

## INTRODUCTION

### OVERCOMING NIHILISM

Arran Gare

The inertia of most people in affluent Western nations in the face of the corruption of the core institutions of their democracies, including their universities, their disempowerment, the plundering of public wealth, growing economic injustice and economic insecurity, environmental degradation and the threat of a global ecological collapse, has impelled a search for explanations, and in doing so, has forced people to confront the nihilism of modern civilization. It appears that the devaluation of the highest values, and of life itself, and the consequent loss of meaning in people's lives, is having practical consequences. Nihilism threatens our liberty, the future of civilization and even the global ecosystem which sustains the conditions for life. The papers collected in the present edition were not solicited; nevertheless they can all be seen as grappling with and attempting to overcome this nihilism, and as such form a coherent body of work. There was a second group of papers submitted this year united by their concern for the future of philosophy. These will be published shortly in another edition. However, even the problematic state of philosophy can only be understood in relation to nihilism. Nihilism is now so totally taken for granted by most people that the discourse through which the source of this nihilism could be identified and challenged is being ignored and undermined by those who now control the funding and management of education and research. Philosophy itself is becoming a victim of nihilism.

The first paper in this edition by David Storey, 'Nihilism, Nature, and the Collapse of the Cosmos' is timely, providing a much needed history of the concept of nihilism and of those who have recognized it and struggled against it. It shows that the term was coined and the problem was recognized long before Nietzsche, and the notion was explicitly formulated as an issue by F.H. Jacobi in 1799. While it has taken

many forms and been understood in different ways, Storey sees the main source of nihilism in a form of scientific naturalism (essentially, what Alfred North Whitehead referred to as ‘scientific materialism’) that has drained meaning, value and purpose from nature. In conclusion Storey endorses the project of environmental philosophers to ‘re-enchant the world’.

The philosopher who most appreciated and responded most forcefully to Jacobi’s diagnosis of nihilism was F.W. J. Schelling, a philosopher who is usually identified with the Idealism that Jacobi was attacking. The second paper by Arran Gare, ‘From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilization’ notes the influence of Jacobi on Schelling and argues that in fact Schelling strove to overcome Idealism, and succeeded, laying the foundation for the modern tradition of process metaphysics. Schelling, who had an enormous influence on subsequent science and mathematics as well as the philosophy of culture and culture generally, under the influence of J.G. Herder and Wolfgang Goethe, had already begun the process of re-enchanting nature called for by Storey. Schelling also called for a new philosophical ‘religion’ (the original meaning of which was ‘re-connection’, from re- = ‘again’ + ligare = ‘to join, to connect, to bind’), transcending the parochialism of Christianity and creating a new world consciousness. Schelling’s work as an ‘event of truth’, to use Alain Badiou’s terms, resulted in a cascade of events of truth, providing the basis for re-enchanting nature, for overcoming nihilism and for creating a global civilization that has inspired directly or indirectly a vast range of philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, artists, writers, environmentalists and political activists. He laid the philosophical and cultural foundations for the ecological civilization now being called for by Chinese environmentalists.

These two papers provide a background against which the importance of the remaining papers in this edition can be appreciated. The question that must arise from an appreciation of Schelling’s work is why the traditions of thought he inspired did not coalesce and replace our nihilistic culture. There can be a number of explanations for this, but a major insight into it is offered by Gennady Shkliarevsky in ‘The God Debates and the Limits of Reason’. Shkliarevsky has shown that the so-called war of science and religion is for the most part fake. While on each side of the divide there have been challenges to the other side, notably Richard Dawkins’ attack on religion, more commonly mainstream science and mainstream religion have accommodated themselves to each other. The outcome has been a stunting of both. Mainstream science has eschewed the more profound questions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it, dismissing such questions as religious questions, while apologists for Christianity have taken refuge in the notion of faith and eschewed

efforts to comprehend the world rationally, claiming that such enquiry is best left to science. Shkliarevsky wonders whether the two sides of this opposition will have the will and wisdom to overcome their subsequent stagnation.

While the debased view of nature of scientific materialism is the ultimate source of the nihilism of the modern age, Jacobi first saw nihilism in the obverse of this, the effort to compensate for this view of nature by founding our beliefs and values on the reflective reasoning of the subject. He condemned Idealism. In various forms, Idealism is still a part of our culture and underlies the problems addressed in the following two papers by Joseph Morrill Kirby and Sami Pihlström. In 'The Quest for Pleasure and the Death of Life', Kirby has confronted the argument that it is irrational to care about what might happen to the human species after one's own death. As Kirby points out, this became a live issue with the 1972 Club of Rome report, *The Limits to Growth*. We must now make decisions about whether we are to sacrifice our present well-being for the sake of people in the future yet unborn. The conclusion that there is no justification for this follows from interpreting the meaning of life purely in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; that is, subjective sensations. Engaging with the defence of this by Amien Kacou, Kirby reveals the weakness in this view of life, revealing the more primordial place the notion of justice has in our comprehension of meaning, and the ontological significance of this. However, this by itself does not justify the sacrifice of the poor of the world for the future of humanity. A corollary of this argument is that if we wish to save the future, then it will be necessary to strive for justice in the present.

In 'Guilt: Facing the Problem of Ethical Solipsism', Pihlström also struggles with the opposition between subjective experience and the quest for an objective view of reality; however, his focus is on the constitutive role played by the emotion of guilt in our moral life. The problem with granting a central place in our moral life to guilt is that it can lead to a form of ethical solipsism. Exploring the role of guilt in moral life through a number of ethical thinkers (Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, as well as philosophers) and problematic situations, Pihlström shows the seriousness of this issue. When considered against the backdrop of our limited knowledge and the potentially immense consequences of our actions, it can lead to the view that no one ever does the right thing, and this in turn can lead to moral nihilism, or even metaphysical nihilism. The argument imagined (but not defended) by Pihlström, is to show that what is really deep in moral life is our way of being in the world, and this involves both historical and cosmic dimensions.

Engaging with another and closely related dualism, a complementary conclusion is reached by Hana Owen in her paper: 'Bakhtinian Thought and the Defence of

Narrative: Overcoming Universalism and Relativism'. Taking as her point of departure the opposition between the modernist's project of totalizing experience and excluding difference and postmodernists who have attacked this and glorified difference, Owen draws on the narrative theory of Mikhail Bakhtin to point the way to a more inclusive and creative understanding of humanity while avoiding the postmodern tendency to isolate and fragment. Owen reveals the profundity of the work of Bakhtin (who, as Miroslav Orel showed, was strongly influenced by Schelling)<sup>1</sup> and the continuing relevance of his ideas. Bakhtin and members of his circle had identified the root of the oppressive tendencies in modernity that were later rediscovered by poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, and worked towards a conception of life, ethics and politics that transcends both the one-eyed reason of modernism embraced by neo-classical economists and techno-scientists and the scepticism and relativism of the deconstructive postmodernism embraced by establishment figures in the arts and the humanities. From the perspective provided by Bakhtin and his circle, modernism and deconstructive post-modernism, like scientism and mainstream religion and subjectivism and objectivism, are shown to be different sides of the same coin.

Another manifestation of the opposition between universalism and the acknowledgement of difference is the opposition between cosmopolitanism and concern with concrete particularity. Paul Healy in 'Situated Cosmopolitanism, and the Conditions of its Possibility: Transformative Dialogue as a Response to the Challenge of Difference' takes as his point of departure Habermas' effort to solve this problem through his discourse model of cosmopolitanism. This model upholds universality while empowering us as citizens and authors of the laws and policies by which we are governed. Drawing on Seyla Benhabib's distinction between the 'generalized' other and 'concrete' other, Healy argues that Habermas' theory of discourse still does not give an adequate place to difference; it will have to be supplemented to give a place to the specific histories, identities and life experiences of diversely situated others. This produces a theory of discourse that gives a place to disagreement and embraces difference as a resource rather than a barrier to consensus.

Martin Heidegger, like Bakhtin, was strongly influenced by Schelling and was centrally concerned to overcome the nihilism of modernity. However, unlike Bakhtin, Heidegger gave no place to laughter. Tziovanis Georgakis in 'Tradition as Gelotopoesis: An Essay on the Hermeneutics of Laughter in Martin Heidegger'

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Orel, 'F. W. J. Schelling's and M. M. Bakhtin's Process Thinking,' *Concrescence*, Vol. 3, 2002: <http://concrescence.org/index.php/ajpt/article/view/119>.

addresses this lacunae. Through a careful explication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* along with other, later writings, Georgakis argues that the question of laughter sanctions the question of the meaning of being and shows how it is laughter that brings forth meaning. It is also by laughing at Heidegger and other philosophers that their positive significance can be affirmed – not as oracles but as thinkers within a tradition of other thinkers and poets, avoiding objectification, formalization and standardization in understanding their work.

The last paper of this edition by Michel Weber, 'On a Certain Blindness in Political Matters', is also a bridge the next edition of *Cosmos & History* on the future of philosophy. Weber argues that 'unless philosophy adopts a radical empiricist standpoint and seeks the uttermost generalities, it cannot differentiate itself from yet another form of limited expertise and become useless.' When it does do its work properly, philosophy moves to a radically progressive politics. What has this to do with overcoming nihilism? In promoting radical empiricism along with the quest for the utmost generalities, Weber pinpoints a major source of nihilism and clarifies what is required to overcome it. Radical empiricism, explicitly defended as such by William James and embraced by Whitehead and Edmund Husserl, has its roots in the work of J.G. Hamann, Herder, Goethe, Jacobi and Schelling. These philosophers recognized the sleight of hand of Newtonian science which, while claiming knowledge superior to and independent of metaphysics by virtue of its empiricism, in fact refused to acknowledge the reality of most of what is experienced. It is through the adoption and imposition of blinkers on experience without acknowledging them that meaning has been drained from the world and from people's lives. The concern with the utmost generalities is a quest to recover and extend the experience that has been lost. Weber shows the practical consequences of this: a politics that takes into account what has previously been excluded, leading to more concern for fellow human beings, for other forms of life, and eventually, for the entire biosphere. And it leads us towards the concept of the common good.

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