

Corneliu NEGRU*

Can be Nihilism defended?

(James Tartaglia, Tracy Llanera, *A Defence of Nihilism*, Routledge Focus on Philosophy Series, Routledge, New York, 2021)

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The latest book written by James Tartaglia and Tracey Llanera in 2020, *A Defence of Nihilism*, advances a radical project that aims to rehabilitate one of the most criticized phenomena of the Western culture. The authors argue that the idea of nihilism has been utilized disapprovingly by various thinkers and religious leaders who claim that it is an increasing cultural danger to truth, meaning, and morals. On the other hand, a fundamental claim of an atheist worldview is that people have the possibility of making their own life choices without having to ground the moral normativity in the belief in deities or the precepts of any religious texts. In this manner, the subject of nihilism brings forth what appears to be an irresolvable conflict between two opposite ontologies. As a first step to bridge the gap, the authors assume that a revised comprehension of nihilism could assist in eradicating miscomprehension among religious believers. Secondly, by clarifying how some sections of society perceive nihilism the authors advance arguments in favor of nihilism, thus bringing the discussion into a wider context.

One thought-provoking aspect of the book is its attempts to defend a position that seems almost unanimously opposed, both by philosophers and theologians. By defending the practice of nihilism, the authors attempt to create an argument for those believers, who oppose the idea of nihilism. The book written by James Tartaglia and Tracey Llanera can be understood as a counterpart to theological scholarship concerning proof supporting the gospel. They follow a similar methodology and apply it to nihilism instead. Thus, the book acts as a good mediator, serving as a defence of the unpopular nihilism. For instance, in the introductory part, *A Much Ado About Nothing*, the author admits the presence of beliefs concerning the entity identified as the “creator”, which has for a long time been the focus of humans, as: “The final goal, which makes our strivings and sufferings either worthwhile or wasted, maybe a preordained destiny, or it may be a

* Corneliu Negru, PhD Candidate, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași; email: corneliu_negru9@yahoo.com.

target we could hit or miss” (1). An essential aspect is the debate regarding humanity’s goals, which the authors of the book link to the usefulness of certain aspects of the nihilistic schools of thought even for cult leaders and opposers of Nihilism alike. *A Defence of Nihilism* also requires the reader to exercise his or her objectivity and proposes in this sense an imagination exercise as “We are just people going in and out of rooms, sending electronic messages, falling in love, eating apples, signing nuclear non-proliferation treaties, and so on” (1). This reminds one of the vast simultaneities of humanity and of the insignificance of the majority of our actions in the grand scheme of things, particularly at a cosmic level. As such there would be no reason not to give nihilism a chance, particularly as it can be suggested that there is no purpose in human life, not even happiness.

Another appealing aspect of the book written by James Tartaglia and Tracey Llanera is its brief history of the concept, starting from its very foundations, which lie as far back as the 4th Century AD. Augustine for instance held that the "continual activity of God was needed to prevent reality from collapsing into nothingness" (p. 13). Therefore, the authors attempt to show the necessity for the belief in a supernatural being as humans feel the profound need of some power to believe in as a means to deter reality from becoming nothingness. Another moment of great advancement was the French Revolution when people started relying on scientific facts rather than on beliefs and values. In this sense, thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau advanced the importance of the scientific argument for the purpose of answering important questions revolving around human life. Moreover, these thinkers encouraged life in harmony with the benevolent natural order rather than wait for God's paradise (p. 14). Greek thinkers Epicurus and Lucretius make a similar case as they argue that “there's no point wasting your time worshipping gods, since they don't bother themselves with us insignificant humans” (p. 14). This brief historical outlook of nihilistic conceptions throughout the ages raises a series of questions. For instance, why have peoples accepted Christianity, Islam, and other religions and neglected or refuted nihilism? What is the origin of the destructive belief, which has flourished ever since the Enlightenment, that scientific proof is to give more meaning to life? Such questions are naturally answered by the authors. Nihilism can be seen as an opposition attempt to immoral behavior made by the elites. Therefore, the practice and belief were depicted as evil (p. 24) by the past elites, who were immoral, and feared the spread of the concept.

One of the book's best aspects is that the authors attempt to clarify the widely believed inconsistencies concerning nihilism. This technique acts as a counterargument to the popular claims. For example, the first argument against nihilism usually evolves around its denial of the existence or the

presence of a supernatural being in human life. Consequently, there is no pre-given *cosmic meaning* that puts the human existence in order and orients it to a definite purpose. But this does not necessarily devalue life in itself. The nihilist outlook of life that sees nothing meaningful should not be confused with the pessimist perspective that life is horrible (p. 27). A good and happy life is possible and preferable within a nihilistic world view because it is this way the human being is freed from the traditional bounds. Therefore, when the optimistic nihilist views the world as void of meaning, this becomes a great opportunity to choose a proper one for oneself. Optimistic nihilism can thus be an exceedingly a powering belief, and in acknowledging it, an individual achieves the strength to amend their experience from negative to positive.

Lastly, the book succeeds in bringing a complicated philosophical topic to an expression accessible to a wider public without compromising the academic rigor. As such, it is also well grounded in the history of the topic with its rich reference list. All in all, the authors have effectively made use of these limited pages to fulfill their intentions of giving a fresh look on nihilism.

References

Tartaglia, James and Tracy Llanera. 2021, *A Defence of Nihilism*. New York. Routledge.