



Research Article

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Nihilism: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Now

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss how Nietzsche's critique of nihilism concerns the complicity between Christian morality and modern atheism. I unpack in what sense Schopenhauer's ascetic denial of the will signifies a return to nothingness, what he calls the *nihil negativum*. I argue that Nietzsche's formulation of nihilism specifically targets Schopenhauer's pessimism as the culmination of the Western metaphysical tradition, the crucial stage of its intellectual history in which the scientific pursuit of truth finally unveils the ascetic *will to nothingness* that motivates it. I contend that Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer anticipates current scholarly debates around the significance of the *nihil negativum* and offers a compelling objection against contemporary proponents of philosophical nihilism such as Eugene Thacker and Ray Brassier.

Keywords: *nihil negativum*, pessimism, ascetic morality, mysticism, Thacker, Brassier

Finally: what remained to be sacrificed? Didn't people have to ultimately sacrifice all solace, holiness, salvation, all hope, all faith in a secret harmony, in future bliss and justice? Didn't they have to sacrifice their very God and, out of cruelty against themselves, worship stones, stupidity, gravity, fate, nothingness? To sacrifice God for nothingness – this paradoxical mystery of the ultimate cruelty was reserved for the generation that is now emerging: all of us already know something of this.

—Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §55

1 Introduction

The gist of nihilism is that life objectively lacks meaning and purpose. Friedrich Jacobi employs the term at the end of the eighteenth century to diagnose an impoverished philosophical conception of God, what he sees as a soulless intellectual abstraction.¹ Nearly a century later, Nietzsche radicalizes the term's polemical bite in his critique of Christian morality. With the advent of modern secularism, nihilism corresponds to the cosmic specter of amoral meaninglessness that emerges from the death of God as a cultural value, “the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of a two-thousand-year training in truth, that in the end forbids itself the *lie of believing in God*.”² The Christian pursuit of truth itself brings about this event as it culminates in secular scientific enlightenment. Nietzsche disparages nineteenth-century atheists for failing to recognize the significance that this event has for the type of Christian morality that they continue to endorse. Schopenhauer is the prime example of such hypocrisy; his philosophy inaugurates the atheistic consummation of Western metaphysics that unveils life's purposelessness. Rather than embracing this, however, Schopenhauer has recourse to the ascetic denial of the will that characterizes his soteriological doctrine of finding transcendent release from suffering. His pessimism remains bound to a Christian moral interpretation of the world that ultimately negates life's senseless cruelty.

¹ Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 519, 544, 583.

² Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, III.27. Citations from the *Genealogy* refer to Essay and Section numbers.

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In this article, I discuss how Nietzsche's critique of nihilism concerns the complicity between Christian morality and modern atheism. I unpack in what sense Schopenhauer's ascetic denial of the will signifies a return to nothingness, what he calls the *nihil negativum*. I argue that Nietzsche's formulation of nihilism specifically targets Schopenhauer's pessimism as the culmination of the Western metaphysical tradition, the crucial stage of its intellectual history in which the scientific pursuit of truth finally unveils the ascetic *will to nothingness* that motivates it. I contend that Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauer anticipates current scholarly debates around the significance of the *nihil negativum* and offers a compelling objection against contemporary proponents of philosophical nihilism such as Eugene Thacker and Ray Brassier.

2 Schopenhauer's *Nihil Negativum*

Schopenhauer breaks with Kant by designating the will as the thing in itself that animates the individuated realm of phenomenal appearances. The process of becoming mysterious arises through the will's objectivization in matter, whose temporal structures he models after Plato's Ideas.³ At the same time, the will's endless, irrational striving undermines Plato's conception of a harmonious *Nous* that rationally orders the cosmos. Beyond the will, Schopenhauer posits an apophatic realm that in my view resembles Plato's good beyond being that Plotinus calls the One, attained by means of the will's mystical abnegation. Plato's metaphysics posits an eternal goodness from which the multiplicity of phenomenal beings emerges, sustaining their unchanging forms. The philosopher's desire for wisdom aims beyond the realm of becoming, comprehending nature's unchanging forms, and finally seeks to return to the unity of goodness by means of spiritual *askesis*. Plotinus takes this up in his Neoplatonic theory of emanation, substituting Plato's good beyond being with the One, which influences the Romantics.⁴ In Plotinus's *Enneads*, the distinction between subject and object emerges with the first emanation from the One, that of the Intellectual-Principle (*Nous*), constituted by the paradoxical unity of Being and Thinking. "Intellectual-Principle by its intellective act establishes Being, which in turn, as the object of intellection, becomes the cause of intellection and of existence to the Intellectual-Principle."⁵ In the context of his aesthetics, Schopenhauer's "pure, will-less, painless, timeless, *subject of cognition*"⁶ objectively grasps the eternal Idea of the will in a manner resembling the self-intellection of Plotinus's *Nous*, albeit reformulated in terms of the transcendental subject's self-cognizance as will freed from the Principle of Sufficient Ground but not the universal form of representation that pairs subject and object. His ethics, by contrast, evokes Plotinus's conception of the One as a mystical goodness beyond Being and Thinking.

Schopenhauer assimilates Kant's transcendental critique in his pessimistic conception of ascetic resignation. In Buddhistic terms, suffering exists within the realm of *Maya*, that of phenomenal appearances. Only the denial of the will's fettering desire, thereby returning it to a state of primordial nothingness or *Nirvana*, liberates one from the cyclical suffering of *Samsara*, or the cosmic manifestation of the noumenal will.⁷ He interprets the Buddhist conception of *Nirvana vis-à-vis* the tradition of Christian-Platonic mysticism, which reduces the illusory world of appearances to nought in light of what transcends it. Taking up and reformulating Kant's thesis of the *Ding an sich* and the unattainability of transcendent or metaphysical knowledge, Schopenhauer transforms the optimism of science into ascetic self-denial, culminating in the will's return to nothingness, as the instinct of life-affirmation turns against itself. This moment signifies the negation of appearances alongside the negation of the will, but a negation that is the basis of a religious

³ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:168–71.

⁴ See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 146–54.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.1.4.

⁶ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:222.

⁷ See Nicholls, "Influences of Eastern Thought," 184–5, 188–90. Singh, *Contemplation and Schopenhauer*, ch. 4, discusses Schopenhauer's relationship to Indian thought and challenges Nicholls's periodization of it.

idealization since Schopenhauer pronounces nothingness to be *holy*.⁸ The religious horizon of metaphysics is for Nietzsche most readily apparent in Schopenhauer's apophatic account of the *nihil negativum*, the transcendent Absolute that the saint attains by means of her ascetic denial of the will. Didier Franck remarks on this. "How is the denial of the will *possible*? How is the saint possible? This really seems to have been the question over which Schopenhauer became a philosopher and began."⁹ That is to say that the metaphysics of the will and German Idealism, whose inheritor is Schopenhauer, belong to the horizon of revealed religion."¹⁰ Nietzsche exposes this religious tendency as what grounds the scientific *will to truth* that culminates in nihilism. Schopenhauer's pessimism denies the value of phenomenal existence as he paints his godless picture of an eternally suffering world. Only against the backdrop of a world emptied of meaning does his portrait of the saint become meaningful, unveiling the soteriological aim of Kantian philosophy, namely, the construction of an ideal at once religious and ethical.

