

# Nihilism and the Meaning of Life

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## 1. Introduction

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, I set out to reaffirm the question of the meaning of life in the face of outdated, positivistic instincts, the scientific and anti-religious sentiment that pervades much of contemporary intellectual culture, and, in no small dose, I think, an existential discomfort that makes people reluctant to take up such questions. When I looked to recent discussions under the ‘meaning of life’ heading, I also felt the need to save the question from a group of contemporary value theorists who have tried to make it something it is not, and to show that the genuine article is just as interesting for non-believers as it is for those of faith. Prominent as this agenda became in the final product, however, it emerged from other aims.

When I began to study philosophy, I wanted to know what it *was* – what made a discussion or topic specifically *philosophical* – and was amazed at the evasion, disinterest and even scorn which this natural question typically elicits within the profession. It has been neglected just as much as the meaning of life, and I came to think this was no coincidence; for as I argue in the book, when philosophy turned away from the meaning of life, it turned away from its own unifying theme. This pushed philosophy to the margins of culture. For outside the discipline (inside as well, for the most part), nobody has much of a clue what philosophy is supposed to be; and the one question you would have thought would be prime philosophical territory is officially not – I cannot think of a better recipe for getting people to lose interest. When people are exposed to philosophy, however, it can elicit a passion that is the envy of other disciplines. This suggested to me that a lack of self-consciousness was preventing philosophy from fulfilling its proper role. I trace this lack of self-consciousness principally to a lack of self-confidence in the face of science.

Traditional works of philosophy, of the kind that still enthuse people about the subject, are typically wide-ranging, interconnected, squarely implicated with matters of natural interest, and aimed at a certain kind of systematic completeness of understanding; they are philosophy-like. The philosophy that predominates in the contemporary analytic tradition is piece-meal and fragmented; it is science-like. If the results of this work were to be pulled together into something of general interest, then you feel that, just as with science, this would have to be done in a popular book that abstracts from the difficulties to distil the interesting, take-home messages. I do not see this happening; and I am not sure that there are enough take-home messages around these days that people *would* find interesting. I worry that the interest is too often solely professional; and worse, that it is sometimes essentially professional, as competing ‘researchers’ vie to carve out their own distinctive niches in debates. All academics engage in the latter to some extent, of course, but in science, burying your head in whatever research programme is within reach can make a certain kind of scientific, rather than just professional, sense; for the visible, real-world effects of science are the collective result of lots of people doing just that. However this model strikes me as much less appropriate to philosophy, where the only visible, real-world effect is human understanding. Science provides us with technological solutions, as well as understanding which may or may not be of general interest; but philosophy produces only understanding.

This understanding should not be confined to the profession if, as I think, philosophy deals with issues of natural human interest. I am not saying that philosophers have a duty to reach out to the public; I would have written a very different book if that had been my main concern. Neither am I saying that the piece-meal approach is without merit; it instils discipline and responsiveness to peers, and much great philosophy has been produced this way. I am saying that since philosophy deals with issues of natural human interest, it should provide answers that cater to those interests; such that if people make the effort to understand what philosophers are saying, and they succeed, then they do not feel cheated.

If you believe that philosophy as a piece-meal, collective endeavour will ultimately provide better answers than the traditional approach did, and which can consequently be disseminated to satisfy natural philosophical

interests, then it may still seem good to you that the piece-meal approach has eclipsed the systematic one. But then you must have faith that the collation and dissemination will ultimately transpire, rather than be indefinitely deferred as debates inconclusively fizzle-out to be replaced by new ones. That is, you must have faith that ways of philosophically understanding the world, and thereby meeting the natural human interests which the discipline arose from – and is still sustained by – really are being produced in this way. Moreover, you must have faith that debates come to dominate journals because they represent the state-of-the-art culmination of a history of philosophical discussion; and that they do not leave behind, for forgotten reasons and happenstance, large swathes of thought which only historians of dead philosophers continue to write about, but which will almost inevitably resurface in tomorrow's leading debates.

Lacking this kind of faith, I set out to write a traditional philosophy book. In that way, I was able assure myself that I was doing my job; for I take a long-view of my job-description. The topic I wanted to build this book around was consciousness. Consciousness was the topic of my Ph.D., and of all the topics I have come across in contemporary debates, it is the one that has gripped me the most. Moreover, I knew that consciousness would lead me into the metaphysics of time, which sounded good for my traditional aspirations, and I had been persuaded by Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that there was a deep connection between modern concerns about consciousness and the ancient problem of universals. So far so good; but I still needed an account of consciousness, and more importantly, I still wanted to know what philosophy was.

For many years I struggled to formulate a physicalist account of consciousness that I could believe, for I was sure that physicalism *must be true*, even if, to echo Thomas Nagel, I found it incredibly difficult to see how it *could be true*. When my overarching concern about the nature of philosophical inquiry finally led me to ask why anyone would care, as I did so much, about how consciousness could be fitted into a physical world, I finally arrived at the question of the meaning of life. (For some days, a passage by Heidegger about science had been stuck in my head, like a song; then it just 'clicked'.) From that point onwards, all the pieces began to fall into place. I soon rejected physicalism, and am now as thoroughly anti-physicalist as the proverbial ex-smoker is anti-cigarettes. This allowed

me to write my book; which panned out as follows.

