

The Deep Personal Resonance of Nihilism

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Abstract

This article examines two concerns that accompany James Tartaglia's claims about nihilism in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. The first concern involves Tartaglia's narrow conception of nihilism. His view is that nihilism is practically neutral. In response, I explore how practical consequences are integral to both the general understanding of the problem of nihilism and his own interpretation of the concept. The second concern involves a tension in Tartaglia's distinction between practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. As a reply, I explain how the notion of deep personal resonance could be interpreted as a practical consequence. The article concludes by questioning the motivation to justify the neutrality of nihilism.

In *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, James Tartaglia claims that nihilism, or the idea that reality is meaningless, is a philosophical fact. To exist means nothing: for any living species, existence carries no fundamental or teleological value apart from the biological; for human beings in particular, existence holds no epistemological burden, moral weight or spiritual agenda. The questions 'what is the meaning of life?', 'what am I here for?' or 'why do human beings exist?' bear no fruit if we are looking for some sort of universally-binding, context-transcending significance. The book suggests that our countless tries in religion and philosophy to respond positively, notably in terms of proposing a transcendent framework to accommodate the possibility of an overall meaning to life, have led to tricky and often unreliable paths. The simple fact that Tartaglia tries to convince his readers of is this: that we exist, just as easily as we could not exist.

But denying a transcendent context of meaning does not mean forsaking the idea of transcendence itself. Tartaglia thinks that the importance of philosophy lies in being able to engage the concept of transcendence fruitfully in the face of nihilism. In his view, transcendence should be reconsidered as a conceptual tool that rightly belongs to the metaphysical concerns of philosophy, and herein lies the novelty of his work. The version of transcendence that Tartaglia offers is one

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that operates *without* the pretension or hope of meaningfulness (unlike in the case of religion, and at times, science). This bold hypothesis has ramifications on both a philosophical dimension and a practical dimension. In terms of philosophy, Tartaglia impressively outlines how the transcendent hypothesis changes the terms of contemporary philosophical debates. A substantial part of his book aims at redefining our understanding of consciousness, time, and universals in view of the reality of nihilism. His redescription of these particular metaphysical concepts responds to the intellectual burden Tartaglia has set for himself in the introduction: to prove that ‘the question of the meaning of life, to which nihilism provides the answer, is the keystone of philosophy; it locks the rest of its traditional conceptions in place, and allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science’ (Tartaglia 2016: 7). Tartaglia’s notable conversation partners in recent review essays (see Bennett-Hunter 2016, Leach 2016) and in the special issue on ‘Nihilism and the Meaning of Life’ of *The Journal of Philosophy of Life* engage these implications in greater detail.

His work also offers a reconsideration of our understanding of nihilism from a practical dimension. Tartaglia proposes that we ought to take nihilism as a neutral philosophical fact. He thinks that it has no moral quality and its truth makes no difference in the exercise of daily life and the availability of sources of meaning within our social context. It is this aspect of Tartaglia’s argument that I want to take issue with in this article. I claim that there are two concerns that accompany the understanding of the practical dimension of nihilism in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. The first concern involves Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism. His view is that nihilism is practically neutral. In response, I explore how practical consequences are integral to both the general understanding of the problem of nihilism and his own interpretation of the concept. The second concern involves a tension in Tartaglia’s distinction between practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. As a reply, I explain how the notion of deep personal resonance could be interpreted as a practical consequence. The article concludes by questioning the motivation to justify the neutrality of nihilism on Tartaglia’s part.

1. Nihilism: narrow and neutral

In this section, I problematize Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism – a nihilism that is devoid of or disconnected from practical consequences. The

common view in the Western tradition is that the significance of nihilism is directly related to the nature of its effects. Nihilism is usually understood to have practical consequences for human beings that are bad, though in some cases they are taken to be good (or a mixture of both). The idea that nihilism is bad can be found in the writings of Heidegger, and in the writings of contemporary figures such as Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly. These thinkers all propose ways of ‘overcoming’ nihilism and thus of avoiding those bad consequences that come with the realization that life has no meaning. To achieve redemption from meaninglessness – one indicated by our attunement to the moods of anxiety and boredom – Heidegger argues that we should embark on the quest of revealing life’s authentic meaning (see 1927, 1936-37, 1939-46, 1954). In the face of nihilism, Taylor thinks that there are many rich and powerful sources of moral and spiritual significance in modernity. He also suggests that our culture should cultivate the possibility of a renewed theism in a secular age (see 1991, 1992, 2007, 2011). Dreyfus and Kelly propose that a modern Homeric polytheism can ward off the threat of meaninglessness. This polytheism involves becoming attuned to the plural manifestations of the sacred in modernity (2011a, 2011b). In contrast, the likes of Nietzsche and Camus recognize the good behind the phenomenon of nihilism apart from the bad. The realization of life’s essential meaninglessness can liberate human beings from the debilitating framework of Western religion. It can also lead to their acceptance of life’s natural constraints and finitude. In place of the misguided values of the Christian tradition, Nietzsche thinks that the truth of nihilism encourages the creation of new and more worthwhile goals for human beings (see 1882, 1883, 1888a, 1888b). Meanwhile, Camus argues that meaninglessness paves the way for the heroic, Sisyphean acceptance of life’s absurdity (see 1942). For Nietzsche and Camus, the ability to transcend the life-negating horrors of nihilism serves as a testament to human potential and resilience.

