noted the Kantian promise that the immoralist can be convicted of irrationality *on his own terms*—see for example (Williams 1973)—which can give us a kind of satisfaction. This foreshadows the view I'll defend below, that morality offers us the promise that wrong actions are somehow bad for the immoral agent themselves, whether or not that agent recognises it.

Even those who deny that anything is depressing about nihilism *per se* might still concede that it is often packaged with depressing non-metaethical theses. It's no coincidence that—like Mackie—many people are attracted both to error theory and to atheism, as part of the disenchanted modern scientific world view. That view is dismaying to many as Russell showed us (a little self-pityingly—Williams was right about that) and Tolstoy puts it especially clearly via his puppet Levin:

> In infinite time, in the infinity of matter, in infinite space, a bubble-organism separates itself, and that bubble holds out for a little while and then bursts, and that bubble is – me.

Levin dismisses this as a falsity, 'the cruel mockery of some evil power' (Tolstoy, Pevear, and Volokhnosky 2000, 788–89). Given such connections, perhaps upset at nihilism is really upset at what it implies about mortality, for example? For many people there is clearly something to this.

But there also seems to be something distinctively sad about the loss of absolute importance. Many of us—including perhaps a plurality of contemporary analytic

[6] Hooker (1998); (removed for review)

[7] Blanchard (2020), p. 124; see also Nagel (2008).

metaethicists—accept atheism, evolution and the rest whilst also holding onto moral realism. For example, even in his defence of pessimism, David Benatar (2017) appeals to moral considerations. Adding error theory or nihilism to this package would make it even more pessimistic, but why?

4 Significance and Luck

My view is that morality and reasons are constitutive means to things we value, and nihilism strips us of those things. We have twin desires for significance and insulation from luck that realist views (claim to) satisfy, and nihilism doesn't. The discussion to follow clearly owes much to Williams, in particular to his *Moral Luck* and *Persons, Character, and Morality*. Much as in the latter he criticises 'recent work in moral philosophy […] of basically Kantian inspiration', I'll stipulate a somewhat hazy realist foil:[8]

> **Plausible Moral Realism.** The well-being of other people (or some other feature of them) provides categorical reason to act in certain ways.

Plausible Moral Realism conjoins a metaethical thesis—that we have categorical moral reasons—with a first-order thesis about what those reasons are. The former is our real concern, but the first-order thesis allows us to focus on relatively standard moral views, temporarily ignoring the possibility that there are categorical reasons but they are not what we thought.

Plausible Moral Realism is compatible with most mainstream realist metaethics. It is entailed by the Kantian Formula of Humanity, for example, which tells us to *act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means* (Wood 2008 [Ak 4:429]). Assuming a realist construal of Kant, and that it's not too anachronistic to cast his views in terms of reasons, the Formula tells us that we always have reason not to act in certain ways—namely, not to treat other people or ourselves as mere means. But Plausible Moral Realism is not itself a Kantian view, and is entailed for example by the views of Hooker (2000) and Crisp (2006).

Plausible Moral Realism says that we matter. Suppose that I am walking down a Berlin street and trip on a paving slab as a tram passes by. I am dependent on the stranger next to me—call her Sarah—not to push me under the tram's wheels. My trip would give her plausible deniability: if someone sees her push me, she was trying to help me but was clumsy, or so she says. In normal circumstances, Plausible Moral Realism says that Sarah has very strong moral reasons to *not* push me, and probably to help me. I matter in that I provide categorical reasons.

These reasons don't imply that Sarah *will* treat me well. But when paired with a non-skeptical moral epistemology, Plausible Moral Realism plausibly implies that the connection between the moral truth and helping me (or at least not pushing me) is non-accidental, since she is capable of grasping moral reasons and acting on them. That itself is reassuring. If we can grasp moral reasons and we have at least a weak tendency to comply with them, then we should be more optimistic about how our

[8] Williams (1981b), Williams (1981c). The quote is from p. 1.

fellow humans will act on the whole. But this causal-statistical claim isn't the most important consoling aspect of Plausible Moral Realism.

