

## Consistent Nihilism

Jasper Doomen

*Leiden University*

Nihilism poses grave problems for those who seek directives to lead their lives. In this article, the three most important ways to deal with nihilism are inquired, with an emphasis on their credibility. Both nihilism from a metaphysical perspective and the emphasis on pleasure from nihilistic considerations are given attention. The acceptance of nihilism can have far-reaching consequences, which are evaluated at various points. Nietzsche's approach must also be considered. He accepts what he calls a sort of nihilism, but as a means to "new" values. This alternative to nihilism is examined no less critically than the other two stances.

Keywords: nihilism, Nietzsche, values, hedonism

Nihilism is the position that values are not to be found and that there is no meaning of life. Nietzsche aptly defines it as the situation in which no goal can be found and the answer to "why" is absent (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [35], p. 14). It is difficult to find, in the present era, stable beacons to direct the course of one's life in such a way that a reason to live can justifiably be supposed to exist. This article explores a number of answers to life's predicaments. The challenge will be to find out whether one of these answers is tenable, and, if so, what this means for the way one evaluates one's life, or whether nihilism can be overcome in any way.

I will start with an inquiry into a possible interpretation of nihilism, which I have dubbed "metaphysical nihilism." Those who claim that life has no value on the basis of a (supposed) fundamental insight into reality will, through this common denomination, jointly receive attention. Buddhism and Schopenhauer's philosophy will be adduced as clear and perhaps the best-known representatives.

Once the analysis of metaphysical nihilism has been completed, the nihilistic perspective that may be most in line with that of the prevalent scientific attitude

is pursued. This perspective amounts to the position that there is no goal; this does not result from a transcendent structure, as in metaphysical nihilism, but rather from the pervasion of scientific explanations scientists have brought about by manifesting their findings successfully in the competition for rendering interpretations of life experiences. Outdated as his physics may in some respects be, Lucretius's work still yields a number of relevant results, being a non-theological outlook. Epicurus's philosophy and his recipe for a pleasant life are dealt with as a possible way to cope with nihilism.

In the final part of the article, Nietzsche's thoughts are given attention. The confrontation with one of the most vigorous combatants of nihilism will be instructive. His observations are for the greater part less straightforward, or at least less organized, than those of the adherents to the positions he attacks, so that it is difficult to discern an obvious interpretation, particularly if the development of his thoughts is taken into consideration, as his position has changed in significant respects over time. Still, the relevant passages provide ample opportunity to construct a vision that is opposed to the nihilism set out while clinging to it as a means to reach values, albeit of an idiosyncratic nature. Whether such values can be supported convincingly will be examined by focusing on Nietzsche's thoughts, from his early work to the notes he left behind unpublished, in those cases where it can be presumed that they reflect his convictions. Finally, the balance is made; the strong and weak points of the various options are considered in order to determine whether a nihilistic stance is the most persuasive.

The question whether one should end one's life, which is to be taken seriously when addressing the issues outlined above, is a grave one, and has even been put forward as the only serious philosophical one (Camus, 1942/2006, p. 221). A number of ways in which this question is answered, clarifying the diverging philosophical attitudes, will be treated.

### *Metaphysical Nihilism*

A central notion in the three most important systems of thought in Indian philosophy (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism) is *dukkha*, usually translated as "suffering," although the notion has a broader connotation than that. This is exemplified in the first of the Noble Truths of the Buddha, which states that in every aspect of existence, suffering is encountered. The other Truths make it clear that this is caused by desire; if this is put to an end, the suffering will cease. An action, *karma*, will have consequences for a future life, into which one is to be reborn after the present life.

Buddhism can be said to be a nihilistic view, since no value is aspired to be reached and "extinction" (*nirvana*), the situation from which no rebirth will follow and one ceases to exist, is propagated. The notion of nirvana has a broader

scope than Buddhism (cf. Zimmer, 1951, p. 183 [note 3]).<sup>1</sup> The nihilistic stance is not wholeheartedly taken in Hinduism and Jainism, which both have a goal — in the case of Jainism, to become divine, in the case of Hinduism, to reach the state of *moksha* (the liberation from rebirth) in which one realizes that the individual self is the world-soul (*Brahman*).

Empirical observations may be employed to confirm the consequences of the central role of suffering, but they do not suffice to corroborate the karma doctrine. The Hindu and Jain schools of thought are even more difficult to uphold in this respect, since they also appeal to some form of divinity. (Hinduism may be characterized as polytheistic, although this is mitigated in practice in that a single divine entity is sometimes put forward; Jainism is difficult to assess in this respect as it clings to a position that seems to transcend the usual perspectives of theism and atheism [cf. Zimmer, 1951, p. 182].) From an empirical point of view it would be difficult to agree with the tenets according to which a fundamental outlook on life is proclaimed. I dub these positions, or at least Buddhism, metaphysically nihilistic: no viewpoint is presented in which positive values are propagated to which to cling — which is the nihilistic aspect — and the views are not supported empirically, which is the metaphysical aspect.