In comparison to these familiar evaluations, Tartaglia’s thinner conception and his morally neutral assessment of nihilism take on a wholly different tone. For him, the total answer to the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is that reality exists for no reason and that there is no compelling basis to make a moral assessment of this fact. Hence, to claim that nihilism is good or bad, whether in terms of its inherent nature or its practical consequences, are mistaken strategies:

For nihilism does not and could not hurt anybody. The realization of

nihilism might cause pain, but then, any fact about the world might be counted as bad on that criterion; a man might react to the realization that he is short by becoming a military despot, for instance. Nihilism is quite unlike a fact such as that nuclear weapons have been invented, where it is the possible consequences of this fact, rather than the mere grasping of it, that are bad. So I do not think the possible bad consequences of realizing a fact provides a good criterion for capturing what we mean in saying that the fact itself could be bad; for on that criterion, all facts could be good or bad, even those of mathematics. So given that I can also see no potential in moral accounts other than consequentialism for classifying nihilism as a fact that could be bad, I think we should conclude that although the existence of life might be, its existence for no reason could not (Tartaglia 2016: 7).

For Tartaglia, life having no meaning is a fact that one ‘grasps’ in the process of self-realization. It is not a kind of knowledge that is inherently bad and neither is it one that inevitably leads to consequences that could be judged as objectively bad (or good). Tartaglia is only interested in nihilism defined as a fact that has no bearing on a moral or existential plane. In short, he offers us a narrow conception of nihilism. But is nihilism recognizable if the criterion of practical consequences is taken out of the picture? In my view, Tartaglia’s restricted version of nihilism requires further questioning.

The inherently practical significance that nihilism has in the Western Tradition can be seen from Karen Carr’s account of nihilism in *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness* (1992), which provides a nice contrast with Tartaglia’s. According to Carr, there are many possible definitions of nihilism and these definitions heavily overlap. In particular, she suggests five elements that inform the historical concept of nihilism: (1) *epistemological*, or the denial of the possibility of knowledge; (2) *alethiological*, or the denial of the reality of truth; (3) *metaphysical* or *ontological*, or the denial of an (independently existing) world; *ethical* or *moral*, or the denial of moral values; and (5) *existential*, or the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness of life, due to existence having no meaning. While it is wise to make these distinctions for the purposes of argument, she also contends that they are fundamentally interrelated. The positions of Heidegger, Taylor, Dreyfus, Kelly, Nietzsche and Camus given briefly in the beginning of this section heed this sense of interrelation between the different elements of nihilism. In their writings, realizing

the truth of nihilism (of the epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical, or moral kind) can be disorienting and its practical consequences (of the existential kind) are explosive by nature. If we follow Carr's reading, consequentialism then matters in nihilism since its existential element is fundamentally energized by the other components of nihilism. As Carr remarks: 'It is because we believe there is no truth that we conclude the world is pointless; it is because we think that knowledge is mere illusion that we describe life as meaningless; it is because we see no moral fabric in the universe that we see our existence as without value. The despair of existential nihilism is parasitic on one of the other logically prior forms' (1992: 20). In this interpretation, nihilism's possible ontological impact participates in propelling urgent reflection on the part of philosophers. Its practical repercussions are responsible for making the fact of meaninglessness worth talking about.

