

# Nihilism

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Nihilism can be defined as the implosion of subjectivity. Alternatively, and being a bit clearer, we can define it as a disbelief in any metaphysical foundation for human existence. It is not, however, something difficult to define, but to apprehend. Because it is a rather broad and abstract notion, there is much confusion around it. Let's look at some of the main reasons for this. First, nihilism is vague in itself, for it comes from the Latin *nihil*, which means nothing. The word nihilism, which could be translated as "nothingism", gives us no immediate idea what it is. Second, nihilism has no positive content. Since it is a negative posture, we will only be able to understand it after we become aware of what it denies, and therefore the understanding of nihilism involves many other concepts; It will only become clear after we sketch its context. Finally, nihilism has not historically been given a consistent employment, and every thinker or movement has interpreted it in a very particular way, usually with an ideological background, in a myopic attempt to justify an active and militant nihilism.

In general, we see nihilism associated with other ideas, denoting its inherent emptiness. For example, political nihilism would be more or

less equivalent to anarchism, repudiating the belief that this or that political system would lead us to progress, which would be nothing but a delusion. Moral nihilism would be equivalent to a denial of the existence of objective moral references, that is, of good or bad values that exist by themselves. Epistemological nihilism, on the other hand, would be the assertion that nothing can be known or communicated. So we see that associating any notion with nihilism is not exactly a compliment, but rather like putting a sign on its side saying: there is nothing here – especially nothing of what is believed to be.

Nihilism, however, is not just a term we juxtapose to any idea that displeases us in order to demean it. Its power to point out the emptiness of things cannot be used as a weapon, simply because, when firing a shot of nothing, the gun automatically ceases to exist, and the whole thing becomes meaningless. Nihilism, being a radical process of criticism, cannot be used partially. We cannot, for instance, use moral nihilism to repudiate specific values, which we dislike for some reason, imagining that our own values would survive. When we say that morality does not exist, it implies that there are no values whatsoever – whether they are our own, or those of our opponents. With moral nihilism, all morals are reduced to nothing, including ours. The reduction of morals to nothing, as we see, is supported not by grammar, but by the assumption that morality is empty in itself, that it has no real, objective foundations. It is not a matter of whether we sympathize or not with the concept of morality, but the deeper realization that morality itself is a dream, a phantasmagoria invented by ourselves, and

therefore moral laws are no more pertinent than transit laws.

That being said, our focus will be on what is called existential nihilism, that is, the assumption that existence itself has no foundation, value, meaning, or purpose. According to existential nihilism, everything that exists has no purpose, including life. All actions, all feelings, all facts are empty in themselves, devoid of any meaning. In this perspective, living is as meaningless as dying, and we are here for the same reason as the stones: none. This seems to be the most fundamental category of nihilism, in relation to which all other types take the appearance of particular cases. Moral and political nihilisms, for instance, can clearly be derived from existential nihilism – for if existence itself has no value, it implies that nothing has value, including moral values, including progress.

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The only way to understand existential nihilism is through reflection. The emptiness of existence could never be demonstrated through practice, or grasped through immediate experience. If, for instance, we reduced our planet to nothing with a nuclear bomb, that wouldn't prove anything. The sight of this shattered planet wouldn't prove anything either. Such a destructive practical approach makes little sense, since it equates to trying to refute a book by burning it. Existential nihilism demonstrates itself when we reduce man to nothing, and for such it suffices to have some intellectual talent and some honesty, for the emptying of existence is the mere consequence of understanding it. We

don't have to behead all humanity to prove that life is meaningless.

To reduce man to nothing, and to understand that this demonstrates existential nihilism, we must grasp the objective emptiness of existence – being obvious that, as subjects, we can only do so subjectively. The problem is that, in the process of demonstrating that existence itself is empty, we are the very emptiness we are trying to point out – we try to explain that we ourselves have no explanation. It may seem paradoxical, but it is not. Once we understand ourselves as a fact, nihilism will follow as a rather obvious consequence. It will also become clear that nihilism is not, as might have seem at first, an extreme position to be in, often invoking some sort of revolt, but rather an honest and sensible view of reality – a view made possible in large part by modern scientific discoveries. With some definitions and simple explanations, we can arrive at a reasonable view of things that equates to existential nihilism. As the argument is a bit long, let's break it down. Let us make some preliminary remarks on why nihilism seems so uncomfortable to us.

Many, out of prejudice, are afraid of the “emptiness of existence,” but this fear in itself is something completely meaningless, for it equates to fearing something that doesn't even exist; emptiness is not a positive threat. Otherwise, let's see: There is no life on Venus. Does anyone feel terrified by this statement? Hardly. There are no banks on Mars. Does anyone pale about it? Not really. Suppose, however, that during all our lives we had worked hard, believing that all our effort would be turned

into money in a bank on Mars. Now we would feel threatened by the assertion that there is no bank on this planet, since we lived in function of that, we believed in this so-called Martian money as what gave meaning to our lives. Therefore, what terrifies us is not the emptiness of existence, or the emptiness of interplanetary banks - what fills us with fear is the possibility that we were completely wrong in our beliefs about reality. It would be overwhelming to realize that we had given great importance, that we had dedicated our entire lives to something that simply does not exist. That is why we tremble at the idea that existence itself is meaningless, even though this claim is as certain as the non-existence of money on other planets in the solar system.

We resist nihilism, not because it is false, but because rearranging our view of reality would be a very laborious task. However, if we put our personal interests aside, we will see that what troubles us in nihilism is the fact that it harshly confronts us with our own naiveté; that we have been so foolishly deceived that our lives have come to rely on lies, on imaginary assumptions. Therefore, let us realize that when nihilism points out these lies, it is not destroying reality, but our illusions. In this view, nihilism is nothing more than an exercise in honesty and impartiality, and only empties the reality of fictions that never really existed. This honesty can be painful, but it is a sign of maturity. If existence, stripped of illusions, seems empty, let us at least admit that this is our own fault for having filled ourselves with such illusions. If we like to fool ourselves, fine. But if our interest is to become capable of dealing with reality as adults, it will always be preferable to accept

existence as it is, even if that means giving up many of our deepest beliefs. It is preferable to live in a meaningless world to believing in a false meaning to the world, one that points nowhere.

As we see, the essential concern of the nihilist approach is not to discover the truth, but to point out the lies and to recognize limitations. Describing the facts is the role of science. Nihilism consists only in the discipline of being honest in the face of the facts we observe, to understand and accept its implications. In this sense, one of the areas most affected by nihilism are the “big questions” of existence. That is because the answer to such questions is often far more obvious than we think – and often we even know what they are, but we prefer to continue to accuse science of being “blind and limited” to justify our prejudices.

We affirm that such matters are too “deep” only as a pretext to treat them superficially; we say we are “mysteries”, “impossible to answer,” just because we are afraid of the answers. Other times we leave those questions aside, not to protect our illusions, but because we think that investigating them would lead us to madness. Quite the contrary, this would lead us only to lucidity, it would allow us to live with our feet on the ground. But what is the floor? Well, it’s that thing under our feet. What is the world? It is what we have before our eyes. What is being? It’s that which exists. For the most part, nihilism is the rare ability to see the obvious.

Let us ask, for instance, what is man? Well, we are what we seem to be:

machines. Just check out any basic anatomy book. There is nothing “behind.” This “behind” is only a fantasy. It was invented by us in a childish attempt to humanize existence. Nevertheless, and although we know perfectly well what man is, we still believe that there is in the equation a mysterious “something more.” We continue to deceive ourselves with the notion of the “depth” of knowledge, which makes us want to seek what’s “behind” world. Even more, it makes us believe that the true reality lies in that “behind”, which, precisely because it is an illusion, amounts to nothing.

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What is concerned with seeking what is “beyond” reality is not science, but metaphysics, which literally means beyond physics. But what is beyond physics? Now the answer is obvious: nothing. Much less reasons. In a world where everything is physical, only what we invent can be metaphysical, at least if we mean by metaphysics the classic investigation of “ultimate reasons”. Beyond the realm of scientific realism, metaphysics has no function; It is absurd that it has a function. In the pursuit of objective knowledge, the staff was passed on to science. The metaphysics that investigates the world “deeply” by pure reason is dead. This has never led to anything, for we try to discover reality, not looking at the world, but looking at a mirror. The metaphysical responses to existence seem interesting to us because they obviously depart from the convenient assumption that human reason is capable of replacing experimentation and accessing a

supposed “essence of being” by means of a magical intuition, as if exploring the world by remote control. It seems tempting that we can explain reality in this way, but metaphysics is a wild guess, something as useless as using imagination to predict the future.

Let’s look at the question as follows: metaphysics was born in a time of ignorance, in which men did not even know of the existence of bacteria. It never even occurred to them that our brains were made up of neurons. Even so, they wanted to rationally explain decomposition and thought. Since they did not have microscopes to see reality accurately, thus finding the existence of decomposing microorganisms, they merely started daydreaming metaphysical theories, speculating about “hidden realities” that decompose us in secret, and of course they had no idea of what they were talking about. Seeing a decomposing body, for example, they thought that perhaps it was due to some natural order of things imposing on us the decomposition as an “existential sense.” Thus, by ignoring that what rot us down are the bacteria, they assumed that this would be due to the mysterious “decomposing essence of being.” This kind of delusional reasoning, consisting of a rigorous logic to cover up holes, is the core of metaphysics. It addresses all issues of existence with this same degree of autism.

