1.0 Introduction

“One ought not torture for fun.” Few would challenge this norm. But why? A common answer is that norms are “prescriptive”, telling us how we should act. Moreover, such norms are regarded as “authoritative”, possessed with a “binding force” that “governs” rational beings. What is the nature of this “normative force” and its “binding power”? Philosophers sometimes talk about different strengths of normative force, invoking the traditional distinction between hypothetical and categorical norms.

Hypothetical norms are “weakly” binding and exemplified by social conventions e.g. “One ought to use the small fork for salads.” Few people would consider it wrong to use the big fork because this norm only “binds us” if we want to impress high society.\(^1\) The force of hypothetical normativity is thus tied to our individual desires; if my desire to rebel against high society is stronger than my desire to fit in, I am hypothetically bound to not use the small fork.

In contrast, categorical norms such as “One ought not torture for fun” are “strongly” binding in the sense of not being conditional on anyone's actual or ideal desires.\(^2\) If a psychopath desires to torture

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\(^1\) Which is not to say that the norms of etiquette are subjective (Foot, 1972). The norms of chess are arbitrary and conventional but not thereby subjective; there is a concrete “fact of the matter” about whether any given move is legal according to the US Chess Federation circa 2013.

\(^2\) Studies suggest that young children make a similar “conventional/moral” distinction between arbitrary social rules (“It's wrong to not wear a uniform at school”) and moral rules (“It's wrong to hit your neighbor”) (Smetana, Kelly, &
others for fun, they are nevertheless obligated to not torture for fun. Unlike their hypothetical cousins, categorical norms are considered “objectively prescriptive” (Mackie, 1977), enjoying what Aquinas calls “the binding force which is proper to a law”.

Suppose categorical force is merely a dressed up version of hypothetical force. How could we tell otherwise? The existence of a “binding” categorical force is not an obvious or trivial truth, nor detectable by any scientific instrument (that I know of). On these grounds alone, a skeptic might propose the “bindingness” of categorical force is merely hypothetical force masquerading as something stronger, a remnant of an old brain disposed for religiosity and magical thinking.

The normative realist claims categoricity is felt as forceful because it really is forceful in virtue of the binding power of “irreducible” normative facts. In contrast, the normative nihilist claims the bindingness of normativity derives its “force” merely from biological and cultural values, but there is no ultimate fact about which values are “better” than any other because, from the physicalist point of view, the universe is cold, uncaring, and ultimately valueless. Nietzsche's statement of the worldview driving normative nihilism is definitive: “Whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 242, emphasis added). Nietzsche offers a “physiological” explanation of the

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2 Twentyman, 1984; Turiel, Killen, & Helwig, 1987).

3 Religious believers seem more familiar with the “force” of categoricity. Most Christians would know what C.S. Lewis means when he says “There is nothing indulgent about the Moral Law. It is hard as nails. It tells you to do the straight thing and it does not seem to care how painful, or dangerous, or difficult it is to do.” (Lewis, 2001, p. 30). Compare Shafer-Landau's claim that “Morality is categorically applicable: a person can be morally obligated to do something even if doing it fails to serve any of her interests, wants, or needs” (2005, p. 109).

4 On magical thinking in adults, see (Bloom, 2004; Rozin, Millman, & Nemeroff, 1986) On the idea that we are disposed towards religiosity, see (Barrett, 2000, 2011; Bering, 2011). Following the lead of Julian Jaynes (1976), Richard Garner uses the link between categoricity and ancient religion in Mesopotamia to support a historically grounded “queerness” argument in Beyond Morality (1994).

5 The denial of there being any ultimate facts about norms and values is compatible with there being objective facts about norms and values relative to determinate standards. For example, there are objective facts about the norms of chess, but they are clearly derived from the desires of chess players, who have the freedom to change the norms, or invent new variations such as Fischer Random. The normative nihilist says all norms—even epistemic norms—are just like the norms of chess, except the contingency is both biological and cultural, whereas the contingency of chess norms is largely cultural.

6 For a similar statement and defense of nihilism, see Sommers & Rosenberg (2003)
source of normativity by tracing the concrete human origins of the concept of categoricity, explaining away the phenomenology of “binding” normative authority as a figment of an over-active brain.

Critics accuse normative nihilists of being either incoherent or hypocritical because in defending the view they “help themselves” to normative concepts, and thus undermine their own attempts at making a meaningful, rational, or intelligible claim. Thus, normativists are doubtful genealogical stories have any revisionary implications for our normative concepts. And even if they did, normativists pull out their trump card *tu quoque* argument: even if an evolutionary critique of moral norms were successful, it would thereby “prove too much” by casting doubt on all norms, including the epistemic norms that rationally “bind” nihilists to avoid saying “This genealogy both happened and did not happen.” Skeptics have dealt with this “global” challenge creatively, but few have opted to bite the bullet on epistemic nihilism for fear of committing “intellectual suicide” (Sorensen, 2013). Philosophers are by professional reputation defenders of epistemic authority and—not surprisingly—tend to dismiss the prospect of Global Normative Nihilism (GNN) as absurd or self-defeating.

My central thesis is this: once we distinguish between hypothetical and categorical strengths of epistemic authority the charge of self-defeat rings hollows, for the following reason. If epistemic norms only “bind” us hypothetically with respect to our contingently held desires and/or values, pointing out epistemic nihilists have “binding” hypothetical reasons to avoid holding contradictory beliefs is consistent with the nihilistic claim that acting in accord with epistemic norms is not good in-itself, because nature is valueless. The psychological inevitability of normal humans to feel “bound” by epistemic norms does not entail we are categorically bound to follow them. Naturalists have no beef with hypothetical forms of “binding force” because this locution is understood as a conceptual

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7 In *The Normative Web* (2007), Terence Cuneo makes a strong case for the “parity premise”: “If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do no exist”. Also, see Bedke (2010), Richard Rowland (2013) for similar arguments.

