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How Does Moral Nihilism Affect Our Taking Action Against Climate Change?

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Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change is among the biggest threats in the history of humanity. Its effects have already led to considerable suffering and deaths. However, without large-scale mitigative and adaptive measures, the current situation will prove to be only a weak foretaste of what is to come. Heat waves, storms, floods and droughts will be the death of millions of human and non-human beings. Many coastal areas and islands will become

uninhabitable. Vector-borne diseases will continue to spread. There will be migration movements across the globe, mass starvation and wars over water. Plant and animal species will die out. In the remote future, even the human race may become extinct.¹

In the face of scenarios such as these one would expect people to be seriously concerned, to do everything they can, to pull together. This is not, however, what one finds. All around the world people continue to hold on to their ecologically poisonous lifestyles. We consume too much, we drive too much, we have too many children - we treat nature as if it were our property, as if we had the right to do with it whatever we want.

What can we do to overcome this collective apathy? In order to be able to develop effective measures, it is first necessary to get clear about the causes of climate change inaction. In recent years, scholars from various disciplines have begun to address this issue.² A number of contributing factors have been identified. In this paper, however, my focus will be on a factor that has not yet received attention: on moral nihilism.

Assessing moral nihilism's contribution to climate change inaction requires consideration of various issues, e.g., how many people in general are moral nihilists, and how many political and economic decision makers are (since decision-makers strongly influence the climate-related behaviour of others). By far the most important question to ask, however, is to what extent holding moral nihilism affects our climate-related actions at all.

Prima facie, being a moral nihilist makes a big difference. If I believe that there is no such thing as right or wrong, that everything is permitted, why should I care about climate change? In what follows I will argue, however, that this assumption is false.

Moral nihilism has some negative effect on our taking action against climate change. Under present circumstances this effect is negligible, though.

Moral Nihilism

The term “nihilism” comes from the Latin “nihil”, meaning “nothing”. One natural way of interpreting nihilism’s relation to nothingness is to conceive of it as a position of denial. Nihilists believe that certain phenomena simply *are* nothing: that they do not exist, or do not have any legitimacy. Starting from a general conception such as this, moral nihilism is the view that morality does not exist, or does not have any legitimacy - or that there are no moral truths, as it is put more clearly.

Moral nihilists deny that it is a good thing to help other people. They deny that we are obliged to care for our children. They even deny that it was wrong for the Hutus to massacre the Tutsis or for the Nazis to kill millions of Jews. Nothing in the world is morally right or wrong, nothing is good or bad, obligatory or permissible, according to moral nihilists.³

There are two forms moral nihilism can take. Proponents of both variants agree that there are no true moral judgements. They disagree, however, about why this is the case.⁴

Non-Cognitivism: According to moral non-cognitivists there are no true moral judgements because moral judgements are not even truth-apt. In making such judgements we do not express beliefs, we do not say how things actually are. Rather we are

expressing desires. A. J. Ayer, e.g., famously argued that Joe's judgement that torturing puppies is morally wrong is akin to his saying "Torturing puppies is wrong" in "a peculiar tone of horror", or to saying "Torturing puppies: Boo!"⁵ Contrary to beliefs, however, desires cannot be meaningfully said to be true or false. Thus moral judgements are not true or false, and thus none of them is true.

Error Theory: According to moral error theorists the reason for no moral judgement's being true is not that moral judgements are not truth-apt, but simply that they are all false. Most of us are error theorists with regard to at least some areas of discourse. We grant that the judgements of astrological discourse express beliefs, and are thus truth-apt, e.g., but we nevertheless have the feeling that there is something deeply problematic about them. What would make these judgements true (special relations between astronomic and human events) just does not exist. Much in the same way, moral error theorists maintain that moral judgements are truth-apt, but that the facts that would make these judgements true (e.g., moral facts that are objectively prescriptive, or that presuppose unrestricted autonomy) do not exist. All moral judgements are false, and thus none of them is true.⁶

Practical Effectiveness

In this paper I am not interested in whether moral nihilism is plausible, but only in how holding it affects our actions with regard to climate change. As far as I can see, there is only one plausible reason to assume that being a moral nihilist reduces one's likelihood of taking action. Moral non-nihilists are sometimes led to take action against climate

change by the moral judgement that they ought to do so. Moral nihilists, in contrast, are not – for they deny that the judgement is true.

In what follows I will attempt to determine how convincing this line of reasoning is. A good way to begin is to think about the relation between morality and action in general.