In this approach, rather than being investigated, the world must be thought of. Instead of observing facts, we must seek explanations of pure reason, wondering about some supernatural essence that determines natural facts. Of course, if the being were rational in itself,

something like a mathematical equation, the truth would be something abstract that transcends the facts themselves, that is, the “essence of being” would consist of logical principles. But where do we get the idea that being is rational? And what is this “essence”? No one knows. The fact is that this delusional metaphysics would never have been born if we had given the Greeks a microscope and a periodic table.

Viewed in this way, the most profound metaphysical investigations are a pure and simple waste of time, for they are in search of something that is simply not there – and the vast majority of the questions of existence, the questions we consider most important, are raised not by physics, but by metaphysics, by the most shameful inquisitive babble. If such observations seem strong, this is because even today our modern view of reality still hides many metaphysical biases.

Let us think, for example, about the *raison d'être* of life. Where do we get this crazy idea? Certainly not from experience, certainly not from the world before our eyes. This is an unreasonable metaphysical question, for it is something that could under no circumstances be solved by observation of the physical world, and this can be illustrated by the simple fact that the observation of the physical world made by modern biology, while explaining perfectly well how life works, is not accepted as an answer to this question. If not, let's see: we observe a spermatozoon and an egg fuse; we see the cells multiplying; we see all the stages involved in the formation of another organism; we see life happen right before us; everything is perfectly clear. Yet we continue to

insist on the belief that there is something “behind” this reality, something that is more important than reality itself. That something, of course, is our metaphysical beliefs. Science cannot answer the question of the “reason” of life because this way of conceiving life does not correspond to reality. It would be the same as asking science to answer where are the winged dragons we saw after consuming hallucinogens.

To be at least reasonable, we must admit that we have never had legitimate reasons to think that life has a “reason for being,” for nothing in our experience in the world suggests this question to us. What kind of physical phenomenon could have hinted at this question? We look at a flower and think: oh, how curious, there is a flower in that vase! Why is there not a vase in the flower? Why the flower has no teeth? What a mystery! This can only be because it has a “raison d’être” – the flower has blossomed to fulfill a transcendental order of things! Seeds and pollen have nothing to do with it: it is something deeper, far superior to the material world! Then we propose to ourselves the challenge: I will find out what the reason is! After a few years, we return from theology college and answer that only God knows.

In this kind of investigation, we desperately went out searching for the answer to a meaningless question, and still we were astonished to never find it. Of course, this question could only be answered if the world were something like a playground for humans, made in our image and likeness by some bored deity. But since the world does not behave according to our childish expectations, instead of admitting the obvious,

of accepting that reality is what is right before our eyes, we think it more sensible to invent a second mysterious existence that carries the “hidden essence” of ours – a world we can only imagine as a huge library full of dusty scrolls on which are noted the “reasons of being” of all that there is in the world we live in.

Therefore, in order to transform any absurd belief into a glorious “metaphysical inquiry,” it is enough to put a question mark at its end: we will have before us another “unfathomable mystery”, another proof of man’s profound ignorance of the world in which he lives. However, let us be frank: were not we ourselves that, for no respectable reason, invented that the flower has a “raison d’être”, that it must have a reason? We turn this circular reasoning into something so grand that by investigating it we have the illusion of walking straight. We are lost in reveries, and we call it “transcendental meditations,” “searching for the inner sense of being,” which is nothing more than a man running around his own tail for reasons that fill his vanity. Faced with this hidden something that makes us so monstrously naive, the question of the mystery of the world seems a matter of lice.

Let’s get back to common sense. If we pay any attention, we will see that the true reason of being of the flower is not really a reason, but a fact: the fact that it has germinated and bloomed; that is all. The rest is meaningless metaphysical questioning, an interrogative nonsense that takes our investigations to an imaginary world that has nothing to do with what we are trying to understand.

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It should already be quite clear why the nihilistic posture is uncomfortable, so let us move on to the next topic. Since nihilism is linked to a change in our metaphysical conception of existence, it is appropriate to sketch what metaphysics is today – and especially what it was. The metaphysics that we criticize here is the so-called traditional metaphysics, which starts from anthropocentric assumptions, launches itself into pointless investigations, seeking something that does not exist to explain what exists. Modern metaphysics, on the other hand, seeks only to delineate a coherent view of reality, leaving to science the role of discovering what exists. Instead of dreaming, it thinks from the facts we know, but without aberrant extrapolations. The contrast between the two will help us to better understand the context of nihilism.

Metaphysics is an area of philosophy that seeks to investigate the most fundamental aspects of existence through reason. It deals with that which is not immediately accessible to us through the senses, which cannot be investigated directly and experimentally, that is, through science. It asks questions like “what is it to be?”, “What is reason?”, “What is reality?” Etc. Metaphysics asks such basic questions that science cannot answer them directly, and the very practice of science presupposes many matters that only metaphysics investigates. Science only observes facts and records them methodically – it investigates with the eyes; Metaphysics, with reason.

When we say that “all living beings are born, grow, reproduce and die,” we make a scientific statement that can be observed. When we say that “life is meaningless,” we make a metaphysical claim, because it is something that we conclude from an intellectual abstraction process, and abstractions, in theory, cannot be observed. Therefore, when we conceptualize reality from facts, we are doing philosophy, not science. Science does not think, but we must think to make science coherently, and this is the role of metaphysical reflection in the modern context: to guide our investigations. For the most part, modern metaphysics has become a means of avoiding the naive errors of traditional metaphysics.

As we saw above, traditional metaphysics is essentialist, that is, it assumes that everything that exists has an “essence” that makes it what it is. The role of metaphysical reflection, in this perspective, would be to rationally investigate such “essence”, since the observed facts would be its mere manifestation. It has already been said that this essence is fire, water, numbers, reasons, gods, etc.; today it is said that this essence is foolishness. Such metaphysics does not care to understand the world we are in: it seeks to understand a transcendental world of imaginary essences of which ours would be the result. Its investigations presuppose an order of things that is extrinsic to being, that is, supernatural. It seeks to discover an essence which is also an explanation: the reason the world exists. This type of questioning, of course, would only be compatible with a world that had a “transcendent essence,” which refers to the idea of a “subjectivity behind the world.”

That is why we say that traditional metaphysics has a theological orientation, because it confers divine attributes to existence. This kind of metaphysical inquiry seems like philosophy, but it is actually theology.

Modern metaphysics, on the other hand, investigates reality, not in a transcendent, but immanent, perspective. Instead of speculating about what lies behind the horizon of existence, it seeks to understand what exists under our feet, not on our pillows. That is to say, it treats the question of the “essence of being” not as something outside one’s being, referring to “ultimate reasons”, but as an order of things that is intrinsic to being, that is, natural. From the facts we know, we seek to understand the here for its own sake, not in function of some imaginary “beyond.”

The current scientific notion we have of reality is based on metaphysical assumptions – it is enough to think of objectivism and naturalism. Objectivism states that, outside our heads, there is a reality common to all. Naturalism asserts that the world functions on its own terms, that it has no supernatural essence that determines it from the outside. It may seem strange that modern science rests on metaphysical assumptions, but they are necessary so that we do not fall into relativism, so that we have a sensible point of reference about what the world is. To investigate the world scientifically, we have to assume what the world is, and this is a metaphysical assumption. Furthermore, we must conceptualize what knowledge is, differentiate the subjective

knowledge from the objective, define what is a proof, and by what evidence are valid, as well as by what criteria this validity is established – which is the task of another external area to science, the epistemology.

Without seriously investigating such questions, we would not know how to interpret the results of our observations or how to structure scientific experiments in order to know reality. The function of modern metaphysics, in this perspective, would be precisely to establish a theoretical foundation to guide the scientific investigation of the reality.

A view that rejected metaphysics indistinctly would not allow us to make any assumptions about reality that were beyond immediate experience. We could not, for example, justify the assumption that there is an objective reality, and with that we would fall into relativism, perhaps even into solipsism. There being nothing objective, all reality would be a social construction – including matter, gravity, electricity. The creation of a world map would be as arbitrary as a novel, for it would all be a subjective fiction. Relativism does well in emphasizing our limitations, but to take it seriously would be as unreasonable as claiming that a scientific publication is as arbitrary as a comic book magazine.

There is, therefore, no pejorative meaning in saying that we make a metaphysical statement by supposing that the world is natural and objective. It is metaphysical only because we speak of the basic constitution of the world, of something theoretical that we need to

ground the sciences. Of course, the findings of science perfectly support such assumptions, but they do not cease to be metaphysical, for they are something that can never be directly demonstrated through sensible reality, but only conceptualized, thought.

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Metaphysical assumptions about reality are important to guide us, to give us a global view of reality, but since it is a speculative terrain, we must be very careful about what we assume about the world itself. Metaphysics thinks in the dark, and can easily get lost in daydreams. If we suppose, for example, that the world is “rational in itself,” we will come to think that everything has a “reason for being”, that there is an intelligible motive that explains, say, why gravity attracts bodies rather than repel them. What kind of reason would that be? It is not known, but bodies falling at  $9.8 \text{ m / s squared}$  would be the result of this “reason”. But why doesn’t this essence make bodies fall at 15 cubic meters per second? What is the reason for this? We do not know where to look for such reasons, but it comforts us to think that the world is rational, and that is all we need to convince ourselves. The fact is that there is no metaphysics in gravity. We know that gravity attracts bodies because we have seen it happen. It is a scientific, empirical statement, not an abstract rationalization.

