

## Reply to Tracy Llanera

James Tartaglia\*

In her superb paper, Tracy Llanera highlights the apparent tension between two claims about nihilism that I make in my book: that it has the potential to achieve deep personal resonance, and that it is a neutral, non-evaluative fact which lacks practical consequences. This leads her to ‘question why the urge to reflect about the effect of nihilism as deep personal resonance even exists in Tartaglia’s text’ (p. 89). It is an excellent question.

It certainly does seem puzzling. On the one hand, this is *the meaning of life* we are talking about – yours and mine – so of course there is potential for deep personal resonance. Nihilism tells us that all the projects we put our hearts and souls into, despairing when things go wrong and rejoicing when things go right ... all of that is not really going anywhere. There is no reason for humans to exist, so there is no reason for us to do that stuff; except that we want to. Meaning is not a pre-existing backdrop to our lives, but a web we spin. If things go well as we move around within in, then we can make a great life for ourselves and others. But still, there is nothing to be achieved except what we want to achieve. The hermit who never tries to do anything much is not making the metaphysical mistake of failing to grasp what life actually amounts; only, perhaps, a practical mistake. John Gray tells us that, ‘The pygmies of the African rainforests – now nearly extinct – work only to meet the needs of the day, and spend most of their lives idling’ (Gray 2002: 195). They are not making a mistake either. And neither is the high-flying businessman who works a 16-hour day. Not *that* kind of mistake, in any case.

I cannot see how recognising this – or at least considering it as a serious candidate for truth – could fail to achieve deep personal resonance; hence my comment about solipsism, which Llanera quotes (p. 87). I fully recognise that interest in philosophy varies between people, so I am not expecting everyone to be immediately dumbstruck and thereafter obsessed. But nevertheless, so long as you have not so thoroughly closed your mind to philosophy that you refuse to

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reflect on it – and to do so is to take an active stance, for which the typical scientific motivations are highly dubious – then it seems to me that *while* you are reflecting on it, if only in passing, then the resonance will be there. Even if you have never believed that there is a meaning of life, you have still lived, so it will be there.

So I seem to be saying that nihilism is a big deal. And yet, on the other hand, I seem to be saying that it is not: hence Llanera's puzzle. For my central claim about nihilism is that it is a non-evaluative, neutral fact. When you grasp and embrace it, the sky will not fall down, and neither will you be elevated to a blissful state above the 'tyranny' of the framework. I am amused by the thought of an overly busy, stressed office worker using my book as a self-help guide: 'At last, I've shed the burden of all that troublesome meaning!' However, the joke trades on both the traditional presupposition that nihilism is a negative evaluation, and the meaning of / in life conflation. Leave those behind you and it is hard to see what practical consequences nihilism *could* have. Suppose it is a metaphysical fact about reality. Evidently, it will have no effect on the people who do not accept it. And as for those who do, what exactly are they supposed to do? Imagine you thought nihilism was true; would you not continue going about your business exactly as before? Since your life has not been evaluated in any way through your acceptance of this fact, and it changes nothing of your empirical assessment of your situation (there are no new objects or events for you to contend with), I fail to see what practical bearing this could have. Of course, accepting nihilism might mean losing your belief in a meaning of life, if you have one, and *that* would have practical consequences. But this is because belief in a meaning of life is evaluative, and hence has practical consequences: both when you have it and when you lose it.

So why do I apparently say that nihilism both is and is not a big deal? Being the incredibly astute critic that she clearly is, Llanera instinctively hones in on a passage which comes close to unlocking the answer (pp. 87-8). In it, I am discussing philosophy-scepticism, of the kind which is rampant in our scientific culture. If we had been playing the 'warmer – cooler' game, then at this point I would have said 'scorching hot'. Another clue is provided by my discussion, in Chapter 8, of the different roles of philosophy and science, the current divergence in the cultural status they enjoy, and the most philosophically significant difference between them, namely that science produces technology. Put all this together, and with the help of Sherlock Holmes, she might perhaps have been able

to ‘deduce’ the answer; on the other hand, she might have needed to enlist the aid of a psychic, rather than Holmes.

