

IX: NIHILISM AND ITS ANTIDOTES

IX.0 Chapter Overview, Duty as the antidote for nihilism

The first goal is to express my understanding of an undesirable condition of nihilism. A second goal is to propose and assess an antidote for moral nihilism. The antidote is “character morality,” which I here label “secularized humanism.” This antidote for moral nihilism is a stance toward human nature from which we take on the life-long task of becoming the right kind of person. Examination of alternative stances in the next chapter shows that the character stance, by providing an antidote to moral nihilism, provides a more effective antidote for total nihilism than alternative stances: progressivism, romanticism and dualism. This chapter closes with a series of questions and answers assessing secularized humanism as a proposal on how to live a significant life by drawing out what it promises and does not promise. Secularized humanism provides a foundation for avoiding nihilism although far from being necessary or sufficient for being happy.

Duty is a conceptual and emotional barricade shielding us from emptiness. Even if there is nothing more than our thoughts and feelings, commitment to duty does not allow recognition of that emptiness. The function of a pragmatic justification that commitment to the duty to build character is an antidote to nihilism is bipartite. First to strengthen commitment to duty and second to transform hope into faith that commitment to duty is the proper response to what is beyond the barricade. May I pretend to be a Teutonic philosopher? *Gibt es kein Gott, nur die Pflicht steht gegen das Nichts.*

IX.1 Use of the ism suffix,

In this chapter, and elsewhere I discuss several “isms” such as moral relativism. When doing so I am not discussing the position of any particular individual or group. I can not even say

that I am discussing a specific position which is held with accidental features by particular individuals or groups. I think that the positions I discuss are in a family of views properly called by the title under which I discuss them. Thus my discussion of moral relativism is properly labeled a moral relativism. Whose view is it then? When I discuss a position, I articulate the position as I would hold it if I were to hold the position. Thus my discussion of amoralism and moral relativism are about positions that I would hold if I were an amoralist or a moral relativist. A benefit of discussing positions this way is that I do not reject views which are set-up to be easily criticized, viz., so-called “straw men.” A cost of discussing positions this way is that readers cannot assumed that they become well-informed about the position from my discussion of it. An idiosyncratic version may be presented. However, all of this being said does not stop me from writing as if I were presenting and criticizing the “official” or standard version of the “ism.” I will write of "the amoralist," etc.

IX.2 Atheism and nihilism

Perform an atheistic experiment to appreciate the thoughts and sentiments of nihilism. What if atheism is true? What if there is nothing to be represented by the various thoughts and images of a god, an ultimate being, realm of the sacred, etc. Some other ways of expressing deep atheism are “When human consciousness vanishes anything remotely resembling consciousness vanishes,” “Nothing is anything to anything,” “Unthinkable emptiness.” For as Parmenides’ reminder noted centuries ago: *For thought and being are the same*. These denials express philosophical atheism.

By itself philosophical atheism is not nihilism. An atheist might not reflect enough to have the next two feelings and thoughts. I was not an atheistic. But I spent years of my professional life

examining and even teaching the totally atheistic ontology of W.V. Quine. At the end of the day, I simply forgot about it!

Did I truly forget it? Maybe I realized that only in that ontological desert landscape so loved by Quine could I work out my salvation. The meager metaphysics used in this book is such a desert, In a rather early essay, *What there is*,¹ Quine writes in criticism of an imagined opponent who posits some type of reality for fictional beings: “Wyman’s overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes,. “ Quine, who had a flair for good lines, often repeated this admiration for philosophical desert landscapes.

A second component of nihilism is a thought infused sentiment – a mood. The nihilistic mood is an anxious sadness that somehow something that should have been there is missing. So now human life is felt to be in some fundamental way insignificant. The thought infused with this sentiment is almost as difficult to articulate as the thought of there being nothing somehow some “place.” Expression of this thought of a fundamental absence or loneliness in the universe is the third component of nihilism. It is the existential thesis of a nihilism. For atheistic nihilism the existential thesis may be expressed as: “Life has no purpose,” “Life has no meaning.” “Nothing matters,” or even “Everything is permitted.”

As inchoate as these thoughts may be, far more than pious fools and romantic adolescents think and feel them. We shall read of David Hume confrontation with nihilism after noting a few significant features of nihilisms.

IX.2.1 Components of nihilisms

The atheistic exercise brings out the three components of a nihilism. First there is absence thesis denying the existence of something usually thought to be of high value or importance.

Second there is mood of an anxious sadness about that absence. Third there is an existential thesis articulating an important unimportance of human life because of this absence.

There is a variety of absence theses. Only atheism and amoralism have the depth and plausibility to be a continuous temptation to nihilism. Some other absence theses claim that there is no free will, we have no coherent concept of the self, the earth is not the center of the universe, humans evolved as did other species and no nation or race has a special destiny. Denials of free will supporting strict determinism use models of the cosmos far beyond what is needed for science. Inability to specify what makes us the same throughout our lives is distressing. But a sense of ourselves remains. Recognition of our place in the universe through natural science has been humbling. However, a mood of humility does not warrant an existential thesis dismissing all of human life as meaningless and insignificant. If there were a God, we can still be important to God despite our “size.” A God who monitors orbital shifts of electrons is able to pay attention to people. If we have duties to act rightly and build character we still have a significant task.

