Tartaglia, James. "The Meaninglessness of Life." *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 21–40. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474247696.ch-001>>.

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The Meaninglessness of Life

I admit, or rather I would assert, that a result, if it fails to satisfy our whole nature, comes short of perfection. And I could not rest tranquilly in a truth if I were compelled to regard it as hateful. While unable, that is, to deny it, I should, rightly or wrongly, insist that the inquiry was not yet closed, and that the result was but partial. And if metaphysics is to stand, it must, I think, take account of all sides of our being.

F. H. Bradley, 1893₁

1. The truth of nihilism

There is no overall point to human life. We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out. Every day when we wake up from sleep we must do something simply because we exist, but there is nothing in particular that we must do. It rarely seems like this to us, because in the midst of life our ongoing projects provide a continual feed of tasks that apparently must be accomplished. The situation becomes more perspicuous, however, when we look to the beginning and the end of the human life cycle, since we do not regard the play-tasks small children devise for themselves as imposing any absolute imperatives, and although very old people continue to motivate and structure their lives with projects, we tend to regard these as things the person wants to do, rather than as things they have to do. In truth, the same situation holds throughout life: there is nothing we ever have to do.

Our most compelling imperatives come from biology, society and ourselves. Biological imperatives are the strongest, for our continued existence depends on our satisfying them; we have to eat, of course. However, since there is no overall point to life, failing to eat cannot count as a mistake comparable to the mistake of failing to play a move in chess that would checkmate your opponent. This point applies equally to imperatives that flow from society and ambition: nobody has to pay the mortgage or write the concluding chapter of their novel, in the sense that a failure to do these things cannot constitute a failure to live properly. Of course in an everyday sense, unforced actions that result in the loss of your home, your publishing contract, and most

especially your life, are mistakes of the gravest kind that exemplify failure in life. This sense, however, reflects only what we want for our lives, and not what our lives actually are. For when we restrict ourselves to the concern of describing the general nature of human life, we find something that exists with no built-in or externally determined purpose, and so must conclude that although we want to survive and prosper, this is not what we are here to do.

It is our concern for collective life that leads us to treat certain imperatives differently from others. Thus the little girl wants to finish her painting, and the octogenarian wants to see the Cook Islands, but we are unlikely to regard the accomplishment of these tasks as of any more than sentimental concern, thinking as we do that the real business of the girl's life is still ahead of her, and the old man's behind him. These activities are seen as just ways of passing the time, as periods of rest and recreation generally are. There are other activities, however, which we regard as constitutive of what we 'do with' or 'make of' our lives. These activities, generally centring around family and profession, and in some cases a project or mission, are regarded differently for the reason that they provide the means to the satisfaction of our most important imperatives. Thus by working, for example, we produce material goods and services, and are thereby able to consume material goods and services, as well as provide for those who do not work, such as the very young and the old. Nevertheless, despite the importance that these activities have in securing the lives we want for ourselves, they are not distinguished from the others by the contribution they make to the overall point of life, since there is none.

What has happened is that our desire to do things has disguised itself as *having* to do things, as if there were a meaning of life impelling us. Feeling that you have to do something is a particularly strong form of desire. It does not typically seem like this; the things we recognize that we *want* to do seem to exert a greater pull on us than those we dutifully go along with because they *have* to be done. But this is an illusion, as can be seen from how we react to the prospect of not doing something we feel we have to do (like paying the bills) as compared to not doing something we want to do (like buying a new car); we give up on the latter far more readily than the former. The reason is that we want to do both, only the former more strongly. Philosophy allows us to see through this disguise, and recognize that we do not need anything stronger than desire to motivate us; that we can live without the disguise. But some sad philosophers who saw through it were so attached to the illusion that they were unable to live without it. They thought that we needed something more than desire – which they once assumed we had – and unable to accept that desire is good enough, they consequently condemned the world. This is how nihilism has led to pessimism.

The social framework we live within, which has been building up over the course of history, makes it seem that our lives have an overall point, thereby disguising desires as absolute imperatives. The framework imposes a mutual understanding; an interpretation of the world and the various options we have for living in it which facilitates cooperation for the purposes of satisfying our imperatives, many of which are suggested – and all of which are shaped – by the framework itself. Within the framework there are roles already set out for us, pre-existing ways of life we can join based around traditions, family relationships, organizations and fields of endeavour. Many of these roles, especially those

built around the mid-life activities that we take most seriously, are associated with criteria of success. Thus every actor, banker or subsistence farmer knows what constitutes success in their field, and in addition, may adopt a more personal criterion of success determined by the extent of their ambition. Within the framework, then, we can tread a more or less beaten path through our lives, and are thereby provided with rules and objectives for living. In this way, life takes on the character of a game: a highly flexible and complex game, of course, but nevertheless an activity we can join in with others, and perhaps at the end, look back to evaluate how well we did.

Life is not a game, however, for games are our invention and human life is not. Since we invent games, we can dictate their rules and objectives, so that in a game of chess there are good moves, bad moves, and within the game, a definite point to playing, namely to win, just as within the wider context of life there is a point to playing chess. However, if the practice of moving chess pieces and investing them with a certain significance were to cease, so would chess; the only remainder would be the boards and pieces. But if the practice of playing the prescribed roles of the framework, and thereby interpreting life as a game were to cease, life would not cease. It would remain, its pointlessness rendered more perspicuous. The difference is that the existence of chess depends on our interpretation of certain moves and pieces, whereas the existence of life does not depend on how we interpret our daily activities. Once the interpretation is in place, activities have a purpose within life, just as chess moves have a purpose within the game, and the game has a purpose within life; but in all these cases the purpose is made up within a life that has no purpose of its own.