Schopenhauer, whose philosophy is heavily influenced by Indian philosophy, as he himself intimates (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Preface to the first edition, pp. XII, XIII), subscribes to a number of the central doctrines embodied therein and his ideas, so I will propound, may be qualified as metaphysically nihilistic. His dismal appraisal of life is aptly comprised in his remark that “as far as the individual’s life is concerned, each life history is a history of suffering: for each course of life is, in general, a continued row of greater and smaller accidents, which everyone admittedly conceals as much as possible, since he knows that others thereby rarely experience sympathy or compassion, but almost always satisfaction through the conception of plagues from which they are free at present” (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 4, § 59, p. 382).<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, Schopenhauer’s conviction that reality is fundamentally the Will (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 2, § 21, p. 131) together with his insistence that its determination of all that happens is without any goal (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965,

---

<sup>1</sup>It is, incidentally, not possible in Buddhism to speak of a stable “self” as a counterpart to the Hindu *atman* (“individual self”) at all; the term *anatman* (literally: “not self”) is used for this in Buddhism.

<sup>2</sup>The original text reads: “Was [. . .] das Leben des Einzelnen betrifft, so ist jede Lebensgeschichte eine Leidensgeschichte: denn jeder Lebenslauf ist, in der Regel, eine fortgesetzte Reihe großer und kleiner Unfälle, die zwar jeder möglichst verbirgt, weil er weiß, daß Andere selten Theilnahme oder Mitleid, fast immer aber Befriedigung durch die Vorstellung der Plagen, von denen sie gerade jetzt verschont sind, dabei empfinden müssen.” (The translations of the quotes from Dühring, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer are the author’s own.)

Book 2, § 29, p. 196; Book 4, § 58, p. 378) constitutes his gloomy view. Through art, the Will ceases to plague man (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 3, § 38, pp. 231–233), but only temporarily: “Since a real, remaining happiness is not possible, it cannot be an object of art” (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 4, § 58, p. 378).<sup>3</sup> Suicide is no solution in the doctrine of karma outlined above as this would merely result in a rebirth (to an even worse life than the one from which one would attempt to escape). Schopenhauer’s stance is similar; he makes it clear that suicide would be the best option (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 4, § 59, p. 383), but in fact it is not (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 4, § 54, p. 331); as things stand, “death is no absolute annihilation” (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 4, § 59, p. 383).<sup>4</sup>

Many of Schopenhauer’s observations can be affirmed from one’s experience. Still, it doesn’t seem justified to extrapolate the way reality is constituted from these findings. This is clear from his epistemological starting-points. In his doctoral dissertation, which he considers necessary preliminary reading for understanding his main work (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Preface to the first edition, pp. IX, X), the “principle of sufficient reason” (*Satz vom zureichenden Grunde*) is at the center: nothing is without a reason why it exists rather than does not exist (Schopenhauer (1813/1950), Introduction, § 5, p. 7). The “principle of causality” (*Satz der Kausalität*) is one of the modes of this “principle of sufficient reason” (Schopenhauer, 1813/1950, Chapter 4, § 23, p. 29; Chapter 4, § 24, p. 31). As causality applies to situations, and not to things (Schopenhauer, 1813/1950, Chapter 4, § 23, p. 30), it is difficult to understand how an appeal to the (meta-physical) view of the Will as the basis of reality can be adequately supported (cf. Magee, 1997, p. 139).

Schopenhauer admits the problem and puts forward that “we are not just the *understanding subject*, but *are*, on the other hand, *ourselves the thing-in-itself*, too” (Schopenhauer, 1844/1949, Book 2, Chapter 18, p. 218).<sup>5</sup> The thing-in-itself in Schopenhauer’s line of thought is the Will (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 2, § 21, p. 131; Book 3, § 31, p. 200; Book 4, § 54, p. 324; Book 4, § 55, p. 342; Schopenhauer, 1844/1949, Book 2, Chapter 18, p. 221; Book 2, Chapter 19, p. 224). Schopenhauer makes it clear, incidentally, that he adopts the terminology “thing-in-itself” from Kant (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Book 2, § 22, p. 131; Book 3, § 31, p. 200). The identification can only be grasped through introspection (Schopenhauer, 1844/1949, Book 2, Chapter 18, p. 219). That this renders neither a complete nor an adequate knowledge of the thing-in-itself is granted (Schopenhauer,

---

<sup>3</sup>The original text reads: “Weil ein ächtes, bleibendes Glück nicht möglich ist, kann es kein Gegenstand der Kunst seyn.”

<sup>4</sup>The original text reads: “der Tod sei keine absolute Vernichtung.”