Some, in their nihilistic moments, say that the scientific picture shows that our human lives are of no more significance than those of insects and other animals. Such comparisons are irrelevant for sustaining nihilism if there is a God and morality. No insight about our status is gained by comparison with non-human animals. If there were a God, God’s concern for us is not diminished by God’s concern, or lack thereof, for amoebas or electrons jumping orbits. The dignity of my moral vocation is not enhanced by saying my wife’s cat does not have it. Nor is it denigrated by speculations that dolphins have duties. The existential status of non-human organisms and objects is none of our business.

IX.2.2 Atheistic & moral nihilism

In this book, I do not confront atheistic nihilism. Atheistic nihilism with atheism broadly interpreted is unqualified nihilism. I offer an antidote for moral nihilism. Of course, I do not assume atheism; let alone atheistic nihilism. I do not assume theism either. Setting aside moral nihilism leaves much more to be desired for a meaningful life. However, I do not go further. I note only in passing that those who inoculate themselves against moral nihilism with character morality cannot hold that it is impossible for there to be a moral God who brings it about that people receive the happiness of which they are worthy.

I consider atheistic and moral nihilisms to be the serious nihilisms. Other absence theses can be dismissed as verbal problems inherent in our conceptual schemes. Some moods can be modified by reminding ourselves that they were founded in an egotistical illusion about our importance relative to other peoples and other beings. But a sense of a deep absence if nothing besides animal consciousness has a purpose for anything and there being no moral order beyond those orders we invent is genuine. The challenge of recognizing the reality of such a being or order once lost requires an encounter with those realities. Ultimately, **discovering the** reality of God or a moral order are not philosophical problems. The possibility of God is a philosophical problem. There is a role for philosophical arguments such as Aquinas's Five Ways and contemporary efforts to uncover a place in the best cosmologies of the day for the action of something outside the scientific order represented within the cosmologies. These arguments make room for the real possibility of something like a God by showing that the best science of the day does not preclude it. Philosophical problems have the character of requiring "just the right words" to say everything clearly. At best philosophical arguments entitle us to say "There is a God." But, yet, the right words alone do not bring us to reality. To find God or a moral order we need to engage in some practice in hope of encountering them. I interpret pragmatic

arguments as defending such practices. In the penultimate chapter on pragmatic defense, we return to examining the need to go beyond language to reach the truth or reality.

IX.2.3 Order of nihilistic components

The following is a “logical” order for development of nihilism. A person’s nihilism begins with consideration of some general negative thesis such as the earth is not the center of the universe or even atheism. Once the thesis is reflected upon a mood develops and then the mood is expressed in a despondent existential thesis. I am not suggesting that the preceding order of nihilistic development is the psychological order. My conjecture is that those disposed towards nihilism already have in a mild form a despairing mood which is exacerbated by reflecting on some of the negative theses. In the cases in which I am the most interested, the mood is recognized and strong. There is an effort to moderate the mood by finding some purpose or direction in a God or a moral order. The genuine difficulties of establishing the reality of these beings threatens full blown nihilism.

IX.3 Hume’s nihilism & distraction

David Hume’s investigation of human understanding eliminated a foundation within reason alone for beliefs of religion, science, morality and common sense. He connected occasional deep sadness with his theoretical results.²

“The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, I must employ in my enquiries, encrease my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties, reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock, on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out to immensity. This sudden view of my danger strikes me with melancholy”.

Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk I. part iv section vii.

[Note to Layout: Subheading 2] **IX.3.1 Hume’s distraction antidote for nihilism**

Hume continued to point out how he dealt with the affliction.³

“Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further.”

Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*

Hume was not a romantic who reveled in proclaiming the insignificance of life. He let nature return him to sanity. Mention of sanity is appropriate because too much brooding about the possible insignificance of life might set off a cascade of events leading to clinical depression. I do not propose distraction as the antidote for nihilism. I highly recommend it for symptomatic treatment. Indeed I go further to suggest that distractions, morally proper of course, should be the normal way of avoiding nihilistic thoughts and moods. I especially recommend it for nihilistic moods induced by insolvable riddles of philosophy such as problems of free will and personal identity. Much brooding on the possible meaningless of life, including thinking of the character stance as an antidote for thoughts and moods of meaninglessness, might exacerbate the condition.

Recently a distraction method has come to my attention which is strangely fascinating but yet unhealthy. I call it “immersion in meaninglessness.” I am thinking primarily of a post-modern fictional work *Infinite Jest*, by David F. Wallace.⁴ Wallace has talent for taking us into the minds of characters who take some daily details very seriously while we are led by Wallace

to feel that none of it matters. We feel the pointlessness of their lives. What is the distraction from nihilism of immersion in meaningless? The distraction is reading this kind of literature. For awhile there is a sense of engaging in some very serious business: Confronting the issue of the meaning of life by fictionally experiencing its meaninglessness. When we finish the book we may think we found the truth through it, viz., nihilism.

Wallace committed suicide by hanging himself on September 12, 2008.

IX.3.2 Dismissal of the distraction antidote for nihilism

The distraction method is unreliable and may lead us away from the most important truths about the human condition. The milder distractions such as games, conversation and exercise distract us only for awhile. In the midst of a game or workout the deep melancholy can intrude itself. Furthermore, we lose interest in these activities. If we are faced with a long life, a time without any ability to distract ourselves looms. Strong “medicines” such as alcohol and other chemicals have notorious “side effects.” Worst of all, though, is that the method of distraction accepts nihilism, as did Hume. That the human condition is not so bleak may be one of those truths, of which William James reminded us, we cannot discover unless we open ourselves to believing it to be true.

