

Affirming Nihilism as a Way to Philosophizing in Life

Juan Rafael G. Macaranas
De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde
Manila, Philippines

James Tartaglia, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 218 pages

Keywords: Meaning, Transcendence, Nihilism, Consciousness, Reality, Time, Universals

What is philosophy in a meaningless life? What is nihilism? Why does it matter if life is meaningful or meaningless? Prof. James Tartaglia's book, *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*, attempts to provide comprehensive philosophical perspectives to such questions. The author thinks that to appreciate and enjoy philosophizing, there are a lot more philosophical clarifications needed on these matters. Such philosophical questions posted in the beginning will be answered by nihilism. Truly, it would seem that reality is meaningless, and that nihilism according to Tartaglia is neither good nor bad, but rather a neutral reality. It is philosophy that will supply the intellectual ammunition for understanding the meaningful and meaningless life as against maybe trends, religion, cultures and traditions. This makes the book unique, laudable, admirable, and interesting to read and review.

Tartaglia's treatment with the book is thematic, creative and dynamic. In the first two chapters, the author refers to some great and famous thinkers as resources for speaking

about the meaning of life and nihilism. He employs their writings to develop and confirm his thought that life is fundamentally meaningless. Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus and Schopenhauer are engaged in a manner that helps the author ground and legitimize his position about nihilism. The author also mentioned some contemporary living philosophers like Bernard Reginster, Thomas Nagel, and Stanley Rosen, an American Christian philosopher who recently died in 2014. The main issues of the book concern the metaphysical topics on *Consciousness, Time, and Universals*. The topics serve as springboards in appreciating and explaining nihilism. His reinterpretation of these metaphysical concepts responds to the intellectual burden to prove that the question of the meaning of life, to which nihilism provides the answer, is the basis of philosophy. In between the main issues of the book are the philosophical foundations or groundings (Chapter 3 and Chapter 8) which reveal the value of nihilism. The importance and role of philosophy in transcendence plays a good viewpoint in living a meaningful life. The book is divided into eight chapters, each with three to seven interesting sub-topics which are well structured and organized.

Chapter 1 (21-39) presents the bird's eye view about the Meaninglessness of Life. *Nihilism in ethical discourse is usually labeled as the absolute denial or negation of values*. James Tartaglia claims that the nihilism he is concerned in the book is metaphysical, claiming that there is no overall point to human life. "We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out" (21). In attunements to nihilism, anxiety and boredom will always come into the context and situation. We must be doers and actors in the world; otherwise, we will be trapped into boredom and anxiety. A good way to illustrate the significance of attunements is by analogy with a game of chess. The game provides us with great freedom within the parameters of action it prescribes, and the whole exercise calls for considerable reflection (27). The meaninglessness of life is a microcosm of the meaninglessness of reality (36).

There were some known philosophers mentioned in this topic. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a German philosopher, is most often associated with nihilism. There is no objective structure in the world except what we give and provide. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), another German philosopher, is known for his rejection of Nietzsche's nihilism. Nietzsche, the man who dedicated his life to fighting nihilism, becomes, for Heidegger, the biggest nihilist of them all, because he thinks of the *Will* not only psychologically but also metaphysically. Heidegger turns against Nietzsche's metaphysics of the *Will-to-Power*, and, against his own *Phenomenology of the Will*. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), a German philosopher, sees life as punishment and that there is nothing we can do to change it because there is no free will, therefore life is meaningless. Heidegger's concern with boredom shows the influence of Schopenhauer. "Although Schopenhauer connects boredom with withdrawing from the framework and nihilism, his main interest is once more bound up with a redemptive agenda. Thus, as for Heidegger, boredom is ultimately a call to action: in Schopenhauer's case, to purge ourselves of will through a life of asceticism, and thereby free ourselves of the unpleasantness of boredom and striving" (33).

There are differing interpretations of Nietzsche's nihilism which is not shocking given the importance he placed on lying and concealment, as Stanley Rosen (1929-2014), an American Christian philosopher, stressed. Tartaglia followed Bernard Reginster, an American philosopher, in thinking that this was his central project. Reginster says: "that in its broadest description, nihilism is the belief that existence is meaningless... According to this 'broadest description' I am a nihilist (though I find it more natural to construe nihilism as what is believed, rather than the belief itself). But that is where I get off the boat, because Nietzsche has a very rich conception of nihilism which amounts to much more than just that" (36).

Chapter 2 (41-60) presents a survey of misguided coping strategies with the question: *Does nihilism ruin your life?* Can nihilism really ruin life? It will always depend on one's view. It is hard to see any valid reason to regard nihilism as a danger that one should struggle to overcome. There is no reason to be

affected unless we were previously under the false impression that life has a meaning. Nihilism should not be blamed for the consequences of discovering that we are wrong. Practical consequences of nihilism might well turn out to be positive. There might be conflict or human struggle to find any in a purposeless, meaningless or irrational space. It might still seem that nihilism changes our attitude to life, even if there is nothing we can do about it (44). Thomas Nagel, an American philosopher, rejected this argument. The larger context Nagel has in mind is that the physical universe does not provide life with a meaning. If we look at life from the outside trying to justify our importance and the fact that life does not exist in any wider context of significance, we will inevitably fail.

Life is absurd because we cannot help taking it seriously, and yet we cannot justify this seriousness (45). It was Albert Camus (1913-1960), a French Algerian philosopher who inspired Nagel's position. Camus describes: "the absurd as arising in a *confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world*, and says that this confrontation produces the *feeling of the absurd*, the *absurd mind* and the *absurd man*; the idea is not that life is absurd, but rather that we cannot help judging that life is absurd if we have a need for a meaning of life that the world cannot provide" (47). Camus's *absurdist* is Nietzsche's *nihilist* without the despair and Nagel tried to over-extend this conception of a certain type of person with a bad argument (47).