In response, Tartaglia may raise the distinction between the meaning *of* life and the meaning *in* life as he does in the book, a distinction that has been reviewed as amounting to 'a very persuasive case that recent discussions have equivocated between these two different concepts' (Leach 2016: 283). He may argue that these thinkers have been construed by their readers as speaking about the former, when they are really speaking about the latter. He may even suggest that these philosophers have irresponsibly conflated this distinction in their own writings. For Tartaglia, the meaning *of* life is a primordial issue that raises the question of what universally constitutes and justifies human life's worth and purpose. Since it intends to make an appraisal of reality and the fundamental human condition, it should be treated as a properly philosophical question. Meanwhile, the issue about the meaning *in* life is about social meaning. It is essentially concerned about how lives can be made meaningful in their own particular, finite, and culture-bound way. In convenient terms, the meaning of life question is apt if we are interested in the *truth* of nihilism, and the meaning in life issue is important if we are interested in the *experience* of the phenomenon of meaninglessness. While they concern related issues, they are also separable. Tartaglia makes it clear that he is not interested in social meaning; furthermore, he thinks that the practical concern to 'maximise social meaningfulness' is an agenda that does not strike him as 'terribly philosophical' (Tartaglia 2016: 4). He notes that the intellectual legacy of Nietzsche and Marx is to blame for sedimenting the question of social meaning as a legitimate concern for theorists. Their legacy is responsible for obfuscating the distinction between the original philosophical question about the meaning of

life and the more ‘recent cultural product’ of maximizing the experience of human meaning (Tartaglia 2016: 192, 4). For example, he characterizes *All Things Shining*, a book by Dreyfus and Kelly that is largely beholden to the concept of Nietzschean nihilism and Heideggerian phenomenology, as having moralistic intent (Tartaglia 2016: 192). Since *All Things Shining* suggests how one can live a spiritually flourishing life in the modern world, it thereby belongs to the quest for finding meaning *in* life.

Yet interestingly, Tartaglia uses some of these thinkers as resources for speaking about the meaning *of* life. He employs their writings to develop and confirm his suspicion that life is fundamentally meaningless. Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus and Schopenhauer are engaged in the first two chapters of his book in a manner that helps ground and legitimize his position about philosophy and nihilism. When Tartaglia talks about Heidegger’s fundamental moods of boredom and anxiety or about Camus’s notion of the absurd, their work is construed as having something integral to say about the human condition. When he discusses Nietzsche’s critique of authoritarianism and the crucial role of nihilistic despair in cultural progress and Schopenhauer’s asceticism as responses to striving and boredom, their claims are assessed not in terms of enhancing or adding to the experience of human meaning, but in terms of their relationship with the ‘deep, natural and ancient’ question of the meaning of life. These discussions reveal that Tartaglia’s narrow conception of nihilism is indebted to its broader notion – a notion that may not have been formulated by these philosophers without their attunement to the ‘universal’ practical consequences of nihilism for human beings. If this is indeed the case, then it would be inaccurate to treat the work of these theorists as pertinent only to the ‘less philosophical’ aim of maximizing meaning, which the dichotomy between the meaning in and of life invites readers to do. It is reasonable to posit that their concerns loom larger and deeper than the modern and pluralistic goal of ‘determining the best ways for people to make their own meaning’ (Tartaglia 2016: 4). It is also sensible to suppose that the conflation of the meaning of life question and the goal of social meaning cannot be cleanly separated when it comes to the writings of these modern philosophers. In short, while the distinction could be useful in assessing contemporary discourses, it would be inappropriate to apply it on Tartaglia’s own analysis (Tartaglia 2016: appendix).

2. The tension between the practical and the personal

In this section, I explore how the response of deep personal resonance to nihilism could be construed as a practical consequence. To reiterate, Tartaglia's position is that nihilism should not be assessed in terms of its practical repercussions. He analogizes human life and the recognition of its fundamental nihilism to playing a game of chess: 'But although reflection on nihilism may provide the spur to practical reflection, nihilism itself is lacking in practical consequences. After all, even if realizing that chess is just an activity of moving pieces around a board may have a bearing on life outside of chess, it is of no relevance within chess; and so it seems that realizing the truth of nihilism should likewise be of no relevance within life' (Tartaglia 2016: 42). For Tartaglia, while the activity may cause a player to philosophize about chess, how the game itself is played will remain unaffected by this reflective act. Applied to human existence, grasping that life has no fundamental meaning will not modify or shape our access and relationship to the many sources of social meaning for human flourishing. However, Tartaglia also says something in his reflection that is particularly puzzling:

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that your life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.' (Tartaglia 2016: 7).

