**A Secular Critique of Nihilism**

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**Introduction**

**Nihilism**

The Earth is so large that we could never hope to see everything there is to see, even when isolated to one single planet for the entirety of our lifetimes. There are multiple planets orbiting our star, and there are billions of stars in our galaxy; there are millions of galaxies in the observable universe; there are 2^10^122 dimensions of reality in Hilbert space. From that perspective, viewing our species as microbes clinging to a single speck of dust within a maelstrom of macro activity would massively overstatement our cosmological significance. With that in mind, how could anything we do actually matter? No single human activity will ever register on a galactic scale, and the galactic scale is nowhere near as large as it gets. Regardless of how we conduct ourselves in day to day life, we and all others will die, the sun will burn out, Earth will cease to house life, and the expansion of the universe will shred all matter into subatomic particles being carried away from each other by space itself faster than the speed of light.

This is the perspective that leads to nihilism; the notion that nothing we do can matter and that our existence has an inherent lack of meaning, making any course of action as valid or invalid as any other. Nihilism has rational appeal, and is often countered with arguments that rely on spiritual, religious, or optimistic assumptions. The type of individual prone to nihilism tends to be notably resistant to the aforementioned strategies, thus I intend to conduct a secular, rational, and anthropological analysis of nihilism - specifically, its objectivity, practicality, and compatibility with the human psyche.

**Disclaimers**

I won’t pretend I am unbiased in my critique of nihilism; I consider it a psychological cancer. I have found it to be the most disheartening and destructive perspective one can occupy. Throughout this paper you will likely notice that I evaluate my conclusions by checking whether the conclusion successfully opposes an aspect of nihilism, often continuing that particular train of thought until it is able to do so. This may seem intellectually dishonest in that I have a particular goal and seek rationalization to that predetermined end, but that is only partly the case. The reason I use the successful opposition of nihilism as the benchmark of a sufficiently clarified concept is due to my belief that we as organic beings are unable to actually believe nihilism, despite what our conscious mind might claim. There are a nearly incomprehensible number of predecessors in any livings things ancestral heritage, and all of those experiences have not only shaped the process of biological evolution, but psychological evolution as well. I am fully convinced that our neurological hardware is incompatible with the conceptual software that is nihilism. We may be able to toy with it from an academic perspective or even convince ourselves that we believe it, but our actions tell a very different story. I mention this not to convince you to share this belief, but so that I might be forthright about the motivation behind my arguments that follow.

**On the Topic of Meaning**

**Objective versus Subjective**

What could be objectively defined as meaningful? Given the paragraph prior, perhaps something that affects the observable universe on a galactic scale or greater? But what would something like that look like? Would it be a species capable of viewing the galaxy in the same perspective that we perceive a town or city; something to be meandered through, possibly establish residence in for sometime, but ultimately something that can be altered or abandoned if desired? This kind of heightened existence might seem far more meaningful to us, but a being of this nature would still be dwarfed by the sheer number of galaxies present in the observable universe, as well as the incomprehensible dimensions present in Hilbert Space. The same nihilistic rationale would apply to an entity that is literally as large as the Milky Way.

Perhaps, instead, some kind of subjective meaning could be found. This might seem like the end all be all answer to nihilism; meaning is subjective, and thus depends on the individual. This answer is insufficient when discussing such topics; rather than failing to address nihilism, this stance actually enables and affirms it. If a nihilist subjectively finds no meaning in their life, that would be a valid conclusion given that all meaning is subjective and can therefore take any form imaginable. I find this anti-argument particularly vexing and witness it most often employed by those attempting damage control in the wake of their exhausted rationale.

I propose a third definition; one that is subjective in that it is oriented using the individual experience (since we do operate as individuals, and exist through our experiences) but is also objectively universal across all known instances of a given subset, such as humans or life. Anything that satisfies these criteria would not be something that affects reality on a galactic scale or in any way that can be felt throughout all space and time, but would be an inescapable truth for any being within the selected demographic. Considering that we exist, and that we cannot ascend to a level that permeates all space and time (as far as we know, but I wouldn’t hold my breath), the only thing that could be defined as having objective meaning is something that all of us are incapable of avoiding. But what might that be? Is there anything that all life - or even just all humans - experience without exception?

