

Nietzsche on Nihilism: A Unifying Thread

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Abstract:

Nihilism is one of Nietzsche's foremost philosophical concerns. But characterizing it proves elusive. His nihilists include those in despair in the wake of the "death of God." Yet they also include believing Christians. We have, among these nihilists, those fervently committed to frameworks of cosmic meaning. But we also have those who lack any such commitment, epitomized in the "last man." We have those who want to escape this life. And we have those who wouldn't dream of such a prospect. Extant accounts have shed helpful light on the particularities of these various manifestations of nihilism. Yet they have not explained what ties these together. In this paper, I propose a unifying thread. Nihilists, on my reading of Nietzsche, are those who have come unmoored from (what he sees as) the most important values. That is not to say that there is nothing more to nihilism than being wrong (by Nietzsche's lights). But it is to say that we don't understand Nietzschean nihilism fully if we just focus on the descriptive psychology of valuers. The unifying thread of Nietzschean nihilism, on my reading, in fact turns out to be structurally similar to the familiar idea of it we get in a number of other 19th century thinkers and authors—and ironically with those moralists who brand Nietzsche himself a nihilist. Where he differs from them is not in his account of what nihilism fundamentally is (i.e., coming unmoored from values), but in the values he sees nihilists as having come unmoored from.

I. Introduction

Nietzsche, it is widely agreed, regards nihilism as a troubling problem, and there is further consensus that it is one of his main philosophical concerns. In a tradition stretching back at least to Heidegger, nihilism has long been discussed by interpreters of Nietzsche. But it has become a greater focus of attention of late in anglophone Nietzsche studies, following on Bernard Reginster's groundbreaking book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*.¹ In the decade or so since that book appeared, a number of interpreters have tried to work out further exactly what nihilism amounts to, some supplementing, some challenging the basic picture centered around the notions of disorientation and despair that Reginster put forward.

¹ Reginster (2006). There were of course many treatments of nihilism before Reginster's, and a number of anglophone philosophers discussed it as well, for example, Schacht (1973); Magnus (1979); Nehamas (1985); Clark (1990); Richardson (1996); May (1999); White (2000). But it is in Reginster's book that it is most explicitly thematized and treated at book length, and dissected and categorized in a way that it previously hadn't been.

The basic interpretive challenge comes from the diversity of characters that Nietzsche thinks of as nihilistic. Nihilists, antecedently, might seem to be those who, in the wake of God's death, have lost their sense that anything matters and fallen into existential despair. But for Nietzsche, Christianity *itself* is also thoroughly nihilistic outlook (TI, 21; A, 20; A, 58; EH, "Why I Write Such Good Books," 1; EH, "BT," 2). So one manifestation of nihilism is to see the world as bereft of God and accordingly meaningless. Another, seemingly diametrically opposed, is to see the world as guided by God and accordingly meaningful. Or take another example: It might seem that nihilists condemn the world and want to escape it. This is true of the Schopenhauerian, the Buddhist, and perhaps the Christian. But what of the "last man," (TSZ, "Prologue") utterly satisfied with the comforts of the world and with no aspiration or feeling for anything higher? Although not called a "nihilist" by name, it is often thought that we are supposed to regard him as the nadir of this condition.²

Faced with these seemingly quite different things being labelled as "nihilism," one strategy is just to say that there are different forms of nihilism that Nietzsche identifies.³ In one respect, this seems evidently correct, in that this broad condition comes in a striking variety of guises. Yet as I shall be arguing in this paper, there is a unifying thread linking together the main forms of nihilism he targets. Nihilism, on his view, is not just a pressing psychological predicament, though it does take that form. It is also, to varying degrees, an ethical failing. Nihilism, on the view I elaborate here, involves one's being unmoored from an important swath of the valuable and thus failing to value it. (With the charge of nihilism coming from Nietzsche's mouth then, the "valuable" will of course be as seen from the standpoint of a Nietzschean ethics.⁴) This failure can happen both at the reflective cognitive level, but also at the emotive or affective level. Nihilism, on Nietzsche's way of thinking,

² Pippin (2010); Katsafanas (2015); Gemes (Forthcoming).

³ As acknowledged in various ways in Reginster (2006); Hussain (2007); Katsafanas (2015); Gemes (Forthcoming).

⁴ This is not presupposing an ambitious meta-ethical construal. Everything I say would be compatible with Nietzsche as an anti-realist or expressivist or similar at the *meta*-ethical level. All that is required is the idea that Nietzsche has first-order normative ethical and evaluative commitments, which he evidently does have.

involves a failure of attraction and attachment to certain important values: this life and world most notably, but particularly the features that make this life and world good, but which it can be a challenge to value in a full-blooded way: its inevitably transitory character, exercises of the will to power, experiences of struggle and striving. In extreme cases, nihilism involves indifference even to exceptional human excellence, creativity and beauty. A nihilist, with regard to such values, finds *nothing* (or little) valuable in it, where (as Nietzsche sees it) there is *something* valuable, and the nihilist's affective orientation and patterns of concern bear out this problematic stance.

The account I propose is a simple one, so simple that it is surprising that it has not received greater attention.⁵ One problem is that interpreters, perhaps out of fear of turning Nietzsche into a remonstrating chastiser, have tried to characterize nihilism in a largely value-neutral way, abstracting from Nietzsche's own value commitments.⁶ (God forbid that the great fulminator Nietzsche should think other people are "wrong" or that his philosophical project should fundamentally depend on "value judgments"!) They have focused instead on the descriptive psychology of nihilists (e.g, being in despair, lacking powerful affects, turned against their drives, and so on) or on the formal job description of what nihilistic values are like (e.g., not realizable in this world) or some combination of these. Although this sheds some useful light on nihilism, it misses, I believe, a key dimension of the phenomenon Nietzsche is seeking to characterize, and also misses a main reason why he thinks of it as a problem. We can't, as I see it, grasp what Nietzsche's central complaint is, unless we bring key Nietzschean values to bear, and see nihilism as, at core, a condition of coming unmoored from these values.

⁵ The closest I've found is in Schacht (1973). Although our respective interpretations have various disagreements about the content and nature of the Nietzschean values, and in the exact characterization of what nihilism amounts to, there is some considerable affinity in our accounts, at least in the idea that nihilism involves failing to find value where there is value.

⁶ Schacht (1973) is in marked contrast to the recent trend. Danto (1964) maintains that Nietzsche does not attack nihilism, but rather that he himself is a nihilist. This implausible view is thoroughly and effectively dismantled in Schacht (1973). Some views that interpret nihilism meta-ethically (Langsam (1997); Hussain (2007)) also take it that Nietzsche is, in some sense, a nihilist. Although to my mind this it is mark against these readings that Nietzsche himself ends up as a nihilist, they correctly see that nihilism is something Nietzsche thinks we need some way of counteracting.

