

## **Nietzsche on Nihilism: A Unifying Thread**

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Nihilism is a concept very much in the intellectual air before Nietzsche. In varying forms, we find it discussed in Jacobi, Kierkegaard, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and others. The concept is picked up by 20th century existentialism and by modernist writers, artists, and filmmakers. And it is one that has continuing currency, used to humorous effect in the black-clad 'nihilists' in *The Big Lebowski*. Nihilism, in contemporary discourse, is a charge we get both from the right and from the left: The specter of these postmodern nihilists who populate academia, especially the humanities, and have afflicted the young with their dangerous ideas that, say, everything is a social construction. Or the nihilistic concern with nothing but the almighty dollar, or personal self-aggrandizement, undergirded by no deeper moral compass. Witness an article in *Prospect* magazine proclaiming Donald Trump a nihilist.<sup>1</sup> At a first pass, we might have been prone to characterize nihilists as those who find things meaningless, or who feel that nothing matters, or who reject the existence of any values, or who are in a state of despair. But this sort of inflection on nihilism is surprisingly inadequate when we try to understand many applications of the epithet, historical and contemporary. The charged term, in the two centuries or so that it has been in circulation, has meant a number of different things.

Where do we situate Nietzsche on the subject of nihilism? Nietzsche himself, herald of the "death of God" and critic of Judeo-Christian morality, has oft been branded a nihilist, particularly by those without any sympathy for his agenda. Even more bizarrely for anyone who has read Nietzsche's works with any degree of care, he has sometimes been held to be a *champion* of nihilism. That is a grave misunderstanding, at least when it comes to Nietzsche's

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/american-nihilist-trump-us-election-republican-democrat>

own application of the term. Nietzsche regards nihilism as a troubling problem, and there is growing consensus in the anglophone secondary literature 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 contemporary Nietzsche studies, especially following on Bernard Reginster's groundbreaking book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*.<sup>2</sup> 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 Reginster put forward—centered around the notions of disorientation and despair.

The main 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 a 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 manifestation, seemingly diametrically opposed, is compatible with seeing the world as guided by God and accordingly meaningful. Or take another example: It might seem that nihilists are life-negating, condemning the world and wanting, in some sense, to escape it. This is true, in Nietzsche's eyes, of the Schopenhauerian, the Buddhist, and the Christian, all of whom he thinks of as nihilists. But what of the "last man," 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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Pippin (2010); Katsafanas (2015); Gemes (Forthcoming).

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.<sup>4</sup> In one respect, this seems evidently correct, in that this broad condition comes in different psychological guises, ranging from fervor, to contentment, to despair. There would seem to be no common psychological profile. Yet as I shall be arguing in this paper, there is nonetheless a unifying thread linking together the main forms of nihilism he targets. Nihilism, on the view I elaborate here, centrally involves one’s being unmoored from the most important values, namely those values that confer a higher meaning on existence. Yet not just any values will do here, even among those (such as the values of Christianity) *purporting* to confer such a meaning. The values in question need (at least by Nietzsche’s lights) to be the *right* values, conferring the *right* meaning—values celebrating existence, not condemning it, and celebrating its higher aspects, not mere animal contentment and satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> Nihilism, on Nietzsche’s way of thinking, involves a failure of attraction and attachment when it comes to these higher, meaning-conferring values. This is especially pronounced with the features of this life and world which it can be a challenge to value in a full-blooded way, but which are inextricably bound up, on Nietzsche’s reckoning, with what gives human existence some of its greatest majesty and profundity: its inevitably transitory character, hard-won achievement, experiences of struggle and striving. Sometimes this unmooring takes the form of ‘life-negation,’ actively denigrating such features of this world, and wanting to escape human existence and repair to the transcendent.<sup>6</sup> But in extreme cases, nihilism doesn’t even rise to this level. It will instead involve *indifference* to some or all of the most important values, indifference even to such things as exceptional human excellence, creativity and beauty, indeed indifference to the very idea that we should need anything like higher values at all. My account explains the commonality

