

Nihilism does not imply a denial of the existence of something good, nor a denial that what is good is a matter of debate, it is rather to deny the existence of evil. (...) Nihilism is to deny that human beings can agree on what is evil.

André Glucksmann: Vesten mot Vesten/ Ouest contre Ouest Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2006. p.46-49.

A nihilist approach to good and evil

For many people nihilism represents a worldview where nothing really matters, due to the fact that life has no meaning. This may lead people to thinking that it is okay to cause harm, since morality and the terms good and evil loses all meaning. How can one argue against this? In my view nihilism is correct, as in there is no objective meaning in life. The famous existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre talked about a form of nihilism. He explained the how absurd the world we live in is. A chair for example is just wood rearranged in a certain way which we sit on. There is no meaning to the chair except the one we apply to it ourselves. In my opinion the same can be said for our lives. Meaning is a word of human creation that we use to feel good about our existence, but it does not exist outside of our imagination. The nonexistence of meaning in the world, however, does not necessarily imply that there is not such thing as right or wrong, nor that good and evil doesn't exist. I therefore think that the people implying that morality does not exist because of life's meaningless is mistaken, however, I think that this conclusion can be reached in other ways, which I will explain in this text.

André Glucksmann wrote this in 2006: "Nihilism does not imply a denial of the existence of something good, nor a denial that what is good is a matter of debate, it is rather to deny the existence of evil. (...) Nihilism is to deny that human beings can agree on what is evil."

According to the quote there is no such thing as objective evil according to a nihilist worldview, and one can understand it to mean that there is no such thing as evil at all.

Glucksmann does however say that there may exist something that is good, or that it is worth arguing about the existence of a good. The author implies that humans argue both about what is good and what is evil, but only good exist objectively, while evil does not. He therefore takes a different view than the view I represented in the first paragraph, where neither good nor evil exists. I do not agree with the above quote. In my opinion the terms good and evil are connected. There is no way of having one without the other. Therefore, I believe that you can not claim an action to be good, without being able to compare it to an evil action. This means that if one is to claim that good exist, one is obliged a belief in the existence of evil. In my

personal view there are two ways of looking at the issue, subjectively: where neither good nor evil exist, and objectively: one where they both do.

The first line of argument which concludes in the nonexistence of good and evil is connected to the absence of free will. It is a common belief that non-human animals are not moral agents. You can not judge a lion for killing a gazelle as it is merely following its instincts. There is no reason to believe that the lion deserves to be punished in any way. According to this view, non-human animals do not have free will, and therefore cannot be considered good nor evil. The most common view regarding humans is the opposite; humans can reason; therefore, we are able to dismiss our natural instincts and live according to moral principles. This however is in many ways a misleading understanding, since it does not take into account other factors that are highly relevant when it comes to causes of human action. In my view, we all do what we want to. This does however not mean that we are free, as we do not decide what we want to. We are all inherently selfish, and therefore act in a way that we believe will increase our own pleasure. There is a good chance that we may be mistaken about what will actually fulfil our desires, but this is irrelevant. The important thing to ask is what causes us to believe that something will increase our pleasure? Is it not our own rational free self?

The term free will is extremely ingrained in our society. It is not before you really think about what it entails that you realize how absurd it actually is. The way I see it, events in our world are either random or they have cause. The same can be said for our actions, as they also are events in this world. The only truly random events that we are aware of exist in the quantum world. An example is the position of an electron. One cannot say for certain where an electron will be placed in space at a given time, only the probability of it having a certain position. Events in the world we experience always have a cause (as far as we know). One may for instance object to this by saying that a toss of a coin is random. But the way you tossed it, the amount of movement in the air, and the surface it landed (all factors that are not random, i.e., caused by something else) on determines how it will land. People like to tell themselves that their actions are neither random nor caused by anything, because free will does not exist in either of these cases. If an action is random, no one decides what happens. If an action is determined, we don't decide what happens. One may object to this by saying: "But I caused the action, my thoughts are the cause." The obvious reply to this is: "What caused your thoughts?". In my opinion our thoughts are determined by our heritage and the environment. Yes, we can reason, but we did not choose to have a big brain (the same way

other animals did not choose to have a smaller brain), and the way we act is largely due to how our brain works.

Let us take the example of psycho- and sociopaths. Psychopaths are born without sympathy for others, while sociopaths often have something traumatic happening to them in life which causes the loss of sympathy. This is an excellent example of our behaviour being caused by outside factors. How can we say that these people are evil, while a lion is not, if all actions are determined? An excellent example of a philosopher who brought attention to this exact problem was Hannah Arendt. In the trial of German officers after World War II, the Jewish philosopher used the phrase the banality of evil to explain how these people were just normal people who did terrible acts because of the society they lived in. There is a good chance that people like you and me would have acted in the exact same way had we been in their position, maybe out of fear or ignorance. But this does not make us inherently evil people, the same way as many Nazis were not inherently evil people. According to the view I have put forward, it is clear that evil people do not exist, and it logically follows that good people don't exist either.

