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The Objectivity of Nihilism

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Abstract

The discourse on nihilism in the German-speaking world continues to take its orientation primarily from Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism as a historical movement of the decline of values. This means that the aspects of nihilism that are not tied to specific epochs and cultures are not accorded due importance (I). In order to make a reappraisal of nihilism that does justice to these objective contents, I will present a classification of types of nihilism and of arguments that support it. The discussion of the typology of the principal meanings of nihilism points to a loss in relevance of conceptions that take their orientation from Nietzsche (II). The discussion of the arguments testifies to the importance of objective knowledge in the justification of nihilism (III).

I. Introduction

The discourse on nihilism in the German-speaking world continues to take its orientation primarily from Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism as a historical movement of the decline of values. In contrast, I will argue here for the relevance of the objective contents of nihilism. "Objectivity" means more than the independence of knowledge from individual factors such as attitudes, opinions, or beliefs. It also designates a feature of the description of states of affairs with an epoch-transcending and a cross-cultural character.

Anthropological definitions of the human, the irreversibility of modernization processes, and cosmic framework conditions—to mention just a few aspects from the recent literature—have a significance for justifications of nihilism that can be captured at best in part by conceptions that go back to Nietzsche.¹

However, Nietzsche's engagement with nihilism exhibits a complex structure that bears on different types of and arguments for nihilism that are not easy to classify. Sometimes it is

¹ Exemplary for the recourse to anthropological definitions is Marmysz 2003, for the irreversibility of modernization processes Brassier 2007; for the reference to cosmological framework conditions, see Smith 2003, Kanitscheider 2008, and Hansen 2012.

impossible to distinguish clearly between them or they are informed by opposing definitions. Nietzsche's view of nihilism is in part positive and in part negative. He regards it, on the one hand, as unavoidable, but also, on the other, as surmountable. However, describing the ways in which the current discourse refers to Nietzsche does not necessitate a global reconstruction of his understanding of nihilism. It suffices to focus on two moments that dominate the German discourse, even allowing that this is of course diverse: the moments of the *value-determination* and of the *historicity* of nihilism. Nietzsche's wide-ranging concept of value includes, among other things, epistemological, moral, religious, and aesthetic ideals, purposes, and rankings, all of which he regards as postulates.² Through the self-devaluation of "highest values,"³ Nietzsche argued, European nihilism was unfolding as a historical movement⁴ to which he wanted to oppose the "revaluation of all values" as a "countermovement."⁵ Even though Nietzsche regarded the forms assumed by nihilism as culture-dependent—he was aware of the peculiarities of Russian nihilism and described the differences between Christian and Buddhist nihilism⁶—he also assumed that the possibility of overcoming nihilism was subject to specific historical preconditions. However, his position on European nihilism remained ambiguous. Whereas the "countermovement" sought to create a non-nihilistic culture, his likewise future-oriented doctrine of eternal recurrence signified the "most extreme form" or the "completion" of European nihilism.⁷ The latter claim shares with the thesis of the objectivity of nihilism, which is in essence opposed to Nietzsche's evaluative and historical understanding, the view that nihilism has properties that are independent of individual or collective action.

Examples of the one-sidedness of the German discourse on nihilism can be found in

²Kuhn 1992, pp. 121ff.

³Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 12, p. 350 (NF 1887, 9[35]), translation from Nietzsche 1968, p. 9. Nietzsche's posthumous fragments are cited using the abbreviation "NF" [*Nachgelassene Fragmente*], the year of authorship, and the numbering of the editors of Nietzsche 1980ff.

⁴See *ibid.* pp. 211ff. (NF 1886/87, 5[71]).

⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 190 (NF 1887/88, 11[411]), translation from Nietzsche 1968, p. 3.

⁶On Russian nihilism, see *ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 127f. (NF 1880, 4[108]); on Buddhism, see *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 186, and vol. 13, p. 267 (NF 1888, 14[91]).

⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 12, p. 213 (NF 1886/87 5[71]), translation from Nietzsche 1968, p. 36, and p. 339 (NF 1887 9[1]).

the relevant lexicon entries on nihilism, which assume that Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism remains representative up to the present day.⁸ Thus, the article on nihilism in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* asserts that: "Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism has become increasingly widespread since the end of the nineteenth century."⁹ In the corresponding article in the second edition of the *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie* published almost thirty years later, Nietzsche's writings are introduced as the locus of "theoretical reflection on nihilism."¹⁰ That nihilism developed into a "dominant attitude toward life" in the twentieth century, it is claimed, is a development "triggered by Nietzsche's diagnosis of the 'devaluation of all values'."¹¹

The reappraisal of the discourse on nihilism presented in what follows does not claim to be based on an in-depth critique of Nietzsche's position and its still influential reception. Rather, it takes as its starting point a review of the relevance of current understandings of nihilism. It aims to demonstrate that the arguments for nihilism have objective content and to contrast this with conceptions that take their orientation from Nietzsche. The contemporary discourse fans out—not only in Germany—into a variety of types and related arguments. By "types" I mean concepts through which a variety of similar linguistic meanings are consolidated within main groups, and are thus subjected to a certain order. If nihilism is understood as a *doctrine of denial* [*Lehre der Bestreitung*], then nihilism has as many meanings as there are objects that can be denied on systematic grounds. Following the typology drawn up by Donald A. Crosby that has been mainly discussed in the Anglo-Saxon literature on nihilism, I classify the philosophical meanings according to their object domains.¹² Thus I differentiate between political, moral, epistemological, cosmic,

⁸ Riedel 1978; Goerdts and Müller-Lauter 1984; Strube 1994; Großheim 2003; Himmelmann 2008; Gerlach, 2010; Schwemmer and Wimmer 2013. Nietzsche also occupies a prominent place, though not a discourse-defining one, in non-German publications on nihilism. See, for example, Vercellone 1992, pp. 56ff.; Slocombe 2006, pp. 15ff.; Metzger 2009.

