

Why Moral Paradoxes *Actually* Support Moral Nihilism (And Why That Matters)*

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Abstract

Christopher Cowie argues that moral error theory is uniquely placed to avoid embracing any of the troubling and counter-intuitive horns of moral paradoxes. Contra Cowie, I argue that moral non-cognitivists can also avoid embracing any such troubling and counter-intuitive horns. Rather than supporting moral error theory, I argue that moral paradoxes more precisely support moral nihilism—a first-order view that is consistent with moral error theory and with moral non-cognitivism. Moreover, I argue that reconstructing the argument from moral paradoxes as an argument for moral nihilism enhances its philosophical significance in two ways. First, the argument from moral paradoxes is the first unified argument in support of moral nihilism. Second, given that the logical space of moral nihilism is greater than the logical space of moral error theory, the threat that the argument from moral paradoxes poses to moral philosophy is more serious than Cowie acknowledges.

1 - Introduction

Moral error theory is the view that moral judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths. This generates troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications: namely, that every positive moral proposition is untrue.¹ The first-order implications of moral error theory are at their most troubling in cases of deeply plausible positive moral propositions: moral error theory implies

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¹ More precisely, moral error theory implies that all atomic, non-tautological, positive, first-order moral propositions are untrue (Elliott & Isserow, 2021, p. 7). In what follows, “atomic, non-tautological, positive, first-order moral propositions” will be shortened to “positive moral propositions”.

that such propositions as “torture is morally impermissible”, “preventing harm to others at no cost to oneself is morally required”, and “suffering is morally bad” are untrue. Christopher Cowie (2023) describes these troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications as the “fundamental challenge” (p. 458) for moral error theory.

But, Cowie argues, moral error theory is not alone in facing troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications. Moral paradoxes commit every one of moral error theory’s meta-ethical competitors to their own troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications. What’s more, moral paradoxes commit moral error theory’s meta-ethical competitors to troubling and counter-intuitive *positive* moral propositions, whereas the troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications of moral error theory are *negative*. So, relative to its meta-ethical competitors, the fundamental challenge for error theory is not so challenging after all.

Cowie argues that moral paradoxes therefore support moral error theory. I argue that moral paradoxes more precisely support moral nihilism: the first-order view that nothing is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on, where “and so on” covers all moral concepts.² Although moral nihilism is implied by moral error theory, it is consistent with the falsity of moral error theory and with the truth of moral non-cognitivism. Hence, contra Cowie, moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory.

Further, I argue that reframing the argument from moral paradoxes as an argument in support of moral nihilism enhances its philosophical significance in two ways. First, the argument from moral paradoxes is the only extant unified argument in support of moral nihilism. Second, given that moral nihilism implies the negation of all positive moral propositions, and given that the logical space of moral nihilism is greater than the logical space of moral error theory, the threat that the argument from moral paradoxes poses to the moral domain is greater than Cowie acknowledges.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In section 2, I outline Cowie’s argument from moral paradoxes. In section 3, I argue that the argument from moral paradoxes more precisely supports moral nihilism. In section 4, I demonstrate two philosophically significant upshots of reframing Cowie’s argument from moral paradoxes as an argument for moral nihilism. Section 5 concludes.

2 – The Argument from Moral Paradoxes

² This definition is borrowed from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2006, p. 53).

Cowie begins his argument by debunking the fundamental challenge facing moral error theory. Even if moral error theory is committed to the negation of the most deeply plausible positive moral propositions—negations such as “torture is not morally impermissible” and so on—Cowie emphasizes that such moral negations do not imply positive moral propositions (pp. 460-462). For example, although the denial that torture is morally impermissible may conversationally implicate that torture is morally permissible, this conversational implicature is cancellable, for moral error theory holds that nothing is morally impermissible or morally permissible (see, e.g., Olson, 2017, pp. 61-62; Pigden, 2007). Analogously, denying that something is spiritually pure may conversationally implicate that it is spiritually impure, but this conversational implicature is cancellable if nothing is spiritually pure or impure (Streumer & Wodak, 2021, pp. 257-260). The cancellability of the conversational implicature from moral negations to positive moral propositions renders the first-order commitments of moral error theory somewhat less troubling and counter-intuitive: although the moral error theorist accepts such troubling and counter-intuitive *negative* moral propositions as “torture is not morally impermissible”, they are not beholden to such troubling and counter-intuitive *positive* moral propositions as “torture is morally permissible”.

