

## Practical Nihilism

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Practical reasoning involves questions of what to do, who to be, what to value, and how to live. I will argue that there are no correct or incorrect answers to these questions—no correct or incorrect things to do, persons to become, or outcomes to pursue. There is no distinguished way to live; they are all on a par. I call this ‘practical nihilism’.

To be sure, we do have a practice of evaluating options and making decisions on that basis—practical nihilists need not deny that. They may also agree that this practice includes calling some things ‘right’ and others ‘wrong’, and that these statements are sometimes true. But according to practical nihilism, this entire practice is groundless and lacks any significance over other possible practices. It would be no mistake, so to speak, to start evaluating and deciding otherwise. In that sense there are no constraints on practical reasoning and decision—one decides *blindly*, to use a Wittgensteinian term. Or as Hume said of induction, practical ‘reasoning’ is a creature of habit or custom, not of reason in any thicker sense.

All this follows from a certain view about the metaphysics of practical reasoning. So, I will start by explaining what I mean by ‘the metaphysics of practical reasoning’ and identifying the view that entails nihilism (sections 1 and 2). Then I will explain why it entails nihilism (section 3) and develop the nihilistic view that emerges (section 4). Finally, I will say why I believe the view that entails nihilism (section 5). This last part will be inconclusive, but my primary goal is not so much to settle the issue but to reveal the picture one must accept if one is to reject practical nihilism. I find the picture absurd, but some readers might feel differently.

### **1. The metaphysics of practical reasoning**

I said that practical reasoning involves questions of what to do, how to live, who to be, and what to value. It therefore involves evaluating the objects of these questions—things like actions, projects, characters, and outcomes. This list is not meant to be exhaustive: no doubt we evaluate other items too. Nor do I mean to single out any one particular mode of evaluation: we evaluate actions with respect to morality, prudence, etiquette, and other factors, and all these would count as practical reasoning in the broad sense I have in mind. I therefore conceive of practical reasoning broadly and I won’t try to define its boundaries sharply. I will focus mostly on action and the reader can generalize as far as they think the boundaries of practical reasoning lie.

When evaluating actions, we have many ordinary-language locutions at our disposal: we can ask whether an action is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’; whether it is ‘rational’, ‘reasonable’, ‘obligatory’, ‘permissible’, and so on. But I will set these words aside for now because there is little agreement about what they *mean* or even what their *function* is—think of the kind of disagreement between utilitarians and Kantians, or between cognitivists and non-cognitivists.

These controversies are tangential to the issue I want to bear down on, as we'll see, so I will avoid these ordinary-language locutions for the time being.

Instead, consider the vast range of standards that an action can meet or fail to meet. There is the *utilitarian* standard of maximizing total pleasure, the *Kantian* standard of being consistent with the categorical imperative, the *Humean* standard of promoting one's desires, the *divine* standard of promoting the will of some deity as described in a revered text, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Thus, consider an action of killing one to save five, and suppose it would maximize total pleasure but goes against the stated will of the deity. Then it meets the utilitarian standard but not the divine standard—that is one thing that can be said by way of evaluating the action, regardless of which standard (if any) we express with ordinary-language locutions such as 'right' or 'rational'. I'll use 'correct' as a term of art to mark this standard-relative form of evaluation. Thus the action is correct relative to the utilitarian standard but not the divine standard.

The above standards comprise just a minute fraction of the space of all possible standards. There is also the *daughter* standard of promoting my daughter's will, the *Jaggerian* standard of ensuring all red doors are painted black, and the *Graggerian* standard of ensuring all *gred* doors are painted black.<sup>2</sup> And so on and so forth. More generally, by a "standard" I just mean a property of actions, and I will assume an abundant conception of properties on which there is a property for every set (one possessed by all and only the members of the set).<sup>3</sup> There are therefore *gazillions* of standards out there by which an action could *in principle* be evaluated, most of which we never will entertain.

Now, the issue I want to bear down is whether any standards are distinguished over the rest as the ones to use in practical reasoning, or 'practically significant' as I will call them. The view that some standard or standards have this status is what I will call 'elitism'; the opposing view, 'egalitarianism', is that no standard is practically significant in this sense. This distinction is central to what follows, for egalitarianism is the view which, I will argue, leads to practical nihilism. But first, I must clarify what elitism and egalitarianism amount to.

One question concerns the source of practical significance. Suppose an elitist says that the divine standard, say, is practically significant. What makes it so? Specifically, does something about *us* make it significant over other standards, or does it have that significance anyway, independently of anything to do with us? Both options are available to the elitist, and it is worth getting clear on what each kind of elitism amounts to.

On the latter option, the divine standard is practically significant—i.e., distinguished as the one to use in practical reasoning—and moreover it has this status independently of us agents. It is not because it promotes our interests to use it, or because we have used it in the past, or because our words like 'right' and 'good' refer to it, or anything like that. Rather, the standard is

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<sup>1</sup> I am using these labels stipulatively. I don't claim, for example, that the standard I just labeled 'Kantian' is exactly Kant's.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'gred' is, of course, based on Goodman's 'grue'. Let us say that something is gred iff it is either first observed before 2050 and green, or not first observed before 2050 and red.

<sup>3</sup> This is not so much an assumption about properties as it is a stipulation of how I use the term 'property'. If you'd rather reserve that term for something else, you could instead think of a standard as a *condition* or *description* that actions do or do not satisfy.

*objectively* significant: significant independently of anything to do with us. Suppose an action is correct relative to the standard that best promotes our interests, or that we have used in the past, or that we refer to with ‘right’ and ‘good’; still, there is on this view a further fact as to whether it is correct relative to *reality’s preferred standard*, i.e., the one with practical significance. Thus, an action might be the thing to do by our lights but not by the lights of reality, so to speak. As Eklund puts it, ‘reality itself favors certain ways of valuing and acting’ (2017, p. 1).

This view that reality itself favors certain actions is the practical analogue of the more familiar idea that reality itself favors certain *descriptions*. Suppose one community of geologists uses categories like ‘green’ to sort gemstones into similarity groups, while another community uses categories like ‘grue’.<sup>4</sup> Given two green gemstones only one of which is grue, the first community says they’re the same while the second says they’re different, and both are correct relative to the respective categories they each use. But some philosophers, notably David Lewis (1984) and Ted Sider (2011), believe that there is a further, human-independent fact about which categories are the ones to use *by the lights of reality itself*. Those categories are said to “carve at the joints”—or the *descriptive* joints, as I’ll call them—and the aim of theoretical reasoning is not just to describe the world truly but to do so in joint-carving terms. Elitism is the practical analogue of this: instead of positing objectively distinguished categories that constrain *theoretical* reasoning, it posits objectively distinguished standards that constrain *practical* reasoning. I’ll call them “practical joints” to emphasize the analogy. And just as the concepts like ‘green’ we use in everyday theoretical reasoning could in principle fail to carve at the descriptive joints, so too the standards we use in everyday practical reasoning could in principle fail to carve at the practical joints. According to elitism, the latter possibility should be no more (and no less) mysterious than the first.

Descriptive and practical joints therefore play analogous roles as objective constraints on theoretical and practical reasoning, respectively. But we should not assume they are co-extensive, or that one determines the other. If the category of *electrons* (say) is a descriptive joint, it wouldn’t follow that reality itself favors the production of more electrons—the practical joints presumably have nothing to do with electrons specifically. Being a descriptive joint therefore does not imply being a practical joint; nor should we expect a complete inventory of descriptive joints to settle where the practical joints lie. What about the other direction? This is less clear: one might think that pleasure-maximization (say) can be a practical joint only if pleasure, or perhaps sentience, is a descriptive joint. The thought (put figuratively) is that reality can only favor those ways of *acting* that align with its favored *descriptions*.<sup>5</sup> But that would be a substantive connection between descriptive and practical joints in need of argument; it doesn’t follow just because both are called “joints”.

That’s what elitism looks like if the practically significant standard has that status independently of us. The other option is that something about *us* makes it significant over other standards. But in that case, notice, this something about us must itself be practically significant also. To see this, suppose an elitist says that the divine standard is practically significant over the utilitarian standard (say) because it serves *human interests*. Think of human interests here as

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<sup>4</sup> This example is from Goodman (1955), who defined ‘grue’ thus (for some future time *t*): *x* is grue if and only if *x* is first observed before *t* and green, or not first observed before *t* and blue.

<sup>5</sup> Lee (2018) argues for a view along these lines.

some gradable property of humans, such as health, which is promoted by the divine standard—i.e., we tend to have more of it when we do what is correct relative to the divine standard. Well, in addition to interests we also have *interests\**, a gradable property that is promoted by the utilitarian standard. This may be a strange property to which we pay little attention, but since properties are cheap we must have some such property.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if human interests single out the divine standard, then, equally, human interests\* single out the utilitarian standard. For the divine standard to be practically significant over the utilitarian standard, therefore, human interests must already have practical significance over human interests\*. If not, there is nothing to distinguish our interests and the divine standard they pick out over our interests\* and the utilitarian standard *they* pick out; neither standard is distinguished over the other as *the one to use in practical reasoning*, contra elitism. Thus, if an elitist says that the divine standard is significant because it serves human interests, what we really have is an elitist view on which *promoting human interests* is the standard which in the first instance has practical significance, and the divine standard is then practically significant derivatively, in virtue of being that which promotes human interests.

