

Journal of Philosophy of Life Vol.7, No.1 (July 2017):98-119

Living in the Frame Meaning on Loan from Nihilism

Alan Malachowski*

Abstract

This article suggests that James Tartaglia's otherwise interesting and insightful handling of the relationship between nihilism and philosophical questions concerning the meaning of life may have underestimated the former. Invoking a mini-tradition based on a Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche's 'European Nihilism' as mainly expressed in *The Will to Power*, it outlines four possible perspectives from which Tartaglia's conception of nihilism is liable to seem too complacent regarding its power to undermine the meaning we are inclined to attach to social life.

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*,¹ James Tartaglia cuts through misconceptions about the nature and consequences of nihilism that have dogged philosophical discussions over the years. And, he does this in a crisp, insightful, and often entertaining, way – one that should help refresh interest in issues concerning the meaning of life, while helping overcome the long prevailing tendency of analytic philosophers in particular to ignore such issues, or just shuffle them around in a pedestrian manner. The upshot is a timely, insightful book, the main thrust of which I am disposed, and even feel I *ought* to be so disposed, to largely agree with.

If we accept, as the book argues, that human beings have autonomy regarding the requirements for a meaningful life within the social realm, and that they are able to endow their own lives and the lives of others with meaning therein, we ought to set aside otiose questions, as commonly inspired by nihilism, concerning whether meaning in some other, overarching, sense exists or is even possible. We should rather spend the time identifying useful ways to exercise some quality control over meaning's dispensation and growth in social life, so as to avoid the trap of accepting just any old thing as meaningful. For this can only cheapen a cluster of very useful, closely associated, evaluations:

* Research Associate: Centre for Applied Ethics, Stellenbosch University.

Email: alanmalachowski[a]hotmail.com

¹ *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness, and Reality*. James Tartaglia, Bloomsbury: New York, 2016. Page references to this edition are given in brackets throughout.

“purposeful”, “valuable”, “authentic”, and so on. Thinking along these lines, it strikes me James is quite right to contend that the threat nihilism poses to the meanings we are inclined to attribute to our lives is bogus, something philosophical reflection can as easily dispense with.

When we are involved in projects and relationships we find worthwhile, and which others are liable to endorse, then we can generally have confidence that the life we are living is meaningful. And, philosophical deliberations along the lines James expounds should only enhance that confidence by drawing any sting nihilism might otherwise be perceived to have. For, it is highly unlikely that any *external* criterion of meaning, one that would have to override well established criteria which already mesh with the experiences of people who also engage in such projects and relationships, is going to possess the authority, natural or otherwise, to undermine this confidence.

Moreover there is something fishy in the very thought that such a criterion *could* serve such a purpose. Although, as James rightly accepts, sincere questions concerning whether life has meaning ought not to be denied a hearing on narrow semantic grounds (e.g. because such questions supposedly lack sense), obedience to a nihilistic external criterion, one that excludes or undermines social meaning *should* raise serious semantic concerns. The idea of such a criterion involves semantic incoherence: under the weight of an alien notion of exclusion, the language within which *we* talk about social meaning would begin to lose its sense. And, this would have a knock on effect. How can we then accept such a criterion, since the language in which it has to be expressed no longer makes sense to us?

What is doing the work here is an intriguing assumption about the connection between what we believe and semantic meaning: it is not possible for such meaning to retain its significance if too many of our beliefs turn out to be false.² Hence if, *per impossible*, we are completely mistaken about meaning in the *non-semantic* senses just alluded to – so our many, and various, judgments about what is valuable, worthwhile, authentic, and so on are all radically mistaken – then there is no way we can *understand that they are*. The language in which this state of affairs has to be expressed will be opaque. Linguistic

² The ‘assumption’ is Donald Davidson’s, who contends that belief, meaning, and truth are interdependent and cannot be pulled too far apart without causing the kind of problems we mention. See *The Essential Davidson*, Donald Davidson, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006, especially pp.116-7 & 205-7.

meanings are holistically interwoven: they feed each other. If very large chunks of our beliefs are false then the words and phrases involved turn out to be meaningless, and language usage as a whole is irreparably damaged, leaving meaning in general destroyed. A totally meaningless life would, it appears, be one we could not contemplate, still less talk about. Having said that, I am, nevertheless, going to think against James' treatment of nihilism which should, of course, also involve some thinking against my own views.

The question I am going to focus on is simply this: "Does nihilism have more teeth than James allows it to have?" On the face of it, there is something of a paradox lurking here anyway. If nihilism has *no* teeth, if it is harmless, "morally neutral", and "simply a fact", with "no practical consequences" as James contends (e.g. 171 & 172), it is pretty uninteresting. For then, its domestication is cheap – more or less self-financing, while James' key claims:

- (1) Nihilism is true: life *is* meaningless.
- (2) Despite (1), our lives can, and presumably should, be carried on in the normal way because the things we do are worthwhile and serviceably meaningful in a social sense.

become trivial. But, if nihilism *has* teeth, it is not clear how both of these can still stand. James fully acknowledges that, historically, nihilism *appears* to have had teeth, but contends that this is a highly deceptive appearance, caused, in the main, by (1) falsely believing that meaning needs to be undergirded by religion, and (2) conflating 'meaninglessness' of a certain lofty kind with 'lack of social value.' Here again, though, a chimerical nihilism that is so easily de-fanged seems hardly worth much serious consideration.

The problem, if there is one, is perhaps structurally reminiscent of the once much discussed difficulties many philosophers had with swallowing John Mackie's view that the second-order characterization of moral values as 'non-objective' ("There are no objective values"³) need have no negative influence on genuine commitments to the first-order judgments involved in moral practices. But, I am not going to dwell on such considerations.

Instead, I want to look more closely at why, contrary to James' fairly relaxed dismissal of nihilism as an innocuous philosophical phantom, there emerged a

³ *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, J. L. Mackie, Penguin: London, 1991, p.15.

tradition that considered it unnervingly real, and monumentally threatening. My hunch here is that perhaps the ‘tradition’ was on to something which James overlooks despite the close, and at times perspicuous, attention he has paid to a number of the main works of its proponents.