Nietzsche never produced a worked-out account of nihilism. Compare his treatment of other moral-psychological phenomena, such as *ressentiment*, guilt, bad conscience, the ascetic ideal, and the will to truth. On such matters, much remains hazy to be sure, but we have relatively more worked out ideas in the published text. With nihilism by contrast, much of the relevant material is found in Nietzsche's notebooks. Given that this is material he did not publish, it is reasonable to wonder how much one can rely on it. These jottings are no doubt important for giving a preliminary indication of Nietzsche's views on nihilism, and good arguments have been given for thus putting considerable weight on the notebooks.⁷ But if we take on board everything Nietzsche says in the notebooks, it is, I believe, going to be impossible to weave it all together into a coherent philosophical position.⁸ This should come as no great surprise. These are *notebooks*, where Nietzsche is sketching and trying out ideas, and not all of those ideas represent what should be his final, considered position.

We need to think philosophically *with* Nietzsche, if we are to explore an issue where his final published remarks are so thin. That is what I intend to do here. I would like to propose the following methodology. It is, as I shall call it, *phenomena-first*. That is, we should identify the main phenomena that Nietzsche regards as nihilistic, and then try to work out what, seen through a Nietzschean lens, might be nihilistic about them. To this end, we look to the published texts and secondarily to the notebooks for some elucidation. But we should not begin from Nietzsche's sketchy and inconsistent characterizations of nihilism from the notebooks. The six main manifestations we need to account for are as follows:

Christianity (TI, 21; A, 20; A, 58; EH, "Why I Write Such Good Books," 1; EH, "BT," 2)

Buddhism (A, 20; CW, "Postscript")

⁷ Reginster (2006).

⁸ As a stark illustration of this: The notebooks from the 1887-8 period can make it seem as though nihilism is a recent phenomenon. Nihilism is "at the door," (WP, 1) or that what is coming is the "advent" [*Heraufkunft*] of nihilism (WP, "Preface," 1). But at roughly the same time, Nietzsche is claiming, in ideas he *actually chose to publish*, that the two-millennia-old phenomenon of Christianity is itself nihilistic.

Schopenhauer (A, 7; TI, 2I; Cf., GM, “Preface,” 5)

Post-Christianity, as seen in the despair of the “madman” (GS, 125)

The fanatical “will to truth” (BGE, 10; Cf, GM III: 24).

The ‘Last Man’ (TSZ, “Prologue”)

In the sections to follow, I will consider several recent interpretations. While these have, to varying degrees, gotten important aspects of nihilism, none, it seems to me, has really gotten into view a unifying thread connecting the main phenomena Nietzsche thinks of as nihilistic. That is not of course to say that the extant views should be rejected *in toto*. A unifying thread is neither an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon in question (the attendant psychologies are important too), nor even a sufficient condition of it. In this respect, this paper incorporates (or is compatible with) a good bit of the existing literature, while still going beyond it to illuminate an interesting strand tying various nihilistic phenomena together.

The unifying thread of Nietzschean nihilism, on my reading, turns out to be not some idiosyncratic and distinctive invention of Nietzsche’s. It is structurally similar to the familiar idea of nihilism we get in a number of other 19th century thinkers (Jacobi) and authors (Dostoevsky, Turgenev)—and indeed from those moralists who brand Nietzsche himself a dangerous nihilist. Where he differs from them is not in his account of what nihilism fundamentally is (i.e., coming unmoored from values), but in the values he sees nihilists as having come unmoored from.

II. Nihilism as meta-ethics

Another, very different understanding of nihilism is of course in wide philosophical circulation. In contemporary analytic meta-ethics, nihilism is the view that there are no facts about value. Because Nietzsche is often taken to subscribe to such a meta-ethical position, it is sometimes thought that he is himself, in this sense, a nihilist. Thus, Nadeem Hussain, for

example, characterizes the Nietzschean problem of nihilism as the issue of i) there being no facts about value, ii) one coming to believe this at the theoretical level, and iii) therefore at the practical level potentially becoming dispirited and subject to a certain paralysis of will. On Hussain's reading, Nietzsche sees the need for creating fictional simulacra of values, because a life without values would be unbearable.⁹ Reginster opts for a similar view, at least as one aspect of his reading. He suggests that the nihilist is someone who is "disoriented" in the face of realizing that there are not any *objective* values, and stands in need of some response to this problem.¹⁰

There are two questions that need to be separated. First, does Nietzsche hold such a meta-ethical position, of anti-realist or error-theoretic skepticism? Second, even if he does, does this, in his eyes, amount to nihilism? The first issue, I believe, is less of a settled matter than it is sometimes taken to be.¹¹ But let's put this aside. Suppose we agree for the sake of argument that Nietzsche is himself doubtful that there are objective values (i.e., mind-independent evaluative facts).¹² Is the meta-ethical belief that there are no such evaluative facts, and the practical consequences of such a belief, tantamount to Nietzschean nihilism? This is implausible for two reasons. The first reason is that it makes Nietzsche seem a nihilist along with his targets.¹³ This can be dealt with somewhat by saying that while Nietzsche may be a "theoretical" nihilist, he is not a "practical" nihilist.¹⁴ Still, it has the unhappy consequence

⁹ Hussain (2007). Cp., Langsam (1997); Reginster (2006), who propose a more subjectivist response.

¹⁰ Reginster's nihilism of disorientation (2006) at times seems meta-ethical, at times at the first-order level (an absence of a certain kind of values). Hussain (2012) and Clark (2012) take Reginster to subscribe to the former meta-ethical twist on disorientation. Katsafanas (2015) and Gemes (forthcoming) take Reginster to mean something structural at the first-order level: the absence of certain kind of values ('overarching,' 'final,' etc).

¹¹ For doubts about whether there is a clear Nietzschean meta-ethical position, see Hussain (2013), retrenching from his earlier view; Huddleston (2014).

¹² Evaluative facts here need to be understood as "mind-independent evaluative facts," since on Reginster's subjectivist reading (2006), there could be evaluative facts, albeit perspectival/ subjective ones.

¹³ Proponents of such readings do differentiate between "theoretical" and "practical" nihilism, and attribute only the former to Nietzsche himself. There is a weak textual case that Nietzsche regards what is labelled "theoretical nihilism" as actually a form of nihilism. And there is also a weak textual case that the forms of psychological dismay labelled as "practical nihilism" in question get going as a result of a theoretical meta-ethical belief.

¹⁴ This terminology is due to Hussain (2007).

of making Nietzsche out to be, by his lights, a nihilist even at the theoretical level. The textual evidence for this is, to my mind, not strong, even taking the notebooks into account. The second reason is that several forms of nihilism that Nietzsche criticizes do not share this putative value skepticism, and none clearly shares it. Many Nietzschean nihilists are not doubtful about the existence of objective values. I will take these two points in turn.

