NIHILISM, NIETZSCHE

AND THE

DOPPELGANGER PROBLEM

1. Introduction

Let me start with two claims: 1) I am a moral nihilist, 2) so was Nietzsche. The first claim is not particularly controversial. Absent brain injury or massive self-deception, I am the best authority on what I believe, and I can assure you that I believe something that can reasonably be described as 'moral nihilism', namely a minor variant of the error theory of J.L. Mackie.   It is otherwise with the second claim. Some say Nietzsche was a nihilist, indeed a perfect, complete or uninhibited nihilist[1].   Some say that this is all a horrible misunderstanding and that Nietzsche was nothing of the kind[2]. I shall argue that he *was* a nihilist in much the same sense as I am, but variously a diagnostician, an opponent and a survivor of certain other kinds of nihilism[3]. Then, with Nietzsche's aid, I shall defend the moral nihilism that we both believe (meta-ethical nihilism or the error theory) against a common line of criticism that nihilism can't be true because if it were we would have to give up morality or, at least, moralizing. I then raise a problem (the Doppelganger Problem) for meta-ethical nihilism, reinforce the problem, and solve it by reformulating the doctrine. Thus although I think that trying to get Nietzsche right is a worthwhile intellectual enterprise, the real point of the paper is to vindicate the error theory (of which Mackie was the foremost defender) against certain kinds of criticism. For the record, I agree with (what I take to be) Nietzsche's metaethic but disagree with his ethic of Calliclean self-assertion. I also think that there are lots of historical, psychological and philosophical insights scattered through Nietzsche's works (mixed with a good deal of silliness) though they don't always repay the effort of putting up with his big-noting, his button-holing and his 'Hi Ma! Look at Me! ' style of writing.

---

[1] Ansell-Pearson (1994, especially ch. 10), Danto (1965, pp. 22, 30, 31).

[2] Schacht (1995, chs. 2-3).

[3] Thus my interpretation is broadly in accord with that of Leiter (2002).

2. Meta-ethical nihilism

So, in what sense am I a moral nihilist? I think (as a first approximation) that moral judgments, specifically moral judgments concerning the *thin* moral concepts ('good', 'right', 'ought', 'wrong' etc) are *propositions*, that they are (in the current jargon) *truth apt*. And I think that they are all *false*[4]. For there are no such properties as goodness, badness, wrongness or obligatoriness. You can't do genuinely good deeds since there is no such property as goodness for your deeds to instantiate: at best they can be good in some watered down or ersatz sense. With the thick moral concepts ('honest', 'kind', 'spiteful' or 'loyal') the situation is more complex. Judgments such as 'Abigail is honest' can be true so long as they are construed factually as describing Abigail's propensity to tell the truth, refrain from falsehood and stick to her word. If Abigail does indeed have these characteristics, then 'Abigail is honest' is true just as 'George Bush is honest' is not (since the illustrious President has a free and easy way with the facts). But 'Abigail is honest' is *false* if it is taken to imply that being honest is a Good Thing, Virtuous or How One Ought To Be and hence that Abigail is good, virtuous or that she does what she should. In other words, judgments involving the *thick* moral concepts can be true so long as the *thin* coating of evaluative content is scraped away. But if such judgments are freighted with thin evaluative content they too are condemned to falsehood. Moreover, judgments involving the thin *and* the thick concepts can both be true, so long as they are construed *sociologically* or in an 'inverted commas' sense. It is true (I hope) that Abigail is a good girl since she conforms (on the whole) to my paternal ethic. It is true that Achilles is *agathos*, even though he procures the defeat of his own side because of a quarrel about a slave girl, since his actions still conform to the heroic code. But Abigail is not absolutely good nor is Achilles absolutely agathos: Abigail is good-according-to-her-Dad and Achilles is agathos-according-to-the-heroic-code.

These pedantic and R.M. Hare-ish distinctions are quite useful when it comes to deciphering Nietzsche's thought. For example, when he says that *to become moral is not itself moral* (*Daybreak*, §97), what he means is that the motives and characteristics which

---

[4] Though as we shall see, this has to be carefully qualified to avoid self-refutation.

induce people to subscribe to a morality (like the methods people use to propagate a morality) may qualify as moral failings according to that very morality. One's commitment to virtue may be due to an 'inverted commas' vice.

To the best of my knowledge, the first clear formulation of meta-ethical nihilism or the error theory in the Twentieth Century was due to Bertrand Russell who propounded it at a meeting of the Cambridge Apostles in 1922. 'There seems to me no doubt that our ethical judgments all claim objectivity; but this claim, to my mind, makes them all false.'[5] Since 'the Society,' as the Apostles were known, was a secret society, Russell's paper did not have much of an impact at the time. The true champion of meta-ethical nihilism in the twentieth century was J.L. Mackie. 'Although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim … to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false.'[6] His 'Refutation of Morals' (1946) put nihilism on the agenda, and his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977) reminded people that it had not been dealt with. Since then numerous efforts have been made, so much so that Michael Smith's recent anthology Meta-*Ethics* (1995) largely consists of desperate attempts by various philosophers to find facts that will make moral judgments true. (In the circumstances, Smith's omission of Mackie makes the book not so much *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, as *Hamlet* without the ghost.)

3. Nietzsche and Nihilism

But was Nietzsche a nihilist? Well, absent brain injury or massive self-deception, he was the best authority on what he believed, and he certainly *said* he was a nihilist, indeed 'the first perfect nihilist in Europe' (*The Will to Power*, p. 3). But this does not prove the point. To begin with, in his case, we cannot altogether discount the possibility of brain injury. He wrote these words about a year before his descent into madness, and the syphilis was beginning to undermine his intellect (the conceit and the megalomania were becoming

---

[5] Pigden ed. (1999, pp. 119-124).