⁹ Goerdts and Müller-Lauter 1984, column 851.

¹⁰ Schwemmer and Wimmer 2013, p. 583.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 584.

¹² Crosby 1988, pp. 8–36. Crosby's classification is among the most comprehensive presentations and has been the subject of many discussions; see Carr 1992, Pratt 2001, Slocombe 2006, Storey 2011, Wallace 2011, Shahabi and Mojdegani 2012.

metaphysical, and existential nihilism.¹³ A variety of arguments have been offered in support of the in part mutually contradictory theories of nihilism represented within these object domains. Even though the arguments are often specific to a particular subject area or a theory, I will discuss them separately.¹⁴ On the one hand, this approach takes their in part plural applicability to different subject areas into account; on the other hand, it allows me to concentrate on the reference to forms of objective knowledge.

II.1 Types of Nihilism

That nihilism fans out into diverse types that must be taken into consideration when defending the thesis that it has an objective basis is presumably a reflection of the differentiation that marks the development of modern discourse structures. In addition, however, the wealth of meanings is also a reflection of the broad understanding of the concept presupposed by the definition of nihilism as a doctrine of denial.¹⁵ The first two types distinguished in the following discussion fall within the scope of practical philosophy; the next three fall within the scope of theoretical philosophy; and the final type falls within the domain of anthropology. The aim of the discussion is to isolate the types that are relevant for the discourse on nihilism and to relate them to Nietzsche's understanding.

(a) The concept of *political nihilism* takes up the use of the word in nineteenth-century Russian literature and politics on which Nietzsche also drew. According to this usage, political nihilism can be understood as a rejection of political structures and social authorities and of the social and cultural modes of understanding that support them. It is bound up with the aspiration to construct an alternative social order.¹⁶ I propose to ignore the limitation that the utopian character of this definition of political nihilism places on negation. Even though as a result the definition no longer does justice to nineteenth-century usage, it takes up the

¹³ Crosby's classification ignores metaphysical nihilism. Further types have been proposed in the discourse on the nihilism, to which I will refer in the footnotes and the concluding remarks. My discussion will be confined to the Anglo-Saxon, the German, and, via Vercellone (1992) and D'Agostini (2009), the Italian discourses on nihilism.

¹⁴ The separation between types and arguments follows a proposal of Crosby 1988.

¹⁵ I will discuss two narrower definitions of nihilism in section III.3.2.

¹⁶Crosby 1988, pp. 10 and 35.

twentieth- and twenty-first-century phenomena of nihilism which are aimed, not at transforming society, but at its *destruction*. Here I am thinking in particular of the connection between nihilism and Nazi rule made, for example, by Theodor W. Adorno and Karl Löwith.¹⁷ Anticipating the arguments for nihilism, one can already observe that political nihilism as the destruction of the social is the only concept for which no convincing justification of the associated conceptions is conceivable and which is not thematized by Nietzsche either.

(b) In contrast to political nihilism, the object of *moral nihilism*, which deals with justifications of morality (and therefore could also be called ethical nihilism), lies within philosophy.¹⁸

Whereas in the nineteenth century moral nihilism remained central to the philosophical denial of validity claims, today its thematization has migrated to a large extent into the academic disciplines where it occupies only a peripheral position.¹⁹ Nietzsche still sought to counteract the decline of values, which he attributed to the culture of decreasing religious faith, with a new moral nihilism.²⁰ The fact that moral nihilism has not met with social recognition is largely due to the fact that universalizable (non-egoistic) ethical conceptions have successively become established.

Because of the lack of relevance of moral nihilism, I will limit myself here to definitions that subdivide the heterogeneous group of meanings falling under this heading into amoralism, moral subjectivism, and egoism.²¹ *Amoralism* rejects all moral principles and postulates the possibility of a life beyond all morality (e.g. Marquis de Sade); *moral subjectivism* considers moral judgments to be individual and arbitrary matters (e.g. Nietzsche); *egoism* attaches more weight to the pursuit of one's own interests than to the interests of others (e.g. Max Stirner).

(c) *Epistemic nihilism* asserts the *relativity of the linguistic meaning of concepts and the*

¹⁷Adorno 1973, pp. 369-374; Löwith 1940.

¹⁸ D'Agostini (2009, p. 5) in contrast to Carr (1992, p. 18, see n. 29) also calls moral nihilism axiological nihilism.

¹⁹ Schröder, 2005, p. 255; Darwall et al. 1992, pp. 180ff.

²⁰Schröder 2005, pp. 23ff. Schröder's concept of moral nihilism, which is compatible with my definition, differs from Nietzsche's understanding.