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<sup>4</sup> As acknowledged in various ways in Reginster (2006); Hussain (2007); Katsafanas (2015); Gemes (Forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> May (2009) gives a nice account of the psychology underlying this life-negating form of nihilism.

between this life-negation and this indifference, in a way that, I believe, has not hitherto been done. In general, a nihilist, with regard to the most important values, finds *nothing* (or little) valuable in them, where (as Nietzsche sees it) there is *something* valuable. It is thus not an apathy—a failure to will anything at all. In many cases, nihilism is not even a matter of willing nothingness, under *that* description, though some nihilists do indeed take nothingness as a kind of ideal (e.g., the Schopenhauerian). Nihilism is instead, with respect to higher values, willing, *de re*, what *amounts to nothing* (i.e., willing what is nonexistent, pathetic, perverse, or insignificant), or, on the other hand, a matter of not willing, *de re*, what ultimately amounts to something (those values that truly would endow human life with higher meaning). This unmooring from the most important values can happen at the reflective cognitive level, but also at the emotive or affective level. 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.<sup>7</sup> One problem is that interpreters have tried to characterize nihilism in a value-neutral way, abstracting from Nietzsche's own value commitments.<sup>8</sup> They will of course admit that Nietzsche thinks nihilism is bad.<sup>9</sup> But they'll think we can specify what the condition of nihilism is, without reference to any substantive value commitments on Nietzsche's part. They have thus focused instead on the *descriptive psychology* of nihilists (e.g., being in despair, lacking powerful affects, turned against their drives, and so on) or various other descriptive facts about nihilistic values (e.g., not in fact being realizable) or some

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<sup>7</sup> 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, particularly in the idea that one can only really understand the charge of nihilism well by reference to Nietzschean higher values and the failure to value these values.

<sup>8</sup> Schacht (1973) is in marked contrast to the recent trend.

<sup>9</sup> Danto (1964) maintains that Nietzsche styles himself 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.

combination of these. Although these factors shed some useful light on nihilism, we cannot, as I see it, grasp what ties various Nietzschean nihilists together just by looking to their psychology or to a purely descriptive characterization of what their values are like. Which is not to say psychology is irrelevant, or such characteristics of their values are unilluminating in all cases. But it is not where we should look for the unifying thread. It is essential to understanding nihilism, I believe, that we bring key Nietzschean values to bear, and see nihilism by reference to having come unmoored from the higher, meaning-conferring values.

Another considerable interpretive challenge is that 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, a lot of details remain hazy to be sure. But we have relatively more worked out ideas in the published text. With nihilism by contrast, much material is found in Nietzsche's notebooks, particularly from the final two years of his active life, 1887-8. *The Will to Power*, the pseudo-book concocted out of these notes, can thus seem the place to look for his "theory" of nihilism. But given that this is material Nietzsche didn't publish, we should proceed with caution. The notebooks from the 1887-8 period, for instance, can make it seem as though nihilism is a newly-impending phenomenon of modernity. In oft-cited passages, given ever more prominence by their placement (not of course by Nietzsche himself) at the beginning of *The Will to Power*, nihilism is said to be "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 as he wrote these notes, Nietzsche is claiming, in ideas he *actually chose to publish*, that the two-millennia-old phenomenon of Christianity is itself nihilistic. Nihilism's advent cannot be coming, if it has been with us for so long.

Although Nietzsche scholars pay lip service to the idea that the notebooks should take a back seat to the published work, merely supplementing views found there, some writing on nihilism in practice neglect this guideline and continue to cite notebook material that is not

