

# Neutral Nihilism

## Why Nihilism Is Neither Good nor Bad

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### Abstract

I defend an evaluatively neutral interpretation of nihilism against the negative and positive alternatives, arguing that Negative Nihilism and Sunny Nihilism fail to grasp the significance of nihilism's claim that there is no cosmic goal to human life, and thereby misinterpret a descriptive claim about the nature of human life as if it were an evaluative claim being made within a social context. Nihilism might seem negative or positive to certain individuals, but only because of the nature of their previously held false beliefs about meaning. Through three counterfactual scenarios, I show that unless the meaning of life involves a non-manifest reward or punishment, its presence or absence is a matter for indifference.

### 1. Some Definitions and the Aim of the Paper

By “nihilism” I mean the view that there is no meaning of life, that life is meaningless.<sup>1</sup> I believe this existential sense of the word to be the historically dominant one, as well as the best known in the contemporary world; I have defended the former in a limited fashion<sup>2</sup> and am currently in the process, with my colleague Stephen Leach, of providing a more extensive historical defence. Probably the second most significant usage, at least in academic philosophy, is to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger and is the idea of a historical process of the degradation of value, akin to Kierkegaard's “levelling”.<sup>3</sup> That is not what I am talking about in this paper. When I talk about “nihilism” I am talking about the view that there is no meaning of life.

By “meaning of life” I mean our cosmic purpose, the goal we were created to

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<sup>1</sup> Tartaglia (2016a).

<sup>2</sup> Tartaglia and Llanera (2021), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard (1846), pp. 86-96. Nietzsche defines nihilism this way at the very beginning of *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 1883-8, p. 9), a collection of notes not organised by him and never intended for publication; it was Heidegger's primary source for Nietzsche. *The Will to Power* also contains plenty of uses of “nihilism” in the standard existential sense (even his initial definition in terms of Kierkegaardian levelling includes it: “The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer”), as well as other senses he seems to have been experimenting with at the time.

fulfil, or must fulfil to play our part in the cosmic unfurling of the universe towards our ultimate goal, perhaps *the* ultimate goal. The Greeks called it the *telos agathôn* and all the major Greek schools took a stance on what it was, influenced by much older ideas in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indian philosophy<sup>4</sup> – only the label “meaning of life” is modern. As with “nihilism”, I believe the existential and teleological sense of “the meaning of life” is the historically dominant one<sup>5</sup>, and it is unquestionably the best known in the contemporary world.

A related concept is meaning *in* life, which concerns the meaningfulness of certain human activities as opposed to others. This more secular and individualist offshoot of the older concept developed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the terminological distinction between meaning *in* and *of* first made by Kurt Baier.<sup>6</sup> Meaning in life is not what I shall be talking about in this paper, although I have recently defended a new account of it.<sup>7</sup> It is clearly a different concept, because whether there is a cosmic purpose or not, it could still be the case that some of our activities are more “meaningful” than others in a non-cosmic sense; what this sense amounts to, or can be engineered into, is another question. In this paper I shall only be talking about the meaning of life and the nihilist’s denial that there is one.

I shall not be arguing for nihilism, although I do believe it.<sup>8</sup> Rather, my primary aim is to persuade you that when considering nihilism, you should, as your default position, be interpreting it in an evaluatively neutral way. That is, you should consider it as a possibility that is neither good nor bad, rather as if you were considering the possibility that dinosaurs were brightly coloured – significant, interesting, amazing even, but not an appropriate focus for regret or celebration. This is not to deny that relative to your other beliefs nihilism might seem good or bad; bad more typically, because of the cultural influence of religion. Accepting the truth of nihilism need not be a matter for reluctance and regret, however, and I shall argue that to think otherwise is a confusion, one which we are ready to advance beyond.

The three ways of interpreting nihilism I shall look at are Negative Nihilism, Sunny Nihilism and Neutral Nihilism. Negative Nihilism is the standard and practically universal interpretation according to which if nihilism is true then this

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<sup>4</sup> Uždavinys (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Tartaglia and Leach (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Baier (1957), p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Tartaglia (2024), pp. 183-191.

<sup>8</sup> Tartaglia (2016a); Tartaglia and Llanera (2021).

represents a very poor state of affairs, perhaps even the worst one possible. Sunny Nihilism is the recently emerged interpretation of nihilism as positive, while Neutral Nihilism denies that nihilism motivates an evaluation of life.