Does Nietzsche ascribe nihilism to himself, as his own current philosophical view?¹⁵ So far as I know, there are no passages where he does so in the published work.¹⁶ In the notebooks, he mentions that he was a “thoroughgoing nihilist” (WP, 25) and someone who has “lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself” (WP, 3). But these are claims describing his past self.¹⁷ The straightforward explanation for why he *was* a nihilist is that he was, at one point anyway, a convinced Schopenhauerian, if not concerning the metaphysics, at least concerning Schopenhauer’s negative judgment on existence as a horrible cycle of endlessly unfulfilled striving and suffering. Nietzsche gets past this sort of life-denial that is an undercurrent in *The Birth of Tragedy*. If Nietzsche indeed continued to think of himself as nihilistic in virtue of his meta-ethical views, he gives no indication of this. It is true that Nietzsche uses the term “nihilism” in various ways in the notebooks, but I can find no good evidence he uses it to refer to this meta-ethical thesis, or that he self-ascribes “nihilism” as his own present philosophical position.

The closest we get is the sometime-characterization of nihilism as the belief in “valuelessness” (WP, 8). But there is a crucial ambiguity here. This could, at a stretch, be construed meta-ethically, as a doubt about whether there are values. But it makes far better sense of the texts if this is construed as a negative *first-order* normative judgment rendered on the world, to the effect that it is value-less because bad. The world is valueless, in the eyes of

¹⁵ Danto (1964) suggests that he does, as does Langsam (1997). For a contrary view, see Schacht (1973).

¹⁶ He does call himself at times a “pessimist,” but pessimism and nihilism are not the same thing.

¹⁷ Schacht (1973).

the Christian, Buddhist, and the Schopenhauerian, because it is the locus of suffering and evil. For this reason, they seek escape from this world. They are not in doubt about values tout court, nor are they thinking that their own values lack standing. Quite the contrary. They would seem committed to the objectivity of the values in light of which they make this thoroughly nihilistic judgment on the valuelessness of life and the world. When Nietzsche, for example, writes, “one has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, precisely to the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world.” (EH, “Preface,” 2), his claim is meant at the first-order evaluative level. One deprives reality of its “value,” not because one doubts the meta-ethics of value (though one may also doubt that independently, on abstract philosophical grounds), but because one judges reality unfavorably, in comparison to the ideal world of one’s invention, or to some counter-ideal.

Of our core nihilistic phenomena, nihilism understood in a meta-ethical way is only potentially a feature of two of them, the post-Christian and the last-man, and even here, it is a questionable interpretive thesis. Does the last-man doubt that comfort and satiety are objective values? There is not really any textual evidence one way or another on this. One thinks, if anything, that he would be unperturbed, regardless of the outcome of this abstruse and to him largely irrelevant meta-ethical dispute, and likely unwilling to take such philosophical matters as of any importance. So we are left with the post-Christian in the wake of the death of God. Does he doubt the existence of evaluative facts? Maybe. The language of *Gay Science* §125 certainly suggests an air of what Reginster rightly calls “disorientation”: “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” (GS, 125). But is this indicative of meta-ethical doubts, or is it a manifestation of doubt about whether there is cosmic or existential *meaning*? One might after all take it to be objectively valuable that the world have such meaning and find it wanting

because it doesn't seem to (anymore). Or might this be giving voice to epistemic-evaluative doubts about what the values are, in a world from which God has been evacuated? What, in other words, do we throw our weight behind, when we've lost our previous point of orientation? We're not really given enough detail from Nietzsche in order to settle this. And perhaps there is not a unitary answer, with some in post-Christian modernity despondent that there are no value facts, others thinking it is a fact that the world is bad, because there is no God to guide us, recompense us for suffering, grant us meaning, and so on, others thinking that there could in principle be values, but epistemically uncertain about what such values would be. And the question would still remain: Is it *in virtue* of their skeptical meta-ethical conviction that these people are nihilistic, by Nietzsche's lights? That, to me, is questionable. They more clearly are nihilistic insofar as they are failing to respond favorably to this life and world, and the sort of good things it contains. Their energy instead remains invested in the collapsing Christian worldview. It's a matter of their not being able to find *this life and world* valuable. It is this valuation, rather than their beliefs about the meta-ethics or metaphysics of such value and the attendant consequences, that is Nietzsche's foremost concern when it comes to nihilism.

The meta-ethical characterization of nihilism really does not do justice to the phenomenon that Nietzsche is seeking to bring into view. Yet Nietzsche, for all I've said, may be a nihilist in the sense of that term given in contemporary meta-ethics. But there are not good grounds for thinking that this is what Nietzsche takes nihilism to be. Nor are there good grounds for thinking that this is a helpful characterization of the phenomena of nihilism that Nietzsche sets out to characterize. Nietzsche, after all, thinks that we are always in a process of valuing. It would virtually be unrecognizable as a human form of life for us to live completely without valuing and the attendant sort of values in this sense.¹⁸ Nietzsche's central concern, vis à vis nihilism, is arguably much more with what people *take* to be valuable, than with a theoretical belief about meta-ethics likely to be had by very few people indeed. But we must be

¹⁸ Katsafanas (2015).

careful here: While Nietzsche thinks valuing something—anything—is better than valuing nothing, it is not sufficient to escape nihilism that one undertakes such a form of valuing, however fervent and committed that valuing may be. It also matters *what one values*, because nihilism is a matter of coming unmoored from the valuable. Or so I shall argue. This all, it bears pointing out again, rests on *first-order* normative claims of Nietzsche’s about what the values are. These are compatible with the full gamut of potential meta-ethical positions. The account I propose does not rely on Nietzsche being a realist, nor is it threatened if he is an anti-realist or expressivist.

III. Nihilism as Despair

I would now like to turn to discussing the other dimension of Bernard Reginster’s account, the aspect on which he rightly rests more weight. As outlined in the previous section, the first aspect he identifies in nihilism is the “disorientation” related to the realization that there are no objective values. The other, and arguably more distinctive aspect that Reginster highlights is the nihilism of *despair*. The issue for this brand of nihilist is more about the world than about the status of values.¹⁹ He is nihilistic in his belief that the world is inhospitable for the realization of his most important values.

One of the great merits of this account is that it offers to make excellent sense of something that might otherwise be very puzzling: namely, why the Schopenhauerian is a paradigmatic kind of nihilist. The Schopenhauerian, on Reginster’s reading, maintains strong value commitments, which say that suffering is extremely bad.²⁰ The Schopenhauerian further thinks that the world contains a great predominance of suffering over pleasure. This is not just an incidental feature of the world, but it is a product of the very nature of willing. As

¹⁹ Reginster (2006).

²⁰ There are some important interpretive complexities here. Schopenhauer’s condemnation of suffering can be misleading. His highest good is not hedonistic happiness, of the sort foiled through desires being perpetually thwarted, but rather it is negation of the will. This negation, on his view, *is* realizable in this world, albeit not through conscious individual effort, but rather through something akin to grace, in which one becomes detached from willing. For further discussion of these issues, see Janaway (2016) and Janaway (Forthcoming).