Transcendence means the possibility of existence or experience to go beyond physical level. The meaning of life would require reality to transcend the physical universe, once more highlights the connection between nihilism and the fact of existence (50). Regarding, humanism and relativism, the author was not biased in presenting nihilism. The humanist notion of the meaningfulness of life is well-established within the collective consciousness of people like Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Nelson Mandela (1918-2013). They are often held up as paradigms of what it is to lead a meaningful life, whereas somebody who spends most of his or her life alone in front of a television might be said to lead a meaningless life (54). Or, the humanist could associate the meaning of life to the

social life context (55). A more radical challenge to nihilism that can be developed from humanism is provided by the truth of relativism.

Chapter 3 (61-81) discusses what philosophy is and how important it is in our everyday life. The author treats it as a tool or a guide in our persistent questioning. Philosophy provides the seeker the capacity to analyze, compare and contrast, and verify views and perspectives. The author gives importance to the persistence of philosophical questions. Among the sub-topics are enframement and ontology, scepticism, and Meno's paradox. He also used *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to demonstrate philosophical questions. We must also think that philosophical questions were being asked long before the official beginning of philosophy (63). But why should we persevere with the question? One reason is that we need to know what philosophy is to assess scepticism about its problems (69).

He reminds the readers that when philosophers try to systematically understand the world, we can assume that questions of enframement are foremost in their minds. The question about the context of meaning fits a question of enframement. Enframing means the gathering together of setting-upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real meaning. We call this basic constituent of reality a question of ontology (71). Ontology is the philosophical study of being. It may be through scepticism that the discipline of philosophy discovered the truth of nihilism.

Chapter 4 (83-100) presents the Problem of Consciousness and tries to show that materialism cannot solve it. Chapter 5 (101-121) focuses on Consciousness: the transcendent hypothesis. In this chapter, the author impressively outlines how the transcendent hypothesis changes the terms of contemporary philosophical debates. There are four transcendent hypotheses that he raised in view of the reality of nihilism (105-120).

Chapter 6 (123-145) explains Time. Philosophy of space and time is concerned with issues surrounding the ontology, epistemology, and character of space and time. It is a philosophical approach to the ontological nature of time, which takes the view that all existence in time is equally real, as

opposed to the growing block universe theory of time, in which at least the future is not the same as any other time.

Chapter 7 (147-167) simply describes Universals and shows how this problem connects with the transcendent hypothesis about consciousness. Chapter 8 (169-184) clarifies Nihilism, Transcendence and Philosophy. Embracing or living nihilism is neither bad nor good. It is a perspective on how one sees life, that philosophy and metaphysics can provide rational direction to beliefs about the spiritual. Ideally, nihilism and transcendence should be in harmony with one another. First, the task could not end, because every new generation needs to make philosophical ideas their own (181). Second, that philosophy's task of tending the space of transcendence may become more important (183). Third, philosophy provides a kind of understanding that is important to people and may become more important as technology progresses (183).

Overall, I find the book philosophical, challenging, informative and self-reflecting. *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* provides a healthy outlook towards the meaning of life. It will inspire or stimulate the learners to continue asking questions and finding solutions to a problem. Indeed, the search for the meaning of life could be approached through nihilism, that is, when one finds reality is meaningless. Tartaglia opens this track by rejecting some of the strategies devised in the 20th century that tended to avoid or touch nihilism. In a comprehensive manner, he established that he found nothing malicious in it. Nihilism would be false if there were a transcendent context of meaning. Each one has a stand regardless of the label of one's belief in nihilism. One could be neutral, extreme, radical, normal, new normal, moderate, or belong to other emerging categories. This is what philosophizing is all about. We just have to self-reflect and do higher philosophizing in a rational discourse.

Tartaglia does this by explaining the autonomy of philosophy with an expanded view on consciousness. The author embraces nihilism and uses transcendence both to provide solution/s to the problem of consciousness, time and universals. His philosophical ideas challenge the reader as well as engage each one to rethink and reflect on one's view and

perspective. The book conveys that the role of philosophizing is to maintain a rational discussion about transcendence, and that through greater self-consciousness and critical thinking, it can regain its influence in society.

I highly recommend this superb book for further readings in college and graduate studies. In fact, it can serve as a textbook for Philosophy of the Mind or Consciousness. This book can serve also as useful tool for further and deeper writing about the Nihilism and the Search for Meaning of Life. I find it so good that I intend to also read his other recent three books. *Nihilism and the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia* (2017) was edited by Masahiro Morioka and published by Journal of Philosophy of Life (Open Access Book). His two recently published books are *Philosophy in a Technological World: Gods and Titans* (2020) and *A Defence of Nihilism* (2020). I guarantee they are interesting to read and will lead our minds to broaden our doing philosophy.

Juan Rafael G. Macaranas is a professor at De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde in Manila, Philippines, teaching Philosophy and Religion subjects. His research interests include Philosophy of Education, Ethics, Religion, and Music. His recent articles were published in *Philosophia - International Journal of Philosophy (PIJP)*, namely: Growth in learner-centered pedagogy (2018); Teaching Logic: An examination of a classroom practice (2017); and a book review on Dialogue and Boundary Learning by Peter Neville Rule (2020). He is the Chairman of the Board of Governors of Philippine National Philosophical Research Society, Inc. (PNPRS) and the Managing Editor of its publication.

Address:

Juan Rafael G. Macaranas
School of Multidisciplinary Studies
De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde
2544 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines
Email: juanrafael.macaranas@benilde.edu.ph