

Diagnosis Without Destiny: Why Nihilism May Conclude Inquiry but Cannot Guide It

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This paper defends a categorical distinction that contemporary debates often blur: nihilism is a terminal inference about justification, not a teleology for life or inquiry. As a verdict, nihilism names the collapse of particular justificatory projects—claims about final causes in nature, stance-independent moral truth, or ultimate meaning. As a telos, by contrast, it would have to function as an aim that organizes deliberation and action. Promoting the former into the latter generates a distinctive performative pathology: the attempt to “aim at nothing” reinstates aim; to organize one’s life around the absence of organization reintroduces organization as a standard of success and failure. After sharpening the concepts of conclusion, telos, teleology, and teleonomy, the paper traces how the conflation recurs in four sites—metaethics (error theory as verdict, not vocation), existential reflection (the absurd as diagnosis rather than lifestyle), scientific naturalism (method without metaphysical mandate), and social practices (fragility without futility). The constructive upshot is a model of non-foundational teleology: purposes that are local, practice-embedded, and revisable, grounded in projects, institutions of mutual accountability, and teleonomic notions of function and control. This reframing preserves the full bite of nihilistic conclusions while blocking their incoherent elevation into creeds. Diagnosis is not destiny: conclusions may end arguments without dictating how agents must live.

Keywords: nihilism, teleology, teleonomy, performative contradiction, error theory, metaethics, existentialism, absurd, scientific naturalism, function, constructivism, pragmatism, practices, repair, normativity, meaning in life.

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Note: See the Epilogue for a contradiction.

Part I — Framing the Problem

1. Introduction: Verdicts, Ends, and Category Mistakes

This essay defends a simple claim with wide consequences: **nihilism is a kind of terminal inference, not a telos**. By “terminal inference” I mean a verdict reached at the end of some inquiry—e.g., that there are no objective moral properties; that life lacks ultimate significance; that nature contains no final causes. By “telos” I mean a guiding end or practical orientation, the sort of thing that structures deliberation, confers reasons, and coordinates action. Conflating these two roles produces a distinctive error. When a verdict is treated as an aim—when one proposes to “live nihilistically”—the proposal **performs** what its content denies. Aiming at nothingness reintroduces aim; elevating “no purpose” into a purpose reimports purposiveness through the back door. The result is not merely unedifying; it is **performatively self-undermining**.

The conflation is common. In metaethics, skeptical verdicts about objective value are taken to mandate amorality (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001). In existential reflection, recognition of the absurd is stylized into a posture—sometimes theatrical, sometimes despairing—rather than kept as diagnosis (Camus 1942/1991; Nagel 1971). In naturalistic philosophy of science, a methodological bracketing of teleology becomes a metaphysical ban on ends in any register (Mayr 1961; Monod 1971; Dennett 1995). Even in social practices, awareness of the contingency and fragility of norms is mistaken for futility, as if the absence of absolutes entailed the impossibility of accountable action (Williams 1985; Habermas 1990).

Two clarifications up front. First, the thesis is **compatible** with severe, even devastating conclusions. To insist that nihilism is a verdict is not to blunt its force. If certain justificatory structures fail, they fail. The claim is only that failure of foundation is not itself a foundation for a life-program; it neither prescribes paralysis nor sanctifies defiance as a goal. Second, the thesis does **not** smuggle in realism or theological teleology. The constructive proposal later in the paper—**non-foundational teleology**—makes room for purposiveness that is local, practice-embedded, and revisable without pretending to cosmic guarantees (Wolf 2010; Metz 2013; Millikan 1984; Dennett 1987).

Methodologically, the paper combines three moves. (i) **Conceptual analysis**: disambiguating conclusion from telos, and distinguishing teleology from teleonomy (function, goal-directedness without final causes). (ii) **Speech-act diagnostics**: identifying when content is defeated by the pragmatic presuppositions of its assertion or enactment (Austin 1962; Habermas 1990). (iii) **Case-based argument**: showing, in metaethics, existential reflection, scientific naturalism, and social practices, how the confusion arises and how to block it. The pay-off is not merely

defensive. Reframing nihilism as an inference **opens** space for projects, practices, and repair—as forms of purposiveness honest about their finitude.

The remainder of Part I maps the terrain and makes the performative point precise. Part II then tracks the conflation across four sites. Part III sketches a positive picture of **non-foundational teleologies**—projects, practices, and teleonomy. Part IV addresses objections and situates the view in contemporary debates.