In exploring this tradition, it should become clear that James’ reasons (interesting and useful though they otherwise may be) for claiming nihilism probably *has to be true, and harmlessly so*,⁴ fail to allow for the devastation that a genuinely threatening nihilism, one such as Nietzsche dubbed “the eeriest of all guests”,⁵ is liable to have wreaked, and is likely to continue to wreak, on everything we can regard as meaningful. Having outlined the nihilism involved, we will discuss how it squares up to James’ notion of a meaningful life in what he calls “the framework” or “the frame”. This is a social context which bestows meaning not on *everything* as such (which is impossible), but on everything in that context: “if we want to understand the meaning of a particular practice, we do so by framing it within the wider context of social life” (70).⁶

A nihilist tradition: Nietzsche and Heidegger

*With regard to the essence of nihilism, there is no
prospect of, and no meaningful claim to, a cure.*
Heidegger

In talking about a “tradition” here, I should make it clear that I am setting aside the rich history of nihilism which includes, for example, its socio-political role in 19th Century Russia and numerous related literary sources such as Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, as well as most of Dostoyevsky’s novels including *Notes From Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Instead, I want to deal with a very narrow *philosophical* tradition, a sort of

⁴ James submits that to confirm life itself has meaning we would need to show how humans came to exist, and do this in a way that is compatible with the view that this existence has a purpose within a world that has a purpose.

⁵ Walter Kaufmann (see 11) translates “unheimlichsten” as “uncanniest”, but here I prefer David Krell’s “eeriest” (see 17), not least because ‘the human being’ is dubbed “the uncanniest” in an excellent translation of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger, Gregory Freid and Richard Polt (trans), Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000 (henceforth ‘IM’).

⁶ Though the notions of ‘enframing’ and ‘frame/framework’ are clear enough, and do not seem to require any pumping up, theoretically speaking, it might have been instructive to see how they compare with John Searle’s well known concepts of the ‘background’ and ‘network’.

‘sub-tradition’ of the tradition I have so far been alluding to that, for the most part, reduces to virtually only two key thinkers: Nietzsche and Heidegger. Indeed, as far as the points that are intended to tell against James’ conception of nihilism go, this tradition shrinks even further, down to a mini-Heideggerian tradition of reading Nietzsche.⁷

Nietzsche’s version of nihilism, though complex, is frequently interpreted as a hyperbolic depiction-cum-prediction of the *socio-psychological* consequences of the death of God, as announced by the ‘madman’ in Section 125 of *The Gay Science*.⁸ James, himself, seems content to buy this interpretation, as when he suggests Nietzsche’s “mistake was to believe that a wave of nihilistic psychology was about to engulf the world” (171-172). But, Nietzsche’s concerns, one ought to hesitate to say “fears”, about the advent of nihilism are more complicated. The extremely dark picture he paints of its putative fallout serves as a dramatic device designed to draw attention to the importance of his underlying claim that *historically speaking*, and regardless of surface social outcomes and our felt responses, nihilism has us by the throat. By “us” he means the people of “Western History” – and, his nihilism is therefore what he calls ‘European’.⁹

Nietzsche can speak for himself, and speak well. But, he shouts far too often,¹⁰ and in my view the resulting ‘megaphonic’ effect tends to obscure the subtlety and importance of this underlying claim, even to the extent of encouraging confusion over the import of a phrase like “historically speaking”.

⁷ There is a much wider tradition in recent European thought, involving thinkers such as Gianni Vattimo and Vittorio Possenti, (not to mention Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida) that is strongly influenced by Nietzsche’s views on nihilism, though the degree to which Heidegger’s interpretation of them is accepted varies considerably. A common factor, however, is the belief that nihilism is a force to be reckoned with largely on account of the writings of both Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is beyond the scope of the present article to consider how James’ approach to nihilism compares with that of this wider tradition. That he does not engage with this tradition by explaining why its members are wrong to take nihilism so seriously is perhaps an unfortunate lacuna given that he refers to both Heidegger and Nietzsche - and not always in passing.

⁸ *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (Bernard Williams, ed.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001.

⁹ “By ‘us’ and ‘we’, Nietzsche means the man of Western History”, (NIV43). Along with Heidegger, my use of the present day “we” assumes the current inhabitants of the West are “the contemporary representatives of Nietzsche’s era” (NIV44).

¹⁰ A quick survey of other commentators on this point reveals an interesting contrast. R. J. Hollindale, one of Nietzsche’s main early translators disagrees with me. After remarking on “the *excess* of manner” of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Hollingdale claims that “excess is the one fault no one could impute to Nietzsche’s subsequent works”, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (R. J. Hollingdale (trans.)), Penguin: London, 1969, p.11. Simon Blackburn, however, asserts that Nietzsche “had no volume control”; *Truth*, Simon Blackburn, Penguin: London, 2006, p.77.

Fortunately, we can turn for illumination to an inveterate reader of Nietzsche who knows how to speak softly, even though he is also prone to overdo the philosophical dramatics.

Heidegger seems to have first broached the question as to what lies behind, what “grounds”, the nihilism which he says was “exposed” by Nietzsche “in the first book of *The Will to Power*”¹¹ during a lecture given in 1935.¹² But there, his brief remarks are tied up in some obscure thoughts about “nothing/the nothing” (*das nichts*). And, his stark definition

“Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being¹³ – that is nihilism.”¹⁴

merely reiterates his habitual insistence that just about everything that can go seriously wrong for human beings is the result of their ignorance of ‘how things stand with Being’. Later, however, at length and in a variety of other works,¹⁵ he uncoils a complex and nuanced account of Nietzsche’s approach to nihilism

¹¹ *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Random House: New York, 1968. All references give page numbers for this volume using the abbreviation ‘WP’ followed by the section number and then the page number.