just unsubstantiated in what Nietzsche chose to publish, but is in considerable tension with it. This disconnect between published work and notebooks 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. These jottings are no doubt important for giving a preliminary indication of Nietzsche's views on nihilism. But if we try to take on board everything Nietzsche says in the notebooks in connection with the word "nihilism" and its cognates, it is, I believe, going to be impossible to weave it all together into a coherent philosophical position. Indeed, I suspect the reason most of these remarks from the notebooks never see publication is that Nietzsche realizes that they won't work (because inconsistent with his considered and eventually published view that Christianity is nihilistic) and so decides not to take various incompatible thoughts further.<sup>10</sup> We thus should not *begin* from Nietzsche's fragmentary, inconsistent characterizations of nihilism from the notebooks as the basis of our account. In this way, my approach is methodologically different from that of some other Nietzsche scholars, who give *de facto* priority to the notebooks. We should instead identify the main phenomena that Nietzsche regards as nihilistic in the published work, and try to work out why he regards them as so. We can look secondarily to the notebooks for some elucidation. But an alleged Nietzschean "theory" of nihilism, reconstructed from the notebooks, is a non-starter if it is inadequate at accounting for the phenomena Nietzsche clearly regards in the published work as nihilistic.

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")

Schopenhauer (A, 7; TI, 21; Cf., GM, "Preface," 5)

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

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<sup>10</sup> For a suggestion of how Nietzsche's thinking on nihilism develops, particularly to include Christianity under the banner, see Yates (2015).

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 brought into view a unifying thread connecting the main phenomena Nietzsche thinks of as nihilistic. That is not to say that the extant views should be rejected *in toto*. A unifying thread is not an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon in question, nor even, necessarily, a sufficient condition of it. The attendant psychologies are important too. My paper thus 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.

Nietzsche’s account will be out of step with our initial inclinations about usage of the term “nihilism” and our first intuitions about who counts as a nihilist. Claiming the Christian to be a nihilist confounds our expectations right away. That said, the unifying thread of Nietzschean nihilism, on my reading, turns out not to be some completely idiosyncratic and distinctive invention of Nietzsche’s. It is structurally similar to the familiar idea of nihilism we get from a number of other 19th century thinkers and authors—and indeed from those moralists who brand Nietzsche himself a dangerous nihilist. Nihilism, for them, is a crisis involving coming unmoored from the most important values that give meaning to human life. Where Nietzsche differs from them is not in his account of what nihilism fundamentally is, but rather in his evaluative outlook, and the most important values he sees nihilists as having come unmoored from.

## II. Nihilism as meta-ethics

In contemporary analytic meta-ethics, ‘nihilism’ often refers to the view that there are no facts in the realm of (non-instrumental) values and normativity. 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 (or this fictional replacement) would be unbearable.<sup>11</sup> Reginster opts for a similar view, at least as one aspect of his reading. He suggests that one species of Nietzschean 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 think, is less of a settled matter than it is sometimes taken to be.<sup>13</sup> 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 or normative facts).<sup>14</sup> Is the meta-ethical belief that there are no such evaluative facts, and the practical consequences of such a belief, tantamount to Nietzschean nihilism? It is an implausible interpretive move for two main reasons. The first reason is that it makes Nietzsche seem a nihilist along with his targets. This can be dealt with somewhat by

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<sup>11</sup> Hussain (2007). Cf., Langsam (1997); Reginster (2006), who propose a more subjectivist response.

<sup>12</sup> 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) seem to take Reginster to mean something structural at the first-order level: the absence of certain kind of values (values that are 'overarching,' 'final,' etc).

<sup>13</sup> For doubts about whether there is a clear Nietzschean meta-ethical position, see Hussain (2013), retrenching from his earlier view; Huddleston (2014).

<sup>14</sup> 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. (And perhaps worth saying that everyone in these debates is (I think) agreed that Nietzsche is not skeptical of the idea of instrumental values and the minimal normativity connected with them.)

saying, using a distinction from Hussain, that while Nietzsche may be a “theoretical” nihilist (someone holding such beliefs), he is not a “practical” nihilist (someone suffering the psychological consequences of such beliefs).<sup>15</sup> Still, it has the unhappy consequence of making Nietzsche out to be, by his lights, a “nihilist” even at the theoretical level. The textual evidence for construing Nietzschean nihilism this way 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 just not doubtful about the existence of objective values, hence this cannot be a key or distinguishing feature of nihilism. I will take these two points in turn.