Purely rational arguments, in the end, only reflect the way we use words. If we cannot verify them, they say nothing – just as the “first cause” argument. When we ask for what “reason” gravity is so, we are

assuming that it could be otherwise, and that is how it is for a reason that can be understood. This presupposes that natural laws are rational, implying that reason is somehow in the essence of reality. But gravity was not thought, it was observed. It is not a theory, but a fact – and we do not need to think when we can see. Therefore, here metaphysics has no function.

Raising metaphysical questions about natural facts is tantamount to humanizing existence, supposing there is a “rational intention” behind everything that exists, as if the world had been projected by humans or super-humans. But where do we get the idea that being is rational in itself? The most plausible explanation is this: from ourselves, for this has never been demonstrated by any observation of reality. Again we see that this quest for the “hidden sense of reality” is just disguised theology. To illustrate, let us realize that asking the “why” of the natural world would be the same as asking why the sun shines. Of course, in asking this kind of question, we put ourselves in the place of the Sun, thinking of the reasons why we would shine if we were this star. From this we respond, for example, that the Sun shines “to warm the Earth,” and of course this assumption cannot be demonstrated, nor does it agree minimally with the findings of Astronomy. This kind of response is clearly anthropocentric, for it seeks outside of man, in reality in itself, something that exists only in our subjective universe: intentionality.

The sciences, when arriving at the same results from independent observers, can justify the assumption that there is an objective reality,

independent of us. Since we have never seen changes in the laws governing phenomena, we can also justify the assumption that the world is natural. But how can we maintain that reason exists outside man? We would only be allowed to think of existence as having a “reason for being” if it had been created by an intelligent supernatural force, if there were many indications of this in the facts we observe, but there is none.

This kind of reverse reasoning, which seeks intentionality in things, is only permissible in subjective matters. For example, just as buildings have foundations, concrete columns, steel reinforcements, elevators, windows, floors, doors, and just as each of these elements has a structure and purpose, if the universe had been designed, there would be an “Intelligible reason” which constitutes its essence and which explains why each thing is as it is, and not something else. The essence of the world itself would be equivalent to the intention of the engineer who projected it – and it is only in this light that this kind of metaphysical investigation would make sense, but we would have to assume that it had a creator. This allows us to better understand why traditional metaphysics has a theological orientation: it asks questions that are only admissible starting from the assumption that the world was intelligently created to fulfill a purpose. So, in the end, traditional metaphysics boils down to the attempt to reverse engineer the divine design.

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When we put reason before observation, instead of investigating the world, we investigate our own reason, our own subjective universe. We shut ourselves from the physical world, and we search not for observable facts, but for “ultimate reasons,” “intentions behind the world,” and this kind of investigation has never gotten anywhere. To investigate the natural world with a metaphysical approach would be like trying to discover the geography of the continents, not by navigating around them and taking note of what’s observed, but by locking ourselves in a room and meditating on the reason for being, on the essence and the purpose of the capricious twists of each continent. With this approach, not only do we end up not knowing about the world, but we also spend all our energies on useless investigations.

We perceive the error of inquiring the world rationally, through pure reason, and we begin to investigate it with our eyes through empirical procedures. We investigate reality through scientific experimentation, and we call natural laws the patterns we can discover about how the world works. Since such patterns are independent of a subject’s viewpoint, we say that they are objective. When we put observation before reason, we begin to investigate what we want to discover. Instead of daydreaming, we go out into the world, outline the continents, and record what we observe, and we only use reason to know how to structure our investigations, not to dispense with the need for ships. This posture has given us useful maps, which can guide any navigators, rather than just thick books with metaphysical speculations on the transcendent essence of fine sand. After the empirical

observation, all that metaphysics can do is affirm that there is a world to which the map corresponds.

Since the purpose of the sciences is to know the world, and not to understand the whys of its supposed creator, we had to readjust our metaphysical conception of the world, reducing it to what we had before us, and to what could be investigated. Our knowledge then became the objective description of facts - rather than an attempt to explain them as a result of the subjectivity of a higher being. From then on we gave science the role of investigating the facts, exploring the world, and to metaphysics it was left only the role of conceptualizing the world from these facts that we observe, adjusting one to the other to allow an ever more precise and coherent knowledge. We have come to use reason not to understand or explain the world, but to make knowledge possible, to justify the validity of science as objective knowledge.

As you can see, today the field of metaphysics is much more modest, and it seeks only to understand what reality is and how our relationship with it occurs. It seeks to explain how it is possible to understand the world objectively, not from the subjective view of an "absolute being", but from the subjective view of man, which is contained in, and not above, natural reality. Therefore, what we now call metaphysics is not the attempt to investigate what exists "beyond" physics, but beyond immediate experience. It seeks to distinguish what exists in itself - and which would exist even if we did not exist - from what exists only in our minds. With this approach, we no longer try to justify the world, but

knowledge. Instead of distinguishing between being and essence, between inside and outside of physics, we begin to distinguish between subjective and objective, between inside and outside of man. We abandoned the idea that there would be an ineffable “transcendental essence,” for we perceived that this essence was only our projected subjectivity in the outside world.

This naturalization movement has profound implications on how we think the world and man’s place in existence – and since this shift in perspective is relatively recent, we still carry many metaphysical prejudices inherited from traditional, essentialist metaphysics. The relation of nihilism to metaphysics, in this case, would be the attempt to understand the implications of reducing man to the natural. Existential nihilism denies that there is any meaning in seeking a subjective meaning in the objective world, outside of man. That is, the investigation of the natural reality can never involve subjective questions, for we cannot investigate them by observing natural facts.

To take such subjective matters further, investigating, for example, the “reason for the man,” we need to naturalize this issue, that is, address it within the context of a natural world ruled by impersonal physical laws. The problem is that, in naturalizing subjectivity, the question becomes as unreasonable as seeking a physical basis for Christmas to happen in December. Understanding our subjectivity as a result of a natural process makes most of the questions we raise about the world itself illegitimate. Thus, when the scope of metaphysical reflection is

tied to science, experimentation, and natural facts, the result is that metaphysical investigations that do not relate to what has been observed in the natural world are no longer permissible. To assert that man cannot seek for himself a meaning that is not based on natural facts is, of course, to destroy the idea of meaning by the root – being the investigations on the meaning of life restricted to natural facts, such as survival of the species and genetic perpetuation, for example.

As we can see, nihilism has the uncomfortable role of recycling senseless investigations. It is not really an ideology, an idea with any “positive” goal, but a posture of analytical and rectifying reflection. Nihilism does not seek to explain or guide man, but to situate him impartially within what is known through science. In this view, since the end of traditional metaphysics amounts to a radical break with theology, we can say that nihilism plays the role of gravedigger of meaning: it seeks to bury all the questions raised on the assumption that there would be a “reason” for everything that exists. The afterlife disappears, leaving only the here.

In this approach, what we call the emptiness of existence would be precisely the vacuum created by this drastic reduction of our metaphysical conception of the world. We thought that what existed within us, our subjectivity, also existed outside of us, reflecting the “ultimate principles” of reality, something like a “spirit of the world.” Now, by reducing the world to physics, to natural phenomena, that essence came to be equivalent to physical laws – something we thought

was only a small part of reality. When we come to see the world as natural and objective, we also become natural and objective, and this has greatly disappointed us – the role of nihilism being to keep man disappointed until he decides to abandon his existential childishness.

Understanding that physical laws are, so to speak, the “essence” of reality, the most interesting observation to make is as follows. Is man’s existence a physical law? No. Is there anything in the natural world that makes the existence of man necessary like gravity? No. It follows that we are not part of the natural world as men, but as matter. Since there are no subjective natural laws, our subjectivity has no essence. Instead of being necessary, the existence of man is contingent: we are an accident. The naturalization of reality imploded subjectivity, and man was reduced to nothing.

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With these observations, we see that nihilism puts us in a rather strange situation, as if we were visitors to the world, temporary guests of matter – and that is exactly the case. We are a natural phenomenon, and our idea here is to revise ourselves completely as such, clearing our understanding of reality.

Up to this point, we have been concerned with explaining that the emptiness of existence stems from recognizing the non-human character of the world itself. From now on, we will be devoted to delineating with greater clarity what this non-human world would be, distinguishing it from our subjective universe. Our first observation will

be about the quest for knowledge. That one thing is missing, but it is important. Then we will begin to delineate the distinction between objective and subjective in detail, and give some examples of “application” of nihilism as an analytical procedure.

There is no doubt that understanding the world has always been our greatest philosophical ambition. However, except for curiosity, in the process of understanding it there is no safe starting point, and that has always bothered us. Many solutions were proposed to the problem of uncertainty in our knowledge, but all of them proved inconclusive – even today we are not sure. What hardly occurs to us, however, is to question the point of arrival: the certainties. If we have no safe starting point, why do we think it safe to say that certainty is the point of arrival? Certainties are the goal of those who seek safety, not knowledge. The problem of uncertainty arises simply from our anguish – it is not something to be solved by research, but by means of tranquilizers.

