Moral Alief and Moral Nihilism

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Abstract
Arguably there is much to gain from having a morality. Moral nihilism may seem to preclude having a morality in the sense of having moral beliefs. I argue that this is in fact not any problem for the moral nihilist, since she can - and will - have moral aliefs. Aliefs of the moral variety will not be touched by the aliever’s moral nihilism and they permit the nihilist to reap the fruits of having a morality without having any moral belief. Some possible objections are also considered.

1 Introduction
There is arguably much to be gained from having a morality. Moral nihilists may find it difficult to have a morality. They have one general belief – that there are no true moral beliefs – that contradicts and thus seems to block any particular moral belief. So, it seems, nihilists cannot have a morality is the sense of having moral beliefs. In this paper I presuppose that having a morality can provide significant benefits.¹ The nihilist’s problem with morality, then, is how to get the goods morality can provide despite belief in nihilism. This paper outlines an optimistic solution to problem: the nihilist as such will in fact not have any particular difficulties in reaping the fruits of morality. The moral nihilist can have a morality without having any moral beliefs. She can have a morality based on moral aliefs.

¹ There is no consensus in this matter. For cogent arguments for the value of having a morality see for example Richard Joyce (2003), Jonas Olson (2014), John Mackie (1977). Ian Hinckfuss (1987) and Richard Garner (2007) argue that morality is the root of much evil, not moral evil of course, but the root of much that many of us want to avoid. Even Mackie, who was far from a moral abolitionist in Ethics (1977) seriously considered the drawbacks of morality in Hume's Moral Theory (1980). The plausible position that morality is sometimes good and sometimes bad is forcefully defended in Eriksson and Olson (forthcoming).
The term ‘alief’ was coined, and the very state first described, by Tamar Szabó Gendler (2008a, 2008b). Aliefs, in general, are, as a first approximation, compound mental states that include at least representation, affection and conation. Aliefs with content that merits them the denomination ‘moral aliefs’ may help nihilists to reap the fruits of morality. We humans probably come equipped with (dispositions to develop) such aliefs. Since aliefs are quite resistant to conflicting beliefs, they are not as problematically related to a general nihilistic belief in the way moral beliefs are. So moral aliefs are as available, normally even inescapable, to the nihilist as to anyone else. Thus moral aliefs may be an important part of a solution to the nihilist’s problem with moral beliefs in so far as they are capable of delivering the goods often thought delivered by moral beliefs.

This approach to solving the nihilists problems with reaping the fruits of morality involves in a sense an ersatz morality built on moral aliefs. (Except that the ‘ersatz’ probably was in place all along.) But it involves no ersatz moral beliefs. There are several proposed solutions to the nihilist’s problem that work by giving the nihilist access to (some sort of) moral beliefs. Fictionalists of different kinds argue that even nihilists may hold fictional moral ‘beliefs’ and conservationists hold that nihilists may and should hold full-fledged moral beliefs, at least part of time. In contrast the present paper is an investigation of the possibilities for solving the nihilist’s problem for what I term a ‘straight nihilist’, that is, someone who actually holds no moral beliefs, fictional or not.

The plan of the paper is this: first, in section 2, I describe in some detail alief in general and moral alief in particular. In section 3 I turn to a recent argument by Uriah Kriegel (2012) to the effect that moral aliefs are important and can escape nihilism. I argue that his conclusion is roughly right but his argument wrong. I also outline the right argument for a slightly improved conclusion. In the course of that discussion two different kinds of moral aliefs are distinguished. In section 4 I describe and defend the viability of the moral nihilist aliever in view of the pervious arguments. I end the paper by briefly considering some arguments launched by E. P. Brandon (1980), in section 5, and Richard Joyce (2001), in section 6, that may seem relevant for the viability of the straight nihilist’s solution to the problem.

In this paper I write under the assumption of the reality of aliefs; I investigate some of the consequences of their existence. There have been some debate over whether there really are any aliefs in addition to more familiar mental states such as beliefs, pretendings and entertainments of thoughts. See Eric Mandelbaum (2013) for some important arguments against the existence of aliefs. Despite this I think the two papers by Gendler make a case for the reality of aliefs sufficiently strong for discussion of their impact on morality to be worthwhile.

