

Nihilism

8.1 We do not exist

We have considered many sorts of things that we might be: material things and immaterial things, persisting things and momentary things, simple things and composite things. But there is one possibility that we haven't yet considered: there is no sort of thing that we are. We don't exist. Our personal pronouns refer to nothing, there being nothing there for them to refer to. Nothing thinks our thoughts. Nothing wrote these words, and nothing is now reading them. Call this view nihilism.

Nihilism is not the view that you and I are not people, or not "selves", or that there is some other important kind that we thought we belonged to but don't. It is the view that we are nothing. It does not, however, say that there are no people at all: it doesn't rule out the existence of non-human people, such as gods or angels. Like the other answers to our question, it is a view about ourselves, and not about people generally.

Nihilism is more or less the same as what Strawson called the "no-ownership doctrine of the self", that "it is only a linguistic illusion that one ascribes one's states of consciousness [to anything] at all, that there is any proper subject of these apparent ascriptions, that states of consciousness belong to, or are states of, anything" (1959: 94). I say "more or less" because nihilism does not say that the belief that we ascribe states of consciousness to something is the result of a linguistic illusion--though this might be a plausible thing for a nihilist to say.

The view that we do not exist might seem so far detached from reality that only a madman could believe it. Or it may appear self-refuting: mustn't anyone who denies her own existence be mistaken? We will deal with these charges presently. Let us first ask what can be said in support of nihilism.

Nihilism may appeal to those dissatisfied with the other answers to our question. Suppose we take there to be things of a certain description, but despite our best efforts we cannot discover an account of their nature that looks even approximately right. This might of course be our fault: our best efforts might not be up to the task. But another possibility is that there is no such nature to be found, for there were never any such things in the first place. The longer our efforts to come up with an account of the nature of these things continue without success, the more tempting it will be to suspect that their existence is some sort of illusion.

Nihilism has the advantage of solving at a stroke all metaphysical problems about personal identity. It solves them by depriving them of their subject matter, in the way that atheism solves all metaphysical problems about the nature of God.

It may face other problems, of course. For instance, it might seem to face our old friend the

thinking-animal problem. If there are human animals, and they think our thoughts, how could we not exist? Surely the existence of a being that thinks my thoughts is sufficient for me to exist. Unless nihilists can argue that human animals cannot think, they will have to deny that there are any such things. But if there are no human organisms, there are no organisms of any other sort. And whatever rules out the existence of organisms is likely to rule out the existence of all ordinary things: houses, bicycles, planets, the lot. That's not a very appealing picture.

Now once someone has denied the existence of people, herself included, it may seem odd for her to worry that she must also deny the existence of trees and houses. If we don't exist, how can it matter whether there are trees? But some philosophers seem more willing to doubt their own existence than that of other concrete objects. In any case, nihilists can turn this apparent problem to their advantage. They can accept that there are no trees or houses. They will probably want to deny the existence of any composite objects at all--any objects with parts other than themselves. Just as denying the existence of people does away with all problems about the metaphysical nature of people, denying the existence of composite objects does away with all problems about the metaphysical nature of composite objects: the replacement puzzle, the amputation puzzle, the paradox of increase, the problem of the ship of Theseus, the sorites paradox, and so on do not arise. Nihilism is probably best seen as a corollary of a more general metaphysical program that would do away with all the ordinary furniture of the earth and the troubles that go with it.

Nihilism is not my own invention. Though not many philosophers have explicitly denied their own existence, a surprising number have held views that seem to imply it.

Parmenides said that the world was thoroughly homogeneous: despite appearances to the contrary (which are admittedly rather hard to explain away), the world never differs from one time or place to another. And what things, in a thoroughly homogeneous world, could you or I be?

Spinoza thought that there was just one substance--God or Nature. It is not homogeneous as Parmenides thought, but exhibits a wide variety of local variation: it has different modes or states in different places. For instance, it exhibits a certain mode of extension and a certain mode of thought here: it is locally anthropomorphic and thinking about philosophy. Many commentators say that on Spinoza's view you and I and other ordinary objects are modes, or collections of modes. That would be a version of the bundle view. But we can just as easily read Spinoza as a nihilist, for it is doubtful whether any anthropomorphic state of Nature is a human being, or whether any episode of thinking thinks.

The early Wittgenstein said in the Tractatus, "There is no thinking, representing subject" (5.631; for a similar remark see Carnap 1967: 261). That certainly seems to imply that we don't exist: surely we are thinking, representing subjects if we are anything. We could hardly be unthinking things (see §6.1).

Russell once wrote,

all the ordinary objects of daily life are apparently complex entities: such things as tables and chairs, loaves and fishes, persons and principalities and powers....For my part, I do not believe in complex entities of this kind....Suppose you made any statement about Piccadilly, such as: 'Piccadilly is a pleasant street.' If you analyse a statement of that sort correctly, I believe you will find that the fact corresponding to your statement does not contain any constituent corresponding to the word 'Piccadilly'. (1918: 50; see also 1921: 17-18)

Russell's view (in 1918 anyway) was that the world consists entirely of momentary property-instances, such as "little patches of colour or sounds". We can collect these things into classes, such as the class of all Socrates' experiences, but classes, Russell thought, are "logical fictions" and don't really exist. Strictly speaking, then, there are many experiences, but no beings that have them. (A few pages later Russell jokes, "the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it" (53).) And although Hume is often said to have thought that we are bundles of perceptions, his remarks are also consistent with a view like Russell's, that there are perceptions but no perceivers.

Unger is the most notable recent philosopher to have endorsed nihilism, though he has since changed his mind.¹ It appears to be a recurrent theme in Buddhist philosophy, and it appeals to students of a certain temperament. The idea that we do not exist undeniably has a certain magnetism.

Nihilism is hard to come to grips with. This chapter has given me more trouble than any other, and I am still not sure what to say about the view in the end. But I think I know what to say to begin with.

8.2 Is nihilism mad?

According to nihilism there are no human people, just as there are no dragons. This may sound like an absurd denial of the obvious. We believe that there are no dragons because if there were it is likely that someone would have seen one, or some fossilized remains, or some other good evidence of dragons, and no one has. Our experience tells against the existence of dragons. But our experience doesn't tell against the existence of human people. On the contrary: it tells us that there vast numbers of them. No sane person can walk through London

¹Unger 1979a, 1979b; his recantation is in 1990. See also Stone 1988 and 2005, Horgan 1993, Giles 1997: ch. 5, and Rosen and Dorr 2002. Though Parfit sometimes sounds like a nihilist, he says explicitly that it is not his view (1984: 341).

and believe that it is uninhabited. Yet according to nihilism there are no more people in London than there are dragons.

Nihilism is of course intended to be a sober metaphysical hypothesis and not an insane delusion, so it had better not be the view that people are mythical, like dragons. What is the difference, then, between the nihilist's denial that there are people and the ordinary denial that there are dragons? Well, when philosophers deny the existence of things we thought we could observe or otherwise know about, they do not deny that there appear to be such things. In fact they typically concede that those of our ordinary beliefs and statements that appear to entail the existence of such things are often in some sense correct--in contrast to the belief in the existence of dragons. But they claim that what makes these beliefs and statements correct is something not involving the existence of those things. So when the ordinary non-philosopher, in the course of discussing the sizes of European cities, asserts that there are around six million people in London, the nihilist will accept that there is something right about this claim. We can take it for ordinary purposes to be true. It describes some real, unified state of affairs.² Since that state of affairs does not strictly contain any people, the ordinary statement may describe it in a way that is loose or misleading or perhaps even wrong. But it isn't completely wrong, as it would be to say that there are six million dragons in London. Something about the state of London--something having to do only with things other than people--makes it appropriate or perhaps even true to describe it by saying, "There are six million people there."

It is common enough for philosophers to deny the existence of things whose existence we appear to assert in non-philosophical contexts. Suppose I say that there is an acute shortage of food in Zimbabwe.³ This appears to assert the existence of a shortage. But we might wonder whether there really are such things as shortages. A shortage doesn't seem to be a sort of thing. It is, rather, a lack or an absence of a thing; and we may doubt whether the furniture of the earth includes not only things but also absences of things. Now if there are no such entities as absences then there is no such entity as the current shortage of food in Zimbabwe. But it ought not to follow from this metaphysical claim that food is plentiful there. There is clearly something going on in Zimbabwe that journalists and aid workers describe as a shortage of food: many people in Zimbabwe have less food than they need.