²¹ I borrow this tripartite division, but not all elements of the definitions or the examples, from Crosby 1988, p. 11.

impossibility of knowledge.²² The classical locus for this type of nihilism is Nietzsche's posthumous fragments. In this context Nietzsche's criticism is directed primarily against the definitional power and the epistemic diktat of the sciences. However, one of the decisive changes in nihilism over the past century is that it demarcates itself less from the sciences than did nineteenth-century nihilism, Russian nihilism excepted.²³ Nevertheless, despite the increased attention paid to scientific arguments fundamental reservations are asserted concerning knowledge, a point to which I will return later. The following two types take into account the main forms of the revitalized nihilistic appeal to science.

(d) *Cosmic nihilism*, which Nietzsche thematized if at all only in passing²⁴ and historically was defended together with epistemic nihilism, takes as its starting point the *insignificance of human beings in the universe*. According to Albert Camus, for example, the cosmic irrelevance of human beings is reflected in the unintelligibility and strangeness of the universe.²⁵ By the same token, however, cosmic nihilism can also appeal to the findings of natural science. The expansiveness and emptiness of the universe, for example, are supposed to demonstrate the nullity of what invests human life with significance.

(e) Whereas cosmic nihilism refers to scientific knowledge whose claim to truth it either rejects or accepts, *metaphysical nihilism* sees itself as a purely philosophical doctrine (like moral nihilism). This form of nihilism denies *the existence of being or the divisibility of its elements*; in other words, it asserts the universal or limited existence of nothingness.²⁶ The spectrum of the variants that fall under this rubric includes as main directions themes from existential philosophy and positions in analytic philosophy. Martin Heidegger's concept of nihilism can be regarded as an outstanding example from existential philosophy. European

²² I subsume Slocombe's (2006) concept of *postmodern nihilism* under the epistemic type. Carr (1992, p. 17) limits epistemic nihilism to the denial of knowledge and introduces the new type of *aletheological nihilism* for the denial of truth, which (as in Richard Rorty) need not imply renouncing knowledge as such.

²³ See the references to the more recent literature in footnotes 1 above and 28 below.

²⁴ Among the relatively rare passages are Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 1, p. 759; vol. 3, pp. 467–69, and vol. 13, pp. 488f. (NF 1888, 16[25]). However, the cosmological meaning of the doctrine of eternal recurrence can also be understood in a nihilistic sense; see n. 7 above.

²⁵ Camus 1991, pp. 14f and 18f.

²⁶ Carr (1992, pp. 17f.) and subsequently Slocombe (2006, p. 6) also refer to this form of nihilism interchangeably as *ontological nihilism*.

metaphysics as a whole is marked for Heidegger by a progressive oblivion of being [Seinsvergessenheit]. “Metaphysics as metaphysics is nihilism proper”.²⁷ In analytic philosophy the assertion that empty worlds are possible or the assertion that fundamental objects are indivisible are referred to as metaphysical nihilism.²⁸

(f) The final type, *existential nihilism*, denies that life has meaningfulness: “existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) is devoid of meaningfulness.”²⁹ In the context of the discourse on nihilism it makes sense to distinguish between meaning or relevance [Bedeutung] and meaningfulness [Sinn]. *Meaning*, according to my proposal, is the expression of a connection between objects (things, states of affairs, events, etc.) in language. An object acquires meaning through its relation to other objects. The concept of *meaningfulness*, which presupposes meaning, opens meaning up to interrogation as to its “why” and “wherefore.”³⁰ Existential nihilism can be understood on these definitions as the assertion of meaninglessness [Sinnlosigkeit], which need not imply that human life is without meaning [Bedeutungslosigkeit des menschlichen Lebens].

Questions about the reasons and purposes of human actions do not admit of conclusive answers. A world endowed with meaningfulness requires the undiscovered, the unknown, and sometimes also the strange and the mysterious. On this conception, meaninglessness is not only a function of the lack of material connection, the dearth of linguistic comprehension, or the absence of reasons and purposes. It would also pertain, paradoxically enough, even if *all reasons and purposes were known*.

II.2 Concluding Remarks

Three types of nihilism—political, moral, and epistemic—have only secondary relevance for discussions of the objectivity of nihilism. Political nihilism cannot be justified in a convincing

²⁷Heidegger 1991, Vol. 4, p. 205 (emphasis in the original).

²⁸ Coggins (2011) was the first to present a comprehensive review of the numerous publications on metaphysical nihilism in analytic philosophy.

²⁹ Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 12, p. 366 (NF 1887, 9[60]), (translation amended from Nietzsche 1968, p. 318; see Crosby 1988, p. 35. Carr (1992, p. 18) refers to this form of nihilism as *axiological nihilism* (in contrast to D’Agostini 2009, p. 5; see n. 18 above).

³⁰ Blumenberg 2010, p. 79.

way; moral nihilism must be regarded as historically superseded; and epistemological nihilism has been discredited above all by the success of scientific knowledge.

The comparison with less differentiated typologies is conducive to evaluating the relations with Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism. Karl Jaspers distinguishes between a form of nihilism that *refers to values* as opposed to one that *refers to being*. Whereas the former rejects "all value and meaningfulness" and asserts that "reality lacks value and meaningfulness" (Jaspers cites materialism as an example), the latter considers reality to be "worthy of destruction" (Jaspers cites the example of Buddhism).³¹ Insofar as Nietzsche thinks that "belief in valuelessness" is an implication of nihilism,³² it makes more sense to align him with the value-related type of nihilism. According to my classification, the political, moral, and existential types of nihilism can be subsumed approximately under value nihilism. Although the cosmic and the metaphysical types need not regard being as worthy of destruction, they fall under the nihilism that refers to being because their object is the relation between nothingness and being. The epistemic type cannot be subsumed unambiguously under Jaspers's classification, because relativity of linguistic meaning and impossibility of knowledge may refer either to being or to values.