Moral fictionalism is defended by Richard Joyce (2001). A conservationist solution to the nihilist’s problem with morality is defended in Olson (2014) and further developed in Eriksson and Olson (forthcoming).
2 Moral Alief

In the words of Gendler,

[a] paradigmatic alief is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated — consciously or nonconsciously — by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment. Aliefs may be either occurrent or dispositional. (2008a: 642)

Aliefs are innate, inherited genetically, or acquired through cultural transmission or individual habit formation. They can be generated in may different ways. This is because they are associative bundles and their is no single way for such bundles to form. Aliefs are automatically activated, in the sense that, while the cues that will activate them may be under voluntary control, whether the alief in question is activated once the cue is present (consciously or nonconsciously) is not under voluntary control. They are also typically easily detectable by their holders only in cases when they are what Gendler calls belief-discordant: when they are such that they prompt behavior that is in discord with the motivation that would be rational given the beliefs and desires of the agent. Some examples of belief discordant alief-induced behavior may be helpful: A chef who has recently rearranged his kitchen walks towards the old knife drawer to get his cleaver, even as he talks about how happy he is with the new set-up. (Gendler 2008b); An Ayn Rand-reading professed egoist is busy helping her fellow students and regularly participates in various cooperative and altruistic activities. (Arpaly 2002); A white explicit non-racist commuter in fact very rarely takes a seat on the bus next to a black person. Armed with the belief/alief-distinction we may say that the chef believes that his knives are were they now in fact are while he alieves (roughly) that they are were they used to be. The Rand reader believes one should help only oneself while she alieves (roughly) that one should help others too. The commuter believes that black and white people are equal but alieves (roughly) that there is some problem with black people. Examples as these are cheap, and they do not carry much argumentative weight. Here they are merely intended to convey a taste of the state in question.4

4 I do not attempt any defense of the existence of aliefs in this paper. But a note on the kind of defense she provides in (2008a and b) may be in order. Aliefs’ claim to existence is on Gendler’s view based on explanatory considerations: only with such associatively linked bundle-states many otherwise puzzling phenomena are explainable.
Representing an alief as (roughly) analogous to a belief, as a mental state with an identifying propositional content, as I just did in the examples above, is somewhat misleading. Beliefs are two-place relations between the believer and a proposition believed: \( P \) believes \( b \). Aliefs are many-place relations between the aliever and ‘an entire associative repertoire, one that paradigmatically includes not only representational (or “registered”) content, but also affective states, behavioral propensities, patterns of attentiveness, and the like’. (Gendler 2008b: 559). We can think of an alief as a mental state that relates the aliever to (at least) associatively linked representation, affection and behavior: \( P \) alieves \( [R-A-B] \). In what follows I’ll stick to Gendler’s somewhat simplified ‘paradigmatic’ description of alief. So to alieve something is to be representing some part of the world in association with both an affective state toward the represented content and a behavior-prompting state relating to the represented content and in line with the affective state. In our three examples the content \( [R-A-B] \) triads of the aliefs could be transcribed as follows. The Chef: \([\text{knife drawer-I want my cleaver}\text{-approach}]\); The Rand reader: \([\text{helping others-nice-do it}]\); The commuter: \([\text{black-bad-keep away}]\). So, an aliever holds an associative mental bundle comprising cognition, affection and conation. And the aliever does this in an automatic, often unconscious manner.

Though aliefs are perhaps not in general ‘informationally encapsulated’ in any strong sense, they normally have their distinct activation cues. This means that there will normally be specific stimuli that activates any given alief. This feature will play some role later in the discussion.

Two of the introductory examples of alief seem \textit{prima facie} candidates for being \textit{moral} aliefs: the non-racist’s racist alief and the egoist’s altruistic alief. Those examples support two points: first that there may indeed be aliefs that may merit the nomination ‘moral’ and, second, that there is no clear moral role assignment for beliefs and aliefs: sometimes the aliefs are ‘good’ and the beliefs are ‘bad’ as with the Rand reader (at least from a non-egoist point of view), sometimes it’s the other way around, as with the commuter (at least from a non-racist point of view). Upon reflection it seems that a large part of what counts as a person’s morality resides in her aliefs. Much moral thinking, experiencing and motivation issues from a distinctively alief-indicating bundle of

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5 I think that among the other aspects of aliefs, patterns of attentiveness may be a quite important for the general question of the existence and character of such states. Patterns of attentiveness may for example help to handle a problem for alief noted by Mandelbaum (2013: 202ff) having to do with just how an alief succeeds in being about a particular part of reality – ‘binding’ to just that part – without (perhaps) having sufficient propositional content for doing that. Allowing patterns of attentiveness to play a role may seem to be able to alleviate or solve that problem. In the present context I shall ignore this and many other complications.