<sup>5</sup>The original text reads: “[. . .] wir nicht bloß das *erkennende Subjekt* sind, sondern andererseits auch *selbst* [. . .] *das Ding an sich* sind [. . .].”

1844/1949, Book 2, Chapter 18, pp. 220–222). Further, the unity of Will is metaphysical and consequently transcendent, so that it cannot be comprehended through reason (Schopenhauer, 1844/1949, Book 2, Chapter 25, p. 367).

The Kantian perspective, in which the thing-in-itself is acknowledged to be unknowable (e.g., Kant, 1781/1787/1904, p. 225 [A 279/B 335]), appears more attractive than the one sketched above. This doesn't mean that it can unreservedly be accepted. To be sure, Schopenhauer himself refers to Schulze in his criticism that Kant both considers causality to be a category (Kant, 1781/1787/1904, p. 93 [A 80/B 106]) and applies it in order to admit the thing-in-itself in his philosophy (Schopenhauer, 1818/1965, Appendix: Kritik der Kantischen Philosophie, p. 516). Schulze's argument — if, as Kant's system of thought demands, the notion "cause" cannot be applied to the thing-in-itself, the premise that all knowledge begins with the operation of objective objects is untenable (Schulze, 1792/1969, pp. 263, 264) — should indeed be taken seriously. Irrespective of its shortcomings, the cautious approach that is characteristic of Kant's epistemology seems to me to be preferable to a line of thought leading to Schopenhauer's metaphysics. However convincing a metaphysical stance may seem, I can find no certainty in it, and will acknowledge my limitations in this respect until convinced otherwise, if that is possible at all.

Schopenhauer's philosophy as a whole can neither be affirmed nor denied to represent reality. The absence of a certain affirmation is mainly a result of the fact that he appeals to intuition and cannot by means of reason demonstrate the Will to be constitutive of reality. A certain denial is no option because this would equally necessitate the possibility of transcendent knowledge. Schopenhauer's findings are, then, valuable but do not prove nihilism. This is the fate of metaphysical nihilism in general, unless, in some way I am unable to grasp, such knowledge is available.

### *Nihilistic Hedonism*

If nihilism is accepted, there are two possibilities. One may conclude that there is no meaning of life from a metaphysical conviction, as was pointed out above. Nihilism may also follow from a neutral stance, recognizing the insignificance of life without a transcendent appeal, or a (perhaps, as I will claim below, misguided) refuge to immanent values.

In the first case, the reason, in some systems of thought at least, not to commit suicide is, as was pointed out, clear: a rebirth is to be avoided, such a situation being brought about if one ends one's life. It is not yet clear why one shouldn't resort to suicide in the second case. Indeed, those who assert that life lacks a meaning are less than convincing if they subsequently continue to live (Diogenes Laertius, ± 250 AD/1979, § 127, pp. 652–653; cf. Nietzsche, 1889/1969, *Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen*, § 36, p. 129). It is difficult to see why a nihilist would

expound his views at all, instead of committing suicide (unless, perhaps, he is a metaphysical nihilist); there would be no use in doing so, if not for the pleasure derived from seeing one's opinions acclaimed, although even this latter experience is relativized once one thinks nihilism's implications through.

One may claim that such an absurd life does not lead to a contemptible existence, but if this is not supplemented with an answer to the question why one should happily continue to live, as in Camus's case, advancing both theses but failing to support the second (Camus, 1942/2006, pp. 233, 234, 304), no real answer is given. In this section, a point of view I call "nihilistic hedonism" is examined, in which such an account is provided. I have chosen this name in juxtaposition to "metaphysical nihilism." In the latter case, nihilism follows from metaphysical considerations, whereas it does not, in the present case, follow from pleasure (*hêdonê*); rather, the emphasis on pleasure is based on nihilism. So "nihilistic hedonism" is preferred by me to "hedonic nihilism."

An explanation of natural processes such as Lucretius's is nowadays probably widely considered acceptable and persuasive. Apart from a number of details, which are obviously crude and unsophisticated in comparison with the latest developments in physics but which must not impede a proper appraisal of the relevant precepts by raising unwarrantedly anachronistic objections, his theory may be attractive for those who seek an explanation separated from any leading goal. In fact, his description is not unlike that of a present-day attempt to interpret as many phenomena as possible scientifically, leaving ever less room for additional — competitive — explanations. The question whether there is a meaning of life can then be said to be solved in the sense that it is no longer a question at all (cf. Wittgenstein, 1921/1997, §§ 6.52, 6.521, p. 85).

