

**Faculty of Philosophy**  
**James Martin Advanced Research Seminar Programme (TT09)**

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**Venue:** James Martin 21<sup>st</sup> Century School, Seminar Room 1, Old Indian Institute, Broad Street

**Date:** 5th Week ~ Wednesday 27 May, 3.00 – 5.00 pm

**Speaker:** Dr Guy Kahane (Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford)

**Title:** "Nihilism: Nothing to Fear?"

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**Abstract:**

The rise of natural science, and the decline of religious belief and traditional forms of life, have often been associated with a sense, or fear, that nothing matters—that the universe is devoid of any significance, and that all human strivings are absurd. The heroes of Turgenev and Dostoevsky grapple with this threat of nihilism, and for many European thinkers from Nietzsche onwards philosophy's most urgent task is to refute or overcome or face up to it. Remarkably, however, one finds none of this cosmic anxiety in analytic metaethics, although it has long been dominated by naturalism. Most analytic metaethicists just do not take nihilism very seriously. I argue that this is a mistake. A sober assessment of the state of the debate in metaethics suggests that there are good grounds for thinking that nihilism might be true. Following Mackie's lead, a number of metaethicists have recently come round to this view—or to something close. But even these philosophers are peculiarly complacent. Incredibly, they think that even if nihilism is true, this won't make much of a difference. This complacency, I will argue, is also mistaken. Although it makes no sense to fear nihilism, its consequences—or, more precisely, the consequences of believing it—are likely to be dramatic.