2. Conceptual Cartography

2.1 Conclusion vs. Telos

A **conclusion** is a role within reasoning: it is what follows from premises, or the deliverance of disciplined observation. Conclusions can be warranted, provisional, or catastrophic; what matters is their inferential status. A **telos**, by contrast, is a role within practice: a guiding end that organizes deliberation and action, grounds standards of success and failure, and orients projects over time. The point is not merely lexical. Conflating the two roles invites a **category mistake**: importing the grammar of ends into the space of verdicts (or vice versa).

The slogan “Nihilism is a reasonable conclusion, but never a teleology” compresses this distinction. It bars two errors: (a) inferring a way of life from the **content** of a negative verdict (“therefore, live for nothing”), and (b) supposing that **adopting** the verdict as an end can render it livable (“I shall pursue nothingness”). In both cases, the practical form defeats the theoretical content.

2.2 A Taxonomy of Nihilisms

It is helpful to disaggregate “nihilism” into at least four familiar kinds:

- **Metaphysical nihilism**: denial of ultimate essences or final causes; nature lacks inherent purpose.
- **Moral (metaethical) nihilism**: denial that moral claims answer to stance-independent truth-makers (error theory: moral discourse presupposes such truth-makers, hence is systematically in error).
- **Existential nihilism**: denial that life as a whole possesses ultimate or cosmic significance.
- **Methodological nihilism** (a misnomer but useful): the anti-teleological **method** of modern science mistakenly read as an ontological or existential injunction.

Each is a **verdict-type**. None, as such, is a **program**. The characteristic mistake arises when the verdict is **promoted** into a telos (“live without purpose,” “act as if nothing matters,” “banish ends because science omits them”).

2.3 Teleology, Teleonomy, and Function

“Teleology” is ambiguous. In the Aristotelian tradition, it names final causes—ends intrinsic to beings or processes. In contemporary biology and cognitive science, explanatory practice often employs **teleonomic** vocabulary—function, goal-directedness, control—without positing robust final causes (Mayr 1961). On etiological accounts, functions are selected effects; on Cummins-style accounts, functions are contributions to system capacities (Millikan 1984; Cummins 1975). Dennett’s “design stance” shows how purposive description can be licensed by system organization and predictive payoff, not by metaphysical teloi (Dennett 1987, 1995).

This distinction matters for two reasons. First, it shows that **purposive talk** need not smuggle in cosmic teleology. Second, it undercuts the slide from anti-teleological **method** to anti-teleological **life**. One can reject final causes in nature while making, using, and evaluating **ends** in practice.

2.4 Verdict, Vocation, Stance, Posture

We also need a small lexicon. A **verdict** is the product of inquiry; a **vocation** is a practical identity that shapes one’s ends; a **stance** (following Dennett, but also “stance” in the everyday sense) is a systematic orientation that governs interpretation and action; a **posture** is a stylized stance, often self-consciously aestheticized. Much confusion about nihilism arises when a verdict (e.g., “no objective values”) hardens into a stance or posture (“I will live as if nothing binds”), thereby becoming indistinguishable from a vocation. That hardening is the point at which the performative problem appears.

3. The Performative Pathology

3.1 Performative Defeat

Some utterances and enactments are **self-defeating** not because their propositional content is false but because the **conditions of their successful performance** contradict that content. Classic examples include “I am not speaking” (spoken aloud), or a promise to “never make promises.” Austin’s and Searle’s analyses of speech acts, and Habermas’s work on the pragmatic presuppositions of communication, give us the tools to describe such defeat (Austin 1962; Habermas 1990).

The nihilism-at-telos mistake is performatively self-defeating in this manner. To **adopt** “nothingness” as an end is to exercise purposive capacities—commitment, planning, self-regulation—in service of the **negation of purposiveness**. The content (“no ends”) is undermined by the act (taking an end). To **aim** at living without aim is to make aim operative; to **organize** one’s life around disorganization is to reintroduce organization.

The point is not that one must always practice what one preaches, but that some preachments cannot be **practiced** as preachments without contradiction. Treating nihilism as a creed belongs to this class. A nihilistic **verdict** can be stated, defended, even embraced as conclusion; but when it is proposed as a **vocation**, the form defeats the content.