[6] Mackie (1977, p. 35).

more pronounced, the style less ironic and more abusive). Moreover, he often says things that suggest that he is *not* a nihilist. In *Twilight of the Idols*, 34, he quotes Flaubert's 'One cannot think or write except when seated', and exclaims 'There I have caught you nihilist! Sitting still is the very sin against the Holy Spirit!' Since Nietzsche had his best ideas whilst wandering lonely as a cloud through Alpine holiday resorts, the conversational implicatum would appear to be that, unlike Flaubert, Nietzsche was *not* a nihilist. Even Nietzsche's claim to be the perfect nihilist is rather equivocal since his 'perfection' consists in the fact that he has *'lived through'* nihilism and come out on the other side, 'leaving it behind, outside himself.' In other words, the reason he is the perfect nihilist is that he is not a nihilist any more.

Against this, Nietzsche's writings are peppered with passages that suggest, imply or express meta-ethical nihilism. *Daybreak*, §103, is explicit: '"To deny morality" … can mean to deny that moral judgments are based on truths. Here it is admitted that they really are motives of action but that in this way it is *errors* which, as the basis of all moral judgments, impel men to their moral actions. This is *my* point of view '. The *Genealogy of Morals* is, in part, an attempt to demonstrate that since the current 'slave' morality would have been believed even if it were false, the fact that it is widely believed gives us no reason to think it true. But the same argument quite obviously applies to the aristocratic morality that Nietzsche evidently prefers. That too was believed because it suited the needs of the aristocracy: hence the fact that it was believed affords no argument for supposing it to be true. But since moral claims purport to be *truth apt*, it follows that if they are *not* true (which is what Nietzsche seems to suggest) then they *are* false. Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, VIII.1 expresses the same idea in less metaphorical language: *'There are absolutely no moral facts.* What moral and religious judgments have in common is the belief in things that are not real. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a *mis*interpretation.'

So how do we reconcile the rejection of nihilism with these nihilistic sentiments? Nietzsche was in my sense a meta-ethical nihilist - that is, an error-theorist in the style of

John Mackie - but the nihilism he claimed to have survived, the nihilism he regarded as a menace, the nihilism he hoped to transcend, was not just the belief that moral judgments are all *false* but the psycho-social malaise *caused* by this belief. 'Scepticism regarding morality is what is decisive', says Nietzsche, 'The end of the moral interpretation of the world which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, *leads* [my emphasis] to nihilism. "Everything lacks meaning"'. (*Will to Power*, p. 7.) Obviously, if moral skepticism *leads* to nihilism it cannot be identical with the thing that it leads to. To be a nihilist, then, is not just to believe in the error theory but to believe in the error theory *and to feel bad about it*. Thus Nietzsche has ceased to be a nihilist (or has perfected his nihilism) not because he has ceased to be an error theorist but because he has *ceased to feel bad*. His project is the revaluation of all values, the reconstruction of a new morality, the morality of the overman, which, though equally false, will be more bracing, more life-enhancing and more conducive to the 'higher' type of man. It will have a higher utility (given Nietzsche's elitist and eccentric ends), but, since there are pernicious truths and useful (even life-enhancing) falsehoods, the fact that it is useful won't make it *true*. Morality for Nietzsche is like mathematics for Hartry Field[7] - it does not have to be true to be good - in the sense of being *good-for-something*. (Though of course he believed that current moralities are neither true *nor* good, at least not good for anything that Nietzsche himself valued.) If we believe (or make-believe) in this new morality, the world will be re-enchanted; it will become meaningful again. For as Zarathrustra makes plain, meaning is not something to be discovered but something to be imposed, and it is imposed by our moral beliefs. 'Only man placed value in things to preserve himself - he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning. Therefore he calls himself "man" which means "the esteemer" ... without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow.' (*Thus Spake Zarathrustra*, I.15.) So if the nut of existence seems to be hollow, if we suffer from a malaise of meaninglessness induced by moral skepticism, the solution is to forget our doubts (except perhaps when we are doing meta-ethics) and to create a new morality by 'esteeming' a novel collection of goods. Of course the new morality will be *im*moral according to current norms, which is why Nietzsche calls himself an immoralist. But a *new*

---

[7] Field (1989).

morality is not *no* morality, nor is it any less of a fiction because it conduces to the (rather vague) ends that Nietzsche has set himself.

4. Schacht's Objections

Richard Schacht (1995, pp. 49-61) will have none of this. In his view, Nietzsche can't have been an 'axiological [or meta-ethical] nihilist'. Nietzsche may have been an 'immoralist' but he was also a *moralist*, the advocate of a new, more healthy ethic based on the 'will to power'. He felt that unless this new 'interpretation' were adopted, European civilization was moribund. He 'held that *this must not happen* and that life [presumably the life of the European elite] *ought* to flourish, *ought* to be enhanced and *ought* to continue to develop' [my italics]. (Schacht (1995, p. 53.) Nietzsche could not have 'held' this if he thought all moral judgments (including his own) were false.

Schacht's argument is interesting since it is closely related to a family of arguments designed to prove, not that Nietzsche was not a nihilist, but that nihilism in its meta-ethical form is *false*. As I understand it, it goes something like this:

S1) If anyone is thinks that all moral judgments are false he must a) give up moralizing (i.e. making and defending moral claims, adopting moral beliefs) and b) give up morality (i.e. acting on the basis of moral beliefs).

S2) Nietzsche did not give up either moralizing or morality. On the contrary he was a dedicated advocate of the ethic of the overman.