Along these lines, Schopenhauer's pessimism culminates in his conception of absolute nothingness (*nihil negativum*), which he distinguishes from mere negation (*nihil privativum*). The *nihil privativum*, as a privation of being, designates the negation of the world of appearances, their non-existence relative to being. In this sense, "nothingness" functions as a relative concept. "That which is generally assumed as positive – what we call *that which is* and whose negation the concept *nothing* in its most general meaning expresses – is precisely the world of presentation, which I have demonstrated to be the objectivization of will, its mirror."¹¹ While the *nihil privativum* inverts this positive presentation of the world, which now appears as nothing, the *nihil negativum* corresponds to the personal state of salvation that results from the denial of the will. The two go hand in hand, since one witnesses the world's nullity only through the will's denial. "[W]hat remains over after the nullification of the will, for all those who are still full of will, is indeed nothingness. But also conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this our so very real world with all its suns and galaxies – is nothing."¹² Simone Weil formulates an identical insight in the context of a Buddhist "extinction of desire" that, like Schopenhauer, she interprets through the lens of Christian mysticism. "The good seems to us as a nothingness, since there is no *thing* that is good. But this nothingness is not unreal. Compared with it, everything in existence is unreal."¹³ This perspective nullifies the existence of phenomenal reality; nothingness, in the sense of the *nihil negativum*, designates the truly real, in contrast to which the phenomenal world manifests a privation of reality. Hence, "a reversal of standpoint, if it were possible for us, would allow the signs to be switched, and display that which has being for us as nothing and the former nothing as that which has being."¹⁴ We can consider the relative nothingness of the *nihil privativum* in two different ways. From the perspective of "those who are still full of will," the will-lessness of the ascetic appears as a privation of reality, while from the perspective of the will-less ascetic, this privation applies instead to the world as will and representation. The saint attains this latter perspective in relation to the *nihil negativum* that she experiences through the denial of the will, but there is little scholarly consensus concerning its exact status.¹⁵

⁸ Berman, "Schopenhauer and Nietzsche," 186, denies the religious aspect of Schopenhauer's ethics. "[T]here is no possible salvation or redemption. This has been cut off by Schopenhauer's atheism. All that seems to remain is nihilism and the ascetic quest for nothingness." But Schopenhauer employs the terms blessed (*selig*), blessedness (*Glückseligkeit*), and holiness (*Heiligkeit*) in the context of achieving spiritual salvation (*Heil*) or redemption (*Erlösung*) through ascetic self-denial, mainly accomplished by saints.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §45.

¹⁰ Franck, *Shadow of God*, 70.

¹¹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:475.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1:478.

¹³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 13. Like Schopenhauer, Weil desires to exit the imaginary "dream world" (p. 95) of Maya by being "carried beyond the will" through "penal suffering" (p. 88). Though Gustave Thibon stresses Weil's "abrupt and final refutation" (p. xx) of a pessimism like Schopenhauer's, the passage to which he refers claims that "we must attain to a knowledge of a still fuller reality in suffering which is a nothingness and a void" (p. 84). This aligns with Schopenhauer's mystical conception of redemptive suffering. See Mannion, "Schopenhauer and Christianity."

¹⁴ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:476.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, ch. 7.

Schopenhauer formulates his conception of the *nihil negativum*, over against the *nihil privativum*, in relativistic terms, while seemingly referring to a non-relative concept. While we can think of the concept of nothingness only in the privative sense as what *is not* relative to *what is*, we cannot properly *think* of the concept of a nothingness that transcends the distinction between being and nonbeing in a non-relative, absolute sense, since it ceases to have any communicable meaning. Julian Young clarifies that while the *nihil negativum* refers to the transcendent Absolute, as a communicable concept it still always operates in a relative sense, a point that Schopenhauer states explicitly in the Second Volume of *Will and Presentation*.¹⁶ “If will were *the* thing in itself simply and absolutely, then this nothing would also be something *absolute*, instead of turning out for us precisely there as expressly *relative*.”¹⁷ Indeed, Schopenhauer contextualizes the concept in relation to Plato’s argument in the *Sophist*, according to which nothingness refers to the relative difference between beings rather than to anything in itself.¹⁸ This supports Young’s view that Schopenhauer refers us to what lies beyond the will, which accounts for the possibility of the will’s abolition, and which we can only conceive negatively in terms of its difference from the will. The *nihil negativum* designates the relative nothingness of the will in relation to a more deeply hidden essence and thus functions as the *nihil privativum* of the will itself.

In Young’s surprising view, we must no longer regard the will as the true thing in itself,¹⁹ which now resembles an indefinable Absolute that Schopenhauer construes as nothingness only relatively in relation to the will. On my reading, Schopenhauer’s conception of the Absolute – the will’s return to which “is designated by the terms ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God,”²⁰ transcending the distinction between subject and object, knower and known – aligns with the “demonic excess” of Plato’s good beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*).²¹ Many passages support this mystical–Platonic interpretation.

All this is accordingly finite existence whose opposite would be conceivable as infinite, as exposed to no attack from without [in other words, indestructible], or as requiring no help from without, and therefore as ... in eternal rest and calm ... without change, without time, without multiplicity or diversity, the negative knowledge of which is the keynote of Plato’s philosophy. *Such an existence must be that to which the denial of the will-to-live opens the way.*²²

This position further aligns with the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius.

[T]his [theology] consists merely in the explanation that all the predicates of God can be denied but not one can be affirmed, because he resides above and beyond all being and all knowledge, what Dionysius calls *epekeina*, ‘on yonder side’ and describes as something wholly and entirely inaccessible to our knowledge. This theology is the only true one; but it has no substance at all. Admittedly it says and tells us nothing, and it consists merely in the declaration that it is aware of this and cannot be otherwise.²³

¹⁶ Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 35. “Salvation ... demands that one should have ‘stepped outside the phenomenon’, that one should have transcended, ‘abolished’, the self and the world ‘as will’. But if the thing in itself were will, then to have transcended the will would be to have ‘passed over into empty nothingness’: ‘If the will were positively and absolutely the thing in itself, then this nothing would be *absolute*’. As it is, however, the nothingness that is beyond the will is only a ‘*relative* nothingness’: only relative to ‘our knowledge’ can it be said that there is nothing beyond the will.”

¹⁷ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:224.

¹⁸ “Since we showed that the nature of *the different* is, chopped up among all beings in relation to each other, we dared to say that *that which is not* really is just this, namely, each part of the nature of the different that’s set over against *that which is*” (*Sophist*, 258e).

¹⁹ My discussion concentrates on the metaphysical–ethical status of Schopenhauer’s *nihil negativum*, rather than contributing to the ongoing debate concerning the status of the will as the thing in itself, on which see e.g. Özen, “Ambiguity in Schopenhauer’s Doctrine,” who highlights Schopenhauer’s overall inconsistency. “I believe any attempt to give a coherent, consistent account of Schopenhauer’s thought as a whole is inevitably bound to encounter difficulties because Schopenhauer’s writings are riddled with irreconcilable passages concerning the thing-in-itself. This is why, I suggest, Schopenhauer’s multiple contrary views about the thing-in-itself leave any effort to reconcile them and reach a univocal representation of his thought a doomed task” (pp. 253–54).

²⁰ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:476.

²¹ Plato, “*Republic*,” 509b–c.

²² Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 2:257. Cited with italics from Özen, “Ambiguity in Schopenhauer’s Doctrine,” 273.

²³ Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, 3:376. Cited from Mannion, “Schopenhauer and Christianity,” 407–8.

