

Reply to Alan Malachowski

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Alan Malachowski went back to Nietzsche and Heidegger, and thereby the very heart of the issues pertaining to my stance on nihilism; because he did so, I could feel this reply rapidly gestate in response to practically every line I read. So let me get straight to the heart of the matter myself, by amending one of Malachowski's quotations from Heidegger:

Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is nihilism. (p. 103)

I would say:

Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is the scientific culture which insufficient and inadequate reflection upon nihilism has unfortunately contributed to.

I very much doubt that this culture is the result of an inevitable unfolding of historical forces. But nevertheless, that is where we have ended up. And although I remain deeply sceptical about the kind of 'redemptive agenda', as I called it in *Meaningless*, which pervades the works of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, nevertheless where we have ended up creates an obvious, practical problem for us all. People can live however they like, to the extent that they are able to, so long as the problem is fixed. Nihilism is not the problem, but rather part of the solution; so nihilism is not toothless. But nihilism is benign. We are not renting our meaning from it; we own the freehold.

Before I start to explain this combination of views, it should be emphasised that Malachowski could not have been expected to anticipate my reply; not from the resources of *Meaningless*, which is all he had to go on. In this respect, and others, his essay is a natural companion to the one by Tracy Llanera in this

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symposium. As I say in response to Llanera, I had an awful lot on my plate when writing *Meaningless*, making it practically inevitable that the future direction of travel for some of my positions would appear as mere hints; Malachowski and Llanera both honed in on blank spaces. In the sequel to *Meaningless*, entitled *Gods and Titans*, all should become clear. But since I am lucky enough to have such astute critics, I will use this forum to add enough additional material into the mix to hopefully explain to them why, when they look back at the text of *Meaningless* with hindsight, it is not so puzzling that I insisted on the ‘deep personal resonance’ of nihilism (Llanera); and that I never meant to suggest that ‘nihilism is ineffectual and can be profitably ignored’ (Malachowski, p. 115). As Malachowski points out, I could have said a lot more about nihilism than I did in my early chapters: my discussion of the framework would have benefited if I had related it to Searle’s work (p. 101), and I could have profitably discussed reflections on nihilism from recent European philosophy (p. 102). But I needed to press on to the metaphilosophy, and the accounts of consciousness, time and universals. Nihilism was the connecting theme of the book, not the subject; the format itself had a point, namely that the meaning of life is not just an isolated topic in philosophy. And if I had lingered to discuss the matters I will now enter into – which, in any case, I was not ready to do at the time – then I would have never reached my destination.

Near the beginning of his essay, Malachowski argues that,

obedience to a nihilistic external criterion, one that excludes or undermines social meaning should raise serious semantic concerns. The idea of such a criterion involves semantic incoherence: under the weight of an alien notion of exclusion, the language within which we talk about social meaning would begin to lose its sense. And, this would have a knock on effect. How can we then accept such a criterion, since the language in which it has to be expressed no longer makes sense to us? (p. 99)

He concludes this argument by saying that, ‘A totally meaningless life would, it appears, be one we could not contemplate, still less talk about’ (p. 100); where by a ‘totally meaningless life’, he means one in which nihilism holds true *and* there is no social meaning – the latter *because* nihilism holds true. It seems to me that the reason nihilism could not eradicate social meaning is rather simpler than that. For if reality is meaningless, then it does not have a meaning which could conflict with, and thereby cancel out, social meaning. Perhaps a meaning of life could, but

I have my doubts. It might explain to us, in some irrefutable fashion, that we are valuing all the wrong things. I think we could understand that alright. If we then proceeded to value the right things (those in accordance with the meaning of life), then social meaning would radically change, but not disappear. If we found we could not value the right things (because they were too esoteric for us to really care about, too disconnected from our lives, or too naturally repulsive to human beings, for instance), then the revelation we had just received might lead social meaning to collapse, I suppose; in which case we would not last long. But without the benefit of the revelation to go on, it seems to me considerably more likely that we would just carry on roughly as before; the phrase, ‘I shouldn’t really care about these things’, even if we believed it, would soon become hollow.