## 2. Synopsis

In the introduction, I begin by tackling the popular notion that the question of the meaning of life is hopelessly obscure. It is in fact perfectly straightforward, but in an intellectual culture dominated by science, and displaying strong anti-philosophical tendencies, the ‘what does it even mean, anyway?’-idea has provided an easy way of dismissing what is perhaps the most potent philosophical question of all. Another popular avoidance strategy is to interpret the question, however tenuously, as a question about the social meaning which we build up within our lives. I argue that this conflation stems from 19<sup>th</sup> century overreactions to the prospect of nihilism which sprang from the false assumption that nihilism is *bad*. But only a meaning of life could be bad, not the lack of one.

The introduction ends with an appendix, in which I launch into a polemic against the contemporary analytic approach to social meaning; an approach which either dismisses, or tries to pass itself off as, inquiry into the meaning of life. I regret the tone I took here, partly because it may overshadow what I think are some good arguments against the main theories in the field, but mainly because the philosophers I attack revived interest in this crucial area, for which they should be congratulated; I made the latter point in the book, but a little too reluctantly. The only excuse I can offer is the rather pathetic one that I had been reading a lot of this stuff at the time, and some of it, especially the examples adversely comparing ordinary people with the great and the good, in terms of how meaningful their lives were deemed to be, had annoyed me. But I wrote with no malice, either here or in other pieces of the time, but rather with an excess of enthusiasm inspired by having seen my book to completion, or knowing that I soon would; anyone who knows me would have no doubt about the truth of this. My views have not changed or softened; in fact I have now seen even more fundamental problems with the social meaning agenda (Tartaglia 2016a). But in making my critique, I should have thought less about honesty and providing a good read, and more about courtesy and diplomacy. Since I targeted leading figures, I trust this was water off a duck’s back; I am sure it would have been, because great experience instils

wisdom of the kind I am still learning. But if I did offend anybody, then I sincerely and publicly apologise.

In chapter one, which survived relatively unscathed from my first draft for over a decade, I claim that human life is meaningless, but does not normally seem like that because our social understanding of the world focuses our attention on goals; we normally have ‘something to do’. Nevertheless nihilism ticks away in the background and reveals itself through our susceptibility to boredom, which arises when our engagement with the social framework subsides; we find ourselves with ‘nothing to do’. After criticising Heidegger’s existentialist analyses of both boredom and anxiety, on the grounds that they are rooted in a misguided redemptive agenda (always a danger for creative philosophers, I think), I connect the question of the meaning of life to another of the great issues of natural philosophical curiosity: the cosmological question of why there is something rather than nothing. The connection is that life and the fact of existence are both things we naturally expect to be able to make a certain kind of sense of, but find that we cannot. In understanding that we cannot, I think we can satisfy the curiosity behind this question. The chapter concludes with a critique of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism, which is much more loaded than mine is.

In chapter two, I look at the various intellectual defence mechanisms which 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers devised to deal with nihilism; the prospect of the truth of nihilism has evidently struck terror into many hearts. But there was no need for protection, consolation, or resignation, since nihilism is neither a threat nor a challenge; it only comes to seem that way because of inherited prejudice and intellectual error. Thus some have argued that nihilism renders life absurd; but such views only make sense within a religious perspective that the nihilist rejects. So nihilists should not be absurdists. Others try to avoid nihilism by defending the humanist view that people make their own meaning. Now people obviously do make their own meaning, but social meaning is a different issue: for there to be a meaning of life would require a transcendent context of meaning of the kind supplied by religions, and since humanists agree with me that there is no good reason to believe in one, they should accept the inevitable result, namely nihilism. A radical form of humanism is relativistic scepticism about objective truth, of the kind promoted by ‘postmodernists’ (an

entrenched and useful label, which most of the thinkers in question try in vain to disavow). But this can be discounted for obvious reasons; people can decide to uncover as many objective truths about the world as they like. I find the circumstances in which these radical, and radically implausible, views came to prominence, far more interesting than the views themselves. For they were yet another unnecessary response to nihilism: if nothing is true, so went the underlying thought, then nihilism cannot be either.

In chapter three, I turned to my overriding concern: achieving philosophical self-consciousness by answering the question of what philosophy is. I have since produced a neater, more journal-friendly version of this chapter's core theory about the unity of philosophy (Tartaglia 2016b); but the position itself did not change. However, I am not particularly happy with how, within the book chapter, I subsequently went on to use this position to answer scepticism about philosophy. What I say is along the right lines, but the ideas had not been properly developed at the time. More importantly, I had not yet seen their importance; I was primarily thinking of philosophy-scepticism as a dumb and annoying meme which philosophers had taken too seriously. But I now see that it is much more than that.

I begin the chapter by supporting my view that the question of the meaning of life is a natural philosophical concern by discussing the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, thereby taking us right back to the beginning of human literature. I was blown away, on first reading this work, when I discovered that its dominant theme is the meaning of life. Although I was nervous about treading into scholarly waters of which I know very little, I simply had to include it; for although some of my speculations about its intentions may be miles off, despite my best efforts, my central point – namely that the authors were thinking about the meaning of life – is something I would be very surprised to be dissuaded of.

I go on to observe that although the question of the meaning of life is paradigmatically philosophical, the same can be said about the traditional questions of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. To understand philosophy, as I see it, the connection between all of these areas of philosophical concern must be understood. The conclusion I came to is that the connection is the question of the meaning of life. More exactly, I claim that philosophy is rooted in attempts to discover the meaning of life

through a description of the world employing the concept of transcendence. Philosophy's various and diverse problems have arisen in this attempt, I argue, but have now often become far removed from their natural sources of curiosity. Thus at the end of the chapter, I offer an account of constructive inquiry in philosophy, inspired by Meno's Paradox, which is designed to counteract this problem; I have used it ever since.