A related typology that also consists of just two classes has been proposed by John Marmysz. Marmysz classifies contemporary discussions according to whether they view nihilism as *a specific feature of a culture* or as *a universal phenomenon*.³³ Nietzsche's talk of "European nihilism" should be placed alongside the culture-dependent understanding. Applied to the classification of types, this understanding applies primarily to political nihilism and the non-egoistic form of moral nihilism.

Whereas the classification of the types of nihilism remains open for an understanding of nihilism that takes its orientation from Nietzsche,³⁴ it also provides initial pointers to its loss

³¹ Jaspers 1919, pp. 252f.

³² Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 12, p. 292 (NF, 1886/87, 7[8]), translation from Nietzsche 1968, p. 11.

³³ Marmysz 2003, p. 5.

³⁴ Kuhn 1992, pp. 132ff., presents a similar analysis of Nietzsche's concept of nihilism into domains. This analysis differentiates four groups of subject domains. The first includes religion, morality, and philosophy (similar to the moral and in part the metaphysical type). The

of relevance vis-à-vis divergent views.

III. Arguments for Nihilism

In this section I will examine the soundness of arguments that claim to justify nihilism on objective grounds. I will begin with the arguments that point back to the early history of nihilism and cannot be correlated unambiguously with the subsequent groups (God and reason). Then I will discuss the scientifically-based justifications (the place of human beings in nature, metaphysics) and conclude by addressing the lifeworld-based justifications (temporal existence, contingency).³⁵ Justifications that appeal to scientific knowledge are based on knowledge supported by arguments or on knowledge that is compatible with systematic observation or experimentally generated data. Lifeworld-based justifications, by contrast, are characterized by their immediacy and the obviousness of the understanding of their objects—that is, by properties that are at odds with non-intuitive and critical scientific knowledge. However, it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between the two groups of arguments.³⁶ The sequence in which they are presented should not be taken to reflect any preference.

Additional arguments are cited in support of the objectivity of nihilism, arguments which in part do not fit into the proposed arrangement. Thus Stanley Rosen's language analytical justification of nihilism as "permanent danger to the human condition"³⁷ can be assimilated only in part to arguments that appeal to reason. Arguments that refer to phenomena such as

second group has a scientific character (similar to the epistemic and in part the cosmic type). The third group deals with politics and economics (in part similar to the political type). Finally, the fourth group thematizes the domain of art, which I leave to one side because of its special status (*ibid.*, p. 188). Although Nietzsche classifies certain artistic movements as expressions of nihilism (*ibid.*, pp. 167ff.), at times he treats aesthetics as a force opposed to nihilism (*ibid.*, pp. 125ff.).

³⁵ Crosby orders the arguments as follows: God, the place of human beings in nature, suffering, temporal existence, reason, will, and other people. I do not use the third argument or the last two, in part because they are not convincing as arguments for nihilism, in part because they have only slight relevance or do not offer any new considerations by comparison with the other arguments. Crosby does not consider the metaphysical arguments or the arguments from contingency.

³⁶ Scientific knowledge remains dependent on life-world knowledge, which is shaped in turn by scientific knowledge.

³⁷ Rosen 1969, p. 206.

the transience of temporal existence, human suffering, or undesirable cultural trends³⁸ can be objective only in a narrower sense that includes the possibility of overcoming of nihilism. Although the discussion of the arguments does not make any claim to completeness, it does claim to cover in essence the full spectrum of philosophical justifications of the objectivity of nihilism.

III.1 God

That nihilism (in its various manifestations) is a consequence of a *culture of waning belief in the Christian Deity* inaugurates the discourse on nihilism cofounded by Nietzsche.³⁹ Nietzsche calls the death of God “the greatest recent event” whose “long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm” is at present not even foreseeable.⁴⁰ He fluctuates between the impression that the people of his time were already “straying as through an infinite space”⁴¹ and the assumption that the nihilism attributable to the decline of religion is a long drawn-out process whose destructive effect will be “accomplished” only in the future.⁴² The uncertainty over what to make of the fundamental change in religious attitudes that began in the nineteenth century and is not confined to Christianity continues to the present day. The spectrum of views extends from the declaration of a “post-religious era” (Herbert Schnädelbach) to the affirmation of a “spiritual reality of our age” (Charles Taylor).⁴³ However, there is broad consensus among the divergent positions on secularization that the nihilistic scenario that Nietzsche assumes on the grounds of the decline in religious faith has not materialized. It is not easy to assess the objectivity of this argument because it has as its object both subjective religious convictions

³⁸ See, for example, Crosby 1988, pp. 62ff. (transience of temporal existence) and 55ff. (human suffering); Kuhn, 1992, pp. 133ff. (the role of undesirable cultural trends in the reconstruction of Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism).

³⁹ Among the prominent historically influential sources of nihilism I include, in addition to the Russian nihilism, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's critique of idealism (see Gawoll 1989) and Nietzsche's nihilism fragments.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 3, p. 573, translation from Nietzsche 1974, p. 279.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 481, translation from Nietzsche 1974, p. 181.

⁴² On the insurmountability of nihilism, see n. 7 above.

⁴³ See Schnädelbach 2005; Taylor 2007, p. 509. Taylor's assessment is subject to Nietzsche's critique of the nihilism of religion.

and culturally overarching religious practices or their absence.