One might claim that existence or life itself is universally experienced by all living things, but that doesn’t seem very helpful. We all know that life is something we have in common. Perhaps we could look at sentience then? Consciousness may or may not be exclusive to humans on Earth, but not all humans experience consciousness. Some humans die prematurely as fetuses at incredibly early stages of development, or suffer disorders that make higher levels of brain development unachievable. Consciousness might be overwhelmingly common, but it doesn’t satisfy the definition of universally experienced without exception. Next, you might suggest that passion or pleasure is universally experienced, and again, I must point out that exceptions to even that exist. Pleasure certainly need not exist for a human to live and die, and even though some individual’s optimism might seem unbreakable, I don’t think that pleasure satisfies this definition then. What could then, if anything?

**The only certainty in Life**

The existence of self cannot be denied whether conscious or not, and neither can the existence of pain. All living things, without exception, experience pain. Some may point to the jellyfish or a bacterium as exceptions to this rule, but I would argue that a slightly less complex definition of pain is appropriate in this instance. While some organisms may not have nervous systems complex enough to experience pain in the same manner that we do, those same organisms do still respond to harmful environmental stimuli. Therefore, pain (which will be defined as negative environmental stimuli to be avoided at the level of the organism from here forward) has subjectively undeniable meaning. No animal or person who is overwhelmed by pain, no matter how nihilistic or depressed or guilt-ridden, would prefer to continue experiencing that pain. That statement might seem pretty reasonable despite a few obvious exceptions, but let's explore those potential exceptions and see if they really do violate this hypothesis.

In response to my above statement, you might claim that there are masochists, and that they would rather stay in the pain they experience. Like most things, this example is a bit more complex than a simple rule without exceptions. What exactly are masochists doing when they derive pleasure from pain? They are experiencing a highly specific type and amount of pain in controlled setting and manner, the exact circumstances of which lead them to derive more pleasure than pain from the event. That’s the first key point here - the pleasure is greater than the pain. This phenomenon is also not exclusive to masochists. Many humans enjoy exercise (which is painful mind you) due to the endorphins that are released (which are a greater pleasure than the pain of exercise). It is also not uncommon for masochistic behaviors to manifest during sexual encounters, with mild examples such as biting and spanking being remarkably common. Lastly, masochists do not derive pleasure from all pain. If you were to walk up to a masochist on the street and shatter their kneecaps with a baseball bat (with the exception of masochists who long for this specific scenario), they would not be grateful and ecstatic with pleasure. Hijacking the pain center of the brain in order to derive greater pleasure from certain activities does not disprove that pain has negative meaning to all life; it merely demonstrates that pain and pleasure have a closely intertwined and complex relationship.

After masochists, you might claim that some people do willingly submit themselves to pain that they do not enjoy. Several examples might be self harm or someone who thinks they deserve punishment. This is a bit tougher to refute, but requires a deeper analysis first. What exactly is happening when someone self harms? An individual experiences a great amount of emotional or psychological pain, and seeks to alleviate that by inflicting physical pain upon themselves. The first thing to notice is that pain is not always physical; loneliness is a psychologically real type of pain, [citation needed].

In the case of the self harmer, they are drowning out their emotional and psychological pain with a lesser but more immediate physical pain. The greater pain is being avoided for a time, and it’s no wonder some people resort to it. Being continually bombarded by two highly complex types of pain is enough to drive anyone to drastic measures. But, in the end, the greater pain is being temporarily subdued, making this example one that fails to refute my initial statement. The strategy of self harm ends up causing a short term reduction in pain. A generally similar thing is happening with someone who feels they deserve punishment; the guilt they feel needs to be dealt with through atonement (which will help alleviate their guilt) or another kind of suffering (which is a lesser pain that helps to drown out the greater pain of guilt).