The concept of a normative reason is hard to analyse. Perhaps incomprehensible, but Williams offers an internalist account of reasons, and so seems not to think so. Reasons guide us in our choices; even if we don't follow them, we *should*. Here I'll make an assumption: if you have a reason, then it's good for you (in some sense) to act in accord with it. A strong version of the assumption is that *pace* Hooker, moral virtue and reasons-compliance more broadly is intrinsically prudentially valuable, as I argue elsewhere, but I won't assume this.[9]

A weaker version is that our reasons are necessarily tied to what benefits us. We cannot have a reason to ϕ if ϕing doesn't benefit us in any way whatsoever. This is a substantive assumption but a Williams-friendly one. For example, internalism about reasons together with a desire-satisfaction theory of well-being means that on the whole, when we act as we have reason to, we tend to increase our well-being. In a less loaded way, it could simply be that when we follow our reasons, we avoid acting in a way that is incoherent by our own lights, which would in some sense be bad for us.

This admittedly mysterious connection between actions and our own good is central to the concept of genuine normativity. The good of complying with one's reasons is the good of *reasonableness*, and it's a component of our welfare, either intrinsically or as an instrument to, for example, desire-satisfaction. Reasonableness is a prudential good, or it would be if there were any normative reasons. The connection between morality, reasons, and welfare partially explains the power of Susan Wolf's 'moral sainthood' challenge to contemporary moral theories: they give us reasons which we don't think it would be at all good for us to follow (Wolf 1982, 419).

An even weaker version of the assumption is that we unreflectively believe that acting on our reasons is good for us, even if that cannot ultimately be borne out.

Granting some connection between our reasons and prudence, Plausible Moral Realism offers us a luck-insulated source of well-being: if we act as we have moral reason to do, we gain at least some reasonableness. We may sacrifice other elements of well-being, because we might for example have most reason to face intense physical pain and rescue the victim of a trolley problem. But the moral reason and associated welfare remains, even if outweighed.

The special features of morality, as Williams highlighted, insulate such welfare from luck. If 'ought' implies 'can', there must be a way we can act in accordance with our reasons, and those reasons will partially vindicate that action no matter how things causally turn out. Even those versions of realism that allow for moral luck do not typically say that we are *always* hostage to it. Moral reasons are a route to increased welfare at least partly and usually insulated from luck.

For the nihilist there are no normative reasons and so no good of reasonableness. There is simply no normative sense in which our actions are correct or incorrect. Sartre calls such a phenomenon *abandonment*: without a God or 'luminous realm of values … [without] any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour … we are left alone, without excuse'. He argues that such abandonment, together with a commitment

[9](removed for review)

to each person as 'a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind', brings a 'sense of complete and profound responsibility' (Sartre 1948, 34 and 30).

Here I part company with Sartre, because part of nihilism's point is that we do *not* legislate for anyone else or even our future selves. There is no legislature. So I adopt the evocative 'abandonment' terminology with the caveat that I do not have quite the existentialist sense in mind. We are abandoned in the sense that there is no guidance for our actions.

Abandonment exposes us to luck. In Sartre's most famous example, a student must choose between two weighty courses of action—caring for his mother and fighting for France—and cannot do both. At least absent a genuine moral dilemma, Plausible Moral Realism tells the student that if he can identify the permissible thing to do, then he can follow that course and be justified. The damage to France or to his mother is a high but acceptable price. Neither course is cost-free, but insofar as he chooses correctly he is justified and his life goes well to that extent. (If we are attached to a fair and luck-immune picture of morality, the fact that moral dilemmas would upset such a picture is some motivation to reject their possibility and to argue that 'ought' implies 'can'. It's also no coincidence that Williams objected to an insistence on tragedy-free rankings of outcomes.)

Existentialism and internalism about reasons say that one can choose one's values or reasons in a certain sense—at the very least, they are mind-dependent. They represent our point of view. But such chosen values aren't enough to avoid luck. Abandonment recurs at the second level: why those values? That's the crucial difference between nihilistic despair and "existentialism 2.0", as (removed for review) called my view.

That was about our role as agents. But Plausible Moral Realism also makes us categorically significant as patients, those who are affected by others. It says that Sarah helping me dodge the tram benefits *her*: she is more reasonable. Anyone who unjustifiably harms or kills me is made worse off, because they lose reasonableness. Maybe not worse off in every respect, and maybe not worse off than me. But even though I lose my life, my enemy takes a debit to (at least one aspect of) her welfare. I have at least partial revenge. Plausible Moral Realism says that reasonableness—and hence the welfare of the agent—bears a necessary connection with treating others well.

To hark back to Williams's distinction, we have at least some importance in the scheme of things, and hence (granting my assumption) some impact on the welfare of others. We are categorically significant in that necessarily, their welfare depends on them treating us well. This is the truth in Blanchard's claim that (even as a patient, subject to the will of another) an authoritative protest makes our lives go better (Blanchard 2020, 124). Perhaps this reflects badly on me, but the benefit of a categorical reason not to harm me is not meaning but revenge: if I'm going down (under a tram), then she's coming down (morally) with me.