3.2 Distinguishing Incoherence from Austerity

Not every austere or unsentimental view is performatively self-defeating. One can consistently hold that many cherished notions lack foundations, or that meaning is contingent, or that morality lacks stance-independent truth, without contradiction. The problem arises when the negative verdict is **normatively upgraded** into a target state: the deliberate pursuit of non-pursuit, the valorization of vacancy, the posture of anti-posture.

A useful diagnostic: ask whether the view makes sense as a **criterion for success**. If so, the view has entered the telic register. “Live without ends” cannot be a criterion for success without reinstating the category of success. “Organize your life around the absence of organization” cannot guide self-assessment without reinstating organization. Where the view collapses under such self-application, we have a performative pathology.

3.3 Why the Pathology Recurs

Three pressures drive the recurring mistake.

(i) The Need for Practical Closure. Severe conclusions solicit responses. One natural, but misguided, response is to make the conclusion itself into the response: let the verdict tell us what to do by making it what we do. This transforms verdict into vocation.

(ii) Aestheticization. Especially in existential contexts, the rhetoric of despair, irony, or defiance offers a style of life that seems to honor the verdict. But styles are telic—they set standards, curate attitudes, reward exemplars. Posture supplies what the verdict denies.

(iii) Overreach from Method to Metaphysics. In science and in certain forms of philosophical analysis, the bracketing of ends is a productive **methodological** constraint. It is tempting to universalize the constraint into an existential injunction. The result is a normative overreach: from “explain without telos” to “live without ends.”

Part II now shows how these pressures play out across four sites and how to block the slide from conclusion to telos.

Part II — Four Sites of Conflation

4. Metaethics: Error Theory as Epistemic Verdict

4.1 The Verdict

Error theory, as developed by Mackie (1977) and elaborated by Joyce (2001), maintains that ordinary moral judgments purport to ascribe objective, categorical reasons or values, but reality contains no such properties. Hence, strictly speaking, ordinary moral assertions are false. This is a **verdict** about the semantics and metaphysics of moral discourse, grounded in arguments from queerness, relativity, and explanatory superfluity.

4.2 The Illicit Promotion

The slide occurs when the error-theoretic verdict is **promoted** into a program: if there are no objective values, then one **ought** to abandon morality, or treat all norms as impostures, or live as an amoralist. The formulation is revealing: it imports the very “ought” that the verdict disavows. Even non-imperative versions (“Live as if nothing binds”) reinstall bindingness at the level of self-directive commitment. The pathology is clearest when the recommendation takes on the grammar of **exemplarhood** (“the clear-sighted amoralist”), thereby generating standards of success and failure within the anti-standard posture.

4.3 Blocking the Slide

Three strategies resist the slide without denying the verdict’s bite.

(i) Expressivist and Quasi-Realist Routes. Blackburn and Gibbard read moral discourse as the expression and regulation of attitudes. One can surrender stance-independent truth while preserving a sophisticated normative practice undergirded by commitments we avow, share, and hold each other to. The “as-if” trappings of objectivity can be reconstructed as practical projections rather than metaphysical posits.

(ii) Constructivist and Second-Personal Routes. Street and Korsgaard treat reasons as rooted in the standpoint of valuing agents and the demands they cannot reject on pain of self-defeat. This preserves normativity as **answerability** within agency and community, without recourse to robust realism.

(iii) **Practice-First Routes.** Williams's critique of "moral theory" and his emphasis on the **genealogy** of our ethical life orient us to practices and projects in which reasons are lived, negotiated, and repaired. Authority is **pragmatic and interpersonal**, not cosmic.

On all three routes, nihilism remains a **verdict** about a certain metaphysical picture, not a **vocation**. Error theory may be true; adopting it as a telos remains incoherent.

5. Existential Reflection: The Absurd as Diagnosis

5.1 The Diagnosis

Call "existential nihilism" the claim that life lacks ultimate significance. Camus's "absurd"—the collision between our demand for meaning and the world's silence—is paradigmatic (Camus 1942/1991). Nagel's analysis similarly frames the absurd as a structural feature of reflective life: we can always step back from our engagements and see their contingency (Nagel 1971). Both are **diagnoses** of a predicament.

5.2 The Stylized Posture

The familiar slide is to adopt the absurd as a **posture** or program: to "live absurdly," to curate detachment or defiance as one's guiding identity. The posture is attractive precisely because it offers **closure**—a way to be faithful to the diagnosis. But stylistic fidelity is telic. It has exemplars and failures, virtues and vices. The absurd becomes the very kind of aim it denies.