In his interpretation of the *nihil negativum*, Young seems implicitly to adopt a Platonic conception of the one, eternal goodness that aligns with an ontology of Absolute Presence. He refers to the in-itself beyond the will as an “ultimate level of being,”²⁴ “the transcendent plane of being” that is finally one:

the mystic is right in believing that the ultimate reality is “one.” And he is right, too, in believing that it offers genuine salvation. The reason for this is that since willing, the cause of suffering, requires a distinction between the subject and object of willing it requires plurality. Hence, at the ultimate level of reality, there can be no willing – another nail in the coffin of the view that Schopenhauer claims to how the world in itself to be will – and hence no suffering.²⁵

However, Young’s characterization of the ultimate reality beyond the will remains ambiguous as it also seems to depart from a Platonic model of transcendence. In the passage above, Young refers to the mystic’s “consciousness of the identity of one’s essence with that of all things, or with the core of the world,”²⁶ an experience designated by what Schopenhauer troublingly calls “pantheistic consciousness.”²⁷ Such consciousness parallels the religious insight into the universal *will for life* in its oneness, since the road to perfect will-lessness entails one’s compassionate cognizance “that the in-itself of [one’s] own phenomenon is also that of others, namely, the will for life that constitutes the essence of every single thing and lives in all of them, indeed that this extends even to animals and the whole of nature.”²⁸ While Schopenhauer describes the mystic’s union with God in terms of a “pantheistic consciousness,” his rejection of pantheism furthermore limits this descriptor to the unity of the will for life that the *nihil negativum* transcends.²⁹ It is unclear where this leaves us, since he also dismisses the fanciful flight of idealists who have recourse to “such bare negations” as the *Absolute*, the *Infinite* and the *Supersensible*, referring to “the dark ground [*Grund*], primal ground [*Urgrund*], Unground [*Ungrund*]” as mere “twaddle.”³⁰ Schopenhauer is thus inconsistent on whether the unity of all things refers to the will for life or that which transcends it, especially since the latter aligns with the idealist notion of a primal ground. Patrick Gardiner anticipates Young’s account of Schopenhauer’s mysticism, of which he distinguishes two distinct aspects.

One of these, mystical awareness, involves simply a true insight into the inner nature of the phenomenal world considered as a whole, and into our own natures as elements of and participants in that world ... On the other, while mystical awareness presupposes and springs from insight of the sort just described, it is itself to be understood as comprehending some ‘deeper’ apprehension, about which, however, nothing can be significantly thought or said.³¹

Mysticism in the first sense refers to the cognizance of the *will for life*, though Schopenhauer does not consistently distinguish this from mysticism in the second sense. Young fails to account for this confusion and appears to replicate it.³² The conflation continuously mars Young’s account as he incoherently equates the “‘pantheistic’ vision of the unified divinity of all things”³³ with a reality transcendentally beyond the world.³⁴

Eugene Thacker proposes a different conception of Schopenhauer’s *nihil negativum*, whereby this term refers not to something beyond the will, but rather to its absolute, non-phenomenal essence. While the *nihil privativum* refers to the nullity of phenomena relative to the will, to the transience of the world as representation, the *nihil negativum* refers to the will in itself apart from representation.

²⁴ Young, *Willing and Unwilling*, 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:683.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:682.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:432.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:719–20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:324.

³¹ Gardiner, *Schopenhauer*, 299. Cited from Atwell, *Character of the World*, 215 n. 58.

³² Young’s description of mystical oneness remains unchanged in *Schopenhauer*, 198; *Philosophical Biography*, 84–6. In *Schopenhauer*, 97–9, 201–3, he seems to address the confusion by distinguishing two unique senses of the thing in itself, but this only compounds the problem. See Özen, “Ambiguity in Schopenhauer’s Doctrine,” 261–7.

³³ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 201.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

Schopenhauer suggests that the Will-to-Life is nothingness for a further reason, which is that, in itself, the Will-to-Life indicates that which is never manifest, that which is never an objectification of the Will, that which is never a Will for a Representation. To the relative nothingness of the *nihil privativum* there is the absolute nothingness (*absolutes Nichts*) of the *nihil negativum*. While Schopenhauer is himself opposed to the post-Kantian Idealists, he is united with them in his interest in the concept of an Absolute, albeit one paradoxically grounded in nothingness. His contribution is to have thought the Absolute without resorting to the ontology of generosity and its undue reliance on romantic conceptions of Life, Nature, and the human. To the negative ontology of life, it would seem, therefore, that there is a kind of *meontology* of life.³⁵

For Thacker, the nothingness of the will is paradoxical in its transcendence, for it immanently nullifies the will to life. It seems to me that this emptiness permeates existence in a way comparable to the atomist's void, manifesting the "cosmic indifference" of "that which is fully immanent yet absolutely inaccessible."³⁶ The Absolute, that is the nonrepresentational basis of representation, divorces life from within life, evoking a vantagepoint that is "radically unhuman"³⁷ and anti-anthropocentric, and also anti-Platonic, since the Absolute is "grounded in nothingness" rather than Platonic goodness. In this sense, for Thacker, Schopenhauer offers a *meontology* of life. This interpretation initially clarifies the confusion surrounding the obscure distinction between the *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum* in a more satisfying way than Young's does, since it avoids undermining Schopenhauer's central conception of the will as the thing in itself.³⁸ Instead, the will is the sole true substance, whose reality at once reveals and conceals itself under two distinct aspects. Under the aspect of its objectivization in the realm of phenomenal appearances the will amounts to the *nihil privativum*, while under the aspect of its nonrepresentational, inconceivable essence the will amounts to the *nihil negativum*.

Thacker attempts to strip Schopenhauer's *nihil negativum* of its moral fundament by situating it in the context of his godless metaphysics. Thacker's defence of Schopenhauer's *nihil negativum* highlights the will's unfathomable persistence, which blatantly contradicts Schopenhauer's ethical-religious conception of its extinction, instead explaining his mysticism in metaphysical terms. In doing so, Thacker cleverly obscures the moral basis of Schopenhauer's pessimism.³⁹ While Thacker's specific emphasis on the will's scientific impenetrability aligns with Schopenhauer's critique of *morphology* and *etiology* that supports his metaphysics of the will,⁴⁰ Schopenhauer's conception of the *nihil negativum* refers to the mystical transcendence of the will from an explicitly ethical standpoint. Similarly, we cannot easily square the anti-anthropocentric implications of Thacker's argument – its "radically unhuman aspect"⁴¹ – with Schopenhauer's anthropic vision of the world as the "macrohuman" (*Makranthropos*): "it is obviously more correct to teach an understanding of the world in terms of the human being than of the human being in terms of the world; for we have to explain what is given in a mediate way, hence the given of external perception, in terms of what is given immediately, hence self-consciousness."⁴² It is worth noting that this position critically undermines Schopenhauer's own metaphysics, according to which self-consciousness

³⁵ Thacker, "Darklife," 23.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁸ See e.g. Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:9, 149–50, 2:262–3, 68, where he stresses the importance of his use of the term will to designate the thing in itself, as opposed to Kant's obscuration of the concept. He explicitly rejects the unknowable character of Kant's thing in itself as an object independent of a subject and denies that the will is an "object" at all (1:33, 43, 217), further contradicting Young's argument.

³⁹ See Cartwright, "Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy," 118–28; Janaway, "Moral Meaning of the World."