Does Nietzsche ascribe nihilism to himself, as his own current philosophical view?<sup>16</sup> So far as I can tell, there are no passages where he does so in the published work. 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 the totality of 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 instead, he gives no indication of this. It is true that Nietzsche uses the term “nihilism” in various ways in the notebooks, but there is no convincing evidence he uses it to refer to a meta-ethical thesis, or that he self-ascribes “nihilism” as his own present philosophical position.

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<sup>15</sup> Hussain (2007). There is, in my view, 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.

<sup>16</sup> Danto (1964) suggests that he does, as does Langsam (1997). For a contrary view, see Schacht (1973).

<sup>17</sup> Schacht (1973).

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 passage at issue 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 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 as such, nor are they thinking that their own values lack standing. Quite the contrary. When Nietzsche, for example, writes that “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 in comparison 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—the famous “death of God” passage—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 instead 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 doubtful. They more clearly are nihilistic insofar as they are failing to respond favorably to the most important values associated with this life and world. 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, in its higher, meaning-conferring aspects. It is this valuational disorder, rather than their beliefs about the meta-ethics or metaphysics of such value and the attendant psychological consequences, that is Nietzsche's foremost concern when it comes to nihilism.

Nietzsche, for all I've said, may be a nihilist in the sense of that term given in contemporary meta-ethics. But there are just not good grounds for thinking that this is what Nietzsche takes nihilism to be. It is an anachronistic terminological projection on to him. Nor are there good grounds for thinking that this is a helpful characterization of the phenomena of nihilism that Nietzsche sets out to characterize with his paradigmatic examples of nihilists. 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 more psychological or descriptive sense (values as things we invest our valuing energy in, or take to be valuable).<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche's central concern, vis à vis nihilism, is much more with what people *take* to be valuable, rather than with a theoretical belief about meta-ethics likely to be had by very few people indeed. But we must be careful here: Nietzsche thinks valuing something—anything—is better than not valuing anything. He is clear about that in the *On Genealogy of Morality*, Essay III. But it is not sufficient to escape nihilism that one finds something, *anything*, to value, and values it, even if one manages to do so in a fervent, committed way. It also matters *what one values*, because nihilism is a matter of coming unmoored from the most important values. 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. So the account I propose does not rely on Nietzsche being a realist, nor is it threatened if he is an anti-realist or expressivist. It is neutral on those issues.

### III. Nihilism as Despair

I would now like to turn to discussing the other dimension of Reginster's account, the aspect on which he rightly rests more weight. As outlined just now, the first aspect he identifies in nihilism is the "disorientation" related to the realization that there are no objective values. The other, and I think more plausible 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.<sup>19</sup> He is nihilistic in his belief that the values in which he is most invested cannot be realized, and this issues in a resultant despair.

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<sup>18</sup> Katsafanas (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Reginster (2006).

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.<sup>20</sup> The Schopenhauerian 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 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 metaphysics that secures what is most important to 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 comes to believe that these values can't be attained.

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.<sup>21</sup> (Moreover, none of these is very well accounted for with Reginster's category of "disorientation" either). I will take these characters in turn.

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<sup>20</sup> 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, 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 (2018).

<sup>21</sup> See Gemes (2008; Forthcoming).

The Christian is not despairing.<sup>22</sup> 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 at all well his reigning psychology, precisely because of the hopeful otherworldly theological beliefs that give him comfort. Indeed, the Christian who is in the throes of despair would be the Christian with serious doubts, not the ardently-believing Christian. The trouble, however, is that Nietzsche clearly thinks of Christianity as nihilistic. Although Reginster would no doubt agree that the Christian is nihilistically oriented against life and the world, my preferred account helps to explain why; an emphasis on the psychological state of despair can’t do this adequately.

Let us now consider the fanatical truth-seeker. The first thing to bear in mind is that Nietzsche is not hostile to truth-seeking in general. There are healthy, admirable forms of it. What he finds perverse is a condition, under the influence of the so-called “ascetic ideal,” where truth has been raised to the status of a supreme, unconditional value, to which all else must be sacrificed.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, Nietzsche speaks of such truth-seekers as “despairing” souls (BGE, 10). But other times, such people, according to the logic of Nietzsche’s account in GM III, see a kind of immense meaning in their truth-seeking 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 “suicidal nihilism” (GM, III:28). But it does so at a cost. Namely, one 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

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<sup>22</sup> Perhaps there could be a state of unconscious or proto-conscious despair in half-hearted Christians, in the vein of Kierkegaard. 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.