¹² IM, pp.26-7.

¹³ No attempt is made throughout to define “Being” since the content of Heidegger’s notion is irrelevant to the main contentions here. Such a definition would be difficult in any case because there is no scholarly consensus on this issue. I have some sympathy with Richard Rorty’s view that “Being is a good example of something we have no criteria for answering questions about”, ‘Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism’, p.36; in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991, pp.27-49. At the same time, I am not yet convinced that Peter van Inwagen is completely wrong when he claims Heidegger’s philosophy of being is “transparently confused”, ‘Being, Existence, and Ontological Commitment’, p.475, n.4; in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, David J. Chalmers, David Manley, Ryan Wasserman (eds.), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009, pp.472-506. Matters have been made even more complicated by Thomas Sheehan’s intervention with what he claims to be a ‘paradigm shift in Heideggerian interpretation’. There he argues forcefully that Heidegger’s talk of ‘Being’ can be cashed out in terms of ‘meaning.’ See: ‘A paradigm shift in Heidegger research’, Thomas Sheehan, *Continental Philosophy Review*, 34, 2001, pp.183-2002. Obviously if Sheehan is right, then the content of ‘Being’ would impact the present article. It need not, however, necessitate any large changes in the basic claims regarding James’ approach to nihilism. I am skeptical that Sheehan is right, if only because of the puzzle it causes for Heidegger’s use of the phrase “the meaning of ‘Being’” throughout *Being and Time*.

¹⁴ IM, p.217

¹⁵ Heidegger’s engagement with Nietzsche’s nihilism is distributed over a large number of other works, but the views I discuss are not, to my knowledge, substantially contradicted or made obsolescent in any of those. Aspects of his similarly deep and wide-ranging engagement with the poet Hölderlin resonate with Heidegger’s treatment of Nietzsche’s nihilism, but touch on matters again beyond the scope of the present discussion. The same can be said of Ernst Junger.

that sparkles with creative insights, while, at the same, adding a measure of deeper coherence which vividly highlights fault lines in less imaginatively penetrating interpretations.

We will take our bearings from just two of these works: ‘Nietzsche’s Word: “God is Dead”’ (hereafter ‘NW’)¹⁶ and *Nietzsche Vols. I-IV*: (hereafter ‘NI’, ‘NII’, etc.),¹⁷ using the second mainly for backup, and elaboration. The aim here is to show how nihilism, as elucidated by Heidegger, still bears out the once-threatening connotations of its name tag, and cannot easily be made compatible with James’ view that life in the frame remains, and deserves to remain, untouched and hence unperturbed by it. As an enemy of the grounding that enables and sustains worthwhile social meaning, this nihilism should be recognized for what it is, and not be given shelter by way of philosophical appeasement.

One of Heidegger’s first interpretational moves in NW is to stress that Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism is *historical*: “His thinking sees itself under the sign of nihilism. That is the name for an historical movement” (NW160) ... “Nietzsche comprehends nihilism as a historical process” (NW166) ... “The essence of nihilism is rooted in history” (NW 197). Moreover, this ‘thinking’ “gives the destiny of two millennia of Western history” for “after dominating the previous century” nihilism “has determined the current one” (NW160) . Such claims already invite obvious objections of historical inaccuracy (e.g. the ‘mistake’ that James refers to). But, Heidegger is using the term “history” in a special sense. He equates it with *metaphysics*, so ordinary criteria for empirical accuracy do not apply.

This means we should not treat the so-called madman’s announcement literally.¹⁸ Again, it is rhetorically devised, this time to capture the attention of

¹⁶ Reprinted in *Off the Beaten Track*, Martin Heidegger, (Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, trans.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002, pp.157-199 (hereafter ‘OTB’).

¹⁷ *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, Martin Heidegger, (David Farrell Krell, trans.), HarperCollins: New York, 1991, and *Nietzsche: Volumes Three and Four*, Martin Heidegger, (David Farrell Krell, trans.), HarperCollins: New York, 1991.

¹⁸ This has not gone unnoticed by other commentators. Megill, for example, tells us that “Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of God, should not be mistaken for an empirical observation concerning the decline of Christian belief in the nineteenth century ... In announcing the death of God, Nietzsche is declaring his conviction that the present is in a state of dereliction.” *Prophets of Extremity*, Alan Megill, University of California Press: California, Berkeley, 1987, p.33. But, Heidegger’s reading is exceptionally insightful as to *why* a purely ‘empirical’ interpretation is wrong, and shows why the ‘dereliction’ Megill refers to cannot be adequately discussed in just empirical terms either. In his introduction to *The Gay Science*, Bernard Williams also briefly notes that Nietzsche was not just concerned with the fallout from the God’s death but from the lapse of any “reassuring metaphysical

those who have no inkling when the ground shifting beneath their feet is symptomatic of a *metaphysical* earthquake. Heidegger is as firm as he is clear about this. Nietzsche is not just describing the consequences of the collapse of Christianity or even Christian faith: “Nietzsche uses the names “God” and “Christian God” to indicate the *supersensory world in general ... the metaphysical world*” (NW162, italics added). In NIV, Heidegger emphasizes the same point, but unpacks it in more direct detail:¹⁹

‘Christian God’ also stands for the ‘transcendent’ in general in its various meanings – for ‘ideals’ and ‘norms’. ‘principles’ and ‘rules’, ‘ends’ and ‘values’ which are set above the being in order to give being as a whole a purpose, an order, and – as it is succinctly expressed – ‘*meaning*’ ((NIV4) italics added).

And in NW, the outcome of God’s death, construed in these broader terms, is spelled out:

If God – as the supersensory ground and as the goal of everything that is real – is dead, if the supersensory world of ideas is bereft of its binding and above all its inspiring and constructive power, then there is nothing left which man can rely on and by which he can orientate himself (NW163).

However, Heidegger stresses that neither belief nor disbelief in religious or secular transcendent sources of ‘orientation’ is sufficient to indicate how someone, or, more to the point, a culture, ‘stands’ with regard to nihilism. To find that out, we must dig deeper.