Therefore

S3) Nietzsche was not an axiological nihilist: he did not believe that all moral judgments are false.

Now the problem with this argument is that premise S1) is clearly untrue. Some meta-ethical nihilists, such as Richard Garner[8] and Ian Hinckfuss[9], give up (or profess to give up) both moralizing and morality and some, such a Mackie, myself and Richard Joyce, do not. (Strictly speaking what Joyce recommends is that we continue to *act* morally and to *think* in moral terms whilst abandoning *belief* in the propositions of morality.) The latter part of Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* is largely devoted to moralizing, and Mackie is described by his erstwhile neighbour, George Cawkwell, as one of the most duteous persons he had ever met[10]. And though Mackie missed out on the Chair at the University of Tasmania because of his nihilistic meta-ethical opinions, it was his successful rival, the moralistic Sydney Orr, who was later dismissed from the post for 'gross moral turpitude'[11]. As for me, I am not only addicted to moralizing but I sometimes even *act* on my principles, which means that I too am a counterexample to S1).

But perhaps I have misconstrued Schacht's argument. The 'must' in S1) is not an alethic but a deontic operator. It is not that the nihilist *must* give up both moralizing and morality (that he cannot help himself, as it were) but that in some sense he *ought* to do so. Really the argument should start from:

S'1) If all moral judgments are false then we *ought* to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

But of course this premise is at a considerable distance from Schacht's desired conclusion. For even if S'1) is true, Nietzsche may not have realized it, and even if he did realize it, the fact that he did not give up moralizing does not prove he was not a nihilist. For he may

---

[8] Garner (1994, p. 1-3).

[9] Hinckfuss (1987, p.1).

[10] Cawkwell (1985, pp. 219-220).

[11] Pybus (1993, pp. 206-207).

not have done what he thought he ought to do.   Still, if we assume that S'1) is obvious to all philosophically sensitive persons we might arrive at the following:

> S'2) Nietzsche thought that if moral judgments were all false, *he* ought to a) give
> up moralizing and b) give up morality.

Then, if we assume that Nietzsche generally did what he thought he ought to do, the fact that he did not give up either moralizing or morality indicates that he did not think he ought to do so. In which case he did not believe that all moral judgments were false. The trouble is that S'2) itself is palpably false. For Nietzsche did not believe that, in general, people should give up or cease acting upon false beliefs. 'The falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment ... The question is to what extent it is life preserving, species preserving, perhaps even species cultivating. And we are fundamentally inclined to think that the falsest judgments (which include synthetic judgments a priori) are the most indispensable for us. ... To recognize untruth as a condition for life - that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way.' (*Beyond Good and Evil*, I.4.) But if untruth can be a condition for life - if falsehoods can be indispensable - then Nietzsche would probably have rejected S'1). For if falsehood is not necessarily an objection to beliefs in general - if indispensability (for certain purposes) is an excuse for falsehood - then it may be a sufficient excuse for moral beliefs. So long as they are 'species preserving' and all the rest of it - which Nietzsche's overman ethic was supposed to be - moral beliefs need not be given up. Hence Schacht's objection collapses.

5. Wright, Blackburn and the Hoi Polloi.

But even if Schacht fails to prove that Nietzsche was not a nihilist he may provide the makings of an argument against nihilism proper. For many people think that if nihilism is true, then we ought to give up either moralizing or morality. And this is somehow supposed to be an objection to nihilism, i.e. a reason to think that it is false. Sophisticated philosophers such as Simon Blackburn and Crispin Wright focus on the alleged duty to

give up moralizing; whereas simple folk focus on the duty to give up morality. To give up moralizing is to give up the practice of moral discourse as currently constituted; to give up making, defending and arguing for moral claims and to give up our distinctively moral beliefs. To give up morality is to give up our moral beliefs and to give up *acting* (and getting other people to act) on the basis of moral beliefs. It is not or not necessarily to give up the *practices* sanctioned by morality. There may be other reasons for not coveting my neighbour's ox besides the alleged fact that it is morally wrong. (For instance: coveting leads to theft, and theft is illegal, and illegal actions risk punishment, thus coveting is imprudent.) But the simple folk are surely right in supposing that if our beliefs suffered such a sea-change our practices would not remain unaltered. If considerations of duty ceased to motivate I would not do *quite* the same things as I do now, even if I refrained from the excesses of a Sid Vicious. Morality is *not* a redundant institution. However, Blackburn seems to suppose that we could give up moralizing without giving up morality. For he seem to think that we might substitute 'shmoral' beliefs and claims for moral beliefs and claims and that these might play much the same role as our moral beliefs do at present (though, as we shall see, he regards such a substitution as silly). Thus giving up moralizing does not entail giving up morality but only *altering* it by replacing *moral* beliefs with *shmoral* beliefs.

According to Blackburn, 'If a vocabulary embodies an error [especially, he seems to think, an error which infects it with falsehood] it would be better if it were replaced by one that avoids the error. ... Surely it would be better if we avoided *moral* (erroneous) views altogether and contented ourselves with some lesser, purged commitments that can be held without making metaphysical mistakes. ... The puzzle is why, in the light of the error theory, Mackie did not at least indicate how a moral vocabulary would look and why he did not himself go on to shmoralize not to moralize. And in my view this is enough of a puzzle to cast doubt back on to the original diagnosis of error. In other words, it would be a silly thing to do, to try to substitute some allegedly hygienic concepts for the moral ones;

but that in itself suggests that no error can be incorporated in mere use of those concepts.'[12]

Blackburn's argument then is this:

B1) If moral judgments are all false, we ought to give up moralizing (and shmoralize instead)

B2) But it is not the case that we ought to give up moralizing (and shmoralize instead). This would be 'silly.'