Notice, then, that it makes no sense to look for certainties in the world, for the very concept of certainty was invented by ourselves – not in order to know the world better, but to feel more secure. We reject certainties because we want to understand the world, not to justify some anxiolytic nonsense. The belief in the need for certainties distorts our understanding because, by accepting the notion of certainty, we proceed to investigate physical reality in search of those same certainties, in an obviously circular process. This goal of attaining

“absolute truths” has never been shown to be valid, only supposed to be desirable by medieval philosophers inspired by mathematics.

In these circumstances, if we cannot start from the assumption that we must seek certainties, we have no starting point or arrival point, which is great. Free from these prejudices, we can begin to construct an impartial view, which is not committed to “peace of mind” as a criterion of truth.

Only now, leaving this circle, abandoning all expectations, our point of departure is to observe what we have before us. We open our eyes, we see that there is a world, and that we are in it – nothing else. This is the most basic and neutral posture we can adopt. Complicated and confusing postures make everything complex and confusing, so we start from our existence in the world, which is the most elementary and immediate thing to which we have access. Of course, we do not have “faith” in this, we do not think it is an undeniable truth. Maybe we’re wrong in thinking we exist. Maybe that’s an illusion. There are endless theoretical maybes, but we want also our reasons for doubt to be based on facts, not on worthless metaphysical assumptions.

Since we do not have reasonable grounds to doubt our existence, we do not doubt it. We think we exist because we are here, and that is all. This is not an issue that we can solve through metaphysical meditations – we cannot investigate it. What makes us accept the existence of the world as the fact is that we have it before us. That’s all we can say. We know that existing is absurd, but it is an absurd fact, not just

speculation.

In this way, there is no metaphysical belief: it is simply opening our eyes and seeing ourselves happen in this something we call the world. Our position would be metaphysical only if we opened our eyes believing that we should seek certainties or ultimate reasons. Instead, we open them up only, and that is what we see. If existence is an illusion, it is before the illusion that we are, and we want to know it, whatever it is. This basic uncertainty about existing is something we simply have to accept, otherwise we will misguide our inquiry from the start, going around in circles in the fashion of theology.

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Having clarified this point, let us turn now to the distinction between objective and subjective. For our purposes, we will define objective reality as that which exists by itself unconditionally. The activity of this reality, in this case, would be what we call phenomena, that is, what happens. If existence, for example, were a clock, the objective reality would be its gears, its pointers, its structure as a whole. The movement of these gears would be the phenomena. But in the nihilistic view, all this would be meaningless, that is, the hours would not exist – these pointers would rotate without reason and point to nothing.

To understand more clearly, let us use another example closer to our daily life: a party. We pass by a place and we see that a festive event is being held in it. The next day, we pass by the same place, but we do not find even traces of the event. The place exists. People exist. The

party does not: it was just happening. That's the idea. Now it is enough to extend the time involved to realize that people also do not exist: they all have a duration, that is, they are also happening. The further we advance in this reasoning, the more the implications become extreme, until we realize that eventually everything will be lost in this eternal recycling – and the only thing that remains is how all this happens, that is, physics, the stuff from which all this is made.

So far, everything is quite clear: the world exists, and we happen through it. Now, to demonstrate why the humanization of reality is a mistake, and also to explain how this error occurs, we need to distinguish between objective and subjective reality, between the world itself and our consciousness of this world. We have some difficulty in perceiving this distinction through intuition, but we can explain it, at least preliminarily, as follows: that which exists independently of us, and which will continue to exist even after we are dead, is the objective reality, the being properly said. On the other hand, what exists only within our minds is the subjective reality. This subjective world is created by ourselves, something that, after our death, will cease to exist without leaving any traces.

Let us go further. We are machines, and our consciousness is part of a reality recognition system that has the function of guiding our bodies. The reality before our eyes is a subjective mental construction, a partial representation of objective reality. Sounds, smells, colors: this is all built by our brains from what they pick up through a sensory apparatus.

There is no *self* behind our perceptions. We are our brains. And around this brain there is a body that allows you to walk around the world, and connected to it are sensory organs that allow you to perceive the world.

Each species has a different type of brain, and each type interprets reality in a particular way – there being, of course, species that have no brains at all. Being human, we have a brain with five senses, and yet the capacity for abstract reflection. It is through this, and only this, that we can know what reality is. It should also be noted that our reason, though magnificently versatile, has no access to outer reality – which is why pure reason is as futile to investigate reality as closed eyes are to see it.

Our consciousness of the world is, then, a representation of the world, a particular point of view of a brain of a particular organism. Our perception of the world is not the world itself; it is only the way our brain presents this world to us. This reality, therefore, instead of immediate, is *mediate*: it is to the world just as a roadmap is to the roads. It is an approximate reproduction, a more or less equivalent translation, not a direct transposition.

Of course, our bodies, our brains, our mental processes exist and happen objectively. However, the world that presents itself to us through consciousness, through the senses, is a merely subjective reality, which depends on us to exist. Therefore, it varies from subject to subject. What we see as a blue color, another individual may see as a green color. What for us smells rotten, for vultures presumably smells

wonderful. There are endless ways of interpreting the same sensory information, and this depends on how our brain works, on how it is programmed to translate the information it receives through the senses. Thus, reality itself is not accessible to us: we can only apprehend it indirectly, in the form of representation.

This gives us a fair idea of what we mean by saying that in our heads there is only a representation of reality, a limited construction made from information that does not exhaust everything that exists. Our senses are programmed to capture only a specific range of information. Our eyes pick up a specific spectrum of electromagnetic waves, representing them as colors. Our ears pick up a specific spectrum of sound vibrations, representing them as sounds, and so on. So, in principle, nothing would prevent us from tasting with our eyes or from sniffing with our ears – it would be enough to have our brains engineered to translate reality in this way.

From material physical processes, our brain creates a sort of “virtual reality” that exists only inside our minds, just as a television creates images from electronic components. The activity of our brain circuits creates our consciousness and, within it, a subjective world. This is our way of existing. Our brain, through the senses, continuously receives information from the environment and, from this information, it elaborates a subjective representation of an objective reality.

Therefore, instead of directly accessing reality, our brain reads the raw data that comes through the senses and presents to our consciousness

a summary of its most relevant aspects. That's what brains do, that's their job. Through the senses, they are informed about reality to know how to guide the bodies in which they are installed. Of course, the better our ability to represent reality, the better our chances of surviving, of avoiding enemies, of finding food, sexual partners, and the like, being our ability to reason only one refinement within that, allowing us to distinguish subtleties. These things, in turn, are designed in terms of genetic perpetuation. That is why we feel pleasure when having sex, and why we feel pain when being beaten etc., but this matter will not occupy us now.

So we are real, but we do not see reality in itself. Conscious life, however, is not an illusion. As machines, we are beings as material and objective as the world around us. We exist objectively, our consciousness is a real phenomenon. But although we are real, our consciousness does not have immediate access to reality in itself. This contact is mediated by the senses. With this, we are limited to the subjective representation created by our brains, our senses being the only point of contact with the outside world. This results in the impression that to exist is to be alive, although life is only a rare kind of randomness.

As our contact with reality happens through this partial view, created by ourselves, two problems arise. First, our representation of reality is committed not to science, but to survival. Second, as being aware of all this complexity is not biologically relevant, we do not distinguish

between both things – and so the subjective seems something objective, as if our consciousness, our mental representation of the world, were the world itself, which leads us to humanize what we observe, transposing our representation of reality, which is interior, to the outside world.

It seems to us, for example, that colors exist by themselves. Colors seem to us an intrinsic property of the objects we observe, they seem to be something external, independent of us. In observing a red object, it seems indubitable to us that the color is in the object itself, not in our heads. But all colors are created by our brain from the capture of electromagnetic waves. That is why we see colors in a world in which there is no color at all. The fact is that there are no green or blue objects in themselves. It is our brain that creates colors in the process of transforming the light reflected by such objects into mental images. Seeing colors is just one way we represent reality, and they only exist because there is a brain that creates them. If we want proof, we just have to close our eyes.

Electromagnetic waves, on the other hand, are objective because their existence is unconditional. They exist by themselves, whether or not there is a brain to capture them and translate them into mental images. The same goes for things like love, joy, pleasure, pain, anguish etc.: they are something that only exists in the biological context of our bodies.

Thus, everything that happens in our consciousness has its beginning

and its end in our own consciousness. Out of consciousness, all is unconsciousness; out of life, everything is dead. Of course, since we are living beings, we have the impression that life has an “intrinsic value,” but that is as illusory as thinking that atoms have feelings.

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As we have defined, objective reality is that which exists by itself unconditionally. But since our subjective existence – the content of our consciousness – is purely conditional, nihilism, when applied to ourselves as subjective beings, reduces us to nothing. Not only colors, but our entire subjective universe is seen as a “fiction”, as a virtual reality created by the subject. In this perspective, when we affirm that “everything is nothing”, by that we mean that our subjective view of existence is conditional. We mean that our consciousness happens within our brains as a result of a material process, so that objective reality is not in our own consciousness but in the neural activity, in the material brain that creates this consciousness. If we blow our brains, only our consciousness of the world will disappear: the world will continue to exist.

Because the world itself does not possess any of the characteristics of human subjectivity and, at the same time, we are beings that exist enclosed in a virtual world created by ourselves, we can say that our subjectivity resembles some sort of psychotic outbreak of matter.