Schopenhauer's famous argument goes, we are perpetually buffeted between the unpleasant states of pain and boredom. The little respite we receive is fleeting. Existence is bad, and it would be better for us never to have come into being. A similar point perhaps applies to Buddhism, as Nietzsche understands it. It too condemns existence, and seeks to detach us from it, though Nietzsche is far less explicit on this front. Reginster's account also potentially explains the reaction on the part of the disappointed Christian, in the wake of the death of God. Such a person, Nietzsche holds, was very invested in a worldview in which life in this world was recompensed by God and a better life in a beyond. It is this beyond that secures what is of value for him. But with the 'Death of God,' belief in this metaphysical realm becomes untenable, and he thus falls into a kind of despair, when he sees that these values can't be secured in the world as it is.

But such a conception of nihilism has more trouble when it comes to accounting for three other main forms of nihilism: that which we see in the Christian, in the fanatical devotee of truth-seeking, and in the last man.²¹ (Moreover, none of these is very well accounted for with Reginster's category of "disorientation" either). I will take these characters in turn.

The Christian is not despairing.²² Even though he believes that various features of the world are bad, he is reassured by the possibility of a heavenly redemption. Upon his death, he will be brought to heaven, where he will be in the company of God, the saints, and the angels. This is thus a cause of hope and not of despair. Still, it might be thought that the Christian *would or should be* despairing, at least about his values being realized in *this* life and world. That may be true, but "despair" does not seem to characterize well his reigning psychology, precisely because of the hopeful otherworldly theological beliefs that give him comfort, in the face of these negative beliefs about life. Indeed, the Christian who is in the throes of despair would be

²¹ See Gemes (2008; Forthcoming).

²² Perhaps there could be a state of unconscious or proto-conscious despair in half-hearted Christians, in the vein of *Sickness Unto Death*. (This idea of despair seems to me to court paradox, if not outright unintelligibility, since arguably a key part of despair is the reflexive awareness of being in that state.) But in any event, the key thing is that the Christian with full-blooded faith doesn't escape the charge of nihilism. He is a nihilist *in virtue* of his fervent Christianity.

the Christian with doubts, not the ardently-believing Christian. The trouble, however, is that Nietzsche clearly thinks of Christianity as nihilistic (TI, 21; A, 20; A, 58; EH, “Why I Write Such Good Books,” 1; EH, “BT,” 2). Reginster’s application of “despair” must then either be construed as a conditional claim or as a historical-predictive claim. Conditionally construed, it would be: If the Christian saw the true character of the world, freed from her illusions, then she would be despairing. That seems right. Yet what is the key explanation for *why* this conditional holds? It is that the Christian is basically opposed to this life and world, as they actually are, and lauds various counter-values. Her nihilism, I would suggest, fundamentally consists in coming unmoored from the value of these things, not in the ancillary, conditional psychological fact that she would be subject to despair, if stripped of her illusions. In historical-predictive terms, the idea would be: Christianity is nihilistic, because as its will to truth unfolds, it will eventually unmask its own illusions, and leave one with despair once these illusions are unmasked. This trajectory is right, but it is a strain to say that the individual believing Christian is nihilistic, in virtue of some despairing attitudes later post-Christians will have, as history unfolds. Although Reginster would no doubt agree that the Christian is nihilistically oriented against life and the world, my preferred account helps to explain this failing better than an emphasis on the psychological state of despair can.

Let us now consider the fanatical truth-seeker. The first thing to bear in mind that Nietzsche is not hostile to truth-seeking *tout court*. There are healthy, admirable forms of it. What he finds perverse is a condition, under the influence of the ascetic ideal, where truth has been raised to a the status of a supreme, unconditional value, to which all else must be sacrificed.²³ Sometimes, Nietzsche speaks of such truth fanatics as “despairing” souls (BGE, 10). But other times, such people see a kind of immense meaning in their scholarly enterprise, even if this is thanks, perversely, to the meaning provided courtesy of the ascetic ideal. Being wedded to the ascetic ideal saves them, as it does the Christian, from what Nietzsche calls

²³ Gemes (1992).

“suicidal nihilism” (GM, III:28). But it does so at the cost of ensnaring them in the clutches of *another* form of nihilism, whereby they deny this life and world (GS, 344; GM, III:24). In discussing why this fanatical ascetic truth-seeking is a nihilistic problem, despair, it seems to me, is the wrong category to use. The whole point of the ascetic ideal is that it *staves off* despair through providing a meaning. Though this truth-seeker values one valuable thing (truth), she is so monomaniacally attached to this value that it squeezes out the others, and she, in most other respects, becomes unmoored from all other worldly values. She knows, and loves, what she can find out through the end of the microscope, or what she can read in dusty tomes in the library, but the rest of life and the world exerts no real appeal. She has a nihilistic problem, but that problem is not best described as one of despair.

Turning now to the “last man”: No one could be further from despair. Such a person seems very satisfied with his pleasant creature comforts:

Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man.

“What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?” thus asks the last man, and he blinks.

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

“We have invented happiness,” say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth. One still works, for work is a form of

entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.

“We have invented happiness,” say the last men, and they blink (TSZ, “Preface”)

The characteristic problem with the nihilism of despair centers on the psychologically troubling realization that one’s values are not realizable in this world. Yet because the last-man has adjusted his standards so far downward, they are able to be met (relatively) easily in this world. He’s under a wooly blanket, snuggled by the burbling radiator, drinking his instant cocoa with miniature marshmallows, from his ‘Life is Good’™ mug, thinking this is as good as life can get.²⁴ Does this warm satisfaction mean that he is not nihilistic? By Nietzsche’s lights, absolutely not. This, too, is a form of Nietzschean nihilism. Granted, Nietzsche never explicitly uses the terminology of nihilism in describing the ‘last man.’ The language of *Zarathustra* is too highly poeticized and non-technical for that. Still, it would seem pretty clear that Nietzsche wants us to think of such a person as the very nadir of the condition he elsewhere describes as nihilism.²⁵ Yet what is nihilistic about the last man is neither despair or disorientation. It is rather, as I will suggest in the positive part of the paper, his failure to appreciate important sorts of value where there is value—to blink in the face of the star, to find nothing worthwhile where there is something worthwhile.

I have so far tried to suggest that an account of nihilism as despair is not going to be able to make sense of some of its most important forms, especially the sort we see in Christianity and in the last man. None of this is to deny, however, that despair is indeed one key psychological characteristic of certain forms of nihilism, and is highly illuminating for that

²⁴ <http://www.lifeisgood.com/home-pet/drinkware/>

²⁵ A number of scholars are agreed on this point: See Pippin (2010); Katsafanas (2015); Gemes (Forthcoming). Even if one is somewhat skeptical about the inclusion of the last man under the rubric of nihilism on textual grounds, my case could be read here as a way of seeing why it would make sense to include him, along with the Christian, under this heading.

reason. But it has not gotten to the core of what unites various forms of nihilism, and it seems to me to leave out an important dimension of Nietzsche's critique. Nihilists are not just people who find themselves in a sorry psychological spot on account of feeling despair. They are, by Nietzsche's lights, people who have come unmoored from values, and are apt targets of ethical scrutiny as a result.