Malachowski’s main concern is captured in the following: ‘If nihilism has *no* teeth, if it is harmless, “morally neutral”, and “simply a fact”, with “no practical consequences” as James contends (e.g. [PML] 171&172), it is pretty uninteresting. For then, its domestication is cheap – more or less self-financing, while James’ key claims [nihilism is true; life continues as normal, since all we need for that is social meaning] appear to be trivial’ (p. 100). But the fact that nihilism has no potential to directly affect our daily routines – by persuading us to change our holiday plans, close our Facebook accounts, follow Tracy Emin’s lead by committing ‘emotional suicide’, find a guru, become at one with nature, leave your family to embark on a nomadic life, stop taking your family for granted, get rich quick, bend the rules, become involved in political anarchism, become more integrated with your local community, live ‘the good life’ of simplicity and self-sufficiency, put yourself first, put others first, put animals and the natural environment first – the fact that nihilism has no potential to rationally steer you in any of those directions, does not mean that it is *trivial*. For it is not *philosophically* trivial, which is one of the most crucial things my book was trying to show. It connects up squarely with a variety of traditional philosophical concerns. Reflection upon it allows us to become more self-conscious about philosophy. Reflection upon it resonates with our lives and draws us into philosophy. None of that is trivial, especially not in the midst of a scientific culture which is doing all it can to end such reflection.

Malachowski says that ‘a chimerical nihilism that is so easily de-fanged seems hardly worth much serious consideration’ (p. 100), and goes on to contrast it with the conceptions of nihilism to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger. But the nihilism I deal with is the only one there ever has been or ever will be in this

area of metaphysics; the contrast appears only because these thinkers and others built some of the consequences they saw arising from nihilism into the thesis itself. The consequences they saw made them think it needed to be 'de-fanged'. But realising that it never did does not make it less interesting; it makes it much more interesting and currently valuable. For it seems to me that these thinkers, for reasons that are perfectly understandable given the time in which they were thinking, alighted upon the wrong target. Nihilism arose just as religious influence declined and the scientifically-driven ability to produce life-changing technologies first reached maturity; ever since then, this ability has grown exponentially. All three of these events were integrally connected, of course, for when life got better, and man-made utopias started to seem within our reach, then the increasingly tenuous promise of an otherworldly utopia rapidly lost its relevance. Since religions embody a philosophy, philosophical influence fell into rapid decline and scientistic culture arose. Philosophers blamed nihilism. But it was scientistic culture and the decline of philosophy they should have worried about. Nihilism is as philosophical as you can get, and offers just the kind of credible secular position needed to keep thoughts about the meaning of life alive. So Nietzsche and Heidegger chose the wrong target, and painted it with the same dark colours that had been allocated to it by the religious philosophy which they should have been replacing.

Malachowski says that Nietzsche's predictions of an impending disaster which nihilism would precipitate, were incidental to his main insight; and that Heidegger is 'as firm as he is clear about this' (p. 105). I am happy to accept this. I wanted to emphasise the point that faltering assurance in metaphysically firm foundations underpinning our social and moral institutions has not led to chaos. Nietzsche thought it would, and that superhuman acts of will would be required on behalf of a newly emerging, better class of people, in order to keep a normal framework of life running in full knowledge that there are no such foundations. I think that is the standard worry; no foundations, no values, chaos. I also think Nietzsche was evidently wrong about this. Billions of people have since lived perfectly ordinary lives without believing in such foundations, and if the power of such belief continues to decline, it will be in the manner we have already witnessed, namely through readings of ancient religious texts becoming gradually more liberal, such that they fit better with current conditions of life. In this sense, then, nihilism has not remotely had the practical consequences it was feared it would have; and I think this was a point well worth making. In fact, I do not think

nihilism has had very much effect at all, outside of art and certain kinds of philosophy, because philosophy was also so much in decline in the twentieth century that nobody much thought about it. To the extent that people continued to think about the meaning of life, they assumed that their lives *were* meaningful, even when they no longer believed in the metaphysical foundations required for there to be a meaning of life; intellectual epicycles like the social meaning debate are attempts to make some sense of this.

