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A Survey of Misguided Coping Strategies: Does Nihilism Ruin Your Life?

This life is worth living, we can say, since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view . . .

William James, 1896₁

1. The consequences of nihilism

When we step back from the framework, we can see there is no overall point to life; but does this have any consequences? Should realizing the truth of nihilism be expected to change our behaviour in any way, or to change how we feel about ourselves? To answer this, let us return to the example of chess. Suppose that we have an obsessive chess-player who is always absorbed by the game, one way or another. Suppose he then steps back and sees it within the wider context of life as just an activity of moving pieces around a board. This thought might reasonably be expected to have consequences for his life both inside and outside the game. Outside the game, he may reappraise his commitment to chess: it may seem less important than it did before. Thus he may come to realize that his absorption in chess has led him to neglect his health or social life, for instance, and in putting more effort into these aspects of his life, he may start practising less, so that his game suffers. His attitude to the game may also be transformed, such that he loses the ‘spirit of seriousness’; perhaps his new attitude will lead him to play deliberately weak moves on occasion, if this makes the game more interesting.₂ And he may also come to regard all the earnestness and drama that is invested in chess as absurd.

What happens when the chess-player breaks his absorption is that he no longer sees the game as his field of action, but rather as one component within the wider field of action that is his life; and this change of perspective may lead him to re-evaluate his commitment. However, since there is no field of action outside of the framework of *life* to rationalize a similar re-evaluation, the analogy cannot be sustained; we cannot re-channel our commitment from our framework goals to something else, as the chess-player can re-channel his commitment from chess. Likewise, there is nothing outside of life to motivate us to take life less seriously; prioritizing pleasure over

success is simply a case of prioritizing one kind of framework goal over another, and nihilism can have no bearing on such a decision, since its assessment of our activities as ultimately pointless is indiscriminating and uniform. And if some of these activities do occasionally strike us as absurd, this can only be in comparison to others, given that there is nothing outside of life capable of making all of our activities – including the serious ones like surgery – seem absurd.

Thus although when the chess-player steps back, his new perspective may transform his attitude to the game and motivate him to make practical changes in his life, what we discover about life when we step back from the framework does not seem capable of providing any similar motivation. Of course, any instance of stepping back can lead us to reappraise our commitments. But although reflection on nihilism may provide the spur to practical reflection, nihilism itself is lacking in practical consequences. After all, even if realizing that chess is just an activity of moving pieces around a board may have a bearing on life outside of chess, it is of no relevance within chess; and so it seems that realizing the truth of nihilism should likewise be of no relevance within life.

However, even though nihilism does not favour any particular activity over another, it may nevertheless have consequences for those who started out believing that there is a meaning of life. For such a person, who believes that their particular goals are constitutive of what a person is supposed to do with their life, there will be two main effects: first, they will realize they are free to choose their own goals, and secondly, a motivation for continuing to pursue their previous goals will have been removed. If they subsequently decide to rebalance their commitments, however, nihilism will play no further role, since nihilism shows no preferences among framework projects. Nihilism will have simply removed a false belief, thereby revealing the possibility of choice this belief had previously obscured, while also removing the illusory motivation it provided.

Nevertheless, this motivation, illusory or not, might still be thought to be crucially important. Now as we ran the chess example before, the reasons the player might become disenamoured with the game were all to do with the fact that he has (potentially) a life outside of chess; but we can vary the example by supposing that the player's life is confined to moving the pieces around the board. This immediately changes the significance of breaking his absorption in the game. In the previous case, looking at chess as an activity of moving pieces around a board placed it within a wider context in which its goals were no longer presupposed, thereby presenting it as one possible activity among others, and revealing the player's choice over whether or not to engage with it, and if so, how. In the new case, however, although his choice over whether or not to engage with the goals of chess is still revealed, the fact that there are no other goals changes the significance of this insight.

Initially he may feel anxiety, since he will realize he is free to make any move either inside or outside of the framework of chess. However, he should soon realize that although he can retract his commitment to working towards checkmate, if he does so, the consequences will be just as bad as before he stepped back from his engagement with this goal; namely that he will begin to lose. For others will continue to interpret his actions according to the rules of chess and will hold him to account accordingly, rather as others will hold us responsible if we fail to meet our framework obligations;

we will hold ourselves responsible too, as soon as we are immersed in the framework once again. And if the others had come to the same realization as him, they would – for the same reasons – continue to play chess. Even if they all had a discussion about what to do next, it is doubtful they would come up with anything better than chess.

However, if we are to make the example more true to life, if even less true to chess, we need to add the stipulation that when the chess player steps back from his absorption in the game, he realizes he can never win: the goal of checkmate is an illusion. His movements around the board will stop not when he wins or loses, but rather when he dies. And now it really does seem that he has been told something that would affect his motivation and attitude. Moreover, it seems to make no difference to remind him that checkmate was always an illusion, and that he had no problem committing to the game previously; for what mattered to his motivation was not the existence of the goal but his belief in it.

However, although learning that checkmate is an illusion would be bound to have an immediate impact on the player, it is unlikely this would be lasting, for he will soon realize that whatever value he finds in the game has nothing to do with its illusory goal, but rather with the achievement of other intermediate goals which he had supposed were helping him on his way to checkmate. The prospect of checkmate was what motivated him before, but now he can see that the goals he was pursuing were not intermediate after all – but rather the only real goals in the game – he should be able to realign his motivation towards them and them only. In short, he should now realize that he does not need to believe in an overall goal. This change of attitude may actually increase his commitment to the game, since a goal such as capturing his opponent's knight would previously have seemed expendable, to the extent that even if he failed to achieve it, he could simply redirect his attention to another intermediate goal that would make an equivalent contribution to achieving checkmate. But now this illusion is gone, he can value these goals for their own sake, or for their contribution to other achievable goals, and this should allow him to show them more commitment than when he thought of them all as simply markers on the way to the only goal that really mattered.