**The Meaning of Pain**

Pain is an unavoidable fact of existence, and pain is something that all creatures want to avoid. Is that enough to define the meaning of our existence? What should Meaning actually be, evidence thus far aside? Meaning is meant to orient you against a fixed point--often something desirable to pursue--such as pleasure. Pain seems to satisfy this definition, with a notable difference being that the orientation it offers gives you something to avoid rather than pursue. That seems like a reasonable enough definition for now. We have an anchor point, but what do we do with it? How does one effectively go about living so that they might experience as little pain as possible? The simplest answer to that question without accounting for any other variables would be to prevent your own continued existence. Is that really as far as rationality will take us? Is there something more to consider?

**From the Perspective of Pain**

**The Opposite of Pain**

If pain has undeniable negative meaning (it repels you, something to avoid), it stands to reason that there might be an opposite positive element. The best descriptor for the opposite of pain is pleasure by my estimation. Is pleasure experienced by all living things? It certainly can be experienced by all humans, although it might seem that some never do. It might not hold up as a singular concept that all humans subjectively experience, but it is certainly common enough to consider seriously. Even if pleasure doesn’t have the same undeniable footing that pain does, it is still reasonable to consider it as part of the equation due to its position in relation to pain. If pain is meant to be avoided, and pleasure is the opposite of pain, then it stands to reason that pursuing pleasure might well be the second highest priority of living organisms we can rationally verify.

**The Pitfalls of Pleasure**

What would it mean to pursue pleasure with the utmost seriousness? An individual taking this seriously might spend their life indulging in their particular variety of pleasure at every opportunity. A glutton might eat everything they desire without a second thought, or someone lustful might seduce everyone that catches their fancy. Lets assume that these individuals are totally successful in their endeavors, and see how it plays out. The glutton might end up morbidly obese and suffering from diabetes, making it a challenge just to get out of bed, take care of themselves, breathe, or even keep their heart beating. The promiscuous might find themselves in their thirties crippled by child support payments and coping with sexually transmitted diseases. These are extreme scenarios, not meant to dissuade anyone from the merits of a pleasurable lifestyle, but not completely unrealistic either. Both of these situations leave the individual in pain; perhaps more pain than if they had not pursued pleasure at all, which seems a bleak alternative.

If pain is terrible, and the opposite of pain leads to more pain, what other possible strategy could yield something less hellish? It seems we are worse off now than before we looked at pleasure. Perhaps these people decide to give into their desires fully, then take their own lives when the resulting pain begins to take effect. They might end up with a net positive in the end, and have years to enjoy themselves. This seems to make sense from a purely mathematical perspective, but surely there must be a better option to consider. Is it even possible to pursue pleasure in a way that avoids or even lessens the resulting pain?

**Mastering Pain and Pleasure**

Let’s assume these individuals want to live to see their sixties while still pursuing pleasure. How might they go about that? Lets look at the glutton first. Had they decided to find meaning in life by indulging in every delicious morsel they please while recognizing the potential pitfalls of doing so, they might have put themselves on a strict exercise routine. If that still wasn’t enough to ward off obesity, perhaps reducing the overall intake would be the missing piece. One can still enjoy the pleasure of cuisine in moderation, and the extended lifespan of the individual almost certainly allows for a greater portion of delicious food to be consumed throughout their life. Approaching a type of pleasure with foresight about future pain, then making responsible sacrifices to avoid that pain, would allow for the pursuit of pleasure in a way that won’t lead to hell. We might be on to something here, so let’s examine the other example.

The same strategy would help the promiscuous, who might decide to use protection against pregnancy and diseases. They might even go so far as being exceedingly clear about their lifestyle and relationship expectations with potential partners before engaging in sexual activity. These strategies might reduce the amount of pleasure being experienced with each encounter or reduce the pool of potential partners, but it staves off the eventual barrage of pain. That’s the concept of sacrifice; you forgo some minor pleasure or take on some minor pain today in order to enjoy some greater pleasure or avoid some greater pain tomorrow. Effectively employing the concept of sacrifice towards appropriate goals, that is the core of responsibility.