Camus's own counsel can be read as an attempt to block the slide. "Revolt"—refusing both suicide and philosophical escape—is not the glorification of absurdity as an end, but a **refusal to let the diagnosis dictate paralysis**. The absurd is a terminus in argument, not a **program** of life.

5.3 After Diagnosis

What, then, follows? The conceptual room cleared by the diagnosis is space for **projects** and **practices** whose authority is enacted rather than deduced from cosmic foundations. Williams's reflection on the "necessities of our condition" underscores that attachment, risk, conflict, and partiality are not defects to be overcome by ultimacy but the media of significance (Williams 1985). To insist that such significance must be **ultimate** before it can be real is to refuse the condition in which meaning is lived.

6. Scientific Naturalism: Method Without Metaphysical Mandate

6.1 Anti-Teleological Method

Modern science explains phenomena without appeal to final causes. Darwin rendered design explicable by selection; physics prefers laws and symmetries to goals. Mayr distinguishes **teleology** (final causes) from **teleonomy** (apparent purposefulness grounded in program-controlled processes). Monod emphasizes “chance and necessity” rather than cosmic intent. These are methodological and explanatory commitments.

6.2 The Illicit Mandate

The slide is to read the method as an **existential mandate**: because science brackets teleology, human life must eschew ends. This overreach is often tacit. We see it in the rhetoric that treats purposive description as necessarily unscientific, or in blanket suspicion of normative vocabulary as “merely subjective.” The effect is to derive a **global norm** (“ban ends”) from a **local heuristic** (“explain without final causes”).

6.3 Blocking the Slide

Two reminders suffice.

First, science itself is **purposive**. Research programs, experimental design, peer review, pedagogy—all are structured by ends. The practice of inquiry belies the existential injunction drawn from its method.

Second, contemporary philosophy of biology and mind has shown how purposive description can be legitimated **naturalistically**. Teleonomic and functional vocabularies license talk of goals, success and failure, proper function, and error without invoking final causes (Cummins 1975; Millikan 1984; Dennett 1987). The space is therefore open for **non-foundational teleology**: ends that are real in practice, intelligible in naturalistic terms, and revisable.

7. Social Practices: Fragility ≠ Futility

7.1 The Worry

Once one appreciates the contingency and contestability of practices—law, art, science, education—it is tempting to despair of their authority. If the standards are historically situated and open to criticism, do they not lack the kind of necessity that could **bind** us?

7.2 The Reply

Fragility need not entail futility. Practices generate **intra-practice standards**—of success and failure, of better and worse—that are intelligible precisely because the practice is shared, taught, and repaired. Their authority is **pragmatic and second-personal**: agents hold one another to expectations indexed to roles and projects. Even when practices are reformed, the **idea of better and worse** remains. The fact that a norm is revisable does not render it void; it renders it **answerable**.

Here the notion of **repair** (broadly construed) becomes central. The work of fixing what is broken—institutions, relationships, ecosystems, arguments—exhibits purposiveness in its most grounded form: directionality oriented by need and responsibility rather than by metaphysical ultimates. Repair does not deny the verdict that foundations are absent. It **inhabits** that verdict and makes something of it.

Transitional Remark. Parts I–II have argued that (i) nihilism is best understood as a family of verdicts, not a telos; (ii) treating it as a telos yields a performative pathology; and (iii) across metaethics, existential reflection, scientific naturalism, and social practices, the same slide from conclusion to program recurs and can be blocked. Part III develops the constructive alternative—**non-foundational teleologies**—in terms of projects, practices, and teleonomy, and articulates a decision procedure for moving from verdict to orientation without contradiction.

Part III — Reconstructing Teleology Without Foundations

8. Non-Foundational Teleologies I: Projects

Projects are the most familiar carriers of purposiveness. They range from the intimate (cultivating a friendship, learning an instrument) to the institutional (running a lab, drafting legislation) and the civic (organizing a neighborhood clinic). What distinguishes **projects** is not metaphysical pedigree but **normative structure**: they articulate ends, specify means, establish criteria of success and failure, and unfold diachronically under plans that can be revised without voiding the enterprise. A project's authority is **enacted** in commitment and coordination rather than derived from stance-independent reasons.

Three features matter for our purposes.

