

CHAPTER 1:

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

There might be a masterplan for the human race, set in place by the creator, or the creators. Meaning may be built into the fabric of reality whether reality was created or not, and this may have implications for what we should be doing with ourselves. The final goal, the one which makes our strivings and sufferings either worthwhile or wasted, may be a preordained destiny, or it may be a target we could hit or miss. Perhaps we have made good progress towards it, or perhaps our choices have led us astray; it's hard to know without knowing what the goal is, which is something the human race has never been able to agree about.

But put all those ideas on hold for a moment and just suppose there is nothing of cosmic significance going on at all. We are just people going in and out of rooms, sending electronic messages, falling in love, eating apples, signing nuclear non-proliferation treaties, and so on. All these things go on, some of them are really important to us, but they don't add up to anything in the cosmic scheme of things, for the simple reason that *there isn't a cosmic scheme of things*. Suppose the great science-fiction writer H.G. Wells was wrong when he said that, 'The world has a greater purpose than happiness; our lives are to serve God's purpose, and that purpose aims not at man as an end, but works through him to greater issues.'¹ Suppose there is no purpose for us, not even happiness. What you are being asked to suppose is the truth of nihilism.

Or at least, that's one interpretation of what 'nihilism' means. The word literally means 'nothing-ism' and is currently a strong contender for the most ambiguous word in philosophy, a true nothing-word. Some think this is par for the course. At the back of philosopher Nolen Gertz's recent book on nihilism, for instance, there is a glossary of terms providing one-sentence explanations of existentialism, metaphysics and postmodernism, but when it comes to nihilism he draws the line. For that entry we are told only that nihilism is wanting 'complicated ideas reduced to one sentence made easily available in the back of a book'.² Back in 1950, philosopher and novelist Ernst Jünger said that, 'A good definition of nihilism would be the equivalent of revealing the cause of cancer' – because he thought nihilism was the elusive thought-disease which produced the Nazis.³ John Gillespie, who has been very influential in forging contemporary understandings of nihilism, ultimately concludes that it is a kind of experience, in which we look out at the void of meaning in which our reality exists and become lost for words. But as Gillespie and others have noted, the lack of clarity around the word 'nihilism' puts it in danger of becoming a catch-all for everything bad. Without clarity it becomes a shape-shifting obstacle to rational debate.⁴

Some philosophers do use the word perfectly clearly, but in special senses that draw on its literal meaning. So there is 'mereological nihilism', according to which there are no ordinary objects, such as chairs, only particles arranged in a way that produces chair-experiences, and there is also 'metaphysical nihilism', the view that there might have been no objects at all. But all that is far removed from the mainstream discussion of nihilism, in which it is usually something bad, although what exactly is never pinned down. We think the best way to use the word is for the claim that human life is meaningless, in the cosmic sense of there being no overall plan for our existence. This is the dominant meaning history has given it, to which the other ideas circulating around it can be easily related and illuminated. It's a very short history

too. Unlike 'nice', which Shakespeare used to mean fussy, lustful, detailed and trivial, it hasn't had long to shape-shift, its clientele has been tiny in comparison, and it was introduced for a specific purpose. But we will leave the history until the next chapter.

If you believe that 'nihilism' (in our simple sense) is true, then what follows? Something very terrible indeed, it is widely supposed. Nihilism is regarded as a subversive and dangerous doctrine. According to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, a will to destroy'.⁵ In popular culture, the nihilist is bad to the bone. The Joker, in the iconic Heath Ledger portrayal, doesn't care about money or infamy – he's much too bad for that, he doesn't care about anything at all. He just wants to cause chaos – if 'wants' is the right word, for perhaps it's better to describe him as a chaotic, destructive force of nature. He's as bad as you can get because he's a nihilist through and through, the ultimate threat – a criminal you can't reason with because he doesn't want anything. You can't empathise with his perspective to talk some sense into him, because that would suck you into the abyss of nihilism which has already done for that poor soul.