If it still nevertheless seems that the passing goals of chess would lose much of their interest without an overall goal, the situation is immediately transformed when we turn to the goals which motivate us in life. For trying to make money, change the world for the better, become famous, find love or just stay out of prison, all remain just as compelling as they ever were in light of nihilism, except to the extent that they were thought to contribute to an overall purpose to life; if indeed they ever did draw much of their appeal from such abstract thoughts. On realizing the truth of nihilism we will not suddenly find our situation transformed to that of the Danaids in Tartarus, endlessly pouring water into a leaky tub. Of course, engagement with our framework goals can always subside, and when this happens, life as a whole can seem boring. However, although boredom is an attunement to nihilism, we do not need to believe in a meaning of life to break its spell. Rather, all we need do is re-engage with the framework, which is something that comes naturally to us, since there are many things in life that we cannot help wanting; we see this from the remarkable speed with which disinterested reflection on life can be brought to a halt when faced with the consequences of failing to meet our framework obligations.

None of this is to deny that there may be people for whom belief in a meaning of life is the decisive factor in motivating them to act at all, and we should perhaps also grant the possibility of people who are only persuaded to act morally by this kind of conviction. But even if nihilism could have such consequences, it does not follow that what it says is reprehensible, for the consequences follow not from its positive content, but from its incompatibility with a false belief; even the most anodyne fact could have reprehensible consequences if it removed a bizarre-enough belief. Thus given that nihilism does not tell people to give up, or to behave immorally, it is not nihilism we should regret, but rather the fact that there are people who have no enthusiasm for life and who want to act immorally.

Overall, then, it is hard to see any good reason to regard belief in nihilism as a danger we should struggle to overcome. For there is no reason this belief should affect us practically at all, unless we were previously under the false impression that life has a meaning. And even if we were under this impression, nihilism can hardly be blamed for the consequences of discovering we were wrong; consequences which might well turn out to be positive in any case. As to the question of what we should do upon realizing the truth of nihilism, then, there may be more than a little relevance in Lin-Chi's advice to 'Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down.'³

2. Absurdity

Nevertheless, it might still seem that nihilism changes our attitude to life, even if there is nothing we can do about it. The most familiar thought along these lines is that life is rendered absurd by the juxtaposition of the meaninglessness of life with the seriousness with which we take it; rather as some clowns embody the absurd by juxtaposing a ridiculous appearance with feigned dignity. Now we already touched on this issue above, when we said that such judgements require a comparison between activities within life. Thus chess or fashion modelling may be judged absurd in comparison to other activities, like life-saving surgery or landing an airliner in emergency conditions, because the former are trivial in comparison to the latter, and so the seriousness they are invested with can seem inappropriate. Some activities can seem absurd, then, if the seriousness we invest in them is inappropriate to what is actually going on, just as the clown's seriousness is inappropriate in light of his appearance. However, given that there is nothing outside of life for us to take more seriously, there would seem to be no question of our seriousness about life as a whole being inappropriate: human life is surely an entirely appropriate thing for human beings to be serious about, on occasion at least.

This reasoning has been explicitly rejected by Thomas Nagel, who argues that unlike ordinary judgements of absurdity, the philosophical judgement of absurdity does not depend on comparisons within life, but rather on 'another contrast which makes it a natural extension from more ordinary cases', and this is the contrast between 'the pretensions of life' and 'a larger context in which *no* standards can be discovered'.⁴ The larger context Nagel has in mind is that of the physical universe, which does not

provide life with a meaning. The idea, then, is that if we look at life from the outside to try to justify our seriousness, the fact that life does not exist in any wider context of significance, but only in the wider physical context of the universe, means that we will inevitably fail. Life is absurd because we cannot help taking it seriously, and yet we cannot justify this seriousness.

Nagel compares his claim that life is absurd to epistemological scepticism, on the grounds that we take life seriously without being able to justify this attitude, just as we take ourselves to know various things that cannot be justified in light of sceptical hypotheses. However, although sceptical hypotheses place our natural confidence in doubt, such that my claim to perceptual knowledge is put into doubt by the possibility that I am dreaming, for example, Nagel never says what is supposed to similarly render dubious our natural confidence in the seriousness of life. In the case of scepticism, according to Nagel, the possibility that I am dreaming motivates me to try to justify my trust in perception, but any justification I might offer – in terms of the reliability of perception, for instance – will be circular, since such justifications are exactly what have been put into doubt by the sceptical hypothesis. Despite the fact that I cannot justify my claims to perceptual knowledge, however, I still cannot help making them, and so am brought to recognize my ‘unsupported natural confidence’.⁵ But the problem with Nagel’s attempt to draw a parallel conclusion about our attitude to life is that there does not seem to be anything like the sceptical hypothesis to shake our confidence in taking life seriously. The sceptical hypothesis shows that I might be wrong to make knowledge claims, but it is not clear how I might similarly be wrong to take life seriously.

One way to explain this would be in terms of something else we should be taking seriously instead. This is how ordinary judgements of absurdity work: we need a conception of the kind of situation that really does deserve seriousness if we are to judge whether or not seriousness is appropriate. Nagel, however, says that his judgement does not require such a conception; as he puts it, stepping back from life ‘is not supposed to give us an understanding of what is *really* important’, but is rather supposed to show that the larger context of the physical universe provides nothing to justify our seriousness about life.⁶ But although he is right that this larger context will not justify our seriousness, we have no need to look to such a context unless we are provided with some reason to think that our seriousness is inappropriate in the first place. If a person is asked why they are acting so seriously, then the answer that somebody’s life is at stake provides a perfectly good justification, and there seems no reason to look for further justification unless some reason can be given why we should not consider life and death worthy of seriousness.

