

Reply to Ronald A. Kuipers

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Just as Ronald A. Kuipers knew of me from my book on Rorty, I knew of him from his; the best general book on Rorty's philosophy there is, in my view (see Kuipers 2013). And just as he reports having felt some trepidation when first confronted by my title, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, I felt some trepidation when I first opened his commentary; knowing that he works at the *Institute for Christian Studies*. It turns out that neither of us had much to worry about. Well, he does report having 'let [my] version of nihilism trouble [his] sleep' (p. 52); for which I apologise! But nevertheless, I was delighted to discover that he sees a substantive common ground between our positions, which 'resides in the context of a difference that makes a difference,' but which still provides plenty of scope for us to 'continue a communal conversation' (p. 52). I agree. That is what I want to happen and I think this symposium marks the beginning of our contribution to it. It was particularly refreshing and gratifying, when reading Kuipers recount my position, to discover that he has seen exactly where I am coming from. Refreshing, because this will allow me to hit the ground running in our conversation; and gratifying, because he takes the position seriously.

Now maintaining both that we occupy a transcendent reality and that nihilism is true, places me in a tight critical spot within today's philosophical culture: because those sympathetic to the former are very unlikely to be sympathetic to the latter, and *vice versa*. But that strikes me as a major bonus, rather than any kind of disadvantage, because it allows me to talk to both sides. If I had wanted a glowing, uncritical reception, then I could have knocked out one of those 'Ditchkinian' books Kuipers mentions, using the very same title, and I reckon I might well have received it; along with a hostile and highly critical reception from the other side (if they could even be bothered). It is on the ground between these sides, however, that new thinking can occur, new alliances can be forged, and entrenched oppositions can start to degrade and transform; not good if you think one of the sides already has it all right, but I do not. I have not been so influenced

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by Rorty's pragmatism that such tactical considerations informed the development of my metaphysic, I hasten to add, for although it would make Rorty howl, the fact is that I was just trying to work out the right answers. But nevertheless, I am very pleased with where I have landed; for the aim is to develop philosophical thinking – and for helping out with that, it is a very useful place to be.

My aims and resources are quite different in relation to the two sides, by which I mean, very roughly, physicalists and believers in a meaningful reality. My resources for dialogue with physicalists are plentiful, because I used to be one and I retain their main instinct: that we must give full, undiluted credence to objective thought. But physicalism embodies a false metaphilosophy, since science cannot determine a credible metaphysic of reality. My aim, like others of my generation who have not focused on the meaning of life, is to bring about the extinction of physicalism. In my case this is not just because I think it is false, but also because I think the unchecked conviction that science *must* determine our metaphysic, coupled with indifference to what that metaphysic actually amounts to – as embodied in the physicalist doctrine that reality is 'whatever contemporary physics says it is' – threatens to downgrade and diminish philosophical discourse. And as I hint at the end of *Meaningless*, and will argue at length in its sequel, this is an outcome no sane person could wish for; not if they had really thought it through. But rejecting the half-baked and insidious metaphysic of physicalism is no obstacle to giving full, undiluted credence to science, in my view, since it was never *supposed* to determine a metaphysic. Philosophy and science are different. It was a bad, but entirely dispensable *philosophical* idea to try to merge them. Liberated from this idea, the philosophers it has seduced can reconnect with the heart of their tradition and put stultifying scepticism about their own discipline behind them.

It is exactly this aim with regards to physicalism which provides my main resource for dialogue with believers in a meaningful reality; even though 'transcendence' obviously provides the headline attraction. For my book is essentially an affirmation of philosophy: an affirmation of our ability to say things about the world which science cannot say, which are rational, and which answer to legitimate matters of human curiosity (cf. Kuipers 2002). Since physicalism closes down the space in which believers in a meaningful reality can talk about the things they want to talk about, and is the main intellectual force in our world which pushes such talk to the boundaries, my energies in this regard should surely

be very welcome to this side. It is just a shame, I imagine them thinking, that upon reaching transcendence, I ruin the plot with nihilism. Despite this sticking point, however, my opposition to physicalism and affirmation of philosophy still must at least earn me a hearing. So what do I want to say? What are my aims with regard to this side of the debate? I must admit that I had thought considerably more about my aims for the other side, but Kuipers has inspired me to now answer this question.