To say that the purposes we allow to govern our life decisions are 'made up' is not to say that they are the imaginative creations of particular individuals, of course; even imperatives of ambition, which come closest to this, are still largely determined by the options available to the individual, over which he or she can have little control. Rather, the purposes have been made up anonymously over the course of history, as people living together in communities, guided by evolving conceptions of what constitutes a good life and how best to achieve it, have established patterns of behaviour with criteria of success and failure. Biological imperatives provide no exception to this, for although the desire to eat is not something we invented, the imperative to satisfy this desire can only govern our behaviour if we choose to play along, just as the need to pay the mortgage can only govern our behaviour if we play along. This freedom to put even biological imperatives aside serves as a reminder that for the modern human being, all purposes are socially constructed impositions upon life, rather than something constitutive of life.²

The case is different with (non-human) animals: an animal cannot decide to go on hunger strike or take a vow of chastity, because the biological frameworks in which they live are largely or wholly constitutive of their lives. If an animal in its prime stops eating or mating for no good biological reason, then it has simply malfunctioned. Human beings, on the other hand, have broken free of the biological framework in which their ancestors lived. Within the biological framework of the animal, daily life is largely governed by learned routines and instincts; the scope for innovation or choice, where present, is limited. With the development of our social framework, however, the measure of freedom in the world was greatly increased, for the traditions and

established practises that came to govern daily life were not as binding and inflexible as the instinctual routines they evolved out of, and the development of different traditions and practices which were equally capable of satisfying our biological needs provided us with scope for choosing between alternative ways of life. An eventual product of this evolution of freedom was the realization that we do not have to choose any of the life options presented by the framework, and thus that although our social framework evolved out of a biological framework, and remains deeply conditioned by biological needs and instincts, it provides us with options only.³

Our social framework nevertheless plays a similar role to the biological frameworks of animals, in that it governs our behaviour to promote the satisfaction of our imperatives, including of course our biological imperatives. When immersed in the framework – as, for instance, when we are fully focused on our work – then we know exactly what we are supposed to be doing with ourselves, and the only decisions required concern how best to realize our presupposed goals. This can be compared both to the animal's immersion in its biological framework, and also to immersion in a game, since each restricts the parameters of possible behaviour while guiding it with an unquestioned goal. A crucial difference, however, is that unlike the animal's immersion, we have the ability to step back from our framework and see it for what it really is. In doing so, we see that the various goals we preoccupy ourselves with throughout life are all optional, and that they do not contribute to an overall goal, since human life exists without existing *for* anything. This capacity to break the spell of our immersion, rather as a player may at any moment suspend play, is a by-product of the freedom we evolved in the transition from the strictures of a biological to a more malleable social framework.

The notion of stepping back from our social framework is, in a variety of terminological guises, a familiar one from twentieth-century philosophy, and is usually introduced with some moralizing or otherwise redemptive intent. Thus in Heidegger, our absorption in the anonymous and impersonal world of 'the "they"' – by which he means our conception of what *anyone* (but no-one in particular) would think or do – produces a 'dimming down' of our possibilities which 'tranquillizes' us; the self that 'discloses to itself its own authentic Being' must first 'find itself' from within its 'dispersal' in 'the "they"'. A similar conception of the framework as imposing conformity and concealing individuality is to be found in Sartre, though with more emphasis on our complicity in this concealment; our self-deceptive aim is to unburden ourselves of freedom by playing out a fixed role, as illustrated in his example of a man 'playing *at being* a waiter in a café'. And in Foucault, to take a final example, the framework is conceived as a means of exerting political power; one which restricts our behaviour but which also 'induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse' in order to indoctrinate, normalize and control us. For Foucault, it is tantamount to a duty to step back from the framework.⁴

In all these well-known examples, then, stepping back from the framework is something positive and desirable; a source of liberation from an oppressive regime into which we can unthinkingly become co-opted. My notion of stepping back from the framework, however, lacks any positive connotations of liberation. To step back from the framework is to suspend in thought the ordinary, everyday understanding of life that makes sense of our actions in terms of goals presupposed as desirable. So, for example, I may be completely engaged by the goal of buying the best computer I can, given my

budget and requirements, and this goal will make sense of much of what I do for a while. To step back from the framework in this case is to stop allowing this goal to guide my thoughts and actions, and to put all such goals – as well as my understanding of my actions in terms of these goals – into question. The significance of doing this is that it allows us to view our lives more objectively, by including our goals as another aspect of life to be described.⁵ Such an understanding of stepping back from the framework is completely indifferent to questions concerning autonomy and self-determination, for whether we have been subtly coerced into our goals, or they are constitutive of an original project that has been authentically chosen, we still need to step back from them (whether actively or passively) in order to describe them as a part of life.

The significance of stepping back from the framework is not practical, then, but rather theoretical: it is necessary to step back from the framework in order to realize that there is no overall point to life. This is because we cannot view our goals objectively while their desirability is being presupposed and they are guiding our actions. When we are fully immersed in our tasks – our minds creatively focused in problem-solving, our bodies coping with the task at hand in manual labour, or when we are preoccupied by the daily intrigues of interpersonal relations – then we are living within a framework of meaning, and thoughts about ultimate meaninglessness can occur only as idle memories from previous reflections. To look objectively at life, however, we must suspend our engagement with the framework in thought, which we are able to do as a by-product of the capacity we evolved to suspend engagement with one way of life in favour of another.

The quickest and easiest way to do this is to retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises. This perspective can arise of its own accord when observing crowded scenes, as for instance on a busy high-street, since the fact that we cannot know all the goals the various individuals understand their actions in terms of, and would not be able to collate this into an immediate collective understanding even if we could, causes our perception of such scenes to naturally condense into one of movement and noise. This perspective on life, which we can always deliberately take up, suggests that the only wider context into which our movements can be fitted is a meaningless physical one; our collective movements have created the context in which individual movements are understood as meaningful, but there is no wider context in which life itself can be understood as meaningful. Such a perspective does not allow us to view actions *as* actions, of course, and so in taking it we miss out on the rich framework understanding of life which has built up over thousands of years. Nevertheless, it remains a legitimate perspective on life, and one that allows us to grasp something that our ordinary perspective obscures; we do not have to live with it, only use it.⁶

2. Attunements to nihilism: Anxiety and boredom

According to Heidegger, as well as the existentialist thinkers he influenced, certain of our moods have a special significance, in that they reveal philosophically significant aspects of our situation. Heidegger sometimes calls these ‘attunements’ and the

name is apt, since they are supposed to show that at some level we are attuned to our fundamental situation, even if we rarely allow this to develop into a conscious theme. The attunements relevant to nihilism are anxiety and boredom.⁷

We are often dismissive of moods, so the idea that certain ones have philosophical significance seems strange when first encountered. Thus somebody in a good mood may take pleasure in their ordinary routines, and be more helpful than usual, but there is little temptation to read any particular significance into this. Rather, the mood seems like an inconsequential accompaniment to whatever the person is doing, and something we should actively avoid drawing conclusions about; for the reason that moods change, often for no particularly good reason. If we were to rashly infer that the person is satisfied with what they are doing, then our view might easily be overthrown the next minute when the good mood passes and a bad one takes its place.