8 Exceptions to this trend, include Stephen Turner (2010), Robert Black (1989), Hartry Field (2009), Kolodny (2005), John Broome (2005), and Olson (2011).
2.0 The Genealogical Path to Normative Nihilism

In the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche writes

> We need a critique of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question*—and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted. (1998, §6, emphasis added)

Nietzsche aims to give a naturalistic account of why humans have moral values, but his challenge probes deeper: is it even good for us to value the things we do? Nietzsche challenges philosophers to go beyond descriptive fact-collecting, for “Even if a morality has grown out of an error, the realization of this fact would not so much as touch the problem of its value” (1974, p. 345). Nietzsche thought that the more interesting—indeed, the distinctively philosophical—task was not just to give a natural history of our moral values but to use that history as a springboard for criticizing the values treasured by moralists, to engage in “an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity” (1969, p. 326).

Nietzsche turns the Moorean question on its head and asks: charity and impartiality seem like good values, but are they really? What if there is no fact of the matter? A common response is to ground such facts in our dispositions or sentiments, pointing out most members of our species just happens to regard charity and impartiality as good and “The good is that which we regard as good”

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10 Contrast Nietzsche's genealogical project with Nichols' (2002), who argues the most genealogy can achieve is descriptive cognitive anthropology. Nietzsche's project crucially depends on the possibility of cognitive anthropology, but Nietzsche thought philosophers must engage with questions of *value*: was it *good* for us to develop the moral norms we currently possess? And moreover, is there even a fact of the matter about which values are “ultimately” good?
The lurking danger of reducing values to dispositions and rationalized sentiments is its utter consistency with normative nihilism.

2.1 The Evolutionary Debunking of Morality

Darwin's “universal acid” has been critically applied to everything from monogamy (Barash & Lipton, 2001; Ryan & Jethá, 2010) to reason (Mercier & Sperber, 2011), but the most common targets are religion and morality. Sharon Street's “Darwinian Dilemma” (2006) for moral realism is a notable example of an “Evolutionary Debunking Argument” (EDA). The dilemma is to assert or deny a relation between an irreducible moral reality and the evolution of our moral faculties. On the first horn, if there is no relation between morality and evolution, what's to stop dispositions toward “immoral” behaviors from being wired into our moral psychology? Evolutionary theorists developed and tested models for how a behavior like violence towards step-children could have been a viable reproductive strategy in the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). On the other horn, Street argues that if moral realists acknowledge there is a relation between moral facts and evolution, the best accounts will still be too naturalistic for strong moral realists. With more sophistication than I can do justice, Street concludes that “antirealism about value is right.” (2006, p. 156). Richard Joyce also uses an EDA to debunk morality, but concludes on a more agnostic note:

[If]...Our moral beliefs are products of a process that is entirely independent of their truth, which forces the recognition that we have no grounds one way or the other for maintaining these beliefs. (Joyce, 2006b, p. 145, emphasis added)

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11 D'Arms (2005) distinguishes pure dispositionalism from “second-order” views that look not just at the sentiments we are disposed to have but whether it is appropriate to have sentiment F toward X. Because both views rely on the Archimedean lever of human sentiments, both are consistent with the nihilist's claim there is no ultimate fact of the matter about whether it's intrinsically good to satisfy human sentiments.

12 c.f. Mackie: “To say there there are objective values would not be to say merely that there are some things which are valued by everyone, nor does it entail this. There could be agreement in valuing even if valuing is just something that people do, even if this activity is not further validated.” (1977, p. 22)

13 For evolutionary critiques of morality, see Ruse & Wilson (1986), Joyce (2006a), Street (2006), Greene (2008), Mason (2010), and Fraser (Forthcoming). For evolutionary critiques of religion, see Freud (2005), (Atran, 2002), (Boyer, 2001), (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2008), (Barrett, 2011), (Dennett, 2006), (Tremlin, 2006)

14 See Kahane (2011) for a general overview of EDAs.

15 See (Daly & Wilson, 1991).
The key phrase in Joyce's genealogical argument is “one way or the other”. Though he is a meta-ethical fictionalist, he acknowledges that, by itself, the most an EDA about domain X can secure is doubt about the justification of our beliefs in domain X. Joyce admits “Pointing out that we have no reason to believe in moral facts does not imply that we have reason to disbelieve in them” (ibid). If Joyce concedes that genealogical knowledge is not a game-changer in the realism/anti-realism debate, have Darwinian skeptics oversold the power of genealogical criticism?

2.2 The Limitations of Genealogical Criticism, a Lesson from the Philosophy of Religion

“How [the belief in God] originated can at the present stage of comparative ethology no longer admit of doubt, and with the insight into that origin the belief falls away.” - Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human

“Finding a ‘natural’ origin for religion in no way discredits it” - Plantinga (2011, p. 140)

Scholars on religion also argue about the limits of genealogical criticism (Plantinga, 2011; Clark, Kelly & Barrett, 2010). Consider the above quotations from Nietzsche and Plantinga. If Plantinga is right that finding natural origins for religious belief “in no way discredits” that belief, was Nietzsche naively committing the “genetic fallacy”? Mutatis mutandis, the question applies to the genealogical analysis of any belief: moral, religious, normative, or otherwise.