Therefore

B3) It is not the case that all moral judgments are false.

Blackburn goes on to contend that the reason moral judgments are not all false is that *strictly speaking* they are neither true nor false (since their true purpose is to express attitudes) even though (for various subtle and complicated reasons) it is OK to *call* them true or false in common parlance. However I am not concerned with Blackburn's defence of quasi-realism but only with his critique of nihilism.

Crispin Wright has something similar in mind:

'The great discomfort with such an [error-theoretic] account [either about morality, maths or 'the comic'] is that, unless more is said, it relegates discourse about the comic to bad faith. [Not such a calamity in the case of the comic, one is inclined to say!] ...as soon as philosophy has taught us that the world is unsuited to confer truth on any of our claims about the funny the reasonable response ought surely to be to forgo making any such claims.

---

[12] Blackburn (1993, pp. 149-50).

> This would not be to forgo right to laugh [That's a relief!} … But it would, apparently be to forgo the point of reasoned appreciation and debate about what is funny and of criticism of others' opinions about it. And these consequences are most calamitous ... within *moral* discourse. If it is of the essence of moral judgment to aim at the truth, and if philosophy teaches that there is no moral truth to hit, how do I take myself seriously in thinking the way I do about any issue which I regard as of major moral importance?'[13]

The obvious and unkind comment is that a man who doesn't have a problem taking himself seriously when engaged in reasoned appreciation and debate about the comic need not fear that even *nihilism* will induce a loss of seriousness when it comes to moral issues. But satire aside, Wright does have an argument, though it would appear to be one rung below Blackburn's on the logical ladder. For Blackburn's argument, whatever its faults, is at least formally valid. The same cannot be said for the argument that Wright propounds. Wright's first premise is much like Blackburn's

> W1) If moral judgments are all false, we ought to give up moralizing (and take our moral commitments a lot less seriously).

But his second premise is simply this:

> W2) Giving up moralizing would be a real calamity. We could not take our moral commitments seriously.

And from this nothing in particular seems to follow. At best W1) and W2) when taken together provide us with a reason for *wishing* that nihilism were not true but not with a reason to *think* that it is not true. However, we can patch up Wright's argument by substituting: W2') for W2).

---

[13] Wright (1992, pp, 9-10).

W2′) It is not the case that we ought to give up moralizing (for it would lead to a loss of moral commitment.)

And W1) and W2′) do indeed entail the desired conclusion:

W3) It is not the case that all moral judgments are false.

6. Nihilism and its Consequences

Having carefully distinguished between the two philosophers and the *hoi polloi*, and between one philosopher and the other, in what follows I am going to run them all together. For what is wrong with this line of argument does not depend on the details we have distinguished. So the premise I start with combines three lines of thought: that of Blackburn, that of Wright and that of the simple folk. It is this:

1) If all moral judgments are false then we ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

The rest of the argument runs as follows:

2) It is not the case that we ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

Therefore

3) It is not the case that all moral judgments are false.

This argument is formally valid. But is it sound? This depends upon which 'oughts' we have in mind. Let us take premise 1). Is it true? Not if the 'ought' is moral, so that 1) becomes:

1') If all moral judgments are false then we *morally* ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

For if all moral judgments are false, then there is nothing that we morally ought to do including giving up moralizing or giving up morality. So on this interpretation the argument fails.

But not all 'oughts' are moral oughts so this does not settle the matter. Let's try again. Suppose we treat the 'ought' in 1) as a hypothetical 'ought' so that it expresses what we ought to do if we want to achieve some end. And let us suppose to that this end has something to do with rationality. (When Blackburn says that if Mackie were right, it would be 'better' to give up moralizing in favor of shmoralizing, he seems to mean *rationally* better. Similarly his justification for the second premise is that shmoralizing would be *silly* i.e. irrational. As for Wright, he explicitly says that 'the reasonable response' to an error theory is to give up making the erroneous claims.) One such end is *truth.* Rationality is often defined with respect to truth so that a rule or procedure is rational if it tends to result in true beliefs either in fact or under the appropriate conditions. So perhaps the idea behind premise 1) is that if all moral judgments are false, we *rationally* ought to give up both moralizing and morality, i.e. that we ought to give them up if we want to have *true*, as opposed to *false*, beliefs. This gives us:

1'') If all moral judgments are false, then *if we want our beliefs to be true* (and not false) we ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

Even if, like Nietzsche, we do *not* regard truth as the supremely rational end, if nihilism is true, we must still give up moralizing and give up morality *if we are to achieve truth*. For if truth demands that we give up moralizing - which means giving up our moral beliefs - it also demands that we give up *acting* on our moral beliefs since we won't have any moral beliefs to act on. But of course, the truth of 1'') does not settle the matter. The second premise - revised so as to maintain validity - has to be true too:

2'') It is not the case that *if we want our beliefs to be true* (and not false) we ought to

a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

Now 2'') might be true. It might be that it is not the case that *if we want our beliefs to be true* (and not false) we ought to give up both moralizing and morality. But 2'') will only be true if nihilism is false. For if nihilism is true then we can't have moral beliefs without having false beliefs. Conversely, if we can have moral beliefs without having false beliefs then nihilism is not true. Indeed, so long as moral judgments are truth apt, the truth of 2'') is tantamount to the falsehood of nihilism and vice versa. Thus 2'') begs the question. It cannot provide an independent reason for supposing nihilism to be false since it more or less amounts to the negation of nihilism. Hence this version of the argument is valid and may even be sound, but it is not *rationally persuasive* since it begs the question against nihilism.