6 Gendler also thinks a two-place description of paradigmatic alief may be appropriate in some contexts: ‘\( S \) (occurrently) alieves \( R \) when \( S \)'s \( R \)-related associations are activated and thereby rendered cognitively, affectively and behaviorally salient.’ I shall sometimes use expressions as ‘a person alieves that \( p \)’ in this sense.
properties: representationality, automaticity, arationality, (relative) uncontrollability, affect-ladenness and motivational thrust. In fact moral aliefs seem to have some of the signature properties of so called ethical intuitions.  

The alief/belief distinction is also interestingly related to the ‘dual-process’ approach currently prominent in many areas of cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience. The general idea is that in many respects our brains seem to be running two distinct processes to generate cognitive, affective and conative output. There is ‘system 1’, the fast, cheap, corner-cutting, error-prone everyday mental processes (e.g. generating the Muller-Lyer illusion) and there is ‘system 2’, the rational, rule-like, computing, argumentative, difficult and time-consuming processes of explicit thinking (e.g. generating understanding of the explanation of the Muller-Lyer illusion). This association of dual-process psychology with a belief/alief distinction applicable to morality is defended by Uriah Kriegel (2012).

3 Kriegel on moral alief and nihilism

Kriegel argues that moral aliefs generated by system one processes not only exists, but that they have a certain priority over moral belief: ‘on a natural understanding of the notion of moral “practice”, moral aliefs are arguably more essential to the practice than moral beliefs’. (2012: 483) Our moral beliefs are often shallow and weakly connected to motivation, he claims. In contrast, our moral aliefs are inherently motivational, affect-laden and difficult to get rid of. Thus our moral aliefs have some claim to constitute or determine our true or real moral character. Kriegel also claims that given moral aliefs and their (central) role in moral practice, ‘error theory is significantly less disconcerting […].’ (432) Since error theory implies nihilism this claim is closely related the

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7 Huemer, a recent defender of ethical intuitionism, describes ethical intuitions as ‘a sort of mental state or experience, distinct from and normally prior to belief […]. They are the experiences we report when we say a thing is “obvious” or “seems true.”’ Such intuitions on Huemer’s view can justify moral beliefs that ‘sometimes constitute our actual motives for action.’ (Huemer 2005: 10) All this seems well in line with aliefs, or at least not incompatible, permitting some tweaking of details.

8 In the work of Jonathan Haidt (2012) and Joshua Greene (2009) dual process models are proposed for moral thinking from a cognitive psychological and a neurological perspective, respectively. Daniel Kahnemann (2003) presents a near lifelong work on dual process thinking concerning decision making in general. These are mere examples of work in this tradition, the interesting point being here that one of the two kinds of mental processes in these various versions of dual process psychology may seem to work largely by generating aliefs.

9 The terms ‘system 1’ and ‘system 2’ comes originally from Keith Stanovich and Richard West (2000) and are now widely used.

10 Confession: I once was a believing utilitarian (classical, act, hedonist). I was never an alieving utilitarian. On Kriegel’s account I was never really or truly a utilitarian, which seems about right to me.
point I am trying to develop. I think, however, that Kriegel misconstrues moral alief in a way that is both instructive and relevant for the role of moral aliefs given nihilism.

His claim that nihilism (as implied by error theory) is less disconcerting given the recognition of moral aliefs, is premised on one of two possible ways to understand moral alief. Kriegel thinks that moral aliefs escape nihilism because their representational content ‘has no moral or motivational dimension at all’. (2012: 480) They are representationally non-moral, we can say. Another possible way to understand moral aliefs is as representationally moral in the sense that the representational part of their content (the $R$ in the $[R-A-B]$) is moral. On this latter view moral aliefs would seem defect, just as moral beliefs, given nihilism, in virtue their moral representational content. So on Kriegel’s view, the fate of moral alief given nihilism depends on whether they are representationally non-moral or moral. Since they are representationally non-moral they are left untouched by nihilism, he in effect claims.

