

Reactions to Skepticism

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AUTHOR BIO

Charlie de Belloy is a student at the Lycée Français de San Francisco, a French high school in San Francisco. He is interested in philosophy and has participated in the International Philosophy Olympiad on behalf of the United States. As a Franco-American, he has seen the importance of having several viewpoints when making decisions or even when questioning one's beliefs. In the future, he would like to study math or philosophy. More specifically, he is interested in the impact of different philosophical perspectives as the basis of societal principals. He is also the co-Chair of the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization's (PLATO) Student Advisory Council, helping get philosophy education in primary, middle and high schools across the U.S.

ABSTRACT

In modern continental philosophy, nihilism has taken place as an important train of thought, both as a consequence of Christian European society and as a novel skeptic argument. It calls for the total removal of current society because humanity has now metaphorically taken the place of God and thus should create its own values and structure. The replacement of God can be attributed to skepticism, which refutes the possibility of certain knowledge. This paper compares two opposite reactions to skepticism: nihilism and pragmatic skepticism. It explores the societal and individual implications of the fulfillment of both views, contrasting the potential danger of radical change with that of conformity. The modern trend of perfectionism and how it influences these philosophies is also explored. Inalienable rights are discussed and their legitimacy or implementation is put into question. Hedonistic consequences and their effect on rational thought are also mentioned to analyze the potential shortcomings of any skeptical view. The structure of society, values, and their evolution raises questions about their validity, origins, and use.

Keywords: Skepticism, nihilism, pragmatism, hedonism, Deleuze, Vattimo, values, society, knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

For the past century, advances in science and philosophy have made skepticism a more accepted philosophical theory. Although arguments for skepticism follow the same basic arguments and logical conclusion (refuting the reliability of where we get knowledge from), the reaction to this conclusion (especially on the scale of society and ethics) can differ wildly. The idea that some knowledge is impossible has large implications on ideas we hold as absolute truths, so what people do with this change can become quite radical. The extreme case is active nihilism, which calls for the destruction of our current baseless society (and everything that's part of it), to rebuild another, better, world. Another reaction to skepticism, and the opposite of skepticism, is pragmatic skepticism, which does only what is practical with skepticism, and separates acknowledgement of skepticism from actions in society. Nihilism is inefficient because it doesn't seem to be the most efficient way to achieve its own goals of freedom and avoiding baseless claims, negative because it proposes destruction before creation, and, in certain aspects, contradictory form of skepticism, especially because it eliminates the possibility of a skeptical thought process being used in tandem with a pragmatic lifestyle and social interaction. Pragmatic skepticism avoids this destructive rejection of knowledge by acting (or, in some cases, avoiding action) in such a way as to avoid the possibility of being worse off in the long term. In this essay, skepticism is the idea that we have no way of being sure about the validity and truthfulness of our values, societal structure, and way of thinking.

Reactions to Skepticism

In this essay, nihilism is a form of extreme skepticism, as well as radical belief in a better world, that calls for the removal of many

baseless claims in society and ethics, and for the pursuit of a world that avoids the supposed mistakes of our current one. A well thought out active nihilist view is that proposed by French philosopher Deleuze. The nihilism he describes is an argument that all of society's values and ideas are constructs, seeing as they aren't grounded in any knowledge. The problem here is that these "values superior to life are inseparable from their effect: the depreciation of life, the negation of this world." (Deleuze, 1983, p.147) We have no way to know for sure what is good or bad, what society should look like, etc. because none of it is provable, so why should they rule our life? This is why to Deleuze, nihilism is a joyful practice. Furthermore, we should try to achieve perfect freedom, where, as individuals, we are no longer subject to anything but ourselves (like society, impulses, values, etc.). This perfect freedom (or emancipation as Vattimo would call it) is important because it liberates the self, and is the only value that is grounded in our reality. It doesn't rely on some larger morals, so it should be used as a base for the rest of our values and society. Achieving perfect freedom requires us to create a new society and new values that aren't baseless. To do so, we must first completely destroy the old society to not be influenced by it. This not only means getting rid of values and our societal structure, but also the impulses and even what we think as rational thinking that has led to these values and societies. He calls this negative affirmation, where we destroy to affirm this better nihilist society. The importance of the negative affirmation is that the destruction is positive, because it empowers us to release ourselves from all our restraints. He describes it as "to affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives." (Deleuze, 1983, p.185) This will lead us to a nihilist society, where we are unburdened. The nihilist here is acting on skepticism to try to achieve perfect freedom,

which he considers to be a perfect goal as a liberation of the self is the ultimate good.