Do I want to persuade them of nihilism? Well, yes and no. The answer is ‘no’, to the extent that *Meaningless* does not set out to persuade people who think that God provides life with meaning that they are wrong. I am fully aware that there are many sophisticated arguments for the existence of God, and any reader of the book cannot fail to notice that I do not engage with any of them. There is an endnote in which I say that I think my transcendent hypothesis provides good reason to be suspicious of any kind of cosmological argument, and that I consider this the most promising line of argument in the area (PML, p. 191). I also say throughout the book that I think belief in a meaning of life is to be expected given natural human desires, the patterns of explanation within the framework, and the transcendence of reality. But nevertheless, if my aim had been to dissuade people of their belief in a transcendent context of meaning, then I clearly wrote the wrong book.

Primarily, I was trying to increase metaphilosophical self-consciousness, vindicate the question of the meaning of life, undermine physicalism, solve problems which physicalists cannot solve, and thereby provide an affirmation of philosophy. One of my many subsidiary aims was to persuade people that the meaning of life is not provided by social meaning; but this critique was directed to the *other* side, since substituting social meaning for the relevant kind is just the kind of thing physicalism primes you for. Believers in a meaningful reality should welcome this critique, especially since advocates of the ‘meaning *in* life’ agenda typically contend that even if God did exist, it would be *irrelevant* to their issue; which strikes me as one of the more conspicuous absurdities within the debate – and a very telling one, as regards the real motivational drivers of physicalism. My concern with nihilism was predominantly expounding, rather than establishing it; within an intellectual culture where it has been marginalised as an ominous threat which nobody would or should pay much attention to, unless of course they were confused, depressed, destructive, or had a remedy to offer. And in the course of expounding it, I tried to show that it is legitimate, plausible and very

philosophically interesting.

On the other hand, however, the answer must in a sense be ‘yes’, since I think nihilism is true. I think that once we get clear about nihilism, we see there is nothing wrong with it, and that a lack of clarity on this matter understandably skews people’s judgements. I think that metaphysically, at least, transcendence is all that the meaningful reality side was ever driving at – and that they were right. And I think that my metaphysic, taken as a whole, gives good reason to think that we cannot escape the rootedness of our cognition in objective thought, and hence that there can be no good reasons to make the kind of positive assertions about transcendent reality which this side does sometimes make. In philosophy, if you think your view is right, then you obviously want to persuade anyone who will listen. But aims come in different shapes and sizes.

To see what I mean, consider the following example; selected in order to be so obviously far removed from the topic at hand that unintended connotations will not be invoked by the specific content. Suppose you think that your friend’s attachment to a certain brand of car is unjustified; you do not think they are particularly good. You are both car-enthusiasts, so you like to talk cars together; he knows what you think and *vice versa*. Given this point of contention between you, the topic of ‘that brand’ is bound to keep coming up; but there are many other, related things for you to talk about. You would like him to come around to your point of view, of course, even if you do not remotely expect this; but you certainly would not try to force the matter. For you only want him to come around if *he* wants to; rather as you would not want to be forced to grudgingly concede to him. This is because you are both convinced. This does not mean that you have closed your mind on the matter. For you are open to a revelation that takes you by surprise and makes you see the brand in a whole new light; just not tiresome, vaguely familiar considerations, which you might not know how to overcome at present, but which nevertheless leave you convinced that you doubtless *could* answer them, given the time and inclination. Only something genuinely new would change your mind about that brand. But there are many other things to talk about, in a world where people hold views on cars which you both find outrageous. So do you aim to persuade your friend that his brand is no good? Only half-heartedly and in good humour.