First, projects exhibit **directionality without ultimacy**. A string quartet rehearses to refine ensemble, intonation, and interpretation—standards internal to the activity. If the quartet later pivots from Beethoven to Shostakovich, the earlier ends were not illusory; they were locally

binding and retrospectively intelligible. Second, projects support **credible assessment**. We can say that a plan was ill-chosen, that an effort failed, that a choice improved the outcome. Such judgments presuppose standards internal to the project—not cosmic necessity. Third, projects are **interpersonally legible**. They create roles, expectations, and obligations indexed to participation (the first violin owes the ensemble preparation; the PI owes the team clarity and credit). That legibility grounds the second-personal nexus of reasons—*you may ask this of me because we are in this together*—without appeal to absolute warrants.

When nihilistic verdicts are kept as verdicts, projects supply the **first** post-diagnostic path: they show how purposiveness can be lived as **practice of planning** and **practice of revision**. Aiming is not made incoherent by the absence of the ultimate; it is made **answerable** to feedback, failure, and repair.

9. Non-Foundational Teleologies II: Practices

Where projects can be individuated by agents and aims, **practices** are historically sedimented forms of activity with standards of excellence, apprenticeship, and shared goods (law, medicine, science, the arts, teaching). Practices are not merely aggregations of projects; they are scaffolds within which projects acquire point. The authority of a practice is **intra-practical**: a piece of legal reasoning is better or worse by legal standards; a proof is elegant or clumsy by mathematical standards; an experiment is well- or poorly-designed by disciplinary standards. Such standards evolve under criticism, but the very possibility of critique presupposes **continuity** of point.

Two dimensions are especially salient.

Accountability. Practices are sites of **second-personal address**: peers demand reasons, students demand explanations, the public demands justification. In Habermasian terms, validity claims are raised and can be redeemed or defeated in discourse, not by invoking metaphysical absolutes but by meeting practice-internal expectations of coherence, evidence, and fairness. Accountability is thus a structural source of normativity.

Repair. Practices institutionalize mechanisms for learning from failure—peer review, appellate courts, replication studies, artistic revision. **Repair** is not an afterthought but a constitutive mode of purposiveness: it renders ends **revisable without collapse**, maintains standards through change, and converts fragility into a resource for improvement. Far from undermining normativity, revisability enables it.

Practices thereby supply the **second** post-diagnostic path: purposiveness as **mutual answerability** over time. If the nihilist's verdict is that there are no absolutes, the practice-based

reply is not “therefore anything goes,” but “therefore everything must be justified *here*, to *these* standards, under *these* responsibilities.”

10. Non-Foundational Teleologies III: Teleonomy

A persistent suspicion holds that purposive description is unscientific. The teleonomy literature shows otherwise. **Teleonomic** accounts explain goal-directed behavior and functional organization without positing final causes. On etiological views, a trait’s **proper function** is the effect for which it was selected; misfiring and malfunction are intelligible as deviations from that historical role. On Cummins-style accounts, a component’s function is its **contribution** to a system capacity, licensed by explanatory decomposition. Dennett’s “design stance” exploits the predictive utility of attributing goals to complex systems (from thermostats to chess programs to organisms) without committing to spooky teleoi.

Two payoffs follow.

First, teleonomy legitimates **purposive vocabulary**—aim, success, error, regulation—in naturalistic registers. A bacterial chemotaxis system “seeks” higher nutrient concentration in a model-usable sense; a hippocampal circuit “aims” at place encoding with quantifiable success and failure. Second, teleonomy enables **continuity** between biological, cognitive, and social levels: the same explanatory grammar can apply (with care) to artifacts and institutions whose functions are design- or practice-dependent.

This matters because it undercuts the familiar overreach from anti-teleological method to anti-teleological life. If purposive talk is **licensed** by function and control, then purposiveness need not be metaphysically ultimate to be real. Teleonomy thus supplies the **third** post-diagnostic path: purposiveness as **organized control** in complex systems, compatible with naturalism and with the non-foundational character of practical ends.

11. From Verdict to Orientation: A Decision Procedure

To operationalize the foregoing, consider a **decision procedure** for moving from nihilistic verdict to coherent practical orientation:

1. **Identify the Verdict-Type.** Is the conclusion metaphysical (no final causes), moral (no stance-independent values), existential (no ultimate meaning), or methodological (anti-teleological explanation)? Precision here prevents domain overreach.
2. **Quarantine Category Drift.** Ask: *Am I promoting the verdict into a criterion for success or a guiding identity?* If yes, stop. This is the performative slide.