Having made the distinction between objective and subjective, nihilism begins to stand more clearly in our minds, allowing us to relativize our

anthropocentrism. Thus, when we affirm that everything is nothing, that existence is empty, we refer to the lack of meaning that inheres to this objective existence – for meanings, intentions and goals are something that only makes sense in the context of our biological machines. We should not, therefore, understand nihilism as a “negation of reality” or as an “existential pessimism.” We must understand it as the view that objective reality is something that only exists, being free of any subjective traits. The subjective, on the other hand, must be understood as something that exists only within our heads. Thus, objectively, the being exists, and nothing more. But what about what happens? What happens, happens, and nothing else. Whether it happens inside or outside our heads, it is indifferent.

This justifies the assertion that, outside our subjective universe, nothing has meaning, for such things are created by the subject itself. That is why the problem of the “meaning of life” has no solution; it’s not even a problem, just a fact.

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At first, it is not very clear what is the point of understanding all this. Nihilism, as a theoretical posture, has not even a trace of practical utility. However, intellectually, it is a very interesting analytical tool, provided that used in moderate quantities. An overdose of relativism will only make us anxious for not being sure of anything and to have rejected all points of reference from which we could deduce something useful. We would be paralyzed by the simple fact that “maybe we can

be wrong,” or that “we cannot be sure of anything.” However, since this posture consists in the certainty that we are not certain, it promptly refutes itself, leaving us without any promising perspective on how to get to know something.

Radical skepticism is just a clever way to say, in philosophical terms, that we are limited and stupid, in which those who make the claim arises as an illustrative example by shooting themselves on the foot. It seems that this kind of skepticism is only anxiety disguised as philosophy. Of course, we can be wrong. But if we are, we will correct the error once we discover it: we are not interested in terrible hypothetical errors, for this is only paranoia.

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Being a destructive agent, nihilism will not lead us to great discoveries; it will only clear the path, so that we can build a more coherent view of reality. Thus, by applying it to any subject, we should not expect more than the annihilation of the object we have analyzed, that is, its reduction to nothing. Nihilism operates a kind of “sterilization of being,” eliminating all its subjective elements: it removes from being all life, all movement, all meaning and sense, that is, dehumanizes it, de-characterizes it to such a point that it becomes indistinguishable from anything else. This allows us to take a raw view of what we are looking at, seeing it stripped of anthropomorphisms, reduced to its crude objective existence, which is to say reduced to nothing, that is, to nothing but itself.

Nihilism, as we see, seeks to remove us from the equation so that we can conceive something close to what reality would be objectively. Thus, by adopting a nihilistic view on any subject, it is as if we were dehumanizing the subject by dissecting it. Once we have erased such subjective qualities, there will cease to exist a distinction between one thing and another, whatever the level such distinctions had been established – as value, meaning, purpose, identity, and so on –, and we shall have to reconstruct our understanding of the subject under this rather severe perspective. In the process, the illusions die, the facts remain.

As this idea is a bit abstract, let us think of a more tangible way to put it. For example, *what is a man?* For our purposes, we can define it as a mammal with a massive brain that walks upright. This definition distinguishes man from all the rest, especially the rest of the animals. It gives the human being a distinctive character in face of existence. Therefore, in this subjective perspective, we have a definition from which we can affirm that man is something, that man exists. Yet what would happen if we now adopted a nihilistic view towards man? There would be a series of questions that would ultimately deconstruct this whole notion, denying the distinction between man and other things. Let's look at something simple that illustrates this idea.

Man is composed of approximately 70% water. As long as this water is, let's say, in his brain as a component of the chemical reactions that keep him alive, or anywhere else in his body, it will also be a man.

Therefore, water is man insofar as it composes the biological system that plays this previously defined role. The same goes for the remaining 30%, which are proteins, fats, sugars, nucleic acids etc. We know that man only remains alive in the condition in which the matter that constitutes his body is continuously replaced. Then at some point the water that was in his brain, and that allowed him to think he needed to trim his fingernails, will be expelled from his body. Will water cease to be a man to be precisely what? Exactly what it was before it was ingested: nothing. Only a bunch of oxygen and hydrogen molecules, as it always was, as it never ceased to be.

Unless we think that atoms acquire some magical aura after absorption and lose it after excretion, we must admit that the subjective concept of *man*, which we ourselves invented, is something that creates a subjective and qualitative distinction between this *man*, which is a specific arrangement of matter, and the other things, which are different arrangements of matter. Both things, deep down, are exactly the same thing: matter. All we have done is to classify, to name the bits of atoms that we think are important, and the distinctions we create with this are just conventions. The distinction we see between man and non-man could never be objective because, for example, the water molecules in a river, in the rain, or in the brain, objectively, have the same nature. Whatever situations they are in, they do not exhibit any discernible difference in their physical behavior.

If this applies not only to water, but also to everything that composes

man, and if man is composed of the same matter as the rest of the universe, where we could find an objective foundation for the distinction between man and the world? Between the water in our blood and the water in a bottle? Between the oxygen in our blood and the oxygen in the atmosphere? We can't - otherwise the rivers would already be humanized by our urine full of essences and larger realities. All we do is to create subjective definitions of conventional character, in which what we take into account is the practical utility of designating this specific arrangement of matter by the term *man*.

Therefore, to analyze man with a nihilistic perspective is to deny his objective existence - but only as a being endowed with a supposed "objective subjectivity." This does not mean that we do not exist, that we are not here, but that it cannot be said that man exists objectively, in the same sense in which water exists. This is because, unlike colors, sounds, feelings, water is not created by our representation of reality. Of course, water arises due to chemical reactions. We know that its elements can be decomposed, but this is independent of a subject's point of view. If we decomposed water using electricity, the electrolysis would not occur in our brains.

Thus, when we accept that man is composed of the same matter that makes up the rest of the universe, and that it behaves in the same way, whether or not in his body, this means rejecting the distinction between man and not-man. In this view, if there were a man sitting in a chair, his body and the chair could not be regarded as distinct, objectively

different things. Everything takes the appearance of an indistinct soup of atoms. The distinction between man and chair could only arise after delineating subjective criteria of classification, which are completely arbitrary. Not that such criteria are useless, because they are not. The fact that something is subjective is not an objection to its significance, only a condition of existence: the condition of existing as a subjective phenomenon, as the view of a subject, not as an “essence of being.” This approach could never be used as a justification for removing the value of the chair or man, since things like value, meaning, purpose only exist within the subjective sphere, never in the objective world.

In the face of this, one might say: *how can it be said that when looking at this object, there is no person seeing this object!* Of course that, for all intents and purposes, there is a person seeing this object. But the person, as a mechanical biological system, as well as its remarkable ability to convert luminous energy into mental images, is a phenomenon, and as such will cease to exist – or, rather, to happen – as soon as the material chaining that gave origin to the phenomenon ceases, resulting in a funeral. With the death of the individual, there ceases to exist that subjective universe in which there was a person who saw objects – and when a subjective universe disappears, there is no trace left of it, just as there are no traces of movies when a television is turned off.

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It may be said that, in the above example, we “nihilified” man, that is,

deconstructed him, depriving him of any subjective qualities. When we suppress the subjective aspect of man, we begin to see ourselves as a fact, as something indistinct, that does not separate from the rest of reality. We see ourselves reduced to a bunch of atoms – and we see that our own thought is only the activity of such atoms. Through this intellectual process, we could glimpse what a man is in himself, in an objective sense. If we ask the same question – what is a man? –, we would answer, now, that man is nothing. As the reduction to nothing is an intellectual process, not a practical one, it did not take a bullet to perform this action – although it serves to illustrate that, after death, nothing will remain of our subjectivity.

The fundamental utility of analyzing something under the nihilistic view is to verify its consistency, that is, its relation to reality, its life – and, to test the vitality of an idea, nothing is more reliable than to destroy it and then check if it has enough strength to be reborn from its own ashes.

Even if we have deconstructed man in the above example, this idea has not ceased to have life, for we can reconstruct it completely from our own subjectivity, and it does not bother us that we would have to do it ourselves without any external authority. Since we are men, this is a concept that we simply make a point of cultivating, and it is completely contained in the human sphere of reality.

It is also important to remember that this deconstruction did not cause us distress only because, from the beginning, we had no metaphysical

fantasies about man being “special” or “beyond” matter. Our existence has never ceased to be a fact, even after we deconstructed it at the conceptual level. And the same could be said of colors: even though we know that colors are just a subjective fiction, we continue to cultivate this concept, since it’s handy for decorating walls in our houses. If colors do not lose their value because they do not have a “transcendental essence”, why would a person?

We judge such observations as obvious because we know that we are only a specific model of biological machine to which we give the name *man*. If the human species did not exist, the concept of man would also not exist – our essence would not continue to exist in a hidden corner of the cosmos. Thus, nihilists can deconstruct the concept of man as much as they want. This only erases a definition, but it does not change the fact that we are machines that like to name things. Nihilism only prevents us from losing sight of the fact that ultimately it is only grammar that distinguishes us from the rest of existence.