Pragmatic skepticism on the other hand is a skeptic point of view that is trying to avoid all of the potential painful consequences of acting on skepticism. This means that the pragmatic skeptic is satisfied enough with the current world (or at least with what can be achieved in the current world), that he doesn't want to risk it. The pragmatic side of pragmatic skepticism is what makes this so different from other forms of skepticism. Skepticism is a purely rational idea, because it will never intrinsically persuade us (there is a part of our thought that is irrational and that we don't have control of that will always take the world around us at face value). This means that if we live a purely skeptical life, it will be unpleasant because some part of us can't be convinced (and that's the part of us that makes life joyous or bad). Any attempt at rationally discrediting this unpleasantness won't change anything, because the unpleasantness isn't rational. Here pragmatism tells you to live life as though skepticism isn't true, as long as that is more practical. But what is practical in this now valueless and reasonless world, devoid of society? The unpleasantness mentioned earlier is the answer to this: hedonism. Here, hedonism means maximizing pleasure while minimizing pain, but not in the traditional sense. Hedonism has grown to mean attraction towards instant pleasure, and avoidance of all pain, but this doesn't have to be the case. This new type of hedonist is willing to suffer temporarily if it means having more pleasure later. Pleasure here is anything that we think is positive or pleasurable, so the pragmatist, like anyone else, can still follow intrinsic feelings of righteousness if overall it feels better to do so. Thus, the pragmatic skeptic, although rationally a skeptic, will live his life as he would normally, because pragmatists don't see reason as some underlying truth. It is important to note that, while the nihilist focuses

skepticism on society values, and reason, the pragmatic skeptic can be applied more globally (and so also contrasts Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is acting on the doubt of the existence of the physical world).

A possible critique of nihilism, and one that would be proposed by the pragmatic skeptic, is how the nihilist knows that the world will be better after we remove all baseless, or at least constricting, values from society. Nihilism proposes two possible answers. The first is that creating a society that isn't based on false or unprovable claims has to be better, because it doesn't impose things on us, or limit our freedom. As Vattimo (2009) said, "there are no ultimate foundations before which our freedom should stop." (p. 21) The second is that, after destroying everything, we will get an opportunity for improvement that is impossible to get right now, because we are trapped by society and reason. The issue with the first argument is that the proposed perfect freedom is unachievable. As humans, we are stuck with our reason, our impulses... that control how we act. We created (or some would say discovered) values, societies, and God because of our natural predispositions (although many values and parts of society are our rational conclusions to these basic impulses). Because we can never get rid of our natural thought process or impulses, we will either just be putting ourselves back at square one, which will lead us to a similar situation as we are in now, or we effectively get rid of society and values, but still be considered restricted by reason and impulses, making everything futile. While, as proposed by Vattimo, one could argue that perfect knowledge would lead to perfect freedom, the physical part of our thought (like our senses giving us potential knowledge) restricts us from ever knowing if we can truly have knowledge. A pragmatic response to the second argument is that, as society has progressed, our lives have become more pleasurable and more free (in the

long run, so here the pragmatic skeptic is ready to sacrifice some pleasure for the advancement of humanity, because that in and of itself is pleasurable), therefore why should we take a 'high risk, high reward' path when we can just go slowly and risk very little. Both of these counter-arguments highlight the core of the disagreement between nihilists and pragmatic skeptics: nihilism says it's doing what's necessary, while pragmatic skepticism says it's doing what best (hedonistically).

Nihilism wouldn't be such a developed and, in some cases, accepted train of thought if it didn't have answers to the critiques above. The first, as mentioned in the explanation of nihilism at the beginning, is negative affirmation. The destruction of our baseless world isn't some brutal uprising (although it can be), but rather a removal that makes things get better. Another rebuttal is that, from our impeded spot, we have no real way of understanding what this better world looks like, and thus there is no comparison to the gradual improvement offered by the pragmatic skeptic. The most important nihilist argument in this case is that nihilism is built in opposition to what is called the 'evil triad': the slave, the tyrant, and the priest. The first impedes his own liberty by taking comfort in his oppressed role, the second impedes the liberty of others through force, and the third makes others impede their own liberty by tricking them. Deleuze (1980) rhetorically asks "what is there in common between a tyrant who has power, a slave who does not have power, and a priest who seems only to have spiritual power", saying that "they need to make sadness reign because the power that they have can only be founded on sadness" (last argument of the class). Our current values allow these three to exist, and therefore anything less than their total removal is wrong. Pragmatic skepticism would be considered by nihilists as compliance and submission to these people who derive power from something negative.