Of course, we can now ask what makes interests practically significant over interests\*. If nothing, then the property of having certain interests counts as a practical joint by definition: practically significant independently of us (i.e., nothing about us makes it significant). The property is *possessed* by us, of course; it's the fact *that the property is practically significant* that holds independently of us. If on the other hand something else about us makes interests significant over interests\*, then that something else must itself be practically significant also (by the above reasoning). Setting aside infinite descending chains, then, even this second variety of elitism is committed to practical joints. The only difference between this and the elitism we started with is whether the practical joint is a property of humans, such as human interests, or something human-independent such as the divine standard. I will call the former kind of elitism 'anthropocentric' and the latter 'full-blooded'.

Anthropocentric views come in many varieties, some of which I will discuss in section 4. For now, note that the jointy human property might be one that is possessed uniformly across humanity or it might be one with respect to which there is variation. The latter possibility leads to a kind of relativism. For example, suppose again that human interests are a practical joint, and suppose that our interests are served by one human-independent standard  $S_1$ —say, the divine standard—but another community has different interests better served by a different human-independent standard  $S_2$ . Then  $S_1$  is practically significant *for us* but not for them, while  $S_2$  is practically significant *for them* but not for us. Likewise, if an action  $A$  is correct relative to  $S_1$  but not  $S_2$ , then  $A$  is distinguished as the thing to do *for us* but not *for them*. This is a relativism of sorts, though not (yet!) a relativism about 'right' and 'wrong', for we have not (yet!) said anything about how those words function. Nor is it relativism about practical joints: on the view

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<sup>6</sup> To see this, note that the property of having certain interests can be represented by a mapping from persons to real numbers that increases as a function of, say, the person's health. Or more precisely: a function from possible worlds to such mappings that increases as a function of the person's health in that world. So, to find the gradable property of *interests\** just take a function from possible worlds to such mappings that typically increases as a function of how much they maximize total pleasure. If properties are cheap, this function represents *some* gradable property of persons (this is just the idea that every set of possibilities corresponds to a property, adjusted to the case of gradable properties).

we're imagining, *human interests* are a practical joint independently of either community. It is, rather, a relativism about whether  $S_1$  or  $S_2$  has practical significance—and, derivatively, about whether A is the thing to do.

That's elitism. Egalitarianism, by contrast, is the view that no standard has this status of being practically significant over the rest—not even in the anthropocentric sense of inheriting its significance from us. If our interests distinguish a standard S, our interests\* will distinguish another standard  $S^*$  and there is nothing that privileges interests over interests\*. *Every* standard is distinguished by *something* about us; none of them is practically significant over the rest. All standards are on a par.

These then are various views about the 'metaphysics of practical reasoning'—about the metaphysical status of different standards by which to evaluate action. Now, look at the striking effect that egalitarianism has on practical reasoning. Imagine you're wondering whether to kill one to save five. You might start by asking whether that is correct relative to a standard that *promotes your interests*, or that *you have used in the past*, or that *your community uses*, or what have you. But the fact that you *have* used that standard in the past, or that your community tends to use it, does not, according to egalitarianism, give it any distinguished status as *the one to use now*—to think otherwise is anthropocentrism. For egalitarians, there are countless other standards out there and they are all on a par. Now, any action you take will inevitably be correct relative to some of those standards and not others. So then all *actions* are on a par too: *whatever* you do will be correct by the lights of some standards and incorrect by the lights of others, and on the egalitarian view that is all there is to say. Nothing distinguishes any of those standards over the others, so nothing distinguishes any action over the others either. In this way the egalitarianism about standards seeps down to the actions themselves: all actions are on a par, there is no distinguished thing to do. This is practical nihilism.

To illustrate the point, suppose our interests and interests\* are served by human-independent standards S and  $S^*$ , respectively. And imagine another community, the Stars, who have the very same interests and interests\* as we do. Suppose finally that both communities have acted similarly in the past, tending to do what promotes their interests. The only difference is that we go on to do what S recommends, promoting our interests, while they go on to do what  $S^*$  recommends, promoting their interests\* instead. Both courses of action are correct relative to *some* standard that serves *something* about us, and according to egalitarianism that is all there is to say. There is nothing to break the symmetry; nothing that privileges one course of action over the other. What *elitism* does, in effect, is posit a symmetry-breaker—something that distinguishes one course of action as *the thing to do*. Perhaps *interests*, not interests\*, are practically significant and distinguish one course of action over the other (anthropocentric elitism). Or perhaps S is practically significant regardless of anyone's interests (full-blooded elitism). But according to egalitarianism, there is no special property of ours or the world that distinguishes one course of action over the other. At bottom, we just *do what we do*. If we happen to go on to promote our interests, that is just an empirical fact about us. To go on differently, promoting our interests\* instead, would not be a "mistake", just a different way of life. Again, this is practical nihilism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The point in this paragraph is related to the rule-following considerations. I will return to this in section 4, when we will be in a better position to appreciate its consequences.

My argument for nihilism therefore rests on two premises:

Premise (1): Elitism is false: no standard has practical significance over any other.

Premise (2): If all standards are on a par, *per* egalitarianism, then all actions (projects, characters, outcomes) are on a par too, *per* practical nihilism.

Premise (2) is what I just argued above: that egalitarianism about standards seeps down to the actions themselves and leaves us with nihilism. That is indisputable, I think, though why this is so may become clearer as I develop the argument in sections 3 and 4. And I will explain the rationale behind Premise (1) soon.

## 2. Normative concepts and normative primitivism

But first, let me further clarify this issue of elitism vs egalitarianism that lies at the heart of the argument. I have so far characterized the issue without saying anything about the normative concepts we typically use in practical reasoning—concepts like ‘reason’, ‘ought’, ‘should’, and ‘must’; nor related concepts like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘virtue’, ‘justice’, and so on. This is because the issue of elitism vs egalitarianism is, at least in principle, largely independent of the particular workings of those concepts.

For one thing, don’t confuse elitism with what often gets called ‘realism’ in the meta-ethics literature. This is a thesis about the nature and commitments of normative concepts like the above and is typically characterized as holding (i) that normative judgments involving these concepts are beliefs that can be true or false; (ii) that some normative beliefs are true; and (iii) that these normative truths are mind-independent, i.e. they hold independently of our values and other attitudes. This leaves open whether these normative truths are identical or reducible to something else—perhaps natural truths about the cosmos, or super-natural truths about God and the divine (if there are such things)—or whether normative truths are a *sui generis* class of truths over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order. I’ll call the former ‘reductive’ realism and the latter ‘non-reductive’ realism. Either way, realism maintains that normative judgment is ‘objective’ in the sense that it concerns truths that are “out there anyway”, independent of us, waiting to be discovered. By contrast, views like subjectivism and constructivism agree that there are normative truths but claim that they depend in some measure on our values and other attitudes, *contra* (iii). Yet other views deny that there are normative truths in the first place. These include error-theory, which rejects (ii) and claims that normative beliefs are systematically false, and non-cognitivist views that reject (i) and claim that normative judgments aren’t truth-evaluable beliefs in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

Realism and elitism may resemble each other insofar as they both assign some degree of objectivity to practical reasoning. Nonetheless, they are distinct theses. For one thing, realism does not imply elitism. Realism says that normative concepts like ‘ought’ express mind-independent properties (or relations), but it does not follow that those properties are practical

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<sup>8</sup> It is famously difficult to place quasi-realism in this division of logical space, but that is not my problem here.

joints, nor that there are any practical joints in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Compare the case of theoretical reasoning: the concept ‘is an electron or a cow’ expresses a mind-independent property, we can all agree; but it doesn’t follow that that property is a descriptive joint, nor that there are any descriptive joints in the first place. Indeed, this is presumably the view of philosophers like Nelson Goodman who deny that there are descriptive joints. On their view, all properties are metaphysically speaking on a par: there is nothing metaphysically distinguished about *electron* over *electron-or-cow*. But if *e* is an electron, they will surely agree that it is a mind-independent truth that *e* is an electron or a cow. Normative realism + egalitarianism is like *that* but in the practical domain. The view is that there are mind-independent truths about what one *should* do and what *reasons* there are for doing it, but that those truths don’t carve at the practical joints because there are no practical joints to carve. Whatever these mind-independent truths about *shoulds* and *reasons* are, they are no more practically significant than all the myriad other truths out there.

Even *non-reductive* realism does not imply elitism. Non-reductive realism says that normative concepts like ‘ought’ and ‘right’ expresses *sui generis* properties, but it doesn’t follow that those properties are practically significant either. For all non-reductive realism says, there may be *gazillions* of other irreducible properties out there and nothing practically significant about the few we express with *our* normative concepts. Admittedly, non-reductive realists tend to talk (if only implicitly) as if their *sui generis* properties are objectively distinguished vis-a-viz practical reasoning. If that’s what they mean, fine—that means they embrace elitism too. My point is just that non-reductive realism *as defined above* (which is not atypical)—i.e., that our normative concepts express *sui generis* properties—does not imply that those properties are practically significant.