IX.4 Place of amoralism in my strategy

Why explore amoralism? Recall that the strategy of this book is to overcome nihilism by overcoming sexual nihilism. In this book nihilism is reduced to moral nihilism. Moral nihilism is amoralism with a suitable mood and existential thesis. So the strategy is developed by using the tactic of showing that the character stance with the parental stance on sexual morality is more effective at setting aside amoralism than the other stances on sexual morality. The other stances

are not as effective because they are vulnerable to sexual nihilism. What in more detail is moral nihilism?

IX.4.1 Amoralism & Moral nihilism

Amoralism is to moral nihilism as atheism is to atheistic nihilism.

Succinctly “There is no morality” states amoralism. Two theses, saying popularly “there is no objective or absolute morality,” also state the moral theory underlying amoralism. But these need elaboration. Amoralists hold that the semantics for moral normative judgments misleads us about their authority. *Amoralism* is a moral theory proposing the two negative theses about “ought to do” and “ought to be” below.

(1) There is nothing outside human thinking for determining that the rules humans make are proper rules. (2) There is nothing outside human thinking specifying the right way to be a human being. Amoralists hold that morality is a human invention.

For amoralism to become moral nihilism there is a need for a mood of anxious sadness and an existential thesis expressing this mood. The mood is one of insignificance and disorientation. There is nothing important to do and there is nothing for which we must strive. The existential thesis for moral nihilism is “Everything is permitted.”

A better understanding of moral nihilism can be gained by examining more closely what is said by the absence thesis of moral nihilism, viz. amoralism.

IX.4.2 Amoralism, permissibility and conduct

It is somewhat misleading to express the existential thesis of moral nihilism as: “everything is permitted” or “nothing is forbidden.” After all there is morality created by humans. There are the innumerable laws and customs of the many human cultures which restrict almost every conceivable type of behavior. The laws and customs people actually have for

restricting behavior are *positive law*. Amoralists, of course, recognize positive law. Amongst the positive laws there are *positive moral laws*. The laws in the various positive moral laws have the semantics of moral judgments. Of course, if there are conflicts, not all can be correct moral laws. So positive moral law provides for moral criticism of moral laws. Of course, reflection about what goes on in moral criticism reveals that moral criticism is part of human normative thinking.

IX.4.3 Amoralism and good conduct

“Amoralism” describes a person’s moral theory; not that person’s behavior. Amoralists can be highly moral in accordance with the positive law of their own culture⁵. Indeed the behavior of amoralists may be highly moral by the standards of someone, such as myself, who holds that there are some moral standards on how to act and how to be which obligate all human beings. For the most part the logical positivists from whom I learned philosophy were pretty good as people go. So I do not criticize other stances for promoting immoral conduct. Given human tendencies towards short term gratification and greed, I worry a bit about the behavior of the third and fourth generation in cultures whose opinion forming élites are heavily influenced by amoralists. I conjecture that many people, both philosophers and those who would never think of themselves as philosophers, hold amoralism. Indeed amoralism is a constant intellectual temptation for me. My recurrent efforts in this book to locate moral laws in our natural capacity for normative thoughts with the semantics of moral normativity are part of my intellectual battle against amoralism.

Logical positivism has left a long legacy. In this positivistic legacy moral judgments are no more than private opinions and attitudes with no respectable intellectual standing.

IX.4.4 Amoralism & varieties of moral relativism

How is amorality connected with moral relativism? Amoralists, as are all well-informed people *cultural moral relativists*. Cultural moral relativists recognize that the positive moral laws vary from culture to culture. Of much more moral significance, amoralists may be moral relativists who apparently hold that it is immoral not to tolerate and indeed not to welcome the culture diversity of moral, especially sexual, practices. Moral relativism may seem to be the logically inconsistent thesis: *There are no universal moral principles but there is a universal moral principle that different moral principles are to be tolerated*. Amoralists can assert moral relativism in a subtle but consistent way. An amoralist can assert the following weakened version of moral relativism: *Within the framework of my culture conflicting moral principles are to be tolerated*. Amoralists are not speaking as moral theorists when they advocate the tolerant outlook of moral relativism. They are speaking as members of a culture whose culture based morality teaches tolerance.

IX.4.5 Consistent versions of moral relativism

I note these trivial points about relativism as a reminder that amorality is not refuted by showing the inconsistency of careless expressions of moral relativism. Disputes about relativism do not address the fundamental theoretical issue. The fundamental theoretical challenge to providing an antidote to moral nihilism is setting aside amorality by locating and discovering a foundation for morality in human nature. My case for setting it aside is the argument of this book for adopting and holding to the character stance. This preliminary discussion of relativism should not be concluded without recognizing the good sense in relativism which is obscured by strong statements of moral relativism. People may, and ought to, hold a principle such as the following. *There are some acts which no human should perform regardless of the consequences and there are some ways no person should be regardless of circumstances. However, there are many acts*

and ways of being which are morally acceptable given consequences and circumstances. In the final chapter on stances on sexual morality, much attention focuses on dimension of stances which allow a stance on sexual morality to accommodate considerable differences in practice as moral.

IX.5 Skepticism and amoralism

Rejection of theses about our ability to know may result in *skepticism*. Skepticism need not be asserted in the inconsistent form: I know I know nothing. Skepticism lies in not accepting, but confessing to not accepting, any theses which would justify any knowledge claim.