But, Cowie argues, moral error theory’s meta-ethical competitors face their own troubling and counter-intuitive *positive* first-order implications. Cowie highlights moral paradoxes whereby meta-ethical competitors to moral error theory must, at pain of inconsistency, embrace at least one troubling and counter-intuitive horn of the paradox.

Trolley cases offer one such example. It is famously challenging to identify a moral principle that accommodates widely-held intuitions in the many variants of trolley cases (e.g., accommodating the intuition that pulling a lever to divert a trolley away from five workers and towards one worker is morally permissible, while accommodating the intuition that pushing a fat man off a bridge to block a trolley from hitting five workers is morally impermissible). Cowie suggests that Frances Kamm’s (2007) Principle of Permissible Harm yields the most intuitive results across the many trolley cases: “it is permissible to kill a smaller number in order to save a greater number if the act of killing is the very same act as the act of saving or is a ‘non-causal flip-side’ of it, but that it is not permissible to kill a smaller number in order to save a greater number if the killing is a mere means, in the causal sense, of the saving” (Cowie, 2023, p. 463). But, Cowie argues, the Principle of Permissible Harm faces a challenge: the distinction between being a causal means and being a non-causal flip-side does not *seem* morally significant. Meta-ethical competitors to moral error theory thereby face a dilemma between accepting the moral significance of a distinction that very much seems morally

insignificant (i.e., accepting the moral significance of the distinction between being a causal means and being a non-causal flip side), or accepting that our intuitions are mistaken in certain trolley cases (e.g., accepting that we ought to push fat men in front of trains, or that pulling the lever in the original trolley case is morally impermissible). Moral error theorists are alone in avoiding both horns of the dilemma, for they can deny that there are any morally significant distinctions or that anything is morally permissible or impermissible.

Cowie cites axiological impossibility theorems as a second example. Without rehearsing the details, Gustaf Arrhenius's axiological impossibility theorems comprise a set of highly plausible yet jointly inconsistent positive axiological propositions. But the denial of any constituent axiological proposition is very troubling and counter-intuitive. For example, Cowie suggests that of the constituent propositions of Arrhenius' sixth impossibility theorem, the Non-Elitism Condition may be easiest to reject (2023, p. 481):

The Non-Elitism Condition: For any triplet of welfare levels **A**, **B**, and **C**, **A** slightly higher than **B**, and **B** higher than **C**, and for any one-life population A with welfare **A**, there is a population C with welfare **C**, and a population B of the same size as AUC and with welfare **B**, such that for any population X consisting of lives with welfare ranging from **C** to **A**, BUX is at least as good as AUCUX, other things being equal (Arrhenius, 2011, p. 8).

Broadly, to reject the Non-Elitism Condition is to accept that a population with one person at a very high welfare level and others at a much lower welfare level is better than a population of the same size where everyone is only slightly worse off than the best-off member of the first population. But this, Cowie contends, is a deeply troubling and counter-intuitive claim (2023, p. 481). Hence, in cases of axiological impossibility theorems, meta-ethical competitors to moral error theory are committed (at pain of inconsistency) to rejecting at least one of the highly plausible constituent positive axiological propositions, and thereby accepting at least one highly troubling and counter-intuitive positive axiological proposition. Moral error theorists are uniquely placed to avoid accepting any such highly troubling and counter-intuitive positive axiological propositions, for they reject *all* positive axiological propositions.