III.2 Reason

Among the arguments that appeal to reason are the justifications of epistemic nihilism. This form of nihilism has been justified in part based on the constitutive weakness of the human cognitive faculty, in part from the world's lack of an intelligible structure.⁴⁴ But since epistemic nihilism now plays only a subordinate role, I will limit myself to a fundamental argument that justifies the *principled reservations about knowledge* mentioned above.

The argument can be summarized as follows: even if there are good reasons for the truth and the well-foundedness of both our lifeworld-based and our scientific assumptions about the world, it cannot be precluded that they are false; at the same time, it is unlikely that a whole system of assumptions will turn out to be erroneous.⁴⁵ In addition, the claim to validity of knowledge could be relativized as a result in such a way that the world proves to be partially unknowable.⁴⁶ Because these reservations cannot be inferred from the cognitive faculty itself, but call for higher-level reflection, the concept of reason provides a suitable rubric for this argument. Insofar as the reservations about knowledge do not assert that knowledge is impossible, they do not justify epistemic nihilism. Rather, they provide the framework for the claims to objectivity of other types of nihilism.

However, together with the premise that a meaningful existence is impossible without world knowledge [Welterkenntnis], they serve to justify *existential nihilism*. "World knowledge" is based on the idea of a desirable, continually advancing, or even complete, knowledge toward which reason strives through its *capacity for transcendence* and which is capable of transcending any finite knowledge. But cognitive expectations geared to ideal claims are thwarted by the always necessarily limited contents of knowledge and by insight

⁴⁴Crosby 1988, pp. 76ff.

⁴⁵ Good reasons for the truth of hypotheses about the world are provided, for example, by the inference to the best explanation. That the falsity of hypotheses about the world cannot be excluded is shown (strictly speaking only for science) by K. R. Popper's falsificationism. And W. v. O. Quine argues that knowledge cannot be refuted as a whole.

⁴⁶ On the possibility that there is a material limit to knowledge, see section III.3.1.b.i.

into the reservations about knowledge.⁴⁷ As Marmysz has shown, this form of justification can be found in different cultures spanning different epochs. It contrasts with Nietzsche's theory of the development of nihilism, which postulates that despair about the unattainability of world knowledge represents an underdeveloped and temporally limited stage of nihilism.⁴⁸

III.3 Scientifically-based Arguments

III.3.1 Human beings' place in nature

The arguments that refer to human beings' place in nature differ from the two preceding and the following metaphysical arguments in their reference to experience. In contrast thematizations of nihilism that take their orientation from Nietzsche's approach, they reflect the change in attitude to scientific—specifically, natural scientific—knowledge. They not only support the thesis of the meaninglessness of human existence, but also the thesis of the irrelevance of human beings in the universe. In an attempt to structure the arguments I will introduce three subdivisions. The first concerns formal aspects, whereas the other two comprise sets of material arguments.

(a) Two opposing strategies can be distinguished for justifying nihilism *by recourse to the methods of natural science*. Scientific methods can be regarded as nihilistic because they do not capture phenomena of the meaningfulness of human existence.⁴⁹ However, one can also derive an argument for *existential nihilism* if, conversely, this limit of scientific methods is not presupposed. What would be the nihilistic implications of these methods if they were also potentially applicable to phenomena of meaningfulness? In the words of Max Weber, the notion of universal applicability would be associated with the belief “that *if one but wished one could learn*[a progressively more general knowledge of the conditions of life to which one is subject] at any time. Hence, it means that in principle there are no mysterious incalculable

⁴⁷ Jaspers 1919, pp. 255f.; Marmysz 2003, pp. 68-74.

⁴⁸Marmysz 2003, *ibid.* Neither Marmysz nor Nietzsche uses the expression “world knowledge.”

⁴⁹For example, Crosby 1988, pp. 46ff.

forces [...]. This means that the world is disenchanting.”⁵⁰ Since the era during which magical notions were refuted and discredited on scientific grounds must be regarded as in essence concluded, I propose to use the expression *transparency* to describe the nihilistic implication of belief in the progressive disclosure of the world by science. “Transparency” in this context refers to naturalistic knowledge of the conditions of human life that makes a claimed objectivity and is always open to revision. It corresponds to what Weber calls “general knowledge” and, together with cultural and subjective phenomena, also includes the question of the meaningfulness of life.

It is to be expected that in future the limits of transparency will continue to extend from middle-range objects to extremely small (submicroscopic) objects and to extremely large objects (on the scale of the universe). But where it need no longer be assumed that the world contains anything unknown, the world loses its capacity to ground meaningfulness.⁵¹ Formally speaking, the objectifying method of the natural sciences leads to nihilism.⁵²

(b) As a first set of material arguments for nihilism I would like to cite the *cosmological* arguments. Since the end of the last century they can be based on interpretations of new astronomical observations which lend these arguments virtually unparalleled weight. Nevertheless, they continue to depend on the validity of scientific theories that, on account of the aforementioned reservation concerning knowledge, have the character of in varying degrees well-founded hypotheses. Among the outstanding arguments for *existential and cosmic nihilism* I would like to highlight the following three, for each of which independent empirical evidence can be provided:

- i) *Limits of knowledge*: According to the standard model of contemporary cosmology, the origin of the universe lies beyond space and time, which came into existence together with the universe. Empirically speaking, this represents a potentially insuperable limit to knowledge which, in so far as it refers to the universe, tends to lend the whole system

⁵⁰ Weber 1946, p. 139 (translation amended, some emphasis added).