Now how is that supposed to follow from the view that there's no meaning of life? We mean 'follow' in the ordinary sense of, 'ah, it's raining – that's why he took the umbrella – it follows'. How is believing that life has no cosmic significance supposed to turn you into the Joker, or, more mundanely, one of those people in the dark corners of the internet who despise everything about life and are eager to tell you about it. Ordinary folk aren't nihilists, it is thought, that's only for life-hating and angry people; or perhaps for people in utter despair. Or in another sense the word is sometimes given, perhaps ordinary folk are actually

the worse culprits, because nihilism is an unthinking immersion in trivia which results when you don't care about the important things in life, or they've ceased to be important to you. In this chapter we'll focus on the more popular destructive / self-destructive senses (we'll see how the 'trivia' idea became involved in the history chapter). Since our aim is to persuade you of the attractions of nihilism, the first step is to understand why hate, subversion or despair have been thought to follow from nihilism, and why they don't.

The crucial reasoning which has given nihilism a bad name, we suggest, is as follows. If you don't think there's a meaning of life, then you see that absolutely everything about the way we live is based on a false premise. We have standards of moral behaviour – you shouldn't cheat or hurt people for personal advantage or sordid satisfaction, you should play by the rules which make things fair and pleasant for everyone. And with those standards in place, we strive to achieve all kinds of goals, ranging from making friends at school or buying your first house, to winning Olympic gold or unifying quantum mechanics with relativity theory. But that only makes sense if there's a meaning of life (or so the reasoning goes). If there isn't, then it's all pointless anyway. It doesn't matter if we turn our meaningless existence into a living hell. When the 'nihilist' realises this, they look out at a world of public institutions upholding illusory moral codes, and people earnestly pursuing pointless goals, and their natural response is contempt. These fools haven't realised that life is meaningless! They haven't realised they're wasting their time! When they observe life going on, it's like watching a drug addict desperately digging in the ground to find the stash they buried, when you know it's not there because you already dug it up and flushed it down the toilet. You despise their goal and know they won't achieve it, but they hope to achieve it and desperately want to, so you feel contempt for them.

Once the ‘nihilist’ has reached the contempt stage, the question of where to go next is something of a moot point; different ideas about what nihilism entails, often conflated with what it amounts to, spin off at this point. Perhaps the nihilist will get destructive. They need to do something about the contemptible world they live in, so they try to disrupt it, or just disillusion everyone else in light of the nihilist truth. But the problem with taking this stance is it must mean the nihilist has goals of their own: they want to destroy and disrupt. Why should they care? Caring undermines the reason they want to destroy, namely that people care about things but shouldn’t. Perhaps they just can’t tolerate the ignorance they see around them, in which case destructive nihilism emerges as a surprisingly high-brow and moralistic stance, one which shows deep concern for others to live in tune with the truth. But given what the truth in question amounts to, that makes no sense. A world of chaos in which you have to sleep with a gun under your pillow would be no more or less meaningless than our own. The sleepy businessman mindlessly trotting down to the office is being just as true to nihilism as the Joker. The businessman doesn’t know, we may suppose. But once we tell him he may still decide to carry on as usual; if nothing matters, why not?

Proactive nihilism of this kind doesn’t follow from the contempt stage, then. There’s no parallel between ‘he took his umbrella because it’s raining’ and ‘she’s trying to cause chaos because she’s realised the truth of nihilism’. If the contempt unleashes your destructive passion, that’s just because of what you’re like. Others might laugh with derision, feel their contempt mellow into pity, or not care enough to give it another thought.

