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Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism

Menschliche Existenz und Koexistenz in der Epoche des Nihilismus

Človeška eksistenca in koeksistenca v epohi nihilizma

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William James's Assessment of Nihilism as a Psychological Phenomenon

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Abstract

The present article examines the contribution to the problem of nihilism found in the American philosopher and psychologist William James, specifically in his essay "Is Life Worth Living?" from 1896 and the chapter "The Sick Soul" from his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* from 1902. At the age of 27, James suffered a period of intense depression that lasted from the fall of 1869 until the spring of 1870. This experience shaped his views on nihilism. The present article argues that James's proposed solution

to the problem of nihilism, although formulated rather differently, is in essence the same as that of Jean Paul and the Danish thinker Poul Martin Møller. James's originality can be found in his treatment of the issue as a psychological problem.

Keywords: nihilism, psychology of religion, depression, meaninglessness, despair.

Opredelitev nihilizma kot psihološkega pojava pri Williamu Jamesu

Povzetek

Članek obravnava prispevek ameriškega filozofa in psihologa Williama Jamesa o problemu nihilizma, zlasti v njegovem eseju »Ali je življenje vredno življenja?« iz leta 1896 in poglavju »Bolna duša« v knjigi *Raznolikost religioznega izkustva* iz leta 1902. Pri 27 letih je James doživel obdobje hude depresije, ki je trajalo od jeseni 1869 do pomladi 1870. Ta izkušnja je oblikovala njegove poglede na nihilizem. Pričujoči članek ugotavlja, da je rešitev problema nihilizma, ki jo predlaga James, čeprav je formulirana precej drugače, v bistvu podobna tisti, ki jo najdemo pri Jeanu Paulu in danskem mislecu Poulu Martinu Møllerju. Jamesovo izvirnost je mogoče najti v njegovi obravnavi nihilizma kot psihološkega problema.

Ključne besede: nihilizem, psihologija religije, depresija, nesmisel, obup.

In my recent book *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, I focused primarily on the discussions about nihilism in the German-speaking world (Stewart 2023). This allowed me to tell a generally continuous story about the views concerning the perceived threat of the sense of meaninglessness during the period in question. As with any survey book of this kind, I regretted the many authors and works that could only be mentioned briefly or had to be omitted altogether. Of these regrets, one in particular stood out. While writing the book, I came to a deeper appreciation of how many works in the Anglophone tradition are concerned with the issue of nihilism. While I included a chapter on Lord Byron and Shelley, I felt that much more could be done.

In the present article, I will try to say more about the contributions toward the issue of nihilism in the English-speaking world. Specifically, I will focus on the American philosopher and psychologist William James. One commentator states: "His work can best be approached in terms of his personal confrontation with nihilism." (McDermott 1977, xx.)[1] This claim is insightful and explains much of James's written *corpus*. Particularly worthy of discussion in this context are two works, first the essay "Is Life Worth Living?" from 1896, and then the chapter "The Sick Soul" from his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* from 1902. These works were written at a time of great scientific and technical advance, including discussions about Darwin's theory of evolution and the birth of the social sciences. James is known for his radical empiricism and his focus on perception, but there is also a religious strand that runs through his thought. While this is non-denominational, James does defend the idea of a transcendent world beyond what we know from our perception.

Like so many of the other thinkers treated in *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, James was a trained scientist. His understanding of the problem of nihilism is, like those other figures, shaped by his appreciation

1 See also Crosby 1993.

This work was produced at the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, v.v.i. It was supported by the Agency VEGA under the project *The Principle of Humanity in the Context of Contemporary Conflicts. Existential and Phenomenological Challenges* (VEGA 2/0130/23).

for the secular scientific world-view, which by the end of the 19th century had firmly established itself. James's response to nihilism is defined by his psychological approach, which means that he sidesteps the issue as a metaphysical problem. I wish to argue that his proposed solution to the problem of nihilism, although formulated rather differently, is in essence the same as that of Jean Paul and the Danish thinker Poul Martin Møller, both of whom were treated in my book (Stewart 2023, 35–63, 73–200). James's originality can be found in his treatment of the issue as a psychological problem.

I. James and nihilism: The biographical context

As a young man, James struggled with health issues, both physical and mental. From 1867–68, he studied medicine in Germany, after which he returned and completed his medical degree at Harvard in 1869 at the age of 27. In the following months, plagued with self-doubt, he suffered a period of intense depression that lasted from the fall of that year until the spring of 1870.[2] During this period, he even contemplated suicide. Living again at home after two years abroad, James seems to have been uncertain about the future direction of his career and despaired of the meaning of his life. Moreover, he was vexed by reductive empiricism that was becoming popular at the time. He struggled with the conundrum caused by Darwin's theory of evolution, which implied materialism and thereby determinism. This meant that humans have no freedom to determine their own fate.

In 1920, James's son published a two-volume collection of his father's letters. In this edition, he describes his father's depression as follows:

> It was during this period that such doubts invaded his consciousness in a way that was personal and intimate and, for the time being, oppressive. He was tormented by misgivings which almost paralyzed his naturally buoyant spirit. Bad health, a feeling of the purposelessness of his own particular existence, his philosophic doubts and his constant

2 See: Perry 1996, 19–126; Allen 1970, 9–10; McDermott 1987, 94–97; and Kuklick 1977, 160–161. See also James's "1869–1872: Invalidism in Cambridge" (James 1920, Vol. 1, 140–164) and James's "Personal Depression and Recovery" (James 1997, 3–8).

> preoccupation with them, all these combined to plunge him into a state of morbid depression. (James 1920, Vol. 1, 145.)

In a letter to his friend Harry Bowditch dated December 29, 1869, James himself portrays his condition as follows:

> I am a low-lived wretch, I know, for keeping you all this time unwritten-to. I have been a prey to such disgust for life during the past three months as to make letter writing almost an impossibility […]. To tell you about matters at home: My own condition, I am sorry to say, goes on pretty steadily deteriorating in all respects, in spite of a fitful flash up for six weeks this summer […]. But I literally have given up all pretense to study or even to serious reading of any kind, and I look on physiology and medicine generally as dim voices from a bygone time. (Quoted from: Perry 1996, 119.)

Only a few months after having finished his degree, James seems to have lost all desire to pursue a career in medicine. This crisis has been seen as a key turning point in James's life (see Perry 1996, 122, and McDermott 1987, xxvii, xxix).

In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James describes a report of an experience of nihilism that he claims to quote from the original French. He introduces the passage as follows:

> The worst kind of melancholy is that which takes the form of panic fear. Here is an excellent example, for permission to print which I have to thank the sufferer. The original is in French, and though the subject was evidently in a bad nervous condition at the time of which he writes, his case has otherwise the merit of extreme simplicity. I translate freely. (James 2002, 127.)[3]

He later revealed that this was an own autobiographical account of his own depression;[4] however, there remains debate about whether this refers

3 In what follows all references to this work will be to this edition.

4 See James's "1869–1872: Invalidism in Cambridge" (James 1920, Vol. 1, 145): "When he wrote the chapter on the 'sick soul' thirty years later, he put into it an account of this

specifically to the crisis of 1869–70 (McDermott 1977, xxvii–xxviii). In any case, the oft-quoted passage reads as follows:

> Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a blackhaired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone. (James 2002, 127–128.)

This passage illustrates the depth of James's first-hand appreciation of existentialist crises of nihilism.

experience. He still disguised it as the report of an anonymous 'French correspondent.' Subsequently he admitted to M. Abauzit that the passage was really the story of his own case, and it may be repeated here, for the words of the fictitious French correspondent, who was really James, are the most authentic statement that could be given." See also Kallen 1953, 25.

James emerged from this period of depression by embracing a basic principle that would guide his thinking subsequently. He believed that although there are no certainties about the divine or human meaning, nonetheless humans are creative beings with energy and will. This means that they have infinite possibilities. These facts alone are enough, he thought, to overcome the debilitating doubts of nihilism. The problem of nihilism itself is not thereby solved, but with this new disposition to it, James was able to find solace in life. This allowed him to take up his work again and pursue his academic goals. In his subsequent works, James tries to articulate in more detail his newly found view.

After his crisis, James began working on his research again, and in 1872, he received an appointment at Harvard and began his teaching career the following year. This provided him with stability and purpose that he seemed to have been lacking.

II. James's argument with the person contemplating suicide in "Is Life Worth Living?"

Initially, "Is Life Worth Living?" was given as a lecture by James at Harvard University at the Young Men's Christian Association in May 1895. James gave the same lecture subsequently for the Society for Ethical Culture in Philadelphia and for the School of Applied Ethics in Plymouth. It was first printed as an article in the *International Journal of Ethics* in October of the same year (James 1895, 1–24). The piece was then published as an independent monograph in 1896 (James 1896). The following year, James reprinted it in his collection *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (James 1897). The article has subsequently been reprinted in different anthologies of James's writings.

By the time he gave this lecture, James had been teaching at Harvard for two decades. His main fields of instruction from 1873 until 1881 were physiology, anatomy, and psychology. Only in 1881 was he made an assistant professor in philosophy. He returned to psychology in 1889 when he was given an endowed chair. This was the position that he held at the time he gave the lecture.

This fact explains James's general approach to the issue of nihilism. He frames the issue in terms of the question asked in the title of the lecture: "Is life worth living?" He imagines a person posing this question and contemplating

suicide. With this way of framing the issue, James anticipates Camus's well-known claim at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* that suicide is the "one serious philosophical problem" (Camus 1955, 3). James tries to come up with reasons to persuade the person not to commit suicide despite whatever hardships the person must endure. This approach is very different from a purely philosophical reflection that is concerned with the question of whether there is any intrinsic value in human life and existence. This is the way that thinkers, such as Nietzsche, approach the issue. James never mentions the term "nihilism" anywhere in the lecture. For him, the issue of meaning is not one for the epistemologist or metaphysician, but instead it is one for psychology. He thus frames the issue as a practical one of dissuading a depressed person from committing suicide.

Presumably during his crisis of depression in 1869–1870, James rehearsed several arguments with himself concerning suicide and meaning. Although he gave the lecture many years later, this theme doubtlessly struck a very personal note for him. What he presents is not a research article based on scholarly work; the only references that he gives are literary ones. Rather, it is in a sense a self-reflection on his own experience some fifteen years earlier. The imaginary person whom James invokes in his lecture is thus he himself during this period of personal crisis.

Evidence for James's approach can immediately be found in the language that he uses to describe the nihilistic sense that life is not worth living. He refers to it as a "disease" (James 1956, 39, 49)"[5] that requires a "remedy" (ibid., 39). He talks about "stages of recovery from this disease" (ibid.). He does not use these terms metaphorically as Nietzsche does. He really takes nihilism to be a clinical issue. The fictional person contemplating suicide is regarded as a patient in need of psychological help.

Like other thinkers, James describes the crisis of nihilism as being connected with religion (ibid., 42). One is taught traditional religious beliefs, which offer comfort in the face of the existential questions. Religion assures us that the world is a cosmos created by a God who is well-disposed towards human

5 This edition is an unaltered reprint of the 1897 collection of the same name. In the following, all references to this essay will be to this edition.

beings. But as people grow older, they come to perceive a disconnect between this positive picture and the pain and suffering that they actually perceive in the world around them. Based sheerly on a scientific observation, it seems that the universe is entirely indifferent to human needs. Nature acts according to its own laws without concern for humanity. James's point is that one's reaction of shock and despair to the realization of this nihilistic, scientific world-view can only take place against the background of a previously held religious view. If one had not assumed that there was a loving God who created a universe for the benefit of human beings in the first place, then the scientific, atheist view would not be such a terrible shock, leading to despair (ibid., 43).

For James, the next step after the realization of the scientific world-view is that of rebellion (ibid., 44), and here he anticipates Camus's concept of metaphysical rebellion (Camus 1956). Having been bitterly disappointed in a God who apparently created a universe for humans to suffer and die with no consolation, people immediately rebel. It is thought that a God who treats human beings in this way is not worthy of veneration. This protest at least allows one to feel a sense of freedom and emancipation (James 1897a, 46), despite the fact that, as a product of nature, one is still subject to suffering and death.

James's main argument concerning the question of meaning is based on the basic psychological constitution of human beings. He points out the fact that merely believing in something can indeed make it possible in the sense that, if one thought that something was impossible to accomplish, then one would never even try to do so, or if one were obliged to do so, it would only be a feeble, half-hearted attempt. The negative preconception thus limits our possibilities in the world. By contrast, another person who fully believes that a specific thing indeed can be done would throw themselves into the task with all their energy and abilities. In many cases, such people would experience success, because their very belief in it serves as a motivation for them to mobilize all their abilities towards this end. In modern psychology, this phenomenon is referred to as self-efficacy. Modern psychological research confirms that those who have an optimistic view of their potential are more motivated and more successful in different contexts (see Bandura 1997 and Schwarzer 1992).

Given this psychological fact of human nature, it follows that it is better to have a positive and optimistic disposition about the meaning of one's life, even

if this cannot be rationally grounded by science. We must put the metaphysical question aside, or place it, so to speak, in the noetic brackets. We should instead focus on the unambiguous and empirically demonstrable positive results for our life that the optimistic, believing disposition facilitates. The conviction that success is possible helps one to realize one's ends.

This solution to the problem of suicide is in line with James's general pragmatist program. Truth in the abstract is meaningless. Instead, the truth concerns people and how they live their lives. Therefore, the truth of the question of the meaning of life is not an abstract metaphysical question. Rather, it is a question of what is conducive to a flourishing life. His proposed solution does not involve arguing for the metaphysical truth of the meaning of life; indeed, he concedes that this cannot be established by means of rationality. However, he thinks, it can be established from the perspective of the lived experience of a person. Believing itself has a *de facto* positive power in one's life. Therefore, James claims that it would be absurd to deprive people of this based on abstract metaphysical principles. He takes the stiff insistence on such principles as unreflective dogmatism and pedantry.

The two approaches, while related, are different kinds of problems, one philosophical and one psychological. With regard to the philosophical problem, James remains a skeptic (see Crosby 1993), believing that no definitive solution can be found based on science or rationality. He grants that his solution for the person disposed towards suicide is no solution to the metaphysical problem of nihilism. By contrast, for the practical psychological problem, a solution does indeed present itself in the positive disposition that the believer has. This is typical of James's thinking, as one commentator writes: "His philosophy was never a mere theory, but always a set of beliefs which reconciled him to life and which he proclaimed as one preaching a way of salvation." (Perry 1996, 122.) James's position has an echo of Kant's arguments of the value of the postulates of practical reason, which, although not proven metaphysically, must be assumed for ethics to make any sense.[6]

6 Note that this view was developed later by James's contemporary, the neo-Kantian

In the lecture, James defines "religion" as the belief in some kind of transcendent order beyond the visible universe that defies our comprehension. He clearly believes that the meaning of life is connected to the existence of this transcendent order. While science condemns such a view as ungrounded superstition, James argues that it is not illogical or irrational to hold a belief of this kind:

> Now, I wish to make you feel […] that we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again. (James 1897a, 52.)

It will be noted that James makes a similar argument a year later in his lecture "The Will to Believe," which was published in 1896.[7] In this piece, James argues that religious belief is not irrational, even if it cannot be grounded scientifically. On the face of it, this seems to be a very dubious claim. It does not matter if we would like something to be true, since it gives us the sense that life is worth living. Metaphysical truth should be indifferent to our wishes. Something is true or false, something exists or does not exist, regardless of our personal hopes and desires. As a scientist, one is not permitted to make ungrounded assumptions of any kind.

James, however, argues that in the development of the sciences, scientists themselves have often worked with assumptions that were not grounded in the then known facts of the world, but these assumptions in fact led to new scientific discoveries. If such assumptions are not irrational for science, why then should we deny people to make use of them in other contexts, such as religion:

> And if needs of ours outrun the visible universe, why *may* not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there? What, in short, has authority to

Hans Vaihinger (1911). This work was reprinted in several editions.

7 This work was a lecture given to the Philosophical Club of Yale University and the Philosophical Club of Harvard University. It was first published in *New World*, June 1896. It was shortly thereafter reprinted (see James 1897b, 1–31).

> debar us from trusting our religious demands? Science as such assuredly has no authority, for she can only say what is, not what is not; and the agnostic "thou shalt not believe without coercive sensible evidence" is simply an expression (free to any one to make) of private personal appetite for evidence of a certain peculiar kind. (James 1897a, 56.)

But not everyone has "religious demands," and even among those who do, these demands are not all the same. It is a *non sequitur* to think that such demands are grounds to believe in "an invisible" universe governed by a divinity.

One might, further, argue that this is a disanalogy. When scientists in the past made assumptions about things that they hoped to demonstrate, these assumptions were nonetheless based on some scientifically established facts and evidence, albeit not yet conclusive. By contrast, the assumptions made by religious belief fly in the face of all scientifically established facts and evidence. In many cases, they are the exact opposite of what we know from the world we perceive around us. The belief in the resurrection of the body and a life after death, for example, flatly contradicts everything that is known about the life sciences. These assumptions are of a very different kind.

A bigger issue seems to be that, even on James's own premises of finding a practical rather than a metaphysical solution, his proposal runs into problems. Specifically, it is implausible that someone would spontaneously be inclined to believe in the meaning of one's own life simply based on the realization that it would lead to a more flourishing existence. This is clearly not the way that belief or faith works. People have different dispositions and are inclined to believe different things. Some are uncritical and quick to believe in things with no evidence to support them. Others demand clear demonstration of the truth of something, in order truly to believe in it. A hardened skeptic cannot be persuaded to believe, even if tempted with the purported positive results of doing so. These results do not change the metaphysical facts, which seem to render such belief naïve or superstitious. But if belief is the equivalent of simple wishful thinking, it looks like a form of self-deception that the honest skeptic would quickly dismiss.

James anticipates the objection of the atheist or agnostic with an appeal to the difference between an abstract doctrine and a lived life. According to these views:

> We have no right … to dream dreams, or suppose anything about the unseen part of the universe, merely because to do so may be for what we are pleased to call our highest interests. We must always wait for sensible evidence for our beliefs; and where such evidence is inaccessible we must frame no hypotheses whatever. (Ibid., 54.)

To the atheist and the agnostic, James responds:

> Of course this is a safe enough position *in abstracto*. If a thinker had no stake in the unknown, no vital needs, to live or languish according to what the unseen world contained, a philosophic neutrality and refusal to believe either one way or the other would be his wisest cue. But, unfortunately, neutrality is not only inwardly difficult, it is also outwardly unrealizable, where our relations to an alternative are practical and vital. This is because, as the psychologists tell us, belief and doubt are living attitudes, and involve conduct on our part. (Ibid., 54.)

But precisely the fact that beliefs are living attitudes means that people cannot be immediately persuaded to change their old beliefs to new ones based merely on the promised positive results of the latter. A change in belief is usually a matter of temperament and life experience, and cannot be evoked by abstract ideas.

James tries to make the case for viewing the issue of religious belief from a pragmatist perspective:

> The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a mere sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal,—this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane. Destroy this inner assurance, however, vague as it is, and all the light and radiance of existence is extinguished for these persons at a stroke. Often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will then set in. (Ibid., 56–57.)

But how can one be assured of such things? It might well be the case that without this view, some people will lapse into nihilism, but this does not make such assurances true.

James concludes:

> This life *is* worth living, we can say, *since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view; and we are determined to make it from that point of view*, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success. (Ibid., 61.)

He advises his auditors: "Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact." (Ibid., 62.) In contrast to Nietzsche, James does not seem to be concerned about the difficulties involved in creating one's own values. Suffice it to say that it is more complex than simply asking his auditors to do so.

James's lecture "Is Life Worth Living?" can be seen as laying the groundwork for his main statement on the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this latter work, he develops his earlier insights and provides more detailed empirical testimony to support his views.

III. "The Sick Soul"

James was asked to deliver the so-called Gifford Lectures on natural theology at the University of Edinburgh for the academic year 1901–1902. He published this lecture series in book form in 1902 under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (James 1902). This work has been reprinted several times. It is regarded as a foundational text in the field of the psychology of religion.

At the beginning of the first lecture, James makes it explicit that he will be using a psychological approach in his study of religion, entirely in line with his earlier lecture "Is Life Worth Living?":

> I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed. To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution. It would seem,

> therefore, that, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities. (James 2002, 8.).[8]

It will be noted here that he makes no claim to being a philosopher. He is not interested in concepts but actual experiences. He relies primarily on literature as sources of his study, since they portray how individuals experienced different aspects of their religious life:

> If the inquiry be psychological, not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography. (Ibid.)

He thus turns the study of nihilism into an empirical investigation. As in his previous lecture, James does not mention the word "nihilism" directly, but it is clear that this is the main issue of at least a part of the work.

This is evidenced in his chapter "The Sick Soul" (lectures 6 and 7 in his lecture series) (ibid., 103–131), where he examines several individual cases of people who have fallen into a nihilist depression. James's designation of this kind of case as a "sick soul" shows once again that he regards this as a kind of illness that should be treated by psychology. He divides his analysis into two parts. First, he examines what he refers to as the healthy-minded temperament, which has an optimistic and trusting view of life. Healthy-minded people do not allow themselves to get fixated on the apparent evil in the world. They try to ignore sin and act ethically as best they can. Then, after providing a few examples of this kind of disposition, James turns to an analysis of the opposite position, namely, the sick soul who is fixed on the sin found in itself and the evil that is evident in the world.[9] He sketches different

8 In what follows all references to this work will be to this edition (James 2002).
9 It will be noted that James had already made the distinction between "temperamental optimism" and "temperamental pessimism" in "Is Life Worth Living?" (James 1897a, 33–34). This clearly anticipates the distinction between the "healthy–minded" and "the sick soul" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

forms of nihilism in descending order, with the mildest first and the most extreme last.

James frames the issue in terms of the problem of evil (James 2002, 107). If the universe is a monistic whole governed by a benevolent God, then it is problematic to explain how evil can exist in it. The sick soul is vexed by this element of evil, which can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as a part of the very nature of human beings, thus being innate to their very constitution. Or it can be regarded as a disconnect between the individual, who is good, and the world, which is evil. The different dispositions to this issue circumscribe the broad spectrum of psychological types that are relevant for the issue of nihilism.

James notes that even the happiest and most optimistic people occasionally experience existential shocks that give them cause for pause by contradicting their positive world-view. Even when the immediate crisis has passed, these immediate setbacks remain naggingly at the back of one's mind as something that could happen again at any time in the future (ibid., 109–110). This removes the sense of stability and certainty that the healthy-minded person once had, although they automatically return to their blissful lives after each crisis.

It is a fundamental human experience that at times our goals and works all seem to turn to nothing in the end. James cites successful men, such as Goethe and Luther, who talk about their lives in such terms (ibid., 110–111). He claims that this is not something idiosyncratic to specific individuals, but rather "an integral part of life" (ibid., 111). This is one level of nihilist depression.

A more serious degree of this "world-sickness" is not just when evil appears periodically and when the ultimate result of life is failure, but when *everything positive* seems to disappear:

> All natural goods perish. Riches take wings; fame is a breath; love is a cheat; youth and health and pleasure vanish. Can things whose end is always dust and disappointment be the real goods which our souls require? Back of everything is the great spectre of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness. (Ibid., 112.)

There is no escape from death as a necessary part of human life. This ominous thought prevents the sick soul from enjoying the pleasures of life.

James rightly acknowledges that this is a part of the scientific world-view: "This sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy." (Ibid., 113.)

He contrasts the views of the two basic positions. First, he writes the following concerning the healthy-minded disposition:

> Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; — and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. (Ibid., 113.)

Then, he writes of the sick soul:

> Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to an anxious trembling. (Ibid., 113–114.)

Here, he clearly indicates that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection has led to an increasing sense of depression about the meaning of human existence. As was the case earlier in the century, scientific development went hand-in-hand with a world-view that offered no meaning.

James cites an extended list of cases of what he calls "pathological melancholy" (ibid., 116), which he takes to be the severest form of nihilism. In his conclusion, he concedes that there is some validity to the nihilist perspective:

> […] there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (Ibid., 130.)

Despite the crisis that the thought of a meaningless world provokes and the difficultly of living with this idea, James seems to agree that this might well be an important fact about the universe, which must be acknowledged.

IV. James's contribution to nihilism in the long 19th century

When placed in the context of the European discussions about nihilism in the 19th century, James's contribution bears similarities to the responses to the problem offered by Jean Paul and the Danish thinker Poul Martin Møller. While the three authors approach the issue in different ways and describe the problem of nihilism with different language, their solution, I submit, is at bottom the same. Specifically, they all shift the problem from a metaphysical one to a practical one.

It will be recalled that in his novel *The Valley of Campan* from 1797, Jean Paul tells the story of the young scientist Karlson, who struggles with his inability to believe in any form of an afterlife (Jean Paul 1797 / Jean Paul 1864).[10] His crisis of depression is prompted by him receiving the mistaken news that his beloved Gione has died. This very personal experience leads to an inner conflict with his scientific convictions. It is easy enough to stick to the atheistic scientific perspective in the abstract, but this becomes considerably more difficult in the midst of the existential crisis that Karlson experiences. When Karlson later learns that the report was incorrect and that Gione is in fact in good health, he is naturally much relieved, yet still haunted by the experience. When the two are reunited, Gione and her friends, who are all religious believers, present several arguments to Karlson that he should abandon his dogmatic scientific perspective. The argument that ultimately causes Karlson to capitulate is that he should join the others in the happy belief in immortality, since otherwise he will be forever tortured by his terrifying conviction that death is the absolute annihilation of the individual. Gione's plea is as follows: "You are the only one among us who is tormented by this melancholy belief, —and you deserve to have one so beautiful!" (Jean Paul 1797, 138 / Jean Paul 1864, 65.) Like James, she thus makes no attempt to argue for the metaphysical truth of the actual

10 This work is treated in: Stewart 2023, 43–61.

belief itself. Her appeal is solely to the fact that such a belief will be beneficial for Karlson's happiness in life. The truth of the belief itself is irrelevant.

While the argument here is, strictly speaking, about the question of immortality or life after death, it bears obvious connections to James's question about the meaning of life. Both Jean Paul and James agree that these issues cannot be proven by means of science. Their solution is the same: one should put science aside, and believe in immortality and the meaning of life out of practical reasons. Such beliefs are beneficial for one's psychological well-being. The only way to have a happy and flourishing life is to believe in these things, although there is no scientific evidence to support them.

Poul Martin Møller's analysis of nihilism runs along rather different lines in his essay "Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality with Regard to the Latest Literature on the Subject" from the year 1837 (Møller 1837 / Møller 2022).[11] Møller argues that the belief in immortality cannot be regarded as an isolated idea in one's mind. Instead, it belongs to a general world-view that each person has, being thus interconnected with a complex network of other ideas. One therefore cannot reject the idea of immortality without it having a knock-on effect on other beliefs. Møller uses this insight, in order to explore the different domains of social life and culture that would be affected, if the belief in immortality were rejected.

He argues that the rejection of the idea of life after death would immediately lead to nihilism. This in turn would make social relations impossible, since it would be meaningless to try to enjoy friendship and love, knowing that one's friends and loved ones will die and perish forever. Further, it would make all political projects impossible, since there would be no point in political reform given that even great states crumble to dust over time, and whatever had been achieved would be destroyed forever. Møller continues with several arguments of this kind that are intended to demonstrate the disastrous consequences of a nihilist belief in the different spheres of culture.

Given that this is the alternative, Møller claims that it is imperative that a belief in immortality must figure as a part of one's general world-view. It will be noted that a world-view is considerably less critical and more malleable than

11 This work is treated in: Stewart 2023, 173–200.

a strictly scientific view. Even though one knows well that one's scientific view can provide no evidence for a life after death, one must include this belief in one's world-view, which includes much that goes beyond science. Like James, Møller appeals to people to drop their dogmatic scientific views and to believe based on the need to live a flourishing life in society.

While James's solution thus in a certain sense resembles the proposals of Jean Paul and Møller, his original contribution to the issue of nihilism is his psychological approach. Psychology was not a well-developed field in the days of Jean Paul and Møller. Therefore, they did not diagnose nihilism as an illness per se. They understood the problem in more general terms as a practical issue of how to live a happy life with others in society. The language and social-scientific methodology had not yet been developed sufficiently for them to describe nihilism as a psychological problem.

It will be noted that James's contemporary Nietzsche also talked about psychology as a part of his analysis of nihilism.[12] Indeed, he also often used the metaphor of a "disease" to describe what he took to be the ills of the day.[13] But in contrast to James, Nietzsche thinks that some people have a more robust constitution and can accept the idea that there is no God, immortality, or intrinsic meaning. For James, skepticism about these things leads to depression that requires psychological treatment. For Nietzsche, by contrast, this skepticism can be a form of liberation for those who are honest with themselves and resist the arguments that such beliefs make for a happier life. Such people have the ability to create values for themselves and need no further grounding from an external source. While James agrees with Nietzsche's positive assessment of the creativity of the human spirit, he seems unconvinced that this alone is enough to overcome the idea of nihilism. People need to believe in some sort of religious or spiritual realm.

In the two texts treated here, James changes the context of the problem of nihilism treated by the other authors. The metaphysical question is usually understood as whether there is any meaning or point to human existence. The post-Enlightenment scientific world-view answers in the negative. The

12 For an account of Nietzsche, see Stewart 2023, 259–279.

13 See, for example, Moore 2002 as well as Podolsky and Tauber 1999.

universe is atoms in the void with no meaning or point. In his lecture "Is Life Worth Living?", James departs from this metaphysical question and turns it into a normative one: Is it permitted to believe in something that is not scientifically grounded or even groundable? Or, under what circumstances is this permitted? These are very different kinds of questions that leave the metaphysical issue untouched. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James likewise considerably shifts the issue by taking a psychological approach to the issue of nihilism. He has in effect put aside the metaphysical problem, by reducing it to the question of how to understand sick souls who suffer from depression due to a nihilist world-view or disposition. Here, nihilism is not a metaphysical problem but a psychological one.

His diagnostic scheme of categorizing people either as healthy-minded or sick in accordance with their general disposition towards nihilism is rather heavy-handed. By making this distinction and designating one group as "sick," he implies that they are in need of psychological treatment or therapy of some kind. But it would be fairer simply to say that these are two different views or dispositions towards the issue without any further label. There is a normative tone in the designations "healthy" and "sick," which is not merited. Both of the views are natural and widespread, and constitute a part of the human condition. It is therefore arbitrary to designate the one "healthy" and the other "sick." As has been noted, James himself conceded that the sick souls have a genuine point, since evil does in fact exist in the world (James 2002, 130).

The beginning of psychology as a science at the end of the 19th century provides James with the tools to understand nihilism in a new way and to describe it in a new language. This makes it possible for him to make a contribution to the issue that is in part original.

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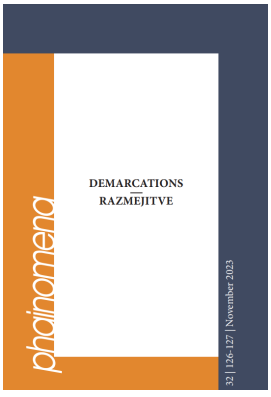

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