

# THE COGNITIVIST THESIS OF NIHILISM

## PAUL VAN TONGEREN'S REFLECTIONS ON THE OVERCOMING OF NIHILISM

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I attempt, firstly, to provide an analysis of Paul van Tongeren's theory of nihilism and, secondly, to offer a critical examination of the assumptions it relies on. I argue that his account of nihilism presupposes that our lives are meaningful only if some existent and independent object makes them so. I call this the cognitivist thesis (Van Tongeren himself does not use this phrase). I question this assumption by pointing out that this is a mischaracterization of the experience of meaning. I argue that in this context, the cost of Van Tongeren's decision to cast aside the texts in which Nietzsche talks of the overcoming of nihilism is not justified. Rather, we should take seriously the possibility entertained in these passages. I conclude that the possibility of overcoming nihilism remains open, on condition that we shed the cognitivist habit of expecting that the meaning of our lives be underwritten objectively.

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## 2. PAUL VAN TONGEREN AND THE COGNITIVIST NOTION OF NIHILISM

### 2.1. *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*

The translation of Paul van Tongeren's 2012 Dutch-language book into English gives the English-speaking scholarship access to the best and most complete existing account of Nietzsche's views on nihilism.<sup>1</sup> The first strength of the book is its comprehensiveness. As is his custom, Van Tongeren begins at the beginning with a historical contextualization of the notion of nihilism before Nietzsche, and the book remains welcoming to non-specialists throughout. Having begun in pedestrian ways, Van Tongeren's thinking takes flight quickly and upwards, carrying with him a reader unsuspecting of how quickly and clearly one could be taken to such heights.

It never loses sight of its ambition, namely, to allow Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism to contribute to the efforts of those of us, moderns, Nietzscheans or not, who live a life in which meaning is at stake. Van Tongeren does not read Nietzsche for his own sake. On the contrary, the emphasis he places on the contemporary invisibility of the problem leads him to ask "Why do we not seem worried by what Nietzsche believed to be the most ominous event of all times?" (1). In his hands, the problem of nihilism regains its urgency and gravity and it comes out fresh and terrifying. Just as it was for Nietzsche himself.

The book, therefore, is distinguished by its broad outlook, that combines close and masterful analyses of Nietzsche's work with an original yet comprehensive contextualization both of Nietzsche's own thoughts and of the history of the concept of nihilism before and since Nietzsche. Most importantly it is distinguished by its systematic and highly philosophical account of the problem of nihilism. By contrast to many accounts of Nietzsche's notion of nihilism, Van Tongeren does not succumb to any reductive strategy. In particular, he does not take one of

<sup>1</sup> Paul van Tongeren, *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). Original Dutch version: *Het Europese nihilisme: Friedrich Nietzsche over een dreiging die niemand schijnt te deren* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2012). A new and expanded version of the Dutch title has recently been published by Boom, 2022.

the meanings available in Nietzsche's writings as representative of all others. His approach is patient and systematic, and it embraces many of the dimensions of Nietzsche's thought: cultural therapy of course, but also the metaphysics of the will to power, moral psychology and theological critique as well as more methodological questions such as the question of genealogy.

The book consists of five chapters, three of which are not specifically devoted to Nietzsche, but rather interested in either contextualizing his thought (chapter 1) or conversely, in using Nietzsche's thought of nihilism to offer an interpretive context for our current, post-modern condition (chapters 4 and 5). This is partly carried out in his remarkable commentary on classical accounts of nihilism in Nietzsche (from Heidegger, Jaspers, Vattimo etc.). These are seminal chapters for the way they frame the debate, critically select the important readings available, and finally, deconstruct and place them in relation to each other. In their own right, these passages stand as an important contribution to legislating within some of the canonical Nietzsche scholarship towards a substantially philosophical and ontological engagement with Nietzsche. Finally, the book concludes with a very helpful appendix containing a compilation of Nietzsche's texts on nihilism. This makes for a striking read, evidencing in blinding light the multivocality of the term in Nietzsche's use where nihilism is regarded as a characteristic of modernity, a characteristic of the western culture since the Greeks at times, against the Greeks at other times, shifting the meaning of 'modern' to stretch it back to Socrates, identifying it with the industrial era some other times, and all the while experimenting with the idea that nihilism may be best understood synchronically in abstraction to any historical or geographical determination. As a result, Van Tongeren activates the idea of nihilism as an adjective rather than an event, an ideology or a historical era, and the implication that it is best understood as characterizing a set of beliefs, or the results of a certain inability to believe (perhaps a sickness). Nihilism is therefore the referent to the adjective 'nihilistic' but an emphasis on its '-ism' also suggests that nihilism is somehow, or sometimes, to be understood as the active effort at bringing about absurdity in response to the recognition that the world is absurd. This

is a theme explored, as Van Tongeren shows well, in the works of Dostoevsky among others (17).

In keeping with the widespread hypothesis according to which our current condition is best defined as nihilistic, and with the book's dual objective (i.e., to understand Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism and to understand our current condition), Van Tongeren puts forward two theses:

The first is a definition of nihilism. Van Tongeren's approach is sensitive to the multivocity of Nietzsche's notion of nihilism as well as Nietzsche's own insistence that nihilism was to be understood as a somewhat (if loosely) unified phenomenon. It leads him to characterise nihilism as the condition of those who are aware of the absurdity of their own lives and of life in general. Therefore, Van Tongeren defines nihilism as "(4) the conscious experience of an antagonism, that is the result of (3) the decline of (2) the protective structure that was built to hide (1) the absurdity of life and world" (100, see also 54-55). This definition relies on Van Tongeren's brilliant interpretation of the famous and all-important Lenzer Heide note (NF 5[71] of 1887). Note the retrogressive numbering of steps that show how nihilism is the result (step 4) of a long process (steps 1-3) which themselves appear only retroactively to be involved with nihilism. This in itself presents a number of possibilities for organizing Nietzsche's multivocal talk of nihilism: any of these four steps could, in some circumstance, be the target of Nietzsche's use of the term 'nihilistic.' Note also how this sends Van Tongeren on the way to an overall original interpretation based on the notion of meaning-making habits: nihilism is defined as the discrepancy between the habit of meaning-making and the discovery of meaninglessness.