Fear often brings out our need for such revenge. I used to live three miles away from my local rail station along a fast and unlit rural road. When cycling home from the station at night, I would get particularly nervous when I heard behind me a large vehicle. As the road in front of me was lit up by their headlights, I took some comfort that since I was wearing reflective clothing and several lights, if they were to hit and kill me it would be *their fault* and they'd have no excuse. Part of this comfort was of

course legal and social, rooted in the the punishment and ostracism the driver would (hopefully!) face, along with having to 'live with' having killed me. But not all: if a driver kills me through culpable negligence, that is worse *for her* too.

Nihilism robs us of categorical significance as patients. There is no sense in which the particles that make up my body necessarily matter more than any other similarly-sized clump of matter. None provide categorical reasons for action, so we are on a par with the other constituents of the universe, including nonhuman animals and distant, inanimate matter. If nihilism is true, then we have no special reason-giving status. As Williams put it, we lack 'absolute importance in the scheme of things'.

You can agree with that even if you deny my claim that acting reasonably necessarily benefits the agent. But if you accept the claim, then you can see what in particular is grim about nihilism: we thought there was a necessary connection between my welfare and that of anyone who acts, but there isn't. There need be no sense in which Sarah is worse off if she pushes me in front of the tram, and so may be no vehicle for my revenge. Not only is it somewhat more likely that people will harm me (as I argued above), those who do so need be taking no debit to their welfare. If the driver's conscience doesn't trouble him for killing me, he need be making no mistake.

To recap, Plausible Moral Realism can be comforting in two ways. Even if in the long run we are all dead, for now we are not abandoned and our actions may be what they ought, or not. They are assessable against and absolute and inescapable standard, compliance with which beings us welfare. Second, anyone who treats us in certain ways—violating the absolute standard—is making a mistake, and taking a *pro tanto* hit to their own welfare. Nihilism denies us these consolations, and so frustrates deep desires.

Of course if nihilism is true, then it is in no sense *objectively* sad. This is the truth in Kahane's argument. Whether each of us will find it sad depends on whether we have the desires in question. Clearly, many do. If such attitudes are nearly universal, we might have a secondary quality account of nihilistic despair: nihilism is such as to provoke sadness or despair in normal observers in normal conditions.

Desire for significance does seem common—fiction is full of stories in which human action turns the tide of the cosmos. Perhaps the desire for significance has an evolutionary basis. Quentin Smith suggests that we live in 'an illusion of meaningfulness', which allows us to survive and reproduce (Smith 2003, 53). Kahane, however, is as dismissive of an evolutionary basis as Smith takes it to be obvious, claiming that 'it's not as if evolution had made us react with fear and despair to nihilism as we instinctively fear snakes…' (Kahane 2017, 6). But neither offers (or claims to offer) arguments for these evolutionary claims, and so I put this matter aside. Kahane does claim that coming to believe nihilism leads to a near-complete decay of subjective concern and action (I disagree). If he is right, then non-nihilists may be more evolutionarily successful, and so perhaps fearing nihilism would be evolutionarily adaptive. But this is entirely speculative.

5 Internalism about Reasons is Even Sadder

I've argued that nihilism is depressing. I'll now turn to Williams-style internalism where there are normative reasons, but all are (on typical versions) connected to our desires. The point is that there is genuine normativity in the world: the internalist about reasons at least aspires to avoid skepticism about all reasons.

Austere Internalism implies that Plausible Moral Realism is false because there are no categorical reasons. Nevertheless, it might be thought that because such a view is closer to moral realism—it accepts *some* normative truths—it must be less depressing than nihilism. I'll argue the opposite.

Williams himself brings out some implications of Austere Internalism. His 'hard case'—who has no motivation to be nicer to his wife—therefore has no reason to be nicer to her, but we can call him 'ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things' (Williams 1995, 39). From *our* point of view, of course. What the man is exactly guilty of is not clear. Some of these insults would be appropriately directed at an abusive husband, but he is also described as lacking a reason to be 'nicer to his wife', which suggests lesser wrongdoing.