More seriously, some philosophers propose a sparse ontology of material objects. We saw in §3.2 how denying the existence of clay statues and lumps of clay can help solve the clay-modelling puzzle, and we saw in §7.4 how denying the existence of such things as undetached hand complements can help solve the paradox of increase. But surely there is something right in the statement that there is a large copper statue on an island in New York Harbor. How can that be if there are no statues? Well, there is a large region of space in New York Harbor, shaped roughly like a robed woman holding aloft a torch only hollow, filled with a vast number

²Here I follow van Inwagen 1990a: 100-102.

³I owe this example to Jonathan Bennett.

of copper atoms. They are in a solid state, and are strongly bonded to one another but not to the atoms surrounding them, apart from those that they rest on. They were put there by a sculptor with the intention of creating a work of art. And so on. None of this entails--in any obvious way, at least--that there is a statue.

In each of these cases there is an appearance of inconsistency: what the intellectuals say in the seminar room appears to conflict with what the rest of us, and for that matter the intellectuals themselves, say in the street. If I say both, "There is a shortage of food in Zimbabwe," and, "There are no such things as shortages," I seem on the face of it to be contradicting myself. If I am to stand by both statements I shall need to explain away this appearance of conflict. Nihilists and sparse ontologists are in a similar situation: they need to say how our ordinary statements and beliefs could be true or at least somehow appropriate even though there are no people or shortages or statues. They cannot simply assert that despite appearances their claims are consistent with our ordinary beliefs and then stop. They must say how they can be consistent. At any rate their inability to do so will be reason to doubt whether they have a coherent position. (Another example: philosophers who deny the existence of abstract objects will need to say something about such statements as, "There are prime numbers between 10 and 20," which, though undoubtedly in some sense correct, appear to entail the existence of numbers, which are abstract. They will need to explain what makes this statement correct in a way that is consistent with their ontology.) We will return to this point in §8.5.

8.3 Is nihilism self-refuting?

Nihilists are philosophers who deny their own existence. But no one can deny her own existence and be right. Anyone who denies that she herself exists is bound to be mistaken, for you have to exist in order to deny anything. We owe this point to Descartes. He imagined a powerful demon bent on deceiving him; yet even an all-powerful demon, he reasoned, could not deceive him by causing him to believe wrongly that he exists, for the simple reason that you can't deceive someone who isn't there to be deceived. If there is no such being as Descartes--never was and never will be--then there is nothing that anyone could possibly do to deceive him. Or rather, in order to deceive Descartes we should first have to bring him into being; only then could we practice our deceptive arts upon him. Because I believe that I exist, and I couldn't do so unless I did exist, it therefore follows that I exist, and nihilism is false. Nihilism looks self-refuting.

The claim that I do not exist is not self-contradictory. I might not have existed: what I say

when I utter the words 'I do not exist' could easily have been true. It would have been true if my parents had never met. It seems, though, that the claim that one does not exist could never truly be asserted in the first person. For if it is asserted, then someone or something asserts it, and it refers to that being. That being is therefore asserting that it itself does not exist, which can only be false. So the claim that one does not exist will be false whenever it is asserted in the first person. It is like the claim that one is not making an assertion: although it could be true, it could never truly be asserted. It is, as philosophers of language say, pragmatically inconsistent: the conditions necessary for it to be asserted ensure that it is false. Contrariwise, the claim that one exists can never falsely be asserted. And the first-person belief that one exists could never falsely be held. So our quick refutation of nihilism is this: I believe that I exist, and that belief can never falsely be held; therefore it is true--I exist--and nihilism is false.

This sort of argument is often criticized. The critics concede that anyone who believes that he exists must be right, but question whether anyone believes anything. If I believe that I exist, then that belief will be true; but what justifies the claim that I believe something? That is already to assume too much: it presupposes that there is such a thing as I. The argument that nihilism is self-refuting therefore assumes the point at issue. For the argument to give us a reason to believe that we exist, the objection goes, it would have to begin with a premise that can be established without illicitly assuming that anyone exists. So no useful argument for the claim that I exist can start with the claim that I think. It would have to start, rather, with the claim that there is thinking, or that there is an occurrence of the belief that I exist, or the like. But from these claims it doesn't follow, or at least doesn't follow in any obvious way, that I or anyone else exists. Without further argument we cannot infer that anyone thinks, and therefore that anyone exists, from the premise that there is thinking. Even if Descartes' demon could not get me to believe falsely that I exist, for all we know he could cause an occurrence of the thought I exist to occur on an occasion when it is false--that is, when it is not a thought of anyone or anything. Likewise, it may be that anyone who asserts that he does not exist is bound to be mistaken; but from the fact that such an assertion is made it doesn't follow that anyone makes it. So for all we know the assertion that one exists might be made on an occasion when it is false. The pragmatic inconsistency of denying one's own existence does not therefore refute nihilism.

I suppose the critics are right that there is no obvious valid inference from the occurrence of thinking to there being someone or something that thinks. Nihilism is not self-refuting, or at least not obviously so. There is no quick and easy way to defeat it. To argue that we exist we are going to need something more substantial. We are going to need a metaphysical argument. Can we find one?

8.4 Unity and simplicity

Let us suppose that human thinking goes on. This is something that even Descartes' critics grant; they simply doubt whether this thinking has to be done by anything. But can there be thought without a thinker? Is it possible for there to be mental states and activities--beliefs, wishes, dreams, and so on--and yet nothing that is a subject of those states or events? If not, then the existence of human thought entails that nihilism is false. (If it is possible, on the other hand, it would not follow that nihilism is true, though it might cast some doubt on our existence.)

One argument for the claim that thought requires a thinker is that mental states and events "owe their identity as particulars to the identity of the person whose states they are" (Strawson 1959: 97). Here is one thing this might mean. Suppose there is a particular pain P1 and a particular pain P2 simultaneous with P1 and qualitatively just like it. P1 and P2 are either the same pain or two different pains. But what could make it the case that they were two and not one, or vice versa? The only possible answer, the argument says, is that they are one if they have the same subject and two if they have different subjects (Carruthers 1986: 57-58). No being could have two qualitatively indistinguishable pains at once, and two beings could never share a single pain. So the number of pains is determined at least in part by the number of suffering beings. And there is a number of pains. It follows that there could not be a pain that was not the pain of some sentient being. And what goes for pains goes for mental states and events generally. It follows that all thinking requires a thinker, and nihilism is false.

I have two worries about this argument. First, if there are sentient beings, I see nothing to prevent a single sentient being--one that is mentally disunified--from having two indistinguishable pains at once (Olson 2003). If this is possible, then the claim that every mental state must have a subject would not answer the question of what determines whether particular mental states are identical or distinct, and would therefore get no support from the argument.⁴ Second, it is not clear whether the question of what makes P1 and P2 two (if they are two) and not one must have any interesting answer. Why must something make them two--apart from the bare fact that they are two?

Another argument begins with the claim that the very idea of a state that was not a state of anything is incoherent. There couldn't be a dent without a dented object. There couldn't be a knot that wasn't a knot in a rope or a string or the like. Think of the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, that disappears and leaves behind its grin--no head, no lips, just the grin. This is a metaphysical joke: you can't have a grin without anything grinning. For the same reason, there cannot be a pain or a dream that was not a state of some suffering or dreaming being. (Roald Dahl's story about a giant who catches dreams and keeps them in jars until he can put them into

⁴Someone might appeal to the psychological individuation principle (§6.3) to argue that this sort of disunity is impossible. But we accept that principle we needn't bother with Strawson's argument, for it implies all by itself that nihilism is false--assuming, anyway, that there are mental states.

the heads of sleeping children is another joke.)