That is pretty much how I feel in relation to the meaningful reality camp. I have no revelation to offer them, and I doubt they are going to find one for me. When I lay out my position, it is only in a half-hearted attempt to persuade them

on *this* matter; in stark contrast to my aims with regard to physicalists. Now this conciliatory, rather apathetic stance, might seem disingenuous on the grounds that the meaning of life is such an important topic; as my own book argues at length. But actually, what is primarily important to my aims in the book is the *question*, about which I see eye-to-eye with this camp. I think my answer to this question provides considerable philosophical insight, but I am not looking for converts from this side. I can see that I would care more if I thought reality *was* meaningful, but that is good, since if what I said inspires others to try to persuade me, we may both learn in the process. Moreover, if you think reality is meaningful in a good way, then you presumably think that this is the most important thing in the world; the meaning is where all the importance of the world resides. Even if I am right that nihilism is evaluatively neutral, then, from their starting point, the transition to nihilism is bound to be a serious downer in the short term. So why would I want to go out of my way to bring about such a transition? Who wants to be Richard Dawkins (*qua* philosopher)?

It is the other side that I am really concerned to bring around to nihilism; to open them up to the question to which it provides an answer – an answer which, if they took the problem seriously, they would already be conducive to. The meaningful reality side is already open to the question, which has come to seem like their sole preserve. But I want to make it available to both sides, thereby widening the space for philosophical debate and speculation which physicalism is trying to close down. This would benefit everyone. Within this space, there is room for all kinds of positions on all kinds of topics; including positive views about the meaning of life. So on reflection, I think, my main aim with regards to the meaningful reality side is to bring them into dialogue with the mainstream of philosophy which physicalism has unfortunately seized; so that we can all talk about questions of natural philosophical interest from our differing perspectives. Were this to transpire, then I would be on the other side with regards to nihilism, and whenever the idea of a meaningful reality was brought to bear on other topics. But now the lines of opposition would have changed; they would have come together within a more unified discipline.

With these aims in mind, I shall turn to the comment on spirituality I make on the last page of *Meaningless*, since it provides the focus of Kuiper's paper (PML, p. 184). I suggested that there is something spiritual about reflecting philosophically upon our meaningless, transcendent reality. I was deliberately cautious in saying that this is the 'most sense' I can make of spirituality, because

the flat-footed will remind me that you can hardly be spiritual if you do not believe in spirit; at which I would immediately concede their flat-footed point. And yet the meanings of words move on, and I readily know what is meant when it is said of certain musicians that their music passed through a more ‘soulful’ period, or that they tapped into the ‘spirit of Africa’. Thoughts about immaterial substances and communal souls do not cross my mind; I think of a sound and where it came from, and if more than this is sometimes meant, that is tangential as far as I am concerned. Now when, in philosophy, we try to rationally think about reality beyond the objective thinking and social framework that dominant our lives, this does indeed strike me as the kind of thinking which might aptly be called ‘spiritual’ these days. It is the kind of thought which tries to get some kind of rational grip on the ‘something else’ which all kinds of people who think of themselves as spiritual are reaching for. That is why I said it; it is an underutilized and extremely attractive selling-point for a discipline with a very bad image-problem. When I said that ‘everything takes on a new significance’, I meant a *philosophical* significance; that is the kind of spirituality I favour, and the only one I really understand.

I am very glad to see that Kuipers thinks I used the right word, for he says that,

There is, indeed, something very spiritually edifying about Tartaglia’s stated refusal to impose human-made meanings on life itself [...] Tartaglia’s position, that when we search for this kind of meaning to life itself we find none, has the spiritual benefit of encouraging us to cease imposing our finite human meanings on that which we have not made, on a world that transcends us. It encourages us to assume an attentive form of spiritual comportment that suspends this feverish activity, and instead puts us in a receptive posture. (p. 67)

The last sentence gives me pause, but up until that point, he captures my intentions almost exactly; I would qualify ‘cease imposing our finite meanings’ with ‘except when they are philosophical, and thus suitably sparse.’ The last sentence would be okay too, if the ‘attentive form of spiritual comportment’ and ‘receptive posture’ just meant openness to philosophical understanding. But Kuipers means more, as is made clear here:

If we decide that the only meaning available to us is of [the] self-imposed variety, then we have already chosen to relate to the universe that surrounds and transcends us in a way that by definition precludes it from having any kind of voice or summons that could speak into our question. (p. 65)

And here we see the basis of Kuiper's critique. He thinks I have made a similar mistake to the one which my qualified endorsement of spirituality offers a remedy to. For the reason I endorse nihilism, in Kuiper's view, is that on achieving the important insight that we must stop looking for a self-imposed meaning to life, I subsequently draw on human-made meaning to steer me to nihilism. Instead, I should have stopped short at the point where I reached his 'receptive posture', on the grounds that, 'even if it is true that the transcending universe or cosmos responds only silently to our question, no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer "no"' (p. 62).