So, realism does not imply elitism. In the other direction, elitism doesn’t imply realism either. If (say) pleasure-maximization is a practical joint, that’s consistent with a non-cognitivist view on which assertions involving ‘ought’ express non-cognitive attitudes—and with the subjectivist view that such statements *describe* our non-cognitive attitudes, and other non-realist views besides. The point is that elitism is a *metaphysical* thesis about the existence of practical joints, while realism (as standardly defined) is a thesis about the nature and commitments of *our normative concepts*, and these topics can in principle come apart from one another.

One might of course argue that the two are connected. Suppose one is a realist about ‘ought’ and maintains that it refers to (or expresses) a mind-independent property. There is then the question of which property that is. If there are practical joints, one might argue that they function as “reference magnets” in something like the Lewisian sense, and that therefore the referent of ‘ought’ is (likely) a practical joint. But that would rest on a substantive thesis about the determination of reference.<sup>10</sup> Without that thesis, it could very well be that the referent of our

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<sup>9</sup> Eklund (2017, chapter 1) argues for this more thoroughly than I do here. Admittedly, some discussions of realism assume implicitly that the mind-independent properties would be practical joints—Mackie (1977) and Street (2006) may be two examples. And of course ‘realism’ is a term of art that different authors may use differently. My point is just that the definition I present in the text—which is hardly idiosyncratic—does not imply that there are practical joints.

<sup>10</sup> A thesis that was not Lewis’, notice. Lewis (1984) proposed that *descriptive* joints are reference magnets; the thesis here is that *practical* joints are reference magnets—at least, for normative concepts like ‘ought’. This does not follow from Lewis’ theory because we cannot assume that practical joints are descriptive joints. See Dunaway and

concept ‘ought’ is *not* a practical joint, even though reality contains practical joints. If our dispositions of application play a role in fixing reference, for example, and if we are disposed to apply ‘ought’ to actions that meet a very non-jointy standard, then it could be that the referent so fixed is not a practical joint. There would then be a distinction between what *ought* to be done—i.e., those actions with the mind-independent property expressed by ‘ought’—and what *really-ought* to be done, as I’ll put it—i.e., those actions that satisfy the jointy standard. Thus, if there are practical joints it is a substantive thesis whether ought = real-ought.<sup>11</sup>

If it sounds odd to carve logical space like this, note that I am just trying to think about objectivity as it pertains to action and practical reasoning in the same way that metaphysicians think about objectivity as it pertains to description and theoretical reasoning. In the latter case, the issue is whether there are objectively distinguished categories that constrain what counts as correct (or accurate) categorization and description, and that is largely independent of the workings of our parochial concepts we use in everyday thought and talk. Even if there is an objectively correct way to describe and categorize the world, it may be that our parochial concepts like ‘green’ don’t correspond to those distinguished categories. In the case of action, the analogous issue is whether there are objectively distinguished standards that constrain what counts as correct action. My point here is that this is also, at least in principle, independent of the workings of the parochial concepts we use when deciding how to act. Even if there is an objectively correct way to act, it may be that our parochial normative concepts do not correspond to those distinguished standards.<sup>12</sup>

I said earlier that elitism does not imply realism; *a fortiori*, it does not imply non-reductive realism. Still, it does imply a non-reductionism of sorts, for the property of *being practically significant* is not identical or reducible to anything else—not to natural properties of the cosmos, nor to super-natural properties of the divine. This may not be obvious. All elitism says is that some standards are practically significant over the rest, but why must this fact be irreducible? Why couldn’t it hold in virtue of something else? Well, it could. But if so, we’ll find irreducibility elsewhere. To see this, suppose the elitist says that a standard S is practically significant over S\* because it *serves our interests*, or because it *maximizes pleasure*, or because it promotes the *will of some deity*. Whatever the details, the idea is that S has some property P<sub>1</sub> that confers this practical significance on it. Fine, but since properties are cheap there will be another property P<sub>1</sub>\* that stands to S\* just as P<sub>1</sub> stands to S. So, for S to be practically significant over S\*, P<sub>1</sub> must already have practical significance over P<sub>1</sub>\*. If this fact is fundamental, we’re done: we have a primitive, *sui generis* fact about practical significance. If instead you say that

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McPherson’s (2016) for a more straightforward application of Lewis’ theory to normative vocabulary, resulting in a view on which ‘ought’ refers to the most descriptively jointy of all candidate referents. See Williams (2018) for another Lewisian approach to normative concepts.

<sup>11</sup> To repeat, I am not suggesting it is plausible that ought and real-ought are distinct. The point is just that it takes a substantive thesis about the determination of reference to identify the two.

<sup>12</sup> So-called quietists will reject this issue of ‘objective constraints’ as unintelligible. To ask whether there are objective constraints on practical reasoning is to look at things ‘side on’, as they say, from outside the practical stance; and they think that this is somehow illegitimate. For the purposes of this paper I must set quietism aside: I am unashamedly doing the *metaphysics* of practical reasoning and there is not space to defend this from skeptics of metaphysics. But I have argued elsewhere (Dasgupta 2025) that quietism has the same egalitarian consequences I will draw from other meta-ethical views in section 3. So ultimately, I think the conclusions of this paper will apply to quietists as much as anyone else.



some further property  $P_2$  confers this significance on  $P_1$ , well, there'll be another property  $P_2^*$  that stands to  $P_1^*$  just as  $P_2$  stands to  $P_1$ ... and so on. Thus, if  $S$  is to have practical significance over  $S^*$ , *either* at some point in the chain some property  $P_n$  must have practical significance all on its own, not in virtue of anything else; *or* the chain of properties  $P_n, P_{n+1}, \dots$  each of which is practically significant in virtue of the next must go on forever. Either way, the property of *being practically significant* is not reducible to something else: it is an extra, *sui generis* component of reality over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order.

As an aside, this shows that practical significance is by definition not \*-able. For the defining role of practical significance is to break the symmetry between  $S$  and  $S^*$ ; between interests and interests\*; and so on. To be sure, we could introduce a word 'practical significance\*' that it is true of  $S^*$  and not  $S$ ; and since properties are abundant there will be *some* such property of practical significance\* that  $S^*$  has and  $S$  lacks. But *if*  $S$  is practically significant, then—by definition of 'practical significance'—introducing such a word would not be enough to break the symmetry. It would be a mere symmetry in language, as it were, not in reality. This follows from what elitism is by definition: it's the view that *there is* a symmetry-breaker that distinguishes  $S$  over  $S^*$ ; 'practical significance' is then a theoretical term introduced with the stipulation that it expresses the symmetry breaker (if in fact there is one).<sup>13</sup> What the above argument shows is that this symmetry-breaker must be an extra, *sui generis* property over and above the natural and super-natural world order.

Note also that this *sui generis* property must be inherently *normative*. This follows from the role of practical significance in practical reasoning, i.e. in answering questions of what to do. Suppose there are two actions available to me,  $A$  and  $A^*$ , where  $A$  is correct relative to standard  $S$  and  $A^*$  is correct relative to standard  $S^*$ . What am I to do? The role of practical significance is to distinguish an answer to this question: do that which is correct relative to the standard with practical significance. *That* is the thing to do. But to call something 'normative'—at least, as the term is used in recent literature—*just is* to say that it provides non-arbitrary grounds for decision and action. So practical significance is normative by definition.

Putting all this together, the result is that *elitism implies normative primitivism*, the view that normativity is an extra, *sui generis* component of reality over and above the natural (and super-natural) world order. Normativity is real and not reducible to anything else.<sup>14</sup>

Turning back to my argument for nihilism, recall that Premise (1) said that elitism is false. We now know that to establish this, the reader need only insert their favorite argument against normative primitivism! Mackie's argument from queerness; Korsgaard's normative question argument; a general commitment to naturalism—pick whichever you wish. I will gesture at a

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<sup>13</sup> If you like, think of the claim that *there is* a symmetry-breaker as elitism's Ramsey sentence, and the associated Carnap sentence as introducing the theoretical term 'practical significance'. Note that since practical significance is a theoretical term, we should not expect elitism to be expressible in parochial normative terms like 'ought' or 'reason'; see my remarks three paragraphs back about the connection (or lack thereof) between parochial normative vocabulary and practical joints. See also Dasgupta (forthcoming), section 4, for more on this point.

<sup>14</sup> This view is sometimes called "robust realism" or "normative non-naturalism", but I prefer "normative primitivism". For a defense of this view, see Enoch (2011). Sometimes quietists like Scanlon (2014) also describe themselves in the same camp, but I think this is a mistake; see Dasgupta (2025) for further details.

more specific argument in section 5, but whatever the details the route to practical nihilism should now be clear: argue against primitive normativity; then show by the above reasoning that this rules out elitism; and by Premise (2), nihilism follows.