When moods endure, however, our attitude to them changes, so that if somebody is happy for a significant amount of time we may suppose this to be because their life is going well. The same is true of dispositions to moods: if somebody is depressive we regard this as indicative of an underlying problem. With this in mind, it is not so strange that the attunements of anxiety and boredom should be regarded as philosophically significant, since they are conceived as a continual, ever-present backdrop to our lives, albeit as potentialities or dispositions that only occasionally develop into conscious moods. For Heidegger, the reason we are only aware of them episodically is that the 'tranquillized' existence of everyday life continually suppresses their development. Thus he says of boredom that it 'draws back and forth like a silent fog in the abysses of Dasein [our being]'. But what exactly do anxiety and boredom reveal about our situation that the framework ordinarily allows us to overlook?⁸

The short answer, but not the one given by Heidegger (who we shall return to in the next section), is that in different ways they both reveal the truth of nihilism. For unless we keep ourselves continually engaged by the framework, we are liable to fall into anxiety or boredom, both of which are appropriate responses to an existence which requires action because it is temporal, but does not require any *particular* action because it is meaningless. We are liable to anxiety, because our participation in the activities of the framework can only constrain or determine our actions if we choose to participate. When fully engaged by these activities, we become unaware of our ability to withdraw participation at any moment; but it is always possible for that engagement to subside, thereby laying bare the full range of our options, and exposing us to the anxiety associated with needing to choose and being responsible for whatever we do choose. In anxiety, then, the freedom the framework conceals becomes visible. In boredom, on the other hand, the pointlessness the framework conceals becomes visible. This is because in disengaging from the framework we cease to be engrossed by our usual goals, and thereby become sensitive to the fact that the activities we preoccupy ourselves with serve no overall purpose.

Anxiety and boredom are attunements, rather than simple moods, because they are not responses to particular and changeable circumstances, but rather the human condition as a whole. They reflect something about our condition that is concealed by our involvement in the framework, whereas ordinary moods arise as a result of our involvement in the framework, as for example when the achievement of a goal

makes us happy. Since attunements are responses to our general condition, it is always possible for anxiety or boredom to arise when our engagement with the framework subsides. When this occurs, anxiety may arise as an appropriate response to the self-imposed restrictions on our choices being removed, and boredom may arise as an appropriate response to the lack of any ultimate grounding for our choices.

That the framework obscures the full extent of our freedom should not be taken to imply that life governed by the framework is lacking in freedom, or indeed reflection. On the contrary, the framework facilitates the cooperative endeavours that provide us with options in life, and the vast majority of our reflection is goal-directed. Rather, the point is that freedom and reflection within the framework are always confined to a certain context – such as choosing where to travel on holiday, or reflecting on possible designs for a new building, for instance – and it is only when we disengage from our preoccupation with particular goals of this sort that we can reflect on our activities within the context of life as a whole. When we disengage in this way, either deliberately for the purposes of philosophy, or passively when we fall into anxiety or boredom, then previously unquestioned and all-consuming goals emerge in a new light: as optional and ultimately pointless.

A good way to illustrate the significance of these attunements is by analogy with a game, since life within the framework takes on the character of a game. Thus the game of chess provides us with great freedom within the parameters of action it prescribes, and the whole exercise obviously calls for considerable reflection. The game also typically elicits certain moods: such as contentment when we are playing well, excitement when we think we are winning, and irritation if we make an unforced error. These moods are appropriate to our perceived position in the game, and reveal our complete immersion in its goals. However, it is always possible for us to step back from the game and take a more objective perspective on it, thereby viewing it as a rule-governed, goal-directed activity of moving pieces around a board.

Now suppose that while the spell of the game is broken, we contemplate moving the pieces around the board outside the framework of the game, rather as we might contemplate life outside the framework: what situation would we be envisaging, and what would be the appropriate response to it? Well, in one sense, we would be envisaging a situation in which we had gained considerable freedom, for the rules of chess would no longer apply; so we could move the pieces across the board wherever and however we wanted. On the other hand, since these moves would no longer be directed towards any goal, they would lose almost all of their significance, and hence differentiation from each other. Each move would be as uninteresting as the next, and each would be essentially isolated, lacking any place within a context of development. As such, the normal emotions that can be elicited by moving pieces in chess would be lacking. For without any rules or a goal, we would be unable to invest the moves with any hopes and fears for success or failure.

Contemplating this situation might be reasonably expected to elicit anxiety and boredom. Anxiety would be appropriate at first, since without the rules, it would now be possible to move anywhere, and yet there would be no criteria for deciding where to move. Of course, if we just think of this as an activity within the wider context of life, namely the activity of randomly moving chess pieces around a board, then it will not

seem especially anxiety-inducing. But if we maintain the analogy with life by supposing the activity to be of the utmost importance to the person, such that moving the pieces is all they will ever do, then the possibility of moving without restriction or criteria would indeed seem to present reasonable cause for anxiety. And another appropriate response, once the anxiety subsided, would be boredom. This is because without any rules or aims, the individual moves would lack any significance connecting them with past and possible future moves, and so we would have no basis for evaluating them as good or bad. Without our projection of a wider significance onto the moves, then, there would be little or nothing that was interesting about them, and it would all seem very boring.