The second thesis is that nihilism cannot be overcome (126-27). Here, Van Tongeren picks up where Nietzsche left off, and it is where his own philosophical voice is heard most clearly. Van Tongeren argues that "there is for [Nietzsche], in [Van Tongeren's] interpretation — no beyond of nihilism" (102). This is for two reasons: first, because it is already too entrenched in our mental habits and secondly, because once nihilism in its fourth — modern — stage, has appeared, no possible

truth-belief is able to retain any credibility. Note that the first argument is empirical, and the second is a priori. Reducing Van Tongeren's argument to the first, however, would be uncharitable. Nietzsche is famous for envisaging the history of culture in terms of major transformations, transformations that precisely upset and disrupt well-entrenched intellectual habits. When he talks of overcoming nihilism, he may be talking of such transformations. The view that nihilism cannot be overcome should not be reduced to the view that the contingencies of history have made it *difficult* to overcome. The second, stronger argument suggests that it is *impossible* to overcome nihilism. It remains the more charitable angle through which to read Van Tongeren's book (and this is the one I shall discuss below).

It is the combination of depth, consistency and comprehensiveness that allows this book to lead his readers towards greater clarity, and invites us to take the next step in our elucidation of the problem of nihilism, both within the confines of Nietzsche's work and beyond it. In what follows, I try to put in order the thoughts that the reading of Van Tongeren's book have elicited in me. The result is some sort of zeroing in on an intuitive disagreement I seem to have with Van Tongeren (assuming I am understanding him correctly). It is a disagreement that still requires much further elaboration, but also one that would never have come to any clarity at all, were it not for Van Tongeren's illuminating work. I try to spell it out in the rest of this paper, but here it is in a nutshell: I believe that van Tongeren assumes a certain notion of meaning that there is no reason to attribute to Nietzsche in any systematic way, and that it is this assumption which entails the impossibility of overcoming nihilism. I argue that rejecting this basic view of meaning also opens up the possibility of overcoming nihilism, and therefore, of doing justice to the texts in which Nietzsche refers to such overcoming. Here is, in my view, Van Tongeren's assumption: the view that meaning relies on objective facts. I call this the *cognitivist* thesis. I use the term 'cognitivism' in the sense used by philosophers of emotions, to refer to the view according to which emotional states (including the psychological syndrome known as nihilism) rely on cognitive states, i.e., a belief about the state of the world (namely, that there is no source of meaning). A cognitivist believes

that meaning is *dependent on reality* and therefore that the experience of meaning is premised on the belief that there is meaning. I argue that Van Tongeren does not consider the possibility that meaning might function otherwise. By contrast, I argue for the *hermeneutic* thesis according to which meaning is, at least partly, *made* rather than found (and for the view that this is Nietzsche's analysis of meaning too). The discussion centres therefore on what meaning *means*: when nihilism expounds the meaninglessness of life, does it argue that there is no meaning in the hermeneutic sense or in the cognitivist sense?

## 2.2. *How to Read Nietzsche's Talk of Overcoming*

In the rest of this first section I will try to reconstruct the implicit arguments adduced by Van Tongeren for his claim that nihilism cannot be overcome (or at least, not until a — more or less post-secular — god rises again<sup>2</sup>). I make two points: the first is that Van Tongeren's contention that Nietzsche himself regards nihilism as impossible to overcome is not fully established. The second is that neither is Van Tongeren's own argument for the impossibility of overcoming nihilism. In both cases, I argue, the flaw in the argument consists in the cognitivist assumption that one cannot have a meaningful life if they don't believe that their life has objective meaning. As a result, I argue that he attributes this view to Nietzsche, at the cost of sacrificing the texts that entertain the possibility of overcoming nihilism.

Nietzsche left us with some impassioned, conflicted, agonizing attempts at designing methods to overcome nihilism which were sometimes hopeful, sometimes desperate. Nietzsche speaks of "the overcoming of pessimism," or the "self-overcoming of nihilism" (102). Indeed, he defines his entire project as the last chance of western civilization to avoid this nihilism. In so doing, he leaves us with the mission to clarify what this overcoming might look like, and whether it is at all possible.

<sup>2</sup> Paul van Tongeren, "Postscript: Concluding Comments and Question," in *Beyond Nihilism?*, ed. Chris Bremmers, Andrew Smith, and Jean-Pierre Wils (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2018), 148.

Van Tongeren recognizes that these texts exist, but his approach to them is deflationary. First, he contends that there are “only very few” (102) such texts (NF 9[127]; 9[164]; 13[4]; briefly discussed by Van Tongeren on 126-27, and the latter, reproduced in the appendix, 174). Secondly, he either discounts those texts that *imply* such hope even if they don’t discuss it explicitly, or proposes a deflationary reading of them. This includes most texts that emphasise futurity, hope, redemption, the Übermensch, Nietzsche’s self-presentation as a thinker who breaks history into two, his talk of crossroads etc. All of them would be vain talk if our condition was condemned to nihilism forever. In short, Van Tongeren identifies a conflict within Nietzsche’s work: Nietzsche’s own painstaking analysis of the deep roots of nihilism conflicts with his faith (either sporadic, as in Van Tongeren’s reading, or sustained, as in my reading) that its overcoming remains possible. For Van Tongeren, this tension at the heart of Nietzsche’s corpus cannot be resolved and therefore, we must make an interpretive decision: either to follow Nietzsche when he says that the overcoming of nihilism is possible, or to follow him when he shows how deep-rooted nihilism is. The problem, of course, is that choosing in favour of either side involves sacrificing the texts that support the other side. In order to save both groups of texts, I argue that although it is indeed very deep-rooted, nihilism is not so deep-rooted as to be impossible to overcome. In short, I suggest that Van Tongeren’s a priori argument that I presented above does not hold: it is true that once the impossibility of believing in truth has been established, then truth-belief becomes irreversibly lost. However, this may not be enough to say that nihilism is irredeemable, for this requires the additional premise that nihilism is impossible without truth-belief, i.e., the cognitivist assumption. The discussion therefore must focus on exactly *how* deep-rooted nihilism is, or to approach it from the other side, how deconstructible it is.