Nihilism “is not just any view or doctrine held by just anyone” (NW163). It operates, as ‘a historical movement’ below the threshold of ordinary beliefs. At first sight, Heidegger makes this sound mysterious:

Nihilism moves history in the way of a scarcely recognized fundamental process in the destiny of the Western peoples. Hence nihilism is not just

structure of the world”, *op.cit.* p.xiii.

¹⁹ There is a good deal of overlap and repetition as between NW and NI-IV. In each case, I use the source that is felicitous for the purposes in hand.

one historical phenomenon among others Nihilism thought in its essence, is on the contrary the fundamental movement of the history of the West. Its roots are so deep that its development can entail only world catastrophes. Nihilism is the world-historical movement of the peoples of the earth who have been drawn in to modernity's arena of power (NW163-164) Nihilism, as the fundamental process of Western history, is also and above all the intrinsic law of this history ... its inner logic" (NW167).

But, even as it stands, this passage provides important clues as to why the consequences of nihilism are liable to be misconstrued, especially by someone who, unaware of its metaphysical depth, believes it to be patently inoffensive. Nihilism is not easy to spot at work. Its roots are deeply submerged, and it operates undercover as an "intrinsic law" or "inner logic". These characteristics help explain why, as Heidegger more than once claims, the effects of nihilism are often mistaken for its cause, and why its most important feature, its 'essence' (*das Wesen*)²⁰ in his elevated terms, is invariably ignored (even Nietzsche himself slips up here, but a bit more about that shortly).

On the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche put forward so far, we have the bare bones of an explanation as to why those who are unable to detect visible signs of 'world catastrophes' not clearly caused by quotidian events might be mistaken in considering this sufficient evidence that Nietzsche was wrong about the ominous nature and dire repercussions of nihilism. But, to cast even a shadow over James' view that, beneath the fierce face commonly projected onto it, nihilism is benign, we need more. We need to see *how* nihilism can threaten meaning and *that it does*. And, we need to give some substance to the idea that what might seem to be no more than an imaginary form of metaphysical terrorism has a real impact.

The Heideggerian story we are unfolding, convoluted as it is, eventually leads us to four different vantage points, or outposts, from which James' take on nihilism looks complacent. For reasons of space, we will need some shortcuts to get to these.²¹

²⁰ 'Essence' is a Heideggerian term of art that he does not, as far as I am aware, define (even when he asks himself directly what it means – e.g. NIV206). Here, I take "the essence of X" just to mean something like "what is most important about X" – though Heidegger's uses "essence" so often that he tends to undermine even the kind of 'importance' alluded to in this particular interpretation.

²¹ For example, we circumvent the doctrine of 'Eternal recurrence' which Heidegger, probably rightly,

Viewed from the first vantage point, that of the Heideggerian Nietzsche, *our world* has no value: “Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking ... the categories ‘aim,’ ‘unity,’ ‘being’ which we used to project some value into the world – we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*” (WP12, 13). In such a world, life in the frame can only embody superficial meanings, the equivalent of moral flotsam. The second vantage point reveals how things look through Nietzsche’s own eyes: again value disappears, and although the possibility of revival through a new form of valuation is broached, this turns out to be a Trojan Horse according to Heidegger. The third vantage point is occupied Heidegger himself. From there, the human situation looks worse than Nietzsche envisaged: nihilism has engulfed our lives, draining them of not just meaning, but also the resources for escaping from, or overcoming, the value vacuum. And, by way of conclusion, the view from the last outpost shows briefly how Heidegger’s verdict on the plight of “those drawn into the arena of modernity’s power”, and hence into nihilism on his terms, might be extrapolated from his reflections on Nietzsche without deploying either bespoke Heideggerian philosophical apparatus/terminology or tendentious assumptions about the priority of issues concerning ‘Being’. This way of reaching the verdict invokes what, following Richard Rorty,²² we might call “Heideggerian common sense”.

Heideggerian Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism is itself nihilistic.

Heidegger

For Heideggerian Nietzsche, metaphysics is the motor of human history, the only kind of history in which meaning can reside (because it is *metaphysical* not, as James would presumably prefer, because it is *human*). This is tantamount to saying that metaphysics creates the human appreciation of order and unity within and amongst entities and events on the world stage, as well as the subsequent basis for evaluations of them. How can it do this? Well recall, history

says is Nietzsche’s fundamental metaphysical position. Adequate treatment of this would take far too long, and also take us too far away from James’ text.

²² ‘Heideggerianism and Leftist Politics’, Richard Rorty; in *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, Santiago Zabala (ed.), McGill-Queen’s University Press: Canada, 2007, pp.149-58.

is *metaphysically infused*. Metaphysics is not just something *behind* it: “We are not thinking of a doctrine or only of a specialized discipline of philosophy but of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety” (NW165). Even so, there is a sticky surface incongruity: metaphysics belongs to the supersensory world *and* manages to exert a ‘determinative and supporting’ effect on what happens in the sensory world. This latter claim about the world-historical potency of metaphysics, one Heidegger is determined to make on Nietzsche’s behalf, apparently introduces an anomaly akin to that of Cartesian dualism: how can the ‘supersensory’ influence the ‘sensory’?

In discussing the view from our fourth outpost, we will suggest a way of re-describing metaphysics’ relationship to the sensory world that allows for straightforward causal influences. But, Heidegger does not see a problem here either, though for different reasons. Humans who lead meaningful lives always lean on and are guided in their actions, consciously or otherwise, by a metaphysics that provides them with a general sense of “the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety”. This is not just something they are inclined to fall back on whenever they are, as Dostoyevsky puts it, “striving to unite the details of existence and to discover at least some kind of general meaning in the universal muddle”.²³ For on that conception, metaphysics seeps into, and gives motivational shape to, *everything* they do. It is not operating from the supersensory realm, but within the history that it shapes. The dualistic dilemma is simply an illusion that vanishes when this becomes clear and the idea of a supersensory realm is redundant, and can no longer play a credible role.