3. Heidegger's rejection of nihilism

One of the central themes in Heidegger's early work, especially *Being and Time*, is that disengaging from the world leads us to misinterpret ourselves and the world around us. But I have been using Heidegger's notion of anxiety and boredom as attunements to show that the disengagement they precipitate allows us to see things more objectively and grasp truths that would otherwise remain hidden. This difference is unsurprising given that Heidegger was mainly concerned with anxiety and boredom for the roles they play within his redemptive agenda of teaching us how to provide our lives with authentic meaning; an agenda which will hold little appeal to those who regard nihilism as simply an ahistorical fact about the human condition which we cannot overcome and have no reason to want to.

For Heidegger, withdrawal from our everyday involved dealings with objects and others explains the genesis of Cartesian ontology and epistemology, and more generally, the conception of the world characteristic of scientific understanding. What happens, according to Heidegger, is that we privilege a certain detached and disengaged attitude to the world, called 'presence-at-hand', which can sometimes arise when our projects are interrupted or suspended. This leads us to conceive of the world as a conglomeration of meaningless stuff to which our epistemic relation is inherently problematic, as well as ourselves as essentially worldless subjects who are disinterestedly observing the world around us. This then creates a number of artificial problems characteristic of the philosophical tradition, such as scepticism, which Heidegger seeks to overcome by showing that the more 'primordial', that is original, way in which we understand our being – from which the scientific conception derives – is essentially tied up with the world around us, such that objects are understood in functional terms specifying their uses and significance within our way of life, and our own being is understood in terms of our relations to others and interpersonal projects.

This well-known critique of the prioritizing and subsequent grounding of the present-at-hand, is intended to dissolve some of the traditional problems of philosophy, but it is also part of a wider strategy: to draw philosophy's attention away from what Heidegger considers the artificial puzzles generated by the Cartesian misinterpretation of our being, and back to more fundamental issues, namely the nature and meaning of human life. Heidegger's insistence that 'the less we just stare at the [Thing], and the

more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and that this more primordial relation to things is one of 'circumspection' – according to which things are seen within the context of our projects – is meant to draw attention back to the nature of the projects which absorb us for the majority of our lives; except on those rare occasions when we step back from them to engage in more or less disinterested contemplation of the world.⁹

By showing that we generally encounter things as equipment within a human project to be used for the achievement of a goal, Heidegger reminds us that we ordinarily conceive of the world in terms of what we are doing and what we are trying to do. And one of his main reasons for wanting to do this is tied up with his redemptive agenda, since he thinks that we generally fail to determine our own projects, and unthinkingly let them be determined by the anonymous opinion of 'the "they"'. Heidegger's aim, then, is to persuade us to wrest control of our lives by choosing our own projects, instead of sleepwalking into a life dictated by circumstance and convenience. The strategic importance of the attunements is that they act as a kind of alarm-bell, waking us from our immersion within the projects we have haphazardly found ourselves engaged in, and reminding us of our ability to select our own, thereby using our allotted time in a manner of our own choosing.

Heidegger wants to claim not only great ontological significance for our everyday absorption in our projects, then, but also great existential significance for our ability to snap out of it by attending to our attunements. He skilfully combines these commitments by saying that 'anxiety brings [Dasein] back from its absorption in the "world"', creating a feeling of 'uncanniness' and 'not-being-at-home'; but immediately adding that although this withdrawal individualizes Dasein, it is 'individualized as Being-in-the-World', and that 'Being-in enters into the existential "mode" of the "not-at-home"'. In other words, anxiety only leads to a partial withdrawal from the framework. In recognizing the contingency of our projects, and the contingency of the interpretations we put on ourselves and the world, the familiarity which allows us to take these projects and interpretations for granted 'collapses', and we are 'individualized' by recognizing the possibility of choosing our own projects and interpretations. But the integrity of the Cartesian critique is maintained, because this transition from feeling that we know the world and our place in it, to feeling 'not-at-home', is not a complete withdrawal, but rather something that takes place within our being-in-the-world.¹⁰

Now Heidegger's view that although we can fall back from our engagements with the world in anxiety or boredom, they remain constitutive of our being, is clearly at odds with my view that falling back from our engagements – by viewing human life as the ultimately pointless activity of bodies moving around and making noises – allows us to grasp something fundamental about our situation. However, although we may grant Heidegger's point that we can never leave behind our involved understanding of the world – to the extent that this is presupposed in all of our practical interactions, such as reaching for the coffee cup while thinking about life objectively, for instance – it is also true that we have developed the ability to escape from this understanding in thought, and thereby look at our lives in detachment from the significance they normally have for us. According to Heidegger, to do so is to misinterpret life. But the problem with this view is that although we spend most of our waking lives in concerned engagement

with the world, withdrawing from these engagements has produced a scientific world-view capable of explaining many of the features of them, as well as many other features of reality that have nothing to do with human engagement; and it is hard to see why temporal priority should be thought to take precedence over explanatory power.¹¹

Thus it may be the case that the understanding we have of ourselves and the world when we are engaged in the framework, is the original human way of understanding things, and it may also be the case that within this form of understanding, the characteristic epistemological problematic of modern philosophy simply cannot arise; but it does not follow that our scientific understanding must therefore be a misinterpretation of the kind of being we have. For we may have improved upon and supplemented our understanding by detaching from our projects, thereby revealing philosophical problems we were previously oblivious to. That this is indeed the case is suggested by the potential of science to make sense of the fact that we naturally understand ourselves in a world alongside others in terms of the evolutionary history of our cognition, for instance, and also by the fact that even if a philosophical problem such as scepticism about the external world is unthinkable within our everyday, engaged attitude, if it is true that our understanding of ourselves as being-in-the-world depends upon a biologically functioning brain, and such a brain could generate an experience of an external world which does not exist, then we have reason to believe that our natural confidence is excessive.

Since objective, scientific thinking provides a more comprehensive vocabulary for describing the world than the kind of understanding we have when engaged in the framework, we have every reason to take what it tells us seriously. And the particular significance it has in thinking about life philosophically is that it allows us to view our lives within a wider, physical context from which we are able to see that there is no overall point to our activities. Heidegger, however, does not allow himself this perspective: so he does not allow himself the perspective from which nihilism most readily comes into view.