⁴⁰ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:131–6. Thacker takes extremophiles (e.g. microbes that flourish without sunlight or oxygen) as examples of life's enigma, whose discovery increases the likelihood of extra-terrestrial life of this sort. Another Schopenhauerian, Houellebecq, *Interventions*, 62–3, contemplates the potential discovery of fossilized microbes on Mars (almost verbatim from *Elementary Particles*, 102–4), though he considers the extinction event as a boon. For him, the discovery would not display life's enigma so much as its banality. On Houellebecq's indebtedness to Schopenhauer, see Houellebecq, *Presence of Schopenhauer*; Howard, "Houellebecq's Educator."

⁴¹ Thacker, "Darklife," 21.

⁴² Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:719.

emerges with the brain, accidentally from matter.⁴³ However, the crucial distinction between the phenomenal realm of appearances, conditioned in space and time, and the causally unconditioned realm of noumenal will exists only for the consciousness that represents reality. In §4 of his unpublished essay “On Schopenhauer” (1867–68), Nietzsche points out that the will must then already possess an intellect that distinguishes it from phenomena – contradicting both the will’s irrational blindness and the accidental origin of consciousness – or no phenomena could exist from which the intellect might emerge, since only the will as pure thing in itself would exist.⁴⁴ “But an intellect exists: consequently it could not be a tool of the world of appearance, as Schopenhauer would have it, but it would be the thing-in-itself, i.e. the will.” Indeed, Schopenhauer can only explain the world in human terms, as *Makranthropos*, to the detriment of his metaphysical will, indelibly stamped by the intellect that conceives it.

Against Thacker’s anti-anthropocentric speculations, I contend that the transcendence of the *nihil negativum* is on Schopenhauer’s account only a possibility for human beings, since one achieves it by means of the will’s immanent self-emptying into nothingness. How else could one deny the will, if not in the world, through the human agony of its crucifixion? “Its self-cognizance and consequent decisive affirmation or denial is the single event in-itself.”⁴⁵ Human consciousness mediates the single ethical event of the will’s affirmation or denial that corresponds to “the crucified Savior, or else the crucified thief, depending on how it decides; consequently, my ethics is also altogether in agreement with Christian ethics, to the extent of its highest tendencies, and no less with that of Brahmanism and Buddhism.”⁴⁶ Schopenhauer introduces the *nihil negativum* within the religious framework of his ethics, and for this reason, it poses problems for his atheistic metaphysics of the will where Thacker attempts to allocate it. The road to salvation begins with a recognition of the *nihil privativum*, which one achieves through the consciousness of life’s nullity, and transitions into a realization of the *nihil negativum*, which one achieves through the immanent movement of the will’s ascetic self-transcendence.⁴⁷ This latter formulation is paradoxical insofar as the will’s self-annulment seems to imply, as Young argues, something beyond the will, which the *nihil negativum* only designates in a relative sense. Thacker clarifies that the will’s self-transcendence is paradoxically immanent to the cosmic will itself, and rather than pointing somewhere beyond it, points to the nothingness of will without representation, what seals itself off from human experience.⁴⁸ This initially seems promising. But if will were already in itself will-lessness, if the world were saturated with the immanence of its own transcendence, then the cosmos would be blessed and there would be no reason to deny it, and consequently, no reason to be a pessimist.⁴⁹ Thacker attempts to assimilate Schopenhauer to his own contemporary brand of nihilism but only distorts Schopenhauer’s ethics in the process and compounds the incoherence of his metaphysics.

I agree with Young that the *nihil negativum* corresponds to something beyond the will, referring to a relative rather than absolute nothingness. Given Schopenhauer’s references to Plotinus and Erigena,⁵⁰ the incomprehensibility of blessed nothingness approximates Plato’s good beyond being and Plotinus’s One. Contra Thacker, Schopenhauer confirms that the *nihil negativum* is not “absolutely nothing,” since it must not “be nothing from every possible standpoint and in every possible sense,” but only appears so due to the

⁴³ “Will, as the thing in itself, constitutes the inner, true, and indestructible essence of a person; yet in itself it is without consciousness. For consciousness is determined by the intellect, and the latter is a mere accident with respect to our essence... [W]e find will as the enduring substance, the intellect by contrast, conditioned by its organ [brain], the variable accident” (Ibid., 1:xxix [2:227, 2:280]). Hence, “the world as presentation emerges merely *per accidens*” (2:720). See also 1:194, 2:310–32.

⁴⁴ See Janaway, “Nietzsche’s Educator,” 19; Porter, *Invention of Dionysus*, 70.

⁴⁵ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:227.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2:721.

⁴⁷ More precisely, recognition of life’s nullity compels one to the asceticism that further intensifies such recognition. It is useful to distinguish these stages of mystical insight even if they do not conform to a rigid sequence.

⁴⁸ Young, *Schopenhauer*, 200, clarifies his position. “To put the point in philosopher’s jargon, that which transcends empirical reality is an *epistemological* but not an *ontological* nothing,” whereas for Thacker it is precisely *meontological*.

⁴⁹ This would correspond to a more Buddhistic disposition, which Schopenhauer did not adopt, according to Thacker, “Introduction,” 7.

⁵⁰ For example, Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:681. See Thacker’s discussion of these thinkers in *After Life*, 25–75.

“limitation of our standpoint,” through which we can only achieve “a wholly negative cognizance of it.”⁵¹ Thacker’s interpretation runs up against passages that support Young’s, wherein the *nihil negativum* points to “the essence of things before or beyond the world, and consequently *beyond will* (italics added),”⁵² referring to “the infinitely preferable repose of blessed nothingness.”⁵³ Here Schopenhauer confirms Young’s view that since willing entails a distinction between the subject and object of willing, no will exists before or beyond the world, that is without representation. This clarifies his earlier statement that “the [world] will accompany will as inseparably as its shadow accompanies a body; and if will exists, so too life, the world will exist.”⁵⁴ Schopenhauer suggests not only that the will cannot be objectified without representation, but also that the world as representation necessarily accompanies the will’s existence.⁵⁵ But this undermines his overall conception of the will as the thing in itself,⁵⁶ whose vacillating incoherence poses different dilemmas for both Thacker and Young. Young’s interpretation contradicts Schopenhauer’s explicit formulation of the will as the thing in itself, and Thacker’s interpretation incoherently conflates the *nihil negativum* – which Schopenhauer explicitly associates with the denial of the will – with the *will to life*. We also saw that Young inadvertently falls prey to this conflation himself. In the next section, I offer an explanation for why this type of confusion emerges from Schopenhauer’s philosophy, specifically in light of Nietzsche’s interpretation of it.

3 Nietzsche Contra Schopenhauer

While Thacker embraces Schopenhauer’s bleak, enigmatic and revolutionary worldview as a form of “cosmic pessimism,”⁵⁷ Nietzsche famously points out the Christian morality that underpins it as part of his critique of nihilism. In my view, this critique remains valid against anyone who would attempt to appropriate Schopenhauer’s pessimism without acknowledging its moral foundation. On my reading of Nietzsche, the saint’s perspective of the world as a privation of being pushes the ascetic logic of Christian morality to its most extreme conclusion, since Schopenhauer views the world as essentially something evil.⁵⁸

[I]f one would conduct the most stubborn optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, and chambers of surgical martyrdom, through prisons, torture chambers and slaves’ quarters, over battlefields and scenes of execution, then open up to him all the dark dwellings of misery where it shuns the glances of cold curiosity, and finally let him glance into the tower of Ugolino’s starvation, then surely he too would in the end see what sort of *meilleur des mondes possible* this is. Where else, after all, did *Dante* get the material for his hell than from this our actual world? ... By contrast, when he came to the task of depicting heaven and its pleasures, he was confronted with an insuperable difficulty; for our world simply offers no materials at all for such a thing.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:681.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2:718.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2:716.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:326.