Sensible though this sounds, however, there is a weakness in it. You could deny that thoughts require thinkers without endorsing an Alice in Wonderland metaphysic by supposing that many unthinking things combine or cooperate to produce thought. Thinking might be like putting on a play. Although someone could put on a play all by herself, it is more often a joint production: many actors, directors, stage hands, and others each do something less than performing the play, and those lesser activities together make it the case that the play is performed. To take another example, the cables of a suspension bridge cooperate to hold up the deck of the bridge, for although no single cable supports the bridge by itself, they hold it up jointly or collectively. This shows that things can “cooperate” to get something done without intending to do so.

It seems possible for many people to put on a play together without thereby composing anything that performs the play individually. The fact that a dozen people cooperate to put on a play does not entail the existence of a disconnected concrete object made up of those dozen people. At any rate it would be a contentious metaphysical claim to suppose that it does. Though there may be reasons for believing in the existence of something the twelve people compose, the fact that they put on a play together does not appear to be one of them.

It seems, then, that at least some tasks can be performed without any one thing performing them, if several objects, by individually doing other things, cooperate to perform the task jointly. This is not the Alice in Wonderland view that things can get done or that properties can be exemplified all by themselves. For all the Alice in Wonderland argument says, then, thinking might be a cooperative activity like putting on a play. Perhaps many unthinking things--atoms, say--could each do something less than thinking in such a way that these lesser contributions add up to an act of thinking, but without making up any subject of the thinking they jointly produce. In that case there might be thought without a thinker.

But is thinking like putting on a play or holding up a bridge? Could it be a mere cooperative activity--something that many things can cooperate to bring about without anything doing it individually? Some say no. Van Inwagen, for instance, says that things working together to produce thinking are “forced, by the very nature of the task set them,” to produce thinking by composing something that thinks individually (1990a: 118). This is not the case, he says, for putting on a play or holding up a bridge. If he is right, it is impossible for things to cooperate to produce thought without there being a subject of that thought. There could not be thought without a thinker. Nihilism is incompatible with the existence of thinking, and therefore false. But van Inwagen doesn't say why thinking could not be a mere cooperative activity. He simply finds it obvious. Can we do any better? Can we say what it is about thinking that requires things that do it jointly to compose (or at least be parts of) something that does it individually?

Suppose that an act or state of thinking--a mental event or state--really could be produced

jointly by a lot of non-thinkers. Then we might expect that act of thinking to be made up of parts: as many parts as there are unthinking beings cooperating to produce it. The reason why many people can put on a play jointly is that this task can be parcelled out into smaller sub-tasks that individuals can perform singly: uttering certain words, making certain gestures, and so on. It is the job of the play's producer to assign these tasks to individual people. Likewise, the task of holding up a bridge can be broken down into sub-tasks that individual cables can perform: each cable has to exert enough upward force so that the sum of those forces equals the weight of the bridge. So if atoms, say, produced thought collectively, we should expect every such act or state of thought to be divisible into a vast number of atom-sized "sub-thoughts"--acts or states that are not themselves thoughts--each of which is produced individually by a single atom. Of course, we have only the vaguest idea of what these atomic roles would be--that is, what each atom would have to do in order for the sum of their activities to amount to an act of thinking. But that, the nihilist will say, is only because we know so much less about how thought is produced than we do about how plays are performed or bridges held up, and not because it is impossible for atoms to produce thought collectively.

Someone might suggest that atoms could jointly produce a simple, monolithic act of thought, not composed of parts distributed over those atoms. Thought might be something "new" or "emergent" that is in no way reducible to anything non-psychological.⁵ Given how little we know about the metaphysics of thinking, it is hard to rule this out with any confidence. That said, I shouldn't expect any nihilist to accept it. Nihilism is a paradigmatically "reductionist" claim: it says that we can account for thinking beings--or the appearance of there being thinking beings--in terms of smaller and simpler things. By contrast, the idea that acts of thought, despite being carried out jointly by a lot of unthinking atoms, are in fact simple, is strongly anti-reductionist. It says that we cannot account for acts of thought in terms of smaller and simpler things. There may be no formal inconsistency in saying that we can account for thinking beings, but not acts of thought, in terms of smaller and simpler things; but it would be a strange combination of views. In any case, it would be important news if the only way of defending nihilism were to accept that acts of thought must be simple.

Let us suppose, then, that an act of thought produced collectively by atoms that don't think individually would have to be made up of non-thoughts, each produced individually by a single atom. But are acts of thought made up of non-thoughts? You might think not. For one thing, it is hard to imagine what the parts of an act of thinking could be. Some acts of thinking may have other acts of thinking as parts: for instance, thinking that it's cold and windy might be made up of thinking that it's cold and thinking that it's windy. But what could be the parts of an act of thinking that it's cold? The very idea of a part of that thought sounds like a muddle--like the idea of the back side of a rainbow. If acts of thinking do not have parts, but they would have to have parts in order for non-thinkers to produce them jointly, then non-thinkers cannot

⁵I owe this suggestion to Dean Zimmerman.

cooperate to produce thought without there being a subject of that thought. Or at any rate thought without a thinker would be an Alice in Wonderland phenomenon like a grin without a cat.

Even if there were such things as sub-thoughts, some argue that it would remain a mystery how they could come together to compose a whole thought unless they were all states of one subject.⁶ If Blott thinks that it's cold and Clott thinks that it's windy, the parts of the compound thought that it's cold and windy will exist, but they won't make up that compound thought unless Blott is Clott. Things can be parts of a single act of thinking only if they are unified in the right way; their mere existence doesn't suffice for them to compose a thought. And the only way for parts of thoughts to be unified in such a way as to make up a whole thought, it seems, is for them to be states of the same being--in which case the thought has got a subject after all. For there to be an act of thought without a thinking subject, that act would have to be decomposable into sub-thoughts performed by non-thinkers; but those sub-thoughts would compose a genuine thought only if they were states of some one thinking being. So again there cannot be thought without a thinker.

There are two different arguments here. Both start from the premise that a thought with no subject, produced cooperatively by many unthinking things, would have to be made up of sub-thoughts--parts that aren't themselves thoughts. The first argument goes on to say that acts of thought are not composed of sub-thoughts, and therefore cannot be produced cooperatively. The only way to avoid the Alice in Wonderland view that thoughts simply occur, like clouds, is to say that they must have a subject. Call this the simplicity-of-thought argument. The second says that even if acts of thought did have such parts, they could compose a whole thought only by being states of a single being--that is, only by having the same subject. Again, thought requires a subject. Call this the unity-of-thought argument.

These arguments would entail that every act of thought must have a thinker, ruling out nihilism. But they appear to entail more than that: they seem to entail that thinking beings must be mereologically simple. If they entail that we exist, they also entail that we have no parts. Suppose a thinking thing--something that thinks in the strictest sense, not merely something that thinks by virtue of having a part that thinks--were composed of unthinking parts. Then our two arguments suggest that its thoughts would be composed of sub-thoughts distributed over its parts (or at least some of its parts). Now as we stated them, the arguments said only that a thought with no subject produced cooperatively by many unthinking things would have to be composed of sub-thoughts. But the idea behind this premise was that any task that many

⁶We find this argument in Kant 1929: A351-2; see also Brentano 1987: 290-297, Hasker 1999: 123-135. Kant rejects it, but only after conceding that it is "no mere sophistical play, contrived by a dogmatist to impart to his assertions a superficial plausibility, but an inference which appears to withstand even the keenest scrutiny and the most scrupulously exact investigation."

beings could carry out jointly must be decomposable into sub-tasks, like roles in a play. And this seems to be so whether or not those beings thereby compose something that performs the task individually. Even if it were impossible for a dozen people to put on a play together without thereby composing a disconnected object that performs the play individually, mustn't the performance be composed of parts, each of which can be performed by an individual person? So it seems that any act of thinking produced by the cooperative activities of many atoms, whether or not those atoms thereby compose a subject of that thinking, must be made up of sub-thoughts performed individually by atoms.

And both arguments say that no act of thought could be composed of sub-thoughts performed individually by non-thinkers. According to the simplicity argument there are no sub-thoughts at all. It follows that thought could be produced only by a simple thinker. According to the unity argument, sub-thoughts would have to be states of the same thing, and not of different things, else they wouldn't make up a thought. Suppose there are many unthinking atoms, each in a different state; and suppose those states are intrinsically suited to compose a certain sort of thought: they would compose a thought if they were suitably unified. Still, they can't compose a thought because they are all states of different objects. They can no more add up to a thought than Blott's thought that it's cold and Clott's thought that it's windy can add up to the thought that it's cold and windy (supposing that Blott and Clott are two).

