



International Journal of Philosophy, Linguistics, and Humanities

Journal Homepage: <https://ijmshe.com/index.php/ijplh>



Research Article

Philosophical and Psychological Dimensions of Moral Nihilism: A Systematic Review

Ankit Banerjee¹  | Kathika Chattopadhyay^{2*} 

¹ Researcher, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Professor, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Article Info

Article history:

Received: 10 December 2025

Revised: 7 January 2026

Accepted: 29 January 2026

Keywords:

Ethical theory, Metaethics, Moral error theory, Moral nihilism, Moral psychology, Moral skepticism, Normativity, Value theory

Abstract

Moral nihilism—the metaethical view that no objective moral facts exist—has drawn sustained philosophical interest and increasing interdisciplinary attention. To systematically synthesize contemporary philosophical arguments, psychological findings, and applied implications of moral nihilism using a transparent, reproducible PRISMA-aligned methodology. Six databases (JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, PhilPapers, PsycINFO, Google Scholar) were searched using predefined Boolean queries. Dual-independent screening and extraction were conducted. Conceptual works were appraised using a bespoke argumentative clarity rubric; empirical works using adapted JBI criteria. Narrative thematic synthesis was applied. Twenty-one included studies form three thematic clusters: (1) philosophical foundations and arguments for/against error theory; (2) psychological and cultural perspectives; (3) applied implications in education, climate ethics, and theology. Moral nihilism remains philosophically resilient, though contested by intuitionist, realist, and pragmatist approaches. Empirical evidence on psychological consequences is sparse and inconsistent. While denying objective moral truths, moral nihilism does not entail moral paralysis. Instead, contemporary literature reframes morality as socially functional, culturally embedded, and pragmatically sustained. Significant empirical and cross-cultural gaps remain.

Cite as: Banerjee, A., & Chattopadhyay, K. (2025). Philosophical and Psychological Dimensions of Moral Nihilism: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Philosophy, Linguistics, and Humanities*, 1(2), 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.70847/680956>

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

* Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

Introduction

Nihilism, derived from *nihil* (“nothing”), has long signified radical skepticism regarding knowledge, value, and obligation. Contemporary discussions increasingly distinguish moral nihilism from relativism or expressivism by its central ontological commitment: there are no moral facts.^{1,2}

The aim of this review is to answer the following question:

What are the philosophical arguments, psychological consequences, and applied implications of moral nihilism as presented in contemporary literature?

To ensure transparency and reproducibility, the study follows PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Methods

A protocol specifying research questions, eligibility criteria, extraction fields, and synthesis procedures was drafted prior to screening.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion:

- Peer-reviewed articles, monographs, dissertations
- Published 1980–2023
- English language
- Focus on moral nihilism, error theory, moral skepticism, psychological/cultural effects

Exclusion:

- Opinion pieces without scholarly apparatus
- Works addressing unrelated forms of nihilism
- Duplicates

Information Sources

Databases searched: JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, PhilPapers, PsycINFO, Google Scholar.

Search Strategy

Example Boolean query:

(“moral nihilism” OR “moral error theory” OR “ethical nihilism” OR “moral skepticism”) AND (“nihilism” OR “error theory”)

Database-specific syntax adhered to each platform’s indexing. Searches were limited to 1980–2023.

Study Selection

Screening followed a two-stage dual-independent process:

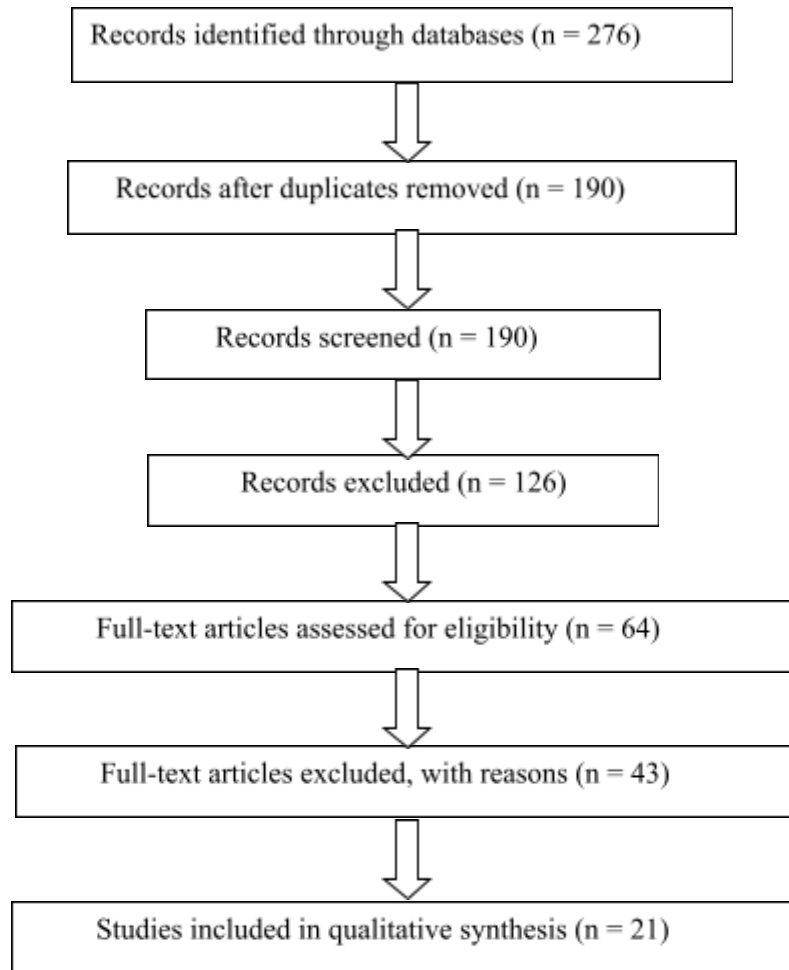
1. Title/abstract screening (duplicates removed)
2. Full-text eligibility review

Disagreements were resolved by consensus. Screening results are summarized in the PRISMA Flow Diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion for the systematic review of moral nihilism (1980–2023)

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com



Data Extraction

Extraction fields included: bibliographic metadata, discipline (philosophical/psychological/applied), methods, key arguments/findings, and limitations.

Quality Assessment

- Conceptual works: evaluated with a 5-domain clarity and argumentative robustness rubric.

- Empirical/cultural studies: assessed via adapted JBI criteria (sampling, measurement validity, clarity of analytic methods).

Synthesis Approach

Given heterogeneity, a narrative thematic synthesis was performed across the philosophical, empirical, and applied domains.

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

Methods

Study Selection

A total of 276 records were identified. After screening and full-text review, 21 studies were included.

Study Characteristics

See Table 1 for a concise overview of author, year, perspective, and key contributions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Author (Year)	Type	Perspective	Key Contribution
Mackie (1977) ³	Book	Philosophy	Argument from queerness; error theory foundation
Joyce (2001, 2013) ^{4,5}	Books	Philosophy	Developments of error theory; moral fictionalism
Blackburn (2009) ⁶	Book	Philosophy	Moral practice persists without justification
Brink (1984) ⁷	Article	Philosophy	Defense of realism against disagreement arguments
Kaspar (2018) ⁸	Article	Philosophy	Intuitionist challenge to nihilism
Copp (2009) ⁹	Chapter	Philosophy	Distinction between relativism and nihilism
Krellenstein (2017) ¹⁰	Article	Psychology	Evolutionary underpinnings of value skepticism
Peng (2018) ¹¹	Conference paper	Sociology	Social instability linked to nihilism in China
Sigurðsson (2016) ¹²	Article	Cultural	Daoist reinterpretation as life-affirming
Weismuller (2012) ¹³	Thesis	Philosophy	Pragmatist critique
May (2013) ¹⁴	Article	Philosophy	Skeptical hypotheses and moral knowledge
Sturgeon (2009) ¹⁵	Chapter	Philosophy	Moral disagreement and explanation
Blake et al. (2012) ¹⁶	Book	Education	Implications for educational practice
Pölzler (2015) ¹⁷	Article	Applied ethics	Nihilism and climate inaction
Olson (2019) ¹⁸	Book	Philosophy	Contemporary defence of error theory
Smith (2009) ¹⁹	Chapter	Philosophy	Infinite spacetime and value implications
Collins (2018) ²⁰	Dissertation	Theology	Atheist/Christian responses to nihilism

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

Thematic Synthesis

Philosophical Foundations

Foundational defenses of error theory are principally developed by Mackie³ and Joyce^{4,5}.