⁵⁵ For a defence of this reading that refines Young’s position, see Atwell, *Character of the World*, ch. 5. For example, in passages such as *Will and Presentation*, 1:193, we see how the mirror of representation reflects the will’s darkest, most impenetrable striving, while Schopenhauer’s description of the *nihil negativum* conversely foregoes this schema. Staten, “*Tragedy Reconstructed*,” 19 n. 12, applies this insight to his reading of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*.

⁵⁶ Schopenhauer clearly postulates the will’s independence from the world. For example, discussing music as a direct copy of the will, he writes that it “is also entirely independent of the phenomenal world, completely ignores it, could even to a certain extent exist if the world were not there (italics added)” (*Will and Presentation*, 1:307–8).

⁵⁷ Thacker, “Darklife,” 21.

⁵⁸ Cartwright, “Schopenhauer’s Moral Philosophy,” 120; and Young, *Schopenhauer*, 101, 201, both emphasize the fundamentally evil character of the world for Schopenhauer, as does Nietzsche, *All Too Human*, §28.

⁵⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:380. Nietzsche seemingly alludes to this passage in *Genealogy of Morality*, III.14, when he likens European culture to “an insane asylum or a hospital.”

The development of Christian theology deprives evil of ontological value by reducing it to nothingness, a mere privation of the goodness that grants being. Georges Bataille helps to clarify the link between asceticism and nothingness. For Bataille, the ascetic sublimation of erotic instinct intensifies the primeval logic of taboo that produces the religious myth of transcendence. This intensification emerges in the form of Christian–Platonic morality, which deprives moral transgression of its immanent sacred quality by positing a transcendent antithesis between good and evil, being and nothingness.⁶⁰ Consider, for instance, Augustine’s identification of evil as nothingness in Book Seven of *Confessions*.⁶¹ As a privation of goodness, evil lacks being altogether. This directly influences Descartes in his *Meditations*, whose references to nothingness closely attend his defence of divine transcendence. Descartes follows Augustine’s Platonic conception of evil as a privation of the good, which corresponds to ignorance as a privation of knowledge. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes identifies the cause of human error as a kind of nothingness.⁶² We see how the positive value of transcendence, its absolute presence, casts the shadow of nothingness, the total privation of being. Such is the antithesis between good and evil conceived within a Platonic framework of Absolute Presence. While neither Augustine nor Descartes takes this to mean that the world is essentially evil, since God creates it out of his immutable goodness, Schopenhauer considers the world as a privation of being insofar as it lacks goodness altogether.⁶³ Considered alone, the world as will and representation is a godless realm of suffering, a view that supports the common assumption of Schopenhauer’s atheism. Conversely, Schopenhauer’s soteriology imbues life with a religious meaning that transcends the world. Are these opposing viewpoints fundamentally irreconcilable?

I propose a synthesis of these competing interpretations of Schopenhauer that I have outlined in relation to the *nihil negativum*. Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the will retains an anti-Platonic conception of nothingness *vis-à-vis* the nullity of life and the absence of a harmonious *Nous*, since the world is irrational and ultimately lacks a telos. This privative picture of the world (what Thacker calls negative ontology) follows consistently from a Christian–Platonic devaluation of appearances, albeit taken to a paradoxical extreme that accords with atheism. The ascetic denial of the will reveals the world’s nothingness and coincides with the saint’s mystical union with an absolute, radiating Presence, the Beyond that Schopenhauer obscures with apophatic language. Schopenhauer’s atheistic, anti-Platonic conception of nature thus coalesces ambivalently with his ethical–religious framework. This ambivalence explains how his conception of the *nihil negativum* gives rise to such antipodal interpretations. For Nietzsche, these opposing viewpoints attain a level of consistency in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, as I now show.

⁶⁰ See Bataille, *Eroticism*, ch. 11, which complements his equation of evil with nothingness in *On Nietzsche*, 143–6. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 79–87, connects Bataille’s meditative practise to the ethical encounter with the real in Lacan, one that bears witness to human suffering without recourse to its soteriological justification, since the sacred “lies beyond salvation” (p. 104), in the “recognition of the essentially ‘nonsensical’ nature of misfortune [that] is the necessary preliminary to any real historical or political change” (p. 85). In Bataille’s meditative practise, the imaginary Beyond of divine transcendence collapses into nothingness, which the immanence of subjective experience transmutes into mystical ecstasy, that is the shock of the real’s heterogeneous contingency.

⁶¹ “[A]ll things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all ... Therefore as long as they exist, they are good. Accordingly, whatever things exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 124–5).

⁶² “I notice that there is present in my thought not only a real and positive idea of God, or rather of a supremely perfect being, but also, so to speak, a certain negative idea of nothingness, or of what is infinitely removed from every kind of perfection. And I see that I am, as it were, a mean between God and nothingness, that is, so placed between the supreme Being and not-being that, in so far as a supreme Being has produced me, there is truly nothing in me which could lead to error; but if I consider myself as somehow participating in nothingness or not-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking many things, I find myself exposed to an infinity of defects, so that I should not be astonished if I go wrong” (Descartes, *Meditations*, 110).

⁶³ Han-Pile, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysics,” 401 n. 37, suggests otherwise. “Schopenhauer criticizes the privative understanding of nothingness inherited from Descartes, and hints that true nothingness is a positive state (a Hinduist idea which comes from his reading of the *Vedantas*).” I emphasize instead Schopenhauer’s assimilation of Christian–Platonic mysticism, which taints his understanding of Eastern philosophy. Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:470–1, credits St. Augustine for expounding the complementary doctrines of original sin and divine grace that inform his conception of worldly evil and ascetic redemption.

The distinctive implications of these two conflicting readings of Schopenhauer, one religious and the other atheistic, find expression throughout Nietzsche's oeuvre. On the one hand, Schopenhauer is guilty of a recidivistic form of Christian morality to which he erroneously submits his philosophy. "Thus, the whole medieval Christian way of viewing the world and perceiving humanity could once again celebrate its resurrection in Schopenhauer's teaching, despite the long-since achieved annihilation of all Christian dogmas."⁶⁴ "As surely as we can gain a great deal for the understanding of Christianity and other religions from Schopenhauer's religious-moral interpretation of human beings and the world, just as surely was he in error concerning *the value of religion for knowledge*."⁶⁵ On the other hand, Schopenhauer envisions the horrifying, dehumanized godlessness of nature, given his honest, "horrified look into a de-deified world that had become stupid, blind, crazed, and questionable."