3. Select the Post-Diagnostic Path.

- If the problem is **local purposelessness** (what now?), adopt a **project** frame: articulate finite ends, standards, and plans susceptible to revision.
 - If the problem is **interpersonal accountability** (how justify?), adopt a **practice** frame: locate relevant standards, interlocutors, and repair mechanisms.
 - If the problem is **explanatory legitimacy** (may I speak of aims?), adopt a **teleonomy** frame: specify functions, success conditions, control structures.
4. **Institute Feedback and Repair.** Build in checkpoints for failure modes (wishful thinking, self-exemption, aestheticized resignation). Make revision a virtue, not a defeat.
5. **Reassess the Verdict.** Over time, check whether the original conclusion has been misread as program. If so, demote it back to verdict and recalibrate orientation accordingly.

The procedure is not algorithmic; it is a **discipline of self-governance** aimed at avoiding the category mistake that generates performative defeat.

Part IV — Objections, Alternatives, Horizons

12. Objections and Replies (Expanded)

12.1 Quietism (“Why not stop?”).

If foundations collapse, perhaps the only honest response is to withhold commitment. But **withholding** is itself a stance with practical consequences; it structures choices, opportunities, and dependencies. Moreover, the quietist cannot exempt herself from the second-personal claims of others without **performing** the very normative moves she disavows (promising to abstain, justifying refusals, demanding forbearance). Quietism underestimates how agency is **inescapably teleic** at the level of form.

12.2 Relativism / “Anything Goes.”

If ends are local, are they arbitrary? No. Practices embed **non-optional constraints**: evidence must be responsibly handled; instruments calibrated; arguments valid; patients consented. Violations are legible as **failures**, not merely differences. That the standards are historically contingent does not make them optional; it makes them **answerable** to reasons, criticism, and improvement.

12.3 Smuggling Normativity.

Isn’t talk of standards and repair just a backdoor realism? The charge presupposes that

normativity requires **stance-independent** foundations. Our view denies that presupposition. Standards are avowed, upheld, and revised within practices; their force is second-personal and functional, not metaphysical. Because the avowal is **overt**, there is no smuggling.

12.4 Constitutivist Rival.

Constitutivists (Korsgaard, Enoch) argue that agency itself delivers necessity: to be an agent is to be bound by certain norms. Our picture is ecumenical about such necessities: if they help articulate practice-internal standards, fine; if not, they are **not required**. The key point is that we need not secure normativity by demonstrating that *any* agent must be bound; we need to show how *these* agents bind **one another** under **these** ends.

12.5 Tragedy and Conflict.

Non-foundational teleology seems ill-equipped for tragic conflict—cases where goods collide without common measure. But the view explains tragedy as **real and unrecoverable loss** precisely because there is no ultimate court of appeal. Repair here does not erase the wound; it reorients agency around **acknowledged damage**, which itself can become a site of purpose.

13. Comparative Positions

13.1 Robust Realisms (Enoch, Parfit).

Realists secure normative authority by positing stance-independent truths. This delivers clarity about error and convergence, but at metaphysical and epistemic cost. Our view trades absoluteness for **practice-anchored authority**: less metaphysical heft, more phenomenological fit with how reasons are made and contested in lived inquiry.

13.2 Error-Theoretic Amoralism.

When developed as a program, amoralism repeats the performative slide. As a verdict, it spurs constructive alternatives: expressivism, constructivism, practice-first approaches. Our view is a **meta-diagnostic** of that dialectic.

13.3 Neo-Nietzschean Anti-Normativity.

Some readings valorize will to power as the only currency. But valorization is already normative; ranking strengths and despising weakness instantiates standards and exemplars. To the extent these are practice-internal, they fall under our schema; to the extent they claim to trump all other practices, they court performative self-defeat.

13.4 Pragmatist Allies.

Deweyan and contemporary pragmatisms are natural allies: inquiry as problem-solving, norms as tools subject to revision, truth tethered to success in practice. Our contribution is the

performative diagnostic focused on the nihilism/telos confusion and the explicit triad of **projects–practices–teleonomy**.