V. Affective Nihilism

As we just saw, one challenge with construing nihilism as a form of despair (or indeed a form of meta-ethical disorientation), is that it leaves no explanation for the nihilism of the fervently-devout Christian. I would now like to turn to an account that is better positioned when it comes to making sense of this. In a response to Reginster's account, Ken Gemes seeks to take a more drive-psychological approach, which he labels "affective nihilism." He proposes that in addition to the nihilism of disorientation and despair, there is a more "fundamental" kind of nihilism, consisting in the drives being turned against each other.²⁶ Gemes's counter-proposal grew out of two objections he posed for Reginster.²⁷ His first objection is that disorientation and despair seem too purely cognitive, being philosophical theses about the existence of values or their realizability in the world. For Gemes, we need to look beyond just this surface (maybe epiphenomenal) cognitive level to the underlying structure of the agent's drives. The second objection, already canvassed above, is that Reginster is unable to account for the nihilism of the Christian.

One of the merits of the affective nihilism approach is that it is able to tie together the nihilism of the Schopenhauerian and Buddhist with that of the Christian (and possibly the despairing post-Christian, and the fanatical truth-seeker, insofar as they remain in thrall to Christian values, even once they give up on the metaphysics). All these forms of nihilist see

²⁶ Gemes (Forthcoming).

²⁷ Gemes (2008).

their drives (particularly their aggressive and sexual drives) as things that are fundamentally suspicious and worthy of mortification or elimination. It is in this regard that they all subscribe to the ascetic ideal. Moreover, Nietzsche seems to think that much that is important with us happens at the unconscious level. On Gemes's view, this underlying psychological condition (the drives being turned against each other) explains the presence of their more articulated theoretical beliefs and commitments about the world being valueless and the like.

While Gemes offers persuasive criticisms, and a promising alternative account to those we have explored, it seems to me that there are also some significant limitations. The overarching problem is that it strays too far from the idea of nihilism as a condition of our values and valuing, and tries instead to give a psycho-biological naturalistic explanation of what might underlie or cause this condition. There is certainly the danger of over-intellectualizing the phenomenon of nihilism. But there is also the danger of being too reductive about it.

This becomes a problem when we try to account for what is nihilistic about worldviews, in addition to the individuals that subscribe to those worldviews. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche's view is that both Buddhism and Christianity are nihilistic religions (A, 20). We could understand this as simply a roundabout claim to the effect that their adherents are possessed of nihilistic psychologies. But it would be nice if we could find an explanation in virtue of which both the worldview and its adherents are nihilistic. Because of its reductive psychological focus, instead of focus on the *content* of the relevant evaluative attitudes themselves, the affective nihilism account is not well-positioned to do this. Yet my account can make sense of this easily: People are nihilistic insofar as they have come unmoored from the most important values. And worldviews are nihilistic on similar grounds in their commitments and orientation.

In addition, the affective nihilism account has difficulty accounting for the "last man." He does not seem rife with this sort of internal conflict, of drive turned against drive. To be fair, the last man is a poetic creation, and is quite under-described in Nietzsche's work. But, to

the extent that we do have a grip on this character, there is no evidence for thinking that the drives being turned against themselves is his underlying problem. Of course, the last man is not a person in whom active drives associated with the will to power predominate; in him, their force is certainly lessened, to the point of being nil. But this does not mean that they are being repressed or suppressed; that would suggest an ongoing effort or struggle (e.g., on the part of other drives) to keep them at bay, with the agent being riven by an attendant psychological conflict (as in the Christian who loathes his sex drive and fiercely represses it). Is this really how Nietzsche wants us to think of the last man? If so, we get no indication of that in his characterization of him as pleasantly unperturbed. Perhaps a certain proto-Freudian hydraulic assumption is operative in the background: Drives (such as those toward power) are ineliminable and retain their fundamental force, regardless of how they are channeled. They are either expressed outwardly, or sublimated, or suppressed/repressed; elimination or dynamic weakening (through oneself or external influences and forces) is not possible. This would then allow for the idea that however things look on the surface, there *must* still be suppression/repression going on in the last man; his ‘active’ drives can’t just disappear. Some text can point in this direction (GM, III: 7), but it is a controversial interpretive matter whether Nietzsche endorses this model.²⁸ The last man would indeed seem to be the best evidence against the idea that Nietzsche subscribes to this hydraulic view, since he is such a good illustration of what happens when certain drives are (putatively) weakened in force or eliminated.

Indeed, it is not clear why it is always bad, from a Nietzschean perspective, that the drives are turned against themselves. This an assumption of Gemes’s account, and it is not clear why we should accept it. There are certainly instances where it is bad. But I think we should also leave space for the possibility that the drives might be turned against themselves in

²⁸ In this passage (GM III:7), Nietzsche says that striving for “an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can vent its power completely and attain its maximal feeling of power” is something “every animal” “instinctively” does. But as Nietzsche makes clear in GM II and III, instincts can be etiolated and twisted in various ways, thanks to various psychological and social influences. From the fact that this is what animals *instinctively* do, it does not follow that this is what human animals all *now* do. (For a corrective against reading the will to power as an ambitious, generalized thesis about all human motivation, see Clark (2017)).

ways that are not problematic and do not amount to nihilism. Consider the artist pulled in one way by his voracious sex drive, and another way by his drive for artistic creativity, where these struggle for mastery, and each tries to suppress the other.²⁹ Perhaps it would be optimal, from the perspective of psychological health, if he integrated these drives, so that, for example, his sublimated sex drive achieved expression in his art. But the fact that these drives try to suppress each other does not seem at all indicative of nihilism, particularly as both are drives directed toward satisfaction in this life and world, not in a beyond. Or consider the person with some (even by her lights) problematic vestige of the ascetic ideal in her, in the form of a drive to nothingness, but who makes ongoing and partly successful efforts to combat this drive to the ascetic ideal through her other drives. The fact that she seeks to suppress a drive is not, in this case, indicative of nihilism, but of a healthy countermovement to it. The presence of the drive to nothingness is indicative of nihilism, to be sure, but not the mere fact of turning against a drive and wanting to deprive it of its power.

Like several current interpretations of nihilism, the affective nihilism account, to its detriment, tries to be formal, and refrain from substantive normative characterizations of the appropriateness of particular drives or the goals of such drives. But it is difficult to see what the textual or philosophical motivation for this is supposed to be. On the contrary, it would seem: Suppressing, weakening, or eliminating some drives is bad, and a sign of nihilism. Suppressing, weakening, or eliminating other drives is good, and is not a sign of nihilism. In working out whether someone is nihilistic, we can't just look to the fact that *a* drive is being suppressed, weakened, or eliminated, but we have to look to what the drive in question is, and whether it should be suppressed, weakened, or eliminated.³⁰

²⁹ What exactly these images amount to, and whether it would require a form of homuncular personification, is another matter. This is a general challenge for drive-based psychologies.