It might be thought that the existence of our lives in a wider, physical context is enough to challenge our ordinary reasons for taking it seriously, and Nagel certainly seems to think this, since he says that if we view ourselves ‘as if from a great height’, our concerns begin to seem utterly trivial, as we form an objective conception of ourselves as a ‘small, contingent, and exceedingly temporary organic bubble in the universal soup’. However Nagel realizes that such considerations cannot provide the basis of a sound argument to show that we should not take life seriously. After all, the universe does not consider us unimportant on account of our smallness, for it does not consider us at all, and there is no reason for people to consider very

large and long-lived astronomical bodies more important than themselves. Rather, Nagel's reason for describing our lives in this way, he says, is that he thinks our 'sense of absurdity finds its natural expression in [such] bad arguments', for the reason that our 'small size and short lifespan' are metaphors for the 'backward step' we take from life in order to view it in detachment from its everyday significance.⁷

What Nagel means by this backwards step, of course, is that we can step back from the framework by placing life within a wider, physical context, in order to grasp the truth of nihilism. But if this is the key to the argument, and it is the lack of a meaning of life that is supposed to undermine our ordinary reasons for regarding our projects as important, then Nagel must be assuming that only a meaning of life can make something important. It is this assumption, then, which must be playing the role of undermining our ordinary reasons for seriousness about life, just as the possibility we are dreaming undermines ordinary perceptual justifications for the epistemological sceptic. But whereas reasons can be given for thinking that we might be dreaming, the assumption that only a meaning of life can bestow importance seems both unmotivated and entirely expendable. It seems like a leftover religious dogma.

Although Nagel claims that his judgement that life is absurd differs from, but is nevertheless a 'natural extension' of ordinary judgements of absurdity, then, we can now see that in this respect it is just like an ordinary judgement, since it uses a meaning of life as its criterion of what is really important and hence what is appropriate to be taken seriously: life is judged to be absurd because it lacks meaning, it being inappropriate, and consequently absurd, to take anything seriously that lacks meaning. Where this judgement does differ from an ordinary judgement of absurdity, however, is that ordinary conceptions of when seriousness is appropriate are based on real examples, whereas a meaning of life is an ideal that the world has never lived up to; it is the religious ideal of what we should take seriously.

That traces of this ideal lie behind Nagel's judgement is clear from the considerations about our physical insignificance from which he takes his cue, and which he considers a 'natural expression' of our sense of the absurd. For what they really express is religious humility. This can be seen from the fact that although it makes sense in comparing ourselves to something much larger than ourselves, that we should feel relatively small and powerless, it is something else again to feel insignificant, in the sense that implies triviality, since this presupposes a wider context of meaning that extends beyond our lives; an ant may be dismissed as trivial within our lives, but our lives could only be dismissed as trivial within some wider context of meaning. Likewise, the finitude and relative brevity of our lives could only show them to be trivial if there were a wider context of meaning that placed more value in things that last forever; this is the thinking behind *memento mori*. Given that religion has dominated our intellectual history, then, it is not surprising that thoughts of physical insignificance should slide so easily into thoughts of triviality. But if we no longer believe in such a context, these feelings of humility lose the redemptive power that leant them their purpose, for we can no longer look to redirect our seriousness to matters which are less trivial in the overall scheme of things. Once this is lost, then, all we are left with is a feeling of absurdity; nothing seems worth taking seriously.⁸

This feeling of absurdity may still be regarded as a significant consequence of nihilism, however; it was the feeling itself which was Camus's original emphasis, and it was Camus who inspired Nagel's position. Thus Camus describes the absurd as arising in a 'confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world'; and says that this confrontation produces the 'feeling of the absurd', the 'absurd mind' and the 'absurd man'; the idea is not that life is absurd, but rather that we cannot help judging that life is absurd if we have a need for a meaning of life that the world cannot provide. Camus's absurdist is Nietzsche's nihilist without the despair; Nagel tried to over-extend this conception of a certain type of person with a bad argument. Maybe the real problem with nihilism, then, is it makes it psychologically impossible for some people to take life seriously; although perfectly capable of living in the absence of a meaning of life, just like Sisyphus, perhaps an insatiable need for meaning turns life for them into a heroic struggle against the odds.

Now if Camus were right about this, then prior to encountering and being persuaded by nihilism, it must have seemed to the absurdist that the world was satisfying their need for meaning. But clearly we do not all start out with an explicit belief about the meaning of life which nihilism subsequently disavows us of; many people do not believe this, and many more have simply never thought about it. Camus may have captured something about his own generation and cultural milieu, then, but there is nothing universal here. However there is a much weaker sense in which engagement in the framework does seem to provide us all with meaning, which is that life thereby takes on the character of a game: a currently unquestioned goal is presupposed. Our experience must take on this character, it seems, if we are to immerse ourselves in the task at hand, because we could never give it our full attention if we were continually questioning its point; this kind of questioning is sometimes appropriate to choosing our goals, but not to achieving them.

But if this is all that is required to satisfy our need for meaning, nihilism will not stand in the way; life will continue to take on the character of a game even after we are fully aware that it lacks meaning. Nihilism has the potential to transform our theoretical understanding of our goals, but provides no obstacle to our engagement with them. Thus once we see that there is no context beyond human life to either underwrite or overthrow our view that, for example, in normal circumstances saving somebody's life is important, then we will need to look for more mundane theoretical reasons to justify it. But however we justify this view in our more theoretical moments – and even if we do not justify it at all – there is no reason this should affect our ability to presuppose it when action is required.

It is not so much that we need a meaning of life, then, but rather that we need to presuppose that our goals are worthwhile while we are engaged with them. Since our most familiar model of a goal that can be presupposed in this way is the overall goal of a game, and has been so since early childhood, it is natural to expect life to work the same way; which is one reason nihilism is liable to strike us as surprising when we first discover it. However, nihilism is compatible with any number of alternative accounts of why it can make sense for us to presuppose our goals. Of course, we do not need to take up the theoretical question of what – if anything – makes our goals worthwhile in order to presuppose them; we do this effortlessly as soon as we stop thinking about it.

But if we do take up this question, then nihilism and the hypothesis of a meaning of life can offer competing answers, either of which would allow our practical engagements to continue as before. The only answer that really might disrupt this engagement is that none of our goals are worthwhile in any sense; if we believed this, then maybe it would be a heroic struggle to carry on. But the highly substantive and majorly contentious view that only goals backed up by a meaning of life can be socially worthwhile would take quite some establishing; and it is not upheld by the vast majority of philosophers who routinely presuppose that nihilism is bad.