This possibility for compliance is what makes pragmatic skepticism better than nihilism. Pragmatism in the face of skepticism is, in and of itself, compliance. This compliance is better because it allows progress, where nihilism advocates for abrupt change. In the end, nihilism doesn't actually give any proof of a better world, and thus compliance seems better than risking everything. People want better lives, and so radical change isn't necessary where slow but consistent improvement is possible. While it is sometimes important to change quickly (as humanity has done a few times when it needed to adapt), it has never been necessary to remove the possibility of going back. From a hedonist point of view, good progress (progress being utilitarian, a sort of hedonism on the scale of society) brings people basic pleasure (like a life with fewer hardships) and the pleasure that comes from knowing that others are suffering less. There is no 'better world', we just slowly make more and more progress, veering towards a non-existent perfection. Compliance is by no means a perfect reaction, but rather it is an inherently negative one. Nonetheless, it is the lesser of two evils when compared to nihilism risking everything. Slow progress allows us to, over time, have less painful lives, while also never risking too much. Historically, our lives have gotten better and better (better here meaning more pleasurable), faster and faster. We must accept that our purely rational conclusions about the world aren't the best bases for living. As mentioned earlier, no matter how rational you are, you still feel pain and pleasure. We take pleasure in some parts of society, in following our values, or in doing the perceived right thing. We also get pain from change and removal of our current life, as well as from not following our intrinsic (stemming from a Darwinist need for societal life, so not necessarily right or wrong) values. Rationally, compliance allows us the most improvement.

Using a natural tendency towards hedonistic progress still isn't an argument against the nihilist, who would call this all a basic infringement on freedom, and so something wrong. This nihilist response is what really makes nihilism lose any credibility. The best way to illustrate this is through three pragmatic skeptic counter arguments:

1. What right does the nihilist have to call something wrong?

Nihilism rejects all of our current morals and our societal judgment, so it can't deem anything right or wrong. How does the nihilist know what to do, when he would also say that he is blinded by society, reason, and impulses? Nihilism is such an extreme form of skepticism that it discredits the supposed foundations of everything, including its own argument.

2. Nihilism is impossible because our identity is stuck in the world it wants to destroy.

The perfect nihilist desires nothing and is no longer subject to the will of other things. This means that should we achieve perfect nihilism, we would just all die. A very simple example is eating: in many cases we eat because we are hungry, but that's an impulse more than a thought from an individual. Perfect nihilism would release people of all impulses that aren't part of the self, and therefore we wouldn't eat and would die because we don't consider hunger part of our identity (this is an extreme example that seems ridiculous, but it does highlight the impossibility of not being subject to anything). Even the nihilist would have to agree that death is bad, at least insofar as it impedes our freedom (if a nihilist said that death was the perfect liberation rather than a restraint, then he would consider it optimal to die rather than change the opinions of others). This shows why nihilism is impossible. From a Darwinist perspective, most

of our basic impulses are built off of a need for survival, as is the core of most societies. If we get rid of this, then we get rid of our most fundamental thoughts. More importantly, our identity and thought is based on the fact that rational thinking can allow us to find better ways to follow our basic impulses. The very impulses that we are trying to dispossess are the reason we have an identity. This means that, even if we managed to get to a perfect nihilist world, we would die or lose the identity that we wanted to free.

3. Perfect freedom for several people is impossible.

While the pragmatic skeptic is an advocate for freedom (because we find freedom pleasurable), he still cannot agree with the pragmatic skeptic because perfect freedom isn't possible. Even ignoring the physical tethers on our minds, from the moment two people have perfect freedom, one can impede the freedom of the other. This is why, in keeping with our natural attraction to progress, we have created more Lockean societies. We choose to give up some freedoms (like the freedom to impede on other's freedom) if, in response, others do the same. In most societies, someone can't murder someone else because most people prefer to avoid the risk of being murdered rather than be able to murder. If perfect freedom were possible for several people, we wouldn't need these compromises in society. The pragmatic skeptic on the other hand can adapt to our current Lockean (but also republican and capitalist) society by seeing it as an improvement on societies that came before.

Conclusion

The only form of skepticism that seems to work is the one that ignores it. Nihilism shows the issue with trying to act on skepticism. If nothing is predictable and nothing is

knowable, any attempt at a conclusion will be easily taken down. Nihilism is so appealing because it rejects everything while still having a very human end goal: freedom. Nihilism is almost hopeful, and in some ways follows our current values more than the pragmatic skepticism, even though it accuses pragmatic skepticism of doing the same. Nihilism can't be considered a legitimate response to skepticism because it only looks at the parts of skepticism that help its argument, but not the ones that go against it. Pragmatic skepticism, although it can end up leading to a utilitarian good, shows how it is sometimes necessary to go against innate (or societal) morals, walking a fine line between potential harm and contradictory values. Therefore, the only way to be a skeptic is not to live in accordance with that rational conclusion.

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