Of particular worry for meta-ethical competitors to moral error theory is that the surveyed moral paradoxes—trolley problems and axiological impossibility theorems—are some of the most rigorously studied areas of moral philosophy in recent years. The longer that moral philosophers are unable to resolve such paradoxes, the dimmer their prospects of doing

so. And nor do the above examples exhaust the moral paradoxes alive in the philosophical literature (Cowie, 2023, p. 472). There are many more moral paradoxes that cannot be resolved without accepting at least one troubling and counter-intuitive positive moral proposition—other examples may include the non-identity problem (Boonin, 2014) and paradoxes concerning choice under uncertainty (Beckstead & Thomas, 2021)—and there may be many more that philosophers have not yet cast their eyes upon. The greater the number and potency of troubling and counter-intuitive first-order implications of moral error theory’s meta-ethical competitors, the greater the relative plausibility of moral error theory.

The argument from moral paradoxes is not designed to conclusively entail the truth of moral error theory. Rather, the argument from moral paradoxes is designed to reduce the sting of the fundamental challenge—Cowie argues that moral error theory “does not fare *that much* worse in this respect, and certainly not badly enough to reject it out of hand” (p. 460). So, relative to those of their meta-ethical competitors, the first-order implications of moral error theory may not be so troubling and counter-intuitive after all.

3 – Why Moral Paradoxes *Actually* Support Moral Nihilism

The feature of moral error theory that enables it to avoid the troubling and counter-intuitive horns of moral paradoxes is its cancellation of the conversational implicature from moral negations to positive moral propositions. For example, the cancelled conversational implicature enables moral error theorists to reject the Non-Elitism Condition without accepting that a population with one person at a very high welfare level and others at a much lower welfare level is better than a population of the same size where everyone is only slightly worse off than the best-off member of the first population, for moral error theorists deny that any population is better, worse, or equivalent to any other.

The moral error theorist is able to cancel the conversational implicature from moral negations to positive moral propositions in virtue of denying that anything is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on, where “and so on” covers all moral concepts. Importantly, the claim that nothing is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on is a first-order moral claim. This first-order claim is straightforwardly implied by moral error theory. But the first-order claim does not imply moral error theory; in the remainder of this section, I will argue that the first-order claim is

consistent with the falsity of moral error theory and with the truth of moral non-cognitivism.³ Moreover, if moral non-cognitivists can also deny that anything is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on, then they too can cancel the conversational implicature from moral negations to positive moral propositions, and they too can avoid the troubling and counter-intuitive horns of moral paradoxes. Hence, moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory and more precisely support the first-order claim that nothing is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on. In order to distinguish this first-order claim from moral error theory, I follow Sinnott-Armstrong in labelling this claim “moral nihilism” (2006, p. 53).

Moral non-cognitivists can qualify as moral nihilists if they generalize whichever attitude is expressed by moral negations to all positive moral propositions (see, e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 56). But moral non-cognitivists can consistently do so only if the attitude expressed by moral negations is not equivalent to the attitude expressed by any positive moral judgement. For if moral negations and some other kind of positive moral judgement express the same attitude (e.g., if the moral negation “murder is not morally permissible” and the positive moral judgement “murder is morally impermissible” both express an attitude of disapproval towards murder), then to make a moral negation would *just be* to make a positive moral judgement. In that case, a moral non-cognitivist could not consistently generalize the attitude expressed by moral negations to *all* positive moral propositions, and, therefore, could not consistently accept moral nihilism.

Identifying precisely which attitude is expressed by moral negations lies beyond the scope of this paper—indeed, moral non-cognitivists have long grappled with the problem of identifying the attitudes expressed by different kinds of moral judgements (Miller, 2013, pp. 88-102), and the problem of developing a coherent semantics for negation (Dreier, 2006). But one illustrative nihilist-friendly example is as follows.