Nietzsche’s great, and terrible, discovery, Heidegger tells us, is that the metaphysics which has been driving history since the time of Plato is unremittingly self-destructive. For the *values* it gave birth to, are fated to issue challenges to the legitimacy of both themselves and any would-be replacements. These are challenges that cannot be met.

Taking the high estimation of truth as a test case, as Nietzsche himself does, we can quickly see how Christian doctrines would succumb to self-destruction given their weak evidential basis (the high estimation of truth bringing in tow urgent demands for strong evidence): “The sense of truthfulness, developed highly by Christianity, is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world and of history (WP 2, 7) If on a Sunday

²³ *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, (David McDuff, trans.) Penguin: London, 2003, p.9.

morning we hear the old church bells chiming, we ask ourselves: is it really possible! This is on account of a Jew crucified two thousand years ago who said that he was the son of God. There is no proof for such an assertion”²⁴. And, Nietzsche suggests that this kind of scenario, where disbelief is the inevitable result of rudimentary questioning, plays out for morality in general:

Morality was the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism*. But among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its genealogy, its partial perspective. (WP 4, 5 (10))

Heidegger speaks, as we said, of ‘destiny’, ‘intrinsic law of history’, ‘inner logic’, and so forth, thus depicting metaphysical activity as something shielded from ordinary scrutiny, as we also indicated. But, we do not need a clearer view of the details of that activity to see why Heidegger wanted to say that when Nietzsche moved beyond the generality of morality *in toto*, and identified the operative metaphysics of the Western world in the even wider terms of *values*, this metaphysics should be regarded as nihilistic. For values were also self-undermining. They could not withstand the force of the insight, already part of their inbuilt logic as it were, that the idealized world they represented, or promised, would never be actualized: “The highest values have already devalued themselves now by coming to understand that the ideal world is not, and not ever, going to be realized within the real world” (NW167) – and not only that, but the *value of the highest values*, the obligatory basis of sincere commitments to them, runs up against the discovery that the “true world (the “transcendent”, the beyond) has been fabricated solely out of ‘psychological needs’” (NIV34) .

At the conclusion of the process of the highest values undermining themselves lies a valueless world, a world in which nihilism therefore reigns. Of course, two key assumptions need to dominate here: (1) a world without value is a world without meaning: “‘Meaning’ signifies the same thing as value, since in place of ‘meaninglessness’, Nietzsche also says ‘valuelessness’” (NIV30), and (2) values are homogeneous, so *all* worthwhile values lose their currency absent the creditworthiness of the higher values: “If these uppermost values, which grant all beings their value, are devalued, then all beings grounded in them

²⁴ *Human All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche, (Gary Hanwerk (trans.)), Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 113, p.93 (hereafter: HAH).

become valueless” (NIV30). The end of the devaluation process is not however the end of Nietzsche’s own story, but it is the place where Heidegger parts company from him. Before we discuss the significance of these points, we need to touch base with James’ handling of Nietzsche in his approach to nihilism.

James gestures towards the richness of Nietzsche’s nihilism (36), but targets his discussion on a thinner version that is no threat to meaning as he conceives it, cannot be overcome by us, and need not be overcome because “we have no reason to want to” do so (28). He thinks this is a good idea because Nietzsche’s nihilism is inextricably tied to at least two bad ideas: (1) that European culture had been embroiled in a long term crisis caused by nihilism, and was heading towards a climacteric phase which we now occupy (“What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*” (WP3)), and (2) that meaning is intimately connected to a religious outlook on life.²⁵ James is skeptical about (1), apparently regarding it as more or less bogus history and unverifiable prophecy. But here, he misses something we have just discussed: the real catastrophe, the one Heideggerian Nietzsche is concerned about, is *metaphysical* for which ordinary talk about cultural calamity and disaster is rhetorical window dressing, serving as a contingent indicator of the more severe underlying problem. This is one of the reasons, as Heidegger often points out, Nietzsche does not dwell on ordinary historical details: “Nowhere does Nietzsche identify any historically recognized and demonstrable forms of the positing of the uppermost values, nor the historically representable contexts of such positings (NIV35) ... for a comprehension of the essence of nihilism there is little to be gained by recounting the history of nihilism in different centuries and depicting its different forms” (NIV53). As for (2), James’ swift suggestion that we can show how ineffectual nihilism is by simply severing the connection between meaning and religion (for this will leave meaning unscathed) fails to acknowledge that such a move cannot thwart Nietzsche’s ‘richer nihilism’, which depends not on tight links between meaning and religion, but between meaning and ‘the transcendent in general’. Nihilism begins to bite when a metaphysics that caters for ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’ has no operational

²⁵ A third reason would presumably be that Nietzsche’s nihilism is tied to the doctrine of ‘Eternal Recurrence’ that James regards as absurd. For reasons of brevity, as we said, we do not discuss this doctrine here, but simply assume what we say about Nietzsche’s nihilism independently of it still holds up.

existence within culture. Life in the frame is always lacking in that regard. For, it is invariably dominated by the antics of the ‘herd’ (Nietzsche) or the ‘They’ (Heidegger), the *mobile vulgus*, the people who are manipulated by popular culture, banal politics, and prejudices masquerading as opinions – and it is therefore bound to forfeit stability:

The real disadvantage that the cessation of metaphysical views brings with it lies in the fact that the individual keeps his eye too strictly upon his short lifespan and receives no stronger impulses to build durable institutions designed to last for centuries; he wants to pick the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and he therefore no longer cares to plant those trees that require centuries of constant cultivation and are intended to shade a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence still *contrasts* too strongly with the deeply breathing repose of metaphysical ages. (HAH 22, p.32).