Nevertheless, even though Heidegger will not allow himself this perspective, the resources for detached reflection provided by our natural, episodic withdrawals from the framework, such as in anxiety and boredom, are enough to allow us to see that our goals do not culminate in any externally imposed end-point; we pursue one goal for the sake of another, and that goal for the sake of another still, but these justifications are not brought to an end by an obligatory overall goal, akin to that of a game. But the significance of this for Heidegger is not that our purposes are created within a life which has no purpose of its own, since he thinks we are unable to form any legitimate understanding of ourselves apart from these purposes. Rather, the significance for him is that we are able to take control of our purposes; the meaning we find ourselves embroiled in must be selected from and actively gathered together if we are to impose our own choice of meaning on our lives. Thus although Heidegger sees that there is no externally imposed point to life, he thinks that it is possible to provide our existence with an overall purpose, by authentically choosing a way of being through an autonomous act of self-creation.

This is why the withdrawals brought about by anxiety and boredom are mainly of importance to Heidegger for the call to action they provide: they jolt us out of inauthentic

complacency to provoke an authentic choice. Moreover, the choice of a frivolous or immoral life would not be good enough, for we must choose in light of 'heritage', since man's deepest values are to be found within what Gadamer called 'the historical reality of his being'.¹² It was this redemptive agenda which led Heidegger to usually prioritize anxiety over boredom, since anxiety calls directly for action; Heidegger expresses this priority by saying that in boredom, beings 'are unveiled somehow as a whole', but that the 'fundamental mood of anxiety' is an 'originary attunement that in the most proper sense of unveiling makes manifest the nothing'. By this he means that in boredom, our immersion in projects subsides and we are left contemplating all possible projects with indifference, whereas in anxiety, when our immersion subsides we are struck by our freedom to choose; the 'nothing' we are confronted with is the open question of how to interpret the world and our place within it. Thus for Heidegger, anxiety provides a possible source of liberation – a route from determination by 'the "they"' to self-determination – since it can truly be said of the 'resolute' man that, 'Anxiety liberates him *from* possibilities which "count for nothing" and lets him become free *for* those which are authentic.'¹³

4. The priority of boredom

Heidegger's view that we can provide our lives with a meaning is mistaken, and is motivated by the similarly mistaken view that nihilism is to be avoided at all costs. Nevertheless, it is because he held these views that he was led to (usually) prioritize anxiety over boredom; for somebody who accepts the truth of nihilism, on the other hand, it is boredom that emerges as the more philosophically significant attunement. This is because in boredom our withdrawal from the framework opens a line of questioning that can lead us to nihilism, whereas anxiety acts as a preparation for re-entry into the framework, calling us to choose new projects to throw ourselves into, and thereby calling for an end to this kind of reflection. If we accept nihilism and are free of redemptive intent, then, we will find more significance in our tendency to fall into the passive state of boredom, than into the action-inducing state of anxiety.

Boredom occurs when our engagement with the framework is suspended, and we notice the change to our experience brought about by our newfound inability to provide different times with different significances according to their relevance to a future goal; when this happens, one moment starts to seem much like the next, and we are bored. This phenomenon is experienced particularly acutely in childhood, when integration into the framework is not yet complete, so that the boy or girl who loses interest in one activity may have difficulty imaginatively projecting themselves into another, leaving them in a kind of limbo where time seems to go on forever.¹⁴ By the time we reach adulthood, the framework reasserts itself much more readily for the average working person, both because we have gained more experience with it, and so are better able to project ourselves into new activities; and also because it makes considerably more demands upon our time, exacting consequences if we do not meet them. But it is in childhood boredom, when we literally cannot think what to do with ourselves and find all suggestions uniformly boring, that it really can seem to us that *we are here with nothing to do*. There is a sense in which this is true.

This kind of experience can sporadically return throughout life, albeit typically in a diluted form.¹⁵ Thus there may be many things I urgently need to do, such as send an email, take the car to a garage, and so on, and yet I really cannot be bothered with any of it; it all seems too boring. I am not paralysed by boredom as a child might be, because I am skilled at filling my time trivially; but nevertheless I find myself at a loss to project the right significance into the tasks required of me by my framework imperatives. The metaphysical root of this phenomenon is that none of our activities have any overall point, since there is nothing that life itself requires of us; although there is much we demand of each other and of ourselves. Consequently there is nothing for us to do until we give ourselves something by choosing, accepting, or reaffirming goals. Of course, not all goals require us to actively project significance, for we accept many goals without trying, as is most obviously the case with biological imperatives, which require considerable force of will to reject. However, the fact that our goals are all optional creates the potential for our engagement with them to fall away to a greater or lesser degree, thereby dulling their hold over us and leaving us suspended within a time they no longer structure.

Although the root cause of boredom is always the same, it can manifest itself in different ways, as Heidegger brings out in his most extended discussion of the topic.¹⁶ Typically, he notes, we experience time as 'dragging' when we are bored: it becomes painfully long, leaving us trying to 'kill' it or 'drive' it on, despite the fact that people generally want their time to last as long as possible, and frequently complain about time 'speeding up' as they get older.¹⁷ Heidegger illustrates this 'dragging' kind of boredom with an example of being stuck at a quiet, provincial train station with nothing to do until your train arrives. The framework neglects such periods, because their only relevance to the satisfaction of our imperatives is that we must get through them in order to continue with the next stage of our project. In such cases, when the framework provides nothing to do, we may find ourselves actively looking for activities to structure our time, even if these activities are as self-evidently pointless as counting the railings on the opposite platform; since at least in this way we are able to provide ourselves with something to aim for, a goal capable of being satisfied during a time in which the arrival of the train remains stubbornly far off.