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Man, as we see, survived criticism. But if we reduce to nothing a concept that has no reality behind it, there is no way to rebuild it. When, after undergoing such a process of criticism, the concept is not able to rise again, this indicates that it was already becoming a ghost, that it had already ceased to correspond to an explicitly human reality to take refuge in the nothingness in the form of an impersonal metaphysical dogma; a belief that can only be sustained by tradition or

faith. So, for example, if we reduce morality to nothing, what will remain of reality in this concept? That is, based on what we could reconstitute it, give life back to it? Only based on ourselves, because there would be no other point of reference. Therefore, if we cannot explain where we got our values from, they cannot continue to be sustained rationally. We cannot claim that they exist “by themselves” if we cannot demonstrate them as a natural fact – and if there is no “beyond”, we can only defend them as a subjective value, invented by us.

Suppose that there was a tribe that believed in two moral laws: that it is wrong to eat feces and that it is wrong to eat lettuce. In an archaeological dig, we find these two laws inscribed in some artifact. In this situation, only the first law would be something intelligible to us, a moral value still capable of being reconstructed as something related to the world. The other law would be seen as a meaningless superstition, based on some fanciful supposition of this tribe on the perverted nature of lettuce leaves. No one in their right mind would think we should stop eating lettuce, nor would it be wise to eat feces to mock the tribe’s values. However, if we discovered that the lettuce that this tribe was cultivating was a variant that, through some genetic mutation, became poisonous, we would then judge both of the tribe’s prohibitions as something perfectly reasonable.

In another example, reducing to nothing the criminal laws and the ten commandments, only the former could be rebuilt with our own hands. We could reinvent criminal laws from scratch, and that’s because we

know where they came from and what they are for. They are human moral values, and we know how to justify them: common interests and police. This, of course, would not apply to the Ten Commandments, since no one could demonstrate the reality of the metaphysical legislator who created them.

In this situation, all moral values that have ceased to have roots in reality, which have become pure abstractions and outdated idealisms, will inevitably die when confronted by nihilism, since there is no reality still alive to sustain them. These values, now without context, no longer defend or represent us. They do not support themselves because there is no one to support them, and their death can only be delayed by appeals to authority.

The process of nihilistic criticism could be seen metaphorically as bringing together all the paper money we have and all the gold that supports its value. Destroying all the paper money, and then checking the amount of gold we have, and issuing the paper money again, knowing that now there is a reality holding its value. Dogmas, that is, ideas without value or content, harm our understanding of reality, just as bad checks harm economy. This analogy makes it clear that nihilism, far from representing a drastic measure, is nothing more than a validation method, emphasizing not the destruction, but the *transparency* of our knowledge. Therefore, whoever is confident that his ideas have solid foundation will have nothing to fear. However, those who cling to hollow and fraudulent judgments will not be able to protect

them.

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Morality is a very controversial topic, but it is evident that we invented all moral notions. We filled them with ideas, then emptied them with criticism, and so we walk. A set of moral notions fulfills the role of guiding our behavior in society. As we are ever-changing beings, creations that originally emerged as our reflection should accompany us in these changes, but it is quite common for them to end up crystallizing into notions seemingly sufficient in themselves. That is, they lose their meaning, their origin, their function, and now they say nothing, they are nothing but the echo of a forgotten voice. However, instead of dying, it is common for them to remain alive anonymously due to tradition and authority. It is as if a subjective element had “caught the tangent” and transposed subjectivity itself, now existing in the objective sphere – that we mere mortals cannot touch. They become angel’s values. This, of course, is impossible, but that’s how the absolute authority of certain values is established, at least in our heads. A great example of this is the veneration of the dead. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, if such values were justifiable, they would not have to be defended.

What do we have here? Incomprehensible values that point nowhere, and whose fundamentals, instead of being something, are nothing. In the beyond, they are everything. In here, they are nothing. They are reasons whose reason nobody understands, but still they are regarded

as “absolutely necessary.” If we admit that this is all a blind and irrational inertia, that’s fine. However, when we try to rationally justify the preservation of these theoretical cadavers, we again have metaphysics trying to inject reason into what has no reason whatsoever. It is only this kind of fraudulent ideas that nihilism destroys, and we can’t see how this could be a bad thing.

Although it apparently establishes a secure framework that free us from relativism and uncertainty, metaphysical morality only uses a circular artifice to silence the subject and allow us to go on with our lives as if the matter were resolved. This metaphysical morality mostly addresses imaginary problems, such as the sex of the angels or Adam’s navel. But when it deals with real problems, the result can be – and often are – harmful, since it locks our understanding of reality into dogmas and throws the key away. Everything remains explained by an untouchable and incomprehensible reason, which we must obey without hesitation. The same sanity that, in other respects, is normal, becomes a crime when directed to such questions. This is how a subject becomes “deep”, and deeper the more palpable its incoherence.

What could be more ridiculous than to subordinate all our understanding of reality to the belief in absolute values and concepts that everyone respects but no one knows how to explain, and which inhabit a reality in which we are not? And what could be more inconsequential than considering such submissive posture as reasonable? We simply pull out of the hat, in a magic trick, a fantastic

explanation for something that often doesn't even exist. Then we try to justify this leap of faith by calling it "mystery," "the inner meaning of things," the "moral order of the world," and the like. We then guide ourselves by this as if it were an ultimate reality, which, in the end, is equivalent to walking randomly, despising the ground itself.

Allowing metaphysics to infiltrate morals may seem like harmless, letting it proclaim its irrelevant moral imperatives with a foolish solemnity, but it is patent how much it hinders a clear understanding of the values that effectively guide us as human beings. This metaphysical atmosphere causes us to see everything under a constantly false perspective, and since we are forbidden to question this view, we lose more and more our contact with reality. In a short time, we lose the ability to issue moral judgments in the first person, for we have given metaphysics the role of dreaming them for us, receiving in return a morality that has lost itself from the facts. It is true that nihilism is a cold and uncomfortable presence, but we have achieved anything by trying to overcome it with metaphysical nonsense - if this doesn't result in a delusional dogma, it will at best be a bunch of commandments that compel us to be even more incoherent.

Metaphysics is not even justified as a preventive measure against the supposedly "pernicious" implications of nihilism, for nothingness cannot be put into practice. Nihilism destroys only illusions, and this only happens intellectually. There are no direct practical implications. To clarify this point, let us think as follows: has anyone ever heard of any

holocaust committed in the name of uncertainty? Of martyrs who gave their lives for disbelief? Nobody kills in the name of doubt, no one sacrifices himself for reality. All wars we fight rest on some certainty, and all certainties are metaphysical beliefs to justify our absurdities. Only convictions are dangerous. For this reason, nihilism poses no danger. Those who say the opposite are those who are trying to protect their illusions from the most elementary facts. Such individuals would never fear nihilism if their beliefs were justifiable facts – after all, no one tries to defend gravity from nihilism, fearing the disintegration of the universe; no one invokes universal imperatives to argue that it is wrong to make blood transfusions between incompatible types; no one needs faith to assert it's wrong to yell in libraries. No healthy morals need to be defended by metaphysical anemia.

Many also claim that nihilism seeks to destroy the “social order,” but that is another misconception. What nihilism seeks to destroy are our lies. However, if our social order rests on lies, it is clear that it will be refuted by nihilism, but that is only an indirect consequence of us being honest. Even so, the primary was never to destroy. All we did was to refute an idea that cannot hold itself together. Moreover, since nihilism does not intend to point to any specific path, it can never serve as a pretext for social militancy, for nihilists have no certainty, ideal, or truth to defend. Since nihilism is a negative posture, in adopting a positive attitude, embracing any cause, we cease to be nihilists and become advocates of this cause.

The harmless character of the nihilistic posture will become even clearer if we are careful to note that a practical nihilist would not be a crazed person involved in some sort of social apocalypse, but someone in a coma, in a vegetative state. The idea of trying to “live” the emptiness of existence indeed resembles a mental disorder, for that emptiness can only be thought. Nihilism, at the most, can cause us to feel distressed over the death of our illusions, but that means nothing, except that we do not like to be wrong.

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The observations above allow us to have a clearer understanding of what exactly we are talking about when we say that something is “nothing”, for at first it seems contradictory the idea that nothingness can actually exist and then consciously deny its own existence. When we speak of things as “nothing,” “empty”, it is not really in the same sense of “that which does not exist”, of “not-being.” Neither has this to do with pessimism, that is, to distort reality negatively only because we do not like it. The terms “nothing” and “emptiness” are used only to denote what disappears when reality is stripped of subjective characteristics that don’t belong to it.

Therefore, to say that existence is “empty in itself” does not mean that nothing exists in it, that it is the purest vacuum, but only that, by removing from it all the qualities that only concern our subjective world, we ourselves also end up removed. All that is left is that situation in which everything is indistinct, and thus it becomes meaningless to

claim that this or that bit of matter is “special” because it corresponds to man full of life, because, in this light, it is completely irrelevant whether this specific bunch of matter constitutes a living man, a dead one, or the dust of something that was alive but now feeds flowers in the garden.

So, when we talk of nihilism, this takes us to this uniformly barren reality, to the contrast of the objective existence in relation to the subjective existence. Of course, it must be clear why nihilism can only be theoretical, never practical. The closest we can come to understanding existential nihilism is the apprehension of this emptiness as our condition of existence; that is, to understand that the very being that constitutes everything that we are is the same as that constitutes the stones, the stars, the cigarettes, the walls etc., and the fact that we are thinking about it, and that this experience might be unpleasant, doesn't really change anything, since such discomfort is happening in our brains with the same necessity as electrons light a lamp.