³⁰ It may well be an ideal, for those few fortunately constituted, to express all of one's drives and not to suppress, weaken, or eliminate any drives. But it does not follow from this ideal that any instance of drive suppression, weakening, or elimination is thereby bad or nihilistic. Cp., Huddleston (2017).

This brings us to the fourth and final point: even if one can establish that there is some sense in which the drives are turned against one another in cases of nihilism, one also needs to establish that this is what the phenomenon of nihilism *consists in*. This seems to me to be a harder claim to make, because the goal-neutral explanation offered (drives turned against each other, with no mention of their specific goals) doesn't seem to pinpoint what actually is nihilistic even in the cases (e.g., the Christian) where this happens. The issue, in the Christian and similar cases, is more about the substantive value commitments (and blindnesses) inherent in the drive-extinguishing *goals* of certain regnant drives. It is the fact that these drives are turned against this life and world, and turned against the drives that are directed toward this life and world, not the mere fact that they are turned against some other drives. My own account provides the explanation of what has gone wrong here. Many of our basic drives are, according to Nietzsche, *valuable* aspects of life, and yet the Christian not only fails to value them; he downright demonizes them. Likewise, in the case of the last man, the issue is not that drives *tout court* are reduced to nothingness or to a low level of expression. Many drives toward shallow and petty goals will be expressed, perhaps energetically so, by the last man. It is instead that certain *worthwhile* drives (by Nietzsche's lights) are not, for what whatever reason, being expressed. This lack of expression of certain drives is perhaps connected to a valuational disorder in the agent, whether as cause or effect. In any event, just talking about the *dynamics* of various drives is going to be insufficient for characterizing the phenomenon of nihilism.

VI. Nihilism and 'Higher' Values

A major challenge for the affective nihilism reading and the despair reading is that they are unable to cope well with the "last man." I would now like to turn to two approaches that do a better job on this front. Robert Pippin has offered an account of such nihilism organized around the idea of eros, and, in particular, the "flickering out" of this erotic flame.³¹

³¹ Pippin (2010).

Importantly, he does not mean by the erotic the reductive Freudian idea of a sex drive. He instead has in mind, in a more Platonic register, a condition of soul, where it can be drawn upward to higher things. On the Platonic picture, elaborated in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, love begins with the earthly and ephemeral, the beauty of bodies. From here, it moves upward to a love of spiritual qualities of character, and eventually onward to contemplation of the forms, at the pinnacle, the form of the good itself. Nietzsche will of course not want such a metaphysics, ethics, or epistemology. But the basic idea of the soul drawn (or not) toward higher things is an apt way of explaining what has gone wrong with the last man. To use one of Nietzsche's own images from the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, and earlier in *Zarathustra* ("Prologue"), the bow is losing its tension, and we will not be able to shoot for distant goals.³² Pippin's account focuses on a certain motivational-psychological condition, an inability to be inspired and committed in a certain deep and lasting way.

In a similar vein, Paul Katsafanas has proposed a helpful account focusing on what these higher values would need to be like. As Katsafanas rightly notes, the problem with the last man is not a lack of values. It is not even a lack of hierarchical structure to his values—a lack, that is to say, of things he values for their own sake. For the last man elevates certain things highly, and does others for the sake of them. Katsafanas writes: "they have no shortage of values, including final values. They value comfort, satiety, warmth, happiness, mild and diverting work, lack of quarrel, and so on. Indeed, their values seem strikingly similar to the ones championed in our culture."³³ Katsafanas goes on to analyze the problem with such values, by contrasting them with other "higher" sorts of values "distinguished by their demandingness, susceptibility toward creating tragic conflicts, recruitment of a characteristic set of powerful emotions,

³² Cp. Clark and Dudrick (2012) on this rich image.

³³ Katsafanas (2015).

perceived import, exclusionary nature, and their tendency to instantiate a community. These features are most familiar in religiously-sanctioned values, but arise elsewhere as well.”³⁴

This, I believe, does pinpoint something nice about the kind of values that the last man subscribes to. As a general account of nihilism, however, these sorts of approaches cannot work, since devoted Christians, Buddhists, and Schopenhauerians have “eros” in Pippin’s sense, and they have “higher values” in Katsafanas’s sense (heavenly redemption, nirvana, negation of the will, and so on). Katsafanas acknowledges as much.³⁵ Pippin should presumably do so as well. For the image of the bow he draws on is one Nietzsche uses precisely to remind us that in Christian-Platonic Europe the bow remained taught (BGE, “Preface”). Nonetheless, this psychology, and the lack of higher values would seem, so far as it goes, to characterize aptly the sort of nihilism that can afflict the last man, and also Nietzsche’s sometime association of nihilism with a certain form of goallessness (WP, 2).

In the face of this, we could opt for a disjunctive way of thinking about nihilism, and hold that there are different types of it in different cases. This might further be part of a historicized narrative, whereby nihilism takes different shapes at different periods. While it is helpful to have this additional degree of detail in the story told about nihilism by seeing its distinctive form with the last man, it would also be helpful to see what, if anything, unites these disparate characters. I claim that while there are many differences, there is an underlying unity here.

As with the other nihilists we have seen, the problem with the last man is not so much one of diminished drive, motivation, and affect, though such a psychology is indeed characteristic of him too. For matters wouldn’t be improved, if he remained devoted to the same shallow things, but in a more fervent way instead.³⁶ The problem with the last man, I

³⁴ Katsafanas (2015).

³⁵ Katsafanas (2015). As he acknowledges in a footnote, he seeks to describe one salient form of nihilism, rather than trying to capture, e.g., the Christian too.

³⁶ Anderson (2013) notes that even strong desires on the part of the last man do not allow him to escape nihilism. Fervent devotion, if it is to petty things, may be even worse than modest devotion to them.

would suggest, is instead a lack of receptivity to value, more extreme than the kind we've seen in any of the nihilists thus far. He, like them, can't attach himself to the right values. More than that, he can't even see their allure. This is poetically rendered by Nietzsche in the repeated mention of his blinking (TSZ, "Prologue"). He doesn't *see* the great star—the sun, the Platonic symbol of ultimate goodness and value. He can't appreciate creation, longing, love. He is content with the meager "happiness" he has "invented." He is goalless, not in the sense of lacking goals entirely (he wants happiness, lack of quarrel, and comfort, after all), but lacking *worthy* higher goals. In the last man, we thus see the withering of the ability to love much of the loveable, to value much of the valuable, particularly when the going starts to get tough. No one is denying that chocolate cake and glasses of cool water are valuable too. But those are the easy things to value. It is another class of valuable things that Nietzsche is concerned with, those capable of conferring meaning on existence. Both the Pippin and Katsafanas accounts, it seems to me, are headed in the right direction: nihilism, they think, is a failing in our valuing, specifically a failure to sustain a certain kind of "higher" values. But we need, I believe, to take this approach further, into more richly substantive normative territory. That is what I shall do in the section that follows.