Time does not always drag when we are bored, however, as Heidegger makes clear with a second illustration. This time, the situation is that he has begrudgingly accepted an invitation to a party. It is a good party: the atmosphere is upbeat and Heidegger fits in effortlessly (you may be surprised to hear). As he puts it, 'time is neither too quick nor too slow'. When he gets home, however, he looks at the open books on his desk, regrets having missed an evening of work, and suddenly realizes that he has been bored all night; he remembers drumming his fingers under the table, for instance. The problem here is similar to the first case, for Heidegger is clearly somebody so motivated by his work that time at the party is as wasted to him as the time waiting for the train. The difference is that in this case his time is fully occupied; he has plenty to do, listening to and contributing to the conversation, but he is still bored because this time lacks importance to him. Thus he describes himself as caught up in the 'standing now', simply reacting to present events, and isolated from the past and future that really concern him. The common factor between the party and train station examples is

that both involve periods of time abandoned by the framework, in which we do not feel the need to do anything. This explanation is readily extended to the boredom experienced by people off work sick, who may well find themselves as entertained by daytime television as Heidegger was by his party.¹⁸

The final form of boredom, which Heidegger thinks brings us 'closer to the depths of the essence of boredom', concerns periods in which we withdraw – or partially withdraw – from the framework, rather than simply periods that are accorded no significance by our particular engagement with it. In such cases, he says that there is an 'indifference enveloping beings as a whole', and compares this to walking through a city on a Sunday when the shops are closed and the streets empty.¹⁹ Unfortunately, Heidegger ties this final form of boredom in with his redemptive agenda, seeing it as a call for Dasein to 'wrest its own possibility from itself' in a 'moment of vision'; and so in this particular discussion, boredom is interpreted as providing the same call to action as anxiety. The essence of boredom Heidegger has in mind, then, is that it reveals to us the possibility of self-consciously choosing our own engagement with the framework, and thus becoming authentic. If our interest is only in nihilism, however, the need to break the spell of boredom emerges as less significant than the way the world appears when we are bored. For this is an appearance that reveals something fundamental to our situation, regardless of the fact that we must suppress such appearances to get anything done.²⁰

Heidegger's concern with boredom shows the influence of Schopenhauer. Within Schopenhauer's dark metaphysic, according to which 'we have not to be pleased but rather sorry about the existence of the world', boredom features as a counterpart pain to the pain of striving, such that life 'swings like a pendulum' between unsatisfied desire and boredom when it is satisfied. Thus he writes that we live life as a 'game [. . .] of the constant transition from desire to satisfaction, and from that to a fresh desire', a game we must continually play because when the transition is interrupted, we are faced with 'a fearful, life-destroying boredom, a lifeless longing without a definite object, a deadening languor'. In other words, when immersed in the framework, we treat life as a game with a continual stream of goals to be achieved, but if we stop striving for these goals, we become bored; this is an unpleasant state for the will, according to Schopenhauer, because it frustrates its nature, which is to will for something. Schopenhauer adds that although 'Every individual act has a purpose or end; willing as a whole has no end in view', which is just to say that there is no overall object to our willing, since life has no overall point.²¹

Although Schopenhauer connects boredom with withdrawing from the framework and nihilism, his main interest is once more bound up with a redemptive agenda. Thus as for Heidegger, boredom is ultimately a call to action: in Schopenhauer's case, to purge ourselves of will through a life of asceticism, and thereby free ourselves of the unpleasantness of boredom and striving.²² If we forget Schopenhauerian metaphysics, however, and restrict our attention to the connection between boredom and nihilism, then there does not seem to be any great philosophical significance to the unpleasantness of boredom. Boredom is unpleasant because interest and enjoyment almost always require us to engage with the framework in some way; even if tranquil and pleasant states in which we are not trying to do anything are possible, and can become the norm for experienced meditators.

What is most significant about boredom from a philosophical perspective is that it naturally orientates us to the truth of nihilism; a line of philosophical questioning can creep up on us of its own accord. Thus rather than taking up an intellectual stance to determine the general nature of human life – a stance which requires us to actively step back from our various projects in order to view them more objectively – we can simply refrain from suppressing our attunements, allowing them to develop and raise by themselves the question of why we are prone to them. Why can the need to conquer anxiety and drive away boredom arise at any moment? Why are these natural states for us? Because there is no overall point to human life, and yet every day we must motivate ourselves to act.

Answering questions such as these can lead us to the realization that the sense we make of life has limits. Thus when we are engaged with life, we understand what we are doing and why we are doing it in terms of our presupposed goals. But when this engagement is suspended, it becomes possible for us to see that our ability to make sense of life in this way stops short at the framework. The suggestion of the limitedness of sense which such reflections are capable of producing is reinforced by the fact that there is another kind of question that comes just as naturally to us, and which leads in the same direction rather more directly; it is to this that we shall now turn.

5. Existence and nihilism

Feeling a sense of astonishment that the universe exists, and hence that there is such a thing as reality, is common currency among philosophers and non-philosophers alike; powerful expressions of this have included Wittgenstein's statement that 'It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists,' and Heidegger's that 'Man alone of all beings, when addressed by the voice of Being, experiences the marvel of all marvels: that what-is *is*.'²³ Astonishing as it certainly is, however, it is not obvious what we are being astonished by. The astonishment is evidently not focused on the fact that this particular world came about, rather than some other, which is something that might strike you in contemplating the contingencies leading to your own existence. Rather, as both the above quotations stress, the issue is that there is any world at all rather than nothingness. However, to say that this is what is astonishing suggests that it would be more reasonable to expect non-existence to existence, and it is not clear why this should be so.²⁴

What strikes us when we contemplate the fact of existence is not just surprise that one of the existence-options triumphed over the non-existence-option; to the extent that the natural question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' suggests this, it is misleading. Rather, what principally strikes us is the limitedness of sense, for when we come to self-consciousness within the framework, we assume that everything can be made sense of; this is the assumption codified by Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason.²⁵ When we contemplate the fact of existence, however, we are presented with an apparent exception, and one that can hardly be dismissed as trivial. And this is what explains our surprise: we expect every particular thing and circumstance that exists to be capable of being made sense of, and yet existence as a whole is something

that apparently cannot be made sense of. What we really mean by the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?', then, is: 'why, given that no reason can be given for why there is something, was there not rather nothing?' What astonishes us is not so much that there is existence rather than non-existence, but that there is apparently existence for no reason; by making the contrast with non-existence, we remind ourselves that existence for no reason ought not to exist.²⁶

In contemplating the fact of existence, it is not just that we have no idea what brought this fact about, as we may have no idea what brought about some puzzling phenomenon within life. Rather we are made aware, however dimly, that asking what brought this fact about cannot be the right question to ask in this context, since any appeal to a 'something' will not answer but rather defer the question. For since anything adduced to explain the fact of existence – be it God or an omniverse of which the universe is only a tiny part – will be something else that exists, and hence itself part of what needs to be explained, we are left with only two desperate alternatives: to say that reality came into existence from nothing and for no reason, or to say that reality has always existed for no reason. To accept either of these alternatives, however, is to give up on making sense of the fact of existence, and accept instead that we cannot explain why there is anything at all, since reality either happened for no reason, or there has always inexplicably been something.