This paper will proceed as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, I will define Negative Nihilism and explain its rationale, then give my reasons for rejecting it. In Sections 4 and 5, I will do the same for Sunny Nihilism. In Section 6, I will define Neutral Nihilism and give its rationale. In Section 7, I will discuss three counterfactual scenarios which favour Neutral Nihilism over the Negative and Sunny alternatives. In Section 8, I will speculate on the historical and psychological root of people interpreting nihilism negatively. Section 9 lists my four conclusions.

## **2. Negative Nihilism – Definition and Rationale**

Negative Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) rationally compels a highly negative evaluation of human life, perhaps even a complete condemnation (hence “negative”).

Negative Nihilism is what people usually mean by “nihilism”, always before the 20<sup>th</sup> century and overwhelmingly to this day. The second claim about being rationally compelled is required because the first is not in itself an evaluation, it just claims that our lives lack cosmic purpose and whether or not that is a good thing is debatable. Similarly, to say that smoking causes cancer is not in and of itself to evaluate smoking, but instead just to state a fact about smoking, one which would rationally compel most people to form a negative evaluation of smoking.<sup>9</sup> Historically, and to this day, the prospect of nihilism being true has been thought to compel not just a negative evaluation of human life, but a highly negative one, perhaps even a complete condemnation.

I shall now present four reasons for favouring the negative interpretation of nihilism. They are the main ones I am aware of, but if there are others unaffected by the critique that I will go on to present, then that would be a promising line of response for a defender of Negative Nihilism.

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<sup>9</sup> Or, strictly speaking, just a *more* negative evaluation, since the smoker might still evaluate smoking positively overall, just less positively given their concerns about cancer.

- a) To say that something is “pointless” is to evaluate it negatively. If human life is itself pointless then everything we do is pointless, so nihilism is the ultimate, all-encompassing negative evaluation of pointlessness.
- b) If nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction all lack value. A meaningless life is consequently a worthless one, and to say that something is worthless is a negative evaluation.
- c) If nihilism is true, then there is no reason to act, nor even to carry on living, because any reason that might be given is undermined by nihilism.
- d) When individuals die their achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, if nihilism is true then our achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are ephemeral and without value.

### 3. Negative Nihilism – Critique

According to (a), “X is pointless” is a negative evaluation of X. This is usually true, and the reason is that human life is goal-directed. We are naturally teleological creatures who live by setting ourselves goals, or having them set for us, whether by others or our own biological instincts.<sup>10</sup> Once we have a goal we try to achieve it. If we fail we are frustrated and either keep trying or move onto a new goal. If we succeed we move onto a new goal and if we have no goals we tend to feel useless, bored or depressed.

As such, “X is pointless” is usually a condemnation because it states that X does not contribute to our goals. For example, if you saw somebody repeatedly striking wet matches you might condemn their activity as pointless because they will never achieve their goal of lighting the match in that manner. There is no point striking wet matches, but there is a point to striking dry ones because doing so achieves a human goal. Note that if we change the goal, then striking wet matches need no longer be pointless, so these judgements are entirely relative to our goals. For example, a comedian repeatedly striking wet matches to make people laugh is only pretending to do something pointless, the real point is to amuse – and thus to put on a good show, please her manager, progress her career, buy a house, and so on. The “and so on” eventually peters out into nothing

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<sup>10</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), chapter 1.

according to the nihilist, whereas the believer in a meaning of life thinks it terminates in a cosmic achievement.

“X is pointless” is usually a condemnation, then, as is “X is meaningless”. It is not always a condemnation, however, because few people would be Puritanical enough to insist that everything we do must have a clearly defined purpose, otherwise it is to be condemned, and it would be Puritanical Fundamentalism to go as far as to require that everything we do must be in service of The Meaning of Life. If you went that far, it would be hard to avoid condemning brushing your teeth. For does keeping your teeth healthy really contribute to the cosmic purpose? If you think it does, you need to justify your view by saying what the cosmic purpose is, because unless you know that, you cannot know that brushing your teeth helps. The most popular answer in human history is that our cosmic purpose is to worship God – I think we could do that perfectly well with bad teeth.