Alan Gibbard (1990) and Gunnar Björnsson and Tristram McPherson (2014) emphasize the role of acceptance in moral non-cognitivism. For Gibbard, to accept a norm is “in part to be disposed to avow it in unconstrained normative discussion, as a result of the workings of demands for consistency in the positions one takes in normative discussion” (p. 74). Drawing on Gibbard, Björnsson and McPherson (2014) cite personal-level acceptance as one of five characteristic components of judgements about moral wrongness. Björnsson and McPherson

³ Unlike moral error theory, moral non-cognitivism is *also* consistent with the negation of this first-order claim (i.e., moral non-cognitivism is also consistent with the claim that at least something *is* good, bad, right, wrong, and so on).

clarify that personal-level acceptance can come apart from the mere seeming or feeling of wrongness: in the same way that we accept the straightness of a partially submerged oar despite it seeming bent, we can accept the wrongness of an option despite it seeming permissible (pp. 14-15).

Björnsson and McPherson discuss personal-level acceptance only in the context of wrongness-judgements; they do not seek to identify the attitudes expressed by any other kinds of positive moral judgements or by moral negations. But, quite naturally, we might imagine that if wrongness-judgements characteristically involve personal-level acceptance, then moral negations may involve personal-level rejection. As the flipside of personal-level acceptance, personal-level rejection could involve, echoing Gibbard (1990, p. 74) on avowals, a disposition to *disavow* the positive moral proposition in unconstrained normative discussion, and, echoing Björnsson and McPherson (2014), personal-level rejection of a positive moral proposition could be consistent with the positive moral propositions *seeming* to be the case.

Such a non-cognitivist analysis of moral negations straightforwardly accommodates moral nihilism: a moral non-cognitivist could qualify as a moral nihilist if they express personal-level rejection towards all positive moral propositions. Moreover, such a non-cognitivist analysis of moral negations dovetails nicely alongside the argument from moral paradoxes: in the face of moral paradoxes, a moral non-cognitivist may opt to reject all positive moral propositions rather than accept a troubling and counter-intuitive horn of every moral paradox. Echoing Gibbard, the moral non-cognitivist's disavowal of all positive moral propositions would arise "as a result of the workings of demands for consistency" (1990, p. 74), and echoing Björnsson and McPherson, this would be consistent with certain positive moral proposition very much *seeming* to be the case.

Of course, different brands of moral non-cognitivism may identify different kinds of conative attitudes that are expressed by moral negations. The plausibility of the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism and moral nihilism may vary depending upon the precise conative attitudes that different brands of moral non-cognitivism identify as being expressed by moral negations. For example, if negating a wrongness-judgement about some option expresses approval towards that option (see, e.g., Schwartz & Hom, 2015), then it is much less plausible that one may negate such paradigmatic wrongness judgements as "torture is morally impermissible". Whereas if negating a wrongness-judgement about some option is to judge that disapproval towards that option is not *warranted*, where judging that disapproval is not warranted expresses personal-level rejection towards norms that permit disapproval towards that option (see, e.g., Gibbard, 1992), then moral nihilism is more plausible. But in any case,

my argument that moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory does not depend on *all* brands of moral non-cognitivism being plausibly consistent with moral nihilism. Moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory and support moral nihilism if *at least some* brands of moral non-cognitivism are plausibly consistent with moral nihilism.⁴

That moral paradoxes do indeed lend at least some support to the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism and moral nihilism assumes that moral non-cognitivism is subject to a consistency constraint. Michael Zhao (2024) has challenged this assumption. Although moral realists can justify a consistency constraint, for moral realists hold that moral judgements attempt to describe reality and reality contains no inconsistencies, moral non-cognitivists cannot offer such a justification for a consistency constraint, for moral non-cognitivists deny that moral judgements attempt to describe reality. And if moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then moral paradoxes do not support moral nihilism—moral non-cognitivists can avoid the troubling and counter-intuitive horns of moral paradoxes by embracing inconsistency rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater and denying that *anything* is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on.