In this context, the question requires an examination of Nietzsche’s historicization of the will to truth. The will to truth, as Nietzsche shows, and as Van Tongeren explains, is the condition whereby humans cannot live a good life if they don’t believe that their life is lived according to the truth. If the will to truth cannot be overcome, then neither



can nihilism, since the will to truth has shown the vanity of any belief in an objective source of meaning, and since our living a good life depends on our belief in such a source of meaning. However, I argue that the will to truth is not an irreducible given. Nietzsche's genealogical accounts of the will to truth, I argue, should be understood as historicizing it. They are, in other words, attempts by Nietzsche to consider the will to truth as a construct *derived from* a deeper, a-historical principle. I shall call this the constructivist account. This means that, if the will to truth can no longer be eradicated, it was not always so, and therefore that there is no necessity to this fact; at best, it has become so. The advantage of this constructivist account is that it does not foreclose the possibility of a deconstruction: it does not presuppose that the satisfaction of the will to truth (i.e., a truth-belief) is a *necessary* prerequisite for the experience of the meaningfulness of life (although it may have become a cultural or psychological prerequisite). By contrast, Van Tongeren's interpretation of these passages takes them to be affirming that the will to truth is *itself* an ahistorical principle, one that cannot be deconstructed. As a result, he argues, nihilism is best defined as stemming from the frustration of this ineradicable will: nihilism, which is the experience of meaninglessness, is best understood as the result of the outcome of the will to truth into the realization that there is nothing to justify the meaning in our lives. As you can see, this line of reasoning presupposes that meaning is the kind of thing that needs objective justification. It also presupposes that we are creatures whose experience of meaning is conditional on objective certainty. Let us look at the passages in which this view of Van Tongeren's is deployed. I shall argue that these passages accommodate both Van Tongeren's ahistorical interpretation and my historicist one equally well.

### 2.3. *The Self-Referentiality Argument*

Van Tongeren begins with Nietzsche's famous declaration from GM III, 27: "what meaning would our whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a problem?" He brings up this passage as part of his important discussion of



the notion of ideals. According to Van Tongeren, the third essay of the *Genealogy* is not only aimed at ascetic ideals, as is usually thought, but at all ideals in general (76). What is nihilistic is not the inability to entertain one kind of ideal but all ideals. This is one of the passages that make his interpretation entirely superior to most other readings of Nietzsche on nihilism insofar as it leads Van Tongeren into a formal analysis of nihilism, where nihilism is characterized, not by its content (the attachment to this or that ideal), but by its form, which is exemplified in all ideals, and which he defines as “self-referentiality.”

Self-referentiality, Van Tongeren argues, is the guarantee of the impossibility of overcoming nihilism (63): overcoming nihilism requires critical thinking, but critical thinking is itself indebted to nihilism, because it refers to a truth beyond thinking. Crucially, this allows Van Tongeren to make the impossibility of overcoming nihilism an a priori truth, since it relies on the very *form* of nihilism as self-referentiality. In this sense, it allows him to go beyond the weaker thesis (laid out above) that would make nihilism impossible to overcome for empirical reasons alone, i.e., the view that our nihilistic habits are so entrenched that it would be extremely difficult to overcome them. Here, on the contrary, Van Tongeren argues that there is logically no room for the overcoming of nihilism because any overcoming would reaffirm it, by positing a substitute for god, which, by definition, would have no credibility. This is why Van Tongeren argues, correctly again, that “Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism repeats the criticized structures, but does not do so naively” (101). Nietzsche’s position is not naive, according to Van Tongeren, because Nietzsche is aware that positing ideals is unavoidable, and Van Tongeren takes the citation at hand as a proof of this. He does not, however, devote any attention to the fact that Nietzsche defines this “consciousness of itself as a problem” as “the meaning [*Sinn*] of our whole being.” We can only assume that Van Tongeren takes a deflationary view of the reference to ‘meaning’ in this passage. He probably regards it as a rhetorical device that dramatizes the vanity and idleness of our position: something like the declaration that we have no meaning since our only meaning is to be aware of our inability to overcome meaninglessness.

But is this the only plausible interpretation of the reference to ‘meaning’ here? It seems equally likely that Nietzsche is trying to point out that becoming aware of our indebtedness to the problem indeed constitutes *some* meaning. In deciding between these two interpretations, much perhaps depends on what is referred to by “we.” In the deflationary reading I attribute to Van Tongeren, a reading that de-emphasises the passages that suggest that nihilism can be overcome, “we” only denotes those who live in modern times, the times that follow the self-undercutting of truth. But in the context of the two last sections of GM, I would argue that what is referred to here are the “we” that opened the book and that Nietzsche would therefore be returning to at the end: “we knowers.” Importantly for Nietzsche, those referred to as “we” in the Preface (as well as the last section of GM II) are meant as transitional figures, those that can see and talk but not live according to the view they have uncovered. These are not defined by their historical location, but rather by their historical role or function (i.e., their ‘meaning’): they are brave thinkers whose only shortcoming is the inability to live, but whose intellectual powers have retained enough integrity to see things as they are. As such, they are transitional figures announcing the higher beings that will be able to live with the truth they have uncovered. In this reading, they are a necessary step towards this new form of life, one that will have overcome nihilism. This is why I contend that the notion of meaning at work here should not be dismissed like Van Tongeren does. Rather, it should be taken seriously: the ‘meaning,’ the *raison d’être* of these knowers is precisely that by becoming aware of themselves as a problem, they prepare the way for the overcoming of nihilism via a new form of life.

The upshot of this discussion is that what Van Tongeren and myself agree on, namely the fact that Nietzsche refers to the fact that we cannot discuss meaninglessness without projecting meaning, does not entail the further consequence that, therefore, nihilism cannot be overcome. This is because for this further consequence to hold, one needs an extra premise: namely that there is no possible talk of meaning without what Van Tongeren calls a ‘truth-imperative,’ i.e., a purportedly real and independent object. Since this truth is no longer forthcoming, any talk of meaning is impossible.

In his analysis of the Lenzer Heide note, Van Tongeren declares that with the death of god, “the only one way in which reality could receive meaning [...] is lost” (94). Although he reports it, he pays no attention to the fact that in the same breath, Nietzsche accuses those who draw that consequence of “fanaticism.” What I take Nietzsche to mean here is that fanaticism is defined by the cognitivist thesis. Van Tongeren is explicitly endorsing that thesis when he glosses over Nietzsche and states that “god” was (or has become) “the only one way in which reality could receive meaning” (94), and in a later text, where he argues that only faith can overcome nihilism.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, he is implicitly endorsing it by concluding from his analysis that nihilism cannot be overcome, a conclusion that relies on the cognitivist thesis. Nihilism, in this view, denotes the condition whereby we are a) unable to believe in the existence of any object which would guarantee that our life is meaningful and b) unable to give up the need for believing in such an object: a nihilist is committed to the cognitivist thesis. This is true of nihilists, but should we take the next step of assuming that this is true of all possible individuals?