Plantinga argues that finding the natural origins of a belief does not necessarily discredit that belief because we can provide a causal history of both false and true beliefs. Suppose scientists found brain modules in humans that generate beliefs about predators and concocted a plausible genealogical story. If I see a slithering motion in the grass as a snake, my knowledge of the causal origins of my brain's predator detection module does not automatically entail there is no snake. On the other hand, if I knew the system was designed by Mother Nature to issue more false positives than false negatives,

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Plantinga is not alone in dismissing the relevance of evolutionary theory on the epistemic status of beliefs. See Brosnan (2011)
then I cannot automatically assume I saw a real snake; it could have been a false alarm. Nothing follows directly about a belief's truth just because we think it has a causal history.

Are there situations where the “genetic fallacy” is not fallacious? Suppose you are hiking with a friend, both of you without a cellphone. You know a sports game is going on, and your friend says, “My psychic powers tell me the Bears defeated the Lions, your favorite team.” If you don't believe in psychic powers, should you be upset? You know there is a 50/50 chance that your friend has it right, and even if he gets lucky, that is no reason to think he was justified in making the claim. If you discovered later your friend had a hidden earpiece broadcasting the game, you'd change your mind. The point is genealogy is sometimes powerful enough to cast doubt on justification.

However, for many important domains of inquiry such as religion and meta-ethics we are not in a position to tell whether we are actually in a circumstance where genealogy undermines justification. We cannot assume it does, but likewise, we cannot assume that it does not. Accordingly, a useful reaction in all unfamiliar and uncharted domains is open-minded skepticism.17 If you are not confident your belief in P is true and know of at least one scenario where you would still have believed in P even if P wasn't true, then the measured, reasonable response is to self-consciously withhold judgment about the truth or falsity of that belief.

In sum, the implications of genealogy for normative beliefs are limited in scope. If genealogy has limited impact on normative beliefs, what about our values?

3.0 A Genealogical Argument for Value Skepticism

“You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.” ~ Nietzsche

Value nihilists contend nothing is intrinsically valuable or valuable in-itself, not even pleasure, happiness, or knowledge. In contrast, value realists believe some things really are valuable in-

17 In the theistic domain, agnostic skepticism is equivalent to what Antony Flew called “negative atheism” (1972).
themselves. If two equally well-read philosophers of comparable intelligence fundamentally disagree about whether pleasure is intrinsically good, could they appeal to reason or empirical evidence to settle the debate? The realist might argue that more pleasure is better for society in the long run, but this only pushes back the question to why the promotion of society is “good-in-itself”. If suitably motivated, the value nihilist can play the “Open Question” game just as well as any non-naturalist by asking, “Yes, the promotion of the well-being of sentient creatures seems good, but is it really good?”

Suppose Altruistic Alice and Selfish Steve are discussing a moral dilemma that turns on whether selfishness is intrinsically wrong. Steve says no amount of moralistic pleading will convince him it's “better” or “more rational” to act against his own interests; he will only act “morally” if it benefits him in the long run.18 In contrast, Alice—a champion of selflessness and impartiality—argues we sometimes have most reason to act altruistically because suffering is “bad-in-itself” and thus, given a choice between causing more or less suffering we should choose less suffering even at our own expense. Selfish Steve is unmoved. He says, “As far as I am concerned, the only suffering that is 'bad-in-itself' is my own suffering, and that's that.”

Before you throw the book at Steve, consider this: An alien anthropologist would be hard-pressed to see the difference in Steve and Alice's day-to-day behavior. They are both loving family members, good friends, and reliable workers. They both pay taxes, but for altogether different reasons. Alice pays taxes for the sake of the Greater Good whereas Steve pays taxes because he selfishly enjoys the benefits of civilization and doesn't want to upset the IRS. Is Steve “wrong” to be so selfish just because as Kant says he merely acts in accord with duty but not from duty?19 However, if meta-ethical egoism is right, then Steve actually would be acting from duty.

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18 c.f. Hume's remark “'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”
19 c.f. Wittgenstein on the distinction between acting in accord with a rule and explicitly following a rule (2001, §201)
Is there a neutral method for resolving fundamental disagreement about the values driving meta-ethical disputes? In the tradition of Nietzsche and Freud's genealogical criticisms, J.L. Mackie famously argue that moral disagreements are “more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions...of objective values” (Mackie, 1977, p. 37). Moral realists traditionally rebutt this anti-realist “argument from relativity” by pointing out that disagreement by experts in realm X does not entail anti-realism about realm X, and vice versa for massive agreement.

The threat of stalemate looms. People tend to eventually bottom out (or hit the ceiling?) at some Ultimate Principle when disputing intrinsic values. whereas some religious believers bottom out at “One ought to make the god(s) happy”, modern secularists might bottom out at “One ought to make sentient creatures happy”. Wittgenstein astutely notes that when we reach the bedrock of justification our spade turns, and we can say nothing but “This is simply what I do.”

How can we know whether these Ultimate Principles are true without placing our thumb on the scale? J.S. Mill noted—rightly in my view—that “To be incapable of proof by reasoning is common to all first principles, to the first premises of our knowledge, as well as to those of our conduct.” (2001, p. 35). Since Mill acknowledges that “questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof”, it seems ironic that he goes on to claim the “proof” of the principle of utility as the supreme principle of morality is that people do in fact seem to value happiness above all. Perhaps Mill's intention in giving such an obviously weak “proof” of the principle of utility was not to show it to be “absolutely certain”, but rather, to level the playing field by showing that any rival first principle faces the same burden of proof.

If we cannot use reason to validate our first principles and we wish to put an end to such wearisome disputes, how do we proceed? My answer is inspired by John Loftus' notion of the
“Outsider Test of Religious Faith” (2013). It begins from Nietzsche's remark that “The real problems of morality...come into view only if we compare many moralities” (BGE, p. 109).