Admittedly, Lucretius accepts the existence of gods, but these are supposed not to be involved with the world as man knows it (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 1, 44–49, pp. 178–179). Crucially, no design is admitted to explain the world's existence (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 2, 180, 181, pp. 244–245), nor its development (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 1, 1021–1027, pp. 228–229). Man's place in nature is nothing special: the world was not created on his behalf (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 5, 156–165, pp. 440–441; 198, 199, pp. 442–443; cf. 419–421, pp. 452–453). The atoms, or the "first-beginnings of things" (*primordia rerum*) as he calls them (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 1, 210, pp. 186–187), play a pivotal part in Lucretius's model. Upon death, the union that composes man as a whole is scattered (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 2, 1002, 1003, pp. 288–289; Book 3, 928, 929, pp. 350–351), which means that no separate soul remains (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 3, 798, 799, pp. 342–343).

Death does not, then, concern man (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 3, 830, 831, pp. 344–345; cf. Diogenes Laertius,  $\pm$  250 AD/1979, §§ 124, 125, pp. 650–651). This insight will lead to peace of mind (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 3,

967–977, pp. 352–353). Importantly, the search for pleasure and the avoidance of pain are man's motives (Lucretius,  $\pm$  60 BCE/1947, Book 2, 17–19, pp. 236–237). In this state of affairs, the absence of values need not be fatal: one doesn't strive for a goal embodied by either an immanent or a transcendent meaning; such a goal is replaced by the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. Incidentally, according to Epicurus, the absence of pain already means enjoyment (Diogenes Laertius,  $\pm$  250 AD/1979, § 128, pp. 652–653, 654–655; § 131, pp. 656–657).

It would, then, simply be a matter of investigating the degree of pleasure and pain (or, if Epicurus is correct, merely the degree of pain) in order to determine whether life is worthwhile. (In fact, Nietzsche qualifies Epicurus's philosophy, pejoratively, as cleverness morals [*Klugheits-Moral*] (Nietzsche, 1882–1884/1977, 7 [209], p. 315). It is difficult to compare the various experiences one encounters, and to estimate possible future ones, but in theory this is a viable approach. If one should object that pleasure would then itself become a value, this criticism is easily enervated: the nihilist does not find a meaning in experiencing pleasure but simply prefers this situation to any other.

In order to know whether one should continue to live or not, more knowledge than is presumably at hand is necessary: an overview in a complicated world such as ours seems all but impossible. Still, sidestepping this problem for now, as this is a matter of practice rather than analysis and the present inquiry is mainly concerned with the latter, the need arises for a radical hedonic calculus. The hedonic calculus is understood to be the course of action to be followed according to Bentham; the radical hedonic calculus consists in a further step along the same basic lines of thought.

Bentham states that pleasure and pain are the only reasons why people act (Bentham, 1789/1962, Chapter 1, § 1, p. 1). Furthermore, a (hedonic) calculus is to be carried out in which the values (not, by the way, to be mistaken for the values considered hitherto) of the pains and pleasures (to be understood as species of the genera pain and pleasure) which will presumably ensue from acts are to be weighed, so that an act should be pursued if more pains than pleasures are to be expected and abandoned if the converse is more likely to occur (Bentham, 1789/1962, Chapter 4, § 4, p. 17). The legislator's point of view in carrying out his policies for a community is described here (Bentham, 1789/1962, Chapter 4, § 1, p. 15), but the analysis can be applied to an individual's outlook as well. If one should limit oneself to the hedonic calculus, the calculus would merely be carried out to charter the possibilities and find out which ones should be realized, with their expected outcomes in the long run in mind.

The radical hedonic calculus would be applied to life itself; this is the further step referred to above. It would thus be clear whether life is to be expected to bring more pain than pleasure — in which case suicide would be advisable —

or vice versa, in which case it would be wise to keep on living. Again, this is rather a theoretical device than a readily applicable one in most cases, *inter alia* since not just quantity but quality is to be weighed, but this has no invalidating effect.

Does this mean that nihilistic hedonism is proven and pleasure and pain are indeed the only standards by which to measure the merits of one's life? No, or at least not necessarily. After all, I started this section by saying: "If nihilism is accepted." Concluding now that nihilism is the correct theory would simply be committing a *petitio principii*. Besides, even if nihilism is accepted, it doesn't perforce entail pleasure as the highest good, *viz.*, not in its metaphysical guise, as was indicated in the first section, unless pleasure in the sense of the absence of pain is to be found — radically — in the extinction.

One may argue that it is important not only to experience things but to do them as well, and to be a certain sort of person (Nozick, 1974, p. 43), in which case pleasure and pain would not be exclusively decisive, but this would be begging the question against the nihilist in supposing, without proof, that life has a meaning. Nietzsche does attempt to constitute a meaning of life under the present circumstances. In the next section, it will be examined whether this view can be maintained.