#### 2.4. *The Need for Truth*

Let’s carry on with the Lenzer Heide note: “we now notice in ourselves needs, implanted by the long-held morality interpretation, which now appear to us as needs to untruth: conversely it is on them that the value for which we bear to live seems to depend” (62). In his analysis of Goudsblom (57-61), Van Tongeren correctly suggests that one of these very needs is the need for truth in the first place. As a result, this will to truth must be conceived of as a precondition for nihilism and also as one that is historically constructed (implanted by the long-held “morality interpretation”). This suggests that nihilism is only insurmountable as long as the will to truth is unsurmountable.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the suggestion that the will to truth

<sup>3</sup> Van Tongeren, “Postscript: Concluding Comments and Question,” 148.

<sup>4</sup> Van Tongeren suggests that the overcoming of the will to truth is itself nihilistic (29), but he gives no argument for it. It seems obvious to me that the overcoming of the *interest* in truth (i.e., curiosity) is related to nihilism. The overcoming of the *belief* in truth, on the other hand, which is

once was not constructed yet suggests that the impossibility to lose it in modern times is, at best, accidental. In principle, at least it is deconstructible: it is not essential to the human form of life that they need to believe in anything in order to experience life as meaningful. All depends on the anthropological stance one takes: is the human essentially unable to experience meaning without reference to truth?

Van Tongeren's implicit philosophical anthropology answers yes. This idea of a human form of life that cannot (or can no longer) change informs his gloss on NF 9 [60] where Nietzsche declares that "submerged beneath the creation of a world ruled by truth, unity and meaning, lies a need. Evidently humankind suffers at the hands of change and transience." This gives us a clue to Nietzsche's most fundamental account of the origins of the will to truth. Namely, the will to power, as an interpretive force, is guided by the very tendency of producing illusions (Van Tongeren, 59, Nietzsche, 2[148]) and an illusion is always a reference to truth. In this context, the "need" that Nietzsche and Van Tongeren are talking about is well substantiated: it is part of the essence of the will to power to induce this need for truth. But if this is correct, all that is unavoidable is for the will to power to present interpretations as truths, not for us to desire these truths. I argue that this extra step is contingent. It is the object of Nietzsche's analysis of the slave revolt in morality (in GM) or the Socratic moment (in GD). There, Nietzsche is trying to explain how the valuation of (and subsequently the need for) truth came about. As a result, I suggest that the need is not "for" "truth, unity and meaning" but rather, the need to "create" "truth, unity and meaning." The additional move that makes these created truths the object of a new need (called the "will to truth") is unlike the first, constructed, contingent and therefore deconstructible. In short, the will to power spontaneously creates such false stabilization, and since its very essence is interpretation, it is not surprising that the carrying out of such interpretations is referred to as a need.

what is required for the overcoming of nihilism, does not seem to me to be obviously nihilistic, or if it is, it is nihilistic only in the sense that it says that truth is nothing. This is a far cry from nihilism as the disease suffered by those who experience life as meaningless, and which is the problem at hand.

Van Tongeren himself refers to this very idea. Following on Nietzsche's famous dictum according to which there are no facts, only interpretations, and that the will to power is interpretation (2[148] discussed by Van Tongeren on 59, 93), he declares that "the will is itself a type of deceit: it fashions a truth that does not exist" (59). In Van Tongeren's reading, this suggests that nihilism is grounded in the very structure of the will to power, and therefore, that it is inescapable, or as fundamental as the will to power itself. In my view, this amounts to conflating the compulsion to interpret (a hermeneutic compulsion) with the compulsion to believe our interpretations to be true according to an (soon-to-be-uncovered-as) unrealistic criterion (a metaphysical compulsion). He concludes that living according to the will to truth is unavoidable, rather than conclude that the will to truth is contingent and secondary to the will to interpretation. The fact that the existence of the will to interpretation is a condition for the establishment of the will to truth is beyond question, but this condition is insufficient until a contingent event (the slave revolt and Socratism) occurs.

Van Tongeren's interpretation of the notion of need as a need for a truth prefigures the argument that nihilism is unlivable, that it is insurmountable without a return of (some form of) god, and therefore that life cannot be lived without a god. Van Tongeren regards the belief in the existence of god as the only bulwark against nihilism: the belief in god is "the only one way in which reality could receive meaning" and thus, "because there was only one way in which reality could receive meaning, that reality is void of all meaning the moment this one perspective is lost", i.e., the moment god is dead (94). As Van Tongeren shows very effectively later (131-39), the death of god is connected with the theme of nihilism in profound and systematic ways. However, the view that the belief in god is "the only one way in which reality could receive meaning" commits him to the cognitivist view. This is a presupposition which does not go without saying.

The distinction between seeing the will to power as a need for truth (Van Tongeren's interpretation) or as the need for interpretations (my interpretation) has the following consequences for nihilism: first, it suggests that humans are not defined by their will to truth, but rather by

their will to interpretation; secondly, and consequently, it suggests the will to truth is not as fundamental as the will to interpretation; thirdly, given that nihilism relies on the will to truth and that the will to truth is not as fundamental as previously assumed, then nihilism is not as insurmountable as previously thought.

On their own, these discussions about the most plausible reading of certain passages in Nietzsche's corpus establish nothing of substance. They are not comprehensive, as they do not cover all of the sources Van Tongeren discusses, let alone the texts from Nietzsche. They do, however, bring out the fact that a certain interpretive decision is necessary in order for anyone to pronounce on whether nihilism can be overcome, and that this decision will not have to do with the means available to overcome it so much as it will have to do with what we consider to be the very nature of nihilism: in short, is the basic mechanism of nihilism historical, and therefore deconstructible as I contend, or more fundamental, as Van Tongeren contends? Secondly this discussion shows the dependence of Van Tongeren's pessimistic stance about our ability to overcome nihilism upon the cognitivist thesis. The impossibility for nihilism to be overcome stands and falls with the cognitivist thesis.