Amoralism is not skepticism because amoralists make two universal negative assertions about what is not in reality. However, a skepticism which is rigid about not allowing belief to go beyond knowledge is for the purpose of providing an antidote to nihilism the same as amoralism.

Skepticism lies at a dividing point on confrontation with nihilism. Skepticism can be a catalyst for developing nihilistic moods. Skepticism may also be the first ingredient for an antidote to nihilism. We need not accept the slogan: “Knowledge or nothing.” Various levels of belief may suffice for immunization against the theoretical components of nihilism. There is a long tradition of using skepticism as the first step in making a case that we are justified, under certain restrictions, in allowing factors to cause us to have beliefs sufficient for not having nihilistic beliefs. My case for the character stance and, in general, my antidote for moral nihilism lies in this skeptical tradition. Recently, while re-reading Pascal (1623-1632) to guide a grandson writing a term paper on Pascal, I realized how well Pascal expressed my skeptical Catholicism. I make a case, with restrictions to avoid superstition and fanaticism, that people are entitled to allow a need to find a significance in life to *cause* them to hold theoretical beliefs sufficient for dismissing the theoretical portion of moral nihilism. Unfortunately, if you combat nihilism on a

foundation of skepticism, you never completely overcome the anxiety of nihilism as long as you remember your skepticism. And I argue that we ought not forget a starting point of skepticism.

That is helpful for avoiding fanaticism!

IX.5 Strong vs. weak moral nihilism

Not even a nihilistic phrase such as “everything is morally permitted” or “nothing is morally forbidden.” is quite the best way of stating the theoretical claims of moral nihilism for my case. Moral nihilists hold that, in principle, there are no impermissible ways for humans to act or to be. What we are imposes no limits on what we may do. As we specified in when developing the stance on which the Paternal Principle is based, this says that humanity is not an end-in-itself. Humanity is morally plastic. So, I distinguish strong and weak moral nihilism. *Strong moral nihilism* has full amorality as its amorality thesis. *Weak moral nihilism* has as its amorality only a denial that morality has a foundation in human nature. Humanity by itself specifies no way that humans ought to be. If there are moral laws they are external moral laws binding people.

The amorality theses of the weak moral nihilism, of the moral neutrality of human nature, are those for “ought to do” and “ought to be” numbered (1) and (2) respectively. (1) There is nothing in human nature which sets standards for the right way for humans to act. (2) There is nothing in human nature which sets standards for the right way for humans to be.

For this book, moral nihilism is reduced to weak moral nihilism. That reduction complicates my case. So it is helpful to review my line of argument. These review sections down to the one titled “Existential theories” are complex and somewhat repetitious. But understanding the line of argument can be increased by repeating it in slightly different ways.

IX.5.1 Review of line of argument

My line of argument is that sexual nihilism based on assuming sexuality is morally neutral, tends to the weak moral nihilism of the moral neutrality of human nature. This weak moral nihilism tends, in a secular setting with biases towards a physicalist metaphysics, to amoralism. I use “tends to” because there is “conceptual pressure” to go from one position to the other although the first position does not logically imply the other. I do not know enough about intellectual causation to warrant a stronger term than the vague “conceptual pressure.”

In this secular setting amoralism is strong moral nihilism which, theoretically, is open to total nihilism. In this book *nihilism* is reduced to *strong moral nihilism*. I make the reduction because I regard avoiding moral nihilism as sufficient for avoiding total nihilism. If we avoid moral nihilism we do not get all that some might want such as a God and an afterlife. However, rejection of moral nihilism puts something in the “empty space” of total nihilism with which we can orient our lives, namely a moral reality and being bound by this morality gives us dignity and our lives significance. Reduction of nihilism to moral nihilism is also significant for my keeping my case secular.

It is important for clarifying and assessing my line of argument for me to try expressing weak moral nihilism and sexual nihilism as nihilisms. They are not **widely** recognized as nihilisms. The next two subsections reach the roots of the reflections giving rise to this book.

IX.5.1a Weak moral nihilism

Absence thesis: Humanity is not an end-in-itself. Humanity has no purpose.

Mood: Dread of future because no scientifically possible way of molding human beings is forbidden.

Existential thesis: No obligations are properly imposed or privileges properly bestowed with the phrase “because you are human.” (Anti-speciesism: Peter Singer is my paradigm weak moral nihilist.)

For many, what I call weak moral nihilism is not nihilistic. It is an optimistic progressive outlook on the indefinite modification of humankind for greater satisfaction of all beings capable of satisfactions. What I call progressive stances on sexuality are applications of this general progressive outlook to sexuality. Contemporary literature exposes its nihilism.

IX.5.1b Sexual nihilism

Absence thesis: Sexuality has no right way of being used.

Mood: Sexual alienation: Our sexuality is trivial but demonic.

Existential thesis: Any sexual activity or way of being is in principle permissible.

For many, what I call sexual nihilism is sexual liberation. This book really began with pessimistic reflections on 1960’s sexual liberation. Over the years I diagnosed it as alienating sexuality from humanity. Positively stated sexual alienation is proclamation of the moral neutrality of sexuality. With sexuality separated from our humanity, the notion that our moral thinking is inseparable from our actual ways of thinking and feeling becomes less plausible. A picture emerges that our moral thinking lies outside the body and invents or discovers moral laws for the acts and developments of the body. This is a picture of the moral neutrality of humanity and is weak moral nihilism. However, in our contemporary secular setting the picture of reason with laws apart from the body is incredible. So, the full moral nihilism of amoralism remains.