VII. The Value-based approach

We cannot characterize this problem of nihilism by stopping with psychological-motivational states (eros or its absence), or with a formal job description of what "higher" values would need to be. What unites nihilists, I submit, is not their descriptive psychology of valuing, but instead *what they are failing to value*. They have come unmoored from the valuable. Their valuational commitments are directed away from many of the right sort of things, or connecting to them in only a weak fashion.

My emphasis on valuations being "right" and "wrong" (or in line with the valuable) can give a doubly misleading impression, however. First, it can seem like nihilism is just a kind of

factual mistake, of simply *believing* the wrong things are valuable. But though this may be involved, this is not the core failing. There is, from Nietzsche's perspective, an ethical misalignment consisting in a failure of responsiveness and commitment to values, where this is as affective as it is cognitive, as much ethical as epistemic. Life and the world are to be loved, and yet, by many, they are despised (in large part, if not entirely). Excellence is to be celebrated, and yet it is held in complete indifference by the last man. Second, the talk of "right" and "wrong" can make it seem as if the view in question presupposes a kind of realism. My view fits nicely with a kind of realism of course, but it is important to notice that it is compatible with the full gamut of meta-ethical positions, including strongly anti-realist or expressivist ones. These are claims about the metaphysical status of value as a property, or claims about what value discourse is doing. The view I am proposing does not wade into this contentious territory; it requires only that Nietzsche have first-order evaluative commitments (in favor of this life and world, excellence, and so on). It is indisputable that he has these commitments. Whether these have real normative authority over other people, and whether he thinks these have real normative authority over other people, is another matter. For all I've said, Nietzsche might just be giving voice to his disapproval of certain values he does not share and the sorts of people attracted to such values. Being "in error" when it comes to values might amount to nothing more than being misaligned, *by Nietzsche's idiosyncratic lights*. I will remain neutral on these issues. Yet whatever we think about Nietzsche's meta-ethics, we should be cautious about a tacit inference that is endemic in this literature, and that would be seeming to underwrite the marked (and to my mind rather puzzling) move from the richly substantive to the thinly formal interpretations of Nietzsche. It would seem to go like this: "Nietzsche is not a realist. Therefore, we shouldn't attribute to him views that presuppose substantive value commitments." Even granting the premise—for which there is some textual evidence, albeit indecisive—this inference confuses the meta-ethical and first-order levels, and threatens to turn Nietzsche from the highly judgmental fulminator he was, into a virtually unrecognizable

figure: a soft-minded, pussyfooting, content-neutral liberal who refrains from criticizing other people's values.

I have identified something that, I believe, all the main forms of nihilism have in common. It is not for the sake of neat philosophical categorization that I do so. I think we bring out something crucially important about nihilism if we see what all the nihilists on the spectrum from the Christian to the last man share. They are people who have come unmoored from what is most valuable. This life and world, by Nietzsche's lights, occupy that status. (This is so, it is key to reiterate, independently of the philosophers' metaphysical question of whether value is there independently of us, or we, in some sense to be specified, are a subjective condition of that value, or are simply projecting it there falsely, and so on.) According to Nietzsche, this world surrounding us matters, matters more than any beyond, and yet for most of the past two thousand years of human history, we haven't been able appreciate this.

The Christian, Schopenhauerian, and Buddhist are committed to values that denigrate this life and world. They say that life is something from which we must escape, in order to repair to a better life. The things of this life they treat with suspicion and scorn. The post-Christian remains committed to the basic values of Christianity, but is in a particularly bad position, because he is also painfully aware of the unrealizability of the most important of these values, and like the Christian, is insensitive to the meaning-conferring potential of some of the 'this-worldly' values that surround him. The fanatical truth-seeker adopts a worldview whereby one value crowds out the others. By the time of the last-man, we get to a point where just everything Nietzsche cares most about has ceased to matter. They *do* care about this world, to be sure, but they care about what, by Nietzsche's lights, are shallow, bovine things only.

My account offers an nice explanation of the historical trajectory of nihilism, and why things are getting worse in the descent toward the last man. Christian culture, for all its life-

negation, is also the time of Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Even as a beyond was lauded, this-worldly excellence and beauty thrived and were respected. Even as the body was denigrated as something lower and evil, it was idealized and celebrated. The bow string, in Nietzsche's multifarious image, was drawn taut, and the arrows of our longing could shoot for distant goals. Christianity valued lives in which one was devoted to more than just animal satisfaction, lives in which something that could give meaning to existence was sought. It played this role, as did Schopenhauerianism and Buddhism, in valorizing (however perversely) a saintly form of life-negation or *Entselbstung*. Of course, none of these three views make sense without a heavy-duty metaphysics, if not of God, then of the self and world. Once such a metaphysics (particularly of its Christian kind) no longer becomes sustainable, nihilism takes a somewhat different and, as Reginster rightly identifies, more despairing shape. But the common thread, I suggest, remains: having come unmoored from the highest values. Despair is to some small degree admirable, because it bears witness to a fundamentally religious sensibility—thwarted, but a religious sensibility even still.³⁷ With the last man, this (very broadly speaking) religious sensibility evaporates. The last man does focus on this life and world, but on its most sublunary aspects only, not on any of its most important higher, meaning-conferring aspects. The culture of the last man is the culture of entertainment, the culture of the shopping mall, the culture of people blinking in the face of majesty and grandeur, not awed, but eager to return to whatever trifling thing will occupy them next. In all of these stages of nihilism, the highest values, by Nietzsche's lights, have been under-appreciated, or not appreciated at all. People are blind to such values, or can't commit themselves to them.

But is this Nietzsche's *own* account of nihilism, or simply a reconstruction? As I said at the outset, my methodological approach is one of trying to work out, on philosophical grounds, what the best Nietzschean story is about what unites the various phenomena he thinks of as nihilistic, rather than basing my account on reconstructing his remarks from the

³⁷ I agree with Simon May (2011) that there is a lingering religious streak in Nietzsche.

notebooks. He sketched some ideas about nihilism, but never arrived at an adequate theory of the phenomena he sought to characterize. Precisely because these were sketches, these ideas often pull in different directions. But we do find indications that Nietzsche was grasping toward the sort of account I set out here. Nihilism, he tells us, is “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability” (WP, 1). This, as I have argued, should not be understood in meta-ethical terms, to the effect that value, meaning, and desirability are bankrupt categories. Nietzsche is a diagnostician not of disaffected angst, or of the philosopher’s rarified skepticism about normative properties. He is a diagnostician of people who, in large part remain committed to these categories of value, meaning, and desirability. Nihilism consists in an inability to *find* valuable what is valuable, to *find* meaningful what is meaningful, to *find* desirable what is desirable. That is the radical repudiation in question, the repudiation of this life and world. “The world does not have the value we thought it had... [But] the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; . . . and while we thought that we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value” (WP, 32).