Most people, however, recognise that pointless activities can be fun, and so long as they are harmless, would not condemn them. You could be a devout Christian and still enjoy some pointless jumping around with your kids, surely. There are plenty of activities in our lives that lack a point even in relation to our wider goals, let alone in relation a cosmic goal. Since we must have learned “X is pointless” judgements from our daily activities, then superimposed that form of judgement onto life as a whole in our metaphysical speculations, the fact that the everyday judgements are not always condemnations, combined with the fact that the metaphysical case seems obviously very different, renders irrelevant that fact that “X is pointless” is *usually* used negatively. It is usually used negatively in everyday life, true enough, but when we make the metaphysical claim of nihilism we are no longer talking about everyday life.

The more serious flaw in the reasoning behind (a), however, is that if there are no cosmic goals for us to achieve, as nihilism claims, then it simply cannot be a bad thing that our lives fail to contribute to those goals – *for there are no goals, they do not exist*, so there is no sense in which we are failing to achieve “them”. In everyday life, we condemn things as pointless when they fail to contribute to our goals. But in metaphysics, we cannot be condemning life by saying that it is pointless / meaningless, because if we were, then we would be presupposing that there is a cosmic goal which human life fails to contribute to.

This seems to me to be the main misunderstanding behind Negative Nihilism – it fails to understand that nihilism undermines any reason for assuming that not contributing to a goal would be a bad thing in the case of human life as a whole.

Such an assumption requires there to be a valued goal that is not being contributed to by human life, hence the condemnation, but nihilism is the view that there are no such goals. As such, Negative Nihilism is ultimately rooted in a conceptual confusion, one firmly rooted in our history. If nihilism strikes you as obviously bad, since pointless / meaningless things are bad, then that is because you have failed to understand the claim, which is a denial of goals, not a statement of regret about our failure to achieve them.

Arguments (b) and (c) exhibit the same confusion in different ways – the problem is again that a judgement about life is being illicitly modelled on a judgement within our goal-directed lives, and in this way it is mistakenly thought that life is being condemned, even though such a condemnation only makes sense in terms of presupposed goals, and so is impossible from the perspective of nihilism's denial of goals. Thus, according to (b):

if nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction all lack value. A meaningless life is consequently a worthless one, and to say that something is worthless is a negative evaluation.

All that can legitimately be said, however, is that if nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction lack *cosmic* value. If nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction never had any cosmic value, it only had value to us human beings; it still does and it always will so long as we continue to exist. Only the Puritanical Fundamentalist could think that if nihilism were true then all achievement, pleasure and satisfaction has been had under false pretences, since it was only ever possible on the false premise of cosmic purpose. You do not need to believe in cosmic purpose to think that saving a child from drowning is a valuable thing to do, nor indeed to value a good meal, human relationships, intellectual and artist achievement, or your own health and wellbeing. Perhaps all of this has cosmic value too, but it is valuable to humans whether or not it does. Once again, the root of the mistake is to think that a judgement *within* human life about what has value vs. what is worthless can be applied to the nihilist claim. Worthlessness in life is what does not contribute to our goals, or what obstructs them. Nihilism is not saying that our lives fail to contribute to, or obstruct, the cosmic purpose, it is denying its existence.

My response to (c) is largely the same. This time the claim is that accepting nihilism would undermine all your reasons for acting, and perhaps even for

carrying on living – Camus’s “one truly serious philosophical question”.<sup>11</sup> But that is simply not true. The claim is just that there is no cosmic reason to act, all of the ordinary, terrestrial ones remain. A strong swimmer who sees a child drowning has every reason to act, and if he would not act unless he thought the rescue would contribute to the cosmic purpose, then he is not only a Puritanical Fundamentalist, he is a monster. Or to bring the examples back down to earth, if I fancy a beer that gives me a good reason to go to the pub, whether I believe in a meaning of life or not.

The fourth line of argument is different from the others since it concerns death, which, as I shall hypothesise in Section 8, is at the root of irrational dread of nihilism. According to (d):

when individuals die their achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, if nihilism is true then our achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are ephemeral and hence without value.

This makes about as much sense as refusing to eat because the meal will end or refusing to go on holiday because the holiday will end. The only achievements, pleasure and satisfaction humans have ever experienced is ephemeral, if the everlasting kind exists none of us has started having it yet, so we are hardly in a position to disparage the former on the basis of the latter, when the latter is a mere speculation based entirely on our familiarity with the former. You might as well condemn human music on the grounds that it lacks value in comparison with the eternal music of the celestial spheres.