So what about a more passive response? That seems more promising, because if nothing matters, realising this shouldn't inspire you to action. Let's suppose the nihilist simply feels their hopes and fears for life fade away. None of their old goals seem worth investing any effort into anymore. Since they've lost interest in everything that used to get them out of bed in the morning, should they commit suicide? That would show they care whether they live or die, and they're not supposed to care about anything. The 19th century German philosopher, Schopenhauer, made a similar objection to suicide: that it gives in to the passion you want to avoid.⁶ But that neglects the practicalities of the passive nihilist's situation, for if they're capable of one more pointless act of will, it will at least be their last. If they live, they have to continue observing the contemptuous human non-drama. And they will feel self-contempt too, because of the goals their biology forces on them – they will genuinely want to eat, for example. So although not entirely consistent, suicide is probably their best option – assuming that nihilism doesn't simply paralyse them, in which case they're doomed to die of dehydration. It seems that realising life is meaningless is not just dangerous, but positively deadly. What follows from the contempt stage is death.

If nihilism leads directly to doom then you can see how it picked up its bad reputation. But doesn't it strike you as bizarre to suppose that doom might follow from absence of cosmic meaning? That sounds like something a religious fundamentalist might say: turn away from God's meaning and you will face only doom and despair. You'd expect most people to disagree with that, especially atheists. So let's look once again at how we got to the contempt stage.

The reasoning is that since our goals and morals are premised on there being a meaning of life, then if there isn't one we're all wasting our time. But goals and morals needn't be premised on a meaning of life *for nihilists*. We can have mundane reasons for pursuing our goals and trying to be nice. We can go shopping so there'll be something in the fridge to cook for dinner, and the thought that this doesn't contribute to a cosmic plan needn't concern us in the least. The meaninglessness of life needn't make us feel it was a wasted effort, if the dinner tells us it wasn't. The reason we don't go around destroying things can just be that we feel for others and don't want to be arrested. You could ramp it up to an almost cosmic level by saying that the ultimate motivation is pleasure, or satisfaction, or the alleviation of boredom and suffering. But then you end up saying something so fuzzy that it can fuzzily apply to all the billions of reasons we have for doing things, like texting or brushing our teeth. Some of us nihilists just can't see the point, because we don't think there's a meaning of life and feel no need for a substitute like 'happiness' to make up for it. We do different things for different reasons.

Maybe you think this is too quick: if everything is pointless, how can individual activities, which are part of that 'everything', still have a point? Well, look at it like this. Suppose there are 360 people, each heading in a different direction corresponding to the 360 degrees on a compass; one is heading due North, another due South, etc. The group of all 360 people isn't heading in any particular direction, since the individuals are all heading in different directions. But the fact that the group isn't heading in a particular direction obviously doesn't mean the individuals aren't. As a matter of fact, they are. Likewise, if there's no meaning to human existence as a whole, that doesn't mean there isn't any meaning in individual human lives. As a matter of fact, there is. We project meaning onto our lives by wanting to do things, and by finding things important, boring, outrageous, unjust, beautiful, or whatever. Nihilists

can regard that as the real thing, the only meaning there is for us, although other animals must have their meanings too – when a wolf is expelled from the pack, that must mean something to it. If this kind of everyday meaning required ultimate purpose, then the truth of nihilism would be strictly impossible, and whatever it is, it isn't that. There's no contradiction involved in supposing that our reality lacks cosmic meaning.

Do believers feel motivation only because they believe in ultimate purpose? Some, possibly, but if any have actually achieved this feat then it can't have been many, given that believers text and brush their teeth too. The much more sensible and believable view is that the meaning of life provides the most important motivation for our lives as a whole, and that if we live good lives in accordance with our religion, then maybe, in some small way, we contribute to God's plan. That represents a big disagreement with the nihilist, but not an impenetrable barrier. Both can accept mundane reasons for doing things – reasons you might be really passionate about and goals you might pour all your effort into. It's just that the nihilist stops there, while the believer thinks there's something more important. The believer thinks the nihilist is missing out and the nihilist is at liberty to disagree.