As we all know (from sometimes bitter experience), moral judgements do not automatically lead their addressees to act in conformity with them. Joe may insist that Jane's torturing of puppies is morally wrong until he is blue in the face. In no way does this guarantee, though, that Jane will actually refrain from it. In order for the addressee of a moral judgement to act in conformity with it, in order for such a judgement to be *practically effective*, certain conditions must be met. The first and most obvious condition is that the addressee actually accepts the judgement.⁷ If Jane does not accept that it is morally wrong to torture puppies, then we can hardly say that it is this judgement that leads her to refrain from torturing puppies.

A more controversial question is whether acceptance is not only a necessary, but also a sufficient condition for the effectiveness of moral judgements. Does accepting a moral judgement guarantee that one acts in conformity with it? As most philosophers see it, this is not the case. Accepting a moral judgement may conceptually necessarily provide one with a moral motive to act upon it (as so called "motivational internalists" claim).

However, people regularly have non-moral motives that are stronger than their moral motives. There are also mental maladies (weakness of will, depression, emotional

exhaustion, and so on) that sometimes prevent us from doing what we consider to be right. In order for a moral judgement to be effective, it is generally the case, thus, that a second condition has to be fulfilled. Not only must we accept the judgement, we must also have non-moral motives pointing in its direction⁸.

Let us now apply this knowledge to the moral judgement that we ought to take action against climate change. How effective is this judgement with regard to ordinary, non-nihilistic persons, and how effective is it with regard to moral nihilists?

Effectiveness for Non-Nihilists

Ordinary, non-nihilistic persons typically accept at least some moral judgements. This does not guarantee, however, that they accept the particular judgement that they ought to take action against climate change. Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, I think that rather few people – and thus rather few non-nihilists - actually accept this judgement.⁹

Most directly, this hypothesis is supported by two recent psychological studies. As many as 58 and 49 % of the participants of the studies did not regard climate change as a moral issue.¹⁰

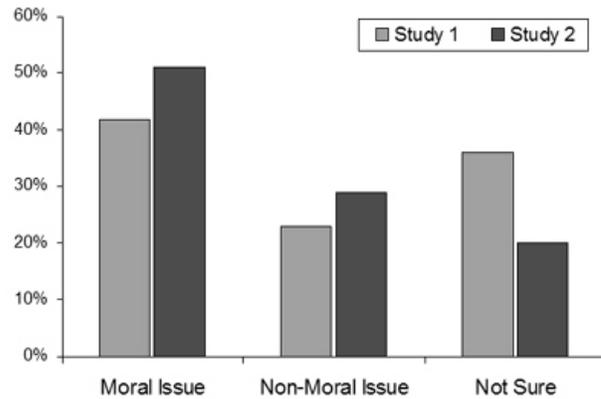


Fig. 1: Percentage of responses to the question “Do you consider ‘climate change’ to be an ethical or moral issue?” in the first and second study of Markowitz forthcoming

That many non-nihilists do not accept their climate-related obligations is suggested by more indirect considerations as well. A significant proportion of people (e.g., around 51 % of Americans and 57 % of Britons¹¹) do not even believe that anthropogenic climate change is real. Another significant proportion acknowledge its reality, but are ignorant about some of its morally relevant features (e.g., about its having been caused mainly by the rich and affecting mainly the poor, or the dimension of its consequences). Finally, even well-informed people can be expected not to accept that they ought to take action. Climate change lacks many of the features that trigger affective reactions. Most importantly, it has not been caused intentionally, it does not mainly affect people who are similar to us (people who are close to us in space and time), and it is not a concrete and non-probabilistic problem. Thus, unlike an old lady’s being robbed of her purse, or a pupil’s being marked unfairly by his/her teacher, climate change is difficult to identify as a moral issue. Recognizing its moral dimension requires conscious moral reasoning.¹²

What about those non-nihilists who do accept that they ought to take action against climate change? Is the judgement likely to be effective in their case? This depends on whether non-nihilists do not only have moral, but sufficiently strong non-moral motives for taking action against climate change as well. Since people's moral motives for taking action are comparatively weak (acceptance arising from reasoning is far less motivating than acceptance arising from affective reactions¹³), and since their conflicting non-moral motives are typically very strong (who really welcomes drastically limiting his/her amount of consumption, not going on vacation, essentially changing his/her whole way of life?), the level of support has to be very high. Strong non-moral motives to take action against climate change are typically absent in people, though.