<sup>23</sup> Gemes (1992). See GM III.

fanatical ascetic truth-seeking is a nihilistic problem, despair, it seems to me, is again the wrong category to use. The whole point of the ascetic ideal is that it *staves off* despair through providing a meaning, specifically in this case the illusion that communion with the truth is kind of ennobling state, akin to beatific vision (“the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*” (GM III:24). “The truthful man, in the audacious and ultimate sense pre-supposed by the faith in science, thereby affirms another world than that of life, nature, and history” (GS 344; GM III:24). He can’t see his truth-seeking as important without this metaphysical apparatus standing surety behind it. This needn’t be a matter of God *per se*, but of transcendent aspects of reality (e.g. the Forms), such that epistemic contact with them is thought to be inherently redemptive.<sup>24</sup> He thereby denies our world, and is unmoored from its values, because he can’t find *in it* the resources to fund the enterprise that gives his life meaning. He has a nihilistic problem, but that problem, again, is not one of despair.<sup>25</sup>

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.

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<sup>24</sup> There are of course other pathologies of truth-seeking besides this one, but insofar as truth-seeking is form of nihilism, it is this ‘otherworldly’ version that I think Nietzsche must have in mind.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on the issue of the will to truth.

“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 is supposed to center on the psychologically-troubling realization that one’s key values are not realizable. Yet because the last-man has adjusted his standards so far downward, they are able to be met (relatively) easily. 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. 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 worst form of the condition he, a few years later, will come to describe as nihilism.<sup>26</sup> 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 the most important sorts of higher, meaning-conferring value—to blink in the face of the star, to find nothing worthwhile where there is something profoundly worthwhile.

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<sup>26</sup> 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.

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, a certain form of truth-seeker, 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 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.

### **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" (Gemes, forthcoming). 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. Gemes's counter-proposal grew out of two objections he posed for Reginster. 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 well 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 basically Christian values, even once they give up on God). All these forms of nihilist see 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 very 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.

The "last man" is also a major sticking point. 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, or 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. The last man would indeed seem to be the best evidence against the idea that Nietzsche subscribes to this hydraulic view, since this character 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 is an assumption of Gemes's account, and it is not apparent 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 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. 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 ascetic drive 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 value or appropriateness of particular drives or the goals of such drives. Ironically, it couples this with an indiscriminating normative valorization of free expression of the drives in general, and an equally indiscriminating condemnation of the suppression of 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 some drives is bad, and a sign of nihilism. Suppressing 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, but we have to look to what the drive in question is, and whether it should be suppressed.

This brings us to the 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 instances, is more about the substantive value commitments (and blindnesses) inherent in, and associated with, the drive-extinguishing goals of certain regnant drives. It is the fact that these drives are turned against the most important values in 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, or bound up inextricably with such aspects, 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, or other pathologies of the drives, are often connected to nihilism. But 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 despair reading and the affective nihilism readings 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—which in fact make the last man the centerpiece of the story about nihilism. Robert Pippin has offered an account of nihilism organized around the idea of eros, and, in particular, the "flickering out" of this erotic flame.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, he does not mean by the erotic the reductive Freudian idea of a sex drive. He instead has in mind, in a vaguely Platonic register, a condition of soul. To use one of Nietzsche's own images from the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, and earlier in *Zarathustra* ("Prologue"), the bow-string is losing its tension, and we will not be able to shoot for distant goals.<sup>28</sup> 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 commitment to higher values would need to be like. As Katsafanas rightly notes, the problem with the last man is not a lack of any values at all. It is not even a lack 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.

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<sup>27</sup> Pippin (2010).

<sup>28</sup> Cp. Clark and Dudrick (2012) on this rich image.

