

A Brief (Nihilistic) Theory of Morality

M. E. Tson

We have an intellectual tradition speeding towards determinism and relativism, and moral and justice systems not only still tethered to the concepts such as objective good and evil, moral agency, and freewill but also having limited capacity to address our moral responsibilities to other species or (eventually) conscious machines. This paper argues that a moral and legal system based upon respect for the subjective experience or perspective of the other (RSEO/RSP) provides a means of addressing these challenges and reconciling ethics, government, and law with the assumptions of the natural sciences.

Even starting from first principles of moral nihilism and determinism and assuming a world bereft of any objective good or value, subjective value would still exist. Although an action may not be good or bad in any objective sense, it will be from some subjective perspective. So, an individual subjectively concerned with doing “good” in a nihilistic universe could begin by valuing and respecting subjective experience (SE) or perspective, attempting not to infringe upon the various individual *subjective spheres* of value.

RSEO/RSP differs from the Golden Rule’s “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” because treating others as we would wish to be treated, assumes that their values are or should be the same as our own and gives too much latitude for paternalism and the disregard of the subjective perspective of the other. *RSEO means assisting others "to live lives that they value" by acknowledging and respecting their choices.*

With no access to another's internal states, the only evidence we have of anyone's subjective experience/perspective are her overt actions and reactions, and such a definition of subjective experience/perspective is easily extended to animals, insects, plants, and unicellular organisms which also react to circumstances, withdrawing from and seeking certain stimuli. Of course, with subjective experience/perspective so expansively defined, as we interact in a world of limited resources, those subjective spheres will inevitably conflict. RSEO, like most moral systems, serves as an asymptotic standard, an ideal which guides and is approached but never actually reached. Some have argued that the morality of actions is to be judged by the extent to which we value the subjective experience of the other *over* our own, but there is no reason to prefer one objectively valueless subjective evaluation (the other's) over another (our own). *Rather, when the choice is between irreconcilable SEs, no alternative or end is any more or less moral than the other, but the means through which that END is brought about (the extent to which those means take into account the SE of the other) can be more or less moral.*

The attempt here is only to suggest the outline of a coherent moral theory within the post-modernist world of determinism and relativism to someone who is looking for such a theory. In some sense, as with any other philosophy, it can only suggest to an individual one way down a path he is already on. If a particular action is ultimately judged morally “better” or “worse” than another, it is still only so from a subjective perspective. There is still no *Ought* only *Is*. A "moral" Government could then be thought of a means of enabling those who do respect subjective experience and perspective to withstand the irreconcilable SEs of tyrants, bullies, psychopaths, and other anti-social actors. This government would allow and promote the greatest opportunity for unobstructed action--at least in so far as that action is consistent with the existence of such a government--by imposing upon all some duty to respect the SEO and by *defining which of the infringements – that inevitably result from personal interaction and clashes of SP – are legally prohibited.* Governmental paternalism would not be justified to the extent that any being (whether human, animal, alien, or machine) was capable of fully acknowledging, accepting, and respecting subjective experience/perspective.

In sum, RSEO or RSP is a standard of behavior rather than a rule: the greater the extent to which an action takes into account and values the SE/P of the other, the more moral it would be.