As I have indicated, the key idea of Nietzschean nihilism, on my reading, turns out to be structurally similar to a familiar idea we already have in circulation. In figures such as Jacobi or Dostoevsky, nihilism is not, from the standpoint of the one leveling the charge, the conviction that there are no values. Quite the opposite. It is commitment to certain values, coupled with the idea that there is a looming threat of coming unmoored from these values. The “nihil” comes from the attendant condition of finding nothing valuable where there is actually something valuable. Where Nietzsche differs from them is not in his account of what nihilism fundamentally is (i.e., coming unmoored from values), but in the values he sees nihilists as having come unmoored from. They are committed to Christian-moral values. Nietzsche of course is not. It is no accident that moralists and Christians who know little

about Nietzsche, and his critique of nihilism, will describe him as a nihilist.³⁸ By the lights of *their* values, Nietzsche is a nihilist. They and Nietzsche disagree not about what nihilism is, but about what values are most important.

But is anyone right? Does Nietzsche himself think anyone is right? Or is it simply a clash of perspectives, none with any privilege or legitimacy? The closest view to the one I offer here is presented by Richard Schacht, and he argues for an objectivist and monistic answer to these questions. Discussing Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism, Schacht writes "...[Nietzsche] is saying that Schopenhauer—and Plato, and Christianity, and the rest—have missed the true meaning of the earth; just as they have missed the fact that the enhancement of life is an absolute value, and is the only absolute value which does not rest upon illusion, but rather has an objective foundation, in the nature of life itself."³⁹ The view I offer here is in the same direction, but one of its merits, I believe, is to rest independently of this sort of objectivism (i.e., value realism) and monism (i.e., there is one ultimate value), both of which are contentious on philosophical and exegetical grounds. The account I offer here requires simply that Nietzsche has first-order normative commitments to a set of higher values. My claim in this paper is that these commitments are deeply implicated in his account of what nihilism is.

VIII. Conclusion:

Nihilism, in one form or another, is in the air preceding Nietzsche. From Jacobi to Turgenev and Dostoevsky, and in a variety of other figures, it is seen as a looming crisis. But he gives an interestingly different take on what this crisis involves by construing nihilism as not just a post-Christian phenomenon but a deeply Christian phenomenon as well. If we are not attentive to this drastic *volte-face*, we cannot hope to get Nietzsche's account right.

³⁸ Thanks to _____ for noting this in conversation.

³⁹ Schacht (1973).

It can look like everyone who disagrees with him about fundamental values is thereby a nihilist. Very few people agree with Nietzsche's values in their entirety, and presumably not all of them are nihilists. It is important to remember that what I am offering here is a unifying thread among forms of nihilism Nietzsche talks about. The goal is not to give us an analytical definition for dividing the world exhaustively into nihilists and non-nihilists, via necessary and sufficient conditions. This was never Nietzsche's concern, and it shouldn't be ours either. It is rather to tell us, when it comes to those Nietzsche calls nihilists, about one philosophically-illuminating (if admittedly, somewhat thin) feature they have in common. They share, on my reading, the ethical failing of having come unmoored from the most important values. That will help us to understand a core element of what their nihilism consists in. But it is not to say that everyone failing to value the valuable is thereby a nihilist. Various other features might be needed, perhaps in complex interrelations that will defy simple formulas. My point is that at least this particular feature is an important part of the story. Extant accounts, it is important to remember, haven't even managed to give us a unifying thread, let alone a more ambitious analysis of what sets nihilists and non-nihilists apart.

Valuing, for Nietzsche, is an inescapable condition for human beings. The question is where these valuing energies are to be directed. With the affliction of nihilism, one is failing, through ideology, depression, or philosophical commitment, of valuing important swaths of the valuable. Humanity has operated under this pernicious condition for two millennia, and the situation has gone from bad to worse, as Christianity has declined and the last man has become ascendant. Far from being idiosyncratic in this proposal, Nietzsche, it seems to me, gives a poignant diagnosis of the signal crisis of humanity, since Christianity took hold: It is not that the people cease to be valuing creatures; they always have been and always will be. It is that they, to some degree, have come unmoored from many of the most important values. By the time of the last man, this condition reaches disastrous proportions.

Some of the literature about Nietzsche on nihilism has left us with a misleading picture about how we might escape from its clutches. It has made it seem like a condition that we might escape so long as we retain sufficiently committed and fanatical to *something*. But this is not enough. Such a reading stems from a misreading of the third essay of the *Genealogy*, a misreading that misses one of its great ironies. By avoiding the dangerous prospect of “suicidal nihilism” through the ascetic ideal (GM, III:28), one does not, as mentioned earlier, escape nihilism, but simply trades one form of nihilism for another. If the lesson of Christianity has taught us anything, it matters *what* we are committed to. Christianity, in Nietzsche’s eyes, is surely better than many things, but it poisons as much as it protects.

Nietzsche’s normative agenda, in light of which he levels these charges of nihilism, is of course highly contentious. For this reason, many readers of Nietzsche try to extract what they see as philosophically important, while seeking to bracket this controversial agenda as much as possible. This is, on one level, understandable, and it may be why formalist and psychologist approaches have been so popular. For who’s to say that Nietzsche is right in his value commitments? Yet as exegesis, this seems to me the wrong approach, on this issue, and on a great many others. Nietzsche’s normative agenda cuts very deep; without it, we don’t understand what he was up to.

But doesn’t this then leave Nietzsche’s analysis and critique of nihilism hostage to his own idiosyncratic, certainly overstated, and possibly false picture of what matters? What if we think Nietzsche is utterly wrong? Or mostly wrong? Or overstated? Or think, at least, that he has no grounds for claiming what he does? Can he get any traction on us? Should we pay any attention to him? I think we often miss what is most interesting and important in Nietzsche if we try to shift him onto a plane where his objections have rational, dialectical bite. For Nietzsche is more a philosopher of rhetoric than rational argument.⁴⁰ Many people, in his reckoning, are lost causes, for whom a life of illusion, continuing nihilism, or both, is the only

⁴⁰ I agree very much with the contention in Janaway (2007) that Nietzsche is interested in reaching us at an affective level as well as at a rational one.

real option. But this is not true for all of us. Through singing songs of praise—his *encomia* sometimes so forced and desperate that they acquire almost a tragic air—he wants to redirect those of us who can be redirected back to this life and world, and to find the value that he thinks we have been missing there. In a rapturously beautiful Nietzschean turn of phrase in one of his letters, Rilke writes: “Not until we can make the abyss our dwelling-place will the paradise we have sent on ahead of us turn around and will everything deeply and fervently of the here-and-now, which the Church embezzled for the Beyond, come back to us; then all the angels will decide, singing praises, in favor of the earth.”⁴¹ This is the life-affirming perspective Nietzsche wants to shift us toward, or to remind us to cherish. Some will not be able to bear this, and life-negating nihilism will, ironically, be more conducive to their continued happiness and survival. But to those of us who can shift, or have shifted, this is our salvation.⁴²

⁴¹ Rilke, letter to Ilse Jahr, 22 Feb 1923. Rilke (1946 [1929]).

⁴² My thanks to Ken Gemes for his comments on drafts of this paper, as well as to the participants in the Late Modern Philosophy Workshop at Boston University and the Post-Kantian Receptions of the Enlightenment Conference in London.

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