3.1 Outsider Tests

If the vignette between Alice and Steve is psychologically plausible, what are the implications of fundamental value-theoretic disagreement? Of course, mere disagreement between peers does not entail there is no fact of the matter, no more than a dispute between scientists over the exact distance of a star from Earth entails there is no fact of the matter. Nevertheless, the history of speculative metaphysics warns us that not all debates are worth contesting, and that a useful approach to intractable disagreement is to discourage dogmatism and insist upon open-minded agnosticism as a default position, including an open-mindedness about an error theory in regards to the subject of dispute. To see why, consider the “Outsider Test” developed by John Loftus as a response to religious diversity:

The Outsider Test of Faith

(1) People who are located in distinct geographical areas around the globe overwhelmingly adopt and justify a wide diversity of religious faiths due to their particular upbringing and shared cultural heritage, and most of these faiths are mutually exclusive.
(2) The best explanation for (1) is that adopting and justifying one's religious faith is not a matter of independent rational judgment. Rather, to an overwhelming degree, one's religious faith is causally dependent on brain processes, cultural conditions, and irrational thinking patterns.
(3) It is highly likely that any given religious faith is false and quite possible that they could all be false. At best there can be only one religious faith that is true. At worst, they could all be false. The sociological facts, along with our brain biology, anthropological (or cultural) data, and psychological studies, lead us to this highly likely conclusion.

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20 On religious disagreement, see (Richard Feldman, 2011; Silver, 2001). For a general overview of the problem of dogmatism, see (Sorensen, 1988).
21 Although Leiter (2011) argues for a similar interpretation of Nietzsche, he is less convinced that a global skepticism is abductively warranted: “The question is always what is the best explanation for the disagreement in question, given its character and scope.” Of course, the epistemic nihilist denies there is any value-theoretic fact of the matter about which explanations are “better” than any other.
22 I use the term “agnosticism” in Thomas Huxley's original sense as a method of open-minded doubt, not a rigid doctrine about what is or isn't knowable.
23 I admire Sinnott-Armstrong's spirit of open-mindedness, admitting that although he is not a moral nihilist, “moral nihilism cannot be ruled out by any method and that moral beliefs can be justified only in limited ways” (2007, p. vii).
So I propose:
(4) The only way to rationally test one’s culturally adopted religious faith is from the perspective of an outsider, a nonbeliever, with the same level of reasonable skepticism believers already use when examining the other religious faiths they reject. (2013, p. 15-16)

I propose an analogous argument can be made for dealing with the diversity of values that I call “The Outsider Test of Values”. My argument differs from Loftus’ in two key respects: (1) It focuses on disagreements about values rather than moral judgments and/or beliefs, and (2) hinges on the mere possibility of fundamental value-theoretic disagreement.24

The Outsider Test of Values

1. It’s possible for people to genuinely disagree about “ultimate” values e.g. Alice and Steve.
2. It’s possible that we hold certain ultimate values for purely causal reasons independent of their truth or validity. Therefore,
3. If we want to know whether our value judgments are “right”, we should apply the same skeptical attitude towards our own values as we do to the values we reject (e.g. egoism).

If Alice wants to know whether she is correct to value altruism, she should ask herself why she rejects Steve's egoist values. If the reason why Alice rejects Steve's egoism is also a reason for Steve to reject altruism, they have effectively reached stalemate. To a value nihilist, the diagnosis is obvious: if values are projections by individuals upon a valueless universe, then Alice and Steve are arguing about a matter of taste that cannot be settled by appeal to fact or reason. To be clear, the Outsider Test of Values is not meant as a conclusive argument for value nihilism. Rather, it is a skeptical argument premised on our inability to rule it out. Moreover, the Outsider Test of Values differs from Loftus’ insofar as our knowledge of religious diversity is empirically grounded whereas the argument for value skepticism hinges only on the possibility of such diversity because there is no consensus on how to scientifically detect the presence of values, let alone their specific content.

24 The Outsider Test of Values seems to be in the same tradition as the Pyrrhonian value-skepticism of Sextus Empircus, which is also based on the possibility of fundamental disagreement over values. See (Mcpherran, 1990).
The emphasis on possible disagreement is crucial, for even if scientists converged on a measurement technique and found that all developmentally normal humans share the same values, this would not refute the second premise about contingency. We must acknowledge that fundamental disagreement over values is possible or accept that massive agreement is possibly contingent. Either way, to avoid value dogmatism we cannot assume the values we start with are correct but must instead begin our inquiry into their correctness with a suitably agnostic attitude towards the “correctness” of our value judgments, including an openness to the possibility that none are correct if the physical universe is ultimately valueless.

Granted, the recommendation of open-minded agnosticism towards value nihilism is a tough pill to swallow. Is Derek Parfit right to think that if naturalistic value nihilism were true, “Sidgwick, Ross, and I would have wasted much of our lives” (2011, p. 367)? If value nihilism is true, Parfit is right: his career is not “good-in-itself”, but since neither is anything else, his hand-wringing would be misplaced. If values did not exist in-themselves, it would be necessary for humans to evolve them for-ourselves. The normative nihilist combines modus ponens with a weak anthropic argument: values do not exist in-themselves, so we evolved them for-ourselves.25

What about epistemic values? We must ask whether global as opposed to local normative nihilism entails an incoherent form of epistemic nihilism.

4.0 Epistemic Nihilism

“The will to truth is in need of a critique.” ~ Nietzsche

Moral realists argue skeptics unfairly criticize moral normativity, arguing there is no special problem for realists to justify their normative or meta-normative beliefs because it's just as hard to satisfy the radical skeptic in regards to the justification of any belief. For the usual Cartesian reasons, the problem of justification could be seen as equally problematic for quotidian perceptual beliefs such

25 c.f. “Morality is something to be made and maintained” (Mackie, p. 227).
as “I know I have hands”. Thus, realists object that moral skeptics prove too much—the inevitable result of philosophizing with a hammer.