He also says something similar in Chapter 4, which I now quote at length:

As regards lack of progress, once it is recognized that questions of enframement are integral to the subject-matter of philosophy – which along with religion is one of only two areas of culture which asks such questions – then philosophy-scepticism is immediately answered by the fact that the discipline of philosophy discovered the truth of nihilism. Thus philosophy answered the most important enframement question of all, the question

which provided its *raison d'être*. This discovery has produced – or at least has the potential to produce – a significant change in our self-understanding, since it overthrows the presumption of a meaning of life that has dominated most of human history, a presumption continually reinforced by both our way of life within the framework, and our usual patterns of explanation. With the discovery of nihilism, then, human beings – who have always been in the unique position of knowing they will die – have learnt in addition that their existence serves no overall purpose. Knowledge of this kind lacks any particular practical consequences, but it does have the potential to achieve a deep personal resonance with every individual who reflects on it, thereby making other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities in comparison (Tartaglia 2016: 74-75).

In these two quotations, Tartaglia denies the practical ramifications of nihilism but also asserts that the grasping of this truth can achieve an intimate, powerful, and transformative effect. This paradoxical hypothesis is worth problematizing since Tartaglia's characterization of deep personal resonance communicates the possibility of a dramatic transfiguration of an individual's life-orientation, which in my mind includes both thought and action. Will nihilism's reflective potential in making 'other more impressive human discoveries seem like mere curiosities' spur the re-framing of human life? Will contemplation on the conclusion that 'everybody's life is meaningless, and hence that your life is too' cause a different way of thinking and behaving? In short, does the idea of a deep personal resonance indicate a connection to what might be understood as a practical consequence? We thus find a tension in Tartaglia's text when we inquire about the link between these two reactions.

The motivation for reasoning in this manner is related to the earlier discussion of how practical consequences are integral in conceptualizing nihilism. Nietzsche, Camus, Heidegger and Schopenhauer are philosophers who were attuned to nihilism in the way Tartaglia characterizes its impact in reflective thought. They were aware of its various and transformational practical consequences both to individuals suffering from nihilism and to the nature of modern culture at large. If we take nihilism as something that propels the direction and development of their philosophy, then their reaction to nihilism would be exemplary candidates for what deep personal resonance as a response might be like. Furthermore, the claim that the realization of meaninglessness can be held as relevant only for

reflection – that it can be responsible for ‘transfiguring everything while changing nothing’ – is not convincing when we consult its impact on the cultural history of the West. After all, the phenomenon of nihilism has arguably inspired a paradigm shift toward existentialism, religious critique, and anti-authoritarianism in philosophy, politics and the arts in the twentieth century, with the publication of works ranging from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1866, 1880) and to the political mobilization of the Russian nihilists. These writings and movements are ready examples of reactions to the meaninglessness of life that are socially metamorphic in real life.

3. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I now question why the urge to reflect about the effect of nihilism as deep personal resonance even exists in Tartaglia’s text. Recall the classic formula for existential nihilism: when we give up on religion and Plato as paths for legitimating our metaphysical and moral hopes, then nihilism, or some sort of epistemological or emotional or spiritual crisis, is expected as the result. The loss of authority can lead to an atmosphere of uncertainty and even melancholy, as existentialist thinkers like Dostoyevsky, Camus, and Kierkegaard have imagined, or thinkers like Taylor, Dreyfus, and Kelly have hypothesized. However, Rorty thinks that the grand anxiety about nihilism is not an automated response. He suggests that ‘we can, for example, tell Zarathustra that the news that God is dead is not all that big a deal. We can tell Heidegger that one can be a perfectly good example of Dasein without even having been what he calls “authentic”’ (Rorty 2010: 507). Concerns about the practical consequences of nihilism, in short, can disappear in a world that does not care about the threat of meaninglessness. In this context, there would be no reason to contemplate or placate any metaphysical worry or anxiety. The urge to appease meaninglessness would simply not exist. Nihilism, in a truly secular age, would be taken for granted; only social meaning becomes worth talking about in an age liberated from these contemplative urges. Tartaglia seems to expect this level of practical neutrality from those who have become aware of life’s essential nihilism. However, Tartaglia’s approach – his lengthy and intense discussion of nihilism and his suggestion of deep personal resonance as a response toward meaninglessness – seems to contradict the position of practical neutrality that he endorses.

Tartaglia could avoid these criticisms if he did not go as far as raising claims about the neutrality of nihilism. Doing so would avoid the problems regarding his narrow and neutral conception of nihilism as well as the tension between the practical consequences and the deep personal resonance of nihilism. The threat of nihilism would be a non-issue if the metaphysical urge to explore the question of the meaning of life did not exist. This is as far as I wish to go by way of conclusion, unlike others who have suggested that his account of transcendence, universals, and time could stand without positing nihilism at all (See Bennett-Hunter 2016). After all, there is still much more to talk about nothing.

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