It seems to me that there is nothing superhuman about the ability to carry on ordinary life without belief in metaphysical foundations. All you need in order for ordinary purposes to govern your behaviour is a compelling social framework; of the kind we have always had. Will, if you like, is all that has ever kept that going; although why it would have to be will *to power*, I have no idea, despite the fact that power is obviously one of the big motivators. So when Malachowski explains Nietzsche's proposal by saying that, 'The value of values then lies *in the willing* itself, and not in anything outside the domain of the will that is doomed to self-destruction or can be undermined' (p. 112), my natural reaction is: that is how it has always been. Now obviously the 'will' in question has received – and still does receive – support from *beliefs* about metaphysical foundations; although how frequently and how explicitly are questionable matters. But we evidently do not need this support; this may not have been obvious in Nietzsche's time, but it is now. I see the *Übermensch* every time I visit the supermarket. The fact that this kind of worry has been taken so seriously is the reason that I emphasised the lack of practical consequences of nihilism, and why I focused on Nietzsche's predictions when discussing him. If you want to rehabilitate nihilism, as I do, then this is important.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche was indeed driving at a metaphysically deeper point. This is clear from the fact that he says nihilism will lead the notion of truth itself to collapse; which strikes me as hyperbolic, radically unsupported in Nietzsche, and badly supported thereafter – despite the influence the idea has had on more radical forms of twentieth-century philosophy. I think a large part of the appeal of the idea, as I say in Chapter 2, was to distance us further from nihilism: since if nothing is true, nihilism could not be either. In any case, Heidegger makes Nietzsche's deeper point quite explicit, in a sentence Malachowski quotes, when he says that 'Nietzsche uses the names "God" and "Christian God" to indicate the *supersensory world in general ... the metaphysical world*' (p. 105). That seems to me largely right; the concern about the collapse of Christian philosophy was part

of a wider concern about the collapse of metaphysics. And if we connect this with the Heidegger quote I opened with, namely ‘Merely to chase after beings in the midst of the oblivion of Being – that is nihilism’, then we start to get into a position where we can see both what is right and wrong with Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Nietzsche was right, in a sense, that we only need will to keep the framework going; but the active connotations of ‘will’ are misleading in this regard. Since will is backed by desire, and our will to achieve some purpose or another is presupposed in framework engagement, this is not the heroic feat he imagined. He was also right, in a sense, that nihilism would sweep away the philosophical beliefs maintained by religious institutions (it was a factor), and that a void of philosophy from our world would result. However, there was no historical necessity to such a void appearing. Philosophy might have seamlessly transitioned, and if technological advance had not so dramatically changed gear at exactly the same time as the idea of nihilism was starting to be taken seriously, then such a transition is not excessively hard to imagine. Suppose a benevolent alien race had visited us while our scientific and technological abilities remained primitive, and bestowed upon us the means to make our lives considerably longer, easier and more pleasant; essentially, they gave us modern life, but without the means to understand, and thereby reproduce, that which makes it possible. Suppose also, if you like, that they banned us from trying to scientifically advance. In such a situation, the influence of religious institutions might have collapsed and nihilism might have arisen; but it is far from obvious that a void of philosophy would thereby have ensued.

But the void happened and it is dangerous; so in an important sense Nietzsche was right. He was also part of the problem, however, because he thought that nihilism and the nullification of the philosophical tradition were inextricable. This is one major reason why he welcomed nihilism; as a destructive, but ultimately cleansing force. There are strong elements of both anti-philosophy and scientism in Nietzsche. He wanted to be the prophet of a new age which would abandon the philosophical tradition he so vehemently criticised throughout his career, in favour of beliefs such as eternal recurrence, which he considered thoroughly scientific.

For Heidegger, as Malachowski says, ‘the human situation looks worse than Nietzsche envisaged: nihilism has engulfed our lives, draining them of not just meaning, but also the resources for escaping from, or overcoming, the value vacuum’ (p. 107). But nihilism has not drained our lives of social meaning, which

is the only meaning they ever had; and the only relevant ‘value vacuum’ is a philosophy vacuum, primarily caused by technology and the scientism it inspired, and which proper attention to nihilism might have mitigated; and still can. As Malachowski goes on to say, ‘Nietzsche’s great, and terrible, discovery, Heidegger tells us, is that the metaphysics which has been driving history since the time of Plato is unremittingly self-destructive. For the *values* it gave birth to, are fated to issue challenges to the legitimacy of both themselves and any would-be replacements. These are challenges that cannot be met’ (p. 108). He subsequently explains Heidegger’s charge that Nietzsche made three fundamental errors which led him to think the challenges could indeed be met, if only we could re-value the world with a hitherto unknown strength of will (pp. 113-4). The first is that although Nietzsche thought he was leaving metaphysics behind, his solution is itself metaphysical, and hence part of the problem. The second is that Nietzsche’s ‘unconditional subjectivity’ of willing, which needs no help from metaphysical foundations, leads to everything being interpreted as an object designed to satisfy our wills; as Heidegger puts it, ‘earth can show itself now only as the attack arranged in the willing of man ... nature appears everywhere as the object of technology’ (p. 113). And thirdly, that Being is no longer accepted as what it is; we actively force it into our own subjective mould, rather than listen to what it tells us about itself.