Suppose the skeptic bites the bullet and argues there are no “ultimate” epistemic facts about what we should believe, or how we should reason. How could this be correct? It cries against common sense! Am I not justified in believing I have hands? that I typed this sentence? Some philosophers reflexively reject epistemic nihilism as self-defeating—or worse—“uninteresting”. I ask, why? What is it about the concept of “justified knowledge” that it would be so dreadful or trivial to realize we didn't have much of it?

One answer is more sociological than philosophical. Philosophers throughout history instilled great value in the concept “knowledge”; to rob us of the knowledge of our own hands would be an epistemic regression, threatening to deflate our self-image as “knowers”. The epistemic nihilist could retort that conceptual revision is unproblematic if we hold a more pragmatic view of theoretical concepts with the Carnapian freedom to revise our concepts in line with our practical ends. Accordingly, the epistemic nihilist might deliberately revise the concept of “knowledge” such that it goes from a commodity previously possessed by everyone to one possessed by almost no one.

Fanciful though it may be, such revision is not incoherent, nor does it seem psychologically impossible. The “absurdity” of supposing humans have no knowledge depends on our use of the concept “knowledge”. If we primarily deploy the concept in situations where knowledge is cheap, then the threat of skepticism will be psychologically unpalatable. However, if we primarily deploy the concept in situations where knowledge is hard to come by (e.g. predicting the stock market), then skepticism is not absurd. However, given its affinity with epistemic relativism, we might worry that epistemic nihilism suffers from the well-known problem of self-defeat.

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26 Sorensen (2013) calls this type of view “epistemic eliminativism”.

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5.0 How to Deal with the Paralytic Threat of Epistemic Nihilism

“'Knowledge for its own sake’ – this is the last snare set by morality.” ~ Nietzsche

Like Big Foot's detractors, critics of normative nihilism are skeptical about the existence of actual epistemic nihilists (Streumer, 2011). The received opinion is that sincere commitment to epistemic nihilism is either incoherent (Shah, 2011) or a recipe for self-paralysis. Kahane says epistemic skepticism would be “self-stultifying”, skepticism about practical norms would be “debilitating”, and the prospect of normative nihilism a “bleak outcome”. For epistemologists, it would be like “using a suicide bomb to kill a fly” (Sorensen, 2013). And if it's not debilitating, it's “culturally explicable perhaps, but philosophically naïve and boring” (Blackburn, 2007).

Naturalists correspondingly hesitate to follow the skeptical argument where it leads. Who could deny—in the midst of rational debate no less—that “One ought not contradict oneself”? But how, exactly, do the norms of rationality exercise their regulative and prescriptive power? Moreover, how did the norms of rationality first gain their “binding power” and pretensions of objectivity? Was it through a self-bootstrapping process, and if so, can we give an explanation of how that works without passing the normative buck? The concepts of natural science are ill-suited for the task. Given the well-known problem of inferring how things should be from a neutral claim about how things are or have been, the prescriptive question of how we should think seems irreducible to the factual question of how we do think.

Suppose naturalists do account for epistemic normativity in a scientifically “respectable” manner. Could this not work for moral norms as well? Russ Shafer-Landau and others have argued that, “If brute normativity is a problem in ethics, it should be a problem anywhere else” (2003, p. 36). I concur. I cannot see any relevant difference between the “respectable” epistemic claim “One ought to be rational when doing science” and the “queer” moral claim “One ought to minimize suffering.” Is the
Darwinian scientist beholden to one of these claims but not to the other? In terms of how a physicist sometimes views the world, both prescriptions are difficult to fit into the austere picture of reality as composed of particles and fields obeying no laws but the ones intrinsic to their entirely physical nature.

As I see it, debunkers of normativity have two options. They can either (1) Bite the bullet and figure out how to apply skepticism to all norms equally and defuse the problem of self-defeat, or (2) try to argue that the normative force of epistemology and scientific discourse are different from non-respectable moral forms of normativity and thus immune from debunking critiques.\(^{27}\) I cannot be certain that option (2) is bound to fail, but my own inclination is to try option (1) first. To bite the bullet, I push for three points: (1) Epistemic nihilism side-steps the problems of self-defeat that plague epistemic relativism (2) Epistemic nihilism is not polemically toothless, and (3) Epistemic nihilists can deal with the “threat” of radical skepticism.

5.1 Epistemic Nihilism is Not Necessarily Relativistic

Epistemic relativists claim there are no objectively correct epistemic principles, no unassailable facts about which epistemic principles are “best” (c.f. Goldman, 2010). Feyerabend describes it as the view that “Only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes” (Feyerabend, 1993, pp. 18–19). Some philosophers cringe at this assertion, reflexively agreeing with Roy Sorensen's verdict that “[Epistemological anarchism] is self-defeating because it implies that “No beliefs are justified” is itself unjustified” (2003, p. 155)

Paul Boghossian argues this response is unfair for at least three reasons. First, the charge of self-defeat against the epistemic relativist does not refute the idea but merely shows how difficult it is to “walk the walk”. But that in itself is not an objection to the truth of relativism. Second, the debate about objective knowledge is framed in a belief-based terminology that the relativist is free to reject and replace with an eliminativist vocabulary (c.f. Rosenberg, 2011). Third, the objection focuses on

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\(^{27}\) This seems to be Olson's strategy, rebutting the charge that Error Theory gives reasons to think there are no reasons by saying “Error-theoretical arguments are arguments to the effect that the error theory is true and not to the effect that there are reasons to believe in the error theory” (2011). This response, however, does not go far enough because the central question remains: What's so good about true theories? The problem of total value-theoretic nihilism—including the value we place on truth—is untouched by Olson's response.
individual inconsistency but doesn't refute the claim that the truth of epistemic principles is relative to a community that encompasses the tacitly accepted principles of both relativists and their critics.