### *Immanent Values Theory*

In the first section, it was pointed out that those who try to demonstrate nihilism by laying bare the nature of reality encounter problems in that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reach transcendent knowledge. This is also a difficulty for those who, conversely, suppose reality to have a teleological structure, in whatever guise, and, to a lesser degree, for those considered above, who uphold pleasure as the only thing worthwhile in life and who suppose this immanent state of being to be the only existing one. There are, however, also those who do not aspire to find a worthwhile life on this basis but, instead, plead the value of that which is encountered in the present; they refer to the same experiences as those mentioned in the first section, but qualify them differently. This is pointed out by Dühring, for example: "The essence of life does not consist in reaching a goal that lies beyond the sequence of its functions; life's appeal instead adheres to the functions themselves" (Dühring, 1891, Chapter 6, § 10, p. 197).<sup>6</sup>

An elaborate attempt to construct such a vision is made by Nietzsche. There are, of course, a number of problems in inquiring his writings. First, Nietzsche's

---

<sup>6</sup>The original text reads: "Das Wesen des Lebens besteht nicht darin, ein Ziel zu erreichen, welches jenseits der Reihe seiner Functionen liegt, sondern es sind die Functionen selbst, an denen der Lebensreiz haftet."

views on relevant issues changed considerably over the years. This will be taken into consideration. Second, his philosophy is far from systematic — indeed, as he characteristically boasts: “I distrust all systematic thinkers and avoid them. The will to systematize is a lack of righteousness” (Nietzsche, 1889/1969, *Sprüche und Pfeile*, § 26, p. 57).<sup>7</sup> Third, a number of vital statements are made in passages incorporated into “his” posthumous work *Der Wille zur Macht* (“The Will to Power”) he (probably) did not want to have published (cf., e.g., Gillespie, 1995, p. 175). (Admittedly, he does hint at this work [Nietzsche, 1887/1968, *Dritte Abhandlung: was bedeuten asketische Ideale?*, § 27, p. 427], but didn’t come around to finishing it himself.) This problem is mitigated by merely resorting to such passages when they support statements that appear in works he did (or intended to) have published.

In one of the remaining fragments, he proclaims the most extreme form of nihilism to be “that there is no truth; that there is no absolute state of things, no “thing-in-itself”” (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [35], p. 15).<sup>8</sup> Nihilism is the denial of a true world, of a being” (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [41], p. 18). Nihilism manifests itself twofold. There is passive nihilism, by which Nietzsche seems to mean nihilism as it is usually understood and which he considers to be a downfall and a decline of the spirit’s power — indeed, he considers nirvana to be an evasion (Nietzsche, 1882–1884/1977, 21 [6], p. 637) — and active nihilism, which is deemed positive and presented as a sign of increased power of the spirit (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [35], pp. 14, 15).

Nietzsche’s approach to life’s condition evolved throughout his active period. In his early work *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (The Birth of Tragedy), he takes a similar stance to Schopenhauer’s, albeit sometimes diverging from the latter’s teachings (cf., e.g., Nietzsche, 1872/1972, § 5, p. 42). Nietzsche sees art, though not in all manifestations, as a means of consolation (Nietzsche, 1872/1972, § 7, p. 52). Art generally gives (the only) meaning of life, as existence is only justified as an esthetic phenomenon (Nietzsche, 1872/1972, § 5, p. 43; cf. § 24, p. 148). The Dionysian art, which is characterized by intoxication (Nietzsche, 1872/1972, § 1, pp. 22, 24), wants to persuade human beings of the joy of being; one is, for a spell, the primal being, which brings a metaphysical consolation (Nietzsche, 1872/1972, § 17, p. 105). Nietzsche appeals to the Dionysian model in his later work again, but in a different form: “[The Dionysus in *Götzen-Dämmerung*] differs from Nietzsche’s early Dionysus, who offered a kind of metaphysical solace and forgetfulness in the face of suffering and death. The later Dionysus offers

---

<sup>7</sup>The original text reads: “Ich misstrauere allen Systematikern und gehe ihnen aus dem Weg. Der Wille zum System ist ein Mangel an Rechtschaffenheit.”

<sup>8</sup>The original text reads: “Daß es keine Wahrheit giebt; daß es keine absolute Beschaffenheit der Dinge, kein ‘Ding an sich’ giebt [ . . . ]”

not solace but the vitality of life itself that transcends the death of all individuals, that reproduces individuality in the face of death and the dissolution of individuality” (Gillespie, 1995, p. 223).

The means of art as outlined above are not, then, maintained in his mature writings; rather, the second sort of nihilism is promulgated. In order to properly evaluate the merits of his position, it is necessary to know in what way Nietzsche takes active nihilism to provide a preferable alternative to, in his own terms, passive nihilism, or any other approach. Nietzsche propagates active nihilism (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [35], p. 14; cf. Nietzsche, 1885–1887/1974, 5 [13], p. 220). This situation, that “old” values such as “sympathy” have lost their value, provides a feeling of happiness for philosophers and “free spirits” (Nietzsche, 1882/1973, § 343, p. 256). As I will argue, his plea for active nihilism is difficult to maintain; in fact, “active nihilism” may be a misnomer.