Through Nietzsche’s own eyes

What does Nihilism mean? – That the highest values are losing their value.
Nietzsche

A world without value is still a world, so Nietzsche’s account of nihilism does not come to a halt when the ‘higher values’ self destruct: “The earth-shattering change behind the devaluation of the highest values hitherto is revealed in the fact that a *new principle of valuation* becomes necessary” (NIV49). Humans can no longer rely on their judgments as to what is, and what is not, worthwhile, but Nietzsche believes this only signals the *completion*, not the triumph, of nihilism. He identifies something that he believes counters nihilism, something he calls ‘the will to power’. This cannot be thwarted or undermined by nihilism because it does not depend on anything that can be undermined. And, it does not depend on anything of that kind because it does not depend on *anything* (even itself). Nor is it professed to occupy the supersensory realms, such as ‘the true world’, that nihilism ‘exposes’ as fraudulent.

Unlike morality and the higher values in general, the will to power is not destined for self-destruction in virtue of its own nature. If anything, its trajectory

is self-reinforcing. It strives to overcome itself, but in doing so only becomes stronger (because a greater force is required to do this). Nick Land graphically captures how the will to power elusively offers nothing for nihilism to bite into:

The will to power is not driven by the tendency to realize and sustain a potential, its sole impetus is that of overcoming itself. It has no motivating end, but only a propulsive source. It is in this sense that will to power is creative desire, without a pre-figured destination or anticipatory perfection. It is an arrow shot into the unconceived.²⁶

Nihilism is defeated because values are so radically transformed in the process of willing, they become indestructible. The value of values then lies *in the willing* itself, and not in anything outside the domain of the will that is doomed to self-destruction or can be undermined.

James' treatment of nihilism has to seem complacent from this perspective, that of the special kind of person, *der Übermensch*, who has taken what Philippa Foot calls the "highly daring mental voyage",²⁷ and come to recognize that traditional values are bankrupt, that the will is the only unimpeachable source of what can replace them.²⁸ By comparison, life in the frame, lacking "deeply breathing repose", then has to look "agitated and ephemeral": a mundane, self-deceptive life; one that surfs routinely, without any overall sense of direction, on an ocean of disparate values, which are now no more than the detritus from the insidious eruption of a metaphysical volcano.

Heidegger

Insight into nihilism remains something terrifying.

Heidegger

For Heidegger, Nietzsche's nihilism has some promising features up to the

²⁶ *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*, Nick Land, Routledge: London, 2002, p.73.

²⁷ 'Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values', Philippa Foot, p.210; in *Nietzsche*, John Richardson and Brian Leiter (eds.), Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001, pp.210-220.

²⁸ Compare Richardson: 'The human becomes overman by grasping himself as will to power, and putting this insight into effect by making new values', *Heidegger*, John Richardson, Routledge: London, 2012, p.246.

point where the will to power is introduced as a countermeasure. Then, in Heidegger's terms and to his great dismay, Being is utterly reduced to mere matters of value: "For Heidegger, Being is annihilated insofar as it is transformed completely into value".²⁹

Heidegger ruminates extensively on the nature of value and valuing (e.g. NIV 15-16), questioning, for instance, what makes a value 'valid'. In doing this he invites further questions as to whether Nietzsche's model of valuing as sheer willing in a social vacuum without an extrinsic aim or object is at all cogent. But, he passes up on these, preferring to concentrate on the consequences of assuming the model *is* viable, or certainly not incoherent. Heidegger has two main problems with these consequences, and believes that they feed into a much larger problem.

The first difficulty is that, far from countering nihilism, the notion of 'a will to power' remains caught up in its underlying metaphysics: "the revaluation of all values, as a grounding of the principle for a new valuation, is itself metaphysics" (NIV6). And, this metaphysics "is not an overcoming of nihilism. It is the ultimate entanglement in nihilism" (NIV203). The supposed countermeasure to nihilism counter-productively, and ironically, empowers it – "ironically", because Nietzsche's 'completion of metaphysics' turns out to be nihilism's last stand.

The second problem is that a world transformed by the metaphysics of the will to power is one given over to "unconditional subjectivity" (NW191) and rampant self-assertion ("pure powerfulness without restraint" (NIV28)) through which all beings are objectified: "World becomes object", and "earth can show itself now only as the attack arranged in the willing of man ... nature appears everywhere as the object of technology" (NIV191). When awareness, conscious or otherwise, of the world's ungroundedness outside the will proliferates, it descends into darkness: "The time of the world's night is a desolate time because the desolation grows continually greater ... The age for which the ground fails to appear hangs in the abyss".³⁰

Both problems feed into a larger problem, a problem which for Heidegger is paramount and therefore never absent throughout even his most protracted discussions of Nietzsche's nihilism: "Being, as a matter of principle is not admitted as Being" (NIV203). Crudely: Being is not given its due. This is the

²⁹ *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics*. Gianni Vattimo, p.21.

³⁰ 'Why Poets?' Martin Heidegger, p.200; in OTB, pp.200-241.

very reason why entanglement in metaphysics is a problem in the first instance. In Heidegger's view, *all* Western metaphysics short changes Being ("In its essence, however, metaphysics is nihilism" (NW198)).

The second problem, unbridled objectification, which is the practical concomitant of Nietzsche's nihilism, fuels the larger problem because it creates a mechanically distracting world that blatantly "leaves Being unthought" (NIV212). Before we discuss whether these considerations might be problematic for James' notion of a toothless nihilism, we need to say a bit more about what is supposed to be going on here.

Heidegger credits Nietzsche with recognizing that the metaphysical underpinnings of successive societies in the West have contained the seeds of their own destruction, and hence have always been nihilistic.³¹ But, he believes Nietzsche's attempt to thwart this inherent nihilism fails miserably because in its totalizing capacity (*everything* comes down to value and ultimately the 'willing' thereof), the attempt is itself metaphysical. At the same time, and Heidegger claims this all along, Nietzsche fails to engage the *essence* of nihilism.³² This is a disastrous deficit.