3. Transcendence

Activities can have a purpose within life because of the context provided by the framework, but nihilism entails that life itself has no purpose, since there is no further context beyond life. A direct way of refuting nihilism, then, would be to show that there *is* a further context. Now we have already seen that placing life within the further context of the physical universe cannot do this, but on the contrary only serves to confirm nihilism, since the physical universe is not a context of meaning. Consequently, the kind of context needed to refute nihilism would be a further context of meaning, akin to the context the framework provides.

To see what the idea of a further context of meaning beyond life amounts to, consider how the framework shapes our understanding of an action, such as somebody systematically raising and lowering their arm; suppose we can see someone doing this, but do not know what it means. If we are subsequently told that the person is signalling to the taxiing aircraft, then this description conveys the meaning of the action by placing it within the context of the framework, and thus relating it to various goals, such as ensuring the safety of the flight, earning a wage and so on. Now according to nihilism, all such teleological explanations come to an end within the framework, but this would not be the case if there were a further context of meaning. Such a context would add an additional level of understanding, such that just as we can move from understanding only that the person is moving their arm to understanding that they are signalling to the pilots, so it would be possible to move from understanding the signalling as part of an attempt to live a constructive and enjoyable life, to understanding the overall point of such a life.

The framework provides a context of meaning in which the action counts as a case of signalling by relating it to various other objects and events; by thinking of the action as it enters into these various relationships, rather than in isolation, we place it in a context in which it is meaningful. The idea of a further context of meaning beyond the framework, then, is the idea that life itself might be placed in a context of meaning; and if there were such a context, this might provide our various activities within life with a further significance. However, the existence of life within just any further context of meaning would not be enough to overthrow nihilism; it would have to be of a particular kind.

To see this, suppose we were to discover that aliens have been watching our planet for centuries, televising our lives as a form of entertainment. This would certainly place

human life within a further context of meaning. However there is an obvious reason why it would not show that our lives had a meaning, which is that it would not explain why we live the lives we do, in the way the framework explains why the person is moving their arm; the issue is whether human life exists for a purpose, not whether it can be put to a purpose. But if we alter the example so the aliens do explain our existence, perhaps because they bred us specifically for their purposes, this is still not enough to challenge nihilism.¹⁰ This is because knowing that our lives have a purpose for the aliens is not enough to undermine nihilism unless we also believe that the lives of the aliens serve an overall purpose: if we do not believe this, then nihilism is unaffected.

The reason the hypothesis of the aliens does not undermine nihilism, then, is that they are just as much a part of the physical universe as we are, and so we can always place their lives within this meaningless wider context and conclude that there is no overall purpose to our providing them with entertainment. This reasoning suggests the following: that nihilism requires that reality has no meaning within the final context of existence, where by the 'final' context, we mean the context which does not depend for its existence upon another, wider context.¹¹ Thus chess depends for its existence upon the context provided by life, which is wider in the sense that chess is one of many possible rule-governed activities within life. And life depends for its existence on the wider context of the physical universe, which is wider in the sense that life is one of many possible types of physical phenomena within the universe. If life is meaningless, then, the final context is a context, such as that provided by the physical universe, in which life has no meaning.

Now possessing meaning in the final context might be thought an overly strong requirement for there to be a meaning of life, given that games provide our paradigm of overall purpose, whether or not they have meaning in the final context. However, the overall purpose of a game is something we can disengage from, while an overall purpose of life could not be something we could disengage from (though it might seem that we could), since that would make it an optional pursuit within life rather than something constitutive of life. Games are our invention, so it is always possible for us to stop allowing their goals to determine our behaviour. But since life is not our invention, any overall purpose it might possess would have to be something that determines the significance of our behaviour whether we like it or not; if life had an overall purpose, it would be like a game we could not stop playing. And this would only be possible if life had an overall purpose in the final context of existence, because if the purpose depended for its existence on a wider context which was not the final context, it would always be possible for us to disengage and yet continue living, thus showing that the purpose was not constitutive of life in the way in which the purpose of a game is constitutive of the game.

Thus the aliens we imagined may have invented us, but the existence of human life does not depend on their interpretation. That is why any account of our origins within the wider context of physical reality can have no bearing on the meaninglessness of life; the same reasoning would show that our overall purpose cannot be to pass on our genes. Rather, for our lives to be meaningful, our physical existence itself would have to be meaningful, which would mean that it would require a certain interpretation in

order to exist as that physical existence, just as moves within a game require a certain interpretation in order to exist as those moves. This could only be the case if there were meaning in the final context.

If our lives did have a purpose in the final context, then, the physical universe could not be the final context, since it is not a context of meaning. Rather, there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended. There would have to be a context of meaning that *transcended* the spatiotemporal world. This transcendent context would provide reasons for the existence of the physical universe, just as the existence of chess in the wider context of life provides reasons for the existence of chess pieces and boards. And if there were reasons for the existence of the physical universe, there might also be reasons for the existence of human life; human life might still be irrelevant to the meaning of the universe, but a transcendent context is nevertheless what would be required to provide our lives with overall purpose.¹²

That a meaning of life would require reality to transcend the physical universe, once more highlights the connection between nihilism and the fact of existence (Chapter 1, Section 5). For if the universe really were transcended in this way, then sense might not be limited after all; perhaps then the principle of sufficient reason could be accepted without restriction, and explanation would culminate in perfect intelligibility. Crucially, we might no longer have to accept the 'absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness' that gave Sartre nausea, and which has provided the impetus to most of the bleak assessments of life in philosophy since Nietzsche.¹³ For with a transcendent context of meaning in place, there might be a reason for reality which would allow the natural world to take on the character of a human artefact brought into existence for a purpose, rather than something that just happens to exist.

Thus for the apparent contingency of reality to conceal an underlying purpose, the world as we know it must be transcended; as Wittgenstein put it, 'all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world.'¹⁴ Nevertheless, given that everything we know about on the basis of experience exists within the physical universe, the possibility of a wider context might seem to be nothing more than an abstract possibility arrived at by a process of reasoning about what would be required if life were to have meaning; which is of course how we have just arrived at it.