IX.5.2 Weak moral nihilism as the heteronomy of morality

At first it may seem odd to class as moral nihilists those who locate moral laws as divine commands or principles in some structure totally outside human nature. Certainly, such believers

are not total nihilists. They find significance and purpose by being subject to those external laws or to use a Kantian term “heteronomous principles.” However, morality by itself does not matter. What counts is obedience to God or whatever gives the moral commands. A sense of being subject to a supreme commander, be it a personal God or impersonal rational order, is an antidote to total nihilism. I am not arguing that overcoming weak moral nihilism is a necessary condition for overcoming total nihilism. However, I am making a case that in our contemporary Western secular setting overcoming weak moral nihilism is necessary and sufficient for avoiding total nihilism. This book is written for such a secular setting.

Before considering merits and demerits of the existential value of character morality as an antidote to nihilism a closer examination of existential theories is useful for understanding them as truth claims.

IX.6 Existential theories

Let us call these theories about the significance of life – the importance and purpose of why we exist: *existential theories*. Nihilism's existential theories have low theoretical content because the nihilistic existential theories are basically rejection of existential theories. Existential theories introduce controversial philosophical issues. So the theoretical component of antidotes to nihilism require at least assent to controversial philosophical theses. A philosophical incentive for nihilistic existential theories is that they require almost no effort to argue for and to defend. Just say "no." Of course, choosing a position with nothing to defend might be choosing what is not worth wanting.

Theoretical components of antidotes to nihilism require at least assent to an existential thesis about an objective significance for human life.

IX.6.1 On an objective significance for life

A significance for life is tripartite. One part is a requirement to act certain ways while striving for a final condition, which is the second part. The third and main part is a dignity or status. It has to be felt, thought and be significant to act these ways for that purpose. The sense of status is of most importance for having an antidote to nihilism. Nihilism is felt in “present moments.” Nihilism needs to be treated in the present. The final condition is of least important insofar as it does not need to be attained to overcome nihilism. It functions as a condition for giving us direction – an orienting star. Kant’s 1786 essay “What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking”⁶ has been a significant influence on my approach.

The recognition of significance or dignity is not necessarily a “happy thought.” To continue my medicinal metaphor: an antidote for nihilism may be “bad tasting medicine.” Recognition of my dignity is recognition of how I should be. Concomitant with this recognition may be the awareness of how undignified I actually am. Upon discovering the significance of my life, I may be overwhelmed by the dreadful thought that my life which I treated as if it did not matter, did matter. I wasted it – I let it be as if it were nothing. To instantiate this thought to sexuality. A man may realize that his sexuality, which he treated as if it did not matter, mattered greatly. He wasted it – let it be nothing.

Here I should acknowledge the influence of Paul Tillich.⁷ I read Tillich as analyzing four types of what he calls existential anxiety. One anxiety is simply tension about the uncertainty of the future, a second is about the uncertainty of our certain death, a third is tension about our failure to be as we ought, viz., guilt, and the fourth is anxiety about meaninglessness. My talk of an antidote of nihilism addresses alleviating anxiety of meaninglessness. Alleviation of anxiety about meaninglessness may exacerbate the other existential anxieties

Each human being has this significance by virtue of being human. The requirement holds throughout life. The final condition cannot be securely attained while living. Even if one attains the condition, e.g. happiness, being pleasing to God or good character and worthiness to be happy, while alive, there is still the requirement to strive to maintain the condition while still alive. To say that the condition is final is to say that it is a goal which is not reached as a stage for moving onto another goal. To say that the significance is objective is to say that *it is true* that human lives have this significance. To say that it is true is to say that the way **things are** apart from all perceiving, feeling and thinking gives human lives this significance.

IX.6.2 Things in themselves, truth, objective significance

A Kantian approach ultimately requires acceptance of things-in-themselves as that which separates the true from the false. However, there is no way we can compare our believing with things-in-themselves to judge whether or not our beliefs correspond with the way things are. We stay within our belief system and use it with the goal of becoming convinced that it brings us to the truth – the way things are. This is pragmatic defense.

Characterizing significance for life as a truth about human being implies that the significance of life, if any, is not chosen by individuals or groups. The purpose of life is set for individuals because they are human beings. From this perspective, it is appropriate to call a significance for life *objective*. This is contrary to one popular view that people have to give their lives significance or meaning by setting themselves a final goal. This popular view could be called *subjective* because the alleged final goal is set by thinking subjects for themselves.

So I need to add a terminological reminder. Despite my use of “existential thesis” the views here are inconsistent with existential philosophies of the mid twentieth century. For Sartre

the thesis that existence precedes essence is inconsistent with any thesis that there is an objective way a human being ought to act or be.

IX.6.3 Religious example of an objective significance for life

My childhood Baltimore catechism provides an example. To be sure this religious view held definite beliefs about the structure of the way things are. God is not a mere thing-in-itself. On the first page it told me that I was made by God to know, love and serve Him on this earth in order to be happy with Him forever in heaven. It was made perfectly clear that knowing, loving and serving God was keeping the commandments which were primarily the moral law. Religious observances were necessary for those to whom they had been preached; but religious observances were not sufficient. This is a traditional Christian view and, for believers, it bestows dignity.