Perhaps we should try another tack. It is not that if moral judgments are false we ought *rationally* give up moralizing where rationality has something to do with truth or consistency. Rather if all moral judgments are false we ought *pragmatically* to give up moralizing. The idea is that there are ends, perhaps humane ends, that are best achieved by giving up both moralizing and morality. This is in fact the view of Hinckfuss and Garner (and briefly, perhaps, of Bertrand Russell[14]). They are what I call 'humanistic amoralists'. They don't just think that moral judgments are false - they think that they are pernicious falsehoods which serve as a prop to tyranny and an excuse to torturers. Whether the humanistic amoralists are right and giving up morality would lead to a bonanza of tolerance, freedom and equality is a decidedly moot point. But there are presumably *some* ends that would be furthered by giving up morality and moralizing. Never mind what they are, let us just designate them as X. Then 1''') will be true (indeed true by fiat):

---

[14] See Pigden (ed.) (1999, pp. 184-188).

1''') If all moral judgments are false, then we ought, if we are to achieve ends X,
to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

But the trouble is it is trivially true, not just in the sense that we have defined ends X as the ones that would be achieved by giving up morality, but because the conditional is true in virtue of its consequent alone. The falsehood of all moral judgments has nothing to do with the fact that abandoning morality would be conducive to ends X. The 'if' expresses no dependency of the consequent on the antecedent. Which means that 2''') is simply false.

2''') It is not the case that we ought, if we are to achieve ends X, to a) give up
moralizing and b) give up morality.

Hence this version of the argument is valid but unsound.

My conclusion is that the 1), 2) 3) line of argument cannot be made to work. If the 'ought' is moral, the first premise is false. If the 'ought' is rational, the first premise may be true, but the second premise presupposes the falsehood of nihilism which means that the argument begs the question. If the 'ought' is pragmatic then the first premise may be true, but if so, it is true in virtue of its consequent, which means that the second premise, which consists in denying the consequent, is false. In my view the argument derives its appeal from an unconscious equivocation. Premise 1) is read with a rational or truth-related 'ought' but premise 2) is read with either a moral or a pragmatic 'ought'. (Thus if all moral judgments are false we ought rationally to shmoralize rather than moralize, but shmoralizing would be pedantic and inconvenient and hence silly, i.e. something we are not pragmatically obliged to do.) But appealing as it is, this line of argument does not show that nihilism is false.

7. The Doppelganger Problem

So far, so good. Meta-ethical nihilism has survived the objections of Blackburn and Wright. But we now come to another problem - the Doppelganger Problem and its supercharged variant, the Reinforced Doppelganger.

The Doppelganger Problem in its simple form is this: It seems that not all moral judgments can be false, for (in many cases at least) the negation of a moral judgment, X, is itself a moral judgment. And if X is false, its negation not-X must be true. But the error theory is precisely the thesis that *all* moral judgments are false (at least with respect to their core moral contents). So the error theory or meta-ethical nihilism is false, indeed incoherent.

The problem is a general one, which afflicts error theories of all sorts. According to Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's famous taxonomy,[15] a realist about a domain of discourse K is someone who believes two things: a) that K-statements express propositions (that is, are truth-apt) and b) that some of them are literally true (that is true when construed literally). Conversely, an anti-realist about a domain K is someone who either a) denies that K-statements are really propositions, truth-apt, true-or-false (at least with respect to their core meanings) or b) insists that all of them are false. Thus with respect to ethics, emotivists and other non-cognitivists are type a) anti-realists, and nihilists or error theorists are type b) anti-realists. Sayre-McCord rather hoped that his taxonomy would be not only neutral but *fair* in a certain sense; it was designed to map out a series of positions that could be consistently (if not sanely) held. But if type-b) anti-realism is *not* such a position then his taxonomy is in deep trouble. And the Doppelganger Problem suggests precisely this. For it seems to show that there *are not*, or at least, that there *should not be*, any type-b) anti-realists about *any* domain (including ethics). And the reason is that type-b) anti-realism is incoherent, and thus collapses into straightforward Sayre-McCord realism.

---

[15] Sayre-McCord (1988).

Here's why: If the membership of a domain of discourse K is closed under negation, then, if X is a statement of kind K, its doppelganger ~X is a statement of kind K. But if X is false, ~X is true. So it cannot be the case that all judgments of kind K are false. If we were not dealing with potentially infinite domains we would have to say that at most *half* the statements of kind K are false. The rest of them - their negations, their doppelgangers - must be true. But the thesis that judgments of kind K are truth apt and that some of them are true is *realism* not anti-realism according to Sayre-McCord's taxonomy. Thus type-b) anti-realism does not mark out a coherent class of theories. Error-theories as such seem to be self-refuting.

8. Solutions to the Doppelganger

Can the Doppelganger Problem be solved? Perhaps. But it is not clear that the problem can always be solved or that the same solution will work for every domain. When Field says that mathematics is false he means that every mathematical statement that quantifies over abstract objects is false. Now the negation of a statement that quantifies over abstract objects does not quantify over abstract objects. Hence the Doppelganger Principle - that if X is a statement of kind K, ~X is a statement of kind K - does not apply within this domain.   And if the Doppelganger Principle does not apply within a domain the Doppelganger Problem is dissolved. Thus Field's type b) anti-realism does not collapse into realism. Can we make the same move within meta-ethics? I think not. For though the negation of a moral proposition is not *always* a moral proposition it seems to me that *sometimes* and in *some* contexts it is. (Consider 'We ought to keep our marriage vows', and its doppelganger 'It is not the case that we ought to keep our marriage vows'. The latter, like the former, might have a considerable impact on our conduct if it came to be widely believed.) In other words, the Doppelganger Principle applies but intermittently.   Even so, it scuppers meta-ethical nihilism as I have described it. For if the negations of *some* moral judgments are moral judgments, then it cannot be the case that *all* moral judgments are false.