There is, however, no reason to think that moral aliefs as such are representationally non-moral. Kriegel exemplifies a moral alief by an (implicit) racist alief and says that ‘its content may be thought of as “Black man, Scary!, Must get away!”’ (480) The representational part of this content is ‘Black man!’ and that is obviously amoral. (My two examples of moral alief above also have this feature.) But there is nothing in the idea of moral alief that excludes the possibility that the representational part of the content is moral. Representationally moral aliefs of two kinds are possible: with thin moral representational content and with thick moral representational content. A moral alief of the thin kind could have content such as e.g. [Wrong!-Outrageous!-Interfere!] A moral alief of the thick variety may have such content as e.g. [Cowardly!-Disgraceful!-Must not do!] I shall reserve the term ‘strict moral alief’ for aliefs of this representationally moral kind and I shall call the kind of aliefs Kriegel calls ‘moral’ ‘loose moral alief’. Since there is nothing in the nature of alief that excludes moral representational content (neither of the thin nor of the thick kinds) we cannot exclude strict moral aliefs. There is also some positive reason to believe in their existence, perhaps in particular those of the thick variety. Aliefs may form around whatever representational content our minds are dealing with, and in so far as any particular person represents the world in moral categories (thick or thin) those representations are candidates for inclusion in a complex alief content.
One way of thinking about this is that moral alief may be located either upstream or downstream from moral belief. They may be what generates or upholds moral belief (loose moral aliefs) or they may be generated in part by moral belief (strict moral alief). In the latter case the moral aliefs end up having moral representational content. I tentatively assert that strict moral aliefs are not only possible: some of us have them. So Kriegel’s assessment of the ‘less disconcerting’ nihilist impact on moral aliefs seems true only for one kind of moral aliefs: the loose ones. (Remember, his reason for optimism in this regard rested on the assumption that moral aliefs lack representationally moral content.) One possible conclusion from this, then, is that the disconcertingness of nihilism is lessened because loose moral aliefs escape it, but it is still somewhat disconcerting because strict moral aliefs along with moral beliefs, are ruled out by nihilism.

I think that would be the wrong conclusion. Aliefs don’t care about nihilism or truth. Nihilism may emphatically deem our strict moral aliefs false or defect, but they will not listen. This, not Kriegel’s analysis, is why nihilism is practically not disconcerting at all. Even (as is surely not the case) if all of our moral aliefs where strict moral aliefs they would, though targeted by nihilism on account of their representational content, rest unmoved by nihilism. Their deafness to nihilism, not their lack of moral representational content, is what saves them.

This feature of alief deserves some special attention. What allows aliefs to be deaf to the voice of truth or evidence is that while they contain representations they do not contain beliefs. The represented part, the R, of an alief content is not believed content. Though a person who alieves [R-A-B] may also hold a belief that R, such a belief is no direct effect of having, nor a presupposition for having, an alief that [R-A-B]. The point that the representational content of aliefs is not believed is forcefully argued by Gendler (2008a: 648ff; 2008b: 561ff). She even argues that aliefs do not involve propositional attitudes belonging to a category wider than but including belief: ‘accepting’. This category also includes such states as imaginings, supposings, assumings and pretendings. The category of accepting requires that accepted content is regarded as true in some way.11

Gendler claims that there is experimental evidence supporting her view. The subjects in one of Paul Rozin’s (1990) much discussed experiments may be interpreted as providing striking examples of aliefs without accepted (and thus without believed) representational content. The subjects were

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11 The category ‘accepting’ comes from Velleman (2000).
asked to put labels on two bottles they knew contained table sugar. One label read ‘Sucrose, Table Sugar’ and the other ‘Not Sodium Cyanide, Not Poison’. The experimenter then used the contents of the two labeled bottles to mix two cups of ‘Kool-Aid’. The subjects showed ‘considerable reluctance’ to drink from the cup made with sugar from the bottle labeled ‘Not Sodium Cyanide, Not Poison’. The subjects conceded that their response was foolish, but that concession did not seem to affect their reluctance. It is very implausible to ascribe any accepted or believed content that one of the cups contained poison to the reluctant subjects. They did not regard it as true in any way that one cup had poisonous content. Gendler’s diagnosis of this experiment is that the reluctant subjects did not believe or even imagined that one cup contained poison, but that they believed just that. (2008a: 648ff) Gendler also has a more general argument that the representational content of aliefs do not involve accepting:

At its core, alief involves the activation of an associative chain – and this is something that can happen regardless of the attitude that one bears to the content activating the associations. […] This means that alief contexts are what we might call hyperopaque: they do not permit salva veritate substitution even of expressions that the subject explicitly recognizes to be coreferential. (2008a: 650)

This contrast starkly to beliefs: ‘whatever belief is – it is normatively governed by the following constraint: beliefs aim to “track truth” in the sense that belief is subject to immediate revision in the face of changes in our all-things-considered evidence’. (2008b: 565)

Since aliefs do not contain believed or other accepted content, they can survive in discord with beliefs; this is in fact crucial for their claim to existence. Gendler’s general kind of argument for the existence of aliefs is that they need to be posited for explaining a wide variety of otherwise very perplexing phenomena. Those phenomena include certain instances of ‘irrational’ behavior, as in cases where we seem to act contrary to our own beliefs, where aliefs with not believed representational content persist, even in the light of occurrent contrary beliefs.

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12 This experiment was a follow-up of an experiment where the label read ‘Sodium Cyanide, Poison’.
Moral beliefs do, as beliefs in general, answer to the world: if in conflict with available evidence they are rejected, such is their paradigmatic function, in any case.\textsuperscript{13} Aliefs, in contrast, are often spotted exactly when they stand up against ‘discordant’ beliefs. And they do not disappear under the influence of discordant beliefs. Even if everything regarding beliefs and aliefs is completely transparent to the agent, an occurrent alief in discord with an occurrent belief can stand its ground. Aliefs are thus well insulated from discordant beliefs. This does not mean that they are completely immune to revision. The point is that they do not answer to contrary belief or evidence in the way well behaved beliefs do. Alief revision has to take indirect routes such as Aristotelian character formation and other ‘therapeutic’ methods.

That aliefs do not listen to beliefs in general does not, as should be clear by now, mean that there cannot be tensions between aliefs and beliefs. All the examples above of belief-discordant aliefs shows such conflicts. Such conflicts are of a peculiar nature. Gendler describes them as involving a kind of norm violation: we are by our belief-discordant aliefs pulled towards behavior that is irrational given our beliefs. Such conflicts are often unwanted and costly. Sometimes, however, they are enjoyable or even enriching (e.g. the aliefs exploited in parachuting or reading good literature).

Applying this to a moral nihilist who harbors moral aliefs we find that she may indeed have belief-discordant moral aliefs but that these discords seem very innocent and sometimes even beneficial. First, it seems that a nihilist as such will find herself in alief-belief discord only to the extent she harbors strict moral aliefs. It is difficult to imagine how loose moral aliefs could be in any kind of conflict with nihilist belief. Second, the discord that may arise from nihilist belief and strict moral alief seems to be of a peculiarly oblique kind. If she harbors strict moral aliefs she may find that she is pulled towards behavior that lacks ‘sanction’ from her metaethical (nihilist) beliefs. She is representing, say, a course of action as wrong and the associated affects and behavioral pulls are activated. That is, \textit{ex hypothesi}, how she experiences the situation. She does not, of course, believe that the course of action is wrong, she is merely seeing it as wrong and, say, abominable and not to be done. So she is pulled towards behavior that is not in any way (as far as the story tells) irrational given her nihilist belief. It is merely that the behavior, judged from the nihilist belief, is not rationalized by the course of action \textit{actually having or being believed to have} the moral property it

\textsuperscript{13} Real beliefs unfortunately often behaves otherwise. For example it is not uncommon that beliefs are strengthened in the light of evidence to the contrary, see Lord et.al. (1979). Studies in cognitive dissonance theory indicates that disconfirming evidence hurts so we are motivated to avoid it and when avoiding contrary evidence fails the evidence is countered with increased credence in the threatened belief. (Galinsky et al. 2000 and Thibodeau and Aronson 1992)
is alief-wise represented as having. Third, presupposing, as we are, that there are significant benefits associated with having a morality, it seems that nihilism-discordant strict moral alief will often be of the beneficial kind, as the discords elicited by reading fiction or parachuting. So nihilism discordant moral aliefs seem to occur only for strict moral alief, be very oblique and often beneficial in the sense that they are pulling the agent towards behavior that is beneficial for her. This is how Kriegel’s claim that error theory (and thus nihilism) seems less disconcerting given moral aliefs is right.