As a philosopher, Schopenhauer was the *first* admitted and uncompromising atheist among us Germans ... The ungodliness of existence counted for him as something given, palpable, indisputable ... This is the locus of his whole integrity; unconditional and honest atheism is simply the *presupposition* of his way of putting the problem, as a victory of the European conscience won finally and with great difficulty; as the most fateful act of two thousand years of [Christian moral] discipline for truth that in the end forbids itself the *lie* in faith in God ... *Schopenhauer's* question immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: *Does existence have any meaning at all?*⁶⁶

Nietzsche recapitulates this passage from *Gay Science* in the penultimate section of his *Genealogy*, where Schopenhauer's atheistic question as to whether life has any meaning paradoxically marks the cumulative expression of Christian morality and its *will to truth*.⁶⁷ Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism on the one hand refers to life's meaninglessness as the culmination of ascetic morality and on the other refers to Schopenhauer's ascetic response to suffering that imbues it with mystical meaning.⁶⁸ "That the ascetic ideal has meant so much to man reveals a basic fact of human will, its *horror vacui*; it needs an aim –, and it prefers to will *nothingness* rather than *not* will [das Nichts wollen, als nicht wollen]."⁶⁹ In response to the prospect of life's meaninglessness as a cyclical process of perpetual, irredeemable suffering, Schopenhauer has recourse to his soteriological doctrine of ascetic transcendence, which culminates in his apophatic notion of the *nihil negativum*. Similar to Simone Weil, Schopenhauer envisions an earthly nihilism whose godless monstrosity dovetails with his redemptive account of unearthly saintliness. Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism makes the point that we cannot isolate Schopenhauer's atheistic metaphysics from his religious ethics, given the moral value of unconditional truth that unites them.⁷⁰ The scientific *will to truth* places the

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *All Too Human*, §26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, §110.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, §357.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, III.27. This ties into Nietzsche's critique of Kant as one for whom the rational pursuit of truth amounts to a form of ascetic self-denial. "[A] violence and cruelty against *reason*: a lustful delight that reaches its pinnacle when ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery decree: 'there is a realm of truth and of being, but precisely reason is *excluded* from it!' ... (Incidentally: there is something of a residue of this lustful ascetic conflict even in the Kantian concept 'intelligible character of things,' which loves to turn reason against reason: that is, 'intelligible character' means in Kant a sort of constitution of things whereby the intellect comprehends just enough to know that for the intellect – it is *completely incomprehensible*)" (*ibid.*, III.12).

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, "Reason" §6, similarly attacks Kant for being "a deceitful Christian, when all is said and done." Like Kant, Schopenhauer effectively gives back with one hand what he takes away with the other, a move that Nietzsche criticizes in *Gay Science*, §335. "I am reminded of old Kant, who helped himself to (*erschlichen*) the 'thing in itself' – another very ridiculous thing! – and was punished for this when the 'categorical imperative' crept into (*beschlichen*) his heart and made him stray back to 'God', 'soul', 'freedom', 'immortality', like a fox who strays back into his cage. Yet it had been *his* cleverness that had *broken open* the cage!" See *Gay Science*, n. 27.

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, III.1. On Schopenhauer as subtext here, see Janaway's discussion in "Nietzsche's Educator," 27–36.

⁷⁰ "We see that science, too, rests on a faith; there is simply no 'presuppositionless' science. The question whether *truth* is necessary must get an answer in advance, the answer 'yes', and moreover this answer must be so firm that it takes the form of the statement, the belief, the conviction: '*Nothing is more necessary than truth*; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value.' This unconditional will to truth – what is it?" (*Gay Science*, §344). On Nietzsche's critique of the unconditional value of truth in *Genealogy*, see Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 229–39.

value of truth in a transcendent sphere beyond life that ascetically negates life's value. Schopenhauer's religious conception of the *nihil negativum* displays the asceticism of science insofar as it expresses the same negational quality as the *will to truth* that ultimately proclaims life's nullity. In this way, Nietzsche's critique of nihilism targets the ascetic correspondence between the *will to truth* and the *will to nothingness*,⁷¹ the abyssal point where Schopenhauer's religious and atheistic tendencies converge in their uncanny identity.

Nietzsche communicates this convergence in his characterization of Schopenhauer's philosophy as "hostile to life,"⁷² specifically given the Christian morality of compassion that infects it.⁷³ He stresses this point in Preface §5 of the *Genealogy*, indicating its importance for his polemic. We see in the Third Essay how the marriage between "great *disgust* for humans, likewise great *compassion* [Mitleid]" would "inevitably [*unvermeidlich*]" give birth to "something most uncanny [*Unheimlichsten*]," namely the "will to nothingness, nihilism" (GM III.14).⁷⁴ He conclusively elucidates this point in *The Antichrist*.

Here, Schopenhauer was within his rights: life is denied through compassion, made more *worthy of denial* – compassion is the *praxis* of nihilism. To repeat: this depressive and contagious instinct cancels out those instincts that are bent on supporting and raising the value of life: both as *multiplier* of misery and *conservator* of all that is miserable, it is a major instrument in the increase of *décadence* – compassion persuades us to *nothingness!* ... One does not say "nothingness": instead, one says "the beyond"; or "God"; or "the *true* life"; or nirvana, redemption, bliss.⁷⁵

In this passage, Nietzsche reverses Schopenhauer's statement that we must confront nothingness *as* nothingness, "instead of avoiding it, like the Indians, through myths and meaningless words such as reabsorption in *Brahman*, or in the *Nirvana* of the Buddhists."⁷⁶ While Schopenhauer's religious conception of willlessness is purportedly heuristic, Nietzsche implies that his use of language like "salvation" (*Heil*) and "holiness" (*Heiligkeit*) contradicts his attempt to conceive of nothingness in atheistic terms when he rejects its evasive description as nirvana.⁷⁷ Given the convergence of Schopenhauer's atheistic and religious sensibilities in his denial of life's value, the above passage presents the overall consistency of his nihilistic outlook.⁷⁸ "Schopenhauer was hostile to life: *therefore* compassion became a virtue for him."⁷⁹ His religious estimation of compassion consistently follows from his despairing evaluation of life's value insofar as his atheistic glimpse into life's horror – itself an ascetic insight – produces delight in the mystical prospect of its

⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, III.28.

⁷² Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §7. He repeats this expression from *Genealogy of Morality*, II.24, III.11.

⁷³ Cartwright, "Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy," 140, also emphasizes that "Nietzsche clearly articulates a connection between the nihilism of Schopenhauer's *Mitleids-Moral* and his higher metaphysical-ethical perspective," which informs Nietzsche's account of the death of God and the hypocrisy of modern secular morality. Cartwright appears to contradict himself when he goes on to assert that Schopenhauer's saint and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* likewise "transcend altruistic morality, the *Mitleids-Moral*, and both figures are beyond good and evil" (p. 148). But for Schopenhauer the saint displays altruism in its purest form as a mystical compassion that empties itself into the world by means of ascetic self-sacrifice. Cartwright's characterization of the saint, which corresponds more accurately to what Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 2:183, dubs "the antichrist" (see Janaway, "Introduction," 6; "Nietzsche's Educator," 25), actually echoes Nietzsche's provocation from *Beyond Good and Evil*, §164: "Jesus said to his Jews: 'The law was for servants, – love God as I love him, as his son! What do we sons of God care about morality!'"

⁷⁴ Nietzsche links pity with the death of God in *Zarathustra*, "Retired"; "Ugliest Human."

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §7.

⁷⁶ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:477–8.

⁷⁷ Mannion, *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality*, 217–9, supports this reading. "[T]his notion of the denial-of-the-will and 'complete will-lessness' is ... what Schopenhauer figuratively describes as the 'Highest Good' [*Will and Presentation*, 1:421]. Even if such a concept is employed only figuratively, it nonetheless serves as a postulate and resembles certain religious concepts of the 'real' or ultimate" (p. 227).

⁷⁸ Jacqueline, *Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, 121, supports this reading. "The proper religious and philosophical attitude, in so far as religion and philosophy converge ... is to have compassion for every suffering being," which expresses Schopenhauer's doctrine of salvation as a form of "metaphysical nihilism" that aligns with Plato's devaluing of appearances.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §7. See Guay, "Schopenhauer's Moral Philosophy," on compassion as a response to life's senselessness.

extinction. For Nietzsche, the curious collusion between atheism and Christian morality characterizes modern European nihilism.