Active nihilism is presented as a symptom of increasing strength (just as its counterpart, passive nihilism, is reckoned to be a symptom of increasing weakness) [Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 9 [60], p. 31]. The question obviously comes to the fore what the use of this strength is. If the values hitherto adhered to turn out to be absent, or void, why shouldn't one simply acknowledge this and end one's life? Nietzsche pleads, possibly deliberately in contradistinction to Schopenhauer (1818/1965, Book 4, § 59, p. 382), the acceptance of life through what he calls his doctrine (“Lehre”): “My doctrine says: ‘to live *in such a way* that you must wish to live again is the task — you will do so *in any event*,’” (Nietzsche, 1882/1973, 11 [163], p. 403).<sup>9</sup> This doctrine is known as that of the eternal recurrence (*die ewige Wiederkunft*) (cf., e.g., Nietzsche, 1889/1969, Was ich den Alten verdanke, § 5, p. 154). This is worked out in the visitation by a fictional demon, who reports that the life one has lived will be lived again to infinity in precisely the same way; this message should be welcomed (Nietzsche, 1882/1973, § 341, p. 250). This doesn't answer the question *why* one should accept this eternal recurrence, except if it is to be interpreted as a cosmological doctrine, but such an interpretation would be stretching what Nietzsche actually says.

One might cling to life in an attempt to find some fulfillment in enjoying pleasure. The appeal of such an option was explored in the previous section. This is not Nietzsche's way out, however. His is a more intricate approach. Pain is considered to be a means to reach profundity (Nietzsche, 1882/1973, Preface to the second edition, § 3, p. 18). As he stresses: “Why is the rise of nihilism henceforth *necessary*? Because it is our values up to now themselves that draw their final conclusion in it; because nihilism is the logic of our great values and ideals, cogitated to the end — because we must first live nihilism in order to find out what in fact was

---

<sup>9</sup>The original text reads: “Meine Lehre sagt: *so leben, daß du wünschen mußt, wieder zu leben ist die Aufgabe — du wirst es jedenfalls.*”

the *value* of these “values.” We need, at some time, *new values*” (Nietzsche, 1887–1888/1970, 11 [411], p. 432).<sup>10</sup>

Recall that Nietzsche considers active and passive nihilism variants of the general category of nihilism. That means, if the implications of nihilism are taken seriously, that it would be impossible for him to find “new” values once the “old” ones are apparently devalued. He may *call* his strategy “active nihilism,” but one cannot simply elect a definition and presume that that which is described fits the definition. “Active nihilism” either has no meaning or is only directed at the “old” values from which Nietzsche distances himself, leaving the possibility of finding “new” ones intact, not rendering (real) nihilism. If there really is no goal to be found, all meaning of life is dissolved, leaving room for neither “old” nor “new” values.

Apart from this problem, Nietzsche’s philosophy suffers from the fact that he seems to confound epistemology and (meta-)ethics in that he doesn’t have — or at least doesn’t provide — a basis for his assertions other than a historical account. He does sometimes manifest his adverse attitude toward any attempt to acquire (certain) knowledge, but that is insufficient to invalidate an alternative. In *Götzen-Dämmerung* (Twilight of the Idols), a number of reasons are presented not to adhere to the position that a “true world” would exist. Four statements are summed up, two of which are of a (meta-)ethical nature (it is of no use to talk of such a world, and it is a sign of decadence), while the other two testify to a mitigated skepticism in that another reality than the one with which one is acquainted is said to be unprovable or merely “known” on the basis of what one has attributed to it (Nietzsche, 1889/1969, Die “Vernunft” in der Philosophie, § 6, pp. 72, 73). A second exposition presents similar statements (Nietzsche, 1889/1969, Wie die “wahre Welt” endlich zur Fabel wurde, §§ 1–6, pp. 74, 75). This doesn’t mean that Nietzsche’s account is devoid of any import. I have merely tried to point out that nihilism is irreconcilable with an attempt to find values of whatever sort. If nihilism is acknowledged, no values are left with which to construct a meaningful life.

It is important to be nuanced. I cannot subscribe to a position such as the one just sketched: there would not be a way out by stating, in a similar fashion as Nietzsche, or, more generally as immanent values theorists would have it, that that which one experiences has a value without giving a reason why, because this would simply be labeling things as values, so that no real account would be given. The only means to convincingly soften nihilistic hedonism’s claims is the

---

<sup>10</sup>The original text reads: “[. . .] warum ist die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus nunmehr *nothwendig?* Weil unsere bisherigen Werthe selbst es sind, die in ihm ihre letzte Folgerung ziehn; weil der Nihilism die zu Ende gedachte Logik unserer großen Werthe und Ideale ist, — weil wir den Nihilismus erst erleben müssen, um dahinter zu kommen, was eigentlich der *Werth* dieser ‘Werthe’ war . . . . Wir haben, irgendwann, *neue Werthe* nöthig . . . .”

one to which I referred above, where metaphysical nihilism's tenets were criticized from an epistemological point of view. Metaphysical nihilism evidently appeals to more elaborate metaphysics than nihilistic hedonism, but they share a common absence of underpinning why their outlook should be correct rather than a competing one. Here, a careful approach such as Kant's may be helpful. As he declares, knowledge must be canceled in order to make room for faith (Kant, 1781/1787/1904, p. 19 [B XXX]).