4 The Alieving Nihilist

A moral nihilist should have no particular problems having moral alief. Some of them (the loose ones) are not touched by her nihilist belief at all and the rest (the strict ones) do not respond to nihilism. The case for the claim that moral alief is available, normally inescapable, for a nihilist can be strengthened by noting the analogy between a moral (realist) believer who holds explicit moral beliefs that are discordant with her moral aliefs, such as an ethical egoist who feels an alief-driven pull of altruism to give her change to a beggar, and a moral nihilist who holds an explicit meta ethical belief that is discordant with her moral aliefs. Just as there is no reason to think that the non-integrated moral believer’s moral aliefs are compromised by her (discordant) moral beliefs, there is no reason to believe that the moral nihilist’s moral aliefs are compromised by her (discordant) metaethical beliefs. It seems even plausible that a moral nihilist’s moral aliefs are less exposed to erosion by her metaethical beliefs than a non-integrated moral believer’s aliefs are exposed to her discordant moral beliefs. We do not normally consult or activate our metaethical beliefs when we ponder practical moral questions, but moral beliefs are likely to be elicited in various everyday situations and are thus prone to clash both more often and more flagrantly with any discordant moral aliefs. And even if we do consult our metaethical view in practical decision making, those views tend to only very obliquely conflict with the behavior we are pulled towards by our moral aliefs.

So having moral aliefs is rather unproblematic for a nihilist. There is no upper limit to how extensive or contentful a given nihilists set of moral aliefs may be. Even a comprehensively moralized nihilist aliever is a possibility. Such a person would token moral aliefs (strict and loose) in a great range of different kinds of situations. It is possible that she doesn’t act on her moral aliefs, because even though aliefs are intrinsically tied to affect and behavior they do not necessarily result in alief induced behavior when tokened. What will be true of such a moralized nihilist is that she
will ‘feel the pull’ of her moral aliefs in a great range of different kinds of situations. Merely thinking about pertinent situations can activate moral alief too, so she can engage in moral thought experimentations and may fruitfully be enrolled in trolley case surveys and such. And therefore it seems plausible that such an agent would be well placed to reap the fruits of morality, without any moral beliefs.

This, then, provides a solution to the nihilist’s problem with the goods of morality: a potentially large and important part of the nihilist’s morality is simply not touched by belief in general and metaethical nihilist belief in particular. To the extent there is substantive truth in Kriegel’s view that the alief-part of one’s morality tends to be one’s ‘true’ morality, it will even be true that it is specifically the nihilist’s true morality that is left untouched by nihilism. Interestingly (though perhaps disconcertingly), this may also be true for a nihilist who goes on to embrace abolitionism: the view that one should simply shed moral practice and stop talking and thinking in moral terms. Such a nihilist may well truly profess that she harbors no moral beliefs and do not engage in moral discussion and argument. But as long as she holds moral aliefs she will experience the motivational pull of them and they will influence her practical thought and talk, and sometimes action. In this important sense even an abolitionist nihilist will (normally) have a morality.

5 The Serious Moral Nihilist

In this final section I shall consider and reject some objections to the rosy picture of the straight nihilist’s access to the goods of morality painted above. First I discuss an argument from P. F. Brandon that any ersatz morality that is available to the nihilist will lack seriousness and that will prevent it from being instrumental in delivering the goods of morality. I argue that the kind of ersatz morality I have claimed accessible to the nihilist will not lack seriousness in the relevant sense. Then I turn to a line of argument put forward by Richard Joyce premised on the claim that nihilists face obstacles for reaping the goods of morality, just as we are presupposing. Joyce argues that the nihilist should adopt moral fictionalism, the policy of accepting moral judgments as fictions, as the best way to avert the dangers of nihilism. I argue that these dangers are more effectively averted by straight nihilists of the kind sketched above.