Why would the thought that my life may be forgotten undermine the value I and others place in it now? When I am dead and forgotten my life will not have value anymore, but it had value while I was alive. Of course, I am very small and short-lived compared to a massive asteroid hurtling through distant unknown space, and so insignificant in comparison to it in terms of size and age. But that does not mean the asteroid is more valuable than me – I am more valuable to myself, to my family and friends, and if there is human-independent objective value then I would have thought being alive and conscious is more important than being big and old.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Camus (1940), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> These confused thoughts about our supposed insignificance have been used to motivate the

#### 4. Sunny Nihilism – Definition and Rationale

Sunny Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) rationally compels an evaluation of human life which is more positive than it would otherwise be (hence “sunny”).

Sunny Nihilism is an online phenomenon that has arisen only recently among Generations Y, Z and Alpha, and which takes its name from the title of a book which crystallizes the phenomenon, Wendy Syfret’s *The Sunny Nihilist: How a Meaningless Life Can Make You Truly Happy*.<sup>13</sup> Syfret is a journalist, not a philosopher, but she is philosophically astute enough to channel an interesting thought that has emerged within a young public prepared to question whether nihilism is really as bad as it is made out to be. Is it not simply a religious prejudice to think life must have a holy purpose to be good? These generations, with Syfret as their eloquent spokesperson, have also asked whether it might not be a big relief that the traditional religious idea of holy purpose is phony, along with its secular descendant of having more or less meaning in your life, because that means we are not tied into its traditional, moralistic prescriptions and can do whatever we ourselves think best.

Syfret became a Sunny Nihilist in a road-to-Damascus moment. She was getting stressed at work and it was making matters worse that she kept thinking she was wasting her life on pointless activities, when she ought to be making her life meaningful. One evening on the walk home from work it all became too much for her, she doubled over gasping for breath, psychologically worn down by the pressure of the need to live a meaningful life, when it suddenly occurred to her that, “*I’m just a chunk of meat hurtling through space on a rock. Futile and meaningless.*” And “the sense of relief was immediate”.<sup>14</sup> The following is what

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judgement that human life is absurd; for an analysis focusing on Nagel and Camus, see Tartaglia 2016a: 44-8.

<sup>13</sup> Syfret (2021). The idea had been thought of before, such as by Nietzsche, who in 1886 remarked (again in his private notebooks – the same ones as *The Will to Power*, but here I use an improved edition), “What a sensation it is to feel, as we freed spirits feel, that we are not harnessed up to a system of ‘ends’!” (Nietzsche 1885-8: 99). Nietzsche certainly toyed with Sunny Nihilism, then, but in the works he published he always interpreted nihilism negatively, as he does in most of his notes too.

<sup>14</sup> Syfret (2021), p. 14; italics original.



I think her reasoning to this conclusion amounts to:

- a) The idea of meaning is oppressive – it “creates hierarchies of how we spend our time and assign value”<sup>15</sup>, thereby adding to our stress levels and making us feel inadequate.
- b) Not believing in a meaning of life allows us to better appreciate passing pleasures and live for the day.
- c) When individuals die their achievements, pleasures and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, we should make the most of life while we still have it.

I have sympathy for (a) and (b), but not (c), which takes the same premise as Negative Nihilism’s (d) but draws a different conclusion, an equally spurious one. (a) is close to something I have argued myself, namely that the idea of a cosmic goal can be oppressive, since it provides a standard by which our lives are to be judged and with which we are not allowed to disagree.<sup>16</sup> And it can also be dangerous too, since it can be used to motivate any measures required to realise the human destiny, regardless of the collateral damage – for example, the idea that our cosmic purpose is to perfect ourselves, and that eugenics is the best technological means to that end.<sup>17</sup> It was dissatisfaction with this rather dictatorial element to the traditional idea of the meaning of life which led to more individualist notions of meaning *in* life developing over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; although as Syfret’s case bears witness, the oppressiveness seems to have remained.

## 5. Sunny Nihilism – Critique

The problem with (a) is that although the meaning of life could be seen as oppressive, it could also be seen as liberating, comforting or inspiring – it entirely depends on both the nature of the meaning and the person who believes in it, as Syfret herself is aware.<sup>18</sup> The meaning of life is not going to seem oppressive to a Christian Saint, and to the Platonist tradition stemming from Plotinus it was

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<sup>15</sup> Syfret (2021), p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 12-19.

<sup>17</sup> Tartaglia (2016b); Tartaglia (2020), chapter 5; Tartaglia and Llanera (2021), chapter 1.