People might object to this view in many ways. The most common is people claiming to "feel free". This is not a good argument, and maybe not even an argument at all. I too "feel free", but this has nothing to do with how things actually are. The fact that we feel free can just be a product of evolution that have benefited our species. A second common argument is claiming that humans have a soul independent of our body. While other animals and the natural world act more like machines, humans have been blessed with a soul that we are unique in having. This idea probably comes from Christianity (and other religions that believe in an immortal soul) and has no relevance for life outside religion. I find it strange that many people cling on to religious ideas even though they claim to be non-religious. There is no scientific evidence for an immortal soul, nor any soul at all. All scientific evidence points to the opposite, what we feel like is our soul is actually dependent, not independent, of our body. There have been instances of brain damage completely changing people's personality, as well as people having the left and right parts of the brain disconnected, and therefore suddenly having two different personalities.

Still, even though we can accept the fact that it may not be as easy as we thought to label humans good or evil, and maybe we can even accept that subjective good and evil is doesn't exist, one may still believe in objective good and evil. There is nothing wrong with saying: "Yes, I get that the murderer is not actually an evil person subjectively. But I still think the

action in itself, the murder, is evil.” But in order to reach this conclusion, one has to establish a morality in order to judge what is good and what is evil. Let us forget for a moment the conclusion just reached and pretend that free will does exist. This will make it easier to find an objective definition of good and evil, independent of humans. In order to find out what is the right thing to do, we must establish what we “ought to do”. The philosopher David Hume was famous for his “is” and “ought” distinction. There is no logical way of having an ought in the conclusion of an argument if there is no ought in the premises. Here is an example.

Premise one: Humans die when they are hanged.

Premise two: Peter is a human.

Conclusion: We ought not to hang Peter.

This is not a valid argument, as there are no oughts in premises. This next argument, however, is valid.

Premise one: We ought not to hang humans.

Premise two: Peter is a human.

Conclusion: We ought not to hang Peter.

The only problem here is that ought in the first premise seemed to come out of nowhere. Maybe we got the ought from another argument? But this in the end necessarily means that there is something called axiomatic oughts that we can use in arguments without using another argument to reach it. But where do these axiomatic oughts come from? Some people may claim that we can “just feel what we ought to do”, but this is not really a good argument, as our feelings can often mislead us. Let us consider: what is the point of morality? To find out what is right? But what makes something “right”? The only answer I can get when thinking about this is that an action is right when its consequences maximise pleasure and minimise pain. No matter how you twist and turn it, everything always comes down to pleasure and pain. If we desire something, it is because we believe it will increase our pleasure, if we try avoiding something, it is because we believe that it will minimize it. John Stuart Mill had a great way of establishing axiomatic oughts; We ought to do what increases pleasure, and we ought not to do what increases pain. The view Mill advocated for is called utilitarianism, which he in his book “utilitarianism” describes as; “the greatest wellbeing for the greatest number”. Mill in fact was not the first person to talk about the utilitarian worldview. Jeremy Bentham also advocated for utilitarianism before this and also included

non-human animals in his philosophy. A famous quote of his is: “The question is not, can they reason, nor can they talk, but can they suffer?” When talking about pain and pleasure we must therefore include all conscious beings. Peter Singer, an Australian modern philosopher describes it as like this in his book “Practical Ethics”: “The same amount of pain/pleasure should have equal moral weight regardless of who is feeling it”. If we use utilitarianism as our starting point for our arguments, we can validly arrive at an ought in the conclusion because we have valid oughts in our premises. Let us use the same example again, but in this case I have put our axiomatic ought in premise three in order to have an ought in the conclusion.

Premise one: Humans die when they are hanged.

Premise two: Death causes pain.

Premise three: We ought not to cause pain.

Premise four: Peter is a human.

Conclusion: We ought not to hang Peter.

This is the best way I can think of solving the “is ought” problem. Without having axiomatic oughts we can never say that an action is good nor evil. According to my view this way of looking at morality can be used only for judging actions, and not the people who caused them. The action and the people are therefore separate entities. It is therefore misleading to judge an action according to the intentions of the person who caused it, because this does not change the action in itself. To sum up, I believe that there is no such thing as subjective good and evil. That is to say good and evil people. However, I still believe there to be something that is objectively good and evil. We can therefore judge actions as good or evil, according to how they increase/decrease the overall pain/pleasure in the world. Nevertheless, even if an objective morality exists is one cannot expect people to act according to it.