One kind of motive that often supports our moral motives is positive social and moral emotions: emotions like love, compassion or solidarity. Due to their having evolved in small group environments, these motives are mainly evoked by what is close to us. We feel considerable compassion toward the child pinching his/her finger right in front of us, but much less toward people starving in Africa (spatial distance) or three hundred years from now (temporal distance). Most of the victims of climate change, however, stand in one of the latter relations to us, or even in both.¹⁴

Other motives that often support our moral motives are the anticipation of benefits and the fear of sanctions. In the case of climate change these motives are weak as well. Our obligations to take action against climate change are largely obligations towards people

living in the distant future. Future generations can hardly reward us for taking action, however, and they can hardly sanction us for not doing so).¹⁵

Furthermore, developing other strong non-moral motives is exacerbated by numerous structural and psychological barriers. In largely disregarding long-term ecological costs, the very untamed economic system that is currently in place incentivizes climate-unfriendly, and exacerbates climate-friendly behaviour, e.g. People tend to exaggerate the uncertainties associated with climate science, and perceptions of uncertainty increase both self-oriented behaviour and wishful thinking.¹⁶ Climate change cannot be mitigated to any significant degree by the actions of one person. This evokes feelings of helplessness: a sense that it does not really matter whether one reduces one's emissions of greenhouse gases or not,¹⁷ and so on.

To summarize, the judgement that we are morally obliged to take action against climate change is not very effective with regard to ordinary, non-nihilistic persons. Many non-nihilists simply do not accept this judgement. Many of those who do accept it do not act in conformity with it because of a lack of supporting non-moral motives.

Effectiveness for Nihilists

Let us look now at the moral nihilist. How effective is the judgement that we ought to take action against climate change in her/his case?

As the argument sketched at the beginning of chapter 2 suggests, the judgement seems to be completely ineffective. Moral nihilists deny that any moral judgement is true. They thus do not seem to *accept* any moral judgement. But if they do not accept *any* moral judgement, then they of course do not accept the moral judgement that we ought to take action against climate change.

Is this line of reasoning sound? I do not think so. To begin with, it is logically possible that moral nihilists accept moral judgements. Accepting a moral judgement simply means being in the mental state that the judgement expresses. If non-cognitivism is true, accepting a moral judgement means having a certain moral desire. However, having such a desire does not involve any degree of belief in moral truths. It is thus not inconsistent for the moral nihilist both to believe that there are no true moral judgements and to accept moral judgements, thus.

If cognitivism is true, accepting a moral judgement means having a certain moral belief: the belief that the judgement is true. This clearly does contradict the nihilist's belief that no moral judgement is true. However, I do not see why it should give rise to the assumption that it is impossible for the moral nihilist to accept moral judgements. People have contradicting beliefs all the time. A conception of belief that disallows believing both p and $\neg p$ does not seem adequate - especially if not both beliefs are manifest at the same time (which very likely is the case with nihilist acceptance, for our metaethical beliefs tend to be in the background most of the time), or if one of the beliefs is rather vague (which very likely is also the case, for most people have only vague intuitions in favour of either nihilism or non-nihilism).

Of course, that it is possible for moral nihilists to accept moral judgements does not guarantee that many of them actually and regularly do in fact accept them. Whether this is the case is an empirical question – a question that has not yet been investigated.

Nevertheless, there are strong reasons for assuming that acceptance is relatively common among moral nihilists. If one looks at philosophy departments, e.g., one finds that the overwhelming majority of self-declared moral nihilists are in favour of our ordinary moral practice. This is true for almost all non-cognitivists¹⁸. But even the majority of error theorists advocate a “fictionalist” rather than an “eliminativist” or “abolitionist” stance. They believe that although all moral judgements are false, we are better off thinking and speaking as if some were true¹⁹.

Moral nihilists often will not see much reason not to accept moral judgements. If, e.g., I think that morality is not about truth and falsity at all (i.e., if I am a non-cognitivist), then why should I be worried by the fact that no moral judgement is true? Why should I be led to refrain from accepting such judgements?

Finally, even if they want to, it is probably quite difficult for moral nihilists to break the habit of accepting moral judgements. Human beings have an evolved disposition to “see the world in moral colors”. We can hardly help considering certain things to be morally right or wrong, good or bad.²⁰

Given that moral nihilists have roughly the same factual beliefs about climate change and the same normative-ethical views as non-nihilists (which seems reasonable to assume),

this suggests that in terms of acceptance the difference between the two groups is probably rather low. Fewer nihilists will accept that they ought to take action against climate change, but probably not that much fewer.