<sup>18</sup> Syfret (2021), pp. 134-135.

regarded as positively liberating, the ultimate aspiration – since they thought the meaning of life was to leave our bodies to live like gods. The kind of meaning Syfret believed in made her negatively evaluate her own life, so when she realised she did not believe in this meaning anymore she was elated, because her life no longer seemed so bad. The realisation of meaningless made her happy, then, but not because it told her something good about human life. It made her happy because it removed her previous false beliefs about the meaning of life, the false beliefs that were making her sad.

Coming to believe in nihilism might be a cause for celebration, then, but only if you were previously oppressed by your belief in a meaning of life, just as it might be a cause for despair in people who were heavily invested in the thought that there is a wonderful meaning of life. There is no more reason to evaluate nihilism positively than negatively, however, since all it states is that there is no meaning of life; it is not stating that we are released from a bad meaning or deprived of a good one. Any evaluatively neutral fact can provoke a negative or positive evaluation, depending on the context, but that does not make the fact itself bad – it is just bad for you that it is a fact, given the surrounding context. For example, the fact that I have written the number three might cause you delight if it means you win a million pounds, but despair if it means you will be executed.

According to (b), nihilism allows us to better appreciate passing pleasures and live for the day, but once again it depends on your previous beliefs in a meaning of life. To feel this way, your previous beliefs must have diminished your appreciation of passing pleasures, as Syfret's evidently did. Others might believe in a meaning of life that accentuates the passing pleasures of life, although admittedly this has most emphatically *not* been the historical tendency, which has rather been to downplay and even despise our embodied pleasures in favour of higher cosmic significances. Nevertheless, a hedonistic religion is a possibility, and even with an ordinary, otherworldly religion, the believer might still find more pleasure in their daily routine because they think they are serving their god or gods. So, the realisation of nihilism could make you happier and more willing to live for the day, or do the opposite, or have no such effect on you either way; and I know the latter is a possibility because that is how it was for me.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> When it first occurred to me that nihilism is the answer to the question of the meaning of life, it did not strike me as either elating or depressing, only interesting – I could see all kinds of connections between the traditional problems of philosophy and the motive of avoiding nihilism, connections of the kind I explore in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (Tartaglia 2016a). The book is not an argument for nihilism, as tends to be assumed from the title, but rather an attempt to understand philosophical

Argument (c) is just a rehash of Negative Nihilism's (d), as previously noted, except this time we are no longer seeing ephemerality as a cause for despair, but rather as something which allows us to fully appreciate life. But recognising value as ephemeral need not enhance it. We typically place greater value in what is long-lived; you can have a relationship with a horse, but not with a fly that only lives for a day. Usually when we are liking something, such as a holiday, we do not want it to end. I think this is the standard attitude to life so long as it is going reasonably well, which is why when life-extension technologies become available they will be a massive commercial success. Even eternal bliss sounds perfectly good to me in principle, although I would have to check the details before committing.<sup>20</sup> So, the reasoning behind (c) is poor, just like the reasoning behind (d); although once again death is definitely relevant to how we greet thoughts of nihilism, as I will try to explain later.

## 6. Neutral Nihilism – Definition and Rationale

Neutral Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) does not rationally compel an evaluation of human life because being meaningless in this sense is neither good nor bad (hence “neutral”).

This is my own view,<sup>21</sup> that of Tracy Llanera when we wrote together,<sup>22</sup> and it is also the official view of Aribiah Attoe,<sup>23</sup> although he vacillates considerably.<sup>24</sup>

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views on the assumption that life is meaningless. It is about how philosophy looks *in a meaningless life*, one in which it is falsely taken for granted that meaninglessness, if true, would be a cause for despair. Before I realised I was a nihilist I did not believe in a meaning of life, I had just never thought seriously about the issue, so had no view either way. (I think this autobiographical note is justified, given that philosophers typically display such strongly negative reactions to nihilism that I often suspect they do not really believe any other reaction is humanly possible, at least among those who understand the issues.)

<sup>20</sup> See Tartaglia (2020), pp. 158ff. and 172-178.

<sup>21</sup> Tartaglia (2016a).

<sup>22</sup> Tartaglia and Llanera (2021).

<sup>23</sup> Attoe (2023).