### 3. No middle ground

Still, the reader may worry that this has all gone by very quickly. For what I've said so far implies that there are only two options: either you're committed to primitive normativity, or you're a practical nihilist. This rules out any view in meta-ethics that (i) rejects primitive normativity, yet (ii) claims that there are normative truths that constrain practical reasoning and action, e.g. truths about which actions are *right*, or *should be done*, or most supported by *reasons*, or what have you. This includes normative naturalism, on which normative truths reduce to truths about the natural cosmos; relativism, on which normative truths vary from culture to culture depending on what normative codes they accept; constructivism, on which normative truths reduce to normative attitudes; and other views besides. In short, what I've said so far rules out the majority of contemporary meta-ethics! I think the arguments above stand as is, but it may help to explain how they apply to familiar views from the meta-ethics literature. Here I will discuss three. In each case, I will argue that insofar as the view delivers on (ii), it assumes—if only implicitly—that some notion it rests on is practically significant. From there, the argument above suffices to show that this practical significance cannot be reduced away.

#### 4.1. Cornell Realism

Consider first a view associated with the name “Cornell realism”, on which normative terms like ‘ought’ and ‘reason’ express natural properties. Which ones? Whichever properties regulate (causally and/or evidentially) our application of the terms. On this view, normative terms are like natural kind terms such as ‘water’, which (on the standard Kripke/Putnam view) refers to whichever chemical substance regulates our application of the term, i.e. H<sub>2</sub>O. Suppose our application of normative terms like ‘ought’ is regulated by pleasure-maximization. Then on this view ‘ought’ refers to the utilitarian standard, and truths about what one ought to do are truths about what would maximize total pleasure. This is just a simplified model, of course, but let's assume it for the sake of argument.

Now, if ‘ought’ refers to the utilitarian standard, it would be natural to think that the utilitarian standard then constrains what counts as correct action thanks to being the referent of ‘ought’. The correct thing to do (for us, at least) is whatever is correct relative to that standard—that is what *ought* to be done, after all. This is component (ii) above. But note that this is anthropocentrism. It's a view on which the utilitarian standard is practically significant *for us* in virtue of being the referent of our normative vocabulary. That is, our property of *referring to the utilitarian standard by 'ought'* is what makes that standard practically significant (for us).

And as we saw in section 1, this requires that this property of ours is practically significant also. To see this, note that reference is a relation between word and world, and relations are cheap. There is a relation for any set of tuples. So, for any other standard S\*, such as the divine standard, our word ‘ought’ also stands in *some* relation to it; call it the reference\* relation. Thus our word ‘ought’ refers to one standard S (the utilitarian standard) *and* refers\* to another

standard  $S^*$  (the divine standard) at the very same time! This might sound odd, but it is no more mysterious than the fact that I am both the son of Carol and the father of Dylan at the same time. I stand in all sorts of different relations to all sorts of different things, and so it is with words. Thus we have the property of *referring\* to  $S^*$  by 'ought'*, and it stands to  $S^*$  just as our property of referring to  $S$  by 'ought' stands to  $S$ . What then distinguishes  $S$  over  $S^*$ ? One *wants* to say that reference is more special than reference\*, of course, so that the *referent* of 'ought' is the practically significant standard that constrains correct action. But that amounts to saying that reference is practically significant. And that in turn, we've seen, commits one to primitive normativity. Without that, there is nothing to distinguish  $S$  over any other standard: all standards are distinguished by *some* property of ours, and that is all there is to say. Hence there is no constraint on action: all actions are on a par, *per* practical nihilism.

Note that this is not a case of Moral Twin Earth (Horgan and Timmons 1991). I am not imagining a different community that uses 'ought' differently from us, i.e. whose application is regulated by the divine standard instead of the utilitarian standard. No, I am talking about *us* and noting that given *our* use of the term, it refers to one standard and refers\* to another at the very same time! Note also that this is not meant as an objection to Cornell realism. It may be *true* that 'ought' refers to the utilitarian standard thanks to being the standard that regulates our use of the term. The point is rather that for egalitarians, this does nothing to constrain correct action because the word also refers\* to other standards and there is nothing practically significant about reference over reference\*. To secure a constraint on action, one must maintain that reference has the *sui generis* normative property of being practically significant.

#### 4.2. Relativism

The second example I want to consider is the kind of moral relativism defended by Harman (1996). He characterizes the view as consisting in three claims. First,

“a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of  $P$  to  $D$* , has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework  $M$ , it would be morally wrong of  $P$  to  $D$* ” (p. 4).

And second,

“there are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others” (p. 5).

I'll come to the third claim later; for now, I interpret these two claims as egalitarianism in different terminology. What Harman calls a 'moral framework' is, in effect, what I call a 'standard'. And following Boghossian (2006), I will charitably interpret the first claim as concerning not the content of moral *judgments* but the nature of moral *facts*: that there are no absolute moral facts of the form *it would be morally wrong of  $P$  to  $D$* , just facts about right and wrong relative to a given moral framework  $M$ . If we understand the latter 'right' and 'wrong' as my technical term 'correct', this is egalitarianism.

If Harman stopped here, then, he would have practical nihilism. All moral frameworks, i.e. standards, are on a par; hence all actions are on a par too. Any course of action is guaranteed to satisfy *some* standard, and that is all there is to say. But this does not appear to be his intended view. When an agent is wondering whether to kill one to save five, for example, I believe Harman would maintain that there is a distinguished answer, *the thing to do*, and therefore a distinguished standard by which to evaluate actions. It's just that the distinguished standard is *relative to the agent* (or community)—it's whatever standard is *theirs*; whatever one they *accept*. Admittedly, Harman does not explicitly put this point in these terms (I'll turn to how he does put it in a moment). But something like it must be there *if* his relativism is not to lapse into practical nihilism in my sense of the term. The picture must be that an agent, or community of agents, stands in some relation of *acceptance* (or *endorsement*, or *ownership*) to a particular standard S; and then an action is distinguished as the thing *for them* to do if it is the thing to do relative to *their* standard S.<sup>15</sup>

Seen like this, the view is transparently anthropocentric. Our property of *accepting S* is what distinguishes S as practically significant for us over other standards. And this requires that *acceptance* is practically significant. For we will inevitably stand in all sorts of relations to all sorts of other standards—in fact, for *any* standard we stand in *some* relation to it. If we stand in the *acceptance* relation to the utilitarian standard, we also stand in a relation of *acceptance\** to the divine standard. One *wants* to say that acceptance is distinguished over acceptance\*, of course, so that the utilitarian standard has practical significance *for us* if it is the one we accept. But that presupposes that acceptance is practically significant. If nothing is practically significant, *per* egalitarianism, then both relations are on a par; and if neither relation is significant over the other then neither *standard* is distinguished either—not even *for us*. Hence no *action* is distinguished over the other as the thing to do either—again, not even *for us*. Once again, we see that this attempt at a view that distinguishes certain courses of action over others presupposes the elitist thesis of practical significance. Without that, it collapses into practical nihilism.

Again, the point here is not to reject Harman's relativism. It is, rather, to show that even if it is true it faces a dilemma: either it recognizes a metaphysically fundamental normative fact to the effect that acceptance (say) is practically significant, or else it collapses into practical nihilism.

As I said, Harman does not talk explicitly of acceptance. So let me make the same point in his own terms. In addition to the two claims quoted above, the third claim by which he characterizes his brand of relativism is that “morality should not be abandoned” (p. 6). Indeed, it is this third claim that he thinks distinguishes his view from nihilism. His argument for this third claim is that agents should negotiate and agree on moral frameworks for self-interested reasons. (These are the moral frameworks they'll come to “accept”, to use my vocabulary above.) The result is a contractualist account on which morality should not be abandoned in the prudential reading of ‘should’. But the prudential ‘should’ is, of course, just one standard amongst many. There are other standards just like it but which disagree on some of the cases Harman discusses, for example. Thus, his argument that morality ‘should’ not be abandoned implicitly presupposes that the prudential should is practically significant. Without that assumption, an agent would be making no mistake by refusing social contracts that would be in her own self-interest, and hence

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<sup>15</sup> Boghossian (2006a) also emphasizes the need for this relation of acceptance.

no mistake by abandoning morality after all. This component of his view therefore assumes elitism—at least, it does insofar as it is supposed to distinguish it from nihilism.

#### 4.3. *Street's Constructivism*

The third and final example I want to consider is Street's (2008) constructivist view on which normative facts are fixed by our normative attitudes. If I value swimming, for example, then swimming is valuable (for me). Moreover, on Street's view this same valuing attitude can make other things valuable for me too. The way this works involves the constitutive natures of these attitudes. It's constitutive of the attitude of valuing, says Street, that it aims at means-ends coherence. For example, if I value swimming and I believe that swimming requires a gym membership card, then I also value a membership card. If I really believed that swimming requires a card but I don't value the card, the idea is, it wouldn't be true that I value swimming after all. On Street's view, constitutive principles like these help fix what's valuable (for me). Suppose I do value swimming and swimming *in fact* requires a membership card. Then the card is valuable (for me) even if I don't *believe* it's required.