You might suppose that if certain atoms compose something, then their individual states are states of the same thing, namely the thing they compose. So how does the unity argument imply that every thought must have a simple thinker, and never a composite one? Well, suppose that Blott, who thinks that it's cold, and Clott, who thinks that it's windy, compose some larger, disconnected object. (Many philosophers believe that any objects whatever, including Blott and Clott, compose something.) That clearly would not suffice for an occurrence of the thought that it's cold and windy. Perhaps the thing Blott and Clott compose would believe that it's cold and also believe that it's windy, but it would not believe that it's cold and windy. So the mere fact that states of different individuals that are intrinsically suited to compose a thought are all states of something or other does not suffice for them to compose a thought. What does suffice? It seems that states could compose a thought only if they are all states of the same simple being. You and I, who obviously think, must therefore be simple.

Because the simplicity and unity arguments have such revolutionary (or perhaps I ought to say reactionary) implications, we ought to be on our guard. And grounds for doubt are not hard to find. Start with the main premise of the simplicity argument: that no act or state of thought could be composed of non-thoughts. Though this has some attraction, it is hardly compelling, and I shouldn't know how to begin to argue for it. I admit that I have no idea what the parts of a thought might be, except in the special case where they are themselves thoughts. But that is because the nature of thought is obscure to me, and not because I can see by the clear

light of reason that acts of thought must be mereologically simple.

What about the main premise of the unity argument, that states or activities of different objects could never add up to a whole thought? To my mind this is nothing more than an intriguing speculation. You may well ask: How could states of different things add up to a whole thought? What does it take for different states or activities to compose a state or act of thought? That is, how do states or activities that are intrinsically suited to compose a mental activity have to relate to one another (and to their surroundings, if that is relevant) in order for them to compose a mental state or activity? We might call this the mental composition question. It is analogous to asking how atoms of the sort that are intrinsically suited to compose an organism--atoms of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and so on, in the right proportions--have to relate to one another and to their surroundings in order for them to compose an organism. If mental states and events can have parts, then the mental composition question must presumably have an answer. The unity-of-thought argument answers it by saying that states intrinsically suited to compose a thought actually do compose a thought if and only if they are states of the same simple object.

I have no alternative answer to the mental composition question. (If I had to guess, I would say that states compose a thought by virtue of their causal relations to one another and to their surroundings, along the lines of §6.3. But that is little more than a vague gesture.) If accepting that states of different objects could never compose a thought would help us to answer the mental composition question, that would be a reason to accept that principle. But it isn't clear whether it does help. For all I know, states intrinsically suited to compose a thought might be states of a single object--even a mereologically simple object--without composing a thought. Why couldn't a being--even a simple being, if a simple being could think at all--believe that it's cold and believe that it's windy at the same time without believing that it's cold and windy? That is, why couldn't a simple being have a disunified mental life? Being states of a simple object doesn't appear to suffice for appropriate states to add up to a thought. And if it's not sufficient, why suppose that it's necessary? If we had an account of what sufficed for states of a simple object to make up a thought, I should expect it to suffice also for states of different parts of a compound object to make up a thought. And if unthinking things can cooperate to produce thought, it is not obvious what could prevent them from doing so without composing any subject of that thought.

These arguments for the claim that thought requires a thinker are disappointing. Thinking may not seem like the sort of thing that could be carried out jointly by many non-thinkers without having a subject; but for all we have been able to show this is little more than a hunch. So we have failed to find any good argument for our existence. But it hardly follows that this that we don't exist, or that the belief in our own existence is unwarranted. You can't argue for everything. There are some things, surely, that it is reasonable to believe without an argument.

And that we exist might be as good a candidate as any for being one of them.

8.5 Paraphrase: The mentalistic strategy

Let us return now to the topic of §8.2. Nihilism entails that the true story of the world--the story that is strictly true and not misleading--is not a story about people, for according to nihilism there are no people. If nihilism is true it ought to be possible, in principle at least, to tell that story. That is, it ought to be possible to state all the facts without mentioning or otherwise implying the existence of people. But although none of these facts involve people, some of them must make certain ordinary statements that appear to be about people in some way right, and others just plain wrong. Sensible nihilists will agree that in most contexts it would be a mistake to say that London is uninhabited. There is something right about the claim that there are many people in London. We can take it for ordinary purposes to be true. Even if nihilism is true, there is some state of affairs--one not involving people--that this ordinary statement describes, albeit in an unperspicuous and misleading way, and which makes that statement true, or if not true then at least somehow right. The nihilist's "impersonal" story of the world must include this state of affairs.

If this is right, then every ordinary statement that appears to be about people will be true, or at least somehow right, if and only if a certain state of affairs not involving people obtains. And it ought to be possible to describe that "impersonal" state of affairs in a way that is strictly true and perspicuous and not misleading: in terms that do not even appear to entail the existence of people. That is, it should be possible, in principle if not in practice, to paraphrase any ordinary statement about people into a statement that nihilists can accept without qualification. The paraphrase ought to capture the truth behind the original statement. It is unlikely to be strictly synonymous with the original--it can't be if the paraphrase is true and the original is false--but it must be close enough to capture what is right or wrong about the original. (This is a difference between the nihilistic paraphrase strategy and the project of "logical construction" mentioned in §6.1: a logical construction of person talk out of vocabulary of some other sort would count as a nihilistic paraphrase, but a nihilistic paraphrase needn't count as a logical construction.) Of course, nihilists are not obliged to use these paraphrases. (They are likely to be forbiddingly complex.) Once they have satisfied themselves and their critics that such ordinary sayings as 'Martina has three brothers' can be made correct in ordinary circumstances by facts about non-people and are thus in a sense compatible with nihilism, they can continue to use them like anyone else.

Earlier I said that ordinary statements about food shortages could be true even if strictly speaking there are no such entities as shortages: they might be made true by facts about the distribution of people and food. For instance, when the papers say that there is a shortage of

food in Zimbabwe, this might be true if and only if many people in Zimbabwe have less food than they need. This paraphrase does not appear to imply the existence of shortages. (More elaborate examples can be found in Lewis and Lewis 1970 and van Inwagen 1990: §11.) Nihilists will want to do for ourselves, so to speak, what we seem to be able to do for shortages. But what might stand to ourselves as people and food stand to food shortages?

Two thoughts come to mind. The first is a “mentalistic strategy”. Maybe there could be particular mental states and events (human ones) even if nihilism is true and they are not the states of anything. The truth behind the statement that I am now hungry would then have something to do with the existence of a certain hunger sensation. The second thought, an “atomistic” strategy, will be the subject of the next section.

Now we cannot simply paraphrase 'I am now hungry' as 'there is now a hunger sensation', for the mere existence of a hunger sensation cannot make it right to say that I am hungry, but at most that someone or something is. Likewise, we cannot paraphrase 'I am not now hungry' as 'there is not now a hunger sensation' (Williams 1978: 97). Nor does the existence of a hunger sensation and a thirst sensation make it right to say that someone is both hungry and thirsty, but at most that someone is hungry and someone is thirsty. Plainly the nihilist needs some device for collecting together those mental states and events that we correctly but loosely describe as having the same subject. She needs to say that the ordinary statement 'someone is hungry and thirsty' is correct if and only if there is a hunger sensation and a thirst sensation and those sensations relate to one another in a certain way, a way that it is somehow apt, even if perhaps strictly false or misleading, to describe as their being states of the same person. But this has to be a relation that mental states can stand in without being states of the same being.

At this point we might return to the idea that mental states come in bundles (§6.3): when mental states are related in a certain way--in the way non-nihilists say they are related when they are the mental states of a thinking being--they compose a bundle. We might be able to characterize this relation in causal terms: the mental states that non-nihilists ascribe to a single subject, but not those they ascribe to different subjects, are disposed to interact in certain characteristic ways that often lead to action. This will of course help the nihilist only if these bundles are never themselves subjects of the mental states that compose them, for if the bundles think, then we exist, contrary to nihilism. The idea must be, rather, that ordinary statements that appear to ascribe mental properties to people are made right or wrong by facts about bundles of subjectless mental states. Then the statement that I am hungry would be correct if and only if a certain bundle--this one, the one producing this utterance--includes a hunger sensation.