Internalism says that we all lack necessary significance. Our well-being may indeed provide reasons for others, but contingently on the desires of those others. There is genuine normativity in the world, but it does not assign us any distinctive or categorical status. All reasons are agent-relative, so there are (agent-relatively) important things—but we need not be among them. Whether any person or group matters in this agent-relative way depends on who the agent is, and in particular on the agent's motivational set. We *do* fail a test of being categorically important in the scheme of things, though admittedly so does everything else.

As he is standardly understood, the hard case has no desires that would be promoted by being nicer to his wife, or they are outweighed by his patriarchal desires. He makes no more mistake in treating her badly and ignoring her welfare than I—as someone who does not care about cricket—do when I ignore cricket. This comparison may be offensive, but that is part of the point: according to austere internalism, our actions are on a par in terms of desire satisfaction, and those are the only terms. The view knocks us off the pedestal that Plausible Moral Realism erects for us, the pedestal for those whose needs nobody may ignore.

Nihilism does that too, but internalism says that the hard case may be normatively *better off* than both his wife and us. If acting in accord with one's reasons contributes to welfare, then insofar as he gains things he values (such as domination of the household), he gains reasonableness.

Similarly, Plausible Moral Realism offered me revenge on Sarah. Even if I would lose a physical confrontation with her, even if I lose my life, I am better off than her in at least one respect: I may be reasonable, and she is not. The eudaimonic difference between us is lessened through her unreasonableness in defying her categorical reasons not to harm me. Nihilism dismissed reasonableness as a myth. That was depressing, but Internalism rubs salt in the wound: there is robust welfare, but it bears no necessary connection to treating me well, and in pushing me in front of a tram she might be gaining reasonableness. Perhaps the eudaimonic difference between us is *increased* by

reasons: she gains reasonableness, and I lose my life.

This brings us to abandonment under internalism. Remember that Plausible Moral Realism offered a luck-insulated component of welfare. Internalism agrees that whatever your desires, they provide reasons, and so you can be more or less reasonable. But we remain abandoned in that those desires cannot themselves be evaluated, except perhaps procedurally. The reasons we have affect our welfare, and are grossly exposed to luck and contingency. We are not in competition with everyone else to comply with reasons we all share, and it is partly a matter of luck whether our desires are easily achieved, for example.

To my knowledge, only Kate Manne (2014) has recently argued that internalism about reasons is sad or depressing. Her internalism is somewhat different to that sketched here: for Manne, an agent has a reason to do something only if they can be interpersonally reasoned into doing it. Our reasons depend on what we can be talked into, which may not be precisely what would satisfy our desires. But the core feature of the view, the agent-relativity of all reasons, is shared with Austere Internalism.

Though not in the same terminology, Manne describes a version of nihilistic despair. Much of her discussion focuses on Williams's abusive husband. It may be that we cannot reason him into treating his wife better, she claims, because 'our tongues are tied by his motivational deficits. This is admittedly sad, but it may be true nonetheless' (Manne 2014, 111). So he doesn't have a reason to treat his wife better. So far, I agree with Manne's diagnosis: her version of internalism implies that people, including his wife, have no categorical significance, in that they don't necessarily provide reasons.

But by what independent standard are his motivations *deficient*? Plausible Moral Realism had an answer, but that's not available here. I think what's truly sad is that he need not be deficient: he could be functioning perfectly well, albeit in a way we'd condemn.

(Manne 2014, 115) thinks it sad that 'there are some people who are most plausibly interpreted as being beyond the reach of being reasoned with about what they are doing'. But there's nothing particular to internalism about *that*: wrongdoers will always be with us, whether or not they have categorical reason to be nicer. She describes individuals like the hard case as 'unguided missiles', but this is exactly the wrong way around: internalism says they may be *guided* missiles, and may be acting perfectly reasonably. Sadly, they are guided to act in ways that harm us. And—to strain the metaphor—insofar as it is good for a missile when its guidance system functions well, they do *better* insofar as they harm us. (According to Plausible Moral Realism their guidance system must be malfunctioning in a way that's bad for them.)

Many of us feel that internalism about reasons is akin to nihilism. I've argued that it is more depressing than outright nihilism. Rather than being a fair and equalising force, normativity can exacerbate luck and inequality.

6 Responses to Nihilistic Despair

If nihilism is true, then we must set aside the notion of an objectively appropriate or fitting response to its truth. But I've argued that nihilistic despair need be no muddle, and is natural given many commonplace desires.