4 Nietzsche Contra Contemporary Nihilism

Broadly construed, Nietzsche's critique of modern nihilism appears to posit two successive phases of its historical development. Schopenhauer's pessimism characterizes the first phase, while the complete annihilation of Christian morality characterizes the second phase. This movement displays the progress of the scientific *will to truth* that finally destroys Christian morality and leaves Schopenhauer's asceticism behind as an obsolete artefact. So far, I have discussed the first phase of modern nihilism, wherein the *will to truth* and the *will to nothingness* converge in Schopenhauer's ascetic denial of the will. Nietzsche advances the second phase of nihilism's godless consummation in his thought of eternal recurrence.⁸⁰ "Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: *'the eternal recurrence.'* This is the most extreme form of nihilism."⁸¹ Contemporary nihilism falls somewhere in between the two phases that Nietzsche distinguishes. As a form of atheism, it embraces life's purposelessness, though unlike Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence, which he calls "the most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses,"⁸² this version of nihilism retains Schopenhauer's emphasis on the cosmic finale of nothingness that nullifies life's value, though importantly stripped of Schopenhauer's moral-religious language.

Distinguishing these two versions of nihilism clarifies the difference between contemporary nihilism and Schopenhauer's pessimism, a distinction that Thacker obviates, in my view misrepresenting Schopenhauer's philosophy by ignoring the ethical significance of his *nihil negativum*. Setting historical qualms aside, let us ponder the direction Thacker's move takes us. If we consider the heat death of the universe, a hypothesis that became prominent in the early 1850s⁸³ and dominates contemporary cosmology,⁸⁴ it appears that science vindicates Schopenhauer's *nihil negativum*, translated from a mystical conviction into what is today "the most *scientific* of all hypotheses" that encapsulates the ultimate horizon of human knowledge. Ray Brassier, another advocate of nihilism, sums it up. "[A]ll the stars in the universe will stop shining in 100 trillion years ... [E]ventually, one trillion, trillion years from now, all matter in the cosmos will disintegrate into unbound elementary particles."⁸⁵ In Schopenhauerian terms, this hypothesis reduces the religious significance of life's soteriological aim – its return to nothingness, "which hovers as the final goal behind all virtue and saintliness"⁸⁶ – to a cosmological fact about the expanding universe, resembling what Brassier describes as a *naturalization of eschatology* and a *theologization of cosmology*.⁸⁷ Brassier embraces this scientific achievement that corresponds to the nihilistic outcome of Nietzsche's *will to truth* as it supposedly transcends Christian morality and confronts us with *horror vacui*. "[A]s Nietzsche provocatively suggested, the will to *know*, in its antagonism with the so-called will to live, is driven by the will to nothingness, understood as the compunction to become equal to the in-itself," which today culminates

⁸⁰ This distinction corresponds roughly to what Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 172, calls *incomplete* and *complete* nihilism. The former encompasses three stages of nihilism, negative, reactive, and passive, that cover the course of Western history (pp. 150–75); the latter corresponds to active nihilism (pp. 69–71), the fourth and final stage that transmutes into life-affirmation. See Woodward, "Overcoming of Nihilism," on the problematic politico-ontological implications of Deleuze's schematization of Nietzsche's thought in terms of activity and reactivity.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, §55.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Following Carnot's theorem, Thomson published "On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy" in 1852. See *Mathematical and Physical Papers*, 511–4. As a familiar point of reference for Nietzsche, see Lange, *History of Materialism*, 2:308.

⁸⁴ Smolin, *Singular Universe*, 407.

⁸⁵ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 49–50.

⁸⁶ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 1:477.

⁸⁷ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 231–2.

in the knowledge that, following the eventual extinction of atoms, “‘dark energy’ ... will keep pushing the extinguished universe deeper and deeper into an eternal and unfathomable blackness.”⁸⁸ Hence, “[t]he will to know is driven by the traumatic reality of extinction ... through which [it] is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself.”⁸⁹ Since the universe expands according to the arrow of time advancing toward thermodynamic equilibrium, the “in-itself” of endless cosmic nothingness not only dooms life’s anomaly to the lifelessness from which it briefly emerged, but also likewise nullifies any value we might mistakenly ascribe to present existence.

Brassier is at his most compelling when discussing the trauma of extinction in the context of Freud’s death drive, which he brilliantly expounds.⁹⁰ More often than not, however, Brassier treats universal extinction as a trump card to invalidate the type of vitalism that he takes as his polemical opponent, failing to acknowledge that the hypothetical heat death of the universe is purely speculative and indeed is but a common *belief* among scientists. Brassier reports large-scale astronomical observations about the known universe, which, contrary to what he suggests, do not support a coherent cosmological theory, given how much of the universe we cannot observe. Thus, for example, physicist Lee Smolin systematically demonstrates⁹¹ how the heat death hypothesis is not only incoherent⁹² but also based on a metaphysical extrapolation beyond the limits of the known universe.⁹³ He calls this the “transcendental folly,”⁹⁴ a turn of phrase that readily applies to Brassier’s conclusion to the effect that “everything is dead already.”⁹⁵ Given Brassier’s vehement atheism, his dogmatic attachment to the heat death hypothesis ironically (but from a Nietzschean perspective unsurprisingly) displays a Christian need for some unconditional truth that undermines life’s value, not to mention its tangible empirical potency. It is fair to suggest that his philosophical prejudice derives from his own moral disposition as an advocate of nihilism. Brassier validates his interpretation of the correspondence between the scientific *will to truth* and the *will to nothingness* at the expense of ignoring, or recklessly tabooing, Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism’s moral and metaphysical fundament, according to which the soteriology of ascetic morality taints any finale of cosmological nothingness.

Nietzsche’s rhetoric confutes this type of dogmatism, exposing its moral and metaphysical fundament by parodying its philosophical perspective, as I will now show. We have seen how Brassier’s defence of nihilism effectively translates Schopenhauer’s *nihil negativum* into a cosmological fact. For this reason, he commends Nietzsche’s formulation of nihilism in his 1873 essay “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.”

In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented [*erfinden*] cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the ‘history of the world’; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die. [–] Someone could invent [*erfinden*] a fable like this and yet they would still not have given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature; there were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened.⁹⁶

Brassier praises this fable as a distillation of nihilism, while criticizing Nietzsche’s endeavour to overcome it.⁹⁷ Yet Brassier misses the self-reflexive irony by which this fable undermines the purportedly objective picture of reality that it presents. That the apex of cognition paradoxically amounts to the recognition of its sheer nullity presumably pleases him, despite the ironical implication that nihilism may be the ultimate

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 227–8. In this context, he rejects Nietzsche’s conception of eternal recurrence as the consummation of nihilism that finally transmutes into life affirmation (pp. 205–23).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234–8.

⁹¹ See Smolin, *Singular Universe*, 393–413.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 407–10.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 405, 410–1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 366.

⁹⁵ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 239.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, “Truth and Lying,” 141.