### 3. THE HERMENEUTIC VIEW OF MEANING

So far, I have argued that:

- Having a meaningful life does not necessitate believing that our life has intrinsic meaning because of an objective source.
- That, as a result, the overcoming of nihilism cannot be rejected flat-out and that, as a result, nihilism does not have the essential relation to the death of god that we thought: it is in theory possible that nihilism be overcome even as god remains dead.
- There is textual evidence that a) encourages us to take the possibility of overcoming nihilism seriously, b) suggests that Nietzsche acknowledges (perhaps even endorses) the hermeneutic views of meaning.
- That as a result, nihilism must be redefined.

However, just how nihilism is to be redefined remains to be seen. This will constitute the focus of this section. I begin by fleshing out what an alternative to the cognitivist view could look like, before offering an alternative account of nihilism defined as any worldview or form of life that is informed by the cognitivist thesis.

In arguing in favour of the hermeneutic view of meaning, I have been showing how the notion of meaning does not necessarily rely on the notion of truth. But this remains abstract and negative. The problem now is to give some intuitive flesh to the hermeneutic view. I call this the hermeneutic view insofar as hermeneutics considers that meaning is independent from objective properties given in the world (e.g., in the text, in the author's intention, in the author's mental state). The hermeneutic approach recognizes that meaning is best considered independently from any truth-claim.<sup>5</sup> This is admittedly a somewhat counter-intuitive view. At the same time, as I shall try to show, the opposite view leads into counter-intuitive consequences as well. The reason this question is central to determining whether nihilism can be overcome is that it brings with it two further questions. First, an anthropological question: did living in meaning regardless of objective belief ever count as one of the resources of the human soul? The second is, assuming it ever was the case, is this still possible? This in turn, takes us to the next problem: I have been assuming that what is constructed is in principle deconstructible. This is meant to placate arguments that state that even if we once were able to live without relying on belief for the meaning of our lives, this possibility has now been closed up. It is true, strictly speaking, that some constructs may be irreversible. In fact, Nietzsche himself entertains this view when he suggests that the creation of the will to truth has created a new human. However, even when Nietzsche uses the language of historical breaks and of historical irreversibility, he also continues his search for those that have survived the cognitivist onslaught chronicled in the GM. It seems as though our ability to live meaningful lives regardless of metaphysical truth has reduced drastically,

<sup>5</sup> See also Mark Eli Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 136. Many thanks to my colleague Wouter Kalf for pointing me to Kalderon's discussion.



and only a few lucky strokes (*Glücksfälle*) still possess it. Yet, Nietzsche believes that they exist. Think of them as living fossils, if you will; remnants of pre-Socratic times. In fact, Nietzsche's entire *Umwertung* project relies on this possibility remaining open.

This section is therefore devoted to proposing a positive framework to do justice to the Nietzschean hope that nihilism could be overcome, to the reading I have tried to present of the passages above and to some unattended uses of the phrase 'nihilism' (in particular, the idea that Christianity is a nihilistic religion). I begin by developing the hermeneutic thesis about meaning with reference to the model of fiction, and I follow by exploring the consequences of this view on the question of Nietzsche's account of nihilism.

### 3.1. *The Hermeneutic Thesis about Meaning: Vattimo*

Let me begin by pointing out that Van Tongeren himself acknowledges implicitly the possibility of approaching meaning in truth-independent ways. This is the case not only in the passages I have cited, where Van Tongeren uses material in which Nietzsche seems to consider that there existed humans before Socrates who had the ability to live without truth (100), or in his recognition that the will to truth has been historically constructed. He also declares that "something beyond nihilism" would take the form of "a creative interaction with the absence of a true world" (68) (my hermeneutic proposal indeed involves such a creative interaction). In order to understand what Van Tongeren means by that, we need to read on until his account of the thought of Gianni Vattimo, where he dwells further on this possibility, only to eventually dismiss it. Whether Van Tongeren's reading of Vattimo is correct or not (I think it is) is not our concern here. What is at issue is that in the context of his encounter with Vattimo, Van Tongeren comes as close as he will to the possibility of distinguishing the cognitivist thesis from the hermeneutic thesis of nihilism and to acknowledging that neither goes without saying.

As Van Tongeren shows it well, Vattimo's approach to the problem of nihilism is implicated with the notion of 'myth.' Vattimo points out

that Nietzsche's project of exposing prejudices should be regarded as a campaign aimed at disseminating nihilism. He adds that we would be mistaken to take this as a campaign of demythologization however, for it involves not the eradication of myths, even less the replacement of myth with truth, but rather the replacement of myths with other myths. The added value of this process of replacement is what Vattimo calls "weakening": the new myths are weak because, unlike the old, they no longer claim to be true. There is enough to these myths for them to replace the ancient "strong" myths (i.e., the myths that claimed to be true), but not so much that the weak myths involve any established truth. This is the point where Vattimo, in my view, remains consistent with Nietzsche's thesis that the will to power irrepressibly posits interpretations without thereby requiring a belief in truth. Van Tongeren expresses reservations. He stresses that "Vattimo regularly emphasizes the challenges of living with interpretations which you acknowledge to be interpretations, which is to say: without believing in their metaphysical truth" (118). Instead, Van Tongeren suggests that Vattimo's hope is impossible but he does not provide more of an argument for it. Picking up a separate point of Vattimo's theory, he simply argues that "his Christian-Theological slant appears to distance itself somewhat too far from Nietzsche's self-conception" (123). This may be the case, but it does not seem that rejecting Vattimo's theologisation of Nietzsche is the same as rejecting the distinction between "strong" and "weak" myths. This needs fleshing out.

### 3.2. *The Hermeneutic Thesis about Meaning: Fiction*

My order of business, therefore, is to demonstrate that one can live a meaningful life regardless of any truth-belief. Here my main proposal is to pay attention to one common experience where engagement with meaning is independent from any reference to truth: namely the experience of our engagement with fiction. Although one of the background concerns that animate this suggestion has to do with providing an account of Nietzsche's own interest for the question of fiction as well as other phenomena where meaning seems to be independent from its

reliance on objective truth, including play (e.g. BGE 94), love (e.g. GS 276), dreaming (e.g. BT, 4) and laughter (e.g. BT, Attempt at Self-Criticism, 7 which, as Van Tongeren points out, provides the context for “the moment the term [nihilism] enters the published work” of Nietzsche’s (70)), I will keep my account of these passages to a minimum and focus on showing the philosophical soundness of using the phenomenon of our engagement with fiction as an illustration of the distinction between the cognitivist thesis and the hermeneutic one.