Within the Heideggarian landscape, these three criticisms of Nietzsche are all practically the same. Essentially, he thinks that the history of metaphysics is the history of actively objectifying our reality through subjective acts of will, technology is the inevitable result of this tendency, whereby we have learnt to mould the reality we have objectified to suit our own subjective purposes, and Nietzsche’s solution of trying to will the value back is not a solution at all, but rather the culmination of the metaphysical tradition. We were landed with the problem by all of that objectifying willing, and Nietzsche planned to solve it with more of the same. I am put in mind of a discussion I had fairly recently with a philosopher (I shall not name names) who was arguing that motivational enhancement drugs are a good thing. Using them can help athletes to train harder, to give the example he lingered over; if sprinters took enough of them, perhaps they could run 100 metres in 9 seconds, rather than just 9.5 seconds, for instance (the more specific example is mine). I suggested that boredom can be a good thing, since it can lead us to re-evaluate our commitments, and thereby sometimes radically improve our lives; but these drugs could leave us locked into our initial

decisions. He took my point and suggested a solution: we make de-motivational drugs too. This struck me as a clear case of trying to fix a problem (one which we do not remotely need to have, but no doubt soon will) with the cause of the problem; and I think this is exactly how Nietzsche's solution struck Heidegger.

I agree with Heidegger about a lot of this; wholeheartedly, in fact. I do think we have ended up with a scientific culture which increasingly sees nothing to the world except what can be done with it. And taken in a certain way, I also agree with his criticism of Nietzsche. If the problem Nietzsche was addressing was how to maintain, without metaphysical support, the everyday values that allow us to live together, then I do not think there is any problem; I can accept his view that our values are held up by will, but only with the crucial caveat that our wilful commitment to projects is predominately a matter of going along with the imperatives of the framework, which comes naturally to us, and hence is no Herculean task. But if the problem is the relentless rise of life-changing technologies within the philosophical void of scientism, which I think is what really worried Heidegger, then Nietzsche's proposal is a clear case of trying to fix a problem with more of the same. A concrete example of this Nietzschean approach is to be found in the proposal to 'morally enhance' us all, so that we can safely manage the technologies blindly thrust upon us with ever-increasing frequency; often in the name of legitimate scientific curiosity, but financed by political agendas and market forces.

Unfortunately, however, Heidegger identifies the root of the problem as metaphysics, which is as clear a case as there could be of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. One particular strain of metaphysics, physicalism, has contributed to the problem, for sure; it gave scientism a philosophy to cling onto during the transition it envisages to no philosophy at all. But metaphysics itself is not the problem; it is the core of our philosophical heritage which might still allow us to break the back of scientific culture, and start thinking about technology within the wider context of what we are, what we want, and what we ought to want. This may yet allow us to exercise some rational control over the ability we have acquired to rapidly harness more and more powers for ourselves through the medium of objective thought.

Our current predicament with technology was not inevitable from the moment people started thinking about the world metaphysically; or at least if it was, then I do not see how anyone could possibly know this. Heidegger says that 'metaphysics is nihilism' (p. 114) – which does not make an awful lot of sense –

but given that he attributes our predicament with technology to nihilism, and buys into Nietzsche's story about nihilism being built into metaphysics from the outset, we can certainly see why he thought it was inevitable from the outset. The only plausibility to this idea, however, comes from the sound Nietzschean observation that the epistemology of metaphysical views which place the foundations of our values in another world is so ropery that it is unsurprising that people ultimately gave up on their belief in a meaning of life and discovered nihilism. But it in no way follows that Plato's transcendent metaphysics was itself nihilistic. It was a strong rejection of nihilism, which took considerable unpicking before we could see the truth it covered over. If you whitewash a blue wall, and it eventually flakes off, the whitewash was not blue. You would only think this if you thought Plato persuaded us that the meaning of life could only be found in a transcendent context, when in actual fact it is really to be found in ordinary life; thus we forgot about the real meaning of life, invested our hopes for one in the transcendent context, and when those hopes did not pan out, we were landed with nihilism. I think that is basically what Nietzsche and Heidegger did think, but it is all wrong; it incorporates both a sophisticated conflation with social meaning and a hidden strain of anti-philosophy; or in Heidegger's case, anti-everybody-else's-philosophy. Plato was right that the meaning of life could only be found within a transcendent context, because without one, there is no way of explaining why we are here. His thought was not nihilistic: it was philosophical. It addressed a philosophical question, and nihilism addresses that same question.

