

Jean Paul's Vision of Nihilism and Plea for the Doctrine of Immortality

The German writer Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825), known best by his pseudonym Jean Paul, was concerned with the problem of nihilism and specifically human mortality throughout his life.¹ His concern with this issue was presumably motivated at least in part by the fact that he experienced the deaths of his close friends Adam Lorenz von Oerthel (1763–86), Johann Bernhard Hermann (1761–90), Christian von Oerthel (1775–92), and Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–93). Moreover, Jean Paul's younger brother Heinrich (1770–89) committed suicide in 1789 at the tender age of 19. On November 15, 1790, Jean Paul had a mystical vision of himself on his own deathbed, and this experience had a profound effect on him. Death thus must have seemed ever-present, and he had a lifelong obsession with it.² His works are filled with motifs related to this topic. It has been claimed that Jean Paul's "work provides some of the most striking documents of nihilism in European Literature."³ While Jean Paul consistently wants to reject nihilism, it always remains for him a terrifying possibility.

Before embarking on a career as a writer, Jean Paul studied theology. Although he abandoned this and was critical of the church and certain forms of organized religion, Jean Paul clearly nourished some religious intuitions. Yet his constant return to the issue of nihilism seems to suggest that his soul was somehow divided. The power and clarity with which he paints the picture of a

¹ For Jean Paul's life, see Kurt Wölfel, "Johann Paul Friedrich Richter. Leben, Werk, Wirkung," in *Jean Paul-Studien*, ed. by Bernhard Buschendorf, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989, pp. 7–50; Günter de Bruyn, *Das Leben des Jean Paul Friedrich Richter. Eine Biographie*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1998 [1975]; Max Kommerell, *Jean Paul*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann 1933; Walter Harich, *Jean Paul*, Leipzig: H. Haessel 1925; Paul Nerlich, *Jean Paul. Sein Leben und seine Werke*, Berlin: Weidmann 1899.

² See Käte Hamburger, "Das Todesproblem bei Jean Paul," in *Jean Paul*, ed. by Uwe Schweikert, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1974, pp. 74–105; Jacob Günter, "Das Nichts und die Welt. Die metaphysische Frage bei Jean Paul," *Logos*, vol. 21, 1932, pp. 65–89.

³ Timothy J. Casey, editorial introduction to *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces in Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. by Timothy J. Casey, trans. by Erika Caset, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1992, p. 161. See also Walther Rehm, *Jean Paul, Dostojewski: Zur dichterischen Gestaltung des Unglaubens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1962.

nihilistic or atheistic worldview is evidence that he has a deep understanding of and appreciation for these perspectives.

Jean Paul is often cast in the role of a literary writer par excellence, but he was also profoundly well versed in the rapid developments of the sciences of his day. His works are replete with examples and images from nature that have been drawn from his knowledge of the sciences. A part of his genius can be seen in his attempt to bring together the results of the modern scientific revolution with a more traditional humanistic perspective. It is from this combination that the issue of nihilism arises.

While the term "nihilism" does not appear in the two works by Jean Paul that we will be exploring here, it should be noted that he does in fact employ the term elsewhere.⁴ He regards the German Romantics with great alarm since he believes that they have taken to heart Fichte's concept of the self-positing ego and have turned this into a justification for a radical rejection of traditional values. For this reason, Jean Paul designates the Romantics "poetic nihilists" in his *Preschool of Aesthetics*.⁵ According to his view, the Romantics reject the validity of the entire external objective world. Instead, they regard themselves as the sole origin of truth, like an atomistic self-positing ego. On this account, the Romantic nihilists are simply relativists. Jean Paul's use of "nihilism" in this context is thus somewhat different from that of the focus of the present study, namely, nihilism in the sense of despair at the meaninglessness of human existence. For our purposes two other texts by Jean Paul are far more important than *Preschool of Aesthetics*, namely, "The Dead Christ Proclaims that There Is No God" and *The Valley of Campan*.

1.1 The Message of the Dead Christ

One of Jean Paul's most important works is the novel *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces; Or, The Wedded Life, Death, and Marriage of Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkæs*, which appeared in three volumes from 1796 to 1797.⁶ The story tells of the life of a lawyer, named in the title, and his ill-fated marriage. Jean Paul borrows the terms "flower piece" and "fruit piece" from art, where they refer to

⁴ See *Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. by Casey, pp. 242f.; Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 106.

⁵ Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik nebenst einigen Vorlesungen in Leipzig über die Parteien der Zeit*, vols. 1–3, 2nd augmented edition, Stuttgart and Tübingen: J. G. Cotta 1813, vol. 1, § 2, "Poetische Nihilisten," pp. 3–12.

⁶ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke oder Ehestand, Tod und Hochzeit des Armenadvokaten F. St. Siebenkæs im Reichsmarktflücken Kuhschnappel*, vols. 1–3, Berlin: In Carl Matzdorff's Buchhandlung 1796–97 (English translation: *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces; Or, The Wedded Life, Death, and Marriage of Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkæs*, trans. by Alexander Ewing [London: George Bell and Sons 1897]; note that this English translation, which is based on a later German edition, moves "The Dead Christ" to a different place in the text).

still-life paintings depicting a group of flowers or fruits. The initial idea was to write a text that contained a number of short, unrelated works that would each individually represent a fruit or flower piece. However, Jean Paul abandoned this idea in favor of a continuous story. But despite this, remnants of a discontinuous work remain with various stories. After the preface, he inserts into the text two “flower pieces” and one “thorn piece,” which are set apart from the running narrative. By calling these parts of his work a “flower piece” or a “fruit piece,” Jean Paul seems to suggest that he presents to the reader a pleasing picture of diverse human relations for contemplation. But then by expanding this also with “thorn pieces,” the implication seems to be that the picture is not just pleasing but also in some aspects painful to behold.