In the context of his discussion of the modern artists who took up the problem of nihilism, Van Tongeren himself points out that “the relationship between nihilism and art has not received much attention in my own book, which was primarily focused on the threat of nihilism” (129). This is in spite of the fact that such artists regard art as precisely an antidote to the threat, that “whether they are concerned with an overcoming of nihilism or a coming to terms with it, in some way or another these authors all locate the capacity to do so within the aesthetic” (128). He further notes that this view is very close to Nietzsche’s own view: “after all, Nietzsche thought art was ‘the great temptress to life, the great stimulus for life’ (NF 11 [415]) [and] ‘the only superior counterforce against all will to a denial of life.’(NF 14 [17])” (128). In short, there is something about art that seems to offer the promise of an overcoming of nihilism. I argue that it is its ability to engage us without any need for a reference to objective truth.

For Van Tongeren, the connection between the cognitivist thesis and the condition called ‘nihilism’ has to do with a sense of discomfort that arises when metaphysical certitudes collapse. The loss of metaphysical certainties also involves the loss of an indispensable sense of “stability” (61) and a certain sense of belonging in the world: “Without meaning, order and truth the world becomes inhospitable in every respect” (61). Interestingly, this view seems to conflict with a long tradition that regards fiction-making and especially mythology as attempts precisely to make the world hospitable. In a way, Van Tongeren is himself reliant on a certain reading of this tradition namely, he takes this tradition to be creating what Vattimo calls “strong myths,” i.e., myths that claim to be true. In short: myths make us feel at home in the world *if and only*

if we believe that they tell the truth about objective sources of meaning (gods for example). This is certainly a possible (although by no means necessary) reading of say, Blumenberg,<sup>6</sup> but certainly not of other authors such as Veyne,<sup>7</sup> Vernant,<sup>8</sup> or Bettini<sup>9</sup> who all regard Ancient Greek myths as paradigmatically “weak” from the very start. More to the point, this does not apply to Nietzsche himself who famously claims that myths and Greek dramas perform their function of creating a home in the world for man *regardless of their truth-status* (BT, 4 *passim*). Nietzsche, like the other authors mentioned above nonetheless believes that myths, even in their weak form, have the ability to make us feel at home in the world. This is, according to this tradition, not because those myths give us truth (not even because we believe they do) but because they provide us with ways of meaning-making. The implication of course is that what makes us feel at home is not certainty but engagement with meaning.

Indeed, what is this “making hospitable”? Based on context, it seems Van Tongeren means “making liveable” for a human, and by that, he means that it fulfils a certain need for “stability” and for intelligibility as well as a certain need to have something to care for. In short, “being hospitable” means making us feel at home emotionally. Indeed, even if one assumes, like Van Tongeren, that certitude is necessary for this sense of belonging, even he will have to accept that this is the case for emotional reasons: what we are after is certainty *for the sake of emotional security*. A stronger way to characterize Van Tongeren’s view, one that makes the most sense of the cognitivist thesis and therefore presents the best challenge to the hermeneutic thesis, would be to understand “hospitality” and “stability” in terms of having a life in which suffering is “worth it.” Indeed, this is Nietzsche’s own view when he points out that it is not suffering, but meaningless suffering, which is intolerable to the human (GM III, 28). A non-nihilistic life would have to make sense of suffering.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?: Essai sur l’imagination constituante* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Etudes de psychologie historique* (Paris: Maspero, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Maurizio Bettini, *Elogio del politeismo: Quello che possiamo imparare dalle religioni antiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

For my proposal to have any traction therefore, I have to show that it can make sense of suffering without referring to any objective ground for this meaning. In short, does the weaker notion of meaning I propose here suffice to make life worth living? The fictional model suggests that at least in our engagement with fiction, we live according to the meaning we create. In the case of literary fiction, for example, we do so by reading. Is this a generalizable model? Nietzsche's worry, as Van Tongeren would agree, is not that meaning disappears in nihilism, but that the meaning that remains is not credible enough for us to live by it. In fact, it is the discrepancy between the meaning that we make and its lack of foundation that troubles the nihilist. This includes the meaning of moral rules, which we now recognize to be unfounded; the meaning we attribute to others or to our own life, which we now discover to be mechanically reducible; or the meaning of our suffering, which is no longer indexed on a moral obligation or a promise of redemption or retribution. Are we, as human beings, able to maintain that moral rules, suffering, others and ourselves retain the same meaning even as their meaningfulness is now exposed as being of our own making? A being that would be able to do so would truly count themselves as the source of meaning, that is, as a god. I argue that this is exactly what Nietzsche has in mind when in the famous passage on the death of god he suggests that after the death of god, we now must become gods ourselves (125), as well as in his later discussions of the *Übermensch* as a god in the late *Nachlass* (11[375] 1887). As I mentioned above, our engagement with fiction offers a good model for this, since in fiction, we engage our "real" life and subject it to the meaning-making matrix of "fictional life." Nietzsche makes the same point about play in BGE 94 (arguably an aphorism about the *Übermensch* as the human that has overcome nihilism), and in play too, it seems we conduct ourselves according to meaning-making structures (rules and self-appointed challenges) without concern for the fact that such meaning-structures are ungrounded. Indeed, players notoriously show willingness to sacrifice real things, including their own life, for the sake of the game. The following anthropological conclusion therefore ensues: the human possesses the psychological resources to engage with meaning indifferently of their objective ground.