⁵¹ See section II.1f above.

⁵² On the nihilism of transparency, see Schiemann 2013.

of knowledge an insular character.

- ii) *Lack of meaning*: The assumption that there are chance events can also be interpreted as a limit to knowledge. It is a special form of knowledge—namely, causal knowledge—whose negation asserts the existence of chance. Whereas chance refers to what lacks a cause, and only to that extent lacks connection, lack of meaning refers to the lack of a relationship between events or objects as such, whether causal or non-causal.⁵³ Chance and lack of meaning coincide only from a causal perspective.

The evolution of the universe points to *noncausal conditions of emergence of matter and life*: Up to now the magnitude of and relationship between the constants of nature, without which life in the universe would be impossible, could be explained only as a result of chance events—or, alternatively, it could not be explained if chance was not admitted as an explanation. To this must be added the phenomenon of *chance in quantum mechanics*. As a fundamental theory of matter, quantum mechanics only admits assertions of probability about elementary processes. Hence, it allows a conception of matter for which all structure formation proceeds from individual events by chance.⁵⁴

- iii) *Coming end*: The counterpart of the conjecture that the past and present states of the universe are governed by chance are the scenarios of its future decline, which have become calculable only in recent times. Given the progressive increase in the luminosity of the sun, it is conjectured that the terrestrial biosphere will continue to exist for around one billion (10^9) years.⁵⁵ Recent measurements of a variety of astronomical phenomena point to the fact that the universe is undergoing an accelerated expansion that will lead to the dissolution of all matter into radiation in the—even in cosmic terms—very distant future (10^{32} years).⁵⁶ Hence it must be considered highly unlikely that the doctrine of eternal recurrence can be justified in cosmological terms, as

⁵³ See sections II.1f above and III.4.2 below.

⁵⁴ On cosmological and quantum-mechanical chance, see the introduction in Mainzer 2007. Even though they are fundamental for understanding quantum mechanics, here I ignore the correlations that exist between elementary particles.

⁵⁵ Bounama et al. 2004, p. 104.

⁵⁶ Among the numerous relevant accounts is Keller 2004.

Nietzsche still hoped.⁵⁷

(c) The second set of material arguments refers to the immanent history of the *evolution of life and culture* on Earth. This can be reconstructed is generally accepted as an established scientific fact. Human origins are becoming increasingly *transparent*. The more successful the reconstruction, the more meaningless the object of reconstruction becomes.⁵⁸ Similar arguments to those offered in support of the nihilistic interpretation of cosmology can be made concerning the role of *chance events*. Whereas the emergence of the conditions of life on Earth is presumably due to an improbable constellation of necessary factors (distance from the Sun, existence of and distance from the Moon, etc.),⁵⁹ the ensuing biological evolution may depend on the chance confluence of causal chains of events (mutation, extreme environmental conditions, etc.). Cultural change is also attributed to noncausal factors that govern the paths of development.⁶⁰

Finally, when it comes to the evolution of life and culture it cannot be ruled out *that humanity will become extinct long before it reaches its cosmological end*. Species are dying out in spite of the successful history of adaptation.⁶¹ The development of civilization is in part at odds with the preservation of life on Earth (e.g. weapons of mass destruction, anthropogenic climate change). However, these nihilistic threats are not unavoidable constellations, assuming that it lies within human power to eliminate their causes. Therefore, the associated arguments should be regarded as arguments for objective nihilism only with qualification.⁶²

⁵⁷Moles (1990) demonstrates that a universe expanding at an accelerating rate is incompatible with the doctrine of eternal recurrence. Theories that postulate a cyclical or an immutable universe are at present more difficult to reconcile with empirical data. They justify the thesis of cosmic boredom (see section III. 4.1a below).

⁵⁸Stamos 2008, pp. 215ff.

⁵⁹Schurz 2010, pp. 89ff.

⁶⁰ See Knöbl 2007.

⁶¹Schurz 2010, pp. 57ff.

⁶² Nihilistic interpretations of cosmology and the theory of evolution also play a role in justifications of *moral nihilism* (Smith 2003; Stamos 2008, pp. 222ff.).

III.3.2 Metaphysics

Conceptually speaking, metaphysical arguments are more broadly defined than metaphysical nihilism, since they have an *ontological and/or a priori character*. The concept of the a priori does not mean the independence of arguments from experience in principle but allows that they can be based on special experience. By taking a priori arguments into consideration, for example, skeptical arguments can also be included in the group of metaphysical arguments.⁶³ Within the group of metaphysical arguments, I want to highlight those that refer to nothingness.

Three main groups of meanings can be distinguished within the concept of nothingness.⁶⁴ First, nothingness as the epitome of all negation refers to what is negated in each case or, as the epitome of all destruction, to what is destroyed in each case, and hence has a *subordinate* status. This broad conception, as already noted, has shaped the definitions of the types of nihilism presented. It generally has a non-a priori character and only in exceptional cases does it have ontological content. Hence, it has only slight relevance for the metaphysical arguments.

Second, nothingness acquires an ontological meaning when it is understood in opposition to being and *is placed on an equal footing* with it. In ancient atomism, for example, nothingness or the void is accorded equal status as a principle with being or the plenum, to whose constitutive conditions nothingness belongs.⁶⁵ Arguments that appeal to nothingness in a sense opposed to being often play a role in analytic justifications of metaphysical nihilism and claim objective—because universal—validity.