One might conclude that pain has negative meaning, nonexistence has neutral meaning, pleasure has positive meaning, and that the best way to experience the most positive meaning over the longest stretch of time would be to pursue pleasure in a responsible manner. This seems like a good structure so far. While I don’t necessarily crave their approval, it would seem that most world religions generally agree, meaning that there is likely some useful truth to it. You might say that the pursuit of pleasure is not common among religions, but the concept of being sorted into places of ultimate pain and ultimate pleasure in the afterlife make it clear that the pursuit of sustainable pleasure is one of the most powerful motivational factors for humankind. The relationship between pain, pleasure, and responsibility is not trivial at all, and its prominence in religions shows it is something humans have been paying attention to and trying to understand for a very long time.

**The Value of Life**

**The Timeline of Your Universe**

Even with this new set of rationally founded guidelines, is life even worth living? We are guaranteed to experience pain, and our pursuit of pleasure can lead to a world of pain if we aren’t careful. We only get to experience the good in life if we put in a lot of effort, and effort is a form of pain in and of itself. Is life a net negative experience? It wouldn’t be hard to make that case. Rather than try to refute that potential argument (which I suspect I might be able to do, but only in subjective terms that can be easily dismissed), I’d like to make some observations about the subjective history of the universe.

You are the only thing that certainly matters (or even certainly exists) from your perspective. Your pain, your pleasure, your existence, are the only things you are unable to deny about reality. There is no objective perspective you can adopt in any real capacity, there is only the subjective. There was an infinite period of time prior to your birth where you did not exist. If we were to graph out this experience with Pleasure as the positive vertical axis, Pain as the negative vertical axis, and Time as the horizontal axis flowing from left to right, all of time prior to your birth would be a flat line. After you die (assuming you do not believe in an afterlife, in which case you have plenty of reason to abandon nihilism anyways), there will be another infinitely long period of time where you do not exist. You experience nothing when you do not exist, making that part of the graph perfectly flat as well. The *only* section of the timeline in the history and future of the universe from your perspective (which is the only thing that you can prove exists mind you) that is not perfectly flat is the period when you are alive. Perhaps life is a net negative, but perhaps not; that varies from individual to individual. However, allow me to present an alternate way of viewing this schema.

**Addressing the Anomaly (You)**

With that perspective, one could easily argue that the only exception to the rule is the portion of the universe that has the most meaning. In that case, your life is the most important thing to ever happen throughout time. This perspective is helpful to the understanding and application of our model of meaning. However, one might argue that the exception (your life) is the only portion of the graph out of place, making existence itself a type of abomination. This latter argument fails to hold up when one considers that the graph extends infinitely in both directions, making any finite deviation from a 0 sum infinitely minuscule. If the grand scheme of things is the preferred perspective and net 0 is a desirable value, then the content of your experiences have no no functional bearing on the total, even if you live for a million years. You can’t cause a deviation from zero across infinity no matter what you do.

My point here is that you can’t sabotage this graph even if you do nothing but experience misery your whole life; it is infinite. A large scale perspective is indifferent to the contents of your life, and a small scale perspective treats your life as the most important events across all of time. Being born released you from an eternal slumber of perfect order and balance to wander a world filled with unpredictability and chaos for a short time. For some, the experience is too great; too unbearable. But this is all we get, and we are guaranteed a return to an infinite void of neutrality at the end. To take some artistic and romantic liberties, I might even go so far as to say that we are exploring something zany and messy on a tether, but only for a moment. In many ways--perhaps all the important ways--your life is the only thing in the universe that you can prove has deviating significance, even if it does contain more pain than pleasure.

**Expanding the Model**

**A Broader Definition of Pain**

Assuming that everything about the model thus far holds up under your scrutiny, lets take a closer look at what could be considered pain for our purposes. The word “pain” seems to be rather constrained and implies physical injuries or irritants, so it may be appropriate to broaden the categories in question here. We as humans are rather complex creatures, being able to experience all kinds of pain that are not physical. We can suffer from loneliness, anxiety, depression, and a myriad of other debilitating psychological conditions that can have little or nothing to do with physical harm. One could look at these phenomena and lump them together into a category known as “negative emotion”, but the inclusion of physical pain makes the term “negative experiences” seem more appropriate.