No friend of epistemic relativism, Boghossian tries his hand at retooling the self-defeat objection. The relativist again faces a dilemma. If there are no true epistemic principles, then it should be possible for an epistemic community to take any arbitrary belief $P$ and jigger the epistemic principles in a way that they are “blameless” for believing $P$. Because there are no ultimate facts about what the “correct” epistemic principles are, this method of epistemic gerrymandering could, in principle, allow anyone in this community to blamelessly accept any proposition, including the proposition “There are objective facts about epistemic principles.” Thus, by their own lights, the epistemic relativist is forced to acknowledge their objectivist opponents are blameless in their rejection of epistemic relativism.

If Boghossian's critique of epistemic relativism is decisive, does this also show that epistemic nihilism is self-defeating? Not quite. Whereas relativists are skeptical of the truth and objectivity associated with epistemic principles, epistemic nihilists are merely skeptical of their intrinsic value. Even if relativism about epistemic justification is incoherent, the question remains whether epistemic justification is good-in-itself. Boghossian shows the difficulty in believing there are no objective facts about epistemic justification, but does nothing to advance our understanding of why justification itself is “good”. Good for what? and for whom?

If we are committed to playing the reasoning game we cannot coherently think “anything goes”, but that does not entail it's good to play the reasoning game. Just as the fact of there being objective criteria to distinguish good sport hunters from bad sport hunters does not entail sport hunting is good-in-itself, the fact of there being objective criteria to distinguish good reasoning from bad does not entail that good reasoning is good-in-itself. Accordingly, Sorensen's objection that epistemic nihilists “imply” their own self-defeat is inconclusive because the notion of “implication” is itself a normative concept.
ambiguous between hypothetical or categorical normativity. If epistemic nihilists only hypothetically justify their claim that “No beliefs are categorically justified”, it would beg the question to charge them with categorical self-defeat.

Moreover, epistemic nihilists are not refuted by pointing out their lives would go better if they operated in accord with the norms of rationality, or that their ancestor's ability to pass along their genes would have been hampered. The fact that we need to act rationally to survive does not, by itself, entail it is intrinsically good for us to do so. Moreover, an appeal to selfish ends to ground the “authority” of epistemic norms is doubly unappealing to normative realists because the traditionally moral norms authorize and indeed venerate the values of altruism and selflessness. Furthermore, the nihilist can ask the rational egoist: why is it good to promote their ultimate ends?

5.2 Epistemic Nihilism Is Not Polemically Toothless

Terence Cuneo argues that epistemic nihilism implies three undesirable results (2007, p. 118-121). The First Undesirable Result is the following dilemma:

Either epistemic nihilism is self-defeating and, hence, we have no (sufficient) reason to believe it, or, it implies that there are no epistemic reasons and, a fortiori, that we have no reason to believe it.

I have already argued that epistemic nihilism is not self-defeating, so must I think we “have no reasons to believe” in epistemic nihilism? I am doubtful. The second horn of Cuneo's dilemma is ambiguous between whether we have hypothetical or categorical reasons to believe in epistemic nihilism. It would clearly be question-begging to argue it's problematic for the epistemic nihilist to say we have no

28 Even Cuneo admits “There is no plausible non-question-begging argument to establish that epistemic nihilism is false” (p. 119).
29 C.S. Peirce distinguished between practical and absolute infallibility, arguing that the psychological necessity of the former is not evidence for belief in the latter. In other words, even if it is psychically necessary or imminently practical for us to believe some things with absolute certainty, that by itself does not establish their absolute truth.
30 This maps onto Hattiangadi’s distinction between “normativity” and “norm-relative” (2007, p. 37), where “normativity” means categorically prescriptive (e.g. “Don't torture”) and “norm-relative” means “relative to a norm of standard” (e.g. the meter bar in Paris). Accordingly, the epistemic nihilist can offer “norm-relative” reasons for accepting epistemic nihilism without claiming to offer “normative” reasons.
categorical reasons to believe in epistemic nihilism because it's perfectly consistent for epistemic nihilists to say there are hypothetical reasons for accepting epistemic nihilism.

To understand why, it's helpful to place Nietzschean nihilism into a Darwinian context. Darwin was the father of population thinking, a theoretical approach that above all emphasizes the variation of individuals within a species, with some creatures being stronger, faster, or sexier than others. The variation of traits within a population often follows the “pareto principle” or “law of the vital few”, where 80% of the effects are produced by 20% of the causes. In evolutionary terms, this usually translates into the Alpha creatures monopolizing reproductive opportunities, food, and territory, e.g. in polygamous species like baboons or elephant seals, a few alpha males fight savagely to control “harems” of females.\(^{31}\) Nietzsche was a paradigmatic population thinker insofar as he thought individual differences in humans follow a power-law distribution: against the backdrop of the “herd” are the “Zarathustras” standing out as noble “superiors”. Most scholars interpret Nietzsche's “nobles” in terms of cultural and political institutions, but it also makes sense as a metaphor for Darwinian competition between a population of varying individuals.\(^{32}\)

Accordingly, Nietzsche's physiological theory of valuation predicts that average human values will diverge from those of “superior” humans, summed up by the slogan “All rare things for the rare”. In other words, what is “good” for the herd is not necessarily “good” for the noble. As a value-nihilist, however, Nietzsche acknowledges that ultimately nature is valueless and projections of the herd are just as groundless as projections of the nobles. But qua noble, nobles have no choice but to project noble values, and likewise for the herd. Assuming Nietzsche saw himself as a noble, it is therefore not

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31 In reality, the situation is complicated by promiscuous females strategically engaging in “Extra-marital copulations” with lower status males (Barash & Lipton, 2001) who “raid” the harems. Female promiscuity set the stage for an evolutionary arms-race of internal male-male competition via “sperm competition” (Parker, 1970), and modern genetic testing shows the appearance of strict monogamy in species like birds belies a more complicated and multi-level reproductive strategy (Greiling & Buss, 2000; Miller, 2000).