Thus meta-ethical nihilism needs to be reformulated. I suggest the following: all non-negative atomic moral judgments are false. This requires elucidation. First we specify a range of primitive 'thin' moral predicates - 'good' ('morally good'), 'bad', 'right', 'wrong' 'ought to' etc. (There may be a problem about this as some of them are interdefinable.) We then define an atomic moral judgment as a proposition ascribing an *n*-place moral predicate to *n* specific items. As defined these are non-negative, i.e. *not* governed by the negation operator, but we redundantly specify that they are non-negative for the sake of clarity. Nihilism now amounts to the claim that all non-negative atomic moral propositions are false. And the argument is the standard nihilistic argument that there are no moral properties or relations corresponding to the moral predicates and thus no moral facts. Although this new formulation of nihilism is much more restricted than the original doctrine, it captures the spirit, though not the letter of the original thesis. It captures the spirit, since moral facts are denied and error ramifies through the great systems of morality, rendering them systematically false. But it rejects the letter, since some items that might reasonably be described as moral judgments will come out true (material conditionals with atomic moral judgments for their antecedents, disjunctions in which one disjunct is moral and the other not etc etc.). But a myth does not cease to be a myth because it contains a few random truths, and what might be called *restricted* nihilism converts morality into a collection of myths.

Does this deal with the Doppelganger Problem? Apparently yes. For the negation of a non-negative atomic moral proposition is *never* a non-negative atomic moral proposition. And where the Doppelganger Principle does not apply, the Doppelganger Problem does not arise.

There is a general lesson here. Error theories as characterized by Sayre-McCord are only viable on one condition. We can only say that all propositions of kind K are false if the negation of a kind K proposition is *never* itself a proposition of kind K. Thus the error theorist must be very careful about defining his kind K if he is to escape self-refutation. Nietzsche omits this precaution. In *The Will to Power* 15, he flirts with what might be

called Global Metaphysical Nihilism of the Global Error Theory: 'The most extreme form of nihilism would be the view that *every* belief, every considering-something-true, is necessarily false because there simply is no *true world*. [This form of nihilism] would be a *divine way of thinking*.' Divine or not, it is absurd. For it amounts to the thesis that *all propositions are false*. Here the kind K of propositions is the kind of propositions as such. This kind is closed under negation since the negation of a proposition is itself a proposition. Hence it cannot be the case that all propositions are false. We may be able to save Nietzsche's bacon as a meta-ethicist by restricting his thesis to non-negative atomic moral propositions, but the 'divine way of thinking' seems to be beyond redemption.

9. The Reinforced Doppelganger.

I come now to the *Reinforced Doppelganger,* a particular problem for meta-ethical nihilists. Let us take a specific act (say the slaying of Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BC) performed by specific actors (Brutus and Cassius for convenience, though of course other conspirators were involved). Then, according to revised meta-ethical nihilism, proposition

(B) Brutus and Cassius' slaying of Caesar was wrong.

is false. And this, in turn, entails:

(~B) It is not the case that Brutus and Cassius' slaying of Caesar was wrong.

But, given that the slaying of Caesar was a deliberate action, (~B) would appear to entail:

(Br) Brutus and Cassius' slaying of Caesar was right (in the sense of 'morally permissible').

Generally speaking, 'Action X is not wrong' appears to entail 'Action X is right' and 'Action X is not right' appears to entail that 'Action X is wrong'. Call these the 'RD' (for 'Reinforced Doppelganger') principles:

(RD1) 'It is not the case that action X is wrong', entails 'Action X is right'.

(RD2) 'It is not the case that action X is right', entails 'Action X is wrong'.

But if either of these principles is correct, my solution to the Doppelganger Problem fails. For the falsehood of a non-negative atomic moral proposition entails its negation and, in some cases at least, the negation of one non-negative atomic moral proposition entails the truth of another. So it can't be the case that all non-negative atomic moral propositions are false. If all actions are not wrong then all actions (at least, those which exist) are right or morally permissible. And if all actions are not right or morally permissible then all actions (at least, those which exist) are wrong. Either way we have moral truths - non-negative atomic moral truths - in abundance. It seems that the only alternative to moral realism (in Sayre-McCord's sense) is non-cognitivism, after all.

There is only one way out for the nihilist. He has to deny the RD principles. 'Action X is not wrong', does *not* entail that action X is right (in the sense of morally permissible) nor does 'Action X is not right', entail that action X is wrong. But is this bold and blunt assertion anything more than the desperate response of the cornered nihilistic rat? No, because (I think) it can be motivated.