On the face of it, this succeeds in distinguishing certain actions over others: the thing (for me) to do is buy the membership card. But on closer examination this requires elitism. To see this, let's change the case slightly. Suppose I *say* that I value swimming, and suppose this is an honest report insofar as I have inner sensations that typically accompany valuing something, such as feeling drawn to it. But suppose I know that swimming requires a card and I don't value the card. According to Street, I don't *really* value swimming because valuing something constitutively aims at means-ends coherence. Fine, but there's a different attitude of *valuing\** that's just like valuing but lacks this constitutive aim when it comes to matters aquatic. After all, attitudes are cheap: an attitude like "valuing this" or "wanting that" is a relation between individuals and objects (or propositions), and there is a relation for every set of pairs. Thus, even if I don't value swimming I do *value\** it. But if my *valuing* attitudes fix truths about value *per* Street's constructivism, my *valuing\** attitudes fix truths about *value\** in an analogous way. My valuing attitudes imply that swimming isn't valuable for me, sure, but my *valuing\** attitudes imply that it *is* valuable\* for me. So now, is swimming distinguished as the thing for me to do? It is by the lights of my *valuing\** attitudes, but not by the lights of my valuing attitudes. Of course, one *wants* to say that the attitude of *valuing* is distinguished over the attitude of *valuing\**; or equivalently, that the standard of promoting one's *values* is what determines what to do. But that is just to say that valuing is practically significant. If nothing is practically significant, *per* egalitarianism, then the standard of promoting one's *values* and the standard of promoting one's *values\** are on a par. Hence both courses of action—swimming and not swimming—are on a par too, just as practical nihilism maintains. Once again, egalitarianism implies practical nihilism.<sup>16</sup>

To avoid nihilism, then, Street must claim that the attitude of valuing is practically significant over *valuing\**. But she must then retract her claim that her constructivism is 'thoroughgoing' in the sense that it accounts for all normativity. For as we've seen, practical significance is a primitive normative property. So in effect, what I've argued here is that 'thoroughgoing constructivism' is a contradiction in terms—at least, if it is supposed to amount to something other than nihilism.

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<sup>16</sup> This is, in effect, Enoch's (2006) argument against constructivism.

#### 4. Practical nihilism

So far I have argued that there are only two options: *either* there are metaphysically fundamental normative facts about which standards are practically significant, *or* all standards are on a par and nihilism follows. Views that purport to occupy the middle ground, i.e. of offering normative constraints on action without primitive normativity, are ultimately incoherent.

Fans of primitive normativity may welcome this result and treat it as a *reductio* of their opponents! Instead, I would like to develop the nihilist alternative. Again, the idea is that when deciding what to do, there are countless standards out there and any action will inevitably be correct by the lights of some and not others. So if all standards are on a par, it follows that all *actions* are on a par too: *whatever* you do is correct by the lights of *some* standard, and that is all there is to say. This is practical nihilism.

This is so, notice, even assuming realism about normative concepts like ‘ought’. Indeed, this exposes the sterility of normative realism. The view is *supposed* to imply that practical questions are “objective” in that they have mind-independent answers out there to discover—answers that hold independently of our attitudes and values. But if no answer is practically significant, this is left no more an objective enterprise than sport. To illustrate, in soccer a player is offside when closer to the opponent’s goal than the second-last opponent. Being offside is therefore a mind-independent property in the sense that it depends just on the geometric arrangement of players and not on anyone’s attitudes or values—we should be realists about offsides.<sup>17</sup> Still, the offside rule was obviously invented by us. We can and do change it as we go along. The rules of 1863 stated that a player was offside if closer to the opponent’s goal than the *third*-last opponent—call this the offside\* rule—but in 1990 the rule was revised to encourage more attacking play. We have decided to use the current rule, but there are obviously no human-independent facts that distinguish it as *the* rule to use—there are no “sporting joints”! Thus, while being offside and being offside\* are both mind-independent properties, it is nonetheless up to us which (if either) to play by. At a first approximation, normative realism without practical significance is like that: *being what ought to be done* is a mind-independent property of actions, but it remains up to us whether to use that standard as a guide to life—whether to do as we ought or ought not. To do as we *ought not* would be no mistake, so to speak, for on this view *ought* has no practical significance over *ought not*. There is nothing to break the symmetry, that is, between a community that goes on to do as they ought and another that goes on to do as they ought not: both are doing what is correct by the lights of some standard or other, and neither standard is significant over the other.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> To be clear, I’m talking about actually *being offside*, not the referee’s call. While the referee determines how the play is recorded, they can make mistakes and hence don’t determine whether the player was in fact offside.

<sup>18</sup> Enoch (2011) agrees that moral realism doesn’t suffice for real objectivity. But we disagree on what would suffice. Enoch claims that non-naturalist realism suffices, but we’ve seen why that’s not enough: even if “ought” expresses a non-natural property it does not follow that that property is a practical joint; and if it is not then the discussion in the text goes through just the same. Relatedly, Dunaway and McPherson (2016) argue that realism properly construed requires that moral properties are descriptive joints. But this doesn’t suffice for objective constraints on *practical* reasoning either. The property of being an electron is arguably a descriptive joint, but as I said in section 1 that does not make it an objective constraint on practical reasoning.

To be sure, we might use a standard because we like to live by it, just as we use the current offside rule because we like the resulting game. But don't think this gives that standard any practical significance: that would be an anthropocentric view on which the attitude of *liking* is practically significant. For egalitarians, our preference gives it no such significance: to choose another standard—one we *don't* like—would be no mistake, just a different choice. Insofar as we do tend to use ones we like, this is, for egalitarians, just an empirical fact about *what we do*.

I have heard it objected that this takes the “reasoning” out of practical *reasoning* and renders action a matter of arbitrary selection.<sup>19</sup> To illustrate with an example of David Enoch's, imagine you are buying Cornflakes and find a shelf of 20 identical packs with no reason to pick one over the others. You select one at random. By contrast, when wondering whether to kill one to save five, you look for some *reason* to select one course of action over the other. The distinction here is between *arbitrary* vs *non-arbitrary* selection, to use McPherson's (2018) terminology; or between *choosing* vs *picking*, as Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser put it (1977). The objection, then, is that practical reasoning is essentially a matter of *non-arbitrary selection* (choosing, not picking), yet this is lost on the practical nihilist's view.

But is it lost? Not if non-arbitrary selection is selection based on a standard. For practical nihilism is consistent with the possibility that, as a matter of empirical fact, we use a certain standard *S* when deciding how to live just as we use the current off-side rule when playing soccer. In that sense the objection is mistaken: just as the referee calls off-side *based on the current off-side rule*, so too we may decide what to do *on the basis of standard S*. Still, there is some truth to the objection, namely that for practical nihilists *S* itself would be an arbitrarily selected standard, something we picked rather than chose. There may be a causal/empirical explanation of why we came to use that standard, of course—perhaps one involving natural selection, cultural evolution, or other historical influences.<sup>20</sup> But there would be no *normative* justification for it, as it were; no further fact, over and above the empirical fact that *we do* use the standard, that distinguishes it as *the one to use*. So it is fair to say that nihilism entails that practical reasoning inevitably contains an element of arbitrary selection (picking)—so long as we add the caveat that this is a selection of standards, not actions; and also that the “selection” may involve historical and non-intentional processes unfolding over millennia, very much *unlike* Enoch's case of picking a packet of Cornflakes. With those caveats in place, the objection loses much of its force.

Does this entail that we are not self-reflective creatures? That depends what you mean. It does not entail that we act merely on impulse, out of whatever beliefs and desires we find ourselves with. For on the view just sketched, there is room to ask whether one's desires accord with a standard *S* that one lives by and revise them accordingly. Nihilists can therefore distinguish the desired from the *desirable* at least to that extent. But what about reasons for living

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<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Matthew Adelstein for pressing me on this point during a Q&A at the University of Michigan in March 2024; I believe he was an undergraduate at the time. Thanks also to Gideon Rosen for further discussions on this point.

<sup>20</sup> For example, evolutionary psychologists try to see moral cognition as adaptations to past environments. The literature on that topic is nicely summarized in Cosmides, Guzman, and Tooby (2019); see also Green (2007) and Tomasello (2016) for distinctive takes. For an introduction cultural evolution, see Richerson and Boyd (2005) and Henrich (2015). For an example of the idea that morality post-dated the agricultural revolution, see McCullough (2020). All these approaches rest on game-theoretic ideas summarized in Skyrms (2014).

by S in the first place? Korsgaard (1996) insists that there must be such reasons and moreover that they are to be found in a standard (or ‘identity’) that is inescapable if one is to count as what she calls a ‘self-reflective agent’. Here is where nihilists part ways. True, we might choose (non-arbitrarily) standard S on the basis of a more basic standard S\* that we picked, but for nihilists this must bottom out at some level and one is simply left with the standards one has (here is the ‘picking’). What Korsgaard is insisting, therefore, is that ‘self-reflective agency’ *in her sense* is a practical joint. Without practical joints, there is nothing objectively incorrect about living by another standard that does not satisfy her description.<sup>21</sup>

To be clear, in saying that an agent may choose on the basis of a standard S they picked, I do *not* mean that the meta-standard ‘do what is recommended by the standard you picked’ has any practical significance. For nihilists, of course, it does not.<sup>22</sup> Picking a standard and doing what it recommends is no more correct, objectively speaking, than picking the same standard and doing the opposite! The point is just that, as a matter of empirical fact, agents may pick a standard and then do what that standard recommends. Insofar as that counts as using the aforementioned meta-standard, that would also be one that they picked. So it is perhaps more accurate to say that for nihilists, practical reasoning involves *two* elements of arbitrary selection (picking): of the standard one uses to evaluate actions, and of the meta-standard to do as that standard recommends.<sup>23</sup>

Another way to put the same point is that, for nihilists, there is nothing practically significant about the relation of *picking*. If an agent picks a standard S that recommends one action, she also stands in a relation of *picking\** to another standard S\* that recommends a different action. Whichever action she performs is therefore recommended by *some* standard to which she bears *some* relation, and for nihilists all those relations are on a par. Still, it may be *true*, given what we mean by ‘picking’, that an agent picked a standard S and then did what it recommends. To the extent that that counts as acting on the basis of standard S, the objection loses its force.