Kuipers thinks my commitment to nihilism is a step too far, then. He thinks I should have rested with an openness to other kinds of meaning, and wonders if I would consider retracing my steps in order to return to a point at which we 'put ourselves into the sort of receptive posture whereby we can once again become beings who are and can be questioned *by life*' (p. 68). Thus he closes his paper by saying,

Tartaglia leaves his reader enough space to wonder, however, whether or not his practice of philosophy as a kind of spiritual exercise has brought him right up to the threshold of the very space in which a human being might once again become open to receiving a meaning that he did not simply construct or impose. (p. 68)

Now Kuipers and I are both actively thinking into the same space; that much is clear. The question is whether I am still open to hearing something within that space; to passively receiving it. To this, my answer is 'yes'; and yet I am not actively *listening out* for anything. I am not listening out for the doorbell at the moment, but if it rings, I will hear it. If reality is transcendent, I could in principle hear intimations of its meaning; this is possible on my metaphysic, unlike that of the physicalists. For reality might be meaningful, and it might be able to convey its meaning to us in a manner which the framework and objective thought makes it hard for us to hear. But I am not hearing anything. And if I did seem to, I would

endeavour to rationalise it away. Only if I failed in this, but found that I could rationalise what I heard in a new way, would I take it seriously.

I do not hear anything in Frankl's report of his 'spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom' and transcending the 'hopeless, meaningless world' within which he found himself imprisoned (p. 64), not because I am insensitive to the feeling expressed in this passage, but rather because I find these kinds of claim easy to rationalise away in terms of the framework and objective thought. To even begin to spell out this kind of rationalisation *would* be insensitive in this case; but Kuipers and I both know the kind of things that could be said – clearly the phenomenology of Frankl's experience, and the sense that he gave to it, *could* have happened just the same way if nihilism were true. We were not always able to rationalize such voices away, however. It is perfectly understandable that people have thought, and still do think, that the meanings within our lives are the central focus of a reality in which something watches over us; or that they are part of a nature that has its own contiguous meanings which we should listen out for. It was natural, before Copernicus, to think that we were at the physical centre of reality; and it was natural, before Darwin, to think that we were at the centre of the phenomenon of life on earth. But it turned out, as a matter of fact, that we were wrong on both counts. These facts were exactly *not* things we primed ourselves for and hence made ourselves hear. They took us by surprise.

Now I could hardly be more enthusiastically in agreement with Kuipers than when he says, as I would put it, that our desire for power led to us finding ways of manipulating reality, and hence that we came to conceive of it in accordance with how we could best manipulate it (pp. 66-7). That is a central topic in the sequel I am writing. But recognising this motivation does not devalue what we learnt in the process. It is not that the human desire for power deafened us to voices that are really there, but rather that as an offshoot of developing objective thought in this manner, we learnt that the voices are not there. Kuipers says that my trust in the deliverances of objective thought is just as much an 'article of faith' as the religious believer's assumption that transcendent reality speaks to us (p. 66). But there is no faith involved in believing what you have firm inductive evidence for; as P.F. Strawson said, in effect, this is a major and inviolable component of what being 'rational' means (Strawson 1952). The voices are simply not there in the objective world. And we cannot discover anything new in this regard from the metaphysical insight that the objective world is transcended. Yet I grant Kuiper's point that 'no answer is not the same thing as the definitive answer "no".'

Consequently, I take my definitive ‘no’ from a combination of objective thought and metaphysical reflection. I find that we have no reason to think our notion of meaningfulness has application to transcendent reality; and that incomplete as it is, objective thought provides our best guide to the nature of that reality. That is definitive enough for me; idle possibilities do not need to be ruled out.