A entails *B* if it cannot be the case that *A* is true and *B* false. Or *A* entails *B* if there is no conceivable situation (possible world) in which *A* is true and *B* false. Is there a conceivable situation in which (~B) is true and (Br) false? Yes. The situation in which there are no moral properties or relations, and specifically no properties of rightness, wrongness or obligatoriness which attach themselves to acts. In such a situation Brutus and Cassius' slaying of Caesar won't have the property of wrongness, but it won't have

the property of rightness (moral permissibility) either. It won't have any moral properties *at all*. Now this situation is precisely the situation that nihilists think obtains. Thus the RD principles cannot provide independent evidence against nihilism. For they rest on the thesis not only that nihilism is *false* but that it is *necessarily false*. The point can be expressed with the aid of the following two diagrams (Figures 1 and 2)
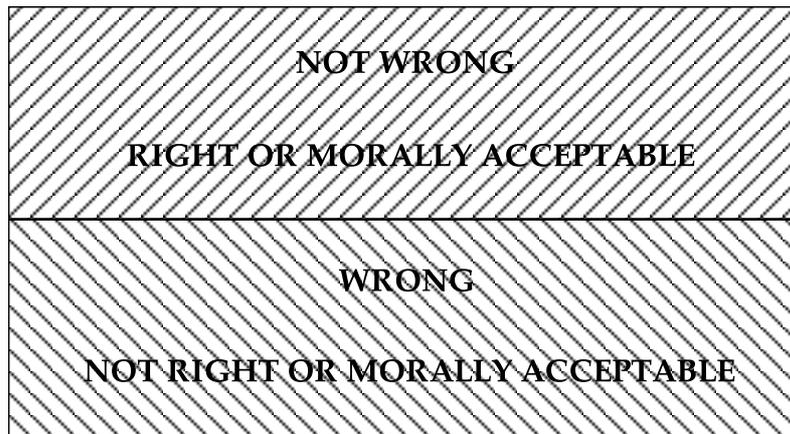
Figure 1

NOT WRONG

RIGHT OR MORALLY ACCEPTABLE

WRONG

NOT RIGHT OR MORALLY ACCEPTABLE

Figure 2

NOT WRONG

RIGHT OR MORALLY ACCEPTABLE

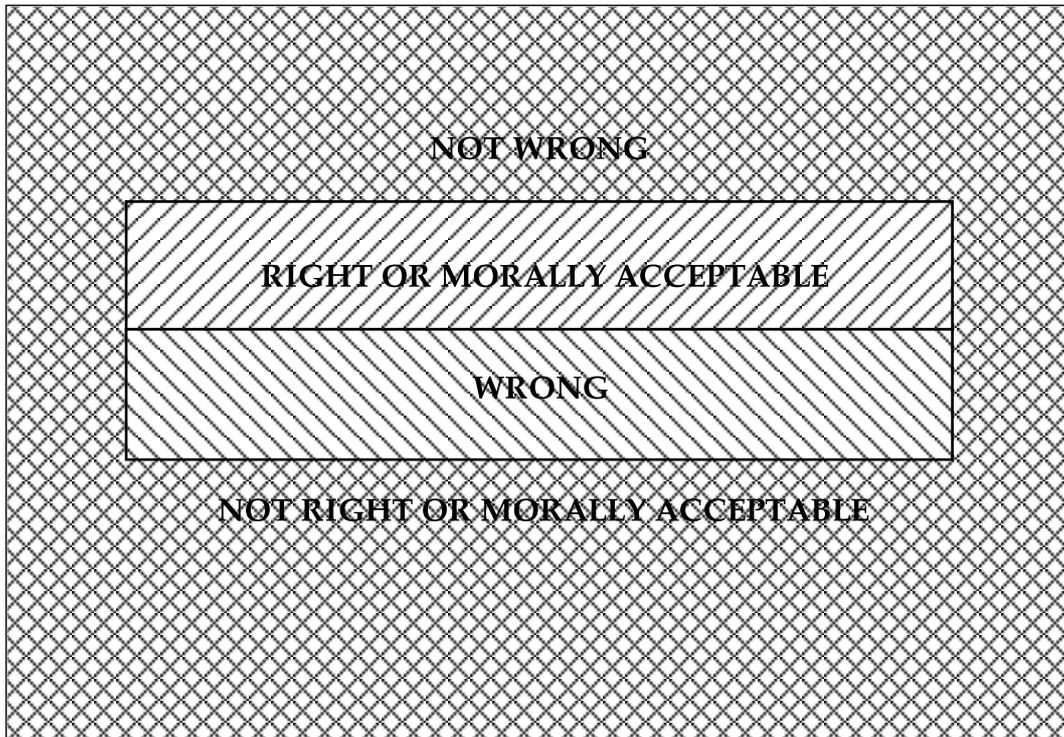WRONG

NOT RIGHT OR MORALLY ACCEPTABLE

Figure 1 represents logical space (for deliberate actions) as presupposed by the RD principles. Figure 2 represents logical space (for deliberate actions) as represented by nihilists. (Of course, nihilists believe that all actual acts are in the doubly shaded area.) Nihilists believe, as RD theorists do not, that it could be that actions are *neither* right *nor* wrong. (Indeed, they argue that this is not just the way it *could be* but the way it *is*.) RD theorists effectively deny even the *possibility* of nihilism. But to say that nihilism is *impossible* - that it is absolutely inconceivable that neither moral rightness nor wrongness attach to actions - is to make a large and implausible claim. Yet if this claim is not true, the RD principles are both false.

Thus meta-ethical nihilism (somewhat revised) can survive both the Doppelganger and the Reinforced Doppelganger Problems.