Indeed, their values seem strikingly similar to the ones championed in our culture.”<sup>29</sup> 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, 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.”<sup>30</sup>

Some quibbles aside, Pippin and Katsafanas are suggestive 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.<sup>31</sup> Pippin should presumably do so as well. For the image of the bow he centrally draws on is one Nietzsche uses precisely to remind us that in Christian-Platonic Europe the bow remained taut (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 also an underlying unity here.

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<sup>29</sup> Katsafanas (2015).

<sup>30</sup> Katsafanas (2015).

<sup>31</sup> 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.

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. For matters wouldn't be improved, if he remained devoted to the same, by Nietzsche's lights, shallow things, but in a more fervent way instead— a point nicely made by R. Lanier Anderson.<sup>32</sup> The problem with the last man, I would suggest, is instead a lack of receptivity to values, more extreme than the kind we've seen in any of the nihilists thus far. He, like them, can't attach himself to the most important values. More than that, he can't even see the allure, indeed even the allure of having higher values at all. 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 value much of the valuable, particularly the higher, meaning-conferring values. No one is denying that chocolate cake and naps are valuable too. But those are the easy things to value. It is another class of valuable things that Nietzsche is concerned with. 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's what I try to do in my own positive account.

## VII. The Value-based approach

We cannot characterize this problem of nihilism by stopping with psychological-motivational states (eros or its absence), or Katsafanas's formal job description of what "higher" values would need to be like, in such a way that Christianity, Buddhism, and Schopenhauerianism end up eluding capture as nihilistic. What unites nihilists, I submit, is

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<sup>32</sup> 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.

what they are failing to value, *substantively characterized*. They have come unmoored from the most important, meaning-conferring values. Their valuational commitments are directed away from the highest sorts of things, or connecting to them in only a weak fashion.

This way of putting it 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, a misalignment consisting in a failure of responsiveness and commitment to the most important values, where this is as affective as it is cognitive, as much ethical as epistemic. The higher aspects of 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 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 with respect to what the most important, meaning-conferring values are. It is, to my mind, 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 personal 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

purely formal interpretations of Nietzsche. The inference 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 live-and-let-live, 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. 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. Higher, meaning-conferring features of this life and world, by Nietzsche’s lights, occupy that status. According to Nietzsche, this world surrounding us matters, matters more than any beyond, and is the locus of such higher values, 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. 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 ascetic truth-seeker, as described by Nietzsche, is in a similar position, thinking that only transcendent metaphysics could provide the requisite grounding for his life project. By the time of the last-man, we get to a point where just about 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 a nice explanation of the gradations and historical trajectory of nihilism, and why things are getting worse in the descent toward the last man. 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. In their way, Schopenhauerianism and Buddhism played this role as well, in valorizing (however perversely) a saintly form of life-negation or *Entselbstung* as the highest condition of human life. These views are still nihilistic, but at least they *see the need* for higher values, and exalt certain values as such, however misguided their choice of higher values may be. So while this doesn't exonerate them from the charge of nihilism, it does mean that they are not the very worst form of it. Indeed, in some cases (e.g., the Renaissance), they look, at least partly, in the right direction for their higher values. Christian culture, for all its life-negation, also is the home to 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.

Of course, none of these three main views (Christianity, Schopenhauerianism, Buddhism) make sense without a heavy-duty metaphysics, if not of God, then of 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, to a greater or lesser degree, from what are actually, at least in Nietzsche's eyes, 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, and one Nietzsche shares, which feels the need for higher values (and is at risk of despair in the face of apparent threats to them).<sup>33</sup> 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

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<sup>33</sup> I agree with Simon May (2011) that there is a lingering religious streak in Nietzsche.

its most important, higher, meaning-conferring aspects. He doesn't even see the need for such values. 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. Even in the periods where people cared about having higher values, they, in large part, latched on to the wrong ones.

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 fragmentary remarks from the 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, insofar as he is concerned with nihilism, is not concerned with 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* value and meaning in the higher aspects of this life and world. That is the radical repudiation in question.