Bundles would help in other cases too. The ordinary statement that there are six million people in London would seem to be right if and only if there are six million bundles of thoughts of the appropriate human sort there. (I say “of the appropriate human sort” to exclude non-human bundles: feline and angelic bundles, for instance. When we speak of the number of

people in London we are not taking a stand on the number of cats or angels there.) It is wrong to say that there are people on the moon because that barren world contains no such bundles. Bundles of thoughts would be convenient for the nihilist because they would be good substitutes, so to speak, for thinking beings.

One difficulty for the mentalistic strategy is statements ascribing non-mental properties to people: that Brita is riding a bicycle, say. The truth behind this statement may have something to do with a certain bundle of mental states, but it clearly involves more. It may be tempting to say that this something more has to do with a certain human body or organism. But nihilists will not want to accept the existence of organisms, for they would be thinkers.

More seriously, if there are no people, there are unlikely to be any bundles of thoughts either. If bundled thoughts--mental states that relate to one another in a way that gives the appearance of their being states of a single thinking being--compose bundles, then we should expect the physical particles that now appear to compose you to compose something as well. Why should bundled thoughts compose something while physical particles arranged in human form compose nothing? Why should there be things made up of mental states but no things made up of quarks and electrons? And if "your" particles--those particles now arranged in human form and resting on your chair--compose something, the thing they compose will be a good candidate for being you: something that thinks your thoughts and performs your actions. And if anything thinks your thoughts and performs your actions, surely you do, in which case you exist and nihilism is false.

It looks, then, as if anyone who denies that we exist will want to deny that any things ever compose anything. Nothing is ever a part of anything. There are no composite objects. Everything is mereologically simple. And presumably this is no accident: there couldn't be composite objects. Let us call this claim compositional nihilism to distinguish it from nihilism about ourselves. If it is true, then statements apparently about ourselves will have to be made correct or incorrect by facts about mereological simples.

Compositional nihilism is an interesting thesis raising worries of its own. One is that no one knows for certain whether there are any simples. Perhaps even the smallest known particles are composed of smaller parts, which are themselves composed of yet smaller parts, and so on, right down to infinity. That would be incompatible with compositional nihilism. Whatever is not simple is by definition composite; so if there were neither simples nor composites, there would not be anything at all, and we know that that isn't true. If nihilism about ourselves entails compositional nihilism, then nihilism too is committed to there being simples.

Another problem is that mental states and events themselves might be composite. This would not be at all surprising if each particular mental state or event were a physical state or event in the brain--that is, if some sort of token-identity theory were true. Any physical event

that was a candidate for being a mental event would be vastly complex, involving the activities of hundreds of millions of cells. If it makes sense to speak of the parts of states or events, we should expect states and events of this sort to have parts. In that case compositional nihilism entails that there are no mental states or events; at best there could be simple non-mental states and events that it is somehow apt to describe as if they composed thoughts. The nihilist could not then simply replace talk of bundles of thoughts with talk of bundled thoughts.

The nonexistence of mental goings-on would be troublesome for another reason too. Recall Descartes' argument for his own existence: I think I exist, and I couldn't think anything unless I existed; therefore I must exist. Descartes' critics say that it is assuming too much to suppose that I think; I am entitled to say only that thinking occurs. It looks now as if even that assumes too much. If I didn't exist, I shouldn't be thinking; so insofar as my existence is doubtful, so is the claim that I think. In the same way it seems that if I didn't exist there would be no acts or states of thinking either; so insofar as my existence is doubtful, so is the existence of thinking. But is it really coherent to doubt the existence of thinking? Even if there could be an occurrence of the thought I exist on an occasion when it is false because no one thinks it, not even an omnipotent deceiver could cause an occurrence of the thought thinking is going on to occur on an occasion when it is false because there is no thinking. The thought thinking is going on could never be false. And there are clearly occurrences of the thought thinking is going on. It is occurring right here. At any rate it appears that thinking is going on; and isn't this appearance itself an instance of thinking?

If this is right, nihilists will have to account for the appearance of thinking in non-mental terms. This is a challenge that eliminative materialists also face. They too deny that there is any thinking, though not on metaphysical grounds but on the grounds that "folk psychology"--the theory according to which we can explain people's actions in terms of their mental properties--has been shown empirically to be false. Even if this is so, the challenge goes, there still appear to be mental goings-on, and this appearance looks like something mental itself. Unless nihilists and eliminative materialists can deny that the appearance of there being mental states is itself mental, their views will be self-refuting. We will consider a suggestion for doing this in the next section.

8.6 Paraphrase: The atomistic strategy

Though nihilists deny that we exist, they will nonetheless want to say that there is something right about many ordinary statements that appear to imply the existence of people, such as the statement that more people live in London than in Berlin. We considered an attempt to state this something right in terms of bundles of mental states, but abandoned it on the grounds that if mental states compose bundles, there are likely to be things that compose human

thinkers as well: whatever prevents your atoms (if we may so speak) from composing a thinking being is likely to prevent your mental states from composing bundles as well. To be safe, nihilists will probably want to deny that any things ever compose anything: they will want to be compositional nihilists. But compositional nihilism threatens to imply not only that there are no thinking beings, but that there are no states or acts of thought either. Is there a way of telling the whole story of the world without implying the existence of either thinkers or thinking?

Perhaps we could tell it in terms of simple particles. Some simple particles--quarks and electrons, according to current physics--have certain properties and relate to one another and to other simple particles in such a way that they would compose a person if they composed anything. They are the ones that non-nihilists take to compose people, and the ones that would compose people if nihilism were false. They are the particles that collectively produce a certain sort of thought--the sort that (to lapse once more into person-talk) distinguishes people from non-people. At any rate it is appropriate for ordinary purposes to describe their activities as making up thought. We might abbreviate all this by saying that such particles are "arranged personwise". The proposal, then, is to replace talk of people with simple talk of particles arranged personwise. This would be an atomistic strategy for paraphrasing people talk, as opposed to the mentalistic strategy we began with.⁷

The general idea is something like this. We replace quantification over people by quantification over particles arranged personwise: for instance, if an ordinary statement says 'Someone...', we replace it by 'Some particles arranged personwise...'. Thus, we can paraphrase the ordinary statement that there are two people in the lift as 'there are particles arranged personwise, and some other particles arranged personwise, different from the first (let us ignore conjoined twins, who share particles), and they are all enclosed within the particles arranged liftwise'. I leave it as an exercise for the reader to paraphrase the ordinary statement that there are six million people in London in this fashion. We replace singular reference to particular people by plural reference to particular particles: we replace 'Socrates', for instance, by 'the Socrates-particles': those particles that, according to non-nihilists, compose Socrates at the appropriate time. It will not be easy to say, in nihilistic terms, what makes it the case that a particle is one of the "Socrates-particles"; but this might be a mere technical detail rather than a principled obstacle in the way of the atomistic strategy. (This would mean that our personal pronouns and proper names do refer to something, despite our initial characterization of nihilism as the view that they refer to nothing. They don't refer in the singular to people, but rather in the plural to many particles.) And we replace the predicates attached to these expressions--terms like 'is hungry' and 'is taller than'--by plural collective predicates true of particles.

⁷Rosen and Dorr (2002) endorse this strategy. Merricks (2001b: 2-8) adopts it for inanimate objects, but not for ourselves.

A plural collective predicate is one that applies (or fails to apply) to a number of things jointly, rather than to each individually: ‘surrounded the house’, ‘are putting on a play’, ‘outnumber’, and ‘are arranged personwise’ are examples. To say that Tom, Dick, and Harry are eating lunch is just to say that Tom is eating lunch, and Dick is eating lunch, and Harry is eating lunch: ‘are eating lunch’ is a plural distributive predicate, not a collective one. But to say that Tom, Dick, and Harry surrounded the house is not to say that Tom surrounded the house, and so did Dick, and so did Harry. They eat lunch individually, but they surround the house jointly: each individually does something less than surrounding the house, and these activities add up to their surrounding the house collectively. (Many predicates are ambiguous as between collective and distributive: to say that Tom, Dick, and Harry are carrying a piano is ordinarily to say that they are carrying a piano together, but it could mean that each is carrying a piano by himself.)