In this light, a highly conspicuous feature of my book needs to be considered; one which Malachowski passes over. The book combines nihilism with transcendence. (For some years I planned to call it *Nihilism and Transcendence* – but nobody would have read a book with that title.) Consider the following:

James' swift suggestion that we can show how ineffectual nihilism is by simply severing the connection between meaning and religion (for this will leave meaning unscathed) fails to acknowledge that such a move cannot thwart Nietzsche's 'richer nihilism', which depends not on tight links between meaning and religion, but between meaning and 'the transcendent in general'. (p. 110)

However the link between nihilism and a denial of 'the transcendent in general' is exactly what I set out to break. Nihilism is trivially incompatible with belief in

a transcendent context *of meaning*, but it does not remotely follow that it is incompatible with *any* transcendent context. The assumption that once you abandon a transcendent context of meaning, you must thereby jettison the whole concept of transcendence, promotes philosophy-scepticism, scientism and the philosophical void. I argue, however, that the history of philosophy has provided us with a number of routes through which we can come to see that reality is indeed transcendent. Desire for a meaning of life may have initially inspired interest in transcendence, but philosophy thereafter found many rational routes to the same place.

As regards nihilism, far from me being someone who, ‘unaware of its metaphysical depth, believes it to be patently inoffensive’ (p. 106), I set out to explain its metaphysical depth. I believe it to be ‘patently inoffensive’ because explaining that depth required severing the link between nihilism as a rejection of a transcendent context of meaning – which in a religious context is offensive – and the spurious idea that nihilism requires the rejection of transcendence *per se*. I placed nihilism within the context of philosophical reflection upon the transcendence of reality.

Malachowski says that,

Nihilism begins to bite when a metaphysics that caters for ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’ has no operational existence within culture. Life in the frame is always lacking in that regard. For, it is invariably dominated by the antics of the ‘herd’ (Nietzsche) or the ‘They’ (Heidegger), the *mobile vulgus*, the people who are manipulated by popular culture, banal politics, and prejudices masquerading as opinions – and it is therefore bound to forfeit stability. (pp. 110-1)

He is explaining Nietzsche and Heidegger’s perspective, which is infected with snobbery. Just because they did not like to see us prosper and inevitably become rather more conspicuous, it does not remotely follow that our framework could not be infused with considerably more philosophy than at present, or that if it became so infused, our lives would substantively change. They might have wanted our lives to substantively change, such that the masses went back to the ‘old ways’ in which they knew their place, but that is entirely tangential to the real problem they failed to isolate. The real problem is that when philosophy culturally collapsed, technology was left unconstrained by philosophical reflection. Few of

us can have any real effect on this problem, and the only extent to which it reflects on culture as a whole is that if philosophy were to acquire renewed cultural respect – such that anti-philosophy collapsed and awareness of, and interest in, philosophical ideas grew to at least the current level of awareness of, and interest in, scientific ideas – then the few who *could* have a real effect would act very differently to how they do at present, I think. This would not be a radical cultural upheaval; who apart from religious fundamentalists, political radicals, or cultural snobs wants that? I am not aware of even professional philosophers living in radically different ways to the contemporary norm. Some are a little odd; but when they sit at their desks to write, I cannot see that this makes an awful lot of difference – unless they are writing about ethics, perhaps, in which case it does not strike me as an obvious advantage.