Whenever we try go beyond the circle in which human subjectivity is inscribed, we fall into this objective void, in which we cannot even recognize ourselves. For to conceive man objectively is, in essence, to imagine him as a portion of matter delimited by dotted lines. Here there are no colors, no sounds, no sensations, no thought, no life; there is nothing. We are just an indistinct phenomenon lost in the meaninglessness of existence.

We may try to conceive an image of existence from a perspective

outside of life itself, but we usually do not come to anything much beyond a version of the world in which everything is composed of semitransparent clouds of atoms of different densities. A more accurate perspective may be that which we had before we were born, although it is difficult to imagine such a thing. Perhaps just imagining the universe without any form of life would be the easiest way to conceive the view of nihilism initially. Then we need only to add life as something that happened in this universe and that will probably cease to exist in the future without leaving any traces.

As our existence does not carry the adjectives we love to give to it, the function of nihilism is, say, only anti adherent: to prevent our understanding of reality from being polluted by our anthropocentrism. By reducing something to nothing, the destruction occurs only in the subjective sphere of existence, reducing it to a “virtual reality” within the material world. From this perspective, we come to understand our consciousness as if it were a “movie being displayed within our brains,” not as existence itself. It is clear that such an understanding does not change anything in practice, it only helps us to discern the facts more clearly.

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Since we cannot change the basic behavior of reality, our only option is to understand it – and if that is the case, to retreat from nihilism is nothing but to entrench ourselves in laughable convictions. If we honestly ask ourselves why nihilism bothers us so much, we will see

that the motives are nothing more than pettiness and prejudices learned in childhood. It is already a great thing that we can understand how the world works: denying it because its functioning does not meet our personal expectations is simply condemning ourselves to ignorance.

Once we dismantle our numerous pretexts for “doubt,” we often realize that we have a pretty good idea of how things are, and that there is no great mystery in existence – we have already answered the big question. We know what life is, and how it works. We know what our planet is, and how it was formed. We know what the sun is, and why it rises. Today we know everything that philosophers have always wanted to know – or almost everything. The world itself is something physical and impersonal. In human terms, reality itself equates to complete emptiness, and it’s great that we know it.

Existential nihilism adopts this “emptiness” as a starting point and, since there is nothing to be done about it, also as the point of conclusion. It is the kind of thing we know there’s no escaping, even though we’re not able to get along very well with the awareness of it. In any case, we must at least learn to deal with the facts, they being pleasant or not, for the other option is delirium. Nihilism obviously has little practical importance. However, as long as we insist on thinking that there is something spectacular to be found “behind” the world, nihilism will continue to be necessary to show us that this is just a fantasy.

Even though nihilism is perfectly defensible intellectually, it does not

make much sense to try to “live” it, for this is a kind of perspective that simply suffocates us. The consciousness of the nullity of life hits us as a paralyzing vertigo – and man’s own biological constitution does not favor this kind of approach to reality. As ignorance is not an impediment, many pass through existence without philosophically understanding their condition, and it would be difficult to imagine why this understanding would bring them any benefit. And the same applies to most men: it does not even occur to them that their bellybuttons are not the center of the universe. If they want to remain ignorant, fine. We recognize that we have nothing to do with the way each one governs their life. But we have chosen to guide ours in an enlightened perspective, which takes into account how reality works.

So, if we are asked how nihilists live, what could we answer? They live as they please, but with open eyes. Nihilists emphasize objectivity, but that does not mean that they despise subjectivity. They only have the prudence to relativize it enough to realize that it is not all that exists. In any case, we are subjective beings, and we can only live as such. We just have to keep in mind that our feet steps on an objective reality, and that is what really determines our lives. In this view, if life is a dream, nihilism would be just the attempt to make it a lucid dream.

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From what has been said, although there is no hope that we can envisage a practical and constructive sphere in nihilism – in addition to its theoretical utility as a reality’s screwdriver –, this does not lead us to

the conclusion that being a nihilist paralyzes practical life, since both are situated in completely different spheres. It is quite superficial the accusation of hypocrisy commonly thrown against the nihilist, in which it is assumed that the true honor would be to blow his brains out in the name of consistency – and the very truth of this assertion can be found in the fact that the shot would not produce honor, but only a mess that some unfortunate people would have to clean up. We cannot put as a theoretical objection the practical fact that nihilists don't necessarily kill themselves, despite considering that life, as everything else, amounts to nothing, because suicide is not an argument, and blood is not honor. Faced with an objection of this nature, we can only suppose that individuals of this sort, for some tortuous reason, think of themselves as a "business", an "investment" of being: as if the atoms that make up their bodies were actions whose value oscillates on the stock exchange of existence as a function of what they believe to be worth. In all likelihood, refusing this idea is merely a sign of common sense. Beliefs do not change the facts.

In itself, nihilism has no value. Its only possible value is relative, and it consists in the fact that this view allows us to identify predictably disastrous illusions. The utility of this lucidity can be illustrated by the difference between a drunken man and a sober man. In this sense, its nature is similar to that of atheism, which also has a negative character in the face of an illusion that is clearly detrimental to our understanding of reality. Explicit atheist disbelief could, in this sense, be understood as a particular case of nihilism.

Thus, there is no reason why we should be “proud” of being nihilists, except that it indicates some degree of critical thinking. An enlightened nihilist, with the assurance of stepping on the solid ground of nothingness, is aware that his values, goals, and himself are things that do not exist effectively, but only conditionally, and have no problem in suspending any effort to place himself as the “essence” of the objective world. Even because, in trying to do this, we would only be creating an imaginary world in which atoms smile when they see us – or worse.

## **APPENDIX**

There is another way of getting in touch with nihilism, though it is not the most pleasant. It is not to try to understand the emptiness of existence rationally, through reflection, but to feel this emptiness emotionally. The very fact that there is such an unexpected point of contact between a purely theoretical view and a universal aspect of human subjectivity makes the subject, if not more interesting, at least more worthy of consideration.

This is the situation in which the daily vision of life, immersed in fantasies and closed in on itself, is smashed by confrontation with a disconcerting situation, causing the world to be reduced to something poor and empty. We are talking about *mourning*, that is, the natural reaction of every human being to the loss of something emotionally important, such as a loved one, a relationship, close friends, including ideals or anything else with which we had a close emotional bond.

Of course, we are not referring to the ritual of wearing black clothes, to minutes of silence, or to hysterical tears, but to subjective worldview of the individual, to the state of mind that follows such a loss. The common symptoms of mourning are sadness, depression, hopelessness, lack of interest in the outside world, and what is especially interesting in our case: a penetrating lucidity. This state in general can be described as the feeling that everything “loses meaning”, or that “nothing has value”. In no other situation the meaning of “in vain” can be better understood.

When we look for something that, in practical terms, corresponds to nihilism, we see that mourning is a strong candidate. This is because the impression one has is that the grieving individual becomes temporarily nihilistic by a sort of “emotional emergency.” In emergencies in which our physical integrity is at stake, the automatic reaction of the body is to trigger the fight-or-flight command. Equally, when the integrity of our psychological world is at stake, we have mourning as a stop-and-think reaction, as if the brain, by “reducing to nothing” our subjectivity, was preparing us for a cold and calculated revision of reality.

Since in this case the individual is not only wondering about the emptiness of existence, but feeling it intimately, practical experience is seriously undermined by anguish and depression, making life seem completely meaningless – and, in the end, isn’t that the case? Isn’t it strange that most individuals need to go to such lengths to grasp this

kind of truth? For every time we try to find “reasons” that justify or make sense of life, we always come to the conclusion that there are none. Since there is no way out, no one insists much on this point. Sooner or later, we recognize the null character of this type of work and, without protest, we let ourselves be guided by our will, using reason only as an accessory.

The problem is that, when transposed into practice, nihilism has the appearance of a mental illness, something that paralyzes us; it has even been characterized by psychiatry as a form of delirium in which the subject denies the existence of reality, in the in whole or in part. The idea that the everyday reality that surrounds us has no value, that it does not even exist objectively, is perfectly logical and justifiable. However, when nihilism contaminates our emotional world, it forces us to admit that we ourselves are nothing, it makes us feel that nothingness – and when both things coincide, they converge on an incredibly sound logic. The only way out seems to be a practical suicide that will solve a theoretical problem.

Of course, most people are not so dominated by rationality as to commit suicide motivated by syllogisms. However, we must admit that feeling empty is quite disturbing, especially when we have the full understanding that this is not a delusion, but a state of mind in which we can clearly grasp one of the most elementary truths to which we have access. Only if we were not content with just grasping this nothingness intellectually, but also wanted to orchestrate our whole

practical life in function of it, living like paralyzed mummies, then we would have become perfectly delirious beings. This is physically impossible, and rightly constitutes a mental disorder.

Hence, being unable to act according to such truth, the most reasonable escape would be to admit that to understand reality and to live in it are things governed by distinct rules. Although, in essence, what is done in both cases does not differ much: in one case we will be fantasizing in a particular world, and in another in a public world. The two solutions arise in self-defense, but only one of them does not cause us to lose contact with the reality that surrounds us, that is, with society.