With my account of the nature of philosophy on the table, I put it to work in providing an answer to the rampant philosophy-scepticism that circulates in our day. This scepticism is based on philosophy's apparent lack of a unified subject-matter, its *a priori* method, and its perceived lack of progress. The point I did not place nearly enough emphasis on in the book, however, is that these perceived problems arise through an invidious comparison with science. The basic thought, as I see it now, is that science is beyond reproach, philosophy has features that are different from science, and therefore philosophy is bad. A popular weapon against philosophy that science-worshippers use, is to disparage it as an 'armchair' pursuit; and defenders of philosophy have displayed dire political instincts by actually *embracing* this description. But seriously, do the action-men and -women of science really write their research papers on the go? Do they not sit at desks? When they get up, they sometimes conduct experiments, of course; because they are scientists. But when philosophers get up, they live and they think; the two often merge. Philosophers often think at their desks, but you would hope that scientists do too. If experimentation really is the be-all-and-end-all, I wonder what experiment I might have performed to see the connection between consciousness, the meaning of life, and the nature of philosophy, which inspired this book? And if thought is obsolete, how is scientific investigation to be rationally directed? In any case, the relation between philosophy and science is something I shall treat much more fully in the sequel to *Meaningless*, which I am currently preparing, and which is entitled *Gods and Titans*.

When philosophers – predominantly in the English-speaking world – turned their backs on concerns like the meaning of life, I think that they lost their sense of identity and, looking around for a new one, became fixated on science; some of the results of this were scepticism about philosophy, aversion to self-reflection, and the piece-meal approach of analytic philosophy. But since this new model of inquiry was not universally

embraced, a split took root in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. I think the situation is more complex with the continental side of the split, where interest in the meaning of life and in providing holistic understanding remained more prominent, and where it seems to have been art, literature and politics, rather than science and mathematics, that provided the new inspiration. I tentatively identify with the analytic side, because I favour argumentative analysis in clear prose, which that side better preserved from the philosophy that predominated before the split. However, I always remember one of my teachers telling me, with a knowing look, that, ‘you’re going to be a continental philosopher!’

In chapter four, I take up one of the hottest topics of debate within analytic philosophy since the 1950s: the problem of consciousness. Enthusiasm for this debate, which is essentially about whether science can tell us what consciousness is, shows no signs of abating. Philosophers who argue that consciousness cannot be incorporated into the scientific world-view of physicalism, or at least that it presents very serious problems for science which nobody yet knows how to overcome, continually infuriate philosophers who think that consciousness is obviously as natural as the birds and the bees, and hence that science can tell us everything there is to know about it. In turn, philosophers of the latter kind continually infuriate those of the former by implying, or even openly stating, that consciousness does not exist. What is primarily at stake in this debate, I have since argued, is philosophy’s voice: for physicalism is a metaphysical position which silences that voice (Tartaglia 2016c). Physicalism endeavours to be the final metaphysical position, which after its triumph, would quietly forget its own status as metaphysical. As I see it, then, the reason the two sides are so entrenched is that the struggle concerns philosophy’s future. If consciousness (or perhaps a related metaphysical concept that will replace it) continues to contextualise the scientific world-view for us, then philosophy will have a future. If not, then I doubt it very much; and so much the worse for us.

After explaining the problem as vividly as I can, I begin by arguing that the distinction between indirect and direct awareness is a red herring in this area. For unless we deny that there are any conscious perceptual states, of the kind you and I are apparently in right now, then we have no choice but to think of experience as providing us with indirect awareness of the world

via a causally mediated process. I then argue that all the various attempts that have been made to incorporate consciousness into the physical world inevitably result in what I call ‘revisionism’; because they must revise our conceptions of either consciousness or the physical world, if they are to make physicalism work. But revisionism is untenable. The dominant kind, which seeks to revise our conception of consciousness, is untenable because our ordinary conception of consciousness will never go away – even from the minds of the revisionists themselves. No matter how well you internalise these theories, consciousness will not seem to be what they say it is. Not only will you go back to thinking of it in the ordinary way when you put the theory aside – that is, as some kind of inner presence, such as a visual image which only you can ‘see’ – but you will think of it that way even in the act of telling yourself you should not; no matter how often you repeat the physicalist mantra. This is hardly surprising, given that human beings have always thought essentially like this, as far as we know, and have constructed their entire world-view on this basis; a world-view that physicalists completely rely upon, thereby demonstrating their inattention to epistemology. How sensible would it be, I wonder, to insist that triangles have four sides, when every time you look at one, or think about triangles, they clearly seem to have three?

Now my PC is currently displaying all the sentences I just wrote, and we could easily make it ‘say’ them too. It could say that, ‘I, the PC, seem to have inner experiences, and cannot shake this impression, despite my physicalist convictions.’ The revisionist thinks my situation is essentially the same as the PC’s would be; for as I argue in the chapter, this is the only stable version of physicalism about consciousness around, namely the one commonly known as ‘eliminativism’, but which now seems to be adopting the improved title of ‘illusionism’ (Tartaglia 2016c). However, I do not think the case for physicalism, such that it is, is remotely strong enough to get me to believe that the PC and I are in the same metaphysical boat; whereas I find the case for thinking that physicalism is a naïve metaphysic which philosophers embraced because of their reverence for science, to be very plausible indeed.