You will likely not fall into such despair if you lack any of the desires I've sketched for normative significance and guidance. You may even experience nihilistic joy if you prefer the rejection of objective values, if you have desires better satisfied by the *absence* of such guidance. You might wish to be a terrible tyrant and have the strength to make this a realistic possibility. If there are categorical reasons not to have your rivals killed then you must choose: give up some welfare from obeying morality and sacrificing tyranny, or *vice versa*? If Nihilism is true, then you face no such choice.

A bit less distant, someone we might call the moralist seeks objective grounding or support for her morally-laden actions. She seeks objective support for the claim that she is more reasonable than those who push others in front of trams. But she's content with arbitrariness or contingency in non-moral matters. Merely agent-relative, internal support will do for her choice of tea or place to live. Many of us are moralist in this sense.

Finally at another extreme, some people can't bear rational arbitrariness. Such a person desires objective grounding or support for even her most trivial preferences. If she likes red wine and her friend doesn't, then she wants assurance that one of them must be *wrong*, absent some vindication for the divergence (such as neurological differences). She wants reassurance that everything she does was objectively best. This person will find nihilism and Austere Internalism quite disturbing, and perhaps also many versions of Plausible Moral Realism, which for desire-based variation in many normative reasons. This most rationally insecure person will experience Street's vertigo about aesthetic pursuits and the reasons to pursue her hobbies. There is no *best* hobby that ought to be pursued.

How should we respond to nihilistic despair? The question sounds confused—*should?*—but internalists are perfectly open to genuinely normative advice. Even the global nihilist might listen to naturalistic truths about which beliefs, attitudes, and actions will best promote her desires. The joyful nihilist doesn't need our advice, of course.

But the other two may simply find nihilistic despair an unpleasant experience. Except for a certain strain of masochist, many of us find intense sadness or despair unpleasant. Here the story is similar to Benatar (2017) on one reason why a lack of meaning can make our lives worse—many of us *want* meaning, and frustrated wants can be painful—and the options below are similar to those he canvasses.

We have many desires, for significance and for other things (right now, I would like a cup of tea). Despair takes up time and energy that could be spent on promoting the satisfaction of desires that *can* be satisfied. We can't change the metaethics, and as Elson (2019) argues, impossible desires play no role in determining what we ought do. If nihilistic despair interferes with eating lunch, perhaps we ought excise the despair so that we might better pursue our more tractable desires.

(Wolf 2007, 14) advises someone upset about a different kind of insignificance:

> Some people do undoubtedly get very upset, even despondent when they start to think about their cosmic insignificance. They want to be important, to have an impact on the world, to make a mark that will last forever. When they realize that they cannot achieve this, they are very disappointed. The only advice one can give to such people is: Get Over It.

Maybe such harsh words will snap some despairers out of their ennui, or lead them to distract themselves, but this isn't very actionable advice. If I really do have the desires that nihilism frustrates, then I may not be able to simply get over it any more than I can get over other kinds of grief.

Another possibility is deception: stop believing in nihilism. This advice is indirectly actionable: don't think too hard about queerness arguments, for example, and is that offered in the Pascalian argument of (Kahane 2017, 344ff). Perhaps we already do this. Nihilism is unpleasant for many, and this may partially explain why it and the error theory are so unpopular. It's surprising that they should be *quite* such niche views. The arguments for them—going back to Mackie but including for example Streumer's criticisms of other metaethical views (Streumer 2017)—may not be decisive, but they have force. Philosophers believe very many odd things on the basis of much weaker arguments, so there should be more nihilists. Olson is right that error theory is emotionally difficult to accept: for many, to flirt with error theory is to flirt with despair, and most of us wish to avoid despair.

Finally, if we cannot get over it or delude ourselves—perhaps if we have deep desires for authenticity and honesty that would be frustrated by such measures—then there may be no cure for nihilistic despair that isn't worse than the disease. Here we have a form of metaethical pessimism, of a sort foreshadowed in Williams's later work such as *The Women of Trachis*: our hopes are dashed, and that is that.

7 Conclusion

I've defended nihilistic despair: *pace* Williams and Kahane, we need not be muddled in being upset at the loss of what morality promised us. If there is no objective moral point of view—in particular no objective point of view that provides reasons for action and contributes to our well-being—then we are more exposed to luck and lack categorical significance. We can find that prospect depressing without incoherence or particularly odd desires.

As we might expect, nihilistic despair focuses on the peculiar features of absolute justification or moral realism. Those things are causally inert, but they (in standard forms) make us absolutely important and offer an inescapable and important standard for the assessment of our actions, and the actions of others towards us. Upset at the loss of such importance and assessment may not be heroic, but it is understandable.

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