<sup>24</sup> Attoe states his adherence to the Neutral Nihilist position quite clearly at a key juncture of his book (Attoe 2023: 165-188, esp. 176), but then repeatedly interprets nihilism very negatively, as if deep down he agrees with the Negative Nihilist – and the final conclusion of the book cannot be read as neutral at all, he is clearly depressed by the thought of nihilism (ibid.: 199). I think he is most

Apart from myself, Llanera and Attoe, I am unaware of any other defenders of Neutral Nihilism, although the idea has certainly been discussed,<sup>25</sup> and Thaddeus Metz seems to be edging into our camp by arguing that nihilism is not as bad as pessimists like David Benatar portray it.<sup>26</sup> But Metz still takes it for granted that absence of cosmic meaning is “absence of a good”<sup>27</sup>, albeit not one we should be overly concerned about, so he remains in the Negative Nihilist camp for now, at least.

My rationale for Neutral Nihilism can be put in the form of the following argument:

*Premise 1:* If there is a meaning of life, then there is a metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to evaluate life positively, negatively or neutrally.

*Premise 2:* If nihilism is true, there is no metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to evaluate life positively, negatively or neutrally.

*Conclusion:* Therefore, the nihilist assertion that there is no meaning of life cannot amount to, include, or require an evaluation of human life, because if what is being asserted is true, then there is no metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to make such an evaluation.

So, to make the reasoning a little more concrete, suppose an all-powerful and all-knowing God exists who knows the meaning of life. He knows exactly why we exist, he grasps it perfectly within his metaphysically authoritative understanding of human life, and He sees that life is a good thing (because our existence contributes to His cosmic purposes, perhaps), or a bad thing (because we sin so much that we interfere with His cosmic purposes, perhaps), or a neutral thing (because our lives make no difference to His cosmic purposes). But now suppose nihilism is true. In that case there is no cosmic purpose for our lives to either contribute to, detract from, or be irrelevant to. So, we should not seek to evaluate life in terms of cosmic purpose. We could still evaluate it in other terms, such as

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charitably interpreted as a Neutral Nihilist who cannot help having a negative reaction to nihilism, even though he realises he should not (Tartaglia 2025 forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> Karr (1992); Marmysz (2003).

<sup>26</sup> Metz (2022).

<sup>27</sup> Metz (2022), p. 50.

the balance of pleasure to pain, but once the idea of a metaphysically authoritative evaluation is rejected, this endeavour looks arbitrary and absurd.

To see this, suppose we choose the balance of pleasure and pain as our basis for evaluation, as has been the most popular approach among disappointed unbelievers since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Well, there are currently about 8.2 billion people in the world – how could anyone have confidence in their *a priori* reasoning about whether the aggregate pain outweighs the pleasure or *vice versa*? How could you empirically test it? Even if you somehow could, perhaps with AI superintelligence, then this would give us no reason to believe life will always be more painful than pleasurable, or that it always has been in the past. And the choice of pleasure and pain seems arbitrary anyway – why not evaluate human life on the basis of artistic achievement, or philosophical wisdom, or scientific knowledge? If we are no longer talking about the reason for which we exist, then you might as well choose sporting achievement; on that basis we are perhaps the most valuable beings in existence.

It seems to me, then, that if human life is not here for a cosmic reason, if it simply exists for no reason, then we are not here for a good reason, such as to evolve into a ball of cosmic bliss, or for a bad reason, such as to suffer, for a middling reason that has both good and bad elements, or for a reason which is irrelevant to the cosmic purpose. We are not here for a reason at all – that is the claim of nihilism, so nihilism is not offering an evaluation of life. If you believe in a meaning of life then you may be offering an evaluation of life, and given the history of this idea you almost certainly are, but if you are a nihilist you are not.

## 7. Three Counterfactual Test Cases

*Case 1: Not bad, could have been better.*

In World 1, the meaning of life is to worship a good deity.

In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of devout worship.

So, A has it right and B has it wrong. A is worshipping a good deity and that is what he is supposed to be doing, that is the meaning of life, the reason he was brought into existence by the deity, his cosmic purpose. B, on the other hand, is worshipping

a fiction, and hence is wasting his time, except to the extent that he enjoys worshipping, or receives intellectual satisfaction from it, or some other positive consequence – although whether he would regard the consequences as positive if he knew his deity was fictional is highly doubtful.