What about the second condition for a moral judgement's being effective: the support by non-moral motives? As in the case of ordinary, non-nihilistic persons, non-moral motives for taking action against climate change are generally absent in moral nihilists. There is equally less affection of the emotional system, equally less anticipation of benefits and fear of sanctions, and so on. In the case of nihilists, non-moral support likely has to be stronger than in the case of non-nihilists in order to lead to action, however. This is so because moral nihilists' moral motives are likely somewhat weaker than those of non-nihilists on average. It might easily occur to the moral nihilist that s/he does not *really* have an obligation to take action, that morality is, after all, only the expression of desires (in the case of the non-cognitivist), or a useful fiction (in the case of the error theorist). Moral non-nihilists typically do not fall into such relativizing thinking.

This suggests that like the first, moral nihilists fulfil the second condition for acting in conformity with our climate change judgement to a slightly lower degree than non-nihilists as well.

Conclusion

How does moral nihilism affect our taking action against climate change? If what I said in this paper is roughly correct, then the answer to this question is: “not much”. A moral judgement generally translates into action if it is accepted and supported by non-moral motives pointing in its direction. When we look at our obligation to take action against climate change, we find that both conditions are fulfilled to a higher degree with regard to non-nihilists than with regard to nihilists. However, the difference is much smaller than one would initially expect; and in absolute terms so few people (even non-nihilists) are led to take action by moral considerations that it will be barely noticeable.

Thus, in order to overcome humanity’s climate change apathy we should not fight moral nihilism, thus. Rather, we should educate people about the existence and nature of the problem; we should make capitalism more sustainable; we should revise our normative-ethical views in ways that make it easier to identify climate change as a moral problem and that shift people’s focus from the outcome of their actions – which often prompts feelings of helplessness – to their character²¹; and we should promote positive social and moral emotions towards the victims of climate change (e.g., appeal to people’s love of their children and grandchildren, or evoke pride for emission-reducing behaviours²²).

¹ E.g., Global Humanitarian Forum, *Human Impact Report: Climate Change – Anatomy of a Silent Crisis* (Geneva, 2009): 9, 11; Jonathan Webber, “Climate change and public moral reasoning,” in *New Waves in Ethics*, ed. Thom Brooks (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

² E.g., Ezra M. Markowitz “Is climate change an ethical issue? Examining young adults’ beliefs about climate and morality,” *Climatic Change* forthcoming; Ezra M. Markowitz and Azim F. Shariff, “Climate change and moral judgement,” *Nature Climate Change* 2 (2012): 243-247; Kari M. Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

³ E.g., Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

⁴ Note that this is a common, but not the only way of conceiving of moral nihilism. Often the view is defined more narrowly, as being identical with error theory; rarely it is also defined more broadly, as including not only non-cognitivism and error theory, but a third position - subjectivism - as well.

⁵ Alfred J. Ayer, “Critique of ethics and theology,” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988): 30.

⁶ John L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1990).

⁷ Dieter Birnbacher, “What motivates us to care for the (distant) future?” in *Intergenerational Justice*, eds. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 274.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁹ See Birnbacher, *What motivates us*, 276 for general future ethical considerations that imply such a view.

¹⁰ Markowitz, *Is climate change an ethical issue?*

¹¹ Angus Reid, *Britons Question Global Warming More Than Americans and Canadians* (New York, 2011).

¹² E.g., Markowitz and Shariff, *Climate change and moral judgement*, 243-245; Dale Jamieson, "Climate change, responsibility, and justice," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 16 (2010): 436.

¹³ E.g. Jonathan Haidt, "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment," *Psychological Review* 108 (2001): 824.

¹⁴ Birnbacher, *What motivates us*, 282-283.

¹⁵ E.g., *ibid.*, 283-284.

¹⁶ Markowitz and Shariff, *Climate change and moral judgement*, 244; APA (American Psychological Association), *Psychology and Global Climate Change: Addressing a Multi-faceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges* (2010), 65.

¹⁷ APA, *Psychology and Global Climate Change*, 67; Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, 83-85.

¹⁸ E.g., Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ E.g., Mackie, *Ethics*; Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁰ E.g., Michael Ruse, “The biological sciences can act as a ground for ethics,” in: *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Biology*, eds. Francisco Ayala and Robert Arp (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 309.

²¹ E.g., Dale Jamieson, “When utilitarians should be virtue theorists,” *Utilitas* 19 (2007).

²² Birnbacher, *What motivates us*, 286-289; Markowitz and Shariff, *Climate change and moral judgement*, 245.