OBJECTIONS AGAINST NIHILISM*

Prologue: Nihilism (as an ethical stance) is the view that there is no such thing as right and wrong or good and bad/evil actions. Nihilism can also involve denying God’s existence and any objective meaning of life. It is not the view it is difficult to understand or come to know what is right and wrong in this lifetime, which is better characterized as moral skepticism. Nihilism is the “positive” stance that there is no such thing as right or wrong. (It is analogously similar to atheism’s being the view that one does not believe in God, and not that it is impossible in this lifetime to know whether God exists or not.)

OBJ1: The nihilist must prove every other objectivist ethical theory wrong as well, including but not limited to the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, Hume, Kant, Mill, Sartre, and even Nietzsche (that is, why we should not be a superman with our own values – note also that Nietzsche criticizes nihilism in his Beyond Good and Evil, so it is far from clear that he is a nihilist). Moreover, it is often claimed that an atheist does not need to “prove the negative” that God does not exist, since the theist is the one claiming that God exists. But in order to prove that nihilism is correct, the nihilist must prove that God does not exist. Without this proof, it is possible that God exists and sets the standard for morality. Related to this defense requirement is that the nihilist must prove that Moral Skepticism (the view that we cannot know in this lifetime what is right or wrong) is also wrong. How can the nihilist be sure that there is no such thing as right or wrong? What if he/she just doesn’t know?

OBJ2: The nihilist also must prove that individual and cultural relativism are wrong, since it may be the case that when, for instance, people get together in a culture and agree upon a social contract, that what is then right is for a member of that society is for her to keep her agreements, and what is wrong is for her to violate them (which is cultural relativism).

OBJ3: One’s having any preferences, desires, or values, implies that one should (or should not) do actions or should (or should not) have certain attitudes, and also that it is better for that person to do or avoid actions, and so on. But the nihilist cannot use the words “should” or “better” in the context of human life in any context. Even to say, “If you want to earn a degree at MCC, you should take courses” implies that desires are something people have, and that such desires are linked with their beliefs that education is valuable and can lead to financial security, and, because they desire financial security as part of a happy life, people go to school. At the very least (not conceding that there is no objective standard of right and wrong), for that person, it is better for her to attend MCC and earn an education. When one uses the word should, it automatically implies or ascribes a value to the action that should be performed. For instance, “If you want to avoid getting hit by the bus, you should not step into the street one second before the bus comes by.” Why does that matter, unless we refer to the person’s desire to live, and why does living matter, without reference to desires? The nihilist must explain this.

OBJ4: To be a nihilist, one must explain why we constantly make judgments concerning right and wrong, and good and bad actions, things, people, situations, and so on. If it is said that making these kinds of judgments “just happen” or “I don’t know,” then this is not a defense of the claim that there can be no such thing as a right or wrong action. Consider the explanation of preferences that people rationalize some issue or situation that is difficult to solve or explain, or just naturally have preferences. But this doesn’t show why people should not have the preferences they have, nor that they should believe that their preference is right. The nihilist must say that every preference is not necessarily right or wrong; but this is not an argument as to why the preference is not right, and if it is right, then there is such a thing as right (or wrong, since it would be wrong for them not to prefer their preference).

OBJ5: To be a nihilist, one must explain why we have preferences even for seemingly trivial things such as food or TV shows. Why does it matter if I have chocolate or vanilla ice cream, or watch MSNBC or FOX News? A nihilist can only answer that it does not matter, but this begs the question in their favor. And if these preferences are explained in terms of biology, for instance, there is still something we prefer, even if that preference is due to hormones, neurotransmitters, or other brain-related science. It is not that preferences do not exist. Why will people die for their religious preferences, for instance?
A popular associated claim of nihilists is that life is meaningless; so they cannot attribute any meaning, even self-imposed meaning, on life or any choice without having their view collapse into individual relativism, as follows: If the nihilist claims that A is better than B according to person P, and P is correct that for P (but maybe not for person Q), A is better than B, then the nihilist’s view collapses into individual relativism, which has its own problems (see http://www.mesacc.edu/~yount/text/relativism.html).

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