This is the kind of reasoning I am relying upon, then, but perhaps it is deafening me to another ‘take’ on reality which is superior. To assert this, however, is to provide a reason to give up on the reason I am relying on; and I cannot see it as a good one. For if there is another kind of reasoning which would side-line both objective thought and the kind of bare metaphysical reflection on transcendence which I engaged in, thereby allowing me to hear what reality is saying, then the superiority of this new reasoning would have to explain and usurp the old; otherwise I could never rationally accept it as superior. Listening out might provide me with this new way of reasoning, thereby allowing me to hear what reality is saying. But my old reasoning provides me with no reason to actively listen out, because I am not expecting to hear anything. I could do it anyway, in the hope of receiving some kind of revelation. However, if there is something to be understood of the prerequisite enormity, which would explain the meaning of transcendent reality in such a way as to encapsulate and usurp both objective thought and metaphysical reflection of the kind which reveals to me only the bare fact of transcendent existence, then I would have thought the only place I am likely to hear it is in a philosophy book. And quite frankly, I would be amazed if there really were something of this magnitude in extant philosophy which has entirely evaded my notice.

So I have no reason to give up on the reasoning I am relying on in order to make myself more receptive to something else. The reasoning I am relying on gives me no reason, and the new reasoning cannot provide that reason unless either somebody tells me what it is, or it somehow occurs to me. Actively listening out is not going to make the latter happen, however, because I have absolutely no idea what to listen for; without the new reasoning at my disposal, I am simply not going to hear anything. So I should do nothing more than remain open to a new discovery; which I always try to do anyway. Perhaps the injunction to actively listen out is rooted in emotion rather than reason. But I cannot help it if I do not feel it, and without the new reasoning at my disposal, I have no reason to think that it makes any difference to my job as a philosopher.

Kuipers asks whether I would bracket ‘joy, wonder, or gratitude’ (p. 58) as

attunements akin to boredom and anxiety? I see what he is driving at – perhaps I have been taken in by existentialist gloom in privileging these two. But nevertheless, I do think they are special. Joy shows a natural propensity to engage with the framework. But does it creep over us when the framework recedes, thereby revealing something about our basic situation? Is there a joy in simply existing? I do not think so; it depends on the context in which you are existing. If you are frustratingly isolated from your framework goals while locked in a prison cell, boredom is inevitable, but not joy; a rush of joy when you realise your inner resolve not to let your present circumstances beat you, sounds like the call of the framework to me. Wonder also seems dependent on circumstances; you need something to inspire wonder. Simply existing may be enough in our more philosophical moments, but even then, this seems to be a product of the framework goal to understand. And gratitude, of the kind Kuipers has in mind, just strikes me as an imposition from the natural patterns of explanation we employ in the framework; something is good, so gratitude has to be expressed to somebody. Boredom and anxiety, on the other hand, however unpleasant they may often be, do strike me as philosophically illuminating responses to our basic situation; for the reason that they are a product of our projection into the framework losing its hold, and can thus reveal that projection to us.

To return to the main thrust of Kuiper's paper, then, I do not think I am going to hear anything. I am pretty sure that I do not think this because I have bought into unjustified assumptions that block my ears; I can hear just fine, but since I am not expecting to hear anything, I am not actively listening out. I would only have my ears to the ground, and recommend this attitude in my philosophy, if I thought there was good reason to expect to hear something; when in actual fact, I think there is very good reason *not* to expect to hear anything. Nevertheless, if I did hear something which I could not rationalise away, such that I was instead inspired to rationalise what I heard, then I fully grant that this could be amazing; I would love to read the book I would then write – so long as it was not the product of me losing my marbles. I am convinced this will never happen, but I am certainly open to a big surprise, especially if it is a good one. So I have an open attitude, just not the active one Kuipers recommends. This is a point of contention between us that we can continue to debate; and hopefully find things to say that others will find interesting. But to my mind, at least, this pales into insignificance against the fact that we are both thinking into a space which many other philosophers are missing out on – and because they are missing out, they are being inspired to say

things which are not only false, but detrimental to philosophy. Judging from his paper, I think Kuipers might just agree; if so, I put it down to our shared background in Rorty.

References

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