Initially, it may not seem appropriate to categorize things like loneliness and physical injury in kind. However, a study published in 2013 concluded that “lonelier participants experienced more concurrent pain, depression, and fatigue and larger increases in symptom cluster levels from one year to the next than less lonely participants” (Jaremka et al., 2013). Loneliness may or may not be a direct source of pain, but it is at the very least correlated with heightened levels of physical pain and negative emotion, if not direct amplifying the existing phenomena. Loneliness is widely considered to be a negative emotional phenomena, and the relationship observed with physical and emotional pain make its inclusion as a negative experience more than justified.

An interesting thing to note is that the conventional definition of negative emotion relies on intuitions we innately possess as a species allowing us to sort between states of being that are desirable and undesirable. While it comes as no surprise, there is virtually no dispute regarding whether anxiety and depression are enjoyable experiences. This indicates a deeply rooted and nearly identical biological orientation of what life ought to be like, which is something totally and completely inescapable as a living organism. As much as we might academically think about the bleakness of reality, our cells and core psychological programming are not so easily modified.

**A Broader Definition of Pleasure**

**Definitions of Responsibility  
Ethics in Self Interest**

**Conclusion**

**The Flaws of Nihilism**

**My Biases**

**References**

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It might be easy to claim that nihilism is way to cognitively numb emotional pain, and perhaps that is the case more often than not. However, that is too easy to refute, so a more potent argument needs to be structured before a competent counter argument can be constructed. The first conclusion of nihilism is that nothing has meaning. This may be true on a galactic scale, but perhaps not. Regardless, we do not exist on a galactic scale. We are living creatures isolated to a single planet, and anything conclusions about how ought to conduct ourselves must keep that context in mind. Even focusing just on Earth, there are billions of people, and one can’t help but wonder what relevance any specific individual has in that landscape. Again, we don’t exist on a planetary scale; we exist on an individual scale. What are the implications of looking for meaning on an individual scale? One might claim that things you decide to imbue meaning into have meaning for you. It’s not a ridiculous claim, but it’s a bit too vague and simplistic to be the best conclusion.

What if there is something that always has meaning across every single human individual regardless of circumstance; surely claiming that has meaning would be academically sound. Things like community, friendship, relationships, parenthood, entertainment, and pleasure come to mind. Most of those are common, but not universal across human experience. Some people resent all of those things. Pleasure is a decent answer since everyone feels and enjoys pleasure, but the types of things that people derive pleasure from are widely varied, making it a similar answer to “meaning is what you make it to be”.

**Behavior with the orientation of Pain and Pleasure**

**Avoiding Pain**

If we accept that pain ought to be avoided and nothing else, how might that manifest in individual conduct? Well, the logical conclusion with only that variable accounted for would be to end the possibility of experiencing any type of pain ever again by preventing your continued existence. If pain is to be avoided at all costs, surely ceasing to exist and succumbing to a brutally neutral void would be a valid strategy. But like most things in life, there are rarely simple answers and singular factors to consider. Pain is not the only anchor point that orients our existence; it is one of a pair. Pain is the negative catastrophe to prevent, pleasure is the positive nirvana to achieve.

**Pursuing Pleasure**

If pain is to be avoided and pleasure is the opposite of pain, then pursuing pleasure would seem a perfectly valid approach to life. Perhaps an individual decides to pursue sexual gratification, arguably the purest type of pleasure. That individual might have a great many partners over the course of a decade, having their every desire met and satisfied. However, perhaps that individual has contracted diseases along the way, and now is destined to die early and slowly to a brutal infection that has no cure. That individual is trapped in a world of pain. Is that an acceptable trade off for years of pleasure? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

If the above scenario were to be modified so that the individual might avoid the resulting pain while still pursuing pleasure, what might that look like? Well, the individual might be more selective in their partners and use appropriate protection. Both of these strategies will decrease the pleasure in the moment, but reduce the pain of the future. That is the basis of sacrifice.

**Sacrifice**

The oldest stories known the humankind are built around sacrifice. Rather than conduct a religious commentary (which will likely fall flat to those who are prone to nihilism anyways), I’d like to focus on what sacrifice actually means. Sacrifice involves forgoing some pleasure or taking on some pain in the present in order to receive greater pleasure or avoid greater pain in the future.