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Everyone fantasizes the world in order to make life bearable, including Nihilists. We flee from emptiness to live, but we must keep in mind that the abyss does not cease to exist only because we look away and the vertigo passes. In any case, intellectually, this fact does not bother us, for there is a great difference between knowing that there is an abyss and being in that abyss, just as it is different only to know that lions are dangerous and to be face to face with one. So we only need to look for ways to divert the affective gaze from the nihilistic perspective, for our logical gaze, as long as we remain sane, will never be able to do so – since that would be tantamount to denying reality.

In this perspective, mourning could be understood as a kind of psychological nihilism, in which we apprehend the emptiness of

existence not directly, through reflection, but indirectly, through affectivity. The depressive state gives us a dry and direct intuition about objective reality, reducing the subjective to nothing – and we can see that this amounts to a kind of “reality check” done involuntarily by our brain, in order to verify the integrity and reality of our subjective world. In these convulsive situations, we are forced to face the naked reality, and even the most optimistic individuals are hijacked by lucidity. As long as the individual is mourning, he loses the ability to deceive himself. Nothing we say will be able to comfort the individual; and that’s why even religious people grieve, which is something that at first doesn’t make much sense. The fact is that when he sees his loved one being embraced by worms, any religious person realizes that his belief in spirits and reincarnations is merely a joke that tries to deny the obvious. His beliefs will only be able to comfort him once he has overcome the loss.

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There are only two situations in which we can be impartial: when our interests are not involved, and when our interest is the truth itself – that is, when our partiality, for personal reasons, coincides with impartiality. Within that, depression itself has nothing of relevance. The interesting thing is only the fact that, in depressive phases, we feel that we “turn our backs” to life, starting to see reality with disinterest. Thus, the perspective of depression, because it is dispassionate, allows us to be impartial, representing a rare opportunity to see things as they really

are.

This explains why, during depressive phases, nihilism seems to us a viscerally coherent view, with which we can identify ourselves both intellectually and emotionally. On the other hand, when we are in a normal phase, pursuing our day-to-day dreams, this same view seems a bit distant from our way of feeling reality, from our experience - even though, intellectually, nihilism continues to have the same vitality. Considering that everyday activities make us somewhat superficial, and that depression, as a rule, makes us realistic, it seems quite logical that this should be so. We know that existence has always been empty, and will always be. The fact that nihilism may cause distress depends not on philosophy, but on our affective disposition, on our brain chemistry - ultimately, on whether or not we are able to deal with reality.

With such details in mind, we can understand more clearly why nihilists are often thought to be suicidal. This is because our own worldview is so charged with affective values that if it is destroyed, even partially, it would lead to mourning, which is pain. And practically no worldview would remain intact after undergoing a thorough revision that takes into account a criterion as fundamental as the distinction between the subjective and objective spheres of reality. But, of course, every individual who calls himself a nihilist has already overcome this phase of mental reorganization and, therefore, is no longer threatened by the fact that everything is empty. However, if we put ourselves in the position of one who claims that nihilists are suicidal, we will have no

difficulty in understanding why he thinks so. The idea of intentionally losing something for which we have deep affection sounds so absurd, so self-destructive, that it would be like the idea of killing our own friends just to learn to deal with the loss of loved ones. That is, a great sacrifice in the emotional sphere which is in no way compensated by the gain in the intellectual sphere. More than natural, it is inevitable that any individual will protect himself from an idea capable of causing such a havoc in his affective life. In the face of such a threat, his deep regard for the truth is reduced to this maxim: *to hell with the truth!*

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So, in order for someone with a somewhat fanciful vision of reality see his remarkable garden wither, a confrontation with philosophical nihilism is usually sufficient. In this perspective, nihilism can no longer be considered as something completely harmless. For it is possible that through thought alone, once we understand our condition, we may enter into a state of mourning for the “death of reality,” so to speak, since for us reality is our understanding of reality, and the destruction of the foundations of our worldview can be something quite difficult to administer.

On an emotional level, when we come to understand the world as a physical system, as something impersonal, it is as if we had “killed” reality. To illustrate, let’s imagine the following situation: we were researching in a library and, by chance, we found a document with our name. As we read it, we find that all our family members are not

actually human beings: they are machines preprogrammed to live with us. They like us automatically from the beginning. Even their feelings are calculations of their central processors. That is what we read in the document. Well, even if such an understanding did not change anything in practice, would not knowing it be emotionally devastating? The feeling that everything has never been more than a fantasy crushes us. Now it is enough to realize that this is not fiction: they really are machines, and so are we. Everyone is. Life is a dream inside a machine. Faced with this, we are astonished, perplexed, and “mourning” is the best word that occurs to us to describe this feeling that something has died, although we cannot tell exactly what.

Whether the reason for this affective state is the loss of a loved one or the deconstruction of our worldview, the central difficulty is to adapt ourselves to a deeply painful loss, to go through a transitional phase without reference, in which we must make a radical change in ourselves. In this transitory state, the way we think and face the world corresponds exactly to nihilism, in which everything loses meaning and life is, as it were, “suspended in nothingness”, perfectly aware of itself and its precarious condition. The subjective reality is rejected for different reasons, but we arrive at the same perspective: the nihilistic abyss, the obvious.

Of course, facing objective reality requires a lot of courage, and most individuals only become capable of this in extreme situations, where lucidity is indispensable. In other situations, we live in a kind of torpor

state. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Subjective reality can cause us suffering, but getting away from it will not bring us any comfort. It will only make us realize the truth even more harshly. Since there is nothing behind our illusions, this lucidity becomes rapidly unbearable. The awareness of the indifference of reality reaches us as something corrosive, like a silence that mocks all our dreams.

There is really no place to escape: we have to face our condition of existence in our element, subjectivity. It would be foolish to think that fleeing from planet Earth and launching ourselves into the emptiness of space would be a great relief to the earthly problems that afflict us. We would just be floating in nothingness. This detachment may allow us to see things with some impartiality, but we cannot remain in this situation for long. Asphyxiated by boredom, overwhelmed by the consciousness of the nullity of life, we soon return to our subjective bubble, certain that there is nothing very interesting on the outside.

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It would also be helpful to understand why there is so much suffering involved in such changes in our worldview. Unfortunately, there is nothing special about this adaptation, although it is common to hear the contrary. The fact that such a process is painful, sometimes overwhelming, is a natural unhappiness to which we are all subject, both mentally and physically. Severe damage to a limb, for example, besides being extremely painful, also requires a great recovery time, since the injured tissues will need to be literally reconstructed by the

organism, cell by cell. Likewise, a drastic change in our worldview or the circumstances in which we are accustomed to living entails a physical change in our brains. Many important connections between neurons will have to be made and others undone so that our nervous system adapts and is able to cope with the new situation, and suffering is merely a sign of how physiologically inconvenient this “update” process is.

Being that during this process of adaptation we are somewhat lost and disoriented, the resulting depression and lucidity can be seen as a preventive measure so that we do not take action before our brain is familiar with the new situation, thus avoiding inadequate decisions that could turn out dangerous to our immediate well-being. It’s as if we had always been accustomed to driving only cars, but, in a twist of fate, we were placed before a vehicle that we have no skill to operate, like an airplane, for example. In this situation, our primary reaction would not be to step on the accelerator and expect everything to be as before, for we know that this would be suicide. Instead, we dwell on the instruction manual at length, inspecting all the relevant issues, and as soon as we feel ready to take control of the vehicle, we take action, and we start living normally again. Of course, this is time-consuming, and in this there is also great resemblance to tissue damage, indicating that mental changes relate to physical changes in the brain.

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Since, in the long term, nihilism is incompatible with the maintenance of life, it is quite common to hear that it is only a “provisional state,”

something to be “overcome.” And this is correct. However, we should not confuse the overcoming of practical nihilism with refuting theoretical nihilism – flirting with that optimistic relativism that seems a like a praise of dementia. The question is only what one can do in spite of existence being hollow, in spite of all nothingness, without running away from the question like cowards. And overcoming nihilism is nothing but to think of ourselves as the ultimate source of value and meaning of all things. Getting used to dealing with such matters without extrapolating the sphere of our own subjectivity.

In practice, we must overcome nihilism because reality does not care about us – it will never pity our misery. Whether we are right or wrong, we still need to keep our bellies full and our bodies warm, and that means overcoming it is a biological issue, not a philosophical problem. If nihilism paralyzes us at first, it is only because illusions, for the most part, are what moves us, and it is inevitable that we become temporarily stunned when we realize it. However, walking again is not tantamount to overcoming nihilism, but to acquiring the ability to better separate our knowledge from our practical needs, until both things work back to normal, now more independently.

In this perspective, the overcoming of nihilism concerns its practical paralyzing effect that makes life morbid, not its logical incoherence; concerns the fact that it is impossible to justify a subjective life by means of objective nothingness. And this, let us put it once and for all, is accomplished through madness, the only way by which we can live

rationality in an absurd world. However, we should not expect anything extraordinary from this, since life itself is a completely crazy system. This “madness” is not the same as an unrestricted right to stupidity, it is not the same as losing your reason. The madness to which we refer is something that goes through life from end to end: our nature. That is something we know quite well. It is our little human fantasies that, in spite of everything, allow us to live our lives, even if it makes no sense at all.

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This essay is a partial translation of the book “O Vazio da Máquina” [The Emptiness of the Machine], originally written in Portuguese by André Cancian.

source: [NIHILISM](#), pp. 9-51 ([kindle](#))

Portuguese version: [Niilismo](#)