The best we can do is to make sense of why we cannot make sense of it. This is the approach Kant takes in his Antinomies, by arguing that the root cause of our confusion is the transcendental realist assumption that the world we experience is 'a whole existing in itself', rather than an appearance structured by us.²⁷ This still does not make sense of the fact of existence *per se*, because Kant also has to posit existence 'as it is in itself', of which we can in principle make no sense; but it does nevertheless offer an account of the limitedness of sense. We must still accept a brute fact, and so cannot satisfy the principle of sufficient reason without qualification, but Kant shows how we might dispel our astonishment at the fact of existence by realizing that the kind of sense we naturally expect to make of it is not appropriate to the case; once we realize that we were expecting a kind of explanation we should not expect, it is no longer astonishing that our expectations are not met.²⁸

That we cannot make sense of the existence of reality as a whole does not prevent us from making sense of things within reality; within a certain context of explanation, the reason for my existence remains that my parents met, for instance. But it does show that our reasons are ultimately groundless: they are reasons given within an existence that is itself lacking in reason. This groundlessness does not prevent us from making sense of things, so long as we remain within a limited context where rules, aims and forms of explanation can be taken for granted. Thus we can make sense of a move within the context of chess, of chess within the context of life and of life within the context of a physical universe. If we keep going, however, then sooner or later we will be confronted with a senseless brute fact: things make sense so long as we do not push too far.

The most important illustration of this point is provided by life within the framework. Thus if we take the various imperatives which motivate our activities for granted, these activities will generally make sense, but if we push further and start to ask ourselves

what the wider significance of being born, growing up, working, travelling, enjoying ourselves, aging, reflecting, suffering, and finally dying could possibly be, then we will find ourselves confronted with the truth of nihilism. The meaninglessness of life is a microcosm of the meaninglessness of reality; in the case of human life, the teleological explanations that make sense of our behaviour break down when we disengage from the framework to consider the overall purpose of this behaviour, and in the case of reality, the causal explanations that make sense of particular objects and events break down when we try to make sense of reality as a whole. Things make teleological sense only within life, and causal sense only within reality. Reality itself, however, makes neither teleological nor causal sense, for there is no purpose to it, and we cannot explain why it is here. As such, in contemplating the fact of existence, we come to see that the sense we make of our lives must be ultimately groundless, since our actions can hardly have a purpose in the grand scheme of things, if the grand scheme of things has no purpose and is consequently no 'scheme' at all.

6. Nietzsche's nihilism

The word 'nihilism' is closely associated with Nietzsche. There are many conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy – which is not surprising given the importance he placed on lying and concealment, as Stanley Rosen emphasizes – but almost all would agree that Nietzsche wanted to overcome nihilism; I follow Bernard Reginster in thinking that this was his 'central project'. Reginster says that in its 'broadest description, nihilism is the belief that existence is *meaningless*'. According to this 'broadest description' I am a nihilist (though I find it more natural to construe nihilism as *what* is believed, rather than the belief itself). But that is where I get off the boat, because Nietzsche has a very rich conception of nihilism which amounts to much more than just that. Nihilism in my sense is not the kind of thing you *overcome* (even if you do construe it as a belief; unless, of course, you want to believe something false).²⁹

Nietzsche, writing in the 1880s, thought that the advent of nihilism (in his rich sense) had become inevitable: the whole of European culture was moving towards it as if 'toward a catastrophe' and was 'afraid to reflect' on it. He, on the other hand, had 'done nothing so far but reflect', and having thought through 'every labyrinth of the future', was now able to reflect on nihilism as if retrospectively, as if it had already happened. He was 'the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived [in reflection] through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself.' Still, this transcendence of nihilism apparently only came very late in his (sane) life, for in 1887 he wrote: 'That I have hitherto been a thorough-going nihilist, I have admitted to myself only recently.' With the visionary benefit of having seen beyond nihilism, however, Nietzsche saw himself as aiding a 'countermovement' which 'in some future' will replace it; a countermovement which would 'logically and psychologically' presuppose nihilism and could come 'only after and out of it'. This future countermovement would require 'new values'; and that is what Nietzsche aimed to supply. So Nietzsche saw nihilism as a crucial transitional stage in the development

of culture, and his concern was directed to the people of the future who would leave it behind, as he had already done. He was, as he said, a 'destiny'.³⁰

Heady stuff: and that is why Nietzsche is so exciting to read. But what was this inevitable transitional stage of nihilism supposed to amount to? Something pretty terrible, by all accounts, even though it was supposed to have a happy ending. As Reginster argues, convincingly to my mind, despair is central to Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. The nihilist despairs because they see that their highest values cannot be realized by a meaningless world, and they have ceased to believe in another one – like the Christian heaven – which *would* realize their values. They have ceased to believe in the latter because religious belief has been discredited by the recognition that it is a product of our psychological needs; heaven would realize our values only because it has been invented for this purpose. This discrediting obviates the need to address every new proof of the existence of God that comes along, and is the principle idea behind Nietzsche's iconic formula: 'God is Dead'. So the nihilist condemns the actual world from the standpoint of nihilistic values; as Nietzsche puts it, the nihilist is 'a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist'. Nihilism can take the passive form of a weary resignation, or the active form of a desire to destroy; depending on how much spirit you can muster in response to the judgement that the world ought not to exist.³¹