As it transpires, however, this is not the case, for the concept of transcendence has been central to the history of philosophy since at least Parmenides, and various arguments have been made for the existence of a transcendent context based on considerations apparently quite independent from the motive of providing life with overall purpose, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Moreover, given that the concept has been even more central to religion, we are evidently dealing here with something deeply rooted in our intellectual history, rather than just a curiosity.

What most clearly demonstrates that transcendence is not just an abstract possibility is the fact that we have a phenomenological model of it within ordinary life: through dreams. Dreams provide a model of transcendence because when we wake from them, the space and time of the dream are transcended by the space and time of a wider

context; as J. J. Valberg has demonstrated, from the point of view of a dream, waking life is a transcendent context.¹⁵ Moreover, the context the dream is placed within when we wake up is a transcendent context of meaning from the perspective of the dream, in which the significance of the dream is often immediately transformed. Thus, surprising as it might initially seem, we are in fact perfectly familiar with the phenomenology of emerging into a transcendent context in which the nature and significance of the experiences we have just been having are revealed to be quite different from what we might previously have expected.

So, for example, I might have a dream in which somebody is trying to break into my house, and I am trying to barricade the door to keep them out. When I awake, however, the significance of the situation is transformed: what I had thought was a threatening scenario in which I needed to repel an intruder is revealed to have been a dream brought on by my anxiety about an important letter I am due to receive. This kind of gestalt switch, in which we are suddenly able to see what was really going on, is the phenomenological basis for the transcendent challenge to nihilism, and has profoundly influenced all the major philosophical traditions; thus, for instance, we find Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) predicting that 'someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream.' Many of today's religious believers think something like this is going to happen.¹⁶

The possibility we are envisaging when we consider the transcendent challenge to nihilism, then, is of a kind we are already familiar with, and so something we can readily imagine; in outline at least. Thus we already know that on waking from a dream, we will find the space and time of the dream transcended, revealing the objects we had previously concerned ourselves with to be mere dream-objects, and the significance of the dream-situation to have been a borrowing from waking life. It takes no great leap of the imagination, then, to envisage the possibility that the physical universe might stand to a transcendent context in the same manner in which a dream stands to the context of waking life beyond the dream. Moreover, just as there is an experiential continuity between dreams and our waking lives – allowing us to wake from a dream, realize that we have been asleep, and consequently make new sense of the dream experiences – life itself might be akin to a dream in this respect also, in that we may one day 'wake up' from our lives in order to see them within a wider context, and thereby discover what has really been going on all along.

As to the question of what would be revealed in the transcendent context, the simple answer is that if life is like a dream, there is no reason we should expect to know, since a dreamer fully immersed in a dream typically does not know about the real world in which they are asleep in bed. Moreover, we have even less reason to expect to know about the transcendent context from the perspective of life than from a dream, for during the experiences we have when asleep, we typically forget our waking lives; but if life were a dream, we would have never even had a 'waking life' to start with; unless Plato was right that our transcendent lives precede our births. Leaving the latter story aside, however, the fact that a dream model of transcendence predicts our ignorance of the wider context serves only to make it more attractive, given that it is hard to come by any concrete suggestions as to what the overall purpose of human life might be. And the attractiveness of this model is increased still further by the fact that if we

were to 'wake' from life, this would presumably take place at the end of life, thereby transforming the significance of death – the greatest of human fears – from an end to a transition.

There exists a certain, persistent line of reasoning, however, which claims that even a transcendent context could not provide life with meaning. After all, the fact that a dream has a meaning within my waking life does not show that my dream has a meaning which accounts for its existence. And so if my life turns out to be one big dream, I might simply be 'waking up' to a new situation in which nihilism holds fast, thereby leading me to consider yet another transcendent hypothesis. It might seem, then, that Santayana was right when he said that 'existence is groundless, essentially groundless; for if I thought I saw a ground for it, I should have to look for a ground for that ground, *ad infinitum*. I must stop at the *quia*, the brute fact.'¹⁷

If this were right, the notion of an overall purpose to life could be ruled out on conceptual grounds, since for any purpose put forward, there would always be a legitimate further question about the purpose of serving that purpose, and so on, until we reached the brute fact of an existence for no purpose. This response betrays a lack of imagination, however, because the reason it is always possible for us to ask the further question may simply be that we are unaware of any context beyond the meaningless context of the physical universe; if the sense we can make of things were not limited by this context, the situation might be quite different. Thus if the physical universe were transcended by a final context of meaning, then an account of the purposes of things would not culminate in the brute fact of meaningless existence, but rather in the fact of purposeful existence. Consequently, it would make no more sense to ask a further question about the purpose of such a reality, than it would make sense – if the physical universe is the final context – to ask a further question about the purpose of the universe existing for no purpose; the answer in both cases would already have been grasped, making the further question redundant.

An overall purpose to reality is not conceptually ruled out, then, it is just that we are used to applying teleological concepts within a meaningless physical reality, in which our demands for a further purpose terminate only with the brute fact of existence for no purpose. If the whole universe were placed within a wider context, however, these explanations might go further, and there is no conceptual reason why they should not terminate in an overall purpose, rather as an explanation of a game, given entirely within the framework of the game, would terminate in the overall purpose of the game. We have no grounds to rule this out, because we have no grounds to suppose that only meaningless existence could provide the final context of existence, and any attempt to do so would simply show a failure to grasp the enormity of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning, which if true, could reasonably be expected to put everything in a new light.¹⁸

However, although we cannot rule out the possibility, we have no good reason to believe in it either.¹⁹ For even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*. The real significance of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning is not the challenge it presents to nihilism, but rather that it provides us with an idea of what would be required for

nihilism to be false; an idea which is deeply rooted in our intellectual history, which is made tangible by our experience, and which people might understandably want to be true. The idea is naturally attractive, because our reasons for pursuing goals within life are ultimately rooted in our desires, and some human desires – especially those for eternal life and universal justice – cannot be satisfied within *our* lives; whatever may happen in the future. A transcendent hypothesis of meaning, however, offers up the prospect of a meaning of life which satisfies them already; it is an idea worthy of faith.

