



Research Article

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Nihilism Lost and Found: Brassier, Jonas, and Nishitani on Embracing and/or Overcoming Nihilism

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Abstract: This essay confronts Ray Brassier's vindication of nihilism with other two important but frequently underexamined philosophical attempts to overcome nihilism: Hans Jonas' and Keiji Nishitani's. By putting these different takes on nihilism into dialogue, it explores some blind spots in Brassier's position, as well as some of the practical consequences, for our current planetary situation, of undertaking a radical divorce between the normative and the natural that results from his radical nihilism. The article opts for a more moderate acceptance and eventual self-overcoming of nihilism, according to which, even if natural entities are indifferent to human reasons and meanings, this does not entail that nature is bereft of a human-independent normative dimension. In other words, the essay argues that care must be taken not to confuse criticisms of an anthropocentric conception of reasons and meanings with the belief that meaning is completely absent from the natural world. Thus, the central contention of the article is that, given our current climate and ecological catastrophe, one of the most pressing tasks of contemporary philosophy is to understand normativity in non-anthropocentric ways, so that humans are no longer considered as the only entities that respond to normativity. Such an attitude conceives humans as estranged normative creatures amidst a meaningless, indifferent natural world, toward which they would have no ethical responsibilities. The essay finishes by suggesting ways in which to develop an account that does not fall into this ethical vacuum.

Keywords: nihilism, normativity vs scientific naturalism, speculative realism, phenomenology of life, Kyoto School

1 Introduction

This article aims at considering what is perhaps the most signaled dire consequence of certain strands of nihilism: the radical divorce between humans and the earth they inhabit, which stems from the modern divide between science and onto-theology (sometimes referred to as the disenchantment of the world). We can explain the latter in a Sellarsian vein as the divorce of the *manifest image* and the *scientific image*, or of normativity and scientific naturalism,¹ the apparently inevitable corollary of which is nihilism. We aim here to explore whether we should undertake the radical divorce between these two images by assuming a

¹ For Sellars' study of the difference between the two images, cf. Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," 1–40.

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radical nihilism, which entails a divorce between the normative and the natural, or whether we should try to find a better solution, in order to avoid some practical consequences that embracing nihilism might entail. Our contention is that, given our current climate and ecological catastrophe, one of the most pressing tasks of philosophy is to elaborate non-anthropocentric ways in which humans can consider themselves part of nature, instead of seeing themselves as estranged normative creatures amidst a meaningless, indifferent natural world.

We believe, in other words, that arguing in favor of what we can call an “ecological imperative,” understood as a moral imperative to protect nature and natural environments even when such protection might go against human interests, is one of contemporary philosophies’ most relevant *desiderata*. Now, given many nihilist positions deny (or are taken to deny) that there are values that somehow or other transcend the human sphere, we also believe there is an urgent need to offer counterarguments to these nihilist positions, specially counterarguments that at least guarantee the plausibility of an ecological imperative. Though we would like to go further and argue for the truth of such an imperative, that is beyond the reach of this article. We will hence limit ourselves to using a discussion of/against nihilism as a resource to lay the groundwork for future ethical work.

In order to bring together the aforementioned topics, we divided this article into four main sections. Section 2 considers Ray Brassier’s vindication of nihilism and how he defends the unavoidable death of the manifest image that comes as a corollary of the disenchantment of the world. Sections 3 and 4 elaborate on two more moderate ways of handling the nihilistic implications of the modern bifurcation between the manifest image: Hans Jonas’ (1903–1993) and Keiji Nishitani’s (1900–1990). In Section 5, we will assess the consequences of these three approaches by signaling their advantages and shortcomings, to pinpoint the specific difficulties plaguing the treatment of nihilism amidst the planetary catastrophe we are facing in the twenty-first century.

Before proceeding, some conceptual and historical clarifications are in order. The definition of nihilism that we will work with boils down to the claim that “life is meaningless.” More specifically, that life (both human and organic) lacks any cosmic significance, is not ordered according to an ultimate cosmic or divine plan that can justify it, and nothing endows it with meaning. In addition, accepting nihilism means renouncing the belief that there is an endgame or an afterlife that can make life’s meaninglessness bearable or worthwhile.

The origins of modern European nihilism can be traced back to the transition from a religious (and monotheistic) approach to the world to a scientific one, which led to the European Enlightenment and its call to rely on reason alone. The Enlightenment purged rational explanations from any mythical and religious implications and thus, by relying on modern physics’ mechanical explanation of nature, expelled the idea of a cosmic teleology, of the physical world conceived as a creation that is intelligently (rationally) directed, and banned the option of resorting to an immaterial immanent principle to explain movement, given the latter was considered anthropomorphic. The modern Galilean–Cartesian and Newtonian legacy reduced the physical world to material efficient causes, with no immanent *telos*. Max Weber described this modern shift as the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world, which dislodged faith and tradition as sources of existential value or meaning.

2 Ray Brassier’s Unbound Nihilism

In his book *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007), Ray Brassier articulates one of the most radical vindications of nihilism in contemporary philosophy. Furthermore, as we will see, Brassier’s nihilist position makes anything even vaguely similar to an ecological imperative impossible. Although he aims to defend a human-independent natural realm, the practical consequences of his argument, which he does not elaborate, could turn out being rather problematic. Detailed criticism will have to wait, though, until Section 4; for now, we need to understand his vision of nihilism and its philosophical import. As he states in the preface, nihilism, is not a disease, and philosophy should not waste time trying to overcome it:

The disenchantment of the world understood as a consequence of the process whereby the Enlightenment shattered the ‘great chain of being’ and defaced the ‘book of the world’ is a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment.²

Contra the anti-Enlightenment revisionism that pervaded nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century philosophy, Brassier considers that the disenchantment of the world “deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment.”³ Nihilism is the unavoidable corollary of the disenchantment of the world, and Brassier attempts to inquire into what remains unsaid and buried beneath the discussions on the origins and long-term implications of the term. Against several critics of nihilism that consider it exacerbates subjectivism by reducing reality to a mere correlate of an absolute ego,⁴ he deems nihilism to stem from a predominantly realist conviction, one that recognizes that, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, there is a mind-independent reality that is wholly “indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.”⁵ What Brassier finds most praiseworthy in nihilism is that it challenges the idea that the natural world is humanity’s (and other species’) “home,” or a “beneficent progenitor,” and acknowledges instead the universe as pointless and indifferent to humans and life. A nihilist philosophy, according to him, is one that accepts this fact with all its predicaments, instead of assuming it as a dangerous idea that must be overcome. He laments that philosophers waste time “re-establish[ing] the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or [trying to] mend the shattered concord between man and nature.”⁶ Instead, philosophy should be more than “a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem,”⁷ and nihilism uncovers a new opportunity for it, since it forces philosophy to explain the speculative implications of the latest scientific findings.

Amongst the praiseworthy accomplishments of the Enlightenment that led to nihilism, Brassier signals mainly two. On the one hand, it presented a picture where molecules, atoms, and electrons dissociated and dismembered the *vital unity of being*. As *Unbound*, the second word of the book’s title, suggests, Brassier considers as its great accomplishment the fact that it exposed being as a process of universal unbinding, a complex idea he assembles in the Second Part of the book, by drawing on Alain Badiou’s⁸ subtractive ontology and François Laruelle’s concept of unilateralization.

Given that the intricacies of his argument exceed the aim of this article, it suffices to concentrate on what he seems to find laudable in the unbinding process. On the one hand, it abrogates the transcendental privileges time has been endowed with in post-Kantian philosophy, time being what accomplishes in post-metaphysical philosophes the ontological syntheses and thus what makes being the correlate of thought. On the other hand, the dissociative virulence prompted by the Enlightenment sundered the putative reciprocity between mind and world or “correlationism” (more on this below), and invited scientific thought to radically think the primacy of its objects over any of their relations to thought. To sum up, the two things he finds more promising in the Enlightenment are how it ultimately opened up the possibility of thinking a world subsisting in-itself, independently of our relation to it, and made it possible for thought to know objects, the existence of which did not depend upon a constituting relation to thought.