Now consider the statement that someone is hungry. We cannot paraphrase this as ‘some particles are hungry’, because ‘are hungry’ is a distributive rather than a collective predicate. That is, to say that x, y, and z are hungry is to say that x is hungry, y is hungry, and z is hungry: ‘are hungry’ is like ‘are eating lunch’, and not like ‘surrounded the house’ or ‘are carrying a piano’. Because no particle is hungry, it follows that if there are only particles and nothing composed of particles, then nothing is hungry. Nihilists might try to argue that despite appearances the ordinary predicate ‘are hungry’ is a collective predicate, not a distributive one. But there may be no need for them to say this, for we might be able to invent a collective “hunger” predicate that applies jointly to a lot of particles just in the case that it is correct for ordinary purposes to describe them as composing a being that is hungry. The predicate might be ‘are collectively hungry’--though it is important to keep in mind that being collectively hungry is not a way of being hungry. So what makes it right for ordinary purposes to say that someone (or something) is hungry would be that some particles are collectively hungry. What does that mean? Well, maybe particles are collectively hungry if and only if they are of such a nature and relate to one another and to other particles in such a way that they would compose something hungry (in the ordinary sense of the word) if they composed anything.

None of this appears to require the existence of either thinking beings or composite objects. In particular, it doesn’t appear to require the existence of mental states or events. What about the appearance that there are mental states? Isn’t that itself a mental state? The atomistic strategy suggests that it is correct in ordinary circumstances to say that thinking appears to someone to go on if and only if there are particles arranged in such a way that they would compose someone to whom it appeared that thinking was going on if they composed anything.

This has an important implication: if the atomistic strategy can be made to work, it seems that nihilism is not committed to the claim that there can be thought without a thinker. In §8.4 we considered arguments to the effect that particular mental states could not be produced

cooperatively by many unthinking beings, or that they would have to be individuated by their subjects, and hence could not exist unless they were states of some thinking being. But now it looks as if those arguments are powerless against nihilism, for even if they succeed on their own terms they are perfectly compatible with it. Nihilists can agree that there can't be thoughts without thinkers: they will simply deny that there are thoughts. And they will hope to account for what is right about talk that appears to be about thoughts in terms of simple particles alone.

The statement that someone is hungry is easy to paraphrase. Or at least it is easy given the crucial assumption that there could be such a thing as the made-up predicate 'are collectively hungry', true of particles if and only if it is correct for ordinary purposes describe them as composing something hungry--and given that we could understand that predicate. Other cases, however, will be more challenging. Take statements about identity over time. Suppose we say that Mina is taller than she was a year ago. It is no good paraphrasing this as 'there are certain particles arranged personwise now (let us ignore the problem of how to specify which ones), and there were certain particles arranged personwise a year ago, and the first particles are now arranged in such a way that their collective lengthwise extent is greater than the lengthwise extent the other particles had a year ago'. This can at most make it correct to say that Mina is now taller than someone was a year ago. Not just any particles that were arranged personwise a year ago are relevant to statements about Mina's height then, but only those that, according to those who reject nihilism, composed Mina then. The nihilist will need to find a time-spanning relation holding among particles that stands in, as it were, for the identity of a person over time--something vaguely analogous to the personal temporal counterpart relation mentioned in §5.8.

Or consider the modal statement that anyone in Fargo might have been in Hong Kong. We cannot paraphrase this as 'Any particles arranged personwise in Fargo might have been arranged personwise in Hong Kong', for that is at once too strong and too weak. It is too strong because, as non-nihilists would say, an inhabitant of Fargo could have been in Hong Kong without being composed of the very particles that actually compose him. It is too weak because the particles non-nihilists say compose an inhabitant of Fargo could be arranged personwise in Hong Kong without making it correct to say that that very person is in Hong Kong. The problem is more obvious if we consider the statement that anyone might have been made up of different atoms from the ones that actually make her up--something whose obvious rightness the nihilist ought to be able to account for.

For another challenge, try paraphrasing statements with complex quantificational structure, such as 'Some people are taller than all their friends' or 'Anyone who is taller than all his friends is envied by his neighbors' in terms of simple particles. (Difficulties of this sort affect even the "shortage" example of §8.2: although we can paraphrase 'There is a shortage of food in Zimbabwe' easily enough as 'Many people in Zimbabwe have less food than they need', paraphrasing 'Food shortages are more frequent than they used to be' is far more difficult.)

For all I know, someone with enough patience and ingenuity could come up with atomistic paraphrases of statements like these. The paraphrases might be cumbersome, but I cannot see any insuperable obstacle in the way of producing them.⁸ If atomistic paraphrase is possible, it would answer the charge that nihilism is an absurd denial of the obvious. Note, however, that this does nothing to make nihilism plausible--any more than the existence of temporal counterpart theory makes the stage view plausible.

8.7 What it would mean if we did not exist

Let us turn now to a different sort of question. What would it mean if we did not exist? What practical consequences would it have? How would it affect our lives if we came to believe it and acted accordingly? How bad would it be if it were true? It might not matter much, practically speaking, whether we are organisms or temporal parts of organisms or bundles of thoughts or what have you. That question is primarily of theoretical interest. But it might be of more than merely theoretical interest whether we exist at all. Here are three thoughts about what the practical consequences of nihilism might be.

One is that it would be unbearably depressing if nihilism were true. To be a nihilist is to believe that all the people you ever loved or respected have never existed. It is hard to imagine a more crushing thought.

Compare nihilism with solipsism. A solipsist is someone who believes that there are no people other than herself: what appear to be other people are either unthinking brutes (organisms with no mental properties) or mere persistent hallucinations on her part. For most of us this would be an utterly appalling prospect. If nothing else, it would be impossible for a solipsist to love or admire anyone other than herself: you cannot sustain a feeling of love towards someone if you believe that there has never been any such person. At any rate a solipsist could not love or admire anyone else except by believing something incompatible with

⁸Compare Argle's increasingly contrived attempts to paraphrase statements about holes in terms of material objects in Lewis and Lewis 1970. It is noteworthy that van Inwagen, who denies the existence of all composite material objects save organisms, claims that it is impossible to paraphrase statements about such things as artefacts in terms that mention only simple particles. His proposed paraphrases appeal to events he calls "histories of maintenance" (1990a: §13). I suspect that nihilists will be no happier with histories of maintenance than they will be with bundles of thoughts. Merricks (2001b: chh. 4-5; see also Olson 2002c and Dorr 2003) argues that the atomistic strategy must fail because the truth of statements about conscious beings does not supervene on facts about particles. A discussion of this complex and important argument would require a chapter (at least) of its own, however. Elder (2004: especially ch. 3) objects to atomistic paraphrases on grounds that are not very clear to me.

solipsism. A consistent solipsist could not love anyone but herself. Now the nihilist goes the solipsist one better and says that she too does not exist. So a consistent nihilist could not even love herself. That seems to make nihilism even worse than solipsism. Or maybe not quite as bad: it might be better for me not to exist than to be the only thinking being in the universe. Either way, we can only hope that nihilism isn't true.

You might wonder how nihilism could be depressing if it implies that there is no one to be depressed. Well, I might want something to be the case even if no one would be in any way unhappy if it weren't the case: for instance, I might find it a good thing that the universe contains sentient life. And although it may be that if nihilism were true we couldn't be depressed, it could make us depressed if we falsely believed it to be true. The question is not whether we ought to be depressed if nihilism were true, but whether we ought to find the prospect that nihilism is true depressing.

The second thought is that our not existing might have its bright side. Perhaps accepting it would make us less selfish. At any rate it would mean that self-interest was not a rational motive for action. How could it be, if there is no "self" to have any interests? If there are no such beings as myself or others, there can be no reason to put my interests above those of others. Nihilism might imply that all interests are of equal value. We might find that liberating.

