

James Tartaglia. *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality.* Bloomsbury Publishing 2015. 232 pp. \$114.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474247702); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781350017511).

Tartaglia is a disappointed physicalist (10) who regards the ordinary world and our subjective experience of it as misrepresentations of a transcendent, ‘inexplicable’ (145) and indescribable reality (176). The discovery of transcendence, traceable to Parmenides (71), means that no scientific conception of the world will ever tell the whole story. This is good news for some kinds of philosophy, but not for religion, which is a flight from the mundane world (62) born of irrational wish-fulfilment (172). As his title suggests, Tartaglia is committed to nihilism, i.e., the view that reality has no ‘overall purpose’ (21-6). Whereas philosophers like Heidegger and Schopenhauer offer secular versions of redemption in the face of meaninglessness (33), Tartaglia denies that nihilism poses a problem that needs resolving (41-60). This is because life is not ‘meaningless’ in the way your marriage might be joyless, but in the way that even interesting games are ultimately pointless. After some early chapters on the meaning of life, Tartaglia devotes his attention to showing how his ‘transcendent hypothesis’ illuminates controversies relating to time, universals, consciousness, and the nature of philosophy itself. The ‘synoptic vision’ (74) that emerges from his dense but original and probing discussion is a variety of Kantian idealism, shaped by the skepticism of Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and some strands of Chinese philosophy. Physicalism has been left behind, but Tartaglia wants us to know he has his feet firmly on the ground.

The argument is Kantian in both style and substance. Like Kant, Tartaglia believes that error results from applying our concepts where they have no purchase. For example, while much of social life can be understood as a rule-governed game organized around familiar purposes, we overreach in thinking that the cosmos and/or transcendent reality has purposes as well (14, 19, 23-7, 33, 42-9). Or again, whereas we can understand physical objects using concepts of space, time, and causation, we err in: seeking universals ‘out there’ when they are only your ‘conception made concrete’ (160); thinking of transcendent reality in temporal terms; or describing consciousness as causally dependent on physical events (112). We can come to understand why we make these errors (35), but we will go on making them just the same (137). Tartaglia’s discussion is subtle, and displays both historical sensitivity and attention to debates in recent literature, although his argument against overall purpose is slight (23-5): in the end, he merely sees no positive reason to say that overall purposes exist (6, 52). It is easier to reach this conclusion if we believe, as Tartaglia and other dualists tend to do, that overall purposes would have to transcend our world, persist without change, and determine rather than incline us to act. To be anything at all, on his view, overall purposes would have to be outside our world, since ‘the physical universe is not a context of meaning’ (48).

Tartaglia follows Kant in drawing a sharp distinction between the two poles of experience: (i) a world of objects for consciousness (‘objective world’); and (ii) consciousness itself as the subjective pole of self-awareness. Consciousness ‘transcends’ the objective world (85), in the sense that our experience is of, but not ‘part of’, that world (112); and yet, crucially, ‘experience and the objective world are both parts of an interpretation of transcendent reality’ (112). ‘Interpretation’ in this sense is not the act of a conscious subject but an obscure process by which transcendent reality generates both self and world. Tartaglia sometimes writes as if an interpretation could be an instance of knowledge, indeed, ‘self-knowledge of transcendent reality’ (107). Yet we know more about the objective world than about conscious experience (119), which is ‘little more than a *shadow* of objective thought’ (108), and in the end ‘experiential self-awareness is simply part of our misconception of experience’ (117). Tartaglia distances himself from Kant in prioritizing objectivity over subjec

tivity (119): objective thought, as distinct from self-conscious awareness, is defined as ‘Our everyday way of thinking about the nature of the world’ (83). It offers a ‘conception of reality—from which all our reasoning derives’ (191), and admits of no revision (102, 167, 180), since it ‘provides the foundation for all our understanding of the world, and cannot be put in doubt by a philosophical problem’ (100). Here are the echoes of Hume.

While protecting ‘everyday’ understanding is central to Tartaglia’s project, this commitment conflicts with his stated aim of making ‘maximal sense of the world using philosophical concepts’ (76). Reality may turn out to be inexplicable or indescribable, but we should try to make better sense of it than that. Unless objective thought is the *only* account available, we would need to be shown that it really does offer ‘by far the richest and most powerful interpretation of independent reality we have’ (119). Tartaglia sometimes suggests that no alternatives are available: objective thought is our *only* ‘substantive interpretation of reality: the communal one we become adept at when we learn language... Its historically embedded and hence practically irrevocable understanding places us in an objective world without experience’ (111). But it is not clear what it means to call an interpretation ‘historically embedded,’ or why he is so sure we could not dig up its roots. Couldn’t there be many different ‘everyday’ ways of seeing things? Not for Tartaglia, who agrees with P. F. Strawson that there is a culturally invariant metaphysics beneath superficial differences, and that philosophical ontology should not aim to revise it (151). But if objective thought is meant to be distinct from ‘the science we have built upon it’ (85), how can Tartaglia know *a priori* that panpsychism (197, 202), to take one example, gives a false account of the material world? Perhaps unconscious nature is ‘a pile of dirt’ (85), but a thesis about the nature of matter cannot be dismissed with a Wittgensteinian catchphrase about philosophy ‘leaving everything as it is’ (95).

Anyway, Tartaglia has himself done more than rearrange the furniture in our ontology. The world we live in is like a dream we can’t wake up from (106, 118), and ‘Human beings... are commitments of [the] misinterpretation’ of transcendence (163). The slogan he really lives by comes not from Wittgenstein but from Auden, who said that poetry should ‘make nothing happen’ (181). Tartaglia dislikes ‘bossy’ (172), moralizing philosophers who like to tell you how to live your life (16-7), and he is therefore anxious to show that his theory has no practical implications (75). There is something to this. After all, if nihilism is true, then like other facts it is morally neither good nor bad but simply true (6). On the other hand, if we are living under the rule of Genghis Khan, then a theory on which ‘murder is bad... because there is a well-informed social consensus to evaluate it as bad’ (6) will yield practical judgements that other available theories certainly would not.

Tartaglia’s discomfort with action-guiding philosophy is linked to the unusually strong emphasis he places on freedom. He thinks, for instance, that admitting overall purpose would trap us in a ‘game we could not stop playing’ (49). We must therefore deny that there is any ‘built-in or externally determined purpose’ (22) if we are to be *truly free*, where being free means ‘there is nothing in particular that we must do’ (21). Nihilism may be a neutral fact, but Tartaglia seems glad that it ‘leaves you perfectly free to pursue [overall goals] if that is what you think best; or what you desire; or what society expects of you; or simply for no reason’ (172). He gives examples (32, 43) of things you might do with or without reason (send an email, become famous, take the car to the garage, stay out of prison), but the best counsel of all comes from the Taoist Lin Chi: ‘Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything in particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down’ (44). This is good advice if you’re struggling with dementia or coping with life in prison, but not much use if you’re planning a democratic revolution.

Perhaps it should not surprise us to find boredom elevated to a philosophy of life in a book that makes so much of the ‘everyday’. Philosophy can do more. In some fine pages (78-81) on the

nature of philosophical inquiry, Tartaglia has himself pointed the way by inviting us to ‘reflect personally on why we ourselves are interested’ (81). But his desire to shield philosophy from hostile scientific critics is fulfilled at the cost of hiding it away in a corner where, at best, it transforms your attitude, and nothing more (7, 62, 183). He offers us the *status quo* and the freedom of indifference in a universe beyond our comprehension. Philosophy, by contrast, should demand ever deeper understanding, and expect it to make a difference in a real world where real people govern themselves by what really matters.

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