Of course, physicalists will scream that they never said that I was just like my PC; and that is true enough. But the ones with a relatively stable position, the ‘illusionists’, do say that I only seem to be conscious because I

make false judgements. And though they will go on to say that my PC cannot make judgements as I can, this can only be through appeal to my greater physical complexity, integration with my environment, etc. That is, they will appeal to objective conditions that cannot possibly be relevant to understanding the objective / subjective gulf. A nice illustration of this point which I use in the chapter is that of the physical differences between colour- and black-and-white cameras (the old-fashioned kind). Told that the cameras are conscious, physical information will explain the difference between their visual experiences; but it will never tell you that they *have* visual experiences. Yet physicalism is a metaphysic which needs to be able to tell us when and why conscious experience arises from certain physical systems, but not others, as a condition of its own success. It does not avoid this requirement by substituting ‘false judgements that there are conscious experiences’ for ‘conscious experiences’; it just lengthens the terminology. If physicalists insist that the PC cannot make these false judgements, it is only because they think it is not conscious. But the task of explaining how consciousness (or: the right kind of false judgement) arises from the physical world is impossible. It arises because physicalism is a metaphysic that forgets its own starting point.

For those wondering what this has to do with the meaning of life, the answer emerges in chapter five, which is the first of three chapters that provide the core of my metaphysic. In this crucial chapter, I present a new (I think) solution to the problem of consciousness, which is neither physicalist nor dualist nor idealist. According to the ‘Transcendent Hypothesis’, which like any philosophical hypothesis can only be tested by thinking through the implications, we have as much prospect of understanding how experiences could be brain states, as we would during a dream of understanding how dream experiences could be states of the brain within the dream. That is to say, no prospect at all: because dream experience does not ontologically belong to the dream-world. And likewise, if the hypothesis is correct, waking experience does not ontologically belong to the objective world: it is transcendent. Thus reflection on consciousness and the meaning of life bring us to the same place; and in a variety of ways, I think this has always been the direction of travel in philosophy. Moreover I think it has been the right direction, since reality is transcendent.

If reality is meaningless and transcendent, this immediately explains the distinctive dialectic we witness throughout the history of philosophy, in which repeated attempts, repeatedly resisted, have been made to close down the conceptual space of transcendence. The instinctive mistrust of transcendence which drives this process is mistaken, but it is a natural enough one for those who, like myself, do not think there is a meaning of life, and who accept that our objective, physical way of thinking about the world provides all the reason we need to dismiss this possibility. I still have the instinctive mistrust to the extent that I think most people have been attracted to transcendence because of the prospect of a meaning of life. But I overcome it by reflecting on the many rational lines of thought which have led philosophers to the same place, whatever their motivations; and also the mess which metaphysics gets into when it tries to deny transcendence. The equilibrium, I think, lies in a combination of nihilism and transcendence. I am fully aware that in defending this combination, I am likely to bifurcate my readers between those who like the nihilism but not the transcendence, and those who like the transcendence but not the nihilism; I am already beginning to witness this. But the consolation is that my account predicts this, which is a fact that some others may find persuasive.

My guiding thought about consciousness is that it creates differential contexts of existence, and on this basis I explain that our positive conceptions of mental states are misrepresentations which allow us to articulate a world. As I follow through on this agenda into deeper theoretical waters than had hitherto been explored in the book, I try to show how the theory makes new sense of the distinctions between introspection and perception, appearance and reality, primary and secondary qualities, and realism and idealism. My hope is that those who follow me this far will no longer immediately associate 'transcendence' with mysticism, religious yearning or, indeed, general wackiness (I do not equate these, but many do). For in my view, the transcendent is *everything*. Name the most ordinary and well-understood thing you can think of; on my view, that thing 'belongs', in the loosest possible sense of the word, to transcendent reality. If it exists, then it must so 'belong'; given that reality is transcendent. The transcendent, as I understand it, is not some ethereal realm that occasionally teases us with its elusive presence. It is all of *this*

stuff. My point is that our objective understanding simply cannot be capturing the nature of this stuff, given certain facts about the world, such as that we are conscious and exist in the present. But nevertheless, this objective understanding, which will only seem to be flawed if you make the mistake of interpreting it as a metaphysic, allows us to form the reasonable hypothesis that reality is transcendent, and thereby allows us to make metaphysical sense of it.

In chapter six, I explore another philosophical route to transcendence, this time via time. Given the connection between transcendence and the question of the meaning of life which I set out before, this builds my case for the centrality of this question to philosophical inquiry, while allowing me to further develop the metaphysic of the Transcendent Hypothesis. I begin the chapter by bringing things down to earth for a while – by which I mean from the philosophical art of justification, to the matters of natural human interest which it ultimately serves – by revealing connections between common anxieties about time, and the philosophical claim that time is unreal. By this method, which I employ throughout the book, my metaphysic remains rooted and purposeful, with its value plain. I then move on to reject Heidegger’s revisionary conception of time – thereby completing the critique of Heidegger initiated in chapter one – before making the case that attempts to dissipate the counterintuitive consequences of the ‘block universe’ theory inspired by modern physics, are hampered by the consciousness revisionism which I diagnosed in chapter four.

This sets the scene for my continued exploration of the consequences of the Transcendent Hypothesis, which, as I now argue, can show us how to accept the block conception, thereby paying due respect to objective thought, without being forced into an untenable denial of the fact that we experience the world from the privileged perspective of the present. The key to being able to make this move is realising that there is both an objective and transcendent sense of ‘now’, and that there is no more reason to think experience belongs to objective time than to objective space. I conclude that the characteristic perplexities of philosophical reflection on time result from attempting to superimpose the transcendent ‘now’ upon the objective world. I end the chapter by relating my position to ideas from the Chan / Zen Buddhist tradition. I *think* that Dōgen was driving at the

same point as me; but in any case, I find his example of firewood turning to ash, with which I open the chapter, fascinating and well-worth sharing.