I will readily grant that this is an unsatisfactory way out. After all, if knowledge cannot be relied on, there will be no steady ground on the basis of which to decide what to believe, for if such a ground were present, there would not be faith but knowledge, undermining the basic premise itself that knowledge cannot be relied on.<sup>11</sup> Still, as long as no definite knowledge is available, this (insufficient) result must, at least from an epistemological point of view, remain. Applied to the present issue, it means that a meaning of life cannot be denied, but, as it is a matter of faith, at the same time lacks any content. (Perhaps a meaning of life could be reduced to pleasure, but this is no less a matter of speculation than the one whether a meaning can be found at all.) Nihilism cannot, then, be refuted or affirmed.

### *Conclusion*

Taking nihilism seriously means accepting what the implications of its depictions of life are if these are correct, but at the same time critically scrutinizing the foundations that are advanced by its advocates. This article is directed at both issues. By examining a number of relevant important teachings from representative thinkers, the tenability of nihilism was examined. Metaphysical nihilism appears to be irrefutable, at least for now. Perhaps transcendent knowledge is forever inaccessible, or perhaps the transcendent, whatever one may take this to mean, is even nothing more than a fiction. This is no more demonstrable than its opposite, a given that is crucial for those whose philosophy I have qualified as metaphysical nihilism. Should they indeed be able to persuade those, among whom I reckon myself, who place the limits of reason (or similar means of realizing knowledge, such as, allegedly, intuition) in an earlier stage of inquiry than they themselves do, and also be right in their analysis, the first part of this article would remain the only relevant one in this writing. It would have to be altered, affirming their position.

---

<sup>11</sup>I do not, of course, introduce through this reasoning, my own definition of "faith" — which would make me guilty of the same mistake for which I reproached Nietzsche in his definition of active nihilism — but take this approach to its meaning to be justified if it is compared to that of "knowledge," not, incidentally, thereby suggesting that a clearly demarcated meaning of either "faith" or "knowledge" is available, but that is a problem these words share with a great number of other words that are nonetheless used.

I have, however, emphasized that metaphysical nihilism cannot be upheld with certainty (at least by me), and accordingly it is not the only option available. In the second point of view I presented, nihilistic hedonism, nihilism was raised again, this time from a different motivation. There is no appeal to metaphysics here; in fact, its point may perhaps be optimally expressed in the context of positivism. The epistemological remarks apply here, too, in that nihilism cannot be conclusively proved in this case either, but the benefit of this variant of nihilism compared to the metaphysical one is that it entails fewer ontological presuppositions. Furthermore, its practical directives are easily understood: pleasure and pain are certainly recognizable and are presumably naturally sought out and avoided, respectively. If metaphysical nihilism is to be abandoned for this position, a concrete guideline is, then, at least available, though, because of the intricacies of life, not readily applicable.

The difficulties connected with the claims of those whose thoughts were assembled under the general banner “immanent values theory” are of another nature. First, it is clear that in this case — nihilism is not accepted but attempted to be unnerved by the presence of immanent values — the lack of transcendent knowledge is equally objectionable, but, second, the account must also be considered on its own merits. In the inquiry made in the beginning of the article, the only empirical given was the suffering life brings; this could relatively easily be covered. The section dealing with immanent values did not afford such luxury. In criticizing Nietzsche’s attack on (passive) nihilism, it had to be made clear what the merits of his alternative to it are. Tackling the exegetical and other issues, I concluded that Nietzsche doesn’t seem to realize nihilism’s implications; I contended that nihilism does not leave the possibility intact to propose *any* values, whether they be the “old” values Nietzsche opposes or the “new” ones he promulgates, so that his alternative to nihilism is not convincing.

The present analysis is brought to the conclusion that no meaning of life can be found. Simply attributing “values” to things one finds integrated in one’s life is unsatisfactory, while the “old” values cannot be attained. Whether nihilism is correct, and *a fortiori* no meaning can be found, is not an answer I have aspired to give in writing this article, and with regard to which I suspend judgment.

I finish with the answers to the question on suicide from the introduction. Is it prudent to end one’s life? The metaphysical nihilist approaches this matter in a straightforward manner: it would lead to a rebirth, even worse than the present one, and should be avoided. The difficulty in establishing nihilistic hedonism is not the basic premise, which is relatively simple, but the application of the calculus to life. It is tempting to interpret the radical hedonic calculus as leading to a simple process — there being more misery than joy in life — but this cannot be conclusively maintained because it is difficult, or even impossible, to know how others than oneself experience their lives. Each individual can still use the calculus, rendering, presumably, the result just mentioned. If no meaning

is to be discerned — if life has no meaning — committing suicide would be the most appealing option.