The further problem Van Tongeren might wish to raise concerns whether our *entire* existences could be lived as a fiction or a game, or should we rather say that play and fiction function in the way I have just described only on the background of a 'real world' which is taken to be objectively grounded? In short, are not play, myth and fiction mere *imitations* of a pre-existing 'real' world? This hypothesis is made doubtful by the fact that some games require the ultimate sacrifice for the player. This would suggest that weak meaning (within the context of which sacrifice is required) is not so weak as to be unable to compete with strong meaning (which requires that the player survive). But all the same, I think there is a deeper point to Nietzsche's hermeneutic argument. And this returns us to the genealogical account of objectivism (Nietzsche sometime says: the spirit of seriousness [*Schwere*] in 14[1] 1888, 11[19] 1883; 23[9] 1883; Za II, Tanzlied; Za III, Gesicht 1 and 2 etc.). The objective ground of meaning, Nietzsche suggests, is *secondary* to the *experience* of meaning. In short, "strong" meaning is derived and genealogically dependent on "weak" meaning and this suggests that any added "strength" cannot be accounted for phenomenologically: "strong" and "weak" meaning *feel* the same, since strong meaning is simply a genealogical misapprehension about weak meaning. In short, any account of strong meaning as stronger than weak meaning would be guilty of the very fallacy Nietzsche identifies when he reminds us that "the real world" is only "this world once again" (11:50, 1887). As a consequence, the "strong" sense of meaning is meaningless: it makes meaning rest in being, and this is a category mistake because meaning can only be the *attribute* of a being: in short, by requiring that meaning be guaranteed by a meaningless entity (a thing-in-itself, which, Nietzsche argues, means nothing to anyone), the strong notion of meaning commits itself to an infinite regress: any thing that supports meaning will do so because of its meaning, and this meaning will have to rest upon something that it is not. The weak notion of meaning that I propose here, however, escapes the infinite regress because it does not make meaning rest upon the meaningless, but unto itself: meaning does not need any other justification than itself. If we return to fiction, this suggests that fiction should not be regarded as an *imitation* of any

pre-existing real-world. This would be to stand the proper genealogy of truth on its head. Rather, the opposite is the case: what we mean by *real* is a kind of what we mean by *fiction*, and we learn to take things to be real through a genealogical process (which includes nihilistic power grabs such as the slave revolt in morality) which has the experience of fiction as its origin.

It seems therefore that the genealogical account of the thing-in-itself as a construction derived from the experience of meaningful objects shows that any strong notion of meaning only refers to the weak notion of meaning in a distorted, and ultimately untenable, way. What has changed of course, in the process in which weak meaning has been falsified into strong meaning, is not the existence of meaning, but the meta-theory at work: we have become deluded about what the experience of meaning *means*: we now understand the experience of meaning in our lives as proof of the existence of an objective source of meaning and further, we make it conditional on this existence. This relates, of course, to the synchronic notion of nihilism identified by Van Tongeren: even at the early stage of civilization, where such objective grounds of meaning (i.e., god) were not yet questioned, Nietzsche mentioned that nihilism was already at work. This was because, I argue, the view that meaning is dependent on objectivity had already gained dominance. The diachronic phenomenon of nihilism remains latent as long as this objective ground is taken for granted, and becomes triggered when the objective ground becomes questioned. All of this suggests that the question of nihilism is the question of whether we feel that our life has meaning, and that the two historically acquired beliefs, namely that meaning has to have an objective grounding and that this grounding is lacking, can affect this feeling. This emotional characterization of the overcoming of nihilism allows us to see that even the cognitivist is committed (unbeknownst to herself) not to objectivism, but to meaning as a qualitative experience.

In addition, let me point out that it allows us to see that any attempt to discount the model of fiction by objecting that fiction produces meaning in the sense of signification but not meaning in the sense of value or purposes will fail, since emotions are the common ground of



both senses of meaning and regards them as two kinds of the general notion of meaning as “counting-as.”<sup>10</sup> Van Tongeren and other cognitivist commentators of nihilism accept Nietzsche’s point whereby “the thing in itself is a contradiction” (BGE 16). They do, *ipso facto*, accept the subsequent thesis that any reference to the thing-in-itself can only be cashed out in experiential terms, and therefore undermines itself: it fails to reach the thing-in-itself. This also suggests that the difference between the cognitivist and the hermeneutic account of meaning is not a difference between two *kinds* of meanings. Rather, they are two competing accounts of one single experience which is the experience of meaning in general. What distinguishes them is the genealogical account that they rely upon. The cognitivist account, as I pointed out earlier, amounts to insisting that meaning is, by definition, always premised on truth. The hermeneutic thesis presupposes that the experience of meaning as cognitivist is a fallacious derivation of the experience of meaning as hermeneutic. The transformation is explained by a combination of the essence of the will to power as interpretation and a cultural event, the slave revolt, which initiated the cultural habit of regarding meaning as dependent on truth. This should show that the weak sense of meaning carried by the hermeneutic thesis in no way makes it a second-rate kind of meaning, perhaps a poor man’s solution to the crisis of nihilism: it is, after all, meant as the *only* account of meaning.

It is hard to deny that the required emotional possibilities are indeed deployed by fiction (including weak myths). Indeed, our ability to engage with fiction regardless of truth has been thematised in contemporary aesthetics as the famed “paradox of the emotional response to fiction.”<sup>11</sup> A paradox, of course, only from the perspective of those who, like Van Tongeren, take for granted the cognitivist thesis (i.e., most

<sup>10</sup> Susan Haack, “The Pragmatist Theory of Truth,” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 27, no 3 (1976): 231-49. See also William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1929, 1975), and Charles Sanders Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” *Popular Science Monthly* 12, no 1 (1877): 1-15.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Radford, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 49 (1975): 67-93

philosophers of aesthetics, probably most philosophers, in both our, and Nietzsche's, times). Discussion surrounding the paradox of fiction have become a large sub-field of aesthetics (especially in the analytic tradition) but also of logic and metaphysics, starting at least with Meinong.<sup>12</sup> The standard account of the paradox uses the case of Anna Karenina jumping to her death in front of a train and the emotions this literary scene evokes in the reader. How can a fictional drama give rise to real-world emotions? Jerrold Levinson's formulation of the paradox is most rigorous: "a) We often have emotions for fictional characters and situations known to be purely fictional; (b) Emotions for objects logically presuppose beliefs in the existence and features of the objects in question; (c) We do not harbour beliefs in the existence and features of objects known to be fictional."<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the distinction I am throwing into the mix between a hermeneutic and a cognitivist view of meaning disables the paradox is a separate issue. For now, the solutions of the paradox matter little. The main point for our purposes is that a) any notion of emotions that relies on cognitivism will run into the paradox and b) this paradox points out that (in purportedly 'irrational' ways) we do, in fact, engage emotionally with phenomena which we know to be fictional: in short, we do not need to believe in the objective meaning of any fictional event in order to *live according* to said meaning (at least while the engagement lasts) and c) therefore, that there is indeed a distinction between the hermeneutic notion of meaning and the cognitivist one. Therefore, the fictional model allows us to problematize not just whether *there is* meaning (the question asked by the cognitivists including Van Tongeren) but what meaning *means*: when nihilism expounds the meaninglessness of life, does it argue that there is no meaning in the hermeneutic sense or in the cognitivist sense? For Nietzsche, it seems obvious that it is at least the latter: god is dead, but even nihilism cannot deny that fictions still exist, that interpretations of the world still take place. The question,

<sup>12</sup> Alexius Meinong, *Über Annahmen* (Leipzig: Barth Verlag, 1910).

