NIHILISM, AND SIX OBJECTIONS AGAINST IT
DR. DAVE YOUNT, MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Prologue: What is Nihilism? Nihilism (as an ethical stance) is the view that there is no such thing as right and wrong or good and bad/evil actions. Nihilism can also involve denying God’s existence and any objective meaning of life. It is not the view it is difficult to understand or come to know what is right and wrong in this lifetime, which is better characterized as moral skepticism. Nihilism is the “positive” stance that there is no such thing as right or wrong. (Nihilism is analogously similar to atheism’s being the view that one does not believe in God, and not to agnosticism, that it is impossible in this lifetime to know whether God exists or not, which is analogously similar to moral skepticism.)

Objection 1: It is often claimed that an atheist does not need to “prove the negative” that God does not exist, since the theist is the one claiming that God exists. However, in order to prove that nihilism is correct, the nihilist must prove that God does not exist. Without this proof, it is possible that God exists and sets the standard for morality. Moreover, the nihilist must prove every other objectivist ethical theory—ethical theories that hold there are objective properties about actions and people that make them—wrong as well, including but not limited to the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Epictetus, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Sartre.²

Objection 2: The nihilist also must prove that individual and cultural relativism are wrong, since it may be the case that when—if cultural relativism is correct—for instance, people get together in a culture and agree upon a social contract, that what is then right is for a member of that society is for her to keep her agreements, and what is wrong is for her to violate them.

Objection 3: The nihilist cannot use the words “should” or “better” in the context of human life in any context. Even to say, “If you want a degree at a university, you should take courses,” implies that desires are something people have, and linked with their beliefs that education is valuable, can lead to financial security, and because they desire financial security as part of a happy life, people go to school. At the very least (while we need not concede that there is no objective standard of right and wrong), for that person, it is better for her to attend a university and earn an education. When one uses the word should, it automatically implies a value to the action that should be performed. “If you want to avoid getting hit by the bus, you should not step into the street one second before the bus comes by.” Why does that matter, unless we refer to

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¹ I’d like to thank Jonathan Abraham, Barry Vaughan, and Debi Campbell for helping me clarify my thoughts and points here.

² This list includes Nietzsche, because he states that we should be “supermen”, living according to our own values, and he criticizes nihilism in his work Beyond Good and Evil, so it is pretty clear that he is not a nihilist.
the person’s desire to live, and why does living matter, without reference to desires? The nihilist must explain this.

**Objection 4:** To be a nihilist, one must explain why we constantly make judgments concerning right and wrong, and good and bad actions, things, people, situations, and so on. If it is said that making these kinds of judgments “just happen” or “I don’t know,” then this is not a defense of the claim that there can be no such thing as a right or wrong action. Consider the explanation of preferences that people rationalize something that’s difficult to solve and hence have preferences. But this doesn’t show why people should not have the preferences they have, and the nihilist must say that every preference is not necessarily right or wrong, but if the person believes her preference is right, then this is not an argument as to why it is not right.

**Objection 5:** To be a nihilist, one must explain why we have preferences even for seemingly trivial things such as food or TV shows. Why does it matter if I have chocolate or vanilla ice cream, or watch MSNBC or FOX News? A nihilist can only answer that it does not matter, but this begs the question in their favor (that is, it assumes that nihilism is true, which is what must be proven). And if these preferences are explained in terms of biology, for instance, there is still something we prefer, even if that preference is due to hormones, neurotransmitters, or other brain-related science. It is not that preferences do not exist. Why will people die for their religious preferences, for instance?

**Objection 6:** A popular associated claim of nihilists is that life is meaningless; so they cannot attribute any meaning, even self-imposed meaning, on life or any choice without having their view collapse into individual relativism, as follows: If the nihilist claims that A is better than B according to person P, and P is correct that for P (but maybe not for person Q), A is better than B, then the nihilist’s view collapses into individual relativism, which has its own problems (see subunit 11.1.1 for Individual and Cultural Relativism).