The same goes for meta-standards like ‘use the same standard over time’—for nihilists, that too has no practical significance. Thus, consistently acting on the basis of a standard S over time is no more correct, objectively speaking, than changing standards from moment to moment, using S<sub>1</sub> now, S<sub>2</sub> next, then S<sub>3</sub> after that, and so on. It may of course strain the ordinary sense of ‘picking’ (or ‘using’) to describe such an agent as having picked (or used) any one of those standards in the first place. Still, to the extent that we can describe this agent as having picked one standard now and another later, executing a course of actions that fits neither standard alone, that course of action is objectively speaking no less correct than any other.<sup>24</sup>

We are sailing close to the rule-following considerations here, which cast doubt on the idea that there is a fact of the matter as to which standard we used—or picked, or followed, or endorsed, or what have you—in the first place. The idea is that our past actions and intentions

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<sup>21</sup> This is, in effect, David Enoch’s (2006) ‘agency shmagency’ point.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Karen Bennett, Martin Lin, and Jill North for helping me to think through this point.

<sup>23</sup> The point here may iterate up the chain in such a way that counting elements of picking becomes inappropriate. There’s no need to settle that one way or another; the important point is that, for nihilists, practical reasoning necessarily involves an element picking.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, there will be a standard that that course of action fits; the point here is that the course of action is on a par with all others even if the agent cannot be said to have picked or used that standard.



and so on are consistent with all sorts of standards that diverge in future cases; hence there is nothing in virtue of which we can be said to have been using one of those standards rather than another.<sup>25</sup> If so, perhaps practical nihilism follows: nothing about our past actions (or intentions etc) suffices to fix a standard that determines ‘the right way to go on’. But my argument for nihilism here is different. It’s that even if there is a fact of the matter as to which standard we used or picked in the past, that in itself does not give that standard any practical significance as *the one to use now*. We may therefore grant any solution to the rule-following considerations we like. Grant that some fact about us—some counterfactual, dispositional, or causal-explanatory fact about our past behavior, perhaps—suffices to determine that we used (or picked, or endorsed, or what have you) a certain standard S in the past. Still, that does not determine *what to do now*—to think otherwise is to suppose that the meta-standard ‘use the same standard you used in the past’ is itself practically significant over other meta-standards, *contra* nihilism.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, picking a standard places no constraints on practical action! That’s the nihilism, and therein lies the element of truth to the objection that nihilism takes the ‘reasoning’ out of practical reasoning. Still, it may nonetheless be *true*, as a matter of empirical fact, that we act on the basis of a standard—herein lies the extent to which we may still *talk* of practical reasoning nonetheless. The result is akin to Kripke’s ‘skeptical solution’ to the rule-following considerations: a *description* of our practice with no claim to be giving it a normative foundation. If you think our common-sense conception of ‘practical reasoning’ involves more than this, so much the worse for common-sense. My argument for practical nihilism is not that fits with common-sense platitudes but that it follows from certain non-obvious metaphysical truths (i.e., the absence of primitive normativity).

Kripke said that his skeptical solution was akin to Hume’s view of induction, and we can draw an affinity here too. For according to nihilism, a key inferential transition involved in practical reasoning is groundless, much like Hume saw the transition from observation to prediction. This is worth dwelling on. Suppose you are faced with a practical question such as whether to kill one to save five. You might start by weighing various considerations for and against. Would killing one produce most total pleasure? Does it promote the will of God? And so on. Here you are asking which standards the action does and does not meet, expressed in non-normative vocabulary. These are purely factual questions, to be answered with *beliefs* one way or the other—practical nihilism leaves all that in place.<sup>27</sup> You might on that basis form a *normative* belief about what *ought* to be done. Suppose just for concreteness that something ought to be done if and only if it maximizes total pleasure. Then from a non-normative belief that killing one would maximize total pleasure, you might infer the normative belief *that you ought to do so*. This normative belief might be true, and mind-independently so—nihilism leaves all this in place too, for remember that nihilists can be normative realists. Still, you must then make a transition

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<sup>25</sup> See Wittgenstein (1953), Kripke (1982).

<sup>26</sup> This approach to rule-following dovetails with my approach in Dasgupta (manuscript): in both cases I suppose for the sake of argument that there is a fact of the matter which standard we used in the past, *contra* Kripkenstein on rule-following, and point out that it is a further question whether that rule is distinguished as the one to use in the future.

<sup>27</sup> You might call all that *theoretical* reasoning, strictly speaking, not practical reasoning. Fair enough. Or you might classify it as part of “practical reasoning” writ large in light of its downstream effects—that is, insofar as its conclusions will be used to answer practical questions and guide action. It doesn’t matter what we call it, the point is that nihilism leaves it in place.

from all that to a *decision* about what to do—or, if not a decision, then some action-oriented state such as an *intention* or *plan* or *commitment* to do one thing rather than another. And, ultimately to *the action* itself. That is, from true beliefs such as

X maximizes total pleasure  
X ought to be done

one transitions to

X!

where this is an action-oriented state like decision, or perhaps even the action itself.

It is this transition that is groundless, according to practical nihilism. Obviously the transition is not *logically* mandated. The output is not something that can be true or false, so the issue isn't whether the transition is *valid* in the logical sense. The question is whether there are any *non-logical* constraints on the transition, something that distinguishes the *correct* decision to transition to. Elitists think there is: the correct decision is whatever action satisfies the standard with practical significance. Indeed, this is the *raison d'être* of practical significance, we can now see: it provides a ground or justification for this transition from *beliefs* about which actions meet which standards—and, for realists, about what ought to be done—to *decisions* about what to do. But for practical nihilists, the transition has no foundation. All standards are on a par, so there is no underlying justification for deciding on the basis of one standard rather than another. If you decide *not* to X, then that is correct by the lights of *some* standard and all standards are on a par. In this sense there is nothing incorrect about believing that you ought to X and yet deciding *not* to X! Hume famously said you can't get an ought from an is; the point here is that you can't get a decision from an ought.<sup>28</sup>

The comparison with Hume on induction should now be clear. He noticed that the transition from observation to prediction is not logically valid, and he argued that there can be no non-logical (i.e., inductive) justification for it either. The transition therefore lacks a foundation or ground, on his view, but he did not conclude that we cannot make it. It must be seen, rather, as a habit or custom. It is *what we do*. In Wittgensteinian terms, one infers *blindly*. Practical nihilists see practical reasoning likewise. We can (and do) reason about which actions meet which standards, and about what one ought to do and so forth, but the transition from there to *decision* has no underlying foundation or ground. It is just *what we do*—something belonging to habit or custom, not to reason.

The point here is not that normative beliefs aren't intrinsically motivating. Perhaps they are. Perhaps anyone who believes that an action ought to be done is thereby disposed to make the transition above—we can suppose that the concept of 'ought' plays this practical role if you like. The issue is the *status* of this transition; in particular, whether the resulting decision or action can

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<sup>28</sup> At least, that's the situation if we assume realism about 'ought'. Non-cognitivists will of course say that those judgments are already on the action-oriented side of the transition. Fine: then the transition at issue is from non-normative belief to normative judgment. However you cut the pie, there is groundless transition.

be evaluated as *correct* in any objective sense over and above that which you were disposed to do. According to practical nihilism, there is not.

This then is practical nihilism. It differs from other views that have gone under the heading of ‘nihilism’. It is not the view that there are no normative truths, or that nothing is wrong. For it may be (true) that torturing innocent people is wrong, given what is meant by ‘wrong’; my nihilist just adds that ‘wrong’ does not express anything of practical significance.