A personal anecdote may help here. One of us (James) was once in a jazz-funk band that played at Christian music festivals, doing Herbie Hancock covers and the like; most of the musicians were Christians, and the leader was thinking of going into the priesthood. At one of these festivals, the conversation turned to religion, unsurprisingly, and James cautiously suggested that being an atheist can't be that bad, pretty much the same really. 'You can live', the bandleader replied, with genuine but light-hearted disparagement. It was a good answer. You can live, and that's all the atheist thinks there is to do, while the believer thinks the

atheist has turned their back on the divine plan, the most important thing of all. There's plenty of room for toleration here, because when it comes to life we're all in the same boat. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible is a clear statement of nihilism about mortal life, which it calls 'vanity of vanities'. 'All is vanity!' it declares, for in pursuit of our mundane goals we're in 'pursuit of wind'. The final conclusion is not nihilism, of course, for mortal life is being contrasted with the afterlife and God's plan. But for the nihilist, the eternal significance of an extra something they don't believe in needn't cast life in a negative light. They can like pursuing wind – and believers evidently can too, they just don't think that's all they're doing. Militant atheists, like the religious fundamentalists who inspire their intolerance, show little interest in this common ground, but rather focus on differences in their efforts to convert. Maybe that's because they're not nihilists, but rather believers in a secular meaning of life.

Only an extremist could think brushing your teeth is motivated by the meaning of life, and that if nihilism were true we wouldn't be able to do it. And yet it is a variant of this extreme view which makes nihilism seem dangerous. The variant is that we need to *believe* in a meaning of life to feel motivation. When the passive nihilist realises there's no such meaning, the rest of the world doesn't grind to a halt, only they do. Yet if we can be motivated to do things without that belief, there's no reason for the nihilist to do anything they wouldn't have done anyway.

Two major intellectual pressures lie in the background of the kind of confused thinking about nihilism we've been exposing. The first is religious teaching that the meaning of life is all that really matters. The second is the highly influential 19th century German philosopher, Nietzsche, whose interpretation of that religious teaching made it seem relevant to atheists.

He thought centuries of religious indoctrination had led people to invest all value and significance in an imaginary meaning of life somewhere beyond the clouds, making things in real life seem as if they're only worthwhile because of it. So when the brainwashing subsided, and the masses lost their faith, they'd find themselves confined to the real world which they'd already stripped of meaning, and where the 'all is vanity' of Ecclesiastes would now become the total 'all' of nihilism. This presented an opportunity for Nietzsche's aggressively anti-religious agenda, because then a better class of people could arise, guided by his teachings, to invest life with a meaning supposedly un-poisoned by life-hating religion.

It's a captivating story, but not very realistic. Christians pray to be 'delivered from temptation' – from the pleasures of the flesh, for instance, which is something Saint Augustine struggled particularly hard with – so the idea that even the most devout Christians manage to transfer all their passion to another world is pie in the sky. At most this is an ideal, something you try your best to achieve, *if* you interpret your religion that way. Nihilism might be a paralysing prospect for someone who achieved this, but such a person is the least likely to lose their faith. Ordinary people who lose their faith frequently manage to get over it and carry on. So why born-and-bred atheists would have a problem with nihilism beats us. Nietzsche was born in 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor. Atheism was bound to seem of great personal and social significance to him, and his characteristically exuberant response was to accord it, and himself, the highest possible world-historical significance.

Now nihilism is not strictly speaking a consequence of atheism, because if all of the world's religions have it completely wrong, human life might still be meaningful. Meaning might be built into the fabric of reality without there being any builder. This is not unfathomable, since

we are all familiar with inherently meaningful realities in the shape of thoughts: if you're thinking about Paris, the meaning of Paris is built into the nature of your thought. Reality might be one big thought, or something like that; but it's a weird idea and we're not recommending it. So let's just say that nihilism *basically* follows from atheism, in that given the kind of things most atheists believe about the nature of reality, they ought to embrace it.