Key themes:

- Argument from queerness (Mackie³): moral properties would be metaphysically strange.
- Fictionalism (Joyce^{4,5}): moral discourse retained for pragmatic utility despite falsity.
- Challenges: intuitionists (Kaspar⁸), realists (Brink⁷), and pragmatists (Weismuller¹³) reject nihilism's metaphysical claims.

Psychological and Cultural Perspectives

Empirical evidence is limited but suggestive:

- Norm erosion in Chinese contexts (Peng¹¹)
- Evolutionary skepticism (Krellenstein¹⁰)
- Positive reinterpretations such as Daoist meaning-creation (Sigurðsson¹²)

Applied Contexts

- Education: nihilism may destabilize traditional value transmission but also enable reflective pedagogy (Blake et al.¹⁶).
- Climate ethics: moral nihilism is not a substantial predictor of inaction (Pölzler¹⁷).
- Religion: theological responses reframe nihilism through vocation and meaning (Collins²⁰).

Discussion

The evidence indicates that moral nihilism is simultaneously a stable philosophical doctrine and a dynamic interdisciplinary problem. Philosophical work remains the intellectual core, structured primarily around Mackie's error theory³ and Joyce's developments^{4,5}.

Yet the inclusion of psychological, cultural, and applied perspectives demonstrates that nihilism also functions as a lived orientation, a cultural force, and a lens for reinterpreting social institutions.

Across these domains, a recurring insight emerges:

Denying objective moral facts does not eliminate moral behavior but transforms how moral practices are justified and experienced. Rather than collapsing, moral discourse becomes re-situated within human psychology, culture, and social coordination.

Mackie's argument from queerness³ and Joyce's error theory and fictionalism^{4,5} remain the most systematic cases for nihilism. Their dual

critique—metaphysical strangeness of moral properties and absence of a cognitive faculty for moral detection—continues to resist straightforward refutation.

However, contemporary critiques target the explanatory costs of error theory, including those developed by May¹⁴, Brink⁷, Sturgeon¹⁵, and others:

- How does one explain the depth and universality of moral experience?¹⁴
- Can motivational force be preserved without evaluative truth?⁷
- Are moral disagreements better explained by realism than nihilism?¹⁵

Thus, the debate has shifted: from metaphysical possibility to explanatory adequacy.

Quasi-realism, constructivism, and fictionalism—advanced by Blackburn⁶, Copp⁹, and Joyce⁵—exemplify attempts to preserve the functionality of moral discourse while relinquishing truth conditions. Their

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

proliferation underscores an academic unease with the radical implications of nihilism—even among those sympathetic to anti-realism. These hybrid positions reveal that:

- People use moral concepts indispensably⁶⁹.
- Morality has pragmatic and communicative roles independent of objectivity⁶.
- Eliminating moral talk entirely is psychologically and socially infeasible⁵⁶.

Error theorists treat normativity as an evolutionary or cultural artifact (Krellenstein¹⁰; Weismuller¹³); realists treat it as evidence for objective moral truths (Brink⁷; Sturgeon¹⁵).

The deeper tension concerns what moral claims are for:

- If they track moral facts → realism is favored⁷.
- If they coordinate social behavior → nihilism or constructivism is plausible⁵⁶⁹.

The literature increasingly frames moral thought as a tool for cooperation, signaling, reputation management, and identity construction—suggesting that moral nihilism may integrate more naturally with scientific explanations of human behavior than robust moral realism (Krellenstein¹⁰; May¹⁴).

Emerging empirical studies challenge the stereotype that nihilism is inherently destructive:

- Evolutionary accounts (Krellenstein¹⁰) suggest skepticism is adaptive for flexible norm negotiation.
- Daoist reinterpretations (Sigurðsson¹²) show people can transform the absence of objective values into opportunities for autonomous meaning-making.

Thus, nihilism can manifest in adaptive, not merely disorienting, ways. Its psychological impact is mediated by cultural frameworks, existential resources, and personal identity.

Peng's analysis of Chinese sociocultural contexts¹¹ indicates that moral skepticism often emerges amid rapid modernization, value pluralism, and erosion of traditional authority. Yet the direction of causality remains unclear: nihilism may be a symptom rather than a cause of social instability.