*Meaningless* covers a lot of ground; within today’s philosophical climate, a very unusually large amount for a non-introductory monograph. I used the word ‘system’ in the subtitle. I did not plan on having a subtitle, but Bloomsbury understandably wanted something on the cover to provide more information about the topics being addressed, and I warmed to the idea primarily because it allowed me to use this word. It was meant as a statement, harking back to an earlier time when philosophy was more respected and philosophers did not pretend to be scientists. The book is not really a system on its own, but at best the beginning of one; for I do intend to continue addressing the traditional problems of philosophy in a systematically related fashion. The sequel to *Meaningless*, which I am working on at the moment, is called *Gods and Titans*; this time, if I get my way at least, the subtitle will be ‘Philosophy amid Ceaseless Technological Advance’. It is in this book that the solution to Llanera’s puzzle will be fully addressed, as the wider point of the positions I defended in the first book come into better focus. In *Meaningless*, my focus was on rehabilitating the question of the meaning of life, showing its connection to the mainstream of philosophy, and doing something concrete with these higher-order reflections by bringing them to bear on some central problems of philosophy, such as consciousness. That was already a lot to do, so it was practically inevitable that elements pertaining to my future direction of travel would appear as tensions. However, since Llanera has spotted this one, I shall address it now.

Now as Llanera says, for philosophers from Nietzsche to the French Existentialists, as well as for the likes of Dreyfus, Kelly and Taylor in the present day, ‘Nihilism is usually understood to have practical consequences for human beings that are bad’ (p. 83). She thinks that this contrasts with my ‘narrow conception of nihilism’ according to which it is ‘practically neutral’ (p. 82). Actually, I think this practical neutrality is where the worry has always lain, and that my nihilism, somewhat paradoxically on the surface, inherits the activity of the need to overcome nihilism which these thinkers felt and still feel; and yet it is better directed, both metaphysically and given our current circumstances. Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger saw their world changing; faster than ever before. The driver of this was technology, which changes how people live and has evident, and hence alarming, destructive powers. They saw the old, traditional order, in which religion governed people’s lives to maintain

conservative ways of life, being swept away. They thought of this as nihilism: a literal void in the place of the old values. They perceived the practical neutrality of nihilism as a threat; the old values, which maintained a way of life by telling us how to live, were being replaced by nothing at all: nihilism was an absence of all practical guidance. The result of its onset, they thought, would be the chaos of ‘anything goes’; and through some spurious reasoning, to my mind, this was sometimes thought to apply so generally as to render even truth a dubious notion.

As I see it, then, it was the neutral passivity of nihilism that spurred these thinkers to action. The enduring influence of religion, according to which nihilism is a negative evaluation, portrayed it as obviously bad for them, but it was its inability to provide positive evaluative guidance – because, in my view, it is not evaluative at all – which was the real worry. So nihilism needed to be overcome; or at least, we needed to learn how to live with it. Perhaps, as Nietzsche thought, with his strong antipathy to the religious values that nihilism was replacing with nothing at all, this presented an opportunity to create new and better values. Or perhaps, as Heidegger thought, philosophical reflection could get us back in touch with our Being, and thereby reaffirm the traditional ways of life which nihilism was threatening; we needed to take decisive action and not allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security by the unthinking crowd – and we needed to do this in a manner historically attuned to our heritage and our integral belonging to the natural world. I find some combination of making our own new values, or getting back in touch with the old ones without the need for support from religious institutions, in all of these thinkers. It continues to this day with the likes of Dreyfus and Kelly, who want to put us back in touch with the compelling ‘flow’ of the old ways. In all such cases, the passivity of nihilism is the problem, whether recognised or not, and the new authority we are supposed to need is found in our individual and collective resolute will, our oneness with nature, our cultural heritage, or some combination thereof. In these ways, we recapture the significance of the world which was lost with nihilism.