IX.6.4 A secularized humanist objective significance for life

Takers of the character stance find a secularized version of the above religious meaning of life. Our human nature requires us to know how we ought to act and to be from our human nature so that we become as human beings ought to be. Succinctly: An answer to “What is the significance of life?” is proposed The significance or meaning of life is to find out from our human nature how we ought to act and to be so that we become as human beings ought to be.

Since human nature is part of nature, I could say that nature requires us to act and be a certain way because nature shows us that we ought to be this way. However, the character stance does not look to nature in general to find our significance. We use our human nature to find out how our human nature ought to be. So the character stance is a humanism. It is a secular humanism because it does not specify any nonhuman agent providing a reward for trying to become, or even being, as we ought to be. It is not a secular humanism which rules out the

possibility of there being a deity which rewards moral behavior. It leaves open the possibility that people need not act contrary to reason if they allow themselves to believe that there is a moral God who brings it about that ultimately all is as it ought to be. For me a full humanism would not bracket off human religiosity from being human. I think that religiosity is an inalienable from humanity. Indeed I would go so far as to deny the moral neutrality of religiosity. I believe that religious reasoning can, in principle, distinguish between correct and incorrect modes of religious belief and action. But here I bracket off religiosity from humanity.

I have argued elsewhere that with certain notions of morality, including that of the character stance, it is not morally permissible to accept that there cannot be a moral God⁸. Since so much of the stance has been included in religious outlooks, I call it a secularized humanism by having secularized religious outlooks. Even if it is a secularized version of religious outlooks, it is, by virtue of being secular, legitimate to argue from it in a secular “marketplace of ideas.” Establishing this legitimacy is one of the main goals of this book.

Above I have used first person plural “we” when talking of reasoning because reasoning is carried out with others. To say moral reasoning is autonomous is to say that in reasoning we set moral laws by reasoning. Reasoning is essentially public. “Autonomous” does not mean “autistic.”

IX.6.5 Requirements for accepting an objective significance

The requirements for accepting an objective purpose can be labeled with some philosophical terminology: doxastic (belief) and metaphysical. The doxastic requirements are those showing that it is permissible to believe that character formation is an objective purpose for human life. The metaphysical requirements are trying to specify what it is like for character formation to be an objective purpose. The pragmatic argument chapter is devoted to showing

how the doxastic requirements can be met. To satisfy the doxastic requirements, I argue that we are entitled to act as if the stance is true with the goal of coming to believe that it is true.

What about the metaphysical requirements? I do little or nothing towards fulfilling them. I do not delay making my case by developing the metaphysical requirements in terms of trying to specify what reality is like since I am skeptical of there being some final satisfactory scheme of reality. However, a case is always strengthened by sketching some plausible model for what is asserted to exist. Models have rhetorical force. This would be difficult because for one it requires development of a model for a self continuing through time and, for me, closely linked with the brain. My efforts to locate the moral laws in human thinking helps my case by making moral realism more “realistic” by having laws in some physical reality such as the human mind. Still my case for moral realism would be strengthened by a model of the human mind which I unfortunately do not have.

I am deeply troubled by my inability to justify philosophical theses presupposed by my stance: free-will, continuance of a self, unity of mind and body, etc. I fear such core philosophical problems cannot be solved. I, or anyone who takes a stance, on the purpose of human life, have to move forward with anxiety that confusion lies at the foundations of our stances. I have admitted an anxiety similar to that when I was a small boy learning to swim and got into water where I could not touch bottom. That’s the human condition. One value of the core philosophical problems is that they remind us of our human condition.

[IX.7 Ten questions on existential merits and demerits of the character stance

Questions and answers provide a format for assessing the merits and demerits. Since the theoretical component of the character stance is a moral realism, viz., rejection of amoralism, several of the questions are answered from the perspective of moral realism. The next sentence

needs to be read carefully! The special theoretical feature of the character stance is locating the moral reality in human reasoning morally legislating for bodily operations in which reason operates. As an existential position the mood of the character stance is a sense of moral obligation – the sense of duty. These questions will address, amongst other things, the issues about freedom, God and immortality Kant raises in his *Critique of Practical Reason*.

IX.7.1 Is not taking the character stance actually another subjective solution for finding meaning in life along the pattern of choosing a meaning for your life?

One does have to choose to take the character stance. My pragmatic defense chapter is an adaptation of James's "Will to Believe" to justify a choice **to take** the character stance. One may choose it to find meaning or direction in life. Taking the stance is subjective in the sense that prior to taking the stance and becoming convinced of it one is not required by logic or morality to take the stance. However, what you choose is to set yourself on a course of finding yourself bound by objective moral laws. Once you take the stance you are required by the moral laws you discover that you cannot abandon being bound by these laws. When you become convinced of the correctness of a moral law, you can no longer think of how it could not be correct. You can look back and realize you made a choice. But you cannot now think of how you could morally have made any other choice.

IX.7.2 Would not moral realism be a sufficient antidote to total nihilism?

Above I classed as moral nihilisms views such as divine command theories which are apparently realistic about moral laws. I will show how moral realism which leaves a significant part of morality unfounded in human nature tends towards losing faith in moral realism.