32 c.f. Beyond Good and Evil, §62: “Among men, as among every other species, there is a surplus of failures, of the sick, the degenerate, the fragile, of those who are bound to suffer; the successful cases are, among men too, always the exception” (emphasis added).
contradictory for Nietzsche to “elevate” his values over those of the herd while self-reflectively acknowledging the “terrible truth” that, either way, it comes down to a matter of taste, not reason because nature in-itself is valueless.

Following Nietzsche's lead, the epistemic nihilist has two responses to Cuneo's dilemma. First, if the epistemic nihilist is part of the “philosophical herd”, they can offer standard herd-reasons for accepting epistemic nihilism that all members of the herd are hypothetically “bound” to follow. Second, if the epistemic nihilist is outside the herd, then they can offer outsider-reasons for accepting epistemic nihilism, which are hypothetically “binding” only on outsiders. Either option is compatible with the higher-order claim that there is no fact of the matter about who is “ultimately” right because nature in-itself is valueless.

5.3 Epistemic Nihilism and Epistemic Skepticism

Cuneo argues that there are two more undesirable results for epistemic nihilism:

**Second Undesirable Result**: Either epistemic nihilism is self-defeating or it implies a radical version of epistemological skepticism according to which no entity can display an epistemic merit or demerit.

**Third Undesirable Result**: Either epistemic nihilism is self-defeating or it implies there could be no arguments for anything.

My response to the third result is short. First, the idea that there “could be no [categorical] arguments for anything” is a prediction of the nihilist view, not a refutation of it. Second, so long as we are careful to distinguish arguments grounded in categorical reasons from arguments grounded in hypothetical reasons, the epistemic nihilist will happily bite the bullet. My response to the second result is longer, and requires a brief foray into physicist P.W. Bridgman's concept of “operational analysis”.

5.3.1 Using Operational Analysis to Cope with Skeptical Paralysis
Bridgman notoriously said, “The true meaning of a term is to be found by observing what a man does with it, not by what he says about it” (Bridgman, 1927, p. 7). It'd be easy to dismiss this statement as philosophically naïve, but a charitable interpretation is possible. Compare C.S. Peirce's advice that if we wish to clarify our concepts for intellectual purposes, we should follow the “pragmatic maxim”:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (1955, p. 31)

Peirce's maxim is not an analysis of the everyday concept “concept”, but rather, a practical guide for settling real-life disputes in theoretical and scientific domains. Likewise, Bridgman's notion of what we “do” with concepts is not just crudely practical in the work-a-day sense, but in addition includes what's useful for the practicing mathematician or theoretical physicist employing what Bridgman called “paper-and-pen” or “verbal” operations. If Bridgman were alive today he'd probably call them “keyboard-and-mouse” operations. The important point for our purposes is Bridgman does not aim for operationalism to be an exhaustive semantics for all aspects of all concepts. Rather, Bridgman conceived of operational analysis as a useful tool or method for clarifying our concepts and avoiding wearisome disputes in important intellectual endeavors.

To see the tool in action, consider Dretske's thought experiment where, at a zoo, you are faced with the hypothesis that the zebras are cleverly disguised mules, undercutting your perceptual knowledge “I see a zebra.” To determine if the concept of “not a cleverly disguised mule” is operationally meaningful in Bridgman's sense, it's necessary to reflect on how we would actually settle a real-life debate about disguised mules. If the “disguise” of the mule is magically defined such that no scientific test could ever uncover its presence, then from an operational point of view the term is meaningless i.e. bound to waste everyone's limited time and lead to the most wearisome disputes. It's crucial that Bridgman's sense of “lacking meaning” is purely practical. The concept of being a brain-in-
a-vat or fooled by an Evil Genius can be treated similarly. We can assign as much meaning to the concepts as we like, but the inability to ever resolve the issue is literally wearisome, as anyone who has stayed up all night philosophizing could attest.

Thus, we are free to assign whatever symbolic meaning we like to far-fetched skeptical possibilities, but if the concept “not a disguised mule” is ever going to enter the norms of critical discourse in the way that concepts of “hardness” and “length” have, they will need to be operationalized with realistically implementable precision. For example, if I wish to settle a dispute with a friend over the length of a room, we can both agree upon a method of resolving the debate: getting out a measuring tape. Likewise, suppose a friend and I were debating how hard a particular piece of jewelry is relative to another piece. My friend and I could verbally spar for hours, but we both know there is—in principle—a way to resolve the debate: take an industry standard diamond and apply pressure equally to both pieces; whichever piece scratches first is agreed to be predicated with the “softer than” relation in comparison to the other piece.

The above examples are paradigmatic cases of how to resolve debates about mundane terrestrial affairs where threats of skepticism could arise but rarely do.33 Duhem and Quine taught us the friend with the allegedly softer piece of jewelry is not logically required to give up his theory based on the apparent results of the experiment because he could always worry about experimental error or add auxiliary hypotheses, complaining that it's still possible his piece of jewelry is harder at colder temperatures. Thus, even skeptical worries about quotidian terrestrial affairs are only practically resolvable in proportion with our limited patience and resources.