Third, nothingness is a limit concept (Jaspers) that refers to what is not valid or does not exist, even though it is not possible to refer to nothing. Death is a paradigmatic example of this meaning of nothingness insofar as it has “metaempirical dimensions ..., or better, lacks any dimension at all” (Vladimir Jankélévitch).⁶⁶ As a limit concept, nothingness can be

⁶³Amoralism, for example—that is, the claim that moral principles are impossible—can be justified in skeptical terms; see Sinnott-Armstrong 2006.

⁶⁴On the different meanings, see, for example, Gloy 1983 and Sorensen 2012.

⁶⁵Diels and Kranz 1971 f., fragments 68 A37, A44 and A49.

⁶⁶Jankélévitch 2008, p. 6.

accorded *priority over* being for speculative purposes and can be endowed with objectivity.⁶⁷

Arguments that refer to nothingness can be described as the real nihilistic arguments. They occupy the largest place among the metaphysical arguments, but do not need to have either an ontological or an a priori character. Nietzsche no more understands nihilism in ontological terms⁶⁸ or deduces it a priori that he grounds it metaphysically in the sense introduced here (which is neither historical nor evaluative).

III.4 Lifeworld-based Arguments

III.4.1 Temporal existence.

Where temporal existence remains empty or comes to an absolute end it can provide a point of reference for objective justifications of existential nihilism.

(a) Empty temporal existence is called *boredom*. As a cultural phenomenon, it arises in tandem with modern subjectification processes and the accompanying transformation of attitudes toward religious belief.⁶⁹ Blaise Pascal's initial paradigmatic thematization of boredom already invokes nihilistic contexts: "Man's condition: Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety."⁷⁰ In order to escape the boredom that leads people to feel "their nullity"⁷¹ they seek diversion; however, this robs life of any enduring content and diversion is not to be had in unlimited amounts. Pascal already anticipated a connection that will probably become predominant in future: the more secure conditions of life become, the greater becomes the portion of life that is prey to boredom and cannot be filled with diversion.⁷²

The kind of boredom that overcomes people when diversion no longer provides relief Heidegger called "profound" boredom. In profound boredom the subject experiences the

⁶⁷ I use the expression "speculative" in the sense of the "speculative realism" advocated by Brassier (2007, p. 31) among others.

⁶⁸ Among the exceptions are Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 10, p. 207 (NF 1882, 5[1] No. 179).

⁶⁹ See Goodstein 2005 and Schiemann and Breuninger 2015.

⁷⁰ Pascal 1995, fragment 34, p. 6 (Brunschvig fragment 127).

⁷¹ Ibid., fragment 622, p. 208 (Brunschvig fragment 131).

⁷² Ibid., pp. 37ff. (Brunschvig fragment 139). For present trends and those pointing into the future, see Bellebaum 1990, p. 159 and Döhlemann 1991, pp. 186ff.

world and her existence as indifferent.⁷³ As Heidegger has shown, boredom involves a combination of *subject- and object-related elements*. It is both a “spiritual experience” and something that “comes towards us ... *from out of the things themselves*.”⁷⁴ In profound boredom the objective predominates from which the subject has no possibility of escape. Therefore, as conditions of life become increasingly secure in saturated societies, it is to be expected that the relevance of boredom as an objective basis of nihilism will increase.

Although Nietzsche identified social structures that elicit boredom, he did not grasp their nihilistic character. He regarded boredom both at the individual and the cultural level as a transitory phenomenon that under certain circumstances is conducive to creativity.⁷⁵

(b) *Death* is the absolute end of individual life, assuming that there is no afterlife. The alleged inescapability of death comes to the fore with the ebbing of religion and the rise of the lifeworld-based belief that death is the irreversible dissolution of an organism.⁷⁶ The lifeworld conviction is objective to the extent that it is based on direct experience of the death of others and assimilates scientific findings about the process of dying and death. Nihilism understands death as nothingness that devours the being of life. Insofar as death destroys the good of life, it is an evil.⁷⁷ In particular, death is “an always possible nihilation of my possibles which is outside my possibilities.”⁷⁸

The reference to death meets with more *fundamental objections* than any other argument for nihilism. The insight into the finitude of one's own existence, it is claimed, does not destroy meaningfulness. On the contrary, this insight founds meaningfulness in the first place and endows it with an effectiveness that transcends one's own lifetime. Because an

⁷³Heidegger 1995, pp. 74ff.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 83 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁵ Among the objective structures that cause boredom Nietzsche rightly numbers the organization of work (Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 2, p. 346); on the uses of boredom, see, for example, *ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 408. It not only passes in the life of the individual, but it does not have any future either: *ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 67f. (NF 1880 3[81]).

⁷⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach's insight that “death is thus the entire dissolution of your whole and complete being” was groundbreaking (Feuerbach 1967ff., vol. 1, p. 207; on this, see Bohrer 1997).

⁷⁷ Nagel, 1979, p. 3f.