<sup>13</sup> Jerrold Levinson "Emotion in Response to Art," in Levinson, *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 38-55.

therefore, is: does the vanishing of meaning in the *cognitivist* sense suffice to entail the vanishing of any sense of being at home in the world? My appeal to the fictional model suggests that it does not.

### 3.3. *Nihilism Redefined: The Cognitivist Thesis of Nihilism*

From the discussion of the fictional model, it follows most importantly that nihilism defined as the awareness that there is no meaning objectively grounded is different from nihilism defined as the impossibility to feel at home in the world, or the impossibility to live a meaningful life. Indeed, the first no longer leads into the other. I started by pointing out that there are two textual points sacrificed by Van Tongeren's reading of nihilism. The first is the fact that Nietzsche continuously keeps open the possibility, and most of the time, the project, of overcoming nihilism after the death of god. The second is Van Tongeren's de-emphasis of some sense of nihilism in spite of his most subtle, sensitive and comprehensive account of a great diversity of such senses. More attention to these two points suggests that they conflict with Van Tongeren's reading: a) theism is not necessarily the solution to nihilism, and b) nihilism may be overcome. These two points pull in opposite directions: the first suggests that nihilism is more deeply set than expected, theism is not sufficient to save us from it. The second suggests that it is less deeply set than expected, as it can be overcome. This places some stress on another aspect of nihilism which was registered by Van Tongeren himself: namely, as I noted above, that Nietzsche sometimes refers to Nihilism as a synchronic possibility, and some other times, as the historical actualization of this possibility, by the coming to dominance of the ideology informed by this possibility. I suggest that the common denominator for all these versions of nihilism is the cognitivist thesis. In particular, this does justice to the idea that nihilism can be either latent or dominant, since nihilism is defined as a *thesis*, and therefore may or may not, according to circumstances, become dominant and inform cultures and ideologies; it may or may not, given circumstances, become triggered (by the discovery of the illusory character of truth or god for example); and may or may not, given psychological circumstance, result in a psycho-physical illness. Secondly, it is naturally

fit to account for the possibility of overcoming nihilism after the death of god since overcoming nihilism means overcoming the false belief that life is only meaningful if god makes it so. Finally, it accommodates the view that theism is nihilistic, albeit latently, because of its commitment to cognitivism.

This allows us to propose a new definition of nihilism, namely, that nihilism is the cognitivist thesis. It is a thesis not about the world (e.g., a thesis about whether there are objectively real sources of meaning such as “god”), or about life (e.g., whether our lives are meaningful), rather, it is a thesis about what meaning means. Nihilism is the view that all meaning is dependent on an objective truth (and different phases of it may be distinguished in terms of their conjunction with the belief that such truth is not forthcoming), and the adjective ‘nihilistic’ refers to any form of life, or any worldview that is informed by this thesis. Secondly, it allows us to show that this thesis fails and therefore that nihilism can be overcome (provided the required cultural-historical events).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Van Tongeren’s book will serve as the new paradigm for discussing Nietzsche’s analysis of nihilism. In this paper, I have focused on one of his arguments in the book. Van Tongeren argues that:

- 1) Nihilism is the experience of the meaninglessness of existence.
- 2) It is impossible to believe in god anymore.
- 3) It is impossible to believe in any substitute for god anymore (self-referentiality argument).
- 4) Therefore, nihilism is unsurmountable.

I argue that this does not follow unless we add an additional, hidden premise, namely

- 1\*) The experience of meaning is dependent on the belief in the existence of an object that justifies that experience (the cognitivist assumption).

I subsequently argue that:

- 5) 1\*) Is dubious and
- 6) It is dubious that Nietzsche held 1\*)
- 7) One may replace 1\*) with 1\*\*): “The experience of meaning is *not necessarily* dependent on the belief in the existence of an object that justifies that experience” (the hermeneutic daim).

I conclude that it is possible to take seriously the passages in which Nietzsche considers the possibility of overcoming nihilism on the condition that we accept that nihilism cannot be directly overcome, rather, cognitivism — the habit or wanting to support our experience of meaning with a god — must be overcome first.

More broadly, and on this basis, I would like to suggest (alas, without further substantiation), that this opens up a series of possibilities that I think are precious both for Nietzsche studies and for the philosophical problem of nihilism at large:

- One could cast many of Nietzsche’s passages as efforts to refute the cognitivist thesis and/or to promote the hermeneutic thesis.
- One could cast many of Nietzsche’s genealogical analyses as analyses of the coming to dominance of the cognitivist thesis, and how it underpins modern despair.
- One could cast the figure of the “Übermensch” as the kind of human for whom the experience of meaningfulness in life is no longer dependent on a truth-belief.
- That Nietzsche’s well-known calls for *Redlichkeit* and responsibility could be cast as appeals for us to take responsibility for producing the meaning of our lives, instead of the ascetic fashion of passively going along with the meanings made possible by discoveries or beliefs about the world taken to be independent from ourselves.
- Overcoming nihilism means overcoming the cognitivist world-view.

KEYWORDS: Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Van Tongeren, nihilism, meaning, will to power.

#### SUMMARY

In this paper I attempt, firstly, to provide an analysis of Paul van Tongeren's theory of nihilism and, secondly, to offer a critical examination of the assumptions it relies on. I argue that his account of nihilism presupposes that our lives are meaningful only if some existent and independent object makes them so. I call this the cognitivist thesis (Van Tongeren himself does not use this phrase). I question this assumption by pointing out that this is a mischaracterization of the experience of meaning. I argue that in this context, the cost of Van Tongeren's decision to cast aside the texts in which Nietzsche talks of the overcoming of nihilism is not justified. Rather, we should take seriously the possibility entertained in these passages. I conclude that the possibility of overcoming nihilism remains open, on condition that we shed the cognitivist habit of expecting that the meaning of our lives be underwritten objectively.