For Heidegger, the rhetoric about nihilism's psychological and social upshot that Nietzsche both voices and encourages covers up the real threat that nihilism poses: the threat to Being. The path from the supersensory world to the will to power bypasses Being, creating a culture in which Being is reduced to nothing. Or, more accurately, the essence of nihilism is that it *eclipses* Being. "Eclipses" is apt because it is not that Being is *destroyed* as such – on my reading at least, Heidegger operates with a quasi conservation of Being principle (it can neither be created nor destroyed by human hand), but rather that is unable to reveal itself or be revealed: "The value-thinking of the metaphysics of the will to power is deadly in an extreme sense because it does not permit Being itself to come into the dawning" (NW196). It should perhaps be noted, however, that Heidegger's immense concern with 'how things stand with Being' leads him to darken his portrait of Nietzsche's nihilism. In his comprehensive study of Nietzsche's thought, Richard Schacht sketches a more optimistic portrait in which its transitional status is emphasized. This leads Nietzsche to regard nihilism as ultimately beneficial because it opens up possibilities for fresh

³¹ "Credits" is too weak. It is clear that Heidegger was often in awe of Nietzsche's insights.

³² However, in NI, Heidegger praises Nietzsche's insights into the essence of Nihilism.

values and a new kind of human being, *der Übermensch*.³³

How do things now ‘stand’ with regard to James’ view that, deceptive appearances aside, nihilism is ineffectual and can be profitably ignored? Historically, at least on Heidegger’s understanding, those who are, *even now*, creating meaning within ‘the frame’ are doing so during, or at least under the influence of, the Nietzschean epoch and hence in the dark, so to speak, because they are not witnessing the light of Being’s presence. But, why should James feel any need to respond to this? Or even take it seriously?

Heidegger believes that metaphysics grounds the intelligibility of the world, typically over long periods of time. In doing this, it both creates regions of intelligibility and conceals other such regions. Yet, it is destined to be exposed as nihilistic because it never does justice to ‘Being’. By contrast, James’ position seems to be that metaphysics *cannot* ground intelligibility on the grand scale Heidegger believes metaphysics aims for, but this is of little consequence because meaning within specific social contexts does not require such grounding. Metaphysics cannot underwrite the meaning of the world *as a whole* or, in Heidegger’s terms, “of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety”. It cannot do this because ‘the whole’ or ‘the fundamental structure’ has no meaning. Meaning is, so to speak, local, and floats free of concerns about globalized ‘grounding’. Being then drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss.

Richard Rorty has voiced some trenchant criticisms of what he regards as Heidegger’s gross over-assessment of the power of philosophy in this connection, finding it preposterous that there should be any substantial connection between our current socio-political difficulties and metaphysics: “that our present troubles are somehow due to the Plato-Nietzsche tradition ..., that our fate is somehow linked to that tradition”.³⁴ As an accomplished Rorty

³³ *Nietzsche*, Richard Schacht, Routledge: London, 1983, see especially pp.344-348.

³⁴ ‘Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey’, Richard Rorty, p.53; in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1982, pp.37-59. In an interesting discussion of the criticisms Rorty voiced both in this paper and in ‘Heidegger Against the Pragmatists’ (unpublished), David Krell concedes that major world events such as the First World War seem to be the upshot of “more a nexus of ineluctable and incomprehensible stupidities than anything one could define as “subjectivity”, “will-to-will”, “calculative thought”, or “*Ge-stell*,” but wonders “might not trade warfare, mobilization, *Realpolitik*, and all the rest, even the unbelievable bungling, conceal ‘some essential relation’ to the way Europeans think and have thought; and would it be utterly ingenuous to believe that the history of metaphysics has had at least ‘some essential relation’ to such thought?” *Intimations of Mortality: Time, Truth, and Finitude in Heidegger’s Thinking*, David Farrell Krell, Penn State University Press: Pennsylvania, 1990, p.167. Heidegger may be vulnerable to a

scholar,³⁵ James is no doubt aware of these, and may well feel that they simply buttress his own preference for keeping some distance from the narrow ‘tradition’ we have been discussing. But, this kind of criticism relegates metaphysics to philosophy, as if it is to be identified with particular doctrines, lines of argument and so forth, whereas, Heidegger claims, these are usually *the products of metaphysics*. Collapsing Heidegger’s distinction between metaphysics and particular philosophical doctrines blurs the bigger causal picture, making it look as if he was trying to say that specific philosophical views were the sole determinant of certain socio- historical outcomes. There are also other factors that Rorty’s, otherwise catchy and characteristically acute, objections ignore.

For, as Iain Thomson percipiently suggests, when Heidegger talks about the longer term influence of metaphysics, he can be usefully interpreted as subscribing to a thesis of *ontological holism*. This “leads him to the view that metaphysics does not just concern philosophers isolated in their ivory towers; on the contrary [it] grounds an age”.³⁶ Here, metaphysics involves underlying synoptic conceptions of the world which dictate what it is for things to be what they are, and in doing so play “a foundational role in establishing and maintaining our very sense of the intelligibility of all things, ourselves included ... metaphysics molds our very sense of what it means for something – anything – to be”.³⁷ Thomson makes Rorty’s objections less immediately compelling by clarifying Heidegger’s notion of ontotheology³⁸ so that it is easier to see (a) *how* metaphysics plays a grounding/foundational role for *ein Zeitalter* (“an age of time”), and then (b) *why* Heidegger insists that “Western humanity in all its comportment towards beings, and even towards itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics” (NIV205). ‘Ontology’ identifies what there is, what counts as ‘a being’, and these identifications are

related line of criticism that Bernard Williams opens up regarding Nietzsche when he suggests that the latter’s “conception of social relations owes more to his understanding of the ancient world than a grasp of modernity”. Interestingly Williams qualifies this by saying that “the idea of nihilism is undeniably relevant to modern conditions”, but unfortunately does not explain why. *The Gay Science*, *op.cit.p.xii*.

³⁵ See, for example, *Rorty and the Mirror of Nature*, James Tartaglia, Routledge: London, 2007.