Nor is it moral nihilism in Gilbert Harman’s sense, the view that morality should be abandoned—or, as he put it, that there is “reason to reject morality” (p. 5). One difference is that Harman’s nihilism pertains to morality, whereas my nihilism pertains to practical reasoning more generally. A second (and related) difference is that Harman’s nihilism is itself a *practical* (or *normative*) claim expressed in terms of non-moral readings of ‘reason’ and ‘should’—that morality *should* be abandoned, or that there is *reason* to reject morality—whereas my nihilism concerns the status those non-moral claims themselves. One could therefore be a nihilist in Harman’s sense without being a nihilist in mine: the view would be that the non-moral concept ‘reason’ expresses something with practical significance, and that there is reason (in that sense) to reject morality. Conversely, a nihilist in my sense need not be a nihilist in Harman’s sense. Indeed, this is my position: I agree with Harman that there is reason to embrace morality; I would just add that this claim of reason does not reflect anything of practical significance.

Christine Korsgaard thinks of nihilism much like Harman. She writes that

“This is why, after all, we seek a philosophical foundation for ethics in the first place: because we are afraid that the true explanation of why we have moral beliefs and motives might not be the one that sustains them. Morality might not survive reflection” (1996, p. 49).

Thus nihilism, as she conceives of it, is the idea that once we learn the truth of morality we’ll see *reason* reject it. Once again, my nihilism is a view about the status of all normativity, including this claim of reason. There will of course be reason to reject morality according to some standards of ‘reason’ and not others, and according to my nihilist all those standards are on a par. Insofar as we live morally, we must have picked one of the latter.

There is of course a separate, empirical question of how the average *Homo sapien* would react, psychologically, to learning that practical nihilism is true. Would it in fact decrease their sense of morality, or their motivation to act at all? I won’t try to speculate without data. Just speaking personally, though, I can report that coming to terms with practical nihilism has if anything made me more careful of my choices and more sensitive of others. For if there is no objective constraint on action, I feel compelled to take extra care to ensure that the world we make is a desirable one to live in. Here I don’t mean to imply that *desirability* is a practical joint, of course, just that the future is entirely up to us—not only in our choice of action, but in what counts as success in action in the first place. When I sit with this fact, I find my experience of decision and action infused with an extra dimension of responsibility: a responsibility not only for doing the right thing, but for deciding what counts as right in the first place. According to nihilism, we cannot outsource that responsibility onto the world.

## 5. Against practical significance

Before concluding, let me return to Premise (1). This said that elitism is false, no standard is practically significant over any other. We saw in section 2 that practical significance is a *sui generis* normative property, so any argument against primitive normativity is *ipso facto* an argument for Premise (1). But let me offer a more specific argument in favor of Premise (1). It won't settle the issue, by any means, but it might help reveal the picture of practical reasoning that elitists are wedded to. I find the picture absurd, but the reader is welcome to draw their own conclusion.

The argument is that the property of being practically significant has two features that seem to me incongruent with one another. The first concerns its normative role. As we just saw, the *raison d'être* of practical significance is to provide non-arbitrary grounds for decision and action. It distinguishes a 'correct' answer to questions of what to do—not in a parochial sense, of course, but correct by the lights of reality's preferred standard. It determines what *really*-ought to be done and the *real*-reasons for doing so, where this could in principle differ from oughts and reasons in the parochial sense. In short, it determines reality's preferred way of living.

The second feature of practical significance concerns its metaphysical status as *sui generis*. To be sure, some things with practical significance might inherit their significance from others. If the divine standard is practically significant, for example, that might be because it is in our interest to act by it. But then *interests* must be practically significant, and the argument from section 2 shows that practical significance can never be explained away. Either the chain of explanations comes to an end in something that is practically significant as a matter of brute fact, or the chain of explanations goes on forever. Either way, there is ultimately no explanation why the property of being practically significant is distributed over the space of all possible standards in the way that it is. It *just is* that way and there is nothing to be said about why. Metaphysically speaking its distribution is completely arbitrary, something that holds for no reason at all.

It is these two features that strike me as incongruent. If something were practically significant then, by the first feature, it would play an incredibly important normative role. It would fix reality's own preferred way of living, no less. Surely, you'd think, there must be some explanation of why it is so special; something about it that *makes* it fit to play this remarkable role. But by the second feature, there isn't. Metaphysically speaking, there is no reason at all why it plays this role. It *just does*. And I do not see how anything with such *normative importance* could be at the same time be so *metaphysically arbitrary*.

To see the point, suppose someone said that the standard of *promoting my daughter's will* is practically significant as a matter of brute fact (i.e. not because of anything else). Their view is that real-reasons and real-obligations are fixed by what promotes *her* will, not that of some deity's. It follows that my daughter is *really* special: it is her will, not yours or mine, that fixes reality's preferred way of living! But if we ask what *makes* her so special, there is no answer; there is nothing about her that makes her more fit to play this role than you or me. And that just seems ludicrous. What's ludicrous here is not just the idea that reality's preferred way of living is fixed by her (though that certainly is). It's the idea that reality's preferred way of living could be

completely arbitrary. It is *reality's preferred way of living*, after all, something far too important for there to be no rhyme or reason why it is what it is.

I claim that the same goes whatever lies at the bottom of chain: it is no less ludicrous to claim of *anything*—God, pleasure, whatever—that it fixes reality's preferred way of living while adding that nothing makes it more fit to do so than anything else. (If you think it's less ludicrous with God or pleasure, you probably think something about them *makes* them significant!) But this is precisely what elitists must say, if the chain has a bottom. Nor is the situation any less ludicrous if the chain has no bottom, for there would still be no rhyme or reason why reality's preferred way of living is determined by *that* chain rather than another.

The thought here is related to Korsgaard's well-known "normative question" argument against non-reductive realism about concepts like 'ought'.<sup>29</sup> Judgments involving 'ought' motivate action, the argument goes, yet this would be mysterious if they were beliefs about a *sui generis* property. So formulated, the argument assumes an "internalist" principle that normative judgments motivate action; the ensuing debate has then centered around that principle, with realists arguing that it is false or that they can respect it after all. To side-step that debate, I once tried to formulate a version of the argument without the internalism (Dasgupta 2017), asking why these *sui generis* properties would matter. The argument here is similar, though pitted against practical significance rather than 'ought'. How could something be so important as to determine reality's preferred way of living, if nothing about it makes it fit to play that role?

The argument rests on Thomas Nagel's observation that there is a "collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary" (1971, p. 718). This is what makes life absurd, he said. Setting aside his conception of the absurd, I believe he was right that there is a collision between those two ideas: between something's being *serious* or *important*, on the one hand, and it's being completely *arbitrary* on the other, lacking any kind of explanation or rationale as to why it is the way it is. The arbitrariness undermines its seriousness, and vice-versa. If a bureaucracy requires you to fill out a form in triplicate and there is no explanation why the system requires this, you will find the task silly. If you don't see the incongruence here, I don't know if there is anything I can say to make it apparent. But it is real, I think, and obvious when one looks at it without prejudice. My argument simply applies this observation to the case of practical significance. I don't claim that there is a logical inconsistency in saying that reality's preferred way of living could be metaphysically arbitrary, but I do claim that it is, well, absurd.<sup>30</sup>

How might elitists reply? They cannot deny that the practically significant standard S is normatively important—that is the *raison d'être* of practical significance. Nor can they deny that it is metaphysically inexplicable why S is practically significant—that follows from the argument of section 2. So, short of biting the bullet and accepting the incongruence, their best move is to

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<sup>29</sup> See Korsgaard (1996, 1997, 2008). For a careful reconstruction of the argument, see Dreier (2015).

<sup>30</sup> In particular, there is no logical inconsistency in saying that practical significance provides *non-arbitrary* grounds for decision and yet is *arbitrarily* distributed across standards, for those are distinct notions of 'arbitrary': the first is normative and the second metaphysical. Rather, the point is that there is absurdity in thinking that something *metaphysically* arbitrary, something that holds (metaphysically speaking) for no rhyme or reason, could have such *normative* importance.

try to remove the sense of arbitrariness by showing that there is *no mystery* why S determines reality's preferred way of living. There is no metaphysical explanation why it does, but no mystery either; it is somehow inevitable that it does even though there is no explanation why. This parallels a standard reply to Korsgaard's normative question argument and can appear tempting at first glance, but on closer examination it is very difficult to make good on the idea.

To see this, note that various attempts at this move miss the mark entirely. For example, suppose an elitist says:

“Look, my view is that S is *practically significant*. So of course it fixes real-reasons and real-obligations and the like—that's what practical significance does by definition! There is no mystery here, S is merely doing what it says on the tin.”

This is clearly cheating. To call something ‘practically significant’ *just is* to say that it fixes reality's preferred way of living—the real-oughts and real-reasons and the like. It is *because* S plays that role that it deserves the title. The question remains why *it* rather than anything else plays that role. Just consider again the view that S is the daughter-command standard. It is *clearly* a good question why we really-ought to do what promotes her will rather than yours or mine. Calling her will practically significant doesn't remove the mystery, it just labels it.