33 The adoption of operationalism as a skeptical method for reducing wearisome debates is uniquely suited for dealing with Moorean claims like “I know I have hands”. The key is that it would be trivial to settle any actual debates about the existence of hands amongst a group of hand investigators by mutually agreeing on stipulated operational definitions of handedness. However, the same process of settling differences in belief cannot be so readily and pragmatically operationalized when it comes to determining meta-normative truths.
Thus, the method of operational analysis gives Pyrrhonian Skepticism a distinctively pragmatic twist. Instead of suspending judgment on *all* matters, operationalism only recommends suspending judgment on questions that have not been sufficiently operationalized. If everyone agrees the platinum rod in Paris is the best standard for settling debates about length, we need not suspend judgment *unless* there is reason to think another material substance is preferable to platinum. In the jewelry case, the two friends could spend the rest of their lives testing the jewelry in the most unusual of experimental circumstances, but at some point we all need to eat and sleep. The takeaway lesson is that we must choose our battles wisely for we are limited beings, and if we value the resource of time, we should strive to pose and answer only those questions which can be operationalized with sufficient precision. Thus, we must learn to deal with skepticism as the finite beings we are, not ignore it.

In sum, the epistemic nihilist has a two-fold response to Cuneo's second undesirable result. First, it is not true that the second result is “sufficiently unattractive that any minimally adequate philosophical theory will be at pains to avoid being committed to it”. As we have seen, the “painfulness” of full-blown skepticism can be ameliorated by adopting Peirce's pragmatic maxim and operationalizing our concepts to the extent our finite willpower allows. Second, Cuneo's dilemma begs the question because whether or not an entity displays “merit or demerit” is ambiguous between merit grounded in hypothetical reasons versus merit grounded in categorical reasons, the very issue at hand.

6. A Final Objection: The “Argument from Ted Bundy”

There is a popular “knock-down” objection to normative nihilism I call the “Argument from Ted Bundy”. The argument starts by quoting the psychopathic serial killer Ted Bundy on the subject of morality:

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34 Indeed, the US government's National Institute of Standards now uses a modern standard and defines the meter in terms of the speed of light and the second, which are themselves validated on the basis of experiments done with operationally defined measurement standards with conventionally accepted degrees of uncertainty. Due to the inevitable uncertainties in characterizing the medium of measurement, even these stricter operational standards make it impossible to overcome what Chang calls the “problem of nomic measurement” (2004).
“Then I learned that all moral judgments are ‘value judgments,’ that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’...”

The argument's invocation of the vivid coldness of psychopathy is designed to invoke an emotional response that showcases the counter-intuitiveness of normative nihilism. Nevertheless, a committed nihilist will have no problem crossing the Rubicon with the help of population thinking. Suppose the human gene pool stabilized such that only one out of every 100 people is genetically disposed towards psychopathy. As long as the rest of the population can successfully protect their way of life against the psychopaths, our inability to rationally “disprove” the psychopathic value system is irrelevant.

Not all nihilists are necessarily psychopaths, and not all psychopaths are necessarily nihilists. If our deepest values are genetically programmed then there is little chance that a normal person is even capable of “choosing” to value the life of serial killer or mad scientist. Barring severe organic damage, the theoretical contemplation and self-conscious acceptance of meta-normative nihilism has little effect on our basic values. And we're better off for it! A creature-design where conscious speculations on meta-ethics interfered with the gears of life would not fare well. Nihilists invoke a version of the weak anthropic principle: if our deepest values weren't conducive to our survival we wouldn't be here, which is not to say our values are conducive to our continued survival (an unverified generalization), and certainly far from a proof of their being “unconditionally good”.

Conclusion

“The point is there ain't no point.” - Cormac McCarthy

The core thesis of this paper is a riff on McCarthy's quip: the hypothetical point is there ain't no categorical point. I think of normative nihilism primarily as negating the authority of normativity rather

35 Many psychologists explain the wide “gap” between theory and practice in terms of a uniquely human “duplex” or “dual process” architecture. See (Baumeister, 2005; Evans, 2003).
than its objectivity relative to determinate standards. Objective truths are cheap, but authority must be earned.

I argued the possibility of normative genealogy compels us to confront the possibility of nihilism with respect to the categorical authority of normativity, including epistemic normativity. I defused the knee-jerk response that GNN is epistemically self-defeating by distinguishing between *hypothetical* and *categorical* epistemic authority. The nihilist employs hypothetical epistemic norms to argue that categorical force does not actually exist and that the “authority” of hypothetical normativity is derived wholly from contingently held values. Normative nihilists admit—barring depression or a brain tumor—they have no choice but to value certain things over others e.g. avoiding contradictions. But this is a prediction of the view, not a bug. Acknowledging the fact humans *need* to value certain things is consistent with the belief nothing in nature is valuable in-itself. The biological depth of our need to value is strong enough to prevent intellectual reflections on normative nihilism from shutting down our daily drive to get out of bed and go to work. Alex Rosenberg’s defense of “Nice Nihilism” makes a similar point:

We need to face the fact that nihilism is true. But there is good news here, too, and it's probably good enough to swamp most of the bad news about nihilism. The good news is that almost all of us, no matter what our scientific, scientistic, or theological beliefs, are committed to the same basic morality and values…Adopting nihilism as it applies to morality is not going to have any impact on anyone's conduct. (Rosenberg, 2011)

Mutatis mutandis, the same can be said of epistemic nihilism. Global normative nihilism is not the paralyzing bogey-man it has been made out to be. It is quite benign, but not trivial! Critics of nihilism sometimes imagine that adopting it would cause a dramatic shift in our moral phenomenology akin to the scene in the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy steps out into technicolor, except with the effect in reverse. Toying with normative nihilism is not like that. Even the skeptic exploring the “ice and high mountains” of nihilism will be immersed in a *Lebenswelt* teeming with value and salience that no one
can think their way out of. Up to their neck in values, the nihilist nevertheless entertains the thought that salience is a smokescreen, a biological ruse designed to keep the engine of life burning.

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