The problem is they don't. We live in a world of non-believers trying to make their lives meaningful and believing that the meaning of life is love, peace, happiness, knowledge or power. It's usually innocent enough, but not always, such as if you think fame gives you a meaningful life – fame for doing anything, no matter how bad. Secular meanings have a disadvantage to religious ones in that they needn't even be supposed to be morally good, while the religious ones have the disadvantage of tending to promote moral inflexibility. Nevertheless, most people get along just fine with their personal beliefs in a meaning of life, secular or religious. The secular ones become more concerning, however, when they leave the personal sphere to try to emulate the religious ones more exactly, becoming beliefs in a destiny of mankind. This can take the form of a worldwide communist revolution, the perfecting of our species through eugenics, our supposedly inevitable future of merging with technology, or our need to create superior artificial intelligences to replace us. When science and politics get hold of the meaning of life in a secular context, it's at least as scary as the Spanish Inquisition.

Accepting nihilism is having a negative belief: you *don't* believe in a meaning of life. But not believing can be positive if the belief in question drives outcomes most of us have not chosen and do not want. It's positive when belief in an ultimate goal is thought to justify untold

quantities of sacrifice, disruption and risk along the way to it. Nihilists don't believe in a meaning of life, so they don't think we're destined to create paradise on earth. Things could go completely wrong – we could make ourselves extinct, as almost happened in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Things could take a very bad turn for the worse, as happened in World War II. Nihilism removes the justification for thinking everything is bound to turn out fine in the end. Far from being the disease it is often portrayed as, then, nihilism is a remedy for atheists. It fosters a healthy scepticism about big plans, especially when they concern the human race as a whole. Big plans can be great, but they're justified by the reasoning behind them and the popular mandate they receive, not the meaning of life. The bigger they come, the more reasoning and mandate they require, and your hunch about our inevitable destiny is not good enough, no good at all.

That's not all that nihilism has to recommend it, however, for it is a philosophical view. To describe yourself as a nihilist is to declare your lack of patience with the woeful scientific positivism that tells us we aren't allowed to ask questions unless our answers can be tested in a laboratory. That kind of attitude is well past its sell-by-date, for as has been realised for the best part of a century now, it completely undermines itself – it rests on the view that only statements that can be scientifically tested are significant ... which itself isn't a view that can be scientifically tested. All kinds of questions are worth asking, and the nihilist sees no problem in asking the same question of the meaning of life as religious believers, just giving a different, equally unverifiable answer – and none the worse for that. This process was as philosophically enlightening as for the religious believer, because now the nihilist can see their life in a cosmic perspective: an all-encompassing, meaningless one. You might call it a spiritual vision, but it's really just a philosophical one. It's something you might overlook your whole life, just never notice, and it brings a greater self-awareness with clear benefits.

Religion and atheism need to make up, and if atheists can stop feeling queasy about nihilism it could really help. We all need to live together and neither side is going away. Religions have embarked on the project of conversation throughout history, and with the advent of intolerant atheists, this is now very much a two-way process. But taking an aggressive, colonising attitude shows a lack of self-confidence which both sides need to grow out of. If life with religion is so much better, or more important, then religion will spread and atheism is not a threat. Similarly, if the arguments for atheism are good, or more accurately, if the arguments for religious belief are no good, then those open to rational persuasion will come around of their own accord. Both sides need to stop seeing the other as a threat and blaming all the ills of the world on them. Many crimes have been perpetrated in the name of religion, but with the advent of atheist totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, we've seen that both sides can be just as bad.

A positive development would be for atheists to take the next step to nihilism – the philosophical step. Both sides would then enter the same cosmic conceptual space, where dialogue becomes possible. And although calling yourself an 'atheist' may be factually correct, it defines you in opposition to religion. It is the desire to avoid this, among other things, which motivates the alternative terminology of 'humanism'. But that strikes us as a bit wishy-washy ('tigerism' isn't an option, we take it?). And it's too human-centric, in a world where we've just started learning to care more about the environment. Although not what's intended, a big game hunter might justify his treating animals as of no more significance than sport for humans in terms of his 'humanism' – the word would fit nicely. But the main problem with 'humanism' is that it sounds like a secular substitute for religion, which for

many is what it has become. And if it's going to be a proper substitute, it needs a meaning of life: one people make for themselves. But we can't make a meaning of life. Even if a popularly -mandated goal for humanity were to arise one day in the distant future, it still wouldn't be what we're here for, it'd just be what we'd all decided we want to do – and we might fail.