Taking the character stance is only one way of finding meaning for life in morality. If you find meaning in life through accepting, and following, moral realism, then you have found

meaning in a way with structural similarity to the character stance. The objective morality you accept will tell you what to do and how to be. So if you find meaning in life by trying to follow morality, then you find meaning by trying to act as you ought and to be as you ought. That is structurally very close to what I call the character stance. Nonetheless, I link the character stance to my theoretical efforts to locate the moral laws in our human nature. I do so because this theoretical link supports the case for adopting the character stance, takes the physical seriously and leaves arguments from it more clearly secular.

Moral realism, by itself, could leave our sexuality morally neutral. The chapters on trivialization of sexuality and demonization of sexuality brought out that leaving sexuality morally neutral separates us too much from what we are as human beings. Morality, apart from being for our sexuality, is too much a morality for us only as souls. Looking at our moral selves as non-physical souls tends to denigrate the physical as not being important – not mattering. If belief in the separate mind or soul weakens, then a sense of nihilism strengthens.

Mere moral realism may also leave us thinking of moral laws as residing in some special realm apart from nature. If the moral laws are outside nature, there is a temptation to locate them in the mind of a supernatural moral being. The moral realism I am trying to develop for the character stance locates our moral laws in our nature just as are the functional teleological laws for human nature.

Moral realisms which locate moral laws in some non-physical realm tend towards a philosophical dualism. Dualists may find a meaning for the mind, soul or spirit. But the physical part of our life tends to be regarded as stuff with which we are somehow burdened and is insignificant. In contemporary secular contexts, I think that mind-body dualism with morality

founded in the mental leaves no place for moral laws outside the human mind. This tends towards a subjective view of morality which undercuts the morality as a way of finding meaning.

IX.3 What are some differences between the character stance and religion?

The character stance is a moralism. Moralisms hold that the purpose of life is to become morally correct. I am not a student of the ethical writings of F. H Bradley.⁹ However, the title of one of his essays “My station and its duties” is an apt expression of the moralism of the character stance. Moralism by itself is definitely not Christianity. I quote from an online essay of a Christian writer.¹⁰

“Moralists can be categorized as both liberal and conservative. In each case, a specific set of moral concerns frames the moral expectation. As a generalization, it is often true that liberals focus on a set of moral expectations related to social ethics while conservatives tend to focus on personal ethics. The essence of moralism is apparent in both — the belief that we can achieve righteousness by means of proper behavior”

Albert Mohler, on line essay “Why moralism is not the Gospel”

A whole chapter could be devoted to comparing and contrasting religion and moralism. Here I note only two. One which gives moralism an “existential advantage.” A second which is an “existential cost.” Moralisms as antidotes for nihilism have an advantage over theistic antidotes for nihilism. The “voice of morality “speaks” to us as our conscience when we reason morally. The voice of God is notoriously silent. By itself moralism offers no prospect of a reward for a life lived forming a good character. Because of this Kant thought that morality inevitably leads to a religious outlook with some provision for reward for a good life.¹¹

IX.7.4 Does taking the character stance protect one against the despair associated with total nihilism?

There is no protection against falling into dark moods in which you feel that nothing matters and that there is nothing for which to live. Even deeply religious people have been afflicted with "dark nights" of the soul. However, the character stance keeps you bound by moral laws. There is always the thought and sense that one must keep going. You may feel that nothing matters. Nonetheless you are obliged to keep going because your character must be developed. Despair is not a moral option.

In particular, suicide to avoid longer life with high probability of horrible suffering is not a morally acceptable option. Escaping from all duties is impermissible. At the "bottom line" life is a duty; not a good. This is a hard teaching. However, there is the consolation that duty is something which cannot be taken away. The stoics made a mistake about human nature when they alleged that happiness could not be taken away from a wise man even while being tortured on the rack. However, for holders of the character stance, who are not stoics, their duties cannot be taken away from them even while being tortured.

IX.5 Does the character stance offer individuals a prospect of happiness?

No! Could we say that the character stance offers individuals the prospect of being worthy of being happy? If someone started early in life and quite successfully developed excellent character in all areas in life, lived fairly long and persevered to the end in pursuit of good character, we might say that such an individual was worthy of being happy. However, far too many who take the character stance take it too late in life or are not very successful at development of good character. As with most of us regardless of stance on morality, I fear, we end up as just "so-so" human beings. In fact we are not worthy of being happy and will never be so. I have argued that a foundation for religious salvation beliefs is a sense that one deliberate choice of what we ought not do prevents us from ever being worthy of happiness.¹²

In William James'¹³ terminology a suitable religion for those with a character stance would not be a religion of the healthy minded. Since those with a character stance need to be aware of their failures and flaws to build character suitable religions for us are those James calls religions of deliverance. Catholic Christianity is such a religion.

Concern with meaning is different from pursuit of happiness. Meaningfulness is not irrelevant to happiness or contentment. But the relevance is that of contingent psychological connections. On the one hand, happiness may be a distraction from anxiety about meaningfulness. On the other hand, a passing sense of meaningless can destroy the happiest moments. The concern with meaning is concern with finding the significance in pursuing happiness amongst other things.

IX.6 Does the character stance provide any incentive for morality?

No! The character stance offers morality as an incentive for living. It would be better, though, to avoid talking of it offering an incentive. The character stance gives meaning to life by requiring us to act and be certain ways. From the stance what we do and how we are is morally important.