4. Humanism

In response to the comment ‘Life’s a funny thing’, in Robert Wise’s film *I Want to Live!*, Susan Hayward’s character dismissively replies ‘Compared to what?’ This reply would have been just as telling had the comment been that life is absurd, or cruel, or exhilarating, its point being that all such evaluations depend for their sense on contrasts made within life, since there are no novel contrasts from which they might gain a new sense outside of life. The implication, of course, is that the comment is nonsense, and although this is not strictly true – since sense can be made of it – there is something in this line of thought to the extent that when we think through these kinds of comment on life, they no longer seem worth making. Thus many things happen within life, some of which are funny, absurd, cruel and so on, with the proportions differing in different lives. But when such evaluations are applied to life as a whole, the result is either to say something vacuous, such as that some funny things occur within life, or else to make an almost inevitably false, and in any event baseless generalization, such as that all lives involve more funny occurrences than boring or predictable ones. It might seem, then, that in claiming that life has no overall purpose, the nihilist is making a mistake of a similar kind.

This idea can be elaborated as part of a humanist challenge to nihilism, where we are using ‘humanist’ in one of its more familiar senses, to convey the belief that human beings need only rely upon each other to maintain institutions and standards once thought to rely upon non-human authority. Thus it might be argued that nihilism is simply a reaction to an essentially religious tradition of thought in which life was thought to derive its meaning from the transcendent context, and that once this model is rejected, meaning can be reconceived as something that human beings make for themselves. As the humanist sees it, then, nihilism and the belief that life has an overall purpose both share the same false premise, namely that life could only have meaning within a transcendent context, with the difference between the views turning solely on the question of whether there is such a context. But if we reject all such supernatural conceptions, however, and realize that meaning is an entirely human product, then rather than denying that life has a meaning, we will look instead to see if the notion can be applied within life, where there might be significant contrasts to be made between the meaning of different lives, or perhaps between lives that possess it and those that do not.

This humanist notion of the meaningfulness of life as something we construct within life is well-established within the collective consciousness, such that people

considered morally exemplary, the Gandhis and Mandelas of this world, are often held up as paradigms of what it is to lead a meaningful life, as sometimes are great scientists, artists and other high achievers; whereas somebody who spends most of his or her life alone in front of a television might be said to lead a meaningless life. This suggests that achievement – especially moral achievement – makes life meaningful, and that the meaning we bestow upon life comes in degrees, such that Gandhi lived a particularly meaningful life, the television-addict lives a more or less meaningless life, and somebody with an office job and an active social life might be said to live a fairly meaningful life; all of this fits in well with a certain contemporary ethos, which regards life as a resource we must expend with maximum efficiency by achieving great things and amassing a wide diversity of experiences. However, although this notion of meaning is readily conflated with moral worth and certain conceptions of the good life, it does in certain contexts seem to acquire its own distinctive content, as can be seen from the fact that morally reprehensible lives are not necessarily classed as meaningless (the ‘Hitler question’ we discussed in the introduction). This content seems to be best captured by the idea of contributing to a social narrative, since lives that are isolated or essentially self-directed are more likely to be described as meaningless, whereas those that make a difference to other lives are more likely to be considered meaningful.²⁰

However, although social interactions provide individual lives with a meaning in the lives of others, this seems too fragmentary and inconclusive to provide any unifying narrative of the kind that would allow us to speak of a social meaning of life; somebody might think of their life as a pursuit of wealth in youth, love in middle age and adventure in old age, for instance, leaving it quite unclear what the social meaning of their life is supposed to be, even for those who happen to concur with the self-interpretations in question. This need for a unifying narrative within the humanist model was a major motivation for the notion of authenticity that arose in twentieth-century philosophy, the basic idea of which was that it is possible to take control of your existence by imposing an overall purpose upon it. Such a choice is typically said to be facilitated by reflection upon death, which allows us to conceive our existence as a whole; something with a start, middle and end that we can impose a narrative upon. This reflection is supposed to remind us of our ability to take control; because although we can allow chance and other people to effectively live our lives for us, we must each face our own death; and this reminds us that the preceding existence is equally our own possession and responsibility.

The fundamental problem with the humanist idea that we can provide our lives with a meaning is that to the extent that this is true, it is a meaning that exists within human life as a whole, rather than a meaning which human life possesses. Thus although individual lives might be said to be meaningful in virtue of our social interactions, the fact that social life itself lacks any meaning shows that the individual lives that make up that social life cannot have any meaning of their own. This should be clear from the fact that any meaning our lives acquire within society, or that we impose upon them ourselves, will always be something we can disengage from, and hence cannot be something that is constitutive of our existence; it is always possible for the socially engaged person to become a recluse, or for the authentic person to lose their resolve.

In response to this objection, the humanist might claim that the concept of the meaning of life can only be legitimately applied within the context of social life. However, this reasoning is immediately undercut by the fact that a human being can exist both inside and outside of social life, so that in referring to a human life, we need not make any reference to our social framework; as opposed to when we talk about an artefact such as a chair. Consequently, since any meaning our lives acquire from society is not constitutive of what it is to be a human being (if there is no wider context of meaning), and hence humans cannot succeed or fail in achieving the purpose of their existence in virtue of their interactions with society, the humanist cannot justify restricting the concept of the meaning of a human life to a social context. And they cannot deny the legitimacy of questioning the meaning of social life; or deny that since there is a clear sense in which social life serves no purpose, there is also a clear sense in which particular lives do not either. If there is no point building the house, then there is a sense in which there is no point in my helping to build it.