### VIII. Conclusion:

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

Dostoevsky, nihilism is not, from their standpoint, the conviction that there are no values.<sup>34</sup> Quite the opposite. The intelligibility of the charge presupposes deep commitment to certain values, coupled with the idea that there is a looming threat of people coming unmoored from these values. The “nihil” comes from the attendant condition of such people finding nothing valuable where there is actually something profoundly valuable. Where Nietzsche differs from them is not in his account of what nihilism fundamentally is (i.e., coming unmoored from the most important values), but in the values he sees nihilists as having come unmoored from. Dostoevsky is committed basically to Christian-moral values. Nietzsche of course is not. It is no accident, though, that moralists and Christians who know little about Nietzsche, and his critique of nihilism, will describe him as a nihilist.<sup>35</sup> By the lights of *their* values, Nietzsche is a nihilist, in his rejection of God and Judeo-Christian morality as the centering forces in human life. They and Nietzsche disagree not about what nihilism is, in its most general outlines, but rather about what values are most important.

It can look like everyone who disagrees with him about fundamental values is thereby a nihilist by his lights. Yet very few people agree with Nietzsche’s values in their entirety, and presumably not all of them are to be branded nihilists. It is important to remember that what I am offering here is a unifying thread among the species of nihilist Nietzsche identifies. 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 that Nietzsche calls nihilists, about one philosophically-illuminating (if admittedly somewhat thin) feature they have in common. They share, on my reading, the 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 most important values is

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<sup>34</sup> For an informative discussion of Nietzsche’s knowledge of Dostoevsky, see Stellino (2015).

<sup>35</sup> Thanks to Ken Gemes for noting this in conversation.

thereby necessarily 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 a central 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.

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 remain sufficiently committed to *something*. But this is not enough. Such an interpretation stems from a misreading of the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*, a misreading that misses one of its great ironies. Nietzsche does say that the ascetic ideal saves us from "suicidal nihilism" through the ascetic ideal (GM, III:28). But this is not an escape from nihilism entirely: it simply trades one form of nihilism for another, slightly less bad version. 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.

But is anyone right, when it comes to which values are the higher, meaning-conferring ones? 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 on 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."<sup>36</sup> 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.,

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<sup>36</sup> Schacht (1973). While Nietzsche does not, to the best of my knowledge, describe Plato as a nihilist *per se*, he does see him as a proto-Christian in his basic metaphysical and evaluative outlook. (BGE, "Preface").

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, meaning-conferring values. My claim in this paper is that these commitments are inextricably implicated in his account of what nihilism is.

Nietzsche's normative agenda, in light of which he levels these charges of nihilism, is of course 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 psychologistic 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 a wrongheaded approach, on this issue, and on a great many others. Nietzsche's normative agenda cuts very deep.

But doesn't this then leave Nietzsche's analysis and critique of nihilism hostage to his own conception of higher values? Can he get any traction on us, insofar as we don't share this outlook? 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.<sup>37</sup> Yet, that said, he is not trying to dissuade everyone from the nihilism, nor thinking it would necessarily be a good thing if they were so dissuaded.<sup>38</sup> Many people, in his reckoning, are lost causes, for whom a life of illusion, continuing nihilism, or both, is the only 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 meaning-conferring higher 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

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<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Nehamas (1985) on Nietzsche's anti-universalism.

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.”<sup>39</sup> 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 pagan salvation.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rilke, letter to Ilse Jahr, 22 Feb 1923. Rilke (1946 [1929]).

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These are cited by section number using the following abbreviations and drawing on the following translations, which I have modified where I've thought appropriate.

A = *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1954.

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1966.

EH = *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967;  
*On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swenson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.

GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books, 1954.

WP= *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale: Vintage Books, 1968.

In works that comprise several individual essays, after the abbreviation is the essay number (as a Roman numeral) and section number (as an arabic numeral). For example, GM, I:2 is *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, Section 2. In works that include titled main sections, I include a key word for that section, followed by subsection numbers, if applicable. For example, TI, 'Socrates', 1 is the *Twilight of the Idols* section 'The Problem of Socrates', sub-section 1. For the German I rely on the following, cited by volume and page number.

KSA = *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Colli and Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967.

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