Malachowski goes on to quote Nietzsche:

The real disadvantage that the cessation of metaphysical views brings with it lies in the fact that the individual keeps his eye too strictly upon his short lifespan and receives no stronger impulses to build durable institutions designed to last for centuries; he wants to pick the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and he therefore no longer cares to plant those trees that require centuries of constant cultivation and are intended to shade a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence still *contrasts* too strongly with the deeply breathing repose of metaphysical ages. (p. 111)

He is right to the extent that this is the attitude taken to the development of new technologies. An advantage can be achieved, or a long-standing human dream realised, or a current problem solved; so we race to produce the technology as quickly as possible (with personal rewards for the scientists involved if they get there first, of course), despite the fact that the new ability we will acquire will never go away, and may well change our lives forever. So in light of what Nietzsche says above, why on earth would he target *metaphysics*? Because, as becomes clear in the bit Malachowski misses out ('a long series of generations ... our agitated and ephemeral existence'), Nietzsche wants to replace metaphysics with science. But this scientific agenda, and the success it has achieved, is the source of the problem. Nietzsche does go on to consider the possibility that philosophy might be useful for smoothing over this transition to pure science; but ultimately decides that, 'It is preferable to use *art* for this transition' (Nietzsche

1878: 32). For the job requires catering to our feelings, which philosophy can only appease (with false metaphysics) or eliminate (with science); elimination is what is ultimately required, but since this is too harsh for now, art's relative isolation from the scientific truth makes it ideal. Nietzsche's antipathy to the metaphysical thought of nihilism flowed straight from his scientism.

Heidegger also targeted metaphysics. This is because he thought that metaphysics was nihilistic, and hence the problem. He did not always say 'metaphysics', either; in *Meaningless* I quoted him saying, 'the development of philosophy into the independent sciences ... is the legitimate completion of philosophy' (PML, p. 67). That is why he despaired of any prospect for a return of metaphysics / philosophy of the old kind, which had ordered our lives through the medium of religion: he thought it had run its course. But the objectifying metaphysics which he critiqued in *Being and Time* is only one strain of the discipline. Put aside the terminology he adopted to suit his own agenda – and his self-image as the unique 'thinker of Being' – and it is clear that Heidegger was doing metaphysics too; he was certainly not doing science. Metaphysics – of Heidegger's kind, and innumerable others – remains perfectly viable. And it is the only route to undermining scientism, since scientism is forced to embrace its own metaphysic: physicalism. That makes it vulnerable. Nihilism is a metaphysical position with the power to draw us back into this area and see things such as this. Given Heidegger's concerns about us 'peoples of the earth who have been drawn in to modernity's arena of power' (p. 106), then, his choice of target was extremely poor.

Malachowski says that,

James' position seems to be that metaphysics *cannot* ground intelligibility on the grand scale Heidegger believes metaphysics aims for, but this is of little consequence because meaning within specific social contexts does not require such grounding. Metaphysics cannot underwrite the meaning of the world *as a whole* or, in Heidegger's terms, "of the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety". It cannot do this because 'the whole' or 'the fundamental structure' has no meaning. Meaning is, so to speak, local, and floats free of concerns about globalized 'grounding'. Being then drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss. (p. 115)

Well, yes and no. There is no meaning of life, so metaphysics cannot ‘ground intelligibility’ in that sense. But we can aim to produce metaphysically complete descriptions of reality; and that is a way of grounding intelligibility. Just because we cannot do it one way, it does not mean we cannot do it another. We can of course theorise about ‘the fundamental structure of beings in their entirety’; as I did at length in my book. Why should that structure need to be supported by a meaning of life? It is not Being that ‘drops out of the picture, with no appreciable loss’, only overall meaning. Being is transcendent, in my view, and we make sense of it with the framework, objective thought, and metaphysical reflection; the task I undertook was to line these up coherently in such a way as to shed light on matters of natural philosophical interest. As with all metaphysics, the aim was to place our lives in a wider, illuminating perspective; the widest possible, at times. Heidegger thought Nietzsche’s metaphysics was ‘deadly in an extreme sense because it does not permit Being itself to come into the dawning’ (p. 114). The only remedy for that is better metaphysics.

Now I was hoping Malachowski would bring up Rorty at some point in his paper, and he did not disappoint. As he says (p. 115), Rorty thought it was crazy of Heidegger to think that current socio-political problems are a direct product of the history of metaphysics. Malachowski disagrees, on the grounds that this history has produced our general conception of reality; it has made things intelligible to us in a manner which is now causing socio-political problems. I would qualify this. One strain of metaphysics has contributed to this problem, physicalism, which Francis Bacon launched an influential manifesto for on the back of the scientific revolution, and which later came into its own when technology had come into its own. As such, I also disagree with Rorty, although not as strongly as with the further implication of what he says, namely that metaphysics will have no part in the solution. Rorty had a point: the rise of technology was far more influential in promoting scientistic culture than physicalist philosophy. But *contra* Rorty, however, metaphysics will have a crucial part to play in the solution, because so long as scientism goes unchecked – and only metaphysics can intellectually check it – then the inevitability of our discovering more and more objective truths about the world, and thereby acquiring more and more technological power for ourselves, will simply not be questioned. The only questioning involved, as is the case in our present situation, will concern how best to deal with the consequences of whatever we have just discovered, or expect to discover soon; when those consequences become clear,