This hopeful thought is threatened, however, by a third thought, namely that nihilism might deprive us of any reason for acting at all. Why do we act? What reason have we for doing anything? Ordinarily we act for the good of someone or something. We don't always succeed in benefitting anyone or anything, but that is our aim. Let us understand the word 'good' or 'benefit' broadly: to make someone happier than she would otherwise be, or to satisfy a desire or preference of hers, or to act in her interests, or to prevent a violation of her rights is to do her good or to benefit her. But if there are no people or other sentient beings, there are no beings that our actions could benefit. Think of solipsism again. According to solipsism the only reason for me to act is for my own benefit. At any rate I am the only one who can benefit from any action. What could be the point of acting for someone else's benefit if there is no one else, and never could be? For a solipsist to act in the interests of others would be like an atheist acting to propitiate the gods. But if nihilism is true then I don't exist either. There is no one at all. In that case there is no reason to act for anyone's benefit. So a nihilist would have to conclude that there is no point in doing anything.

Now it probably isn't true that the only possible reason for acting is to benefit someone. Suppose I could do something that would prevent the existence of beings who would have utterly miserable lives. That might be a reason for acting that did not aim at benefitting anyone. (It couldn't benefit those who are thereby spared a miserable life, for if I act there will be no such beings. It might, of course, benefit those who would have to care for these wretched beings; but it needn't.) This sort of thing could not be a reason for acting if nihilism is true,

however. If nihilism is true, I cannot prevent the existence of beings who would have utterly miserable lives, for there will be no such beings no matter what I do: I could no more prevent there from being certain miserable beings than I can prevent there from being objects that move faster than light. The only reasons a consistent nihilist could have for acting would be reasons that did not even require the possibility that anyone or anything could be benefitted or harmed. And it is not clear whether there could be such reasons.

If any of this is right, nihilism would have enormous practical consequences. Just how a nihilist ought to think or act may be hard to say, but few of us could accept nihilism and carry on living as before--or at least not without doing something that presupposes that nihilism is false.

But is any of it right? Take the complaint that nihilism would be as depressing as solipsism, on account of its implication that none of the people we care about ever existed. Someone might object to this comparison. Sensible nihilists, as we have seen, will accept that there are particles arranged personwise other than their own. Solipsists will disagree: they believe that the only particles arranged personwise, and the only thoughts, are their own. (At least that's what I suppose a solipsist would believe. I have never had the misfortune to meet a real solipsist. But that is what I should believe if I were a solipsist.) The difference between solipsism and nihilism is not just the difference between there being one person and there being none. Nihilism does not merely take solipsism and subtract something. It has something that solipsism lacks, namely particles other than one's own that collectively think and are collectively conscious.

This may leave us wondering whether nihilism would deprive us of anything valuable at all. My particles--the ones producing these words--can still collectively love or admire other particles arranged personwise, and those other particles can collectively relate to my particles in the same way. Nihilism is consistent with the occurrence of births and deaths, memories and dreams, conversations, relationships, and everything else that we care about--or at least with the occurrence of activities at the level of particles that it is appropriate for ordinary purposes to describe as births, deaths, relationships, and so on. Once our beliefs and statements are reformulated in terms compatible with nihilism, we might find (to put it crudely) that everything we thought was true of people is true of particles arranged personwise. All that is missing are thinking subjects. And why should anyone but a metaphysician care whether there are thinking subjects? Nothing of any practical importance is lost. Ordinary life can go on as before.

Let us have an example. Imagine that one of my strongest desires is to be married. As it happens, I believe that I am married. I believe therefore that I have what I want. But should I have what I want if nihilism were true? It may seem not. The desire to be married is the desire to be married to someone, and nihilism implies that there is no one for me to be married to. If nihilism would frustrate one of my strongest desires, it would matter a great deal to me whether

it was true.

On the other hand, nihilism allows that my particles are “collectively married” to certain other particles. Would that give me what I want? Well, what would it be for particles to be collectively married to other particles? The collective-marriage relation is not the familiar relation of marriage that beings enter into pairwise: a particle cannot be married to another particle. The atomistic paraphrase strategy of the previous section suggests something like this: for the x s to be collectively married to the y s is for the x s and the y s to be of such a nature and to relate to one another and to their surroundings in such a way that, if the x s composed something and the y s composed something, the x s would compose something that was married (in the ordinary sense) to something the y s composed. If that is anywhere near right, then the truth behind the belief that I am married, according to nihilism, is roughly this: the world’s particles are arranged in such a way that, if nihilism were false, my particles would compose a person and certain other particles would compose a person and the first person would be married to the second.

Suppose the particles really are arranged in that way. That may not appear to satisfy my desire to be married. What I want, surely, in wanting to be married is that I be married, not that certain particles be “collectively married” to certain other particles. And according to nihilism no one is married. It is merely the case that if I existed, and a certain other person existed, but everything at the level of particles were equal, then I should be married. And that purely hypothetical state of affairs can hardly satisfy my desire to be married--any more than the fact that if I inherited a million dollars then I should be rich does anything to satisfy my desire to be rich. So it seems that if nihilism is true I don’t have what I want in wanting to be married. I could have it only if certain particles arranged personwise composed something--that is, only if nihilism were false.

This is not right as it stands, however. The fact that my particles are collectively married to other particles is not the purely hypothetical fact that if I existed and a certain other person existed and all else were equal then I should be married. It is, rather, that the world’s particles are in fact arranged in such a way that, if nihilism were false but other things were equal, my particles would compose a person and certain other particles would compose a person to whom the first person was married. And that is not a purely hypothetical state of affairs. It implies that certain particles actually are arranged in a special way, a way that we ordinarily describe--in a misleading way if nihilism is true, but nonetheless aptly--by saying that two people are married. The impediment that nihilism would put in the way of my being married is not like the usual impediments--poverty, egotism, slovenly habits, that sort of thing. What nihilism offers as a substitute for my being married strictly speaking is not merely the hypothetical fact that if something incompatible with nihilism were the case then I should be married, but a categorical state of affairs to do with particles.

We might still wonder how facts about things that could not possibly be married could satisfy my desire to be married. What do I care about particles if they never compose anything I could be married to? Well (the idea goes), my desire to be married is an attitude whose content I express in the words ‘that I be married’. And nihilism appears to allow that it is correct to say, in contexts that have nothing to do with metaphysical speculation, that I am married: it is correct if there are particles arranged in the right way. Moreover, my desire to be married is an ordinary desire, not one freighted with metaphysical content--a desire I could have even if I had no metaphysical thoughts. So it ought to suffice to satisfy it that it be correct to say, in ordinary contexts, that I am married. And so it is. If that is right, then the way the particles are arranged gives me what I want in wanting to be married.

This reasoning is based on two claims. First,

1. It is correct to say, in ordinary circumstances, that Olson is married if and only if the particles are arranged in such a way that, if the Olson-particles composed something and certain other particles composed something, the Olson-particles would compose something that was married to something the other particles composed.

(The “Olson-particles” are those that would be collectively denoted by the name ‘Olson’ at the relevant time if nihilism were true. As before, let us set aside the considerable problem of specifying which ones they are.) This, or something like it, is what would make the ordinary statement that Olson is married correct if nihilism were true. Second,

2. Olson’s desire to be married is satisfied if it is correct to say, in ordinary circumstances, that Olson is married.

It follows that

3. Olson’s desire to be married is satisfied if the particles are arranged in such a way that, if the Olson-particles composed something and certain other particles composed something, the Olson-particles would compose something that was married to something the other particles composed.

In other words, the way the particles are arranged suffices to satisfy my desire to be married.

The premises of this argument are plausible. If 1 were false it would mean that nearly everything I said about paraphrase in the previous section is wrong. There might perhaps be a way of paraphrasing talk of people in nihilistic terms that is radically different from the atomistic strategy. Failing that, however, nihilism would imply that all statements that appear to

entail the existence of people are not only strictly false, but cannot even be taken to be true for ordinary purposes: the statement that there are six million people in London would be no better than the statement that there are six million dragons there. That would reduce nihilism to absurdity. A similar argument would presumably show any view according to which there are fewer concrete objects than we might have thought to be an absurd denial of the obvious: for instance the sparse ontology of §§3.2 and 7.4.