Moreover, the question of the meaning of social life is hardly an artificial question raised for no other reason than to provide an objection to the humanist proposal. Rather, it is the most natural question about the meaning of life that can occur to us. Thus when people first began to step back from their framework activities to raise the question of the meaning of life, what they were looking for – as is amply testified to by the phenomenon of religion – was a context into which human life as a whole might fit; they were interested in the meaning of their own, particular lives, of course, but only as an example of life in general. And it is patently obvious that they were not curious about social roles and evaluations. Now understanding a phenomenon within a wider context is usually the same as understanding its social role, but this cannot be the case when we are trying to understand the meaning of social life itself. Consequently, the notion of a context of meaning beyond life, far from being a spurious imposition on the question of the meaning of life, is an idea that cannot be avoided once the question has been raised.²¹

Rather than nihilism being enthralled to an otherworldly conception of meaning inherited from a religious tradition, then, nihilism is right to take the question at face value, but then deny there is any transcendent context of meaning; and it is humanism that really shows an allegiance to this tradition by assuming the need to provide life with a meaning, which is something it can manage only by changing the subject. And it clearly does change the subject, for even if my life has a strong social narrative that dovetails with various other lives from start to finish; or even if I rush forward to my death in imagination, thereby individualizing myself in order to impose my own choice of grand narrative; there remains a clear sense in which there would still be no overall point to my life. It may have a point within other lives, but only within other lives that have no point. Rather than such humanist proposals being ways of providing our lives with overall purpose, then, all they really amount to are suggestions for living; suggestions such as that we live socially engaged lives, or self-consciously narrate our lives, or perhaps actively avoid purposes and narratives, which was Camus's alternative suggestion. None of these have any claim over us in virtue of the kind of existence we have, however; we can take them or leave them.²²

To get back to Susan Hayward's sassy riposte in *I Want to Live!*, then, although evaluations taking the form 'life is x' do tend to be either vacuous or false, there are nevertheless perfectly substantive, non-evaluative descriptions of this form, such as 'life is a biological phenomenon', or 'life evolved on Earth'; 'life has no overall purpose' is one of these. If you make the mistake of thinking that nihilism is evaluative and that this is a negative evaluation made on the grounds that only God's meaning could make our lives worthwhile, then the humanist's proposal to dismiss this evaluation does start to seem appealing. However nihilism simply states a fact about life, and all humanism does is obscure this by substituting a notion of social meaning that was never in dispute in the first place. Life has no overall purpose compared to what? Compared to games, to how things seem in the framework, and to how things might be if there is a wider context of meaning. We cannot give our lives this kind of purpose, but we do not need to anyway, because we have more localized and transitory purposes to occupy ourselves with.²³

5. Relativism

A more radical challenge to nihilism that can be developed from humanism is provided by relativism. Thus in opposition to absolute claims to truth, justification or goodness, for example, relativists have argued that we may only legitimately speak of truth at a certain historical epoch, justification within a field of inquiry or goodness within a culture. The following is a memorable statement of one kind of relativism:

Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism, and the others may be so cowardly or slack as to let them do so. If so Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us.²⁴

This comes from Sartre's lecture 'Existentialism is a Humanism', and indeed, relativism of this kind is an extension of humanistic thinking, since it is motivated by the idea that absolute conceptions of truth or morality tacitly presuppose a non-human standpoint from which our practices are evaluated; a standpoint which is a residue of religious thinking we could manage without. Thus Sartre's idea in this example is that in a future state in which the persecution of minorities is condoned, for instance, there would no longer be any perspective from which this counted as morally unacceptable; it is morally unacceptable to us, of course, but we would no longer be around, and so if we refuse to be seduced by the idea of a transcendent third party looking down and favouring our extinct opinion over that of the fascists, then we are invited to accept Sartre's conclusion that in this situation, fascism would be 'the truth of man'.

Relativism can be used to argue that nihilism is not an absolute truth, but could at best be a truth relative to some particular audience. Thus it is easy to imagine a certain kind of contemporary relativist claiming, for example, that nihilism is simply a reflection of developed capitalist society, in which technology has isolated us from our environment, and thereby removed the possibility of the kind of meaningful existence we used to enjoy; perhaps nihilism is the result of the fact that our relation to the

environment is now being mediated by a technology-based infrastructure that renders all of our activities optional, so that we no longer fit into any particular way of life, and are prone to disengage and regard life as pointless.²⁵ Or perhaps it might simply be claimed that nihilism is a transitory product of the collapse of religious faith in a certain sector of Western society. Either way, and whatever sociopolitical story is told, the moral the relativist wants to draw is that nihilism is not a truth applicable to every human being who has ever lived or ever will, but is rather true only for a certain group of people at a certain point in history.

If there is any relevance in these kinds of consideration, however, it is simply that we are now better placed than ever before to grasp an absolute truth, even if people will eventually be blinded to it by the advent of relativism and humanist conceptions of social meaning, just as people have always been blinded to it by faith in transcendent hypotheses. To see why relativism can have no bearing on nihilism, consider again Sartre's hypothetical fascist state that condones the persecution of minorities. Now the fascists may not want to talk about 'persecution', preferring, as they no doubt would, to put a positive spin on proceedings. But whether described in a positive light by them, or a negative light by us, exactly the same activities will be going on: certain people will be being rounded up, imprisoned, put under surveillance and so on. Thus when described from our differing moral perspectives, two different evaluations are made of the same physical events. Similarly, the fascists may describe a work of modernist art as degenerate and we may describe it as a masterpiece, in which case two different aesthetic evaluations are made of the same physical thing or event. Again, same thing or event, different evaluation. With this kind of evaluative disagreement, then, relativism is on its strongest ground, since the evaluation must belong to somebody, and yet if we step outside of the evaluations of particular societies, we find no further basis for an evaluation provided by the physical universe, making it hard to see on what basis the fascists' activities could be said to be wrong except, as the relativist suggests, our own or that of God. In the case of a disagreement that is not evaluative, however, the situation is quite different.²⁶

Suppose the fascists believe that the world is flat; would this then be the 'truth of man'? In this case, of course, it seems obvious that it would not be, because our disagreement with the fascists is not over how to evaluate something, the underlying nature of which we can agree upon, but is rather about the underlying nature of the thing itself. What makes moral and aesthetic disagreements amenable to relativism is that they are normative disagreements about how people ought to respond to things and events; the fascists want to encourage the persecution of minorities and discourage the viewing of modernist art, whereas our society values the opposite kinds of behaviour. Non-evaluative disagreements, on the other hand, are not disagreements about how we should behaviourally interact with people and things, but are rather disagreements about what kinds of things and events exist. Given that such disagreements are not resolved by a decision about how we should live, then, but rather by the world itself, the fascist's belief could only be true if the Earth really were flat. And since whether or not it is flat is a matter quite independent of human society, the fact that everybody in this future society believes the Earth is flat cannot be enough to establish that it is.