A meaning of life is, then, the final bastion against this course of action. Even if such a meaning is established or taken to exist, suicide may, incidentally, still be the optimal course of action, but on the basis of other considerations than in the alternatives. Should transcendent knowledge be available, or with certainty be established to be unavailable in case there is no transcendent domain, the status of this bastion can be qualified more clearly and comprehensively than I am able to do.

Finally, the immanent values theorist's answer is not equally easily established. He stresses the values in life itself, and it is difficult to what extent suffering should be borne. Concentrating on the principal advocate, Nietzsche, as was done above, it is clear that he would oppose suicide, as this would attest to a rejection of the thought behind the eternal recurrence thesis. This doesn't mean that he has erected the bastion searched for. As I have argued, his proposal of "new" values evidences a failure to answer to the challenge nihilism poses. If a meaning of life is to be found at all, this is no viable approach.

## References

- Bentham, J. (1962). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation*. [The Works of Jeremy Bentham. Vol. 1.] Edited by J. Bowring. New York: Russell & Russell. (Originally published in 1789)
- Camus, A. (2006). *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Œuvres Complètes [Complete Works]. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard. (Originally published in 1942)
- Diogenes Laertius. (1979). *Lives of eminent philosophers*, vol. 2. Book 10: Epicurus, Letter to Menoecus. Edited and translated by R. Hicks. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. (Originally written in ± 250 AD)
- Dühring, E. (1891). *Der Werth des Lebens*. Leipzig: O. Reissland.
- Gillespie, M. (1995). *Nihilism before Nietzsche*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kant, I. (1904). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Kant's gesammelte Schriften. Erste Abtheilung: Werke. Band 3 (Kant's collected writings. First section: Works. Vol. 3). Berlin: Georg Reimer. (Originally published in 1781/1787)
- Lucretius. (1947). *De Rerum Natura*, vol. 1. Edited and translated by C. Bailey. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Originally written in ± 60 BCE)
- Magee, B. (1997). *The philosophy of Schopenhauer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1963). *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Sechste Abteilung, Zweiter Band (Works. Critical complete edition, section 6, vol. 2). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally published in 1887)
- Nietzsche, F. (1969). *Götzen-Dämmerung*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Sechste Abteilung, Dritter Band (Works. Critical complete edition, section 6, vol. 3). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally published in 1889)
- Nietzsche, F. (1970). *Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1887 bis März 1888*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Achte Abteilung, Zweiter Band (Remaining fragments from Autumn 1887 to March 1888. Works. Critical complete edition, section 8, vol. 2). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally written in 1887–1888)
- Nietzsche, F. (1972). *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Dritte Abteilung, Erster Band (Works. Critical complete edition, section 3, vol. 1). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally published in 1872)

- Nietzsche, F. (1973). *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* [1882]; *Nachgelassene Fragmente Frühjahr 1881 – Sommer 1882*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Fünfte Abteilung, Zweiter Band (Remaining Fragments Spring 1881 – Summer 1882. Works. Critical complete edition, section 5, vol. 2). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally published in 1882)
- Nietzsche, F. (1974). *Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1885 bis Herbst 1887*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Achte Abteilung, Erster Band (Remaining fragments from Autumn 1885 to Autumn 1887. Works. Critical complete edition, section 8, vol. 1). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally written in 1885–1887)
- Nietzsche, F. (1977). *Nachgelassene Fragmente Juli 1882 bis Winter 1883–1884*. Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe (KGA), Siebente Abteilung, Erster Band (Remaining fragments from July 1882 to Winter 1883–1884. Works. Critical complete edition, section 7, vol. 1). Edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. (Originally written in 1882–1884)
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schopenhauer, A. (1949). *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, part 2. Sämtliche Werke, Dritter Band (Complete works, vol. 3). Edited by A. Hübscher. Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus Verlag. (Originally published in 1844)
- Schopenhauer, A. (1950). *Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde*. Sämtliche Werke, Siebenter Band (Complete works, vol. 7). Edited by A. Hübscher. Wiesbaden: Eberhard Brockhaus Verlag. (Originally published in 1813)
- Schopenhauer, A. (1965). *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, part 1. Sämtliche Werke, Zweiter Band (Complete works, vol. 2). Edited by A. Hübscher. Wiesbaden: F. Brockhaus. (Originally published in 1818)
- Schulze, G. (1969). *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie*. Brussels: Culture et civilisation. (Originally published in 1792)
- Wittgenstein, L. (1997). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Werkausgabe, Band 1 (Work edition, vol. 1). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. (Originally published in 1921)
- Zimmer, H. (1951). *Philosophies of India*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.