These claims make more sense once one understands his overall attempt to break free of what other speculative and new realists have been trying to dismantle on the way to a “post-continental philosophy”:

² Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ According to Badiou, nihilism “is understood as *the rupturing of the traditional figure of the bond*; unbinding as the form of everything which acts as a semblance of the bond” (Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, 35, cited in Brassier *Nihil Unbound*, 98).

correlationism. As is well known by now, Meillassoux coined the term to refer to a typical idealist gesture which underpins post-Kantian philosophy's treatment of the relationship between mind and world, or reason and nature. Correlationism's fundamental conviction is that a reality-in-itself, independent of our relation to it, is an unwarranted "metaphysical chimera," rendering reality-in-itself philosophically unintelligible. For correlationist philosophies, objective reality depends on transcendental guarantors such as pure consciousness, intersubjective consensus, or a community of rational agents. Although phenomenology, pragmatism, and even Wittgensteinian language games altered these transcendental guarantors in the twentieth century, by seeking "more ordinary" types of correlations in a pre-theoretical realm that debunked reason's privilege, their tweaks still left the post-Kantian correlationist consensus unchallenged. Brassier is especially disapproving of strands of strong correlationism that assume that the most basic condition of manifestation for all phenomena is "the relation between un-objectifiable thinking and un-representable being" or "the primordial reciprocity or 'co-propagation' of *logos* and *physis* which at once unites and distinguishes the terms which it relates."⁹ He calls this strategy the "premium on relationality in post-metaphysical philosophy" and criticizes the fact that it has become an unquestioned orthodoxy, albeit being constantly touted as a "profound innovation."¹⁰ By insisting that there is no cognizable reality independent of our relation to it and that a transcendental operator (be it life, consciousness, Dasein) must be postulated as the generator of the conditions of manifestation through which phenomena can manifest themselves, correlationist philosophies struggle to solve, and instead end up circumventing, the problem of independent reality. In the absence of correlation, nothing can be manifest, apprehended, thought, or known according to them, not even the phenomena described by the sciences. Brassier considers correlationism as a pretext for evading the fundamental challenge posed to philosophy by modern science's unveiling of a reality which is as indifferent to life as it is to thought. What he most appears to despise is correlationism's scientific instrumentalism, or their belief that entities postulated by scientific theory are mere abstractions derived from some supposedly "more primary" dimensions of experience. Scientific instrumentalism illegitimately assumes that "the preconditions of human experience of reality are also the preconditions for the entities postulated by science."¹¹ For Brassier, on the contrary, science is able to describe non-experiential phenomena, and correlationism should avoid giving their implausible solutions to the question about the possibility of scientific cognition.

Thoroughly assuming nihilism is an opportunity for philosophy to break free of correlationism. Instead of affirming that the *manifest image* is more fundamental than the scientific one, and insisting on the incircumventability of mind and life, philosophy should rise to the challenge posed by the evidence patiently accumulated by science about life's and human existence's peripheral and ephemeral status. Philosophy's task is to "provid[e] an appropriate speculative armature for science's exploration of a reality which need not conform to any of reason's putative interests or ends."¹² That is, he considers the manifest image to be a sophisticated construction that makes sense of nature according to reason's interests or ends, an endeavor challenged by scientific findings. Accordingly, he also considers that values and meaning are not found in a human-independent reality, but are rather draped onto inhospitable nature in order to re-enchant what science has disenchant.

Brassier sketches what the speculative armature would look like by posing the question, "how is thought able to know an object whose existence does not depend upon some constituting relation to thought?"¹³ These objects are paradigmatic cases of an independent thing-in-itself, given without givenness, that science *discovers* instead of *constructs*. The two examples he presents are Meillassoux's "arche-

⁹ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

fossil”¹⁴ and the natural-scientific phenomenon of cosmic extinction.¹⁵ According to Brassier, the death of the universe is a scientific “descendent statement” that indexes events that will occur after the annihilation of thought, events that will occur independently of the existence of life and thought. Ancestral and descendent statements have the power to indicate how life and thought have had a determinate beginning and an end in space–time, and they can point to spatiotemporal occurrences that are not dependent on the ontologically generative conditions of spatiotemporal manifestation: “if we begin to take these questions seriously, then the haughty condescension with which post-Kantian continental philosophy deigns to consider what the natural sciences say about the world begins to appear less like aristocratic detachment and more like infantile disavowal.”¹⁶

Brassier dedicates no words to how we should embrace nihilism in our practical lives, and concentrates solely on the speculative opportunity it opens. He also calls for a philosophy that can render the findings of our best sciences not only consistent with philosophy, but also metaphysically coherent. This goal will not be attained by any variation of phenomenology, pragmatism, vitalism, or, more unpredictably, philosophical naturalism. Instead, only a philosophy capable of assuming science’s *subtractive* modus operandi will be able to provide such a metaphysically coherent framework. In his words,

[T]he principal task of contemporary philosophy is to draw out the ultimate speculative implications of the logic of Enlightenment, then [philosophy] cannot allow itself to be seduced into contriving ever more sophisticated proofs for the transcendental inviolability of the manifest image. Nor should it resign itself to espousing naturalism and taking up residence in the scientific image in the hope of winning promotion to the status of cognitive science. Above all, it should not waste time trying to effect some sort of synthesis or reconciliation between the manifest and scientific images. The philosophical consummation of Enlightenment consists in expediting science’s *demolition* of the manifest image by kicking away whatever pseudo-transcendental props are being used to shore it up or otherwise inhibit the corrosive potency of science’s metaphysical subtractions.¹⁷

As per this passage, the task of philosophy is to be a gatekeeper to all the ruses and scams philosophy creates in order to maintain the manifest image’s authority in place. It should also stop safeguarding the manifest image from the incursions of positivism and naturalism and should assume, instead, the corrosive effects scientific discoveries have on the manifest image’s alleged inviolability. It should stop trying to render mind-independent reality compatible with the putative interests of reason as construed within the bounds of the manifest image.¹⁸ Anomalous speculative objects like the “arche-fossil” and cosmic extinction are what philosophy should speculate about, by means of the manifest image’s most sophisticated conceptual resources (in conjunction with elements of scientific discourse) in order to hijack that image’s own self-understanding. In the closing chapter of his book, he clarifies his position regarding the *manifest* and the *scientific image*:

At this particular historical juncture, philosophy should resist the temptation to install itself within one of the rival images, just as it should refuse the forced choice between the reactionary authoritarianism of manifest normativism, and the metaphysical conservatism of scientific naturalism. Rather, it should *exploit the mobility* that is one of the rare advantages of abstraction in order to shuttle back and forth between images, *establishing conditions of transposition*, rather than synthesis, between the speculative anomalies thrown up within the order of phenomenal manifestation, and the metaphysical quandaries generated by the sciences’ challenge to the manifest order. In this regard, the concept of extinction is necessarily equivocal precisely insofar as it crystallizes the interference between the two discourses.¹⁹

¹⁴ The arche-fossil indexes a reality that occurred in a geological time *anterior* to the emergence of perceptual experience, like the time of the accretion of the earth, which occurred 4.5 billion years ago, and is indexed by its radiation and measurable through isotopic studies. The arche-fossil opens up the possibility of pointing to a cognizable reality existing independently to any relation to thought, that occurred before the existence of an original correlation necessary for manifestation to occur. In other words, it indexes a time that is *anterior* to the time when the conditions of manifestation emerged.

¹⁵ This extinction refers to the prospect of universal annihilation that will occur roughly one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, when the accelerating expansion of the universe will disintegrate the fabric of matter itself.

¹⁶ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 231. Emphasis added.

In the end, he argues that science's discovery of non-manifest phenomena, and of an indifferent reality that cannot be made compatible with reason's interests, must be taken seriously by speculative philosophy to unbind correlation. No attempt to synthesize the two images shall be made; rather, speculative thought should shuttle back and forth between them. He provisionally carries out this task by showing how the irrecusable reality of physical, cosmic death opens a mind-independent reality where time and space will coincide and where the object determines thought, instead of the other way around.