In chapter seven, I move onto the Western philosophical problem *par excellence*, namely the problem of universals. To illustrate: we experience many different particular red things, but what is redness itself? Whenever I teach this topic, I reflect that I could have been doing much the same thing at any time during the last two-and-a-half millennia; which is one reason why I like my job so much. Glorious as the problem is, however, it has become rather dusty and arcane, making it a challenge to get today's students to empathise and fully engage; and when I read contemporary writings about the problem, although I am glad they continue to flow, I do sometimes wonder what the authors think they are up to. As such, I begin the chapter by trying to bring things down to earth again, showing that we actually do have natural concerns about universals, and that they dovetail with and motivate Plato's monumental metaphysics of universals.

After rejecting a strand of scepticism about the universal / particular distinction which originates with Nietzsche, I connect the ancient but still ongoing debate between nominalist and realist positions on this issue, with debates about consciousness and time. We witness exactly the same contours: efforts are made to either deny the existence of a phenomenon (real universals, consciousness, the temporal present), or else to squeeze it into the objective world. The motivation is always to close down the space of transcendence, within which a meaning of life might reside; but these efforts always fail because reality is transcendent. Thus the debates roll on and on. Once more I invoke the Transcendent Hypothesis to try to resolve the standoff. First I try to show how the problem of universals is just as intimately connected with consciousness as time is, by explaining how the roots of the modern conception of consciousness reside in Greek metaphysics. I do not think our conception of consciousness is 'modern' in any very substantive sense – I think it is natural, since people have always thought of their experience subjectively (Homer did; see Tartaglia 2017) – but I do think that philosophy came to thematise this conception more explicitly, as the appearance / reality distinction developed to fit a changing world.

I then present a new argument to show that the instantiation of universals is required by our conception of experience as a self-sustaining

reality. However I do not conclude that this implies the existence of universals, and thereby vindicates realism, because, as I have by this point been arguing since chapter five, our only positive conception of experience is a misrepresentation derived from the objective world. I end the chapter with a discussion of representation, which is a notion I previously needed to simply rely upon in order to get this far. This allows me to explain the ontological status which my metaphysic provides to the objective, physical world; and that is as far as the metaphysic develops in this book.

I now read the final, eighth chapter as thoroughly transitional, since it begins to take up a theme, namely that of philosophical and scientific understanding in the midst of ceaseless technological advance, which will be central to the sequel, *Gods and Titans*; the new book will also give me the opportunity to further develop the metaphysic so as to incorporate free will, personal identity and truth. Providing this transitional link was certainly not my intention at the time, but nevertheless, it was surprisingly soon after I finished *Meaningless* that the plot of the new one started coming together.

In this chapter, in addition to some inevitable recapitulation and consolidation, my main concern is with showing how my position establishes the (relative) autonomy of philosophy. Science cannot solve philosophical problems because its role is to describe the objective world; while philosophy's concern is with the status of the objective world within the context of transcendence. I anticipate that philosophy will continue to oscillate between affirmations and denials of transcendence, but nevertheless welcome this as a fulfilment of its social role: to maintain a rational discussion about transcendence. Against populist, science-worshipping atheism, I argue that religious believers have seen something important, regardless of how they got there: for there *is* a transcendent context, and they are only wrong to think that it is a context of meaning. And in a thoroughly transitional ending (with hindsight), I argue that the provision of a rational way of thinking about these matters, as our social framework advances in ways that make it harder to see, is something philosophy uniquely has to offer us.

### **3. Transition**

And that is the book. If you are reading this symposium in the right order, then the main event is about to commence. But before it does, I want to do two things. The first is to thank the ten philosophers who agreed to comment on *Meaningless*. They have very generously given me the opportunity to reflect on and develop my work in the company of thinkers I really respect; money can buy you a Bentley Continental, but not that. It is particularly gratifying that the line-up includes both my teacher (Valberg) and my student (Balmer). Above all, however, I would like to thank the editor, Masahiro Morioka, since this was all his idea. Setting up this journal showed great foresight, and I suspect that its significance to philosophy will steadily increase.

The second thing I shall do is respond to the three reviews of the book that have been published to date. Usually when I read book reviews – and always when I write them – I want to know how the author would respond. And yet there is no institutional mechanism for this; which to my mind removes a great source of philosophical value which academic reviewing could have. In the absence of a *Journal of Philosophical Replies*, then, this symposium strikes me as an ideal forum in which to take the measure of an extra three critical responses to my work.

### **4. Leach, Hawkins and Bennett-Hunter**

In the review by Stephen Leach (2016), an elegant summary of the book is followed by two interesting criticisms. The first is that we have no way of knowing whether or not life is meaningless, and hence I have no justification for dismissing the possibility of a meaning of life as ‘idle’, as I like to put it. He says that, ‘All agree, including Tartaglia, that the obvious place to look for the meaning of life is in death. But we know nothing about death. Therefore we have no justification for describing one possibility as idle and another more likely.’ He concludes that since we cannot know what will happen after we die, and hence whether life is meaningful or meaningless, it follows that life is absurd. This is because we fear disappointment at death, but it is a disappointment we will never experience. Leach thinks this phenomenon is at the root of a gulf that exists

between how we think life should be and how it actually is, such that we are continually surprised by disappointment, but rationally should not be. This gulf permeates our social lives and thereby renders them absurd.