Overall, the psychological and cultural data support a nuanced conclusion:

Moral nihilism interacts with sociocultural environments in diverse ways, producing disorientation in some contexts and creativity or resilience in others.

Educational literature suggests two distinct implications:

- Traditional moral pedagogy—based on transmitting objective norms—is destabilized¹⁶.
- Reflective, dialogic, and pluralistic pedagogies may be strengthened¹⁶.

Nihilism thus challenges normative authority while promoting critical engagement.

Pözlér's work¹⁷ reveals that nihilism is not a strong predictor of climate inaction. Practical motives, social norms, and identity commitments exert significantly more influence. This finding undermines the assumption that nihilistic commitments drive moral apathy.

Theological responses (Collins²⁰) indicate that nihilism frequently serves as a dialectical partner that ultimately reinforces religious meaning-making. Rather than eroding faith commitments, nihilism becomes a conceptual foil for reasserting purpose and vocation.

Across applied domains, a central insight emerges:

Moral systems can operate effectively without presupposing objective moral truths.

The reviewed literature strongly supports the view that moral systems function as social,

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

psychological, and linguistic constructs, not metaphysical realities (Olson¹⁸; Joyce⁵; Weismuller¹³).

Humans appear capable of sustaining:

- commitment,
- moral motivation,
- ethical reasoning

even when they reject objective moral facts. This supports pragmatic, constructivist, and fictionalist accounts⁵⁶⁹¹³.

Rather than representing a purely negative thesis, nihilism prompts constructive re-evaluations of:

- value creation,
- moral justification,
- cultural narratives,
- social coordination^{3-5,18,21}.

Limitations

Several limitations constrain the present review and the broader literature:

1. Empirical Scarcity
 - Few psychological or sociological studies investigate nihilistic belief or its behavioral effects.
 - Lack of standardized instruments prevents quantitative synthesis.
2. Conceptual Heterogeneity
 - “Nihilism” is inconsistently defined across fields, ranging from metaphysical error theory to cultural pessimism.
 - This variability complicates cross-study comparisons.
3. Publication Bias
 - Philosophical literature dominates the field, overshadowing empirical or

Moral nihilism, as used in this review, is a meta-ethical thesis about the status of moral propositions. Error theorists such as Mackie³ and Joyce^{4,5} hold that moral claims aim to describe objective moral facts, but no such facts exist; therefore, all positive moral judgements are systematically false. This concerns the ontology and semantics of moral discourse. In contrast, moral behaviour and social morality refer to the empirical and cultural practices through which people form preferences, coordinate action, enforce norms, and construct ethical narratives. These behaviours occur across societies largely independently of meta-ethical commitments, and psychological research studies how people act in moral contexts, not whether moral claims are objectively true^{10-12,21}.

culturally embedded analyses.

– Critical perspectives from non-Western traditions remain underrepresented.

4. Methodological Diversity
 - Mixing conceptual philosophy with empirical psychology introduces incommensurability in evidence standards.
5. Temporal and Cultural Constraints
 - The 1980–2023 scope may omit recent data or earlier foundational works shaping contemporary discourse.

These limitations indicate that caution is required when generalizing the findings, particularly regarding psychological and societal implications.

Conclusion

This systematic review demonstrates that moral nihilism remains a philosophically robust and culturally significant position. The central

thesis—that no objective moral facts exist—continues to withstand many contemporary objections. Yet the wider

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

interdisciplinary literature reveals that the implications of moral nihilism are far more nuanced than often assumed.

Rejecting objective moral truths does not eliminate moral reasoning, cooperative behavior, or ethical concern. Instead, moral life becomes anchored in human practices: shared norms, affective dispositions, narrative identities, and pragmatic coordination mechanisms. In this sense, nihilism reframes morality rather than abolishing it.

Future research will benefit from empirical operationalizations of nihilistic belief,

cross-cultural comparisons of moral motivation absent realism, and applied analyses in contexts like professional ethics and technological governance. As societies navigate increasingly pluralistic moral landscapes, understanding how individuals and institutions function without appeals to objective morality will be essential.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that moral nihilism—far from prompting moral collapse—illuminates the fundamentally human processes through which values, obligations, and meanings are created.