14. Implications Beyond Philosophy

14.1 Philosophy of Religion.

If nihilism is a verdict, not a rival telos, the burden shifts. The theist need not show that only God averts nihilism by supplying ultimate purpose; the secularist need not show that meaning flourishes without ultimacy. Both can recognize **plural teleologies** enacted in finite lives. The contest becomes comparative: which forms of life and community best sustain **repair, accountability, and mutual recognition?**

14.2 Meaning in Life.

Wolf’s “reasons of love” and Metz’s pluralist accounts fit neatly: meaning arises from **subjective attraction to objectively worth-while projects**, where “objective” cashes out as practice-internal standards and social uptake, not cosmic mandate. Our view clarifies why meaning threatens to collapse only when one demands ultimacy; remove that demand, and meaning becomes a **task**, not a metaphysical condition.

14.3 Pedagogy and Research Design.

Teaching and inquiry are paradigms of non-foundational teleology. Curricula articulate ends while remaining revisable; labs pursue questions under constraints that evolve; evaluation distinguishes better from worse without sacralizing standards. Explicitly thematizing repair inoculates against both cynicism (nothing matters) and dogmatism (absolutes everywhere).

15. Conclusion: Diagnosis Is Not Destiny (Reprise)

Across domains, the temptation is perennial: convert a severe verdict into a life-program and thereby seek existential closure. The result is performatively self-defeating: **aiming at non-aim** reinstates aim; **organizing around disorganization** reinstates organization. The alternative is neither metaphysical consolation nor cheerful denial. It is the discipline of **keeping verdicts as verdicts** while living purposiveness through **projects, practices, and teleonomy**. On this view, nihilism is taken with full seriousness—as terminal inference where arguments run out—yet denied the promotion that would make it incoherent. Diagnosis is not destiny.

Epilogue (Contradiction): This Is What You Get Without Christianity

Everything I have argued now reverses. Strip away Christianity's thick teleological frame and the very distinction I have defended—**verdict vs. telos**—does not merely blur; it **collapses by necessity**. Without a substantive picture of the good that is prior to our choosing, verdicts are fated to be lived as vocations, and postures harden into programs. The performative snare I diagnosed becomes not a mistake to avoid but the **default grammar of late secular agency**.

Here is the counter-thesis:

1. **Without Christianity, conclusions cannot remain merely conclusions.** The habit of keeping verdicts as verdicts presupposes an orientation stable enough to *receive* them as such. In Christianity, that stability is secured by an antecedent telos—creational good, the imago Dei, a final horizon of judgment and mercy. Remove that horizon and every negative verdict (**no cosmic meaning, no stance-independent value, no final causes**) immediately seeks embodiment as a way of life, because nothing stands upstream to discipline the drift from belief to identity. *Nihilism becomes a vocation because nothing else has authority to stop it.*
2. **Without Christianity, practices lack an adjudicating good.** I claimed that practices supply internal standards. But which standards ought to govern conflicts among practices—science vs. art, law vs. care, profit vs. repair? Christianity once offered a common scale: love of God and neighbor as the measure of goods, a grammar of gift and forgiveness that interrupts raw mutual address. Remove it, and the second-personal quickly becomes **second-impersonal**: accountability collapses into bargaining power. The “practice-first” solution curdles into managerialism—ends determined by what the strongest coalition can maintain.
3. **Without Christianity, teleonomy slides into technē.** Functional talk can license purposive vocabulary; I said so. Yet absent a prior good, function defaults to **instrumentality**. We do not ask “What is this for?” in the sense of final cause; we ask “What can this be made to do?” In that world, *repair* becomes optimization, *projects* become throughput, and *success* becomes compliance with metrics. Teleonomy, unmoored, is indistinguishable from technique.
4. **Without Christianity, tragedy loses depth and becomes price.** Where there is no promise that wrongs matter beyond our bookkeeping, irreparable loss is re-described as “trade-off.” The language of **redemption**—so easy to caricature—once kept open the possibility that the worst things are not simply costs. Remove it, and cruelty is what a system learns to amortize.

A final inversion. I argued that elevating “nothing” to an aim is performatively self-defeating. True—but the only reliable prophylactic against that elevation was the **liturgical training** that Christianity supplied: words and practices that taught the soul not to absolutize its negations, that yoked intellect to worship so that severe verdicts were *confessed* rather than *performed*. In that ecology, one could say “all is vanity” and still resist making vanity a creed. Outside it, the cleverness of our negations tends, predictably, to become our style.

So, yes: **this is what you get without Christianity**—a world in which the paper you just read is elegant and wrong. The strict distinction between diagnosis and destiny presupposes a Destiny large enough to keep diagnoses in their place. Remove that, and destiny rushes in from below, assembled out of verdicts that cannot help becoming our ends.

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