If we all fear being disappointed at death on discovering that life is meaningless, it seems to follow that nihilists like me are secretly hoping we are wrong. If there is any truth to this, however, it is surely not that we incoherently fear a disappointment we will never feel, but rather that we fear *death*; that is, our last moments actually being our last moments, rather than the final countdown to an after-life. You might perhaps make some headway in persuading me that I would be happy to be wrong about nihilism if that meant transitioning at death into something new and not altogether worse. But then, I do not see anything inherently absurd in that. I can quite reasonably hope for something which I nevertheless consider to be overwhelmingly unlikely. And generally, I see nothing absurd in maintaining a positive attitude to life, so long as it is grounded in a reasonable assessment of the facts. It might, after all, be perfectly rational to try to escape from a burning building, even if you think it is overwhelmingly likely that you will die in there; you never know, you might just make it. Leach thinks we are constantly disappointed but should not be because we should expect the worst. That sounds like pessimism to me, which can be just as absurd as optimism if not grounded in a reasonable assessment of the facts. Irrational optimism generates unnecessary disappointment, but irrational pessimism generates unnecessary miserableness; and disappointment, unlike miserableness, is a spur to try again.

The reason Leach thinks my nihilism is unjustified, and that we do not know what will happen at death, is that he neglects a central aspect of my position, namely that without misrepresenting it, we cannot know anything about transcendent reality except that it exists. At a first glance, this might seem to reinforce Leach's point, since it would be illegitimate to form any positive hypothesis about what happens to consciousness at death; whether it ends or continues. Surely, then, according to my own principles, we simply cannot know. However, to ask about 'what will happen' inserts the question into the time of the objective world; we can ask the question only by misrepresenting consciousness as something it is not, that is, as something objective. The question only makes sense within the

misrepresentation we live by, then. And within this misrepresentation of consciousness as temporally ordered states in causal communion with the objective world, the states are correlated with the objective states of living human beings, and we have absolutely no reason to think they are correlated with dead bodies, or that they can float free of the objective world altogether; if the latter even makes sense. Objective thought does, however, give us plenty of reason to think that our attachment to the idea of an after-life, and indeed a meaning of life, is the product of wishful thinking and intellectual justifications designed to serve it. So given that the question directs us to objective thought, we must believe what it tells us. Similarly, when assessing nihilism, we have nothing to go on except objective thought; even though the recognition of transcendence opens up the idle possibility that religious believers guessed right.

Leach's second criticism is that the connection I make between boredom and nihilism is unwarranted. The connection in question is that boredom occurs when our immersion in the social framework drops away, thereby leaving us exposed to nihilism, such that our susceptibility to boredom shows a latent sensitivity to this truth, of the kind which metaphysics can exploit. But Leach says that it is just as likely – although he seems to actually think it is more likely – that boredom is a product of our immersion in the framework which 'incites' thoughts about nihilism. Thus rather than boredom being a window onto nihilism, it may rather be that belief in nihilism is a product of boredom. This is clearly where he thinks I went astray, because earlier in the review, he surmised that I am someone who is highly susceptible to boredom. Maybe so, Dr. Freud, but idiosyncratic entry points to philosophy are either false starts or lucky breaks: the reasoning determines which.

Boredom has its uses within the framework, to be sure. When it hits in, it can make you realise that your time would be better spent elsewhere. However it is not always like that, for tasks sometimes bore us when we have no doubt that pressing on is the best possible way to meet the framework commitments that matter most to us. Boredom is essentially disruptive of our framework engagement; evidently so when it is just a hindrance, but equally so when boredom will ultimately be useful to that engagement by providing the spur to re-evaluate our goals. However, in all cases the phenomenon is the same: we are not gripped by goals.

Suppose Leach is right that this is a kind of framework engagement; perhaps it developed because of its potentially useful consequences, or perhaps it is an aberrant engagement that arose through a kind of malfunction. Thus although it would seem to me in boredom that the goals do not grip me, they actually do: in a boring sort of way. The objection would then be that when my goals grip me in this special, boring way, I mistake this for them not gripping me at all, and thereby falsely come to a nihilist conclusion. However, it does not follow that the conclusion is false. For even if I can never shed my immersion in the framework, the nihilist thoughts this special kind of immersion incites in me will still reveal that my goals are a product of ordinary immersion, rather than the meaning of life; for the special immersion will never generate its own goals, even if it inspires more ordinary immersion which does. With the spell of ordinary immersion broken, then, I am better positioned to realise the truth of nihilism. I describe this as boredom providing us with an attunement to nihilism. So even if Leach were right, it would not affect my case. However, I still think my description is better, because I find it less natural to say that when bored, our attitude towards goals becomes one of boredom, than that certain outcomes cease to present themselves *as* goals.

Stephen B. Hawkins (2017) begins his review by calling me ‘a disappointed physicalist’. He is thinking of the fact that I used to be a physicalist – but then, why would that make me a disappointed physicalist? Surely, the situation is just that I once held the belief that physicalism is true, and later found reasons to abandon it. To be disappointed, you must have wanted your belief to be true. But why would anyone *want* physicalism to be true? I can think of two reasons. The first would be that you want it to be the case that human beings can tell the final, definitive story about reality by means of physical science. The motivation here cannot be curiosity about what the story amounts to because physicalism is a metaphysical view *about* the story – it claims there is one to tell and that physics can in principle tell it – so it must rather be something to do with human dignity or the prestige of science. If there turned out to be a reason why the final metaphysical story can never be told by science, then that might be disappointing, if it revealed human, or scientific, limitations. A second reason you might want physicalism to be true stems from anti-philosophical sentiment. Thus you might think that describing the

nature of reality is obviously something only science can do, and be annoyed that anti-physicalist philosophers question the metaphysical status of the scientific description of the world. Physicalism promises to put an end to all of that nonsense.