To see the irrelevance of a moral incentive as an antidote to nihilism, some remarks on the Kantian notion of a good will may be helpful. A person with a good will is one who has a character such that he always chooses what he ought because he ought. A good will is the highest good for those taking the character stance. There are two ways to view the highest good. One way is to view a good will as an attractive condition. We pursue a good will because we want it or are inclined toward it. The second way to view a good will is as an obligatory condition. Only when viewed as an obligatory condition is pursuit of a good will an antidote to nihilism. With the parental stance wherein nature gives us our obligations the source of what we ought to do also

sets us the obligation to pursue a good will. On the character stance, there is homogeneity of the source of all obligations. For the progressive stance, some principle about maximizing pleasure sets obligations – the ought to do. A desire to alleviate boredom makes the good will attractive. So for progressives, who try to avoid nihilism by being moral, being moral is a sophisticated, and laudable, method of distraction.

The next three questions are based on Kant's antinomies of practical reason.

IX.7 Can the stance provide an antidote to nihilism if the course of our lives are determined by factors before our birth?

No. If you think that you cannot change your character to conform to moral laws by your choices, you do not take the character stance. To take the character stance you have to believe the following free will thesis. *There are acts such that I performed them because I chose them but I could have chosen not to perform them and if I had so chosen, I would not have performed them.*

I interpret a claim that our lives are determined by theological, metaphysical or physical, factors in place before our births as inconsistent with this free will thesis. So dismissal of determinism is part of the character stance. However, the assumption of free will does not imply any specific analysis of how free will operates. A persuasive analysis of free will would be helpful, though, in supporting the character stance. Unfortunately, I do not have such an analysis. I am consoled a bit by David Hume's reminder that we also lack a model of how deterministic causation operates.

Here is a place to note why avoiding nihilism by direct action on our nervous system is inappropriate from the character stance. To alter our moods and beliefs by causal action, suggests too much that we are causally determined. As just said, determinism is nihilistic.

IX.8 Can the stance provide an antidote to nihilism if there is almost no chance of our becoming as we ought to be?

Weak wills and short lives suggest that few, if any of us, can become totally what we ought to be. Indeed, most of us will fall far short. But the existential function of the character stance is not to bring us to perfection. The function is to give us the important task and dignity of aiming at perfection **in** whatever condition we are. Even a vile serial killer near to his execution can attain dignity and a significance for his remaining hours by repenting and choosing whatever he could to act and be right. He might properly think that his life so far has been wasted – it counted for nothing. The new openness to acting and being morally right accomplishes nothing but leaves him to die with the same dignity as a moral being as someone who has worked at being right all of his life. However, having dignity does not bring happiness. The last thought of our repentant killer may be that his life was wasted. For eternity, the thought of that man is “My life is wasted.” That may be what hell is.

We do not need to postulate, with Kant, an indefinite post mortem “life” for people to attain moral perfection.

IX.9 Can the stance really protect against total nihilism without an incentive for morality?

What if there is no moral being who can bring it about that it is as it ought to be? In this case, do not our efforts to be moral count for nothing? If the same fate awaits both the moral and the immoral, does not morality count for nothing? If at biological death, both saints and sinners cease to be, did it matter whether they were saints or sinners? Yes, it mattered from the perspective of the character stance. The saint tried to live as he ought to live while the sinner made little or no effort.

From the perspective of the character stance, you cannot say that it does not matter whether or not I worked on character formation. So you cannot say that at the point of biological death it does not matter whether or not we worked at character formation. For all that the character stance asserts, after biological death saints and sinners are no more; eternally vanished. I have argued, though, that holders of the character stance cannot consistently hold that it is impossible that after biological death each of us has a happiness worthy of our moral character.¹⁴

IX.10 May people justify letting themselves come to believe the character stance?

My justification is strongly influenced by William James's so-called pragmatic defense of believing in his "The Will to Believe." James outlines conditions for allowing ourselves to become convinced of positions with existential importance which he calls options. He specifies that these options should be momentous, live, forced and open. In the next chapter, I characterize and dismiss three alternative options on sexuality and morality. I argue that these options, which I call stances, are insufficient antidotes for moral nihilism. After setting aside these options called: Progressive, Rationalist and Romantic, I go on to give a pragmatic defense of my option: The Parental character stance

¹1948 paper "On What There Is" published in *Review of Metaphysics*. Reprinted in 1953 *From a Logical Point of View*. Harvard University Press.

² See Conclusion section of Hume's 1739 *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk I. part iv section vii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Little Brown, 1996

⁵ My Ohio State colleague, Richard Garner, a decent man, published a book supporting amoralism, *Beyond Morality*. [Temple University](http://www.templeuniversity.edu) Press, 1994.

⁶ See 14th printing of Kant's *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge U. Press, UK 2003

⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952)

⁸ See my *Kantian Condemnation of Atheistic Despair*.

⁹ British philosopher 1846-1924

¹⁰ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/09/03/why-moralism-is-not-the-gospel-and-why-so-many-christians-think-it-is/>

¹¹ *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Ak VI 6

¹² “A Kantian Model for Religions of Deliverance,” in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Chris Firestone and Stephen Palmquist, Indian U. Press, Bloomington IN, 2006

¹³ *The Varieties of Religious Experience : a study in human nature*, 1902 Gifford Lecture I refer to the Collier Macmillan edition, London 1961 p. 114 for sketch of religion of the healthy minded. and p. 141 for sketch of religion of deliverance.

¹⁴ *Atheistic Despair*, Chapter IX §9.4