that is, and to the extent that they can be anticipated before the irreversible event. Rorty's promotion of physicalism, and his paradoxical combination of anti-philosophy and pragmatism ('all philosophy is confused' / 'let's put it to useful purposes'), was not helpful in this regard. He had a habit, it seems to me, of homing in on all the important and interesting issues, making them as clear as day, but then too often saying the wrong things about them.

I shall end by quoting the ending of Malachowski's essay, because I agree with much of it, when construed in the right way, and yet strongly disagree with one word:

What is missing – and its absence *constitutes* a cause of 'fragmentation', is the equivalent of a thoroughly naturalized metaphysics: a guiding conception of how life makes sense considered in the round. This needs to involve, or at least inspire, a set of interwoven beliefs and congruent practices that provide practical guidance as to how to make sense of life *as a whole*, and *within* the whole so that social purposes can be aligned with it. James contends that while "nihilism tells us that life has no overall goal ... we can still act as if it did" (172). But, generally speaking, we do not. When we do, any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware *philosophical* reflection is liable to destroy it. Common sense nihilism distilled from the late Heidegger's diagnosis of our world shows: "There is no longer any goal in and through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere, and in the direction of which they can develop" [Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, p. 157]. The absence of such goals is a symptom of an unsettling, Western world-historical, nihilistic social malaise, the evidence for which seems ubiquitous. A cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking. (pp. 118-9)

The word, as the reader will no doubt have guessed, is 'naturalized'. Naturalized metaphysics, namely physicalism, is exactly what we do not need. We need metaphysics; and we need the idea of a naturalized metaphysics to become a distant and thoroughly discredited memory, born of an age in which amazement at our suddenly spectacular achievements in science led us to forget about philosophy, and assume that if there could still be such a thing, it would have to

emulate science. Of course, metaphysics must take account of what science tells us about the world – when it is relevant – and it must never conflict with it; we should not make that kind of mistake again. But the scientific description of reality is not the widest perspective we can take. And without wider perspectives, science becomes dangerously autonomous.

Malachowski says that generally speaking, we do not act as if life has an overall goal, and that ‘any serious reflection is liable to undermine our motivation – and even a modicum of historically aware philosophical reflection is liable to destroy it’. I disagree. While writing this paper, my goals have been presupposed as I effortlessly engaged with the task at hand (the engagement, not the task, was effortless). I imagine it was the same for Malachowski when writing his paper. I think we both showed a ‘modicum of historically aware philosophical reflection’, but neither of us gave up. That is all I ever meant. I think he means that humanity as a whole needs to act as if it had an overall goal. I do not think this has ever happened before; but maybe one day, and maybe it would be good. Nevertheless, I do not think it necessary, because I do not think there is any problem of widespread ‘nihilistic social malaise’; I think the only worry in this area which remains of contemporary relevance relates squarely and exclusively to a particular problem with technology, which arose due to the badly-timed decline of philosophy’s cultural influence.

Malachowski says that, ‘a cure, an ersatz metaphysics, will not be found within conventional thinking sanctioned by the frame, but rather within perdurable consideration of the limitations of such thinking.’ But we do not need an ersatz metaphysics, we need the real thing. And although there is not enough philosophy in our current framework to deal with the problem, this situation could be rapidly turned around. The problem is big alright, but it is not a wholesale problem with contemporary life; malcontents have continually been detecting such wholesale problems with the culture of their era ever since Ancient Greece. Assuming we will not succumb to misanthropy, then, they cannot all have been right. I do not think that this is where the problem lies; many problems do, of course, but not the one at issue. The problem is that our scientific knowledge now far exceeds our philosophical wisdom; and the philosophical wisdom we do have has been maligned and quarantined. So we have too much power and not enough control. The balance needs to be redressed and I maintain that reflection on nihilism and transcendence can help.

References

Nietzsche, F. (1878 / 2004) *Human, All Too Human*, trans. M. Faber and S. Lehmann, London: Penguin.