Supplementary Details

1. Supplementary Materials & Data Availability Statement

The supplementary material has been uploaded in the form of Appendix 1, Appendix 2, and Appendix 3, which contain the relevant supporting data. In addition, a table and a figure have been fully incorporated within the main manuscript.

2. Author Contributions

Ankit Banerjee: Conceptualization; Methodology; Literature search; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing – original draft.
Kathika Chattopadhyay: Conceptualization; Supervision; Validation; Critical interpretation; Writing – review and editing; Corresponding author responsibilities.

3. Funding Information

This research received no external funding

4. Institutional Review Board (IRB) Statement

Not applicable.

5. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

6. Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida, for its guidance and academic resources throughout the development of this research. The institute's scholarly environment and continued encouragement substantially contributed to the completion of this work.

7. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

8. Disclosure Statement (Use of AI Tools)

AI-based language assistance tools were used during the manuscript preparation process solely for linguistic support, including grammar correction, stylistic refinement, and improvement of clarity and academic tone. No AI tools were used for data generation, data analysis, interpretation of results etc. All content generated with AI assistance was carefully reviewed, verified, and validated by the authors

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

References

- Pratt, A. (2020). *Nihilism*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Britannica Editors. (2020). *Nihilism*. Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*. Penguin Books.
- Joyce, R. (2001). *The myth of morality*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511487101>
- Joyce, R. (2016). *Essays in moral skepticism*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198754879.001.0001>
- Blackburn, S. (1995). Justification, scepticism, and nihilism. *Utilitas*, 7(2), 237–246. [//doi.10.1017/S0953820800002065](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820800002065)
- Brink, D. (1984). Moral realism and skeptical arguments from disagreement and queerness. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 62(2), 111–125. [//doi.10.1080/00048408412341311](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048408412341311)
- Kaspar, D. (2018). Intuitionism and nihilism. *Philosophia*, 46(2), 319–326.
- Copp, D. (2009). Moral relativism and moral nihilism. In D. Copp (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of ethical theory* (pp. 296–321). Oxford University Press.
- Kreinsen, M. (2017). Moral nihilism and its implications. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 38(1–2), 75–90.
- Peng, G. (2018). The causes, manifestations, and negative influences of moral nihilism in China. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences & Ecological Studies* (pp. 1–5).
- Sigurðsson, G. (2016). Creating meaning: A Daoist response to existential nihilism. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 3(3), 377–390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-016-0061-2>
- Weismuller, J. (2012). *Values and beliefs: A pragmatist critique of moral nihilism* (Honors thesis). Philosophy Honors Projects.
- May, J. (2013). Skeptical hypotheses and moral skepticism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 43(3), 341–359. [//doi:10.1080/00455091.2013.857138](https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2013.857138)
- Sturgeon, N. (2009). Moral explanations. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Arguing about metaethics* (pp. 23–45). Routledge.
- Blake, N., Smeyers, P., Smith, R., & Standish, P. (2012). *Education in an age of nihilism*. Routledge.

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com

- Pözlér, T. (2015). Climate change inaction and moral nihilism. *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 18(2), 202–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2015.1070488>
- Olson, J. (2019). *Moral error theory: History, critique, defence*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Q. (2009). Moral realism and infinite spacetime imply moral nihilism. In H. Dyke (Ed.), *Time and ethics: Essays at the intersection* (pp. 43–54). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-3530-8_4
- Collins, P. (2018). *Some contemporary atheist and Christian responses to moral nihilism and amorality* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford).
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2019). Moral skepticism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.



© The Author(s) 2025. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Creative Commons Licensing Terms

Authors retain copyright for their published articles, with the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) applied to their work. This license allows anyone in the community to copy, distribute, transmit, or adapt the article without needing permission from the author(s) or publisher, as long as clear and proper attribution is given to the authors. This attribution should clarify that the materials are being reused under the Creative Commons License. The opinions, views, and conclusions presented in the articles belong solely to the author(s). The Open Access Publishing Group and the International Journal of Philosophy, Linguistics, and Humanities disclaim responsibility for any potential losses, damages, or liabilities arising from conflicts of interest, copyright issues, or improper use of content related to the research. All published works meet Open Access Publishing standards and are freely accessible for educational, commercial, and non-commercial use, allowing for sharing, modification, and distribution under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

² Corresponding Author: Kathika Chattopadhyay

*Corresponding Email: dr.kathika@gmail.com