A's life is better in this situation, because it is meaningful in a good way, whereas B thinks his life is meaningful in a good way but is wrong. But B's life is only worse in a trivial, counterfactual way, so long as A is not going to receive concrete rewards for his efforts, such as eternal bliss in heaven. We must assume this because otherwise A's and B's lives would be different, one of them would include an afterlife, and we are supposed to be considering a case in which they are exactly the same except for whether there is a meaning of life or not, in order to ascertain whether the truth of nihilism would make life worse. And it seems to me that it would only make it worse in a trivial, counterfactual way. Nihilism prevents B's life from having cosmically good meaning, so counterfactually he misses out, but it does not otherwise make his life any more or less valuable. This is as trivial as accepting that I have counterfactually missed out by not belonging to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 150 years old, or one which experiences twice as much pleasure when eating. I suppose that is true, but I am equally lucky, in a correspondingly trivial sense, that I do not belong to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 40 years old, or one which experiences half as much pleasure when eating.

On the other hand, B misses out in a non-trivial way by believing in a good deity that does not exist. He goes to church and prays under false pretences, and hence uses that time in a way that could be put to better use. Falsely believing in the meaning of life can make your life actually worse, whereas falsely believing in nihilism is risk-free, so long as adhering to the meaning of life lacks concrete rewards, such as eternal life.

*Case 2: Not good, could have been worse.*

In World 1, the meaning of life is for our suffering to please a sadistic deity. In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of devout worship of a good deity that they think exists but does not exist in either world. A sadistic deity does exist in World 1, however, and She loves watching A suffer,

especially when the suffering is incurred in his acts of worship of the non-existent good deity, such as when he drags himself up the 583 steps of the Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte on bleeding knees – the amusement this kind of suffering gives her was the main reason She created human life, and hence is its cosmic purpose.

In this case B's life is better, because it is better to be wasting your time than providing this kind of service to a sadistic deity. If both A and B were aware of their cosmic situation, A would have more reason to regret it than B, although you would expect B to regret it too, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, B has only lucked out in a trivial, counterfactual sense, the same sense in which I am lucky not to belong to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 40 years old, or one which experience half as much pleasure when eating. However, both A and B have actually suffered from their false beliefs in a meaning of life. So once again, we see that believing in a meaning of life is risky, whereas believing in nihilism is not, because if you are wrong it cannot really matter to you – not unless it has deprived you of some cosmic reward, of course, but then nihilists do not think there are any of those.

### *Case 3: Does it matter?*

In World 1, the meaning of life is for human pleasure to be maximised.

In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of pure hedonism.

In Cases 1 and 2, believing in a meaning of life could be damaging to the value of your life, because you might be wasting your time if nihilism is true, or if you chose the wrong meaning. Looking back on a life of prayer in full knowledge that the deity you were praying to did not exist, although for your whole life you thought He did, most people would surely regret having wasted their time, at least to some extent; if they had their time again they would do something different. There might be some who would think their life of prayer was so wonderful that they did not regret it even though it was based on a false premise, but I think such people are rare; the kind who would not regret years spent with a lover they thought was faithful but who cheated obsessively. And that is just the penalty for

betting on a meaning of life when nihilism is true. The penalty for choosing the wrong meaning could be much worse, as in the sadistic deity scenario of Case 2.

Case 3 is different because it makes no difference to the value of your life even if you are wrong that hedonism is the meaning of life. Suppose persons A and B both think it is, they are true believers, so they put the maximum effort into their hedonistic pursuits. Person B went awry in her metaphysical speculations, however, because nihilism was true in her world, so did she miss out? Perhaps she could have spent her time more enjoyably praying and bird-watching, but to suppose this is to suppose she had no real enthusiasm for the hedonism, and that seems unrealistic when she genuinely believed she was trying to achieve the ultimate cosmic goal, the meaning of life. Whatever you think of hedonism as a lifestyle, it seems equally good, bad or neutral if it is the meaning of life as if it is not.

Now switch the example from hedonism to something more worthy, like contributing to the spread of justice, or wisdom, or knowledge, or beauty. The same argument applies. Persons A and B spend their lives in pursuit of beauty, say, they are great artist doppelgängers. Both thought the meaning of life was to create beauty, Person A was right but Person B was wrong, so Person's A's life was meaningful and Person B's life was meaningless. So what? Well, Person B's life made no contribution to the cosmic purpose of, for example, saturating the cosmos with beauty so that reality itself becomes the intelligible matter of The Form of Beauty. I see no reason for Person B to care about that: the cosmos counterfactually missed out, which is trivial, and the pursuit of beauty is a reasonable, and indeed admirable pursuit for a human being. As such, it makes no difference that she was wrong about the meaning of life. The pursuit of beauty is a good thing to do with your life anyway.