It seems to me, however, that in light of the violent history of our species, we have weathered the decline in institutionalised religious authority remarkably well. Nations of atheists have lived perfectly ordinary lives. In fact, we have now reached the point where we are just as likely to hear the ills of this world being blamed upon the influence, rather than lack of influence, of organised religion. I do not think the cataclysmic breakdown of order which these thinkers feared either happened, or is ever likely to happen; the idea was in large part a prediction,

for which a remedy was urgently sought, but its main effect seems to have been to provide inspiration to the arts – sometimes good, sometimes not so. Perhaps some of the philosophical remedies, such as relying upon our heritage, did transpire in a way; but overwhelmingly through muddling along, not because the philosophers thought of it. For philosophy, along with religion, was also in decline in this period. True, nihilism was not widely embraced. Atheism was, however, and they are only a short step from each other; but I think philosophy is harder to give up on than religion, given that religion always embodies a philosophy of one kind or another. Nevertheless, the fact that people typically continued to think they were living meaningful lives – by learning to think that you could make your life meaningful in any way you liked, or else to disparage the notion of the meaning of life, and thereby avoid thinking about it – strikes me as an intellectual epiphenomenon to what was really going on. Essentially, large numbers of people started living with nihilism, and in the moral sphere, which is what most concerned the likes of Nietzsche, nothing much changed. Decent nihilists wanted the same kind of things as decent religious believers; and the restraint which belief in the meaning of life was supposed to exercise on non-decent types was no longer terribly effective anyway, to the extent that it ever had been.

In light of what transpired, I think it is reasonable to conclude, with hindsight, that nihilism itself was never really the problem. The problem was rather the symbiotic rise of technology and fall of philosophy. Technology started becoming really impressive, religious belief declined as living standards improved, scientific culture arose to fill the void, and philosophy, struggling to find its place in this new world, turned in on itself and fell into decline. The philosophers who worried about nihilism should really have been worrying about the fact that the touchpaper of technology had finally been ignited after centuries of preparatory work, thereby precipitating rapid decline in the philosophical context required to make it safe. It all came in the same package, and although their moral concerns with nihilism were hardly irrelevant, and fully understandable at the time, what they failed to see was that by targeting nihilism – at a time when the meaning of life issue had no other credible place to go – they were actually targeting philosophy, and thereby contributing to the problem. For to think about, and embrace, nihilism, is to adopt a philosophical attitude to the world. The passionate activity of their opposition to nihilism should really have been directed to the preservation of philosophy, in the face of technological advances bringing awesome forces into the world on the basis of little more than blind curiosity, luck,

and market forces – and thereby practically every dream humans have ever dreamt, regardless of the wisdom of fulfilling them. For without philosophical guidance, when we see a way to do it, we do it. Research ethics committees, increasingly populated by scientists, cannot hold back the tide for long; for we simply do not live in a philosophical enough world for that anymore.

That is why the deep personal resonance of nihilism is something to be cultivated. This resonance will not inspire any particular kind of action, because nihilism is not evaluative. However it can help to draw people into philosophy; so strongly that scientific culture will have an uphill battle trying to combat it. And once they are drawn in, and start thinking about our world within a wider context which scientific culture tries to discredit – about what to do with this life we have found ourselves with, and how much technological power we can realistically handle – then plenty of action should be inspired. These practical consequences will not spring from nihilism *per se*, but rather from an incompatibility between feeling its resonance and remaining blind to philosophy. What Llanera calls the ‘intimate, powerful, and transformative effect’ of nihilism (p. 88) is nothing other than openness to a philosophical thought of immediate and universal interest. And we have never been in more need of such openness, with the ‘Doomsday Clock’ posted by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* currently giving us three minutes until oblivion, and scientists around the world diligently working away to spring a massive portfolio of new, life-transforming technologies upon us, of the kind which regularly make the news these days. So this is how Llanera’s puzzle is resolved; and I think I have already said enough to reveal how I would answer her more specific objections and queries, since they are all firmly rooted in this puzzle. I did not provide her with the resources to resolve the puzzle herself (Holmes might disagree), but the fact that it was the principle focus of her reading of my book is enough to leave me keenly anticipating the publication of her own positive views on these matters.

## References

Gray, John (2002) *Straw Dogs*, London: Granta.