⁹⁷ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 205–6.

manifestation of anthropocentric arrogance rather than its anti-anthropocentric overturning. After all, the fable does not distinguish the mendacious invention of cognition from the subsequent recognition of its purposelessness, a temporal differentiation that collapses into the cosmic indifference, rendering our minute of world history meaningless. In this light, intellectual hubris and humiliation go hand in hand – its vanity hides best under the conceit of its defeat, in the moment of its self-proclaimed nullity. Such is the disguise under which the intellect disavows its anthropocentrism. Indeed, Nietzsche goes on to emphasize that “this intellect has no further mission that might extend beyond the bounds of human life. Rather, the intellect is human, and only its possessor and progenitor regards it with such pathos, as if it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved.”⁹⁸ The nihilist notion that *nothing will have happened* arises for the intellect that originally takes itself as the centre of the world and corresponds to the cry of self-laceration as it apparently deflates this arrogant presumption, but actually reproduces it. The claim that *nothing will have happened* extends the bounds of the human intellect to encompass all that it is incapable of grasping by reducing this to nought. Nihilism thus inversely mirrors the same anthropocentric delusion as before, displaying an intellectual vanity that only masquerades as its overturning. Hence, I highlight Nietzsche’s repetition of the verb *erfinden* to characterize both the emergence of cognition and the fable of its destruction, the former nesting in the latter as an invention within an invention or dream within a dream.

Nietzsche’s distinction between the fable he invents and its supposed scientific credentials – separated by a modest dash – becomes merely rhetorical. Notice how the fable’s inventor quietly calls attention to himself in the third person as a discreet “someone” who disavows his fictional invention, furthermore, imbuing his own existence with the unreal character that all life now appears to have. However, the fable’s inventor cannot accomplish the self-erasure that he presents as a cosmic phenomenon; his attempt ironically conceals the perspective of a timeless subjective consciousness whose presence bears witness to the fabular event, imbuing Nietzsche’s thought experiment with the mytho-metaphysical significance that we are supposed to be left without. In other words, the fable implies a god’s eye view of the world that beholds the spectacle of universal extinction, an imaginary perspective that, in a circular fashion, verifies the human judgement about how pitiful, insubstantial, and transitory the intellect is, since the judgement itself entails the cosmic spectator for whom this is a banal fact. Schopenhauer succinctly explains the Kantian foundation for this insight. “[When] we attempt to *imagine an objective world without a knowing subject*, then we become aware that what we are imagining at that moment is in truth the opposite of what we intended, namely nothing but just the process in the intellect of a knowing being who perceives an objective world, that is to say, precisely that which we had sought to exclude.”⁹⁹ Christopher Janaway suggests that Nietzsche’s fable parodies the opening of *Will and Presentation*, Volume Two¹⁰⁰ (where we also find the above statement), though the parallel between them is more ambiguous. I contend that Nietzsche tacitly evokes Schopenhauer in order to parody nihilism.¹⁰¹

Nietzsche’s formulation of nihilism in this case belies the claim of scientific objectivity that Brassier admires and instead stresses the anthropic limit of human subjectivity. Nietzsche states the foundation for this approach in another writing from the same year as “Truth and Lying.” “‘It is absolutely impossible for the subject to want [and hence, to be able] to see and know something beyond itself: knowledge and being are the most contradictory spheres there are.’ The ‘subjective concept’ is ‘eternal’: we can never accede to a region ‘beyond the wall of relations’ by which we are conditioned, for beyond these lies merely ‘a mythical primordial ground of things.’”¹⁰² While Brassier contends that only an “objective, third-person perspective is equipped with conceptual resources sensitive enough to map consciousness’ opaque, sub-linguistic reality,” one that undermines any “first-person phenomenological description or linguistic articulation,”¹⁰³ Nietzsche

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, “Truth and Lying,” 141.

⁹⁹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Presentation*, 2:5.

¹⁰⁰ Janaway, “Introduction,” 5.

¹⁰¹ On nihilism’s incoherence as a philosophical position for Nietzsche, see Porter, “Impossibility of Nihilism.”

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §11. Cited from Porter, *Philology of the Future*, 21. For Porter’s engagement with speculative realism, see “Hyperobjects, OOO.”

¹⁰³ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 29.

shows how these perspectives are inextricable. The fable from “Truth and Lying” effectively posits a cosmic first-person perspective *for which* nothing will have happened, which is an inevitable anthropomorphism, since “a representing agency cannot ‘not represent’ itself, cannot represent itself away.”¹⁰⁴ His self-reflexive narrator lurks behind the “objective, third-person perspective” that would give us an accurate account of reality, one limited by the subjective features of representation. Conceiving the intellect’s purposelessness in nature simply inverts its anthropocentric pathos, producing yet another delusive appearance.

In sum, rather than presenting a type of knowledge that Brassier declares to be “commensurate with the in-itself,”¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche presents the specter of cosmic nothingness within the context of a fable that not only shocks our moral–intellectual sensibilities, but also, more profoundly, communicates the protean vanity hiding in the pleasure of our humiliation. Hence, already in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche formulates the satyr Silenus’s nihilistic wisdom – better “not to *be*, to be *nothing*” – in direct association with the ascetic rapture of a martyr.¹⁰⁶ Scholars scarcely note that Nietzsche ironically inflects this “piece of popular wisdom” with the wily satyr’s “shrill laughter” that announces it,¹⁰⁷ thereby accentuating the satyr’s parodic character.¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche further targets the narcissistic basis of ascetic self-humiliation in §137 of *All Too Human*. “This shattering of oneself, this mockery of one’s own nature, this *spernere se sperni* [answer contempt with contempt] of which the religions have made so much is really a very high degree of vanity.” Finally, the masochistic denial of life’s value decisively characterizes the ascetic gratification that Nietzsche elucidates in the Third Essay of his *Genealogy*. We can thus appreciate the overall consistency of Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism, which in his early work takes the remarkable form of a duplicitous parody.

5 Conclusion

I began this article by discussing Schopenhauer’s ascetic denial of the will, its mystical return to nothingness (the *nihil negativum*). I compared Young and Thacker’s accounts of the *nihil negativum* – neither of which proved wholly satisfactory – in order to highlight the ambiguous relationship between Schopenhauer’s atheistic metaphysics and his ethical–religious doctrine of salvation. Next, I argued that Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism targets this ambiguity in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, whose overall consistency he presents in the denial of life’s value, at which point the scientific *will to truth* and the ascetic *will to nothingness* converge on the horizon of nineteenth-century European culture. Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism thereby exposes the complicity between modern atheism and Christian morality. I concluded that his critique still challenges contemporary advocates of philosophical nihilism such as Thacker and Brassier, whose anti-anthropocentric conceptions of cosmic nothingness resonate with Nietzsche’s memorable fable from “Truth and Lying.” Pointing out Brassier’s in my view misguided appropriation of the fable, I interpreted it as a parody of nihilism that exposes the vanity hiding in the pleasure of our moral–intellectual humiliation, what Nietzsche consistently diagnoses as a form of ascetic self-laceration.

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¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Complete Works*, NF-1873 26[11]. Cited from Porter, “Untimely Meditations,” 59, which analyzes Nietzsche’s early rhetorical innovations.

¹⁰⁵ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 239.

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, §3.

¹⁰⁷ Most scholars take Silenus’s wisdom about life’s horror to communicate an objective feature of reality in *Birth of Tragedy*. E.g., Burnham and Jesinghausen, *Birth of Tragedy*, 52, 70–1; Daniels, *Birth of Tragedy*, 21, 42–3, 81, 98–104; Gemes and Sykes, “Nietzsche’s Illusion,” 81, 85, 104; Came, “Affirmation and Illusion;” Soll, “Nietzsche’s ‘Great Teacher,’” 163–76; Janaway, “Beauty is False;” Huddleston, “Nietzsche on Nihilism,” 6.

¹⁰⁸ On the comical dimension of the satyr figure in *Birth of Tragedy*, see Porter, *Invention of Dionysus*, 113–4.

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