Brandon’s critique is not very rigorously argued. There is also an evident anachronism in pitting a nihilist packed with moral aliefs against arguments formulated before aliefs were invented. Brandon’s critique is, however, of a kind that rather easily comes to mind and is in that sense
natural. It is also instructive to see how easily these arguments are defused by the present version of the straight nihilist. Brandon argues that the kind of ‘subjectivist’ morality Mackie (1977) defended as suitable for a nihilist ‘falls [far] short from the pretensions of “our” ordinary morality. Ideals and universal principles, a passion for justice on the grand scale, tolerance, liberty, equality, fraternity […], these are left unsupported by the structure of largely prudential reasoning Mackie employs.’ (1980:103) Brandon goes on to claim that moral views defensible from a nihilist perspective ‘could only be ungrounded choices on [the nihilist’s] own terms; not positions one could argue [an] amoralist into’. (104) He seems thus to hold that Mackie (and other nihilists) are doomed to ‘moral’ considerations that are merely prudential. And the problem with this is lurking egoism: ‘[l]ong term prudence […] only urges me to gather my rosebuds.’ Brandon contrasts such prudential reasoning with ‘universalistic moral thought’ according to which ‘there is an unacceptable arbitrariness in limiting sympathy to my compatriots or to people of my non-religion or my skin colour; but these categories are precisely the one’s Mackie’s general strategy asks us to accept with but little hopes of overcoming.’ (105) Summing up his critique of Mackie’s ‘moral subjectivism’ Brandon says it ‘does not seem able to sustain the kind of seriousness with which morality demands to be taken. […] it seem[s] to encourage […] a candid admission that in many areas, at least, this is merely how we do things, that other people can do them differently without dire consequences, so that we should not make too much of a meal out of our (moral) conventions’. (106) All in all, then, this seems to amount to a three-fold objection that nihilist moral reasoning like Mackie’s will be a matter of (i) ’ungrounded choices’, (ii) egoistic or in any case merely prudential or ‘self-referential’ and also (iii) impotent in argument (with amoralists).

Brandon’s three-fold critique seems entirely misdirected against the kind of ersatz moral practice available to a nihilist on my account. It is clear that the alief based ersatz morality I have defended as viable, indeed practically inescapable, for a nihilist need not be a matter of ungrounded choices. It will not be generally ungrounded because even nihilists may have reflective concerns, things they care about in the Frankfurt (1982) sense. The content of such concerns is completely open (except that nihilists probably cannot care about moral truths). Such concerns may themselves be grounded in other reflective concerns. And these concerns may be what guides the straight nihilist in her (Aristotelean or therapeutic) management of her moral aliefs. Some reflective concerns may well lack identifiable grounds, but that is a property found among fundamental realist moral beliefs as well. Even less plausible is the claim that reflective concerns and aliefs are matters of choice. Aliefs are as a matter of their nature not matters of (direct) choice. And reflective concerns are often, I
believe, experienced as beyond their holders voluntary control: the world as we experience it force them upon us. Regarding the alleged self-referential nature of nihilist ersatz morality we can note that it was indeed something Mackie (always the psychological realist) thought of as an important desideratum for any morality that would have any chance of being widely accepted, but that need not constrain any particular nihilist: reflectively I may come to care intensely for humanity as such or even for all sentient beings. Such a concern will not be easy to sell to people at large but that is another matter entirely. Lastly, Brandon’s claim that a ‘subjectivist’ morality like Mackie’s will not work in arguments against amoralists seems neither here nor there. What reason could there be to think that a nihilist, as such, armed with her moral aliefs and her reflective concerns may have a harder time convincing (by argument) an amoralist on some issue than a moral realist, as such, armed with her moral beliefs would have? Nothing comes to mind. To the contrary, there seems to be some common ground between the amoralist and the nihilist that might be exploited in argument by the nihilist. I turn now the the claims of Joyce that lack of moral beliefs lands one in trouble having to do with acrasia and misfiring rational calculation.

6 Real alief vs. fictional belief

The goods morality delivers on Joyce’s view are, linked to the need to sometimes bolster self-control. There are two threats to self-control as Joyce describes it: acrasia and misfiring rational calculation. Sometimes we are simply tempted (by temptations) to swerve from the path of duty, and sometimes we acratically do that. A moral person may muster her morality and sometimes overcome acratic behavior. And for a nihilist who has expressly denounced her moral beliefs there seems to be only ‘rational calculation’ left for practical decision making. But, Joyce argues, we tend to be bad at assessing more remote and dispersed consequences of our actions. This often makes direct rational calculation over consequences a bad move. We are often better off sticking to moral consideration. So on Joyce’s view morality may, at times, act a remedy both to succumbing to temptation and morally unconstrained rational calculation.