If you want physicalism to be true for either of these reasons, however, then I doubt you will ever meet with disappointment. For you will not be open to the truth or falsity of physicalism, but rather driven by pride in scientific achievement, disdain for philosophy, or both. No matter how good the argument against physicalism which such a person hears, they are unlikely to be persuaded unless it comes from science itself; and it is hard to see how it could. So the notion of a disappointed physicalist strikes me as rather fanciful. Personally, I am just an ex-physicalist; one who finds it difficult to imagine wanting a metaphysic to be true, unless it were of the religious kind that holds something positive in store for us. I would like to think that the majority of physicalists in academic philosophy today are like this.

Hawkins' image of me as a disappointed physicalist frames his whole reading of the book, I think. He sees my Transcendent Hypothesis as a case of settling for second-best. Since I could not have the physicalist metaphysic I wanted, I instead worked up 'a variety of Kantian idealism, shaped by the scepticism of Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and some strands of Chinese philosophy', in accordance with my overriding concern to stay on the right side of both our scientific and everyday understandings of the world. The only kind of reason I could stomach for rejecting physicalism, pertains to limitations on human understanding which do not impugn or challenge the scientific picture in any way, but rather just place it within a wider, philosophical perspective. Taking this philosophical perspective must neither challenge science, nor remove us from our common-sense, everyday understanding of the world. In short, philosophy must be tangential to science and not at all wacky. Well, I do think a bit like that, so this is certainly an insightful review. Hawkins disapproves, however. He thinks the price I pay to 'shield' philosophy from science is that of 'hiding it away in a corner where, at best, it transforms your attitude, and nothing more'; and that I offer only 'the *status quo* and the freedom of indifference in a universe beyond our comprehension'. Hawkins, by contrast, thinks philosophy should 'demand ever deeper understanding' and

‘make a difference in a real world where real people govern themselves by what really matters.’ He seems to think my philosophy is conservative and apathetic.

I find this reading both intriguing and disconcerting; but I am pretty sure it is not sustainable. In a world where scientism, and its philosophical extension, physicalism, is trying to discredit attempts to place the scientific description of the world within any context other than its own, thereby leaving it as the unassailable absolute truth, there is nothing timid or browbeaten about my view that objective thought must be placed within the context of a transcendent reality whose nature it can never capture; how is that hiding philosophy away in a corner? As to my affirming of the *status quo*, I do this in two ways, both of which I think are sound. Firstly, I do not see any credible way of disputing what science tells us about the world; or any good reason to try to do so. Secondly, I do not see any credible way of disputing what our everyday framework understanding tells us about what life basically amounts to. That picture certainly presents what life *seems* to be, and to argue that it should not seem that way, or that the seeming covers over an incompatible reality, would require exactly the kind of positive metaphysic of a meaningful reality which the book argues is untenable. There is, however, a more philosophically significant sense in which I am certainly *not* affirming the *status quo*; namely by arguing that reality is meaningless and transcendent, and building that argument upon philosophical considerations about consciousness. If that argument is correct, then Hawkins’ demand for ‘ever deeper understanding’ is not going to get us any further than the fact that reality is transcendent.

Hawkins’ line of criticism, according to which I should have been trying to completely revolutionise our understanding of the world and thereby spur us into positive action by revealing what ‘really matters’, did make me wonder what he himself thinks. A reviewer need not reveal their own views, of course, but I did become curious about the nature of the higher stance from which my position was being criticised. A clue is provided, perhaps, when he says that, ‘it should not surprise us to find boredom elevated to a philosophy of life in a book that makes so much of the “everyday”. Philosophy can do more.’ Hegelian is my best guess; possibly Thomist.

In any case, the most explicit criticism in the review is that I should not

have assumed that objective thought is our only substantive interpretation of reality. Hawkins seems to think that philosophy can provide a better, and at least equally substantive, interpretation of reality. Thus he sees a tension between my aim of preserving the everyday understanding of objective thought, and making maximum sense of the world with philosophical concepts. He thinks I am not entitled to assume that philosophy can never overturn objective thought, unless I can supply an argument to show that no explanatorily comparable alternative is possible. In short, my trust in objective thought is uncritical, dogmatic, and – once again – apathetic. I back it up with an appeal to everyday understanding, but in fact everyday understanding is silent on many issues that philosophical concepts can elucidate, such as the nature of matter.

I think there are two main kinds of reason why someone would want to overturn objective thought. The first is to make sense of consciousness; or some other feature of reality which seems to resist incorporation into the objective world as a matter of principle. The second is to make room for a competing form of description which affirms a particular meaning of life; and possibly thereby provokes personal or social action of a kind designed to get us in touch with that meaning. Now in the book I argued that consciousness is transcendent. If that is right, then it is a mistake to think of objective thought's inability to describe consciousness (or other related phenomena) as a shortfall. Hence the first kind of reason for wanting to overturn objective thought is explained away. I also argued that life is meaningless, and so the ultimate nature of human life does not provide any clues about what we should be doing with ourselves: these are matters we have to decide. That removes the second kind of reason. As I see it, then, the position I defended in the book removes any compelling reason for wanting to replace, or seriously question the legitimacy of, objective thought. Everyday objective thought tells us little about the nature of matter, I grant, but its extension – namely science – certainly does. If my account of consciousness is on the right track, then we have no reason to think there is anything wrong with a broadly objective account of what appears within the context of conscious experience. And in any case, common sense alone, it seems to me, dictates that we are never going to get an alternative of remotely comparable substance.