It is perhaps worth stressing that the RD principles are not analytic since another famous attempt to refute the error theory (along with many other forms of moral anti-realism) rests on the claim that they are. In his famous paper 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe it' (1996) Ronald Dworkin argues that wholesale or Archimedean moral skepticism of the kind advanced by Mackie (and in my view by Nietzsche) is fundamentally incoherent. You can't be a skeptic about *all* moral claims, since if you think that abortion is not wrong – or if you think that it is not full-bloodedly true that abortion is wrong – you are committed to the first-order view that abortion is morally permissible. But that only holds if you subscribe to something like (RD1) - that the claim that actions of kind X are not wrong, *entails* that actions of kind X are *right* (in the sense of morally permissible). But nihilists (if they have any sense) reject such claims. Dworkin might reply that this is like people who believe both that Oscar is round and that Oscar is square but absolve themselves from the charge of inconsistency, by rejecting the thesis that what is round is not square (and vice versa). The problem with this is that it really is analytic (or at least necessarily true) that what is round is not square, but it is *not* analytic that actions that are not wrong are morally permissible. For it does not hold in worlds where there are no moral properties, which is precisely that kind of world that nihilists

think we inhabit. Dworkin is like the citizen of a mighty empire in which everything is legal unless the emperor forbids it. Taking this to be an analytic truth, he concludes that outside in the Badlands, where the writ of the emperor does not run and nothing is forbidden, everything is legal. 'Those who adopt the second-order view that the Badlands are lawless are in fact committed to the first-order view that everything in the badlands is legal! For they admit – nay, they insist- that in the Badlands nothing is forbidden by the emperor!' ' But where there is nobody with the authority to permit or forbid, the fact that something is not forbidden does not entail that it is permitted.

10. Unfinished Business

In §§ 5-6, I discussed a family of arguments, derived, in part, from Blackburn and Wright, which criticize the nihilistic view that moral judgments are all false. These arguments fail, but perhaps they do better against the amended form of the error theory that I have been defending in §§7-9? Premise 1') transforms into premise 1*)

> 1*) If all non-negative atomic moral judgments are false then we *morally* ought to
> a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

Is 1*) true? Surely not. It is not quite clear how the consequent of 1*) should be analyzed, but it is most naturally rendered as a universal quantification: For any person x, x morally ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality. Thus for the consequent of 1*) to be true there must be a relation of obligation between each individual and the act-types of a) giving up moralizing and b) giving up morality. But if all non-negative atomic moral propositions are false, because there are no such things as obligations, then it will not be true of each individual that he/she ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality. Thus if the antecedent is true, the consequent will be false, which means that the conditional itself is false. Thus the first variant of the argument (with the 'oughts' interpreted as moral) is unsound. What about the other two? In the second variant of the argument in which the 'oughts' are read as hypothetical imperatives indexed to some truth-seeking project, Premise 1'') transforms into Premise 1*'')

1*'') If all non-negative atomic moral judgments are false, then *if we want our beliefs to be true* (and not false) we ought to a) give up moralizing and b) give up morality.

1*'') appears to be true, but Premise 2''), which does not need to be amended, is just as question begging in this version as it was in the earlier argument, since it is tantamount (in context) to the claim that not all non-negative atomic moral judgments are false. As for the third variant (pragmatic 'ought'), the uniform substitution of 'non-negative atomic moral judgments' for 'moral judgments' makes no difference to its status. The arguments fail against the older version of the error theory and they are just as unsuccessful against the amended version.

11. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Nietzsche was a certain sort of nihilist i.e. an error theorist about ethics, defending my interpretation against Schacht. I then defended this more or less Mackian position against Blackburn, Wright and the hoi polloi. Morality does not have to be true to be good (in the sense of good for something), thus if it *is* good for something and even worth persisting with, this does not show that it is composed of truths. I raised and solved both the Doppelganger Problem and the Reinforced Doppelganger Problem, amending the error theory along the way. In order to escape self-refutation, error-theorists like Nietzsche and Mackie must pull in their horns. The claim should not be that *all* moral judgments are false but only that *non-negative atomic moral judgments* are all false. Thus we can move from the non-existence of moral properties to the systematic falsehood of morality without adopting the incoherent idea that everything that might reasonably be regarded as a moral judgment is condemned to error. But my aim has been to vindicate the error theory against certain objections, not to establish its truth. The error theory may be in error, but I hope I have shown that it is a lot less silly than some have supposed.

REFERENCES

Ansell-Pearson, Keith: *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker: the Perfect Nihilist*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Berkowitz, Peter, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Blackburn, Simon, 'Errors and the Phenomenology of Value' in Blackburn, Simon, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 149-165.

Cawkwell, G.L., 'A Memorial Address', in Honderich, Ted (ed.), *Morality and Objectivity*. London: Routledge, 1985, pp. 219-222.

Danto, Arthur, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, New York: Macmillan, 1965.

Dworkin Ronald, 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe it', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 25 (2) (1996), pp. 87-139.

Field, Hartrey, *Realism, Mathematics and Modality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

Garner, Richard, *Beyond Morality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Hinckfuss, Ian, *The Moral Society: Its Structure and Effects*. Canberra: Australian National University, 1987.

Leiter, Brian, *Nietzsche on Morality*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Mackie, J.L. 'The Refutation of Morals' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 24, (1946), pp. 77-90.

Mackie, J.L., *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Kaufmann, Walter (includes *Thus Spake Zarathrustra*). New York: Viking Penguin, 1954.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Kaufmann, Walter (includes *Beyond Good and Evil*). New York: Modern Library, 1968a.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Will to Power*, ed. Kaufmann, Walter, trans. Kaufmann, Walter, and Hollingdale, R.J. New York: Vintage, 1968b.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *Daybreak*, trans. Hollingdale, R.J.. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Ansell-Pearson, K., trans. Diethe, Caroline. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Nietzsche, Friederich, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, eds. Ridley, Aaron and Norman, Judith, trans. Norman, Judith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Pigden, Charles R. (ed.), *Russell on Ethics*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Pybus, Cassandra, Gross Moral Turpitude: the Orr Case Reconsidered. Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1993.

Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey, 'Introduction: the Many Modal Realisms', in Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Schacht, Richard, *Making Sense of Nietzsche*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Smith, Michael (ed.) *Meta-Ethics*. Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995.

Wright, Crispin, *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.