³⁶ *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Iain Thomson, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2007, p.12.

³⁷ Thomson, *op.cit.* p. 124.

³⁸ Here, and elsewhere, we do not distinguish between the views of the ‘early’ and ‘late’ Heidegger, on the assumption that the core of his later beliefs is prefigured in the *Nietzsche* volumes – this, in my view, is largely what makes those books so interesting.

intellectually justified by an accompanying ‘theology’. The combination (*Ontotheology*) thereby creates what Thomson calls “constellations of intelligibility”. He also points out that ontological holism presupposes two additional theses which lend further credence to Heidegger’s account of metaphysics: *ontological historicity* and *epochality*. The first holds that our elemental ideas about what there is, and hence our basic understanding of reality, change over time. While the second, recognizing the way in which ontotheology stabilizes these ideas and this understanding, “specifies that Western humanity’s changing sense of reality congeals into a series of relatively distinct and unified historical epochs”.³⁹

Heidegger’s history of metaphysics provides a narrative in which Nietzsche’s attempt to ‘counter’ nihilism only conjures it up in a stronger and more virulent form. What matters most here, for Heidegger, is that Being has been neglected, with little prospect of life progressing in ways which will alter this.⁴⁰ The picture he paints – empirically, as it were, for he is now expecting us to take his discussion seriously on its surface and not as ‘window dressing’ or some rhetorical ploy, is one which the whole earth is dominated by the unrestrained willfulness of humans, and all beings, including themselves, are treated as technological resources that have no inherent meaning, but are ‘on standby’ (*Bestand*), readily available for projects motivated and guided only by the bleakest calculative notions of ‘optimization’, ‘efficiency’, ‘cost-effectiveness’, and the like. The great danger, *the danger (die Gefahr)*, in Heidegger’s eyes, is that the Nietzschean nihilistic ontotheology of our time will buck the age-old trend of gradually giving way to some other version, and become, instead, a permanent fixture. If that happens, and Heidegger often speaks to us as if it *already has*, then we will inhabit “a technologically homogenized world civilization”.⁴¹ Contemplating this, Thomson draws a plausibly dire conclusion: “It is, in fact, not so difficult to imagine that, in our endless quest for self-optimization, we might go so far as to unintentionally reengineer our meaning-bestowing capacity for creative world-disclosure right out of our genetic make-up, thereby eliminating the very source of any

³⁹ Thomson, *op.cit.*p.142. Thomson goes into some detail in explaining how this works out for a number of different epochs: pre-Socratic, Platonic, medieval, modern, and late-modern.

⁴⁰ We are now alluding to the late Heidegger, although, as already suggested, the rudiments of this picture are already there in the *Nietzsche* books.

⁴¹ Quoted by Thomson. The original source is *Gesamtausgabe* Vol.11: *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, 1910-1976, H. Heidegger (ed.), Klostermann: Germany, 1983, p.243.

meaningful future.”⁴² Set against such prospects, James’ claim that meaning is both safe and sufficient within the frame again seems complacent.⁴³

Heideggerian common sense

The kingdom of nihilism is powerful.

Gilles Deleuze

This concluding section could well have been entitled “Heideggerian common sense and the fragility of social meaning”. For the view from our final vantage point, reveals that the meaning typically generated in the frame is not robust enough to withstand a form of nihilism that can be derived from a common sense interpretation of Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche. Here, Heidegger’s claim that Nietzsche identified the necessary fragmentation of meaning which characterizes our societies is accepted, but the explanation for this ‘necessity’ (which is *historical*) can be couched in plainer terms that need not refer to the neglect of Being or involve use of any of the terminology associated with metaphysics as Heidegger views it (“essence”, “destiny”, “intrinsic law”, “inner logic”, and so forth). What is missing – and its absence *constitutes* a cause of ‘fragmentation’, is the equivalent of a thoroughly naturalized metaphysics: a guiding conception of how life makes sense considered in the round. This needs to involve, or at least inspire, a set of interwoven beliefs and congruent practices that provide practical guidance as to how to make sense of life *as a whole*, and *within* the whole so that social purposes can be aligned with it. James contends that while “nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal ... we can still act as if it did” (172). But, generally speaking, we do not. When we do, any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware *philosophical* reflection is liable to destroy it. Common sense nihilism distilled from the late Heidegger’s diagnosis of our world shows: “There is no longer any goal in and

⁴² Thomson, *op.cit.* 157.

⁴³ Interestingly, Julian Young claims that Heidegger, in his later work, is the only significant ‘post-death-of-God’ philosopher who contends “there is a meaning to life as such”. This ‘meaning’ is revealed when the role of ‘guardianship of the world’ is fulfilled; *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2nd Edition, Julian Young, Routledge: London, 2014, p.248. Again for reasons of space, we do not explore the possibility that this claim could be worked up into a sustained objection to James’ view that life is meaningless.

through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere, and in the direction of which they can develop” (NI157).⁴⁴ The absence of such goals is a symptom of an unsettling, Western world-historical, nihilistic social malaise, the evidence for which seems ubiquitous. A cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In his introduction to NI, the translator David Krell points out that *in context* this remark also bears an ominous interpretation, one that implies the absence of such goals is “a matter of the *Volk*, a matter that calls for bold deeds and interminable struggle” (NI xiii).

⁴⁵ I have resisted throughout any play on Heidegger’s great fear of ‘enframing’ (*Gestell*) and James’ philosophical satisfaction with his own version of it and with the meaning that life in the frame achieves (plus the escape hatch of ‘transcendence’). The way out of nihilism that the later Heidegger advocates involves an approach to life that is the antithesis of ‘the will to power’. It involves an abdication of what he calls ‘calculative thinking’ and ‘willfulness’ in order to take up a meditative stance (*Gelassenheit*) in which things in the world are left to reveal their nature. This approach involves a version of truth (unconcealment) that possibly insulates it from the Davidsonian objections about meaning mentioned at the start of this paper.