The review by Guy Bennett-Hunter (2016) is a prime example of the

bifurcation of critical response I expected; he likes the transcendence but not the nihilism. The central criticism the review revolves around is that I fail to refute the best argument for the claim that there is a meaning of life – the one Bennett-Hunter agrees with – and hence fail to establish nihilism. He says that I do not explicitly address this argument, despite promising to do so in the introduction, but that my implicit response not only fails, but is, he strongly implies, outrageous. This is because it amounts to an invitation to stop thinking about the matter; philosophers ‘of all people’ should never do this, he says, thereby neatly using my own turn of phrase against me.

The argument in question is that we would not be able to carry on if nihilism were true, and so given that most of us do carry on, there must be a meaning of life. Now a great many of us apparently *think* nihilism is true, of course; atheism is on the rise, and signs in cafes saying that life is all about ‘the journey, not the destination’ are very popular. Perhaps such people are psychologically spurred on by the humanist belief that we ‘make our own meaning’. I do not think so, however, because this kind of intellectual justification comes only after the event, and popular as this one has become, it is obviously not universally believed; not by me, and not by a great many people who would deny that there is a meaning of life, without having considered the philosophical question of what motivates goals in its absence. Bennett-Hunter, however, thinks motivation requires the psychological spur which belief in a meaning of life provides. But he fails to realise that this plays no part in his objection. For according to that objection, whether you believe there is a meaning of life or not, there can be no motivation without a meaning of life. If the meaning of life is there, we can feel motivated; but if it is not, we cannot.

Bennett-Hunter gets close to realising this implication when he says, ‘there is a *logical* [my emphasis] as well as a psychological need to suppose that life has meaning and nihilism is false.’ He believes in both needs, but only the logical one has any role in his objection. Whether or not we have a psychological need to believe in a meaning of life makes no difference. Presumably, he thinks that those of us who would deny that we have any such need nevertheless have it at some undetected psychological level. But even for those who fully recognise this need in themselves, and think it is being satisfied, the psychology would be completely ineffectual

if the meaning of life were not there. Should the meaning of life somehow recede, then they, like the rest of us, would slump to the ground.

This view is unstable according to Bennett-Hunter's own principles; as well as independently implausible. If he knows that nihilism is impossible, given that goals motivate us, then he must know some feature of transcendent reality which is required for motivation. We know square circles are impossible because we know about squares and circles. To know that nihilistic motivation is impossible, then, would require knowing something about both meaningless realities and motivation. But if the reality is the objective world, we already know that nihilism and motivation can coexist: motivation would be part of such a meaningless, objective world. If it is transcendent, however, then we cannot know anything about it that would rule out motivation. Bennett-Hunter's main philosophical interest is in ineffability, and his interesting and original work argues that reality is both transcendent and ineffable (Bennett-Hunter 2014). As such he, of all people, should not be claiming that meaninglessness is impossible for transcendent reality: if we cannot say what it is, then we certainly cannot say what is or is not possible for it. So long as it is even possible for transcendent reality to co-exist with motivation, however, then we have no reason to look to a metaphysic of transcendence to explain motivation; for objective thought does the job perfectly well. Human beings naturally want things because this allows them to survive and find satisfaction. That seems to me a perfectly good explanation of why we find it so easy to be motivated.

I am criticised for encouraging philosophers to stop thinking; but what I really said is this. Think about nihilism as long and hard as you like. Eventually, as a plain matter of fact, you will stop; and when you do, if you are psychologically healthy, you will probably find goals motivating you just as much as they always did, despite the fact that you were recently considering the intellectual position that they never terminate in a meaning of life. If your reflection went well, then you will have endorsed nihilism as a non-evaluative position, and hence will never have thought that you *ought* to resist the natural motivation kicking back in: for nihilism does not say that we ought not to be motivated by ordinary goals. If Bennett-Hunter wants the reflection to run on and on, then fine; but I suspect this is just because he does not like the natural terminus – and that is because he is still

thinking of nihilism as evaluative, and negatively so. Saying that the meaning of life is ineffable sounds to me suspiciously like what someone might be expected to say if they were determined to avoid nihilism, could not find the meaning of life, and were intrigued by the history of religious mysticism.

When in the introduction to the book I mentioned the kind of argument which attracts Bennett-Hunter, in connection with David Cooper's views, I took the worry behind it to be that without belief in a meaning of life, of the kind that is still widespread, people might find their commitment to goals drain away. That is why I said that the worry, 'overestimates the importance of philosophy'; meaning that our commitment to goals can get along just fine with or without philosophical justification. I addressed this worry at length in chapter two; I was not thinking of Bennett-Hunter's view that the meaning of life sustains our motivation directly, rather than indirectly via our belief in it. As to his complaint that my views on nihilism and transcendence do not connect up, I really do not know what more I could have done to make the connection plain and to place it squarely at the centre of the work. My account of the unity of philosophy depends on the connection, and I use it to explain the typical lines of opposition to be found in debates about consciousness, time and universals. I use the connection to explain opposition to nihilism, opposition to transcendence, and the distinctive value of philosophy. These explanations are backed up by detailed descriptions of the ways we misrepresent transcendent reality. Present me with an apparently ineffable experience, and I will do my best to describe and explain it: philosophy *begins* in wonder.

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