⁷⁸ Sartre, 1957, p. 537.

eternal life could not ground meaning, it would succumb to boredom.⁷⁹ Nietzsche's understanding of death is also opposed to the nihilistic argument: without death "existence is worthless."⁸⁰ By contrast, the immortal gods would be prey to boredom.⁸¹

Against these objections must be cited, on the one hand, the familiar lifeworld perspective of the individual. From the individual's point of view, the destructive force of death erases the meaningfulness of his life entirely, even assuming that this is first constituted in the light of death. On the other hand, one could point out the categorical difference between the lifeworld experience from which boredom springs and immortality, which may never be experienced. To the extent that an eternal life is unimaginable, I cannot associate any familiar feeling with it.

The more certain the end of life became, the greater became the efforts to extend it. To date science and technology allow nothing more than marginal *increases in life expectancy*. It cannot be ruled out that the natural foundations of life are compatible with only very limited artificial extensions of life. If death were to remain the unavoidable end of life, it would acquire the same nullifying objectivity as the finitude of earthly and cosmic conditions of life. However, it seems to be analytically impossible to refute the possibility of life after death.⁸² But the increasing rationalization of our understanding of ourselves and the world will probably undermine the plausibility of belief in immortality.

III.4.2 Contingency

As the final group I would like to mention the arguments that appeal to the contingency of human existence. The concept of chance has a broader meaning than that of contingency.⁸³ Contingency affects *objects that are possible but not necessary, without necessarily occurring by chance*. Thus something can be conceived as contingent that happens to you

⁷⁹ Heidegger, for example, argues in *Being and Time* that death plays a role in constituting meaning; Williams 1978 argues that immortality would be tedious.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 8, p. 204 (NF 1875 11[18]).

⁸¹ Ibid., vol. 6, p. 226.

⁸² Wittwer 2009, pp. 25–40.

⁸³ I take my orientation from the relevant definitions presented by Stöckler (1999) and Brugger and Höring (1971ff.).

without your involvement and could just as well have been different or not have happened at all. Like chance, contingency is in a specific way at odds with meaning and hence with any associated meaningfulness.

The objectivity of contingency exerts its corrosive effects on meaning in the modern era through the increasing interchangeability and mutability of forms of life and modes of work. The biographies of members of particular social strata are becoming comparable and hence more independent from local strictures. But, at the same time, choices between different forms of life and forms of work have multiplied. The role of life choices that are not forced upon us but could have been different is becoming more important.

The correlate of the increasing importance of contingency in practical contexts, however, is that individuals have more control over their conduct of life and greater protection against the contingent intrusion of undesirable events. The more effective these possibilities for coping with contingency become, the more difficult it is to assess the importance of contingency.⁸⁴ This problem is already reflected in Nietzsche's critique of culture. Nietzsche fluctuates between the demand to recognize the contingency of modernity and the effort to curb this contingency through a more conscious conduct of life.⁸⁵

IV. Closing Remarks

Today the assertion of the impossibility of knowledge rightly plays a more minor role than it did for Nietzsche as a justification for nihilism by comparison with the appeal to *objective knowledge*.⁸⁶ The uncoupling of nihilistic discourses from discourses on the cultural consequences of changes in religious beliefs has contributed to this development (see sect. III.1). In the secular discourse on nihilism, an objective argument can be gleaned from the divergence between ideal knowledge claims and real contents of knowledge (see sect. III.2).

The objectivity of arguments based on science and lifeworld experience is compatible

⁸⁴ On the lack of meaningfulness of contingency and how to cope with it, see Lübke 1997, pp. 203ff.

⁸⁵ Nietzsche's doctrine of *amor fati* calls for recognition of contingency; for negative evaluations of the orientation to chance, see, inter alia, Nietzsche 1980ff., vol. 8, pp. 19f. (NF 1875, 3[19]) and 32f. (NF 1875, 3[64]), and vol. 9, p. 19 (NF 1880, 1[63]).

⁸⁶ See footnotes 1 and 28.

with the epistemic reservations that serve as presuppositions for these arguments (ibid.). Among the scientific arguments, the cosmological and metaphysical arguments deal with objects beyond human control, but not the arguments that refer to scientific procedures and evolution. From a methodological perspective, meaningfulness is destroyed by the belief in the transparency of scientific procedure (see sect. III.3). The arguments based on lifeworld experience can be classified in a similar way into those that acknowledge human scopes for action (contingency) and those that deny them (boredom and death). But whereas the objectivity of scientific knowledge has a methodological foundation (and hence is also at our disposal), the arguments based on lifeworld experience call for a separate justification. In the case of boredom I pointed out the importance of object-like elements. Although it is not possible to demonstrate the objectivity of death as the ineluctable end of life, it can be affirmed with a high degree of plausibility (see sect. III.4).

With this, the discussion of types and arguments has undergone a noticeable shift by comparison with *Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism* and the discourse that takes its orientation from this conception. I analyzed Nietzsche's conception in terms of the two moments of the value-determination and the historicity of nihilism. Among the different types of nihilism, political, moral and existential nihilism, and also in part epistemic nihilism, could be correlated with Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism (see sect. II.2). I left political nihilism to one side because it cannot be justified in a convincing way (see sect. II.1a). Thus the shift is, *first*, that the justifications offered by Nietzsche for moral and for epistemic nihilism have lost their persuasive power (see sect. II.1b and c). *Second*, the shift is justified by the weight of the justifications based on scientific findings to which conceptions oriented to Nietzsche cannot do justice (see sect. III.3.1 and 2). *Third*, existential nihilism derives its justification from the lifeworld-based arguments concerning boredom and death that do not play any role in Nietzsche's thematization of nihilism (see sect. III.4.1).

Translated by Ciaran Cronin

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