The most famous part of the work is the short chapter entitled “The Dead Christ Proclaims That There Is No God.”⁷ This work appears as the first flower piece, which follows immediately after the preface. Although this is only a short text, Jean Paul worked on it over an extended period of time. It was translated several times and caused a great stir in the literary world of the day. The piece consists of a short introduction and then a dream sequence, which is followed by an awakening and a return to reality, which represent the conclusion of the chapter.

The piece concerns the value of the belief in God, which the modern sciences call into question. Jean Paul tries to follow the scientifically based denial of God to its logical conclusion in order to show that this leads to a horrifying view that no one can accept. The author notes that most people casually believe in God but fail to appreciate fully how important this belief is for them. Especially academics, whether theists or atheists, discuss this issue in a sober yet almost indifferent manner, apparently without realizing that they too as individuals are implicated in the results. This anticipates Kierkegaard’s complaint about how scholars tend to be so absorbed in their analyses that they forget to ask themselves what their relation is to the issue. The twentieth-century existentialists were also critical of what they regarded as overly abstract philosophy or what Merleau-Ponty called “high-altitude thinking.”⁸ They tried to promote a form of philosophy that was related to real life and concrete human situations. Jean Paul clearly shares this sentiment and, in this respect, can be said to anticipate this aspect of existentialist thinking. A part of Jean Paul’s strategy is to present his argument by means of images and not just sterile arguments. The images that he depicts in “The Dead Christ” are so powerful and provocative that they are potentially more effective than traditional forms of philosophical reasoning and persuasion. Here again he anticipates a part of the argumentative strategy

⁷ For useful accounts of this text, see J. P. Vijn, *Carlyle and Jean Paul: Their Spiritual Optics*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 1982.

⁸ See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1968, p. 73.

of the existentialists, many of whom also wrote novels and plays alongside their more strictly philosophical treatises.

This is the point of departure since the unnamed narrator in "The Dead Christ" concedes that he too has been complacent in regard to his beliefs in God: "I myself was suddenly horror-struck at the perception of the poison-power of that vapor which strikes with such suffocating fumes to the heart of him who enters the school of Atheistic doctrine."⁹ Jean Paul depicts what he regards as the nefarious nature of the rejection of the belief in God. The idea that this took place suddenly (and not over a long period of time) implies that his crisis of faith was the result of some new information from the sciences that called his belief into question. When one denies the existence of God, the result is the following:

The whole spiritual universe is shattered and shivered, by the hand of Atheism, into innumerable glittering quicksilver globules of individual personalities, running hither and thither at random, coalescing, and parting asunder without unity, coherence, or consistency. In all this wide universe there is none so utterly solitary and alone as a denier of God.¹⁰

The idea seems to be that without belief in God, one is left with an empty mechanistic world where things happen by chance with no greater *logos* or purpose. This is the vision of the universe as consisting of atoms in the void with nothing more. The stated goal of the chapter is then to bring home to the reader the gravity of this way of seeing the world, which is rarely fully appreciated.

Without God, nature itself loses its meaning and becomes an "immeasurable corpse."¹¹ For the atheist there is nothing left to do but mourn this loss "until he himself crumbles and falls away from it into nothingness [T]he immeasurable universe has become for him but the cold iron-mask upon an eternity which is without form and void."¹² The atheist must live with this disconsolate picture of the universe in the absence of God and, by implication, the absence of meaning. The implicit question is whether anyone, even the most devoted scientific mind and critic of religion, can fully embrace this view in all its details. Is it really possible to live believing that one's life has no meaning and that one will revert to dust after death?

The narrator reflects on the fears of children, which often come out in the form of dreams. He argues that we should try to preserve these dreams since

⁹ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 2 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 260).

¹⁰ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 2 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 260).

¹¹ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 2 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 260).

¹² Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, pp. 2f. (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 260).

they serve to highlight certain things about life. Frightening dreams can serve to inform our disposition and life decisions. In this way he introduces his own dream, which he had when he fell asleep on a hillside one summer evening. This is the centerpiece of "The Dead Christ." In his dream he sees himself in a graveyard with the spirits of the dead, who were coming out of their coffins. According to the Gospel of Matthew, this is what happened after Jesus' death on the cross: "The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised."¹³ Jean Paul's narrator portrays the nature around him in apocalyptic terms: the sky darkens, avalanches rumble in the distance, and an earthquake strikes below his feet. This also corresponds to the signs that accompany the crucifixion in Matthew, where it is said that "darkness came over the whole land"¹⁴ and the "earth shook, and the rocks were split."¹⁵ The message is that the world without God is an inhospitable place. But Jean Paul evokes these images also in order to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, which concerns not just individuals but the entire universe. The narrator enters the church where the dead are assembling. Jean Paul alludes to the ancient Greek designation σκῆαι by referring to them as "shadows" or "shades."

With no explanation or motivation given, it is described how Christ descends to them and is immediately recognized since he is expected. The dead ask, "Christ! Is there no God?" to which he answers, "There is none."¹⁶ Christ goes on to explain,

I have traversed the worlds, I have risen to the suns, with the milky ways
I have passed athwart the great waste spaces of the sky; there is no God.
And I descended to where the very shadow cast by Being dies out