Or suppose an elitist says that it's an *obvious platitude* that S is practically significant.<sup>31</sup> Now, this seems highly doubtful when I think about the obvious candidates for S: is it really *platitudinous* that the divine standard, or the utilitarian standard, fixes the real-reasons and real-oughts? Perhaps it would sound more platitudinous if S were the referent of our parochial term ‘ought’, for then the relevant claim is that we really-ought to do as we ought. But even that is far from platitudinous, for (as I emphasized in section 2) there is a conceptual gap between what *ought* to be done—i.e., those actions with the mind-independent property expressed by ‘ought’—and what *really-ought* to be done—i.e., those actions that satisfy the jointy standard. If they coincide, that is a substantive claim about two independent notions and not platitudinous by any stretch. But setting all that aside, the more basic problem is that even if it were platitudinous this would not remove the mystery. For my question is not *whether* S fixes the real-reasons and real-oughts, but *what explains why* it does. It's an obvious platitude *that* water is wet, but that does not address the chemical question of *why* it is. Likewise, even if it is obvious *that* we really-ought do as S recommends, the question *why* S plays that role remains a mystery.

More promising is the idea that it lies in S's nature to be practically significant. For example, it is often said that pain is essentially something to be avoided; taking this a step further, an elitist might try saying that minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure are standards that essentially have practical significance. Specifically, the claim would be this:

(\*) It is essential to pleasure (pain) that one really-ought to maximize (minimize) it.

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<sup>31</sup> This parallels a common reply to Korsgaard's normative question argument. She asks realists about reasons why, on their view, we ought to conform to reasons, and some replied that there's no mystery: it's an *obvious platitude* that we ought to conform to reasons! I don't believe this is a fair response to her argument (see Dreier (2015) and Dasgupta (2017)); here I discuss the parallel response regarding practical significance.

Now, I have argued elsewhere that essential truths like (\*) stand in no need of metaphysical explanation (Dasgupta 2015, 2016). They lack an explanation, but they aren't 'brute' or 'arbitrary' because they are not the kind of truths that are apt for being explained in the first place. I called them 'autonomous' to mark this status. If so, elitists could say that while there is no *explanation* of why one really-ought to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, there is nothing *arbitrary* about it either for it is built into the nature of pleasure and pain themselves and therefore isn't apt for being explanation.

For this to work, we must understand this talk of 'essence' in the right way. On one reading, talk of essence is just talk of necessity: (\*) just means that it is *necessary* that one really-ought to maximize pleasure. But this can't be the intended reading, for necessary truths are not in general autonomous. The proposition that water is a compound is a necessary truth, but it can be metaphysically explained in terms of water's chemical composition. More pertinently, I suspect that if my daughter was practically significant she would necessarily be so; but the fact that she is significant in all possible worlds does not remove the question of *why* she is significant in the first place. Better instead to understand this talk of essence in the model of definition. Just as words have nominal definitions, the idea is that worldly entities have real definitions.<sup>32</sup> On this reading, (\*) states that pleasure is *by definition* that state such that one really-ought to do what maximizes it. The virtue of this reading is that real definitions are plausibly said to be autonomous: if you ask what *makes* a definition true, an appropriate reply is 'that is just what the definiendum *is*' (see Dasgupta 2015, 2016).

As far as I can see, this is the elitist's best shot of maintaining that there is nothing arbitrary about the fact that e.g. pleasure is practically significant. The trouble is, the required reading of (\*) is not readily available to the elitist. For on the elitist view under discussion, pleasure was supposed to be prior to practical significance and real-oughts. First come the descriptive facts about which actions promote most pleasure; then comes the *sui generis* fact that pleasure-maximization is practically significant, and that then fixes what one really-ought to do. But the current reading of (\*) has it exactly the other way around, for it says that pleasure is *defined* in terms of real-oughts. On this reading there is nothing *there*, so to speak, prior to a specification of what one really-ought to do! Call this the priority problem.

Elitists cannot avoid this problem by reversing the direction of the definition and saying:

(\*\*) It is essential to real-ought that one really-ought to maximize pleasure (minimize pain).

For then real-ought would not be *sui generis*, contra the argument of section 3. More fully, if real-ought were *defined* in terms of pleasure-maximization then it wouldn't break the symmetry between the utilitarian standard and (say) the divine standard, since one could just as well define real-ought\* in terms of the deity's will. Thus, this strategy of locating practical significance in the essences of things must be formulated in the direction of (\*): it must be essential to *the thing with practical significance*, e.g. pleasure, that it fix the real-oughts. But that lands us back with the priority problem.

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<sup>32</sup> Fine (1994) champions this reading of essentialist talk.

For these reasons, I don't think this idea that pleasure and pain essentially have practical significance will work. I don't mean to deny that pleasure and pain have normative upshots, parochially speaking. Perhaps it is *true* that pain ought to be minimized—perhaps it is even a necessary truth, or a platitude lying at the heart of our parochial conceptual scheme. But the elitist who thinks pleasure and pain essentially have practical significance is saying much more than this, and I don't think this further idea withstands scrutiny.

Go back to the idea that the practical significance of pain is autonomous, i.e. not apt for being explained. Might we secure this idea somehow else, without appeal to essence or real definition? Perhaps, but I conjecture that the line of argument above will generalize. For if there is really no question of why a standard S (e.g. pain-minimization) has the property of being practically significant, that is presumably because there is very little metaphysical distance between the two (so to speak). If it's not that one is *defined* in terms of the other, perhaps it's that one *reduces* to the other, or *depends* on the other, or *consists* in the other, or something of that ilk. But it can't be that standard S reduces to (depends on, consists in, etc.) practical significance, for S was supposed to be there anyway, prior to being practically significant—that's the priority problem. And it can't be that practical significance reduces to (depends on, consists in, etc.) S either, for then practical significance wouldn't be *sui generis*—it wouldn't break the symmetry between different standards.

So, as tempting as it might be to say there is no mystery why a standard S is practically significant, the idea does not ultimately hold water. It is metaphysically brute that S plays this normatively important role, something that *just is* the way it is and holds for no rhyme or reason. And as I said, I do not think that anything of any importance could be grounded in something so arbitrary.

This then is my objection to elitism. But it is just one objection. As we saw earlier, any argument against primitive normativity is *ipso facto* an argument against elitism too. So if you're not convinced by this particular argument, I hope to have at least convinced you that there are only two options: you must either embrace primitive normativity, or you must accept the nihilist view that all ways of living are on a par. There is no in-between.

## Postscript

Elitists might—just *might*—have a way out of the priority problem. I outlined it in Dasgupta (2024) and I'll gesture at it here. Roughly, the priority problem arises because of a metaphysical picture that's been implicitly assumed from the beginning. The picture is that there is an enormous range of 'descriptive' standards—the utilitarian standard, the divine standard, and so forth—each of which is what it is independently of anything to do with practical significance; and it is then a further, *sui generis* fact about one of them that it is the practically significant one. That is why we cannot say that this further fact is definitional of the standard: the standard itself was assumed to be there already, so to speak. That was the priority problem. If someone insists that pain is defined in terms of practical significance *a la* (\*), fine: that just means they think the utilitarian standard was not on the menu of descriptive standards we started with. Pain is a package of real-oughts, on their view, not a descriptive mental state, so the question remains which of the descriptive standards on the menu determines those real-oughts; i.e., which is



practically significant. Elitism maintains that one of them is, and so long as the metaphysical picture above is granted this fact about the standard cannot be definitional of what it is. It is metaphysically brute, arbitrary fact about reality that one really-ought do as it recommends.

The way out is to deny that there is a menu of descriptive standards in the first place and maintain, instead, that no standard has a being or identity independently of practical significance. Since standards are cheap, what this amounts to, I think, is that *all of reality* has its source in practical significance. Reality is fundamentally normative. This is not just the view that normativity is a fundamental component of reality over and above the natural world order—that's normative primitivism. Rather, it's the view that the natural world order, including all the matter distributed across spacetime, consists in pure normativity. This might seem too crazy to take seriously—perhaps that is why the view is rarely even *articulated* in contemporary meta-ethics, let alone defended. But something in the vicinity can be found in ancient Neoplatonists such as Plotinus, who held that reality emanates from a single principle of 'the Good'. I called the view 'normative Neoplatonism' to mark this resemblance, and it might just avoid the priority problem. For on this view there are no descriptive standards on the menu in the first place. There is therefore no problem in defining pain in terms of practical significance, for *everything* is ultimately defined in those terms! All of reality has a purely normative source, so there is nothing left for the priority problem to be a problem for.

Zooming out, the picture we assumed from the beginning was in effect a *dualist* metaphysics—a normative-descriptive dualism on which the descriptive standards were one thing and normative properties like practical significance another. Each is what it is independent of the other; neither is reducible to the other. The fact that a descriptive standard S has the normative property of practical significance is then akin to a metaphysically brute connection between two independent realms—that is what made it arbitrary. But normative Neoplatonism rejects the idea that there are two independent realms in the first place—not because it reduces the normative to the descriptive, as does normative naturalism, but because it reduces the descriptive to the normative. The fact that one really-ought do as S recommends is then not arbitrary in the slightest, for it flows from the very nature of *what S is*. We may not know the real nature of things, of course; but if we did, the rhyme and reason behind real-oughts would be apparent.

*If* one can make sense of a view like this—and it is a *big* if!—then I think it is what elitism must amount to if it is to avoid the absurd collision between the important and the arbitrary.

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