Next, I will consider a consequence of the utilitarian worldview. It concerns the philosophy of a South-African philosopher named David Benatar. In his book “Better never to have been” he introduces the term antinatalism. He does not claim to do so himself, but he mostly uses utilitarianism to reach the conclusion that starting a new life is immoral. The reason he gives for this that pain is bad for the people (or animals) experiencing it, while pain is bad for people experiencing it, as we have established. He also claims that we have no obligation to bring people into existence who will experience pleasure. Pleasure is to satisfy preferences, but there is no point in creating new preferences just to fulfil them. We hence have no duty to

create new preferences, even though they might be fulfilled. We do however have an obligation not to bring suffering into this world unnecessarily. It is common sense that a mother who knows her child will suffer greatly in life has an obligation not to create that child, but a mother who knows her child will have a good life does *not* have an obligation to create that child. Because we have no way of knowing whether a child will have a good life or not, and due to the fact that we must also take into account all future generation, this leads us to the conclusion that creating new life is an immoral action. It is also important to note that no being in practice has a life without suffering. As well as this, having preferences can be viewed as suffering because the preferences are not yet fulfilled. To live a life without suffering therefore necessarily means to always have one's preferences fulfilled, something that is practically impossible. The utilitarian view therefore leads to some absurd conclusions, like never having kids (and maybe even it being right to kill painlessly, even though Benatar himself does not support this view). And even if one does not accept the asymmetry of pain and pleasure as presented in this paragraph, the world clearly includes way more pain than pleasure; one can therefore reach the conclusion without the asymmetry. One can therefore claim, and I would have to agree with this in theory, that ending all life would be the right thing to do (even if it is not completely painless, it may be worth it due to all future suffering that will not take place).

Next, I will consider some practical issues with my views on morality. I think that it is in many ways a good thing that people believe in free will. People like to believe that they are in control of their actions, and that it is their own choosing that leads to the good (or bad actions) that they commit. If we quit believing in free will, we may end up with question like: "Why should we act morally?" and "Should we stop punishing criminals?". I believe that there are many things that logically follows theoretically that not necessarily correspond with the real world. In theory there is not logical reason for us to behave morally and is not our fault if we do/don't. We can never experience the pleasures and pains of other people, so subjectively it makes sense to be selfish. We may still benefit from caring about other people. I believe that everyone will benefit from having a peaceful society for instance, and we often feel better about ourselves if we do "altruistic" acts. It is however hard to point out why we should act morally towards someone if we ourselves have nothing to gain. Like why a murderer should stop killing if he enjoys it. There are two answers to this; Subjectivity he should not because of his own pleasure, and objectively he should for the pleasure/pain of others. One my argue that what he *ought* to do is act according to objective morality, but that is not what he is

actually going to do, as stated before. We all act according to our own subjective morality, only concerning ourselves, and if we think we act objectively it is only because we believe that acting according to objective morality increases our own pleasure. Regarding the question on whether we should punish criminals, I believe that even though criminals don't *deserve* to be punished, it is still going to increase the overall pleasure in society. It may prevent people from doing criminal activities, which will benefit the society as a whole. I do not believe that there is any reason to punish criminals more than necessary, as causing pain to criminals should not count for less than causing pain to anyone else, no matter what they have done, as I have concluded. There are also some practical weaknesses with the utilitarian worldview. The world today is obsessed with rights: human rights, animals rights, rights of nature etc. But according to utilitarianism the term *right* is useless. I do believe however that even though one believes in the utilitarian principle, one can still be a supporter of rights in practice. It is impossible to know and calculate the consequences and the consequences of the consequences (etc) of all actions. Therefore, believing in rights (even if they do not actually exist) can be a useful tool to handle the real world.

What does it mean to say that life has meaning? As I explained in the beginning of this text, meaning is something we have made up in our minds. The term meaning is also really vague and can mean different things according to how you interpret it. In my understanding meaning, in the classical sense, does not exist. Nihilism is therefore, in my opinion the correct view if interpreted the right way. I have, throughout this text, explained that life does not have to have a deeper meaning, i.e., religion, for morality to exist. The quote by André Glucksmann agrees with this statement. He however claims that good exists, while evil does not. I have challenged this view, by explaining that good and evil cannot exist independent of each other, and either both exist or neither exist. Furthermore, I argued that good and evil exist objectively but not subjectively. What I mean by this is that an action can be either good or evil, and one can use utilitarianism to judge whether it is right or wrong, but a person cannot be judged as evil in the normal sense. A person can commit evil acts, but it does not follow that s(he) is an evil person who *deserves* punishment; this is due to the lack of free will. It is however a known fact that human thinking is flawed, and as I pointed out in the text: we will always do what is in our own interest. My arguing in the favour of an objective morality is therefore a circular argument, as I too am a selfish human being with flawed thinking. By only using human reasoning and experience, we may therefore never reach a certain conclusion.

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