I agree that it is true that there are systematic dangers with morally unguided rational calculation and moral acrasia and that moral beliefs may save us from those failures. Since Joyce’s views this matter from a nihilistic perspective he faces the (for us familiar) problem that useful moral beliefs will be thought to be false by a clear-headed nihilist. So what could such a person do? There are, as mentioned in the introduction, several possibilities on offer here: forget nihilism, run nihilism and moral beliefs in inconsistent tandem, perhaps relying of ‘compartmentalization’ of beliefs so that
metaethical beliefs not reach status of occurrent beliefs in the same situations were moral beliefs reach that status. Or, as Joyce recommends, we could embrace the content of our moral beliefs in a way that makes that embracing consistent with nihilism. The way to do this is to stick to moral ‘thoughts’ rather than moral belief. Such thoughts function like fictional ‘beliefs’ Joyce argues. They are entertained (a kind of ‘accepting’) while not believed. This, according to Joyce, allows the moral fictional ‘beliefs’ to fulfill the function of bolstering self-control while avoiding inconsistency with the nihilist’s rejection of moral belief. Joyce fictionalism is intriguing and in many ways attractive. There are some serious drawbacks which I shall not rehearse here.14 Here I shall argue that in any case there much better alternative to Joycean fictional moral beliefs: moral aliefs.

Moral aliefs have some key features that make them seem particularly suitable for the job Joyce thinks need to be done by morality, bolstering of self-control. First, the automatic activation of aliefs by their own specific cues tends to keep overt discord with metaethical beliefs to a minimum. One of Joyce’s chief arguments for fictionalism’s superiority to conservationism – the view that one simply should retain one’s moral belief (as far as one is able) in spite of one’s nihilism – is that false beliefs leads to intellectual havoc since they enter into all kinds of logical and epistemic relations to other beliefs and ultimately to uncontrollable falsity and practically unusable beliefs. This threat, Joyce thinks, speaks in favor of a general policy of avoiding false beliefs and trying to accumulate (within reason) true beliefs. Such a general policy is in conflict with the recommendations of the conservationist. However, none of this seem relevant for aliefs. They don’t engage in frivolous entailments. Primarily they are activated by some instance of their specific cues and normally sail below the radar of argumentative and logical structures. When the cues are removed they retreat to stand-by mode and refuse to play any role in entailments. Second, the sturdiness in (rare) conflicts with belief makes it likely that they will not be obliterated in actual conflicts with occurrent nihilist belief. Aliefs are known for (and to a large extent by) their ability to survive discordant belief. Thirdly, the built in motivational content of aliefs makes them practically forceful motivators. The much debated issue of moral motivational internalism seems to be a non-issue for aliefs: they come with motivation right out of the box.

14 Olson (2014: 181ff)
Thus, reflecting of the general properties of aliefs it seems that moral aliefs seems well-nigh designed for the tasks under discussion: providing bolstered motivation for actions that may be threatened by forces in discord with more or less conventional morality. The sturdiness in clashes with beliefs and the automatic, cue-specific activation conspires with the built in motivational force to make moral aliefs just what one needs to stave off counter productive inclinations to calculate as well as tendencies to succumb to moral acrasia. And moral aliefs seems significantly more forceful resources in these regards than the merely entertained fictional moral beliefs Joyce recommends. Those land the fictionalist in an inherently unstable position of trying simultaneously to uphold the fictional yet somehow motivationally efficient moral ‘beliefs’ while staying true to their very fictionality. This seems to create at least an unwanted tension between getting the moral motivation and resisting false moral belief. Indeed it seems therefore unclear to what extent fictional ‘beliefs’ really will hold up in those situations where they are most needed. The fictionality of them may well step forward as their salient feature in cases where other motivational forces operate. Moral alief seems all in all better for the job Joyce wants to get done.

**Conclusion**

If there are goods to be had from having a morality, those goods seem to be available to a straight moral nihilist. Part of the nihilist’s morality will in fact be left alone by her nihilist belief. The alief-part of her moral outlook will not as such differ from that of any moral realist. And that part may even merit to be called ‘her true morality’. Straight nihilists can have a morality without moral belief. In fact most of them *will* have a morality whether they like it or not.
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