If 2 were false, it would apparently be because my desire to be married demands not merely that it be correct for ordinary purposes to say that I am married, but that it be strictly true that I am married to someone, which is incompatible with nihilism. My desire to be married would have a content that goes beyond that of the ordinary statement that Olson is married--it would have metaphysical content, or at any rate metaphysical implications. That might be surprising.

If 1 and 2 are true, then 3 follows, and my desire to be married can be satisfied even if nihilism is true. In that case it is hard to see how nihilism could deprive us of anything that we ordinarily desire. Perhaps there is nothing especially depressing about nihilism after all. And if this is right, similar reasoning is likely to show that the other thoughts about nihilism's practical consequences--that it would make us less selfish and that it would deprive us of any reason to act--are also mistaken.

What makes me suspicious of all this is that one could argue in the same way that there is nothing depressing about solipsism. Solipsism is not meant to be an absurd denial of the obvious, any more than nihilism is. Solipsists can accept that statements appearing to entail the existence of other people can be in some sense right: there ought to be something right, even if solipsism is true, in the claim that there are six million people in London, and none on the moon. Solipsists will say that what makes it somehow right has to do with unthinking brutes or sense-impressions or the like. So they can accept a variant of 1 that replaces the bit about particles with something about unthinking brutes or sense-impressions. In other words, they can play the paraphrase game as well as the nihilist can. If I were a solipsist I could maintain that it is correct to say, in ordinary circumstances, that I am married if and only if an unthinking brute relates to me in a certain way. (What this way is might be hard to say, but no harder than saying what facts about particles could make it correct to say that I am married.) And I could say that my desire to be married is satisfied if and only if it is correct to say, in ordinary circumstances, that I am married. It would follow that my desire to be married does not require the existence of anyone other than myself, and would be in no way frustrated by the truth of solipsism. This would suggest that solipsism would not deprive me of anything I desire, and more generally that it would have few if any practical consequences. Becoming a solipsist would be a purely intellectual affair, and need have no effect on the rest of one's life.

Surely that is wrong. Solipsism is a paradigm case of a depressing philosophical claim. What makes it depressing? Well, it implies that strictly speaking I am not married, and have no

children or friends. It implies that no one other than myself will ever read this book. And so on. Those are all bad things, or at any rate things that I want very much not to be the case. And it would be little consolation to me that certain facts about unthinking brutes or about my sense-impressions make it correct for certain purposes to say that I am married and have friends. That is nothing more than the well-founded appearance of my being married and having friends, and although it may be better than nothing, it falls dismally short of giving me what I want in wanting to be married and have friends. If this means that those desires have metaphysical content, then so be it.

What about nihilism, then? Would it be as depressing as solipsism? Would it frustrate our those of desires that have to do with people? That depends on the content of those desires. It depends on whether the desire to be married (for instance) can be satisfied by particles' being arranged in certain ways without their composing people. It depends, that is, on whether our desires involving people demand that there really be people, or whether it is enough that it merely be correct for ordinary purposes to say that there are. I am inclined to say that nihilism does not give me what I want, and that the comparison with solipsism is apt. That certain particles are "collectively married" to my particles doesn't seem to be enough: I want those particles to compose beings that really are married to each other. At least I think that's what I want. The way the particles are arranged seems to me to be of little value, if any, unless they compose thinking, sentient beings.

If this is right, then nihilism is a hard philosophy to live by. It is not merely counterintuitive, in the sense that it seems on reflection to be false. It is hard in the sense that it would take some doing to get oneself to believe it, and to accept its consequences, and to change one's behavior and one's practical attitudes accordingly. It is hard to live by for the same reason as solipsism is hard to live by. At least anyone who thinks that nihilism leaves everything else as it is and has no practical consequences will need to explain what makes it different in this regard from solipsism.

I have one final thought about what nihilism would mean practically speaking. Nihilism might be not merely hard to live by, but literally impossible to live by. It might be psychologically impossible to believe. Or at least it might be that anyone who accepted nihilism, and accepted nothing inconsistent with it, could only be described as mad.

A number of philosophical claims are impossible to live by. We might call them pathological views. The view there is no free will would appear to be an example. I mean the view that we can never do otherwise than we in fact do: whenever it appears that we have a choice between two incompatible courses of action, A and B, it never the case that it is possible for us to do A and also possible for us to do B. What would it mean for us if we really believed this and acted accordingly? It seems that we should have to stop deliberating (van Inwagen 1983: 154-6). I don't mean that it would be impossible to deliberate if we actually had

no free will, but that we could not deliberate if we consistently believed that we didn't. You cannot deliberate about whether to do something unless you believe that it is possible for you to do it, and also possible for you not to do it. If you were in a room with two doors, and you knew that one of them was locked and impassable, you could not deliberate about which door to leave by. You might be able to deliberate about which door to try; but to deliberate about which door to try is not to deliberate about which door to leave by; and in any case you could do it only if you believed that it was possible for you to try either door first. If you were convinced that there was never more than one option open to you, even if you didn't know which it was, and if you had no beliefs inconsistent with this, you could not deliberate about what to do. How someone who never deliberated would behave in consequence of this is hard to know, but it would clearly be a pathological condition.

Nihilism might be pathological too, by dint of implying that there could never be any reason to do anything. It is hard to see what reason there could be for acting if no action could ever result in anyone's (or anything's) being benefitted or harmed in any way. And that there is never any reason for doing anything looks like a claim that no one could believe consistently. At any rate someone who did believe it consistently, and acted accordingly, would be in a state similar to that of someone who never deliberated.

So maybe there really is something mad about nihilism. It is not mad because it denies obvious facts, such as the fact that London is populous. There is nothing mad about denying the existence of ordinary objects other than ourselves, provided that one does it for good philosophical reasons and that one can account for the difference between those claims apparently concerning such objects that can be taken to be correct for ordinary purposes and those that cannot. So I have argued, anyway. But denying that we exist might be mad, in that we could not consistently do it and remain sane. Our every action seems to presuppose that nihilism is false.

Now I am not at all confident that this is right. Perhaps there could be reasons for acting that don't require it to be possible that anyone or anything be harmed or benefitted as a result. There might be some point, for instance, in acting to promote pleasure and prevent suffering, even if there could never be any subjects of pleasure or suffering.⁹ Now I argued in §8.5 that nihilism might rule out the existence of states of pleasure or suffering just as it rules out the existence of pleased or suffering beings. But nihilism might allow that particles are arranged in ways that would make it correct for ordinary purposes to say that someone or something is pleased or suffering, and there might be a reason for preferring particles to be arranged in some of those ways rather than others. Perhaps the fact that particles can be "collectively benefitted" can provide reasons for acting. Some arrangements of particles might be better than or preferable to others, even if there are never any sentient beings or mental states. Maybe. The

⁹Parfit (1984) argues for something like this, though whether his "impersonal utilitarianism" is compatible with nihilism is unclear.

challenge, for those who take this line, will be to say how the nihilist's position differs from that of the solipsist: how the facts about particles (or whatever) that according to nihilism make it correct for ordinary purposes to say that someone is benefitted provide reasons for acting, but not those facts about unthinking brutes (or whatever) that according to solipsism make it correct for ordinary purposes to say that other people are benefitted.

What if nihilism really is pathological? That would put its advocates in an embarrassing position: if they really believed their nihilism, they would have no reason to advocate it. In any case they would believe that they had no reason to advocate it, unless they were unaware of its implication that there is no reason to do anything. Anyone who advocated nihilism would be either insincere or inconsistent. But although this might give non-nihilists some satisfaction, it would not be a reason to suppose that nihilism is false. That we could not consistently deny that we exist without going mad is no evidence for the claim that we do exist--any more than the impossibility of believing consistently that we lack free will without going mad is evidence for the claim that we have free will. Why should the truth be believable? For all we know the true account of what we are might be pathological. That would be a truly absurd situation. If we are humble, we ought to accept that our metaphysical nature might be beyond our ability to know, or even to understand. But it would be a cruel joke on us if we were perfectly capable of understanding or even knowing our metaphysical nature, yet that knowledge, if we were consistent, would inevitably result in madness.