Nihilists enter the same conceptual space as the religious, seeing no reason to miss out, but they most certainly do not allow religious beliefs to frame their own, for then their nihilism would be a choice to ignore the best thing about life, or even to seal their own doom – so nobody in their right mind would opt for nihilism in a religious context. It's defined by the absence of a meaning of life, which is an idea that arose with religion, but which atheists have shown themselves very partial to as well, with plans devised ever since the 18th century Enlightenment for building heaven on earth. Nihilists believe neither in a meaning of life imposed by God, nor in one supposedly made by humans. Nihilism spans divides in a conciliatory and illuminating way.

Now you might think 'nihilism' is an odd choice for a word to try to rehabilitate, since it has already been claimed by two sets of proud owners: the amoralists, misanthropes and anarchists, and the 'culture critics' who use it to disparage modern life. It indicates belief in nothing where others believe in something; the first group don't believe in morality, people or law, while the second think our trivial contemporary lives reveal a lack of proper purpose. But just as these ideas belong to the vague *status quo* of current usage, so does the idea that nihilism is a philosophical doctrine connected with the meaning of life – otherwise you wouldn't have bought this book and read this far, we'd wager. And while it's true that

‘nihilism’ has had a negative connotation for most (not all) of its history, that’s only because it was viewed in a religious context. So if the connotation isn’t justified, we shouldn’t allow the confusion to live on. It encourages both believers and atheists to carry on fearing nihilism and acting accordingly. Until the word is reclaimed, its very existence encourages belief in a meaning of life. People who are positive about not believing in a meaning of life will hardly want the word used in a way that means: the terrible consequences of *not* believing in a meaning of life. Other people’s misunderstandings should not force us to invent a new word.

Do nihilists not believe in anything? The ‘in’ is crucial, since they can obviously believe lots of things. Well, in an innocent sense, they can indeed believe *in* things. They might believe in the fire brigade when their house is burning down, since they trust the firefighters will do everything they can. Or they might believe in their friend during a difficult period, since they believe he or she will have the strength to get through it. But nihilists do not believe in a destiny guiding us, or in the power of the human race to overcome all obstacles. If you are a nihilist, you might believe in people to the extent that you think that, probably, most of them are basically OK, and hope the ones you struggle to get along with would classify you that way too. But having seen through the most influential attempts to give overall significance and destiny to the human race, namely religious meanings of life, nihilists ought to be very wary when they encounter others. Succumb, and you may find yourself seeing us as out-of-control bacteria spreading havoc across our planet, because you have seen our true biological meaning. Or you may see us as an intelligence set to shed its biological form to emanate around the universe, because you have seen our true informational meaning. Or you may see us as a manifestation of free-market forces working their way through history as a replacement for Darwinian natural selection, because you have seen our true

economicmonetary meaning.⁷ That's the danger nihilism helps us avoid: the danger of allowing a non-moral substitute for the meaning of life to develop.

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¹ Wells, *Anticipations*, 340-3.

² Gertz, *Nihilism*, 188 (this was perhaps intended as a protest against the demand for a glossary by Gertz's publishers).

³ Jünger is cited in Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, 15.

⁴ Gillespie, 'Nihilism after Nietzsche', 80-100.

⁵ Pratt, 'Nihilism'.

⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1 (1818), 398ff.

⁷ For contemporary advocates of these three ideas, see Gray's *Straw Dogs*, Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near* and Ridley's *The Evolution of Everything*.