Nietzsche thinks that nihilism is the logical consequence of the values that gained cultural dominance within our religiously dominated history, and hence became our own; values he regards as essentially life-denying, in that they condemn real life in favour of an imaginary, supposedly better world. In one striking passage, for instance, he says that Christianity 'made of sexuality something impure: it threw *filth* on the beginning, on the prerequisite of our life'. Key among these values, he says, are the notions of intrinsic purpose; a unity to reality within which human life finds its true context; and truth itself. The demands of the latter – truth – lead us to 'the last form of nihilism' in which we reject the supposedly better world beyond this one, as merely a product of our psychological needs; and hence not *true*. But this is still nihilism, because truth itself is just one more life-denying fabrication; a case of us reaching for 'nothingness' in order to condemn '*this* state of being'.³²

Nietzsche welcomes rather than regrets the onset of nihilistic despair, however, because no matter how bad it will be, it is uniquely capable of revealing what our values amount to, by showing us where they lead. On the far side of nihilism, Nietzsche thinks (or rather knows) that there will emerge a new kind of people who – like Nietzsche himself – have 'the strength to reverse values and to deify becoming and the apparent world as the only world, and to call them good'. And as Reginster argues, the kind of post-nihilist revaluation Nietzsche envisages would show that 'life-negating values are not the *highest* values'.³³

Nietzsche's nihilism, then, is a kind of despair generated by religiously inculcated values: we recognize that the world is meaningless, and so we morally condemn it because it does not provide our lives with the overall purpose our values demand. Camus, who we will discuss in the next chapter, gave this idea a lighter, twentieth-century spin with his notion of absurdity. In the backdrop of both is the fact that our intellectual history is dominated by the religious idea that God both gives our

lives meaning and dictates moral standards: in the eyes of God our lives have both a meaning and a moral worth. The meaninglessness of life and a lack of moral standards were thus yoked together, because God performed the twin functions of making life meaningful and maintaining the difference between right and wrong. Without God, then, life is meaningless and anything goes, and if you retain your religious values into atheism, as Nietzsche's nihilist does, then life is to be morally condemned.³⁴

However, although these functions go together within a religious world-view, there is no good reason to leave them together within a secular world-view. If we accept nihilism (in my sense), we will deny that the overall point of life is to act morally, just as we will deny that there is any other overall point to life; such as pleasure, for example. Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that we thereby lose all reason and motivation for acting morally. Rather we lose one reason; a reason we never even thought we had for enjoying ourselves, despite the massive efforts people have invested in that agenda. Certainly without God's plan, acting morally is not the point of life, but there remain many other reasons for acting morally, not least that most of us want to, and that our societies impose penalties for immoral behaviour.³⁵

To respond to Nietzsche's nihilism, then, I cannot see that anything more is required than to renounce the religious link between the meaning of life and morality; a link that millions of good people have already lived and died without making. I think that Nietzsche and many other philosophers have massively overestimated the motivational and moral significance of belief in overall purpose. Such belief is not essential to framework engagement, after all; if it were, then it is doubtful we would have ever heard of nihilism, since nobody would have been motivated enough to write about it. Perhaps such belief is very important to some religious people's framework engagement, especially in the moral sphere. But it cannot always be essential, because people do sometimes lose their faith and carry on.

The question of the meaning of life is indeed a very natural one, and naturally leads to ideas of overall purpose. But philosophy is not *that* important to people: not everybody asks the question; not everyone who does answers it with a belief in overall purpose; and even in the cases of those who do, it is very hard to believe that this is always, or even mostly, essential to their sense of right and wrong; and not at all obvious that it should be when it is. There seems no reason, then, not to treat the rejection of overall purpose as an isolated concern; one relevant to a specific philosophical question. And if we do, we need not follow Nietzsche in allowing it to bleed into rejections of a unified context of reality, and of truth itself; rejections which have led philosophy down some particularly implausible routes, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Of course Nietzsche thought that the link between religion and morality could and should be broken, and that after nihilism, people would be able to uphold values without supposing them backed up by God. Nevertheless, he also thought that the advent of nihilism was a major and malevolent turning point in history, and something we would have to struggle to overcome. With hindsight, we may perhaps regard such assessments as overestimating the extent to which religious belief sustained morality, which in turn must have resulted from being born into a society in which religion was culturally predominant; for later generations who would never be tempted to suppose that moral actions fulfil God's purposes for human life, the recognition that life is

meaningless would inevitably seem more anodyne. On the other hand, however, most people in the world remain religious, and even though religious belief and immorality have coexisted throughout history – often feeding off each other, of course – it may still be the case that the former restrains the latter, so that if religion ever does start to seriously wane, there really will be a moral catastrophe. Without the benefit of Nietzsche's clairvoyance – which from our present perspective is looking seriously dubious – it is impossible to know; and it may never happen anyway.

But even if we did have reason to fear the spread of belief in nihilism (in my sense), this should hardly be thought to have any bearing on our assessment of whether or not it is true; the effects of believing something true may, unfortunately, be regrettable. If we did have cause to regret the meaninglessness of life, this would not provide a good motivation for seeking to disprove or overcome it, any more than the fact that a serious illness is to be regretted would provide a good motivation for a doctor to reach a different diagnosis. Nevertheless, the notion that the provision of comfort is a condition of adequacy for philosophical description has surprisingly often held currency, with the quotation from Bradley with which we began this chapter providing an unusually self-conscious illustration; Fichte provides another good example:

And how can I believe in an explanation of my existence which conflicts so decisively with the innermost root of my existence, with the purpose for the sake of which alone I care to live and without which I deplore my existence, despite the correctness and strict precision of the proofs which this reflection seems to me to have?³⁶

The simple answer is that if the proofs really are correct, then you have to believe what they establish, or else give up on the rational life of believing whatever you have best reason to think is true.³⁷ Before we start to think about devising coping strategies for living with the truth of nihilism, however, we first need to look a little more closely into the question of whether it really is such a burden.