If this distinction between evaluative and non-evaluative descriptions is accepted, then the challenge presented by relativism has been met, since nihilism provides a non-evaluative description, and hence one whose truth or falsity is not determined by the views of a particular society, but rather by a fact of the matter; namely whether or not the final context of existence is meaningful. However, there is a certain, extreme kind of relativism, influential from the 1960s onwards, which denies that there are any facts at all. According to this kind of view, the only reason we are inclined to think that the Earth is roughly spherical, irrespective of what the fascists think, is that we are illicitly applying our own standards of justification. However, since the fascists might have quite different standards of justification, so the argument goes, we have no right to assume that the kind of evidence which persuades us – such as Eratosthenes's calculations, Magellan's expedition, or satellite images – would also persuade the fascists. As such, given that our claim that the Earth is spherical presupposes standards of justification the fascists might reject, and that their standards would be the only ones in this hypothetical future, then perhaps the flatness of the Earth would become part of the new 'truth of man' after all.

Far-fetched as this kind of view may seem, the serious point behind it is that 'the only criterion we have for applying the word "true" is justification, and justification is always relative to an audience', as Rorty once put it.²⁷ Thus in judging that it is true that the Earth is spherical, we must be presupposing some standards of justification, and yet given the premise that these are standards the fascists reject, the relativist concludes that the Earth can only be said to be spherical relative to our standards, while it is flat relative to theirs. Without any neutral and definitive standards of justification to adjudicate between the fascists and us, then – of the sort that might be supplied by God – we are invited to conclude that we can never be justified in claiming that something is objectively true, since even truths about the physical world are relative to society. An alternative to this conclusion, defended by Rorty, is to claim that the Earth is spherical and hence the fascists are wrong, but to base this not on an objective truth about the Earth, but rather our 'ethnocentric' loyalty to the standards of justification prevalent in the contemporary West; given that the fascists would have their own ethnocentric loyalties, however, this is clearly just a variation on a theme.²⁸

The basic flaw to this kind of relativism is that there are no genuine alternatives to our standards of justification in non-evaluative matters: human beings justify their beliefs about physical states of affairs through a combination of observation, induction and deduction.²⁹ Thus, for example, if we show the fascists some photographs taken from a satellite orbiting the Earth, they will be able to see that the Earth is spherical. This is quite unlike the moral case, where any evidence we might use to try to persuade them their practices are wrong – such as evidence of the suffering of the minorities they persecute, for instance – is likely to be something they already know about but interpret differently. For in showing them the satellite photographs, we would be showing them something incompatible with their beliefs according to our shared standards, since like us, they must form their views about shape on the basis of observation. Now the natural response for the relativist to make is that the photographs would also be open to differing interpretations, just like the evidence of suffering. The case is different, however, since to render the photographic evidence compatible with a flat Earth

would require more than just a different interpretation. Rather, the fascists would need to invoke some extraneous state of affairs, such as mysterious forces that alter photographs, systematic hallucinations or something similarly unlikely. But since any belief in such a state of affairs would also have to be based on observation, induction and deduction, these standards could simply be employed again to settle the matter, thereby demonstrating the overwhelming likelihood that the Earth is spherical.

Since the fascists would justify their beliefs in the same ways that we do, then, the relativist's premise that they might have alternative standards that would warrant their belief that the Earth is flat can be rejected; they may believe it is flat, but only because they lack our evidence. Thus given that certain kinds of evidence would justify a belief to any human audience, we can accept the relativist's point that our only criterion of truth is justification, but nevertheless claim that the best explanation of the fact that certain beliefs could be justified whatever views prevailed in society is that they are objectively true. This is not only the best explanation of why we could justify our beliefs to the fascists, but also of why they might be expected to come to our beliefs of their own accord. After all, if the fascists were to try to sail to the edge of the Earth, they would find themselves unable to reach it, and this is just one of many possible experiences capable of undermining their beliefs. And the best, and perhaps only, explanation of why there should be so much potential for doubt about the flatness of the Earth to arise of its own accord is that there is an objective fact about its shape which has nothing to do with society; the Earth itself opposes their view.

The kind of extreme relativism we have been considering overextends humanistic thinking by rejecting all objective truths; our religious heritage may be responsible for many aspects of our moral thinking, but it is not responsible for our belief in an independent world. However, more interesting than the view itself are the circumstances in which it came to prominence, namely in the immediate aftermath of the philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century which – under the influence of Nietzsche – had explored the possibility of an alternative to nihilism through notions such as authenticity. The driving force behind this kind of existentialist philosophy was the humanist idea that we do not need God to provide our lives with meaning, since we can provide the meaning ourselves. It was in this atmosphere, then, when philosophers were trying to get to grips with the thought that without a transcendent context of meaning provided by God there could be no objective truth determining the meaning of human life and our moral standards, that some took what must have seemed like the natural next step; one Nietzsche had already suggested. This was to deny that there is any objective truth whatsoever, such that nothing holds true independently of human opinion, and everything is endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This extreme relativism, which is sometimes called postmodernism, is the most recent stage in the intellectual flight from nihilism.

For those who saw the prospect of nihilism replacing religious meaningfulness as a threat – and were not satisfied that existentialism had neutralized this threat, in light of the negative assessments of life made by most of its proponents – the idea of dispensing with objective truth altogether must have held an immediate appeal. Since the meaninglessness of life could not then be an objective truth, only an optional interpretation.³⁰ This move was dressed up historically, as if it were the final liberation

from religious modes of thought; so that we find Derrida, for instance, talking about passing 'beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play'. What was right about the humanism that led to these postmodernist conclusions, was that human beings must take responsibility for the moral meaning of their own individual lives, and the moral codes of their societies; William James was right that life is what we make it from the moral point of view, and condemnations of life, of the kind associated with Schopenhauer, are either vacuous or false. What was wrong with the direction this humanist line of thought took, however, is that not everything about life is a construction; to the extent that Sartre was right that 'we *make ourselves* what we are', we can do so only with the existence that we find ourselves given over to, and about which there are numerous objective truths.³¹