In so far as we are able to set overall goals for our lives, or believe there are such goals because we believe in a meaning of life, the most reasonable goals are those which would remain reasonable if nihilism turned out to be true. Hedonism, justice, knowledge, art, happiness, adventure, spirituality and love are likely to be key components of such goals. If we pursue goals like these, then we personally do not miss out if nihilism is true, only the cosmos misses out, in a trivial, counterfactual way. Such goals do not need the royal seal of approval from the cosmos. It is only when the meaning of life involves some secret, non-manifest reward or penalty that the possibility of nihilism, and of belief in nihilism, starts to matter. The possibility of nihilism then matters because the believer in a



meaning of life might be wasting their time, which could have been more gainfully employed had they correctly ascertained the nihilistic metaphysical situation. And believing in nihilism starts to matter when we consider meanings which might land nihilists in hell.

If you mould your life around a quest for non-manifest reward or penalty then it makes a big difference whether nihilism is true because you have chosen a risky lifestyle, given the extreme tendentiousness of the evidence for non-manifest rewards or penalties. If you take that risk and are wrong, then that is no good reason for a negative appraisal of nihilism, however – it was your false belief in a meaning of life that did you harm, not the truth of nihilism. If you were right and nihilists like me are heading to hell, then we are going to hell for believing something evaluatively neutral about the cosmos, which is some consolation. It is hard to imagine nihilists being quite that unlucky, however, given the extreme evidential tendentiousness. In fact, if the psychology of God bears any resemblance to that of humans, then I would think it far more likely that She, He or It would favour the humans who lived lives which would have been reasonable even if nihilism was true.

## **8. Nihilism and Eternal Life**

If my reasoning is along the right lines and nihilism is indeed an evaluatively neutral metaphysical claim, then why has human history developed in such a way that it has almost always interpreted nihilism with extreme negativity? My hypothesis is because of the kind of meanings of life that have predominated in human history, namely those that promise an escape from death. Humans fear death, not just instinctively, as do other animals, but intellectually too – the idea of it disturbs us, and it takes some serious discipline in a philosophy such as Stoicism to overcome that; a far more common tactic, because far less demanding, is philosophical thoughtlessness.

If it is because of our fear of death, whether raw, ignored, or overcome, that believers in the kind of meaning of life that saves you from death think exceptionally highly of this meaning – for what could be more important to them? Imagine a superior being poses you the following dilemma: in one week's time you are going to die unless you write and then post ten thousand letters – if you do that, your life can continue as normal. Personally, I would drop everything and start writing and posting letters, as fast as I possibly could. Then imagine you

reach nine thousand letters and still have two days to go, you are very relieved to realise that you will easily make it. But as you are basking in relief while working on the remaining letters, the intelligence tells you it was only joking, since it is going to kill you at the end of the week anyway. That is what it would be like for a true believer in a lifesaving meaning of life to be told that nihilism is true.

No wonder nihilism has been evaluated negatively, then, for it has dashed false religious hope. Or, at least, I presume it is false hope. Even if it is not, however, nihilism is still only a neutral claim, because all it does is take life at face value. It does not set out to undermine people's hopes for eternal life, it just asserts what seems to be true if you take life at face value, namely that life ends when your body dies and consciousness ends, the two go together. The fact that people are primordially and viscerally afraid of death should make us maximally suspicious of any reasoning that purports to show that, appearances to the contrary, we actually live forever. Those who earnestly tell you that you can live forever like to include a set of instructions on how you must live to earn this ultimate reward. Personally, I would rather be a nihilist and live the way I think best.

## **9. Conclusions**

- 1) Negative nihilism is inspired by fear of death. If what you want more than anything is to believe that living in manner X will earn you eternal life, then the thought of nihilism will fill you with despair. If you have never thought about it much, then you will take it for granted that nihilism is terrible because that is its historical reputation.
- 2) Although nihilism is neutral, it may seem good or bad to you, depending on which false views about the meaning of life it has disabused you of.
- 3) Unless the meaning of life involves a reward or penalty in addition to the manifest, face-value rewards and penalties which a human being can reasonably expect for living one way or another, then the presence or absence of a meaning of life is a matter for personal indifference.
- 4) Philosophers theorising about nihilism should work with the neutral kind unless they know how to overcome the arguments in this paper. Otherwise, they will be theorising about a straw man, because in the realm of nihilism there is only one real contender – Neutral Nihilism is the one to beat if you are a believer in the meaning of life.

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