However, even if Zhao is correct that moral non-cognitivists cannot *justify* a consistency constraint, it may be a *conceptual truth* that moral non-cognitivists are subject to a consistency constraint. For example, if my proposed non-cognitivist analysis of moral negations is correct, and if, drawing on Gibbard (1990), personal-level rejection arises “as a result of the workings of demands for consistency in the positions one takes in normative discussion” (p. 74) then a consistency constraint may be baked into the very kinds of attitudes that are expressed by moral negations. If accepting that a positive moral proposition coheres with one’s substantive moral framework is part of what it means to make a positive moral

⁴ More precisely, moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory and support moral nihilism if (i) at least some brands of moral non-cognitivism are plausibly consistent with moral nihilism *and* if (ii) those brands of moral non-cognitivism are inconsistent with moral error theory. The preceding discussion may exert some pressure upon (ii). For earlier, I defined moral error theory as the view that moral judgements are assertoric yet fail to state truths. And if “assertoric” in the relevant sense covers assertions that present statements as *minimally* true or false, then the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism, moral nihilism, and minimalism about truth may be consistent with moral error theory (pace Akhlaghi, 2021)—minimalism enables the moral non-cognitivist to agree that moral judgements are assertoric, and moral nihilism enables the moral non-cognitivist to agree that moral judgements fail to state truths. But in any case, my argument that moral paradoxes under-support moral error theory still stands, for moral paradoxes also support the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism, moral nihilism, and *inflationism* about truth, and the conjunction of those views is *inconsistent* with moral error theory.

judgement (and similarly, if rejecting the coherence of a positive moral proposition with one's substantive moral framework is part of what it means to make a moral negation), then moral non-cognitivists can be subject to a consistency constraint without having to *justify* that consistency constraint.

Moreover, even if Zhao is correct that moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, and even if moral paradoxes therefore lend no support to the conjunction of moral nihilism and moral non-cognitivism, moral paradoxes *still* under-support moral error theory, for they would also lend support to non-nihilistic kinds of moral non-cognitivism. For if moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then moral non-cognitivists can avoid the troubling and counter-intuitive horns of moral paradoxes by simply embracing inconsistency. Hence, either moral non-cognitivism is subject to a consistency constraint, in which case moral paradoxes most precisely support moral nihilism, or moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, in which case moral paradoxes support the disjunction of moral nihilism and non-nihilistic kinds of moral non-cognitivism.

If, then, Zhao is correct that moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, this would undermine my claim that the argument from moral paradoxes most precisely supports moral error theory. But the significance of this challenge should not be overstated. First, whether or not moral non-cognitivism is subject to a consistency constraint, my argument that the argument from moral paradoxes under-supports moral error theory still goes through. Second, if moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then the claim that the argument from moral paradoxes also under-supports moral nihilism radically over-generalizes. For if moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then moral non-cognitivists can resist the conclusion of *any* moral argument by embracing inconsistency. Take, for example, Peter Singer's (1977) drowning child argument. If moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then a moral non-cognitivist could inconsistently accept that we are morally obligated to save drowning children, that there are no morally relevant differences between saving drowning children and giving to effective charities, and that we are not morally obligated to give to effective charities. Rather than supporting the view that we have moral obligations to donate to effective charities, the drowning child argument would support the disjunction of (i) the view that we have moral obligations to donate to effective charities and (ii) the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism and the view that we do not have moral obligations to donate to effective charities. More generally, if moral non-cognitivism is not subject to a consistency constraint, then any moral

argument supports the disjunction of (i) its conclusion and (ii) the conjunction of moral non-cognitivism and the negation of its conclusion. Thus, inasmuch as any moral argument precisely supports any first-order view, the argument from moral paradoxes most precisely supports moral nihilism.

4 – Why That Matters

I have argued that the argument from moral paradoxes under-supports moral error theory and most precisely supports moral nihilism (inasmuch as any moral argument precisely supports any first-order view). In this section, I will argue that reconstructing the argument from moral paradoxes as an argument for moral nihilism enhances its philosophical significance in two ways.

First, the argument from moral paradoxes is, to my knowledge, the first and only extant unified argument in support of moral nihilism. Moral nihilism is typically defended indirectly via moral error theory, which is typically defended via the conjunction of two meta-ethical claims: the claim that moral judgements are conceptually committed to some kind of property (e.g., irreducibly normative properties or categorical reasons) and the claim that those properties do not exist (see, e.g., Joyce, 2001; Olson. 2014). But moral nihilism has not, to my knowledge, received defense qua first-order thesis. Indeed, that moral error theory implies moral nihilism is usually seen as a cost for moral error theory—it is this implication that gives rise to the fundamental challenge for moral error theory. Of the extant arguments in the vicinity, evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs) come closest to constituting a unified argument in support of moral nihilism. EDAs, like the argument from moral paradoxes, operate at the first-order level—they employ empirical and epistemic premises in support of the first-order epistemic conclusion that no positive moral judgements are justified (Joyce, 2006; Street, 2006).⁵ But the conclusion that no positive moral judgements are justified (i.e., moral *skepticism*) does not imply moral *nihilism*—even if we are not justified in believing that anything is good, bad, right, wrong and so on, that does not imply that nothing really is good, bad, right, wrong and so on. Hence, the argument from moral paradoxes is of greater philosophical significance than Cowie acknowledges: rather than constituting yet another argument in support of moral error theory or moral skepticism, it is the first and only extant unified argument in support of moral *nihilism*.

⁵ Some, however, argue that EDAs rely on meta-ethical *assumptions* (see, e.g., Kahane, 2011, pp. 112-113).

Second, moral nihilism is often conflated with moral error theory (see, e.g., Joyce, 2013, p. 3606; Kulp, 2019, p. 12; Pigden, 2007, p. 442). And more generally, the compatibility of moral non-cognitivism with moral nihilism has mostly gone unacknowledged. If moral nihilism did indeed imply moral error theory—if moral nihilism were incompatible with moral non-cognitivism—then the falsity of moral error theory would imply the falsity of moral nihilism. But, as I have argued, the falsity of moral error theory does not imply the falsity of moral nihilism.

This enhances the philosophical significance of the argument from moral paradoxes in a second way. The argument from moral paradoxes, and the moral nihilism that it supports, poses a threat to moral philosophy: if the argument from moral paradoxes is successful, then contra philosophical orthodoxy, nothing is good, bad, right, wrong, and so on. If Cowie were correct that the argument from moral paradoxes most precisely supports moral error theory, then refuting moral error theory qua meta-ethical view would overcome the threat to moral philosophy that the argument from moral paradoxes poses. But given that the argument from moral paradoxes most precisely supports moral nihilism rather than moral error theory, and given that moral nihilism is consistent with the falsity of moral error theory, then the threat posed by the argument from moral paradoxes is insulated from such meta-ethical refutations of moral error theory. The threat that the argument from moral paradoxes poses to the moral domain is therefore greater than Cowie acknowledges; to vindicate the moral domain in light of the argument from moral paradoxes requires more than merely refuting moral error theory—it requires refuting moral nihilism on its own first-order grounds.⁶

5 – Conclusion

I have argued that Cowie’s argument from moral paradoxes under-supports moral error theory and most precisely supports moral nihilism—a first-order view that is consistent with the falsity of moral error theory and with the truth of moral non-cognitivism. Further, I have argued that reconstructing the argument from moral paradoxes as an argument in support of moral nihilism enhances its philosophical significance in two ways. First, the argument from moral paradoxes

⁶ The threat posed by the argument from moral paradoxes may be even greater if paradoxes with troubling and counter-intuitive horns are identified in other normative domains. For example, Marina Moreno (manuscript) has argued that Gustaf Arrhenius’ fifth impossibility theorem can be applied to the prudential domain. If the horns of paradoxes in other normative domains are sufficiently troubling and counter-intuitive, they could form an argument from normative paradoxes in support of a more general normative nihilism.

is the first and only extant unified argument in support of moral nihilism. Second, given that moral nihilism poses a threat to the moral domain, and given that the argument from moral paradoxes promises a defense of moral nihilism that does not stand and fall with moral error theory, the threat to moral philosophy is greater than philosophers have hitherto acknowledged.

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