Now, regardless of how tempting some of Brassier's arguments against correlationism might be, they also lead us to a complicated ethical position, one in which it is impossible to argue in favor of what we have called the ecological imperative. In other words, Brassier's position can be read as a theory that regards human destruction of nature and natural environments as something which, in the end, makes no difference from a cosmic vantage point. This is the case since, according to him, there is nothing intrinsically valuable or meaningful in the physical world that would have moral standing and place a limit to human mastery. Now, this is certainly not an argument against Brassier's vindication of realism, but in our current planetary situation, when catastrophe seems imminent, it is difficult to deny that a philosophical system that ponders about ways in which humans can inhabit the Earth without desecrating it seems more urgent than a nihilist position that argues against any attempts for mending the shattered relation between humans and the natural world. Is not Zarathustra's exhortation to consummate nihilism by becoming loyal to the earth (which Brassier turns down as affirmative vitalism) more urgent for philosophy than thinking about cosmic death in order to remove any apex of human narcissism? Even if we accept that terrestrial time and biological death are not the absolute limit for philosophy, is it not possible to continue working within more micro-correlational philosophies to deal with current problems, since we do not want to extinguish the vital conditions of life, even if we know that the history of consciousness and life will not make a difference from the perspective of cosmic time-space and death? Even if everything tends toward unbinding and nothingness, cannot the local and temporary consistent multiplicity we witness at another scale assume speculative realism's challenge of thinking beyond human narcissism, but use it to become more earth-bound instead? Terrestrial life, after all, even if it is haunted by the death-drive, still manages to find local strategies for survival, and requires vital conditions to be able to prosper, which are the same conditions some humans are destroying. In the next two sections, we will inquire into other philosophical options to cope with nihilism, in order to show some blind spots in Brassier's narrow vindication of nihilism.

3 Hans Jonas' Attempt to Overcome Nihilism Through an Existential Interpretation of Biological Facts

In this section, we will address Hans Jonas' attempt to counter the nihilistic tendencies of his time. Unlike Brassier, Jonas considers that nihilism must be overcome, due to the ethical vacuum that it entails, which led to the terrors of Auschwitz. By articulating a philosophy of organism, which Brassier would certainly accuse of being one of vitalism's strategies to safeguard the manifest image, he attempts to show that purposefulness is not merely draped by humans onto nature to make it more hospitable for humans. Instead, it can be discovered in the natural world, and it is a proof that nature bears a good-in-itself that can then ontologically ground moral obligation. His philosophy of organism is pitted against Heidegger's existentialism and the latter's belief that human existence is set apart from the rest of nature and is endowed, through Dasein's care-structure, with a privileged relationship to death.

Before delving into Jonas' philosophy of organism, it is important to understand what motivated him to develop it in the first place. His main target is modern nihilism, a matter he engaged with critically during the 1950s, chiefly in his article "Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism"²⁰ and in the Epilogue of his *Gnostic*

²⁰ Jonas, *Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism*, 430–52.

Religion (1958), entitled “Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism.” In both works, Jonas compares modern nihilism, epitomized in Heidegger’s (and Sartre’s) existentialism, with the Gnostic’s ancient nihilism. According to him, both ancient and modern nihilism result from a radical rift between humans and the natural world, grounded in the way in which both historical moments conceive the physical world.

Jonas finds in the Gnostic movement of the early Christian period the first historical manifestation of this rift. Whereas the ancient Greeks considered the cosmos as governed by a *logos* that could be witnessed in the lawful motion of the celestial bodies, a *logos* that served as a frame of reference for human action, the Gnostics, on the contrary, felt radically estranged from the cosmos. This was due mainly to their account of the creation of the cosmos, according to which the physical realm in which they were imbedded was not created by the true supreme God but by an inferior “world-god,”²¹ and obeyed a cosmic law that was both mindless and unenlightened. Whereas the Stoics identified the cosmic *logos* with providence, the Gnostics called its law *heimarmene*, an oppressive cosmic fate²² which inspired no worshipful confidence. Their cosmic estrangement translated into an existential feeling of anxiety and dread, and only knowledge, *gnosis*, could liberate them from their servitude to *heimarmene*. Nevertheless, the enlightenment provided by the *Gnose* was aimed not at integrating them into the cosmic whole, but was set instead to awaken their inner self from the “slumber or intoxication of the world”²³ and deepen their alienation from it. According to Jonas, this ends up in a de-worlding (*Entweltlichung*), which results in an ethical vacuum, since the Gnostic will not find in the cosmos or in the world-god’s will the standards by which he can set his course.

The Gnostic situation seems, for Jonas, strangely close to the modern one²⁴, at least insofar as the new science of the seventeenth century portrayed the cosmos as an overawing infinite space, totally indifferent to human deeds, and nature as a blind purposeless mechanism, with no reference to ends. Modern Europeans will henceforth feel so estranged from that in which they are cast, that they will not find a way to give a place to their normative, rational dimension amidst the sheer indifference of the physical universe. As happened in Gnostic thought, nature will not serve as a frame of reference for their self-understanding and will be considered as a sheer compulsive manifestation of power. Their God’s purposes or intentions will not serve as guidance for humans, since he is also a *Deus Absconditus* like the Gnostic’s “true God,” whose purposes are not discernable in the evidence of its creation.

For Jonas, Heidegger’s and Sartre’s conception of human existence as a thrown project amidst a senseless natural world that functions mainly as a backdrop for its existential projects resounds impressively with both the moderns and the Gnostics. Both the Gnostics and the Existentialists deny any “objective values” to the world. They are, in a sense, antinomistic: once a transcendent realm is absent, the “thrown humans” are abandoned to themselves, they do not make part of an objective order of nature. As we will see in more detail when discussing Nishitani, there is but a step from this conception of humanity’s place in nature to the belief that human lives are a project from nothingness to nothingness, and can find no direction at all in the absolute vacuum and bottomless pit of indifferent nature: from the existentialist’s and modern’s *physis* no “direction at all can be elicited.”²⁵ The practical consequence thereof being that an ethical vacuum is left once there is no longer a human-independent realm that can serve as a lodestar, or at least a limiter, to human action.

As a response to this ethical vacuum, Jonas aims at undermining the nihilist credo according to which, when no transcendent (divine) or human-independent source of value remains, humans are the sole source of all value. To counter this situation, he develops a philosophy that discovers in life an ontological ground for values. Values, for Jonas, cannot be grounded in a community of humans, but must be found in an objective realm. This realm, as is evident, can no longer be a divine or transcendent one, in an epoch in which nihilism abounds, in which “God is dead.” Accordingly, he will seek this objective value in a principle discoverable immanently in the natural world. Only such an objective value can help philosophy overcome nihilism.

²¹ Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 327.

²² *Ibid.*, 328.

²³ *Ibid.*, 329.

²⁴ Jonas draws heavily on Karl Löwith’s interpretation of modern nihilism and its relation to existentialism. For Löwith’s important article on nihilism see Löwith, “Nature, History and Existentialism”, pp. 79–94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

Consequently, Jonas distances himself from the dualist conception of humans vs indifferent physical nature and struggles to integrate humans in the greater scheme of things to retrieve their sense of belonging in the world. In order to achieve this, he claims that there is an organic basis to all of humans' intellectual accomplishments and possibilities and that even the most lofty and abstract intellectuality is connected to organic life. To demonstrate it, he engages in an "existential interpretation of biological facts."²⁶ By arguing that organic nature has a purpose of its own, which is for him a proof that it bears a mind-independent good-in-itself, not just a good according to humans, he carves out the ontological ground for an ethics toward nature and toward future humanity.

Attempting to reclaim a value-laden nature might seem, for most post-Enlightenment philosophers, like a failed, anthropomorphical, ethical endeavor from the start. As Hume's proverbial "is/ought dichotomy" states, it is a fallacy to derive an *ought* from a description of a state of affairs. In other words, it is illegitimate to move from a descriptive claim about the natural world to a prescriptive one. Under these circumstances, Jonas's endeavor of discovering an *ought* that could guide human action in the natural world can be counted as a sacrilege for modern philosophy.

Contrary to this, Jonas states that the is/ought divide is another modern heritage that has been assumed accurate with little confrontation, and though it might make sense on some occasions, it is grounded more on a taken for granted prohibition than on anything else. To revise it, he ventures into ontology and tries to pull away "the foundation of 'ought' from the ego of man" and relocate it in "the nature of being in general."²⁷ This ontological ground for value will presumably allow him to claim an objective principle for the ethics he is after: "hence would result a principle of ethics which is ultimately grounded neither in the autonomy of the self nor in the needs of the [human] community, but in an objective assignment by the nature of things."²⁸

His book *The Phenomenon of Life* opens with a stark declaration of intention:

Contemporary existentialism, obsessed with man alone, is in the habit of claiming as his unique privilege and predicament much of what is rooted in organic existence as such: in so doing, it withholds from the organic world the insights to be learned from awareness of self. ... Accordingly, the following investigations seek to break through the anthropocentric confines of idealist and existentialist philosophy, as well as through the materialist confines of natural science. In the mystery of the living body, both poles are in fact integrated. The great contradictions which man discovers in himself ... have their rudimentary traces in even the most primitive forms of life, each precariously balanced between being and non-being, and each already endowed with an internal horizon of 'transcendence'. We shall pursue this underlying theme of all life in its development through the ascending order of organic powers and functions ... - a progressive scale of freedom and peril, culminating in man, who may understand his uniqueness anew when he no longer sees himself in metaphysical isolation.²⁹

As can be noticed in this passage, Jonas's two main adversaries are scientific materialism, which reduces the world to an extensive realm of discrete entities juxtaposed in space devoid of inwardness, and idealism and existentialism, for which the realm of mind has no share in the world of matter. For both materialism and idealism, psychophysical phenomena become problematic entities, because they belong (as bodies) to the realm of extended matter and, at the same time, as self-propelled moving entities, are endowed with an inwardness and an immanent teleonomic structure that cannot be explained merely by the laws of physics. On the one hand, scientific materialism conceives matter as lifeless and purposeless and tries to explain living beings as a particular and more sophisticated configuration of matter the behavior of which can still be described in mechanistic terms of stimulus and response, without resorting to teleology or anthropomorphic explanations of purposiveness. Idealists, or those who concentrate on mind, make of human's ability to think their most important attribute, and forget how this conscience needs vital and physiological

²⁶ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, x.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

conditions in order to be conscious. In addition, it also willingly ignores how this constituting consciousness was possible in the first place and how it might have evolved from more rudimentary forms of life.

In order to surmount these apparent irreconcilable positions, Jonas attempts to *integrate* them in what he calls an “integral monism” that comprises both a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of mind, without reducing or absorbing one realm into the other. His main thesis contends that “organic [nature] even in its lowest forms prefigures the mind, and that mind even in its highest reaches remains part of the organism.”³⁰ Or, as he recalls in his *Memoirs*, “the essence of reality [i.e. reality’s being] reveals itself most completely in the organic components of the organism – not in the atom, not in the molecule, not in the crystal ... but in the living organism, which indubitably is a body, but harbors something more than the silent being of matter.”³¹

As stated earlier, Jonas’ perspective offers “an ‘existential’ interpretation of biological facts.”³² What this means is that, instead of simply studying living nature from a detached scientific point of view, he analyzes how these biological facts seem to pinpoint the fact that living beings are not just blind mechanisms being moved by stimuli and response, but are creatures of need, concerned for their own continued existence, as existentialists defined human beings. His account is phenomenological insofar as he starts from the fact that humans, as living beings that are a body, have insider’s knowledge about what it is like to be a living being: “On the strength of the immediate testimony of *our* bodies, *we* are able to say what no disembodied onlooker would have a cause for saying.”³³

His integral monism thus seeks to show the particular modes in which non-human living beings exist and how *self-concern* is manifest through and through in their dealings with their surroundings. He asks, for instance, when a living organism moves, why does it move? Some concern must be involved when an outer stimulus makes a living being respond actively. It moves in *order to* remove irritation, or *to* escape danger, or in *order to* grasp and devour an object.³⁴ This leads him to assert that living organisms care in the sense that, in them, there is an urge, a drive, interposed between mere receptivity and the activity of responding to it. Only when an external incidence is met by something that is self-concerned can this external incidence become a stimulus. Being self-concerned for their existence means that they take what they encounter in the world selectively and take in (or metabolize) what is relevant for their specific purposes.

This strive for existence involves effort, an effort exerted over against the world, from which and against which life actively secures its continuance. It also proves there is an “essential boundary dividing ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ and that [living beings] are consistently in exchange with the outside world.”³⁵ The most basic and certain evidence we have, as Leon Kass says when he comments Jonas, is not that “I am a thinking thing” as Descartes states, but that “I am a striving indivisible, self-concerned self,” and that “I need and I strive, therefore I am.”³⁶ To carry on, organisms need to engage in metabolic transactions with their environment by exchanging matter with it, transiently incorporating it, using it, and excreting it again.³⁷ This ability to exchange materials with the environment is a unique trait of life in the vast world of matter and what allows living things to endure. This is why metabolism is, according to Jonas, the defining property of life: all living beings have it and nonliving beings don’t have it.³⁸ Since they need outside material in order to survive and they must be capable of reaching out to obtain that material, they must have the means to find it (sensibility), to appropriate it, and to transform it into something useful for them. This means that living organisms, contrary to non-living ones, are open to their surroundings and *act* on them.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ Jonas, *Memoirs*, 198.

³² Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, ix.

³³ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ Jonas, *Organism and Freedom*, 4.

³⁵ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 79.

³⁶ Kass, “Appreciating the Phenomenon of Life,” 57.

³⁷ Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*, 88–9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

Even if the organism incorporates and excretes substances and constantly changes, it still maintains a formal continuity. Its form persists and is independent of the flux of materials in it. Non-living beings, on the contrary, persist inertially and do not need to maintain their self-identity through their own efforts. There is thus a constant effort, a constant strive, in living organisms to maintain their self-identity. As Leon Kass comments, living beings “must constantly work to maintain both their existence and their self-identity in the face of ever-present dangers of going out of business. Metabolism is a full-time occupation from which only death provides release ... An organism’s ability to metabolize is inseparable from its absolute *need* to do so.”³⁹ This shows an *inherent neediness* of living things that drives them into transactions and relations with their *milieux*, instead of merely occupying space. Organisms show themselves as both independent and dependent. This is why Jonas will establish that theirs is, paradoxically, a *needful freedom*: “The exercise of the freedom which the living thing enjoys is rather a stern *necessity*. This necessity we call ‘need’, which has a place only when existence is unassured and its own continual task.”⁴⁰ Living beings are thus distinct and separate beings that persist in their being by their own workings thanks to metabolism and self-nourishing. They are also pitted against the world but in constant commerce with it, a selfhood set against otherness, and their peculiar relation to the world is made possible through sensitivity, concern, and reaching-outward through action. The more complex the organism, the “more pronounced [the] self is set over against a more pronounced world.”⁴¹

By extending self-concern to organic entities, Jonas seeks to show that these entities value in a certain way, and by doing so they seek a certain good that is independent of the human axiological scale. In this way, he attempts to counter modern nihilism’s belief that normativity lies solely on the human realm. But this line of reasoning is insufficient for the more binding ethical theory Jonas is after. After all, a nihilist could always claim that nonexistence in general can be chosen over organic existence, because nothing grounds the fact that being alive is more desirable than nothingness. In order to counter the nihilist, the pessimist, and the skeptic about why existence (human or other) is preferable over non-existence if in the end nothing will make a difference, Jonas will seek an ontological grounding that can answer why humans and life in general *ought* to exist, which leads him to a more fundamental ontological question: “whether there *ought* to be anything at all – rather than nothing.”⁴² He will pursue his answer to this fundamental question in *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1979).

In this book, he turns to his philosophical biology in order to prove that life values more being than nothingness. The mere capacity to have any purposes can be regarded as a good-in-itself, that is infinitely superior to any purposelessness of being. Inherent to such a purposiveness, there is a fundamental self-affirmation of being over nothingness: “that being is concerned with something, at least with itself, is the first thing we can learn about it from the presence of purpose within it.”⁴³ So, purpose as such is its own accreditation within being, purpose is superior to purposelessness, and Jonas affirms that this must be postulated as an *ontological axiom*.⁴⁴ It follows that humans, too, must say yes to life and be responsible for it. In this way, the purpose of nature lays a claim on us not to destroy it, even if we have the power to do so. Even if he cannot deduce rationally his axiom, he states that it is graspable with *intuitive certainty*.

If we judge Jonas from Brassier’s standpoint, Brassier would denounce him as a vitalist, since he epitomizes “life,” as if life made any difference from a cosmic perspective. Brassier would also claim that Jonas does not engage seriously with the non-experiential phenomena described by science, but only projects reasons’ interests onto living nature. One could concede that Jonas, in fact, does not engage thoroughly with scientific biology, but makes a case for a philosophy of organism using phenomenology’s “intuitive” tools. One could use, contra Jonas, Brassier’s main contention that phenomenology’s first-person intuitions of what appears is not enough to provide a decent explanation or justification of them.

³⁹ Kass, *Appreciating the Phenomenon of Life*, 58.

⁴⁰ Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴² Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 46.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

Humans do not enjoy, according to Brassier, privileged access to all the properties of what appears, and, accordingly, there is no reason to suppose that appearing is transparent to us. Since value and meaning are almost certainly generated through mechanisms that are not intuitively accessed, Brassier would require a stronger third-person point of view description from a more hardcore biological theory if he were to accept something like Jonas' position (which, of course, he rejects).

Nevertheless, there are still several bright spots in Jonas' philosophical approach to living nature. On the one hand, he extends values and meaning to an immanent but more-than-human realm, without appealing to a transcendent realm. This allows him to show that there are mind-independent values that are binding for humans, something Brassier's nihilism, despite being a case for a mind-independent reality, would not concede. For Jonas, at least the biosphere is not as *indifferent*, on a biological-time scale, to human action as nihilism seems to concede. It might be indifferent to human values and reasons, but this does not mean that it does not care for its survival. Nevertheless, the fact that Jonas bases his grounding for extending value to nature on "intuitive certainty," and that he seeks his objective binding value through sensible intuition, is methodologically problematic and unconvincing. In the fourth section, we will extend the implications of these criticisms further, and argue that it is possible to accept the premises of nihilism (in fact, that it is possible to accept nihilism as a whole), and yet deny that values are merely human constructs. Having reached that point, we will be in a position to suggest that there are at least partially independent values in reality, which can underpin the argument in favor of the ecological imperative, which hence becomes not only a *desideratum*, but a component of a plausible philosophical theory. In order to do this, we will take a few tricks from another student of nihilism: the Kyoto School's philosopher Keiji Nishitani.

4 Nishitani on Nihilism and Science

Before trying to understand Nishitani's ideas on how to overcome nihilism, we should begin by explaining his peculiar take on what the problem with nihilism is, which he believes closely correlated with the problem of the relation between science and religion (which Nishitani, at least in part, understands as covering the area of human life related to finding value and meaning in our position in the world):

When modern science excluded teleology from the natural world, it dealt a fatal blow to the whole of the teleological world view, which leads from the "life" of organic beings in the natural world, to the "soul" and "spirit" or "mind" of man, and, finally, to the "divine" or "God." The world was no longer seen as having its ground in what may be called a preestablished harmony of the "internal" and "external." Instead, it came to be looked upon as an "external" world possessed of its own laws and existing by itself alone.⁴⁵

The move from the loss of a teleological structuring of reality to the externalization of the world makes better sense if we keep in mind that, for Nishitani, the teleological realm "is the place where she [any human being] has her life with a conscious purpose as a rational being;"⁴⁶ i.e., the internal, in this sense, corresponds to what (in Sellarsian/McDowellian terms) belongs to the "sphere of reasons." When an action occurs as a result of there being a subject sensitive to meanings and values in the world, instead of as a result of merely causal process, we say that the action belongs to the space of reasons and depends on the meaning or value as its reason.⁴⁷ For example (assuming a common sensical metaphysics), if walking through noisy streets we suddenly pause because we happen to hear a lingering melody by Schubert, we do not attempt to explain our behavior in terms of the laws of physics, but in terms of aesthetical delight, the beauty of the melody being the reason we stopped our walk. According to Nishitani, pre-nihilist

⁴⁵ Nishitani, "Science and Zen," 109. Though we usually keep the translation as it is, given Japanese adjectives and nouns have no grammatical gender, we have silently altered all renditions of terms such as 人間 as "human" instead of "man," and changed the corresponding possessives to the feminine.

⁴⁶ Nishitani, *Science and Zen*, 110.

⁴⁷ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 70–1.

conceptions of the world applied a similar pattern of explanation to Nature: thus, natural disasters were divine actions having the misbehavior of humans as their reason.

As opposed to this, natural causal laws are external in as far as they require no subject susceptible to them, no understanding of them as laws, to modify their reality. Thus, if one's Japanese reading skills are rather low, a sign in kanji stating that entrance is forbidden will not stop one's opening a door that happens to arouse one's curiosity precisely because one is not susceptible to the sign as a reason,⁴⁸ while a heavy bolt on the other side will stop our progress regardless of whether we perceive it as a reason or not. When, then, Nishitani claims that nihilism has externalized even the internal, this is to be understood as affirming that the scientific belief according to which the whole set of explanations for the world is to be couched in terms of natural causal laws leaves us in a world in which nothing happens for a reason. Likewise, if nothing happens for a reason, then what happens does not happen because a human subject recognizes it as a reason. If, as Nishitani claims, natural causal laws occur regardless of whether subjects recognize them as laws or not, and everything that occurs is determined by such laws, then the subject's consciousness plays no explanatory role in reality. We are left with a world in which our subjectivity is ontologically inert. Everything would stay the same regardless of whether we are conscious of the world or not. At this point, in Nishitani's words, we realize that "the essence of science itself constitutes a problem of a scope that goes beyond the scope of science itself. ... The essence of science is something to be brought into question in the same realm where the essence of [humans] becomes a question to [humans themselves]."⁴⁹

Before we go on to explain Nishitani's two-pronged approach to the overcoming of nihilism, a word of warning is in order: despite how tempting it might be, Nishitani at no point rejects the validity of science, though he will limit the scope of its applicability. Quite on the contrary, Nishitani embraces science as a challenge through which religion must pass: "In other words, what we are talking about is submitting to science as to a fire with which to purge and temper traditional religions and philosophies, that is, as a new starting point for the inquiry into the essence of man."⁵⁰ Nishitani's aim, in other words, is not to reject scientific advances into nature, but to make sense of what it is to be a human in a scientific world. We ask the reader to keep this in mind while considering Nishitani's arguments, since a too quick inspection thereof easily lends itself to interpreting Nishitani's position as that of an anti-scientific mystic. And mystic he might be, but never anti-scientific.

The first prong of Nishitani's argument reinterprets the modern nihilist crisis in terms of the loss of our "personal" relationship with the world:

[I]t is then no longer possible to see the world as simply ordered according to divine providence or divine will. Thus, the total impersonality of the world came to appear as something qualitatively different from either human or divine "personality." ... This means that man is no longer merely personally in the world. As a being who is both completely material and completely biological, he is ruled by the indifferent laws of nature. ... Human interests make no difference, either.⁵¹

"Personal relations" are here best understood as relations mediated by susceptibility to reasons, with an important clarification: it is not only that the things that happen in the world are no longer determined by whatever could be a reason *for us*, but also that we as subjects are no longer reasons necessary to explain the way things are. That is to say, a personal relation with one of us is that in which our subjectivity is a reason for the actions of others. Given subjectivity appears in Nishitani as susceptibility to reasons, we can define someone's having a personal relation with one of us as our reasons' being a reason for their actions precisely because they are our reasons. Thus, we can move our chair, say, as we well please, given the chair has no reason of its own to be where it is,⁵² but we should not move a person around as we well please,

⁴⁸ The case of understanding and disregarding is still a case of not being susceptible to the sign as a reason, but now in as far as we believe the reason does not apply to us.

⁴⁹ Nishitani, *Science and Zen*, 115.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵¹ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 50.

⁵² Of course, somebody else might have placed the chair where it is for their own reasons, but then it would be nothing but a regular case of respecting the reasons of others.

given they may have (probably do have) reasons of their own for being where they are. The other person's role in my behavior is, then, as a reason that has reasons, and this two-tiered recognition of reasons is what characterizes my relation to them as personal. An impersonal world would be a world that offers no such recognition of my reasons as reasons.

Nishitani's rather surprising move, best explained in *Religion and Nothingness*, is not to reaffirm the personality of the world (that would, of course, be "unscientific"), but to argue that personality can be denied in two different ways, only one of which leads to impersonality. Nishitani claims that the relation we have with nature is not such an impersonal relation: it is instead "transpersonal" (we will define the term in a minute). To build his case, Nishitani begins by arguing that we not only recognize the possibility of transpersonal relations, but in fact value them highly in moral terms; to do so, he relies on a series of testimonies from both the Catholic tradition and Buddhism, though perhaps the clearest example, at least for us Western readers, is a passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew, where rain is described as an act of God's love that embraces both the just and the unjust:

There are two points to be noted in this passage [from St. Matthew]. First is the command to love one's enemies as one's friends, which is presented as the way to becoming perfect as God is perfect. ... Second, God's causing the sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and the rain to fall on the unjust and just alike, is cited as an example of this perfection. The phenomenon this speaks to is similar to what I referred to before as the indifference of nature, except that here it is not a cold and insensitive indifference, but the indifference of love. It is a nondifferentiating love that transcends the distinctions men make between good and evil, justice and injustice.⁵³

Nishitani's rather complex claim can be separated into several parts; the most initially surprising is the perception of personal qualities in entities which we would not usually consider endowed with subjectivity. All in all, Nishitani's evidence for it stems from phenomenological observations: we cannot but feel that the unexpected shaft of winter sun, as well as the light rain on a warm spring afternoon, are tender and loving, and feel the anger when summer breaks into darkness and thunder, to use the most trivial of examples. And this is not limited to meteorological phenomena:

On a summer's night, a mosquito flies into my room from the outside. It buzzes about merrily, as if cheering itself for having found its prey. With a single motion I catch it and squash it in the palm of my hand, and in that final moment it lets out a shrill sound of distress. This is the only word we can use to describe it. The sound it makes is different from the howling of a dog or the screams of a man, and yet in its "essence" it is the selfsame sound of distress.⁵⁴

Many might object that this is but a variety of the fallacy of projection, but we, at least, believe it is not quite so easy to build an argument proving it is a fallacy that does not assume what it intends to demonstrate. We might agree that humans express love in as far as they are subjects, and that the rain would do so without having a subjectivity, but why does this imply that we are projecting our subjectivity unto the world instead of being a reason for claiming that expressions of affective states (like the mosquito's shrill sound of distress) are not necessarily related to possessing a subjectivity? We are faced with the following phenomenological claim: we perceive certain events and entities in the world as lacking subjectivity, and at the same time we perceive them as expressing affective states. Usually, this is interpreted as a projection of the affective states we feel onto the world outside, but why? The answer cannot be "because only beings endowed with inner subjective lives have affective states," given that our phenomenological datum points in the opposite direction. The projection fallacy claim needs prior motivation before it can tip the interpretation of the phenomenological datum in the direction of a projection. We need, in other words, a reason to believe that affective states occur only within subjectivities. Some might claim that the argument for this is that affective states are not the kind of thing that can be out there in a strict sense, but when asked why, the result is usually of a scientificist bend: there is no way other than "feeling" it to determine the reality of, say, love. But then love is precisely the kind of thing that is felt and not measured by a ruler, and being

⁵³ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 58.

⁵⁴ Nishitani, "The Awakening of Self in Buddhism," 12.

incapable of finding other means by which to prove its reality is but a natural consequence of the kind of thing love is, not an argument against its being out there, at least not until we have somehow argued that rulers and weights are the only possible means of determining external existence, instead of merely serving the function of delimiting the aspects of reality with which we wish to interact for a certain purpose.⁵⁵

Nishitani's position (and this leads us to the second part of his complex claim) is that the term "personal" covers two different phenomena, and that we often assume that denying one of them implies denying both. It is one thing to argue that the facts of a certain domain cannot be explained by appealing to its susceptibility to reasons, which gives us an impersonal domain. It is quite another to contend that an action that takes us as reasons is only explainable in as far as our value as reasons is determined by our individuality (or in as far as we are reasons because we are susceptible to specific reasons), which gives us what Nishitani calls a transpersonal relation.⁵⁶

If Nishitani is correct, the phenomenological evidence points toward a recognition of transpersonal relations between the world and persons, and if there is no argument to deny the reality of these transpersonal feelings, then we are faced with a new challenge: part of what we usually took to be an essentially human trait, being a person, turns out to be a property common to entities quite distinct from humans, and the need to redefine both what it is to be a person and what it is to be a human becomes even more acute:

The person-centered prehension of person, however, is by no means self-evident. Indeed, it stems from a bias rooted deep within the self-consciousness of humans. More fundamentally, the ego-centered grasp and interpretation of ego which we find in modern humans is no less of a bias and hardly as self-evident as it is assumed to be. These biases signal a confinement of self-being to the perspective of self-immanence from which a human prehends his own egoity and personality, a confinement that inevitably ushers in the narcissistic mode of grasping the self wherein the self gets caught up in itself.⁵⁷

Nishitani's move here, which concludes the first prong, is an inversion of nihilism's argument: humans, he claims, have been forced to deny there are reasons (meanings, values, etc.) in nature not because we cannot find them there, but because we have assumed reasons can only exist as we understand them, as objects *for* conscious subjects. Given how often we humans define ourselves as "the rational animal," as beings whose essence, whose way of life, is bound as one with rationality, accepting that reasons might exist in manners we cannot fully grasp poses a challenge for who we are, a challenge which forces us to reconsider what we are and to accept the humbling lesson that we must look outward instead of inward if we are to understand rationality. According to Nishitani, following the path of transpersonal reasons takes us to the same decentering of humanity which we encounter in nihilism. However, in this occasion we find ourselves peripheral in a world of reasons, and obligated, in our search for meaning and value, to head outside ourselves and explore reasons as they occur in the world around us. It would, without a doubt, demand important transformations in the way we understand science's methodology, but if there is an ideal candidate for the exploration of reality while attempting to overcome the biases inherent in our subjectivity, it is science. It is through the scientific exploration of the (reason-laden) world that nihilism can be overcome.

The second prong of Nishitani's overcoming of nihilism also begins with the crisis brought about by the scientific image of reality:

For the spirit which has sustained most traditional religions and philosophies, the establishment of modern science, to use familiar Zen terms, spells a sort of "destruction of the house and demolition of the hearth," that is, a fatal breakup of the "nest and cave of the spirit." This turn of events has to be accepted as it is. Like it or not, it is the historical "fate" of

⁵⁵ The last few decades have seen a surge in the number of authors willing to recognize the reality of feelings, moral qualities, etc. Especially influential for our account are the arguments presented in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, where many of the arguments sketched here are discussed in detail, and where other points we have not touched upon for lack of space (such as the apparent relativity of emotional perceptions as opposed to objective facts) also receive full treatment.

⁵⁶ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 59–60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

[humans] ... It is a sort of fate assaulting [humans] as a “fatal” question, so that [humanity] once more gets reduced fundamentally, in [her] own eyes, to a question mark.⁵⁸

In this case, though, Nishitani reads the results of contemporary science as arguments proving the validity of what we might call the Buddhist thought experiment of the Great Kalpa Fire, which cyclically destroys everything in the universe, all memories included, only to have the universe start all over again afterward. The question is, then: when all things and all traces of them are burned, is there any chance meanings or values will survive?⁵⁹ The details of the argument are complex, especially when we realize that the Great Fire burns even what we would consider divine entities; suffice it to say that Nishitani takes the thought experiment as proving that reasons in general would be destroyed with everything else, and that this possibility entails they are not atemporal. More in detail, the argument would go something like this: (1) The existence of that which we can think of as not existing is not necessary. (2) We can think of a situation (the Great Kalpas Fire) in which the totality of existents becomes non-existent. (3) (from (1) and (2)) The existence of the totality of existents is not necessary. (4) That which depends upon something the existence of which is not necessary cannot have necessary existence. (5) Reasons (values, meanings, etc.) depend upon existents. (6) (from (4) and (5)) Reasons do not have necessary existence.

We could continue the argument (we believe Nishitani does so) by establishing a biconditional between necessary existence and atemporality, thus concluding that reasons are temporally bounded. The point, though, comes across without these last few steps: there are no such things as absolute reasons, as ultimate meanings or values, in reality. We are not entitled, in other words, to assume that whatever reasons we have for our actions, whatever meaning we find in life or world, will transcend our death. Realizing this brings with it the “unspeakably awesome cold”⁶⁰ which Nishitani uses to describe the death of whatever might transcend our individual lives: the Great Death.⁶¹ This, of course, contrasts strongly with Jonas’ position, whose work sought to overcome nihilism by anchoring a good-in-itself in biological facts, independent of subjective perceptions of it, albeit accessed through “intuitive certainty.” Nishitani’s rejection of such a good-in-itself brings him closer to Brassier, though, as we will see further on, their interpretations of what such a denial implies are radically different.

As far as we can see, although there might be some way of causing problems for several of the premises in the earlier argument, it is (5) that might first strike us as somehow unacceptable, perhaps because it seems too close to a *petitio*, even if the underlying anti-platonic thesis of reasons requiring embodiment would seem attractive in a different context. Instead of defending it, Nishitani argues that the scientific discovery of the world as reasonless takes us to the same place:

The very procedure of stepping out onto the field of the scientific world view is here translated into the decision to accept the universe with its feature of bottomless death as the place for abandoning oneself and throwing away one’s own life.⁶²

Faced with this ordeal, most of us would seek a way of denying the conclusion of both the Great Kalpa Fire thought experiment and of the scientific worldview; Nishitani, heavily influenced by the Buddhist tradition of freeing oneself from the bonds of pain, argues instead that we must embrace it:

Indeed, this dimension [of bottomlessness] is nothing other than the place where all natural phenomena emerge manifesting themselves as they actually are. We may call it the place where the concrete facts of nature emerge manifesting themselves as they actually are and possessed of greater “truth” than when they are ordinarily experienced as true facts; and the place where scientific truths emerge manifesting themselves as they actually are and possessed of greater “facticity” than when they are ordinarily thought of as truths concerning facts. ... But, to repeat, such a dimension of bottomlessness can only open up in a religious existence that accepts the universe as a field for self-abandonment and for

⁵⁸ Ibid., 114–5.

⁵⁹ Cf. Nishitani, *Science and Zen*.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 119.

⁶¹ Ibid., 121.

⁶² Ibid., 119.

throwing away one's life; it can open only through the Great Death. ... When anything, be it empirical or scientific, "is," its being always takes place as a manifestation on the dimension of bottomlessness.⁶³

The gist of Nishitani's argument is clear: there is something about the world which we can only learn by living through the Great Death, a truth about who we are and what the world is that will allow us to overcome nihilism. What this truth is, though, requires that we look yet again at Nishitani's *Religion and Nothingness*:

In standing subjectively on the field of nihility [i.e., when living the Great Death] (I use the term "stand" and refer to nihility as a "field," but in fact there is literally noplac to stand), the self becomes itself in a more elemental sense. When this takes place, the being of the self itself is nullified along with the being of everything else. "Nullification" does not mean that everything is simply "annihilated" out of existence. It means that nihility appears at the ground of everything that exists, that the field of consciousness with its separation of the within and the without is surpassed subjectively, and that nihility opens up at the ground of the within and the without.⁶⁴

Before commenting, another passage from the same text might be useful:

By the "self-awareness of reality" I mean both our becoming aware of reality and, at the same time, the reality realizing itself in our awareness. The English word "realize," with its twofold meaning of "actualize" and "understand," is particularly well suited to what I have in mind here, although I am told that its sense of "understand" does not necessarily connote the sense of reality coming to actualization in us. Be that as it may, I am using the word to indicate that our ability to perceive reality means that reality realizes (actualizes) itself in us; that this in turn is the only way that we can realize (appropriate through understanding) the fact that reality is so realizing itself in us; and that in so doing the self-realization of reality itself takes place.⁶⁵

Both these sections are somewhat obscure, and the interpretation we are going to offer is quite probably far from uncontroversial, but for the purposes of this article, we will have to limit ourselves to presenting its core ideas. First, we believe Nishitani's main argument is that there are truths or varieties of knowledge that we cannot possess, perhaps because we lack the conceptual capacities to do so, until we have lived through a certain experience. In this case, living through the Great Death results in our discovery that, despite what we believed earlier, life, though an essentially reason-driven activity, stems from and thrives within nihility. Second, we believe Nishitani claims that an epistemological transformation can be the catalyst for an ontological transformation, i.e., by gaining a certain kind of knowledge, a non-trivial ontological transformation occurs (by "trivial ontological transformations," we understand those that simply alter the number of entities in existence, without in anyway affecting the set of possible ontological categories or altering the category to which a certain entity belongs). In this case, grasping the paradox of life in a void of reasons brings with it a transformation in the structure of our reality, a transformation which consists precisely in the newfound capacity to bring about reasons together with the world around us, without, of course, therefore having to assume that reasons require an absolute upon which to stand. In other words, according to Nishitani, living through the Great Death is an epistemological transformation that brings with it a non-trivial ontological change in reality: the possibility of transpersonal reasons. This, though, would not be a mere subjective delusion, but a fact of the world, occurring because of the individual's transformation, but not having the individual as a reason (hence its transpersonality).

The details are complicated, and much work must be done before we can determine just how cogent Nishitani's position is, but, at the very least, we have enough clarity to realize that, yet again, Nishitani's project implies embracing science, at least in as far as living the scientific worldview is a possible path toward the Great Death, without the experience of which the paradox of life, i.e., the fact that meaningful existence is born in a meaningless universe, cannot be grasped. But if we combine the conclusion of this prong of Nishitani's argument with the conclusion of the first prong, we reach an even stronger requirement

⁶³ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴ Nishitani, *The Awakening of Self in Buddhism*, 17.

⁶⁵ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 5.

for science: in as far as it is both a discovery of reality and, as technology, a transformation of it that demands of us the abandonment of our subjective, ego-laden point of view, science can also be an essential component of the process that is the meaningful transformation of reality which can begin occurring once we have learned the lesson of the Great Death. We conclude, therefore, by affirming that, for Nishitani, overcoming nihilism is not to be brought about by abandoning the scientific worldview and returning to our old, enchanted view or reality, but by embracing its lessons, following it as far as possible into the abyss where our subjective reasons crumble into nothing, and using science to both discover the possibility of yet other kinds of reasons, transpersonal and molded out of the clay of emptiness, and to make ourselves a new life within that very void. Nihilism, in other words, is not overcome by denying it, but by embracing it and taking it even farther than it was taken before, and all of this without letting go of the hand of science.

5 Conclusions

By now, we have considered three different approaches to the problem of nihilism: Brassier's, Jonas's, and Nishitani's. Despite their essential differences, all three share at least two essential points, both related to our attitude toward science. The first of these shared points is the belief that the scientific image of the world common in the West since at the very least the Enlightenment leads to the disenchantment of reality. This disenchantment, as we have discussed in the previous sections, is due to the fact that meanings, reasons, affective states, values, etc. (i.e. normative phenomena), play no role whatsoever when explaining what we take to be the facts of the world. The second is that the correct way of dealing with the crisis brought about by realizing we live in a disenchanted world is not to reject science, but to embrace it fully. What this act of embracing should consist of, and what its implications are, though, mark a point of stringent disagreement among the three. In this paper, we have built upon Jonas' and Nishitani's insights as part of an answer to Brassier's nihilism. More in detail, we have tried to make sense of the claim that there can be normative phenomena that are independent of human subjectivity. This should then provide us with, at the very least, the means to make sense of the ecological imperative that Brassier fails to provide us with, even if we do not offer a full-blown argumentation in its favor (which will have to wait until a future occasion). For now, our aim is to lay down the theoretical groundwork.

Before dealing with the ecological imperative, though, let us consider a few other possible problems with Brassier's arguments. Brassier's position implies the eventual abandonment of philosophy's use of the manifest image to account for phenomena (such as meaning and mental entities) that allegedly science cannot thoroughly explain, while both Jonas and Nishitani suggest a more nuanced approach. Tempting as Brassier's absolute acceptance of science might be, there are three different sets of issues that, without being knock-down arguments, at least suggest that we would do well to consider alternatives. The first such set of issues has to do with the very possibility of eliminativism: throughout Brassier's book, we get the impression that philosophy's common-sense understanding of meaning and normative phenomena will eventually have no role to play once cognitive science reaches a more advanced stage, when in fact radical eliminativism seems to play the role of a motivating *desideratum*, an ideal assumed by scientists as a challenge, a motivation for forcing themselves to forever examine further phenomena in search of the simplest possible explanation, instead of as an already-determined conclusion. Brassier's radical position and his endorsement of the manifest image's eventual death, though, require that eliminativism already be an established fact. Said otherwise, it is one thing to accept that science has managed to dislodge specific beliefs we held concerning the reality of our manifest image, and hence that no one such belief is free from doubt, and another to claim that the manifest image as a whole will end up disappearing. Consider a parallel case: every stone in a bag of *go* pieces might be black or white, and hence, if you grab one without looking, we might doubt whether it is black or white, but this is very different from doubting whether the whole set of stones is black or white. The argumentative requirements for reaching the second level of doubt are much more stringent than those required for reaching the first, and nothing similar, at least that we

know of, has been attempted for radical eliminativism. Let us first, if you will, have a complete explanation, in merely physical/chemical/neurobiological terms, of the history of, say, literature:⁶⁶ then, perhaps, we can begin to consider the arguments for radical eliminativism as a whole. This is not the same, though, as giving up on science: let us embrace the invitation to investigate particular facts from a scientific perspective, let us face up to the fear of discovering we are not what we thought we were and challenge our individual beliefs with the fires of the scientific image; whichever result we obtain, we will learn something new about both the world and ourselves. But let us not be over hasty and fall into the same dogmatism Brassier seems to find in many philosophers, though on the opposite side: when so many questions regarding our manifest image are still open to investigation, assuming without complete evidence that there is nothing there worth investigating is not ridding ourselves of illusions but foreclosing the possibility of certain kinds of knowledge. Moreover, Brassier does not have much to say about other kinds of philosophical approaches to the world, like aesthetics or ethics, and does not even consider the possibility that there are other non-Western human collectives that did not go through the Enlightenment and have other ways of relating to the natural world. He seems to embrace the idea that reason's own teleology eventually leads to an Enlightened state and an eventual nihilism, but this is specific to the history of Europe, and it seems severely Eurocentric to assume it as the only possible way of thinking about the relationship between humans and nature.

The second set of problems has to do with what seems to be an inconsistency in Brassier's approach to entities belonging to the manifest image: much of Brassier's criticism is directed to an anthropomorphic reading of the world, but he does not pause to consider the possibility that those entities, the reality of which he is so intent on denying, might exist independently of humans, and even in manners which do not require the existence of, for example, human subjectivity. To use Nishitani's terminology introduced earlier, Brassier is blind to the difference between the impersonal and the transpersonal, and assumes that, by denying that reasons exist as they do in human subjectivity in the world out there, he has proven that they cannot exist in any manner whatsoever, when, if Nishitani is correct, he would have determined at most that the world is not personal, but has not yet determined whether it is impersonal or transpersonal. To state it differently, Brassier seems to attribute exceedingly high requirements for a demonstration that the manifest image somehow captures part of reality, and when it fails to do so, does not even consider the possibility that his requirement might be unjustifiably high, and hence that the reality of the manifest image might pass the test of a perfectly acceptable set of less stringent requirements.

The third set of problems we find with Brassier is more a desired outcome than an argument: as we mentioned earlier, Brassier leaves us with no possible way of constructing an ethical system covering our relationship with nature, and hence leaves us with no possible way of facing philosophically the current environmental crisis our actions are bringing about. Of course, it might be the case that Brassier is correct, and that, like it or not, it is not up to philosophy to deal with environmentally damaging behaviors. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that such a conclusion would be undesirable, and hence that it is our duty to scrutinize the argument leading to it as carefully as possible while considering possible alternatives. Given the first set of problems at least suggests something might be wrong with Brassier's premises, and

⁶⁶ There is some ambiguity here: technically, reductivism would claim that the history of literature is a fact, but a fact that needs to be explained only in physical and/or chemical terms, while eliminativism would deny that there is any specific fact here requiring a precise explanation: there are a variety of facts, which might require widely differing explanations, but no singular explanation, given the unity of the phenomenon is the result of a mistaken theoretical construction, and does not carve nature at its joints. In other words, for a strict eliminativist, asking for a unique explanation for the history of literature would be like asking for a unique explanation for a supposedly unitary fact *X* composed of today's being Sunday, the distribution of currents in the Pacific Ocean, and my being passionately in love with Japanese curry rice: failure to find a unique explanation is not a negative point for the theory, but for whatever led us to the belief that *X* is a unitary fact. Though Brassier explicitly endorses eliminativism, his treatment of it leaves us in doubt as to whether he is actually an eliminativist, or more of a reductivist. Whichever is the case, though, he needs to offer either a singular explanation for literary history, or a set of explanations for the illusory unity that we call literary history, and none of these seem forthcoming.

that the second suggests there are alternatives he is not even considering, we believe this third desiderative mandate compels us to withhold our assent to his conclusions.

Jonas suggests, quite openly, that we can justify the inclusion in reality of a fair amount of the components of our manifest image as having an essential explanatory value when making sense of what we take to be the facts of the world by taking biology, instead of physics and/or chemistry, as our starting point. In other words, according to Jonas, there is no way in which we can make sense of biological facts if we attempt to reduce them to merely physical and/or chemical facts, the difference between the two sets of facts being that biological facts require that we assume as a given the presence in the world of compounds possessing the irreducible characteristic of life (i.e., organisms). That being given, or so Jonas claims, the next step would be to investigate how exactly life works, at which point we are supposed to discover that much of what belongs to our manifest image is not the result of human subjectivity, but is already an undeniable fact of living processes. The details of how this is meant to work were already discussed earlier; suffice it to say that, though we find something commendable in Jonas' insisting not only science as a solution to nihilism, but on a very specific scientific endeavor (biology), his reconstructions of meaning seems quite open to Brassier's criticism of the vitalist strategy and, more specifically, of accepting the implicit theoretical construction behind the manifest image with almost blind naivety (i.e., Jonas might well be accused of taking Sellars' "Myth of Jones" seriously). Jonas might be searching for a scientific foundation for our manifest image that does not fall into either reductivism or eliminativism, but he does so without even considering the possibility of transforming, much less challenging, its essential tenants. As we mentioned a few paragraphs ago, Brassier is, we believe, mistaken in confusing the openness to doubt of each individual component of the manifest image's explanation of reality with the openness to doubt of the whole image, but Jonas fails by going to the opposite extreme: attempting to save the whole of the manifest image, he seems not to consider even the possibility that we might have to reconsider who and what we are, or that morality needs not a mere "objective" foundation, but a critical reconsideration.

Given these two extremes, we believe Nishitani turns out to be a promising midpoint, though one that can learn a couple of lessons from the two extremes. As we discussed in the section dedicated to his ideas, Nishitani takes science to be the way out of nihilism, though not because there is a scientific approach to grounding our current manifest image of the world as heedful of our own, subjective reasons, but because through science we can come to understand that even a subjectless world is still a place of reasons, a reality that is, at least partly, in need of explanations in terms of meaning and affective states. This implies, of course, a radical revision of our current manifest image; more specifically, it involves both a reconceptualization of what (transpersonal) reasons are and a radical revision of our self-understanding as reason-guided beings *in as far as* we are subjects. Our subjectivity, the first-person access to reality so reviled by Brassier under the auspices of Churchland, is an undoubted victim of Nishitani's manner of embracing nihilism: much, if not all, of what we believed to depend on the strictly personal (i.e., understandable only in the first-person) has been proven by both science and, at least according to Nishitani, Buddhist philosophy to be the result of third-person phenomena, leaving subjectivity as little but a nomological dangler, to paraphrase Smart.⁶⁷

So far, Nishitani agrees with Brassier. Nevertheless, he also recognizes that there is a difference between the perception of an event in the world as reason-guided and the theoretical construction implicit in the manifest image which assumes that this can be explained only by postulating an internal consciousness *for which* things in the world are reasons. Given Nishitani is also willing to accept that it is evidence that should guide our conception of both the scientific image and the manifest image (in as far as we understand the manifest image to be the belief that the world outside us participates in the space of reasons), he takes our experience of a meaningful world, together with the scientific demonstration of the epiphenomenality of consciousness, to be proof that reasons are independent of consciousness. This is, of course, a conclusion which Nishitani recognizes as rather bewildering, though he does not dissolve the causes for discomfort: quite the opposite, trying to do so *a priori* would go against the realization of how theoretically inadequate our manifest image is. Instead, Nishitani feels satisfied that he has pinpointed

⁶⁷ Cf. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," 141–56.

what the real question would be (i.e., how can there be reasons without consciousness?), and prudently leaves us to find the answers in the world.

As we also mentioned before, it is science that will provide us with an answer, though not science quite as we know it so far. If Nishitani's argument is cogent, then Brassier's conception of science is as much a result of our theoretical mistakes as is our idea of the manifest image: after all, science takes it for granted that its object of study is what can be weighed and measured *because* we previously assumed that human subjectivity is, in some sense, ontologically distinct. If we realize reasons exist without us, in the world outside, then science itself is in need of revisions such that it can begin to explain Nishitani's transpersonal phenomena, instead of ignoring them. How this is to happen is, rather unfortunately, not something Nishitani stops to consider: despite his being an advocate of science, there is little of actual scientific detail in his proposal. This explains why Jonas plays an important part in our essay: misguided as he might have been, Jonas's admiration for biological explorations is an excellent example of how science can be done without falling into eliminativism.

In other words, by considering both of them together, we reach what we believe to be a viable approach to nihilism which has not received as much consideration as it deserves, an approach that rejects neither science nor the relevance of the space of reasons, an approach that realizes instead that both, at least as we understand them nowadays, are the result of the same mistaken theoretical separation, and is willing to reformulate them both in light of our experience of the world, and is thus open to discovering that there are values in Nature, perhaps values of Nature, such that they can impose upon humans an ecological imperative. Exactly how such an investigation would go is beyond the scope of this essay; we hope, instead, to have argued for viability of this middle road, unexplored not because it seems inherently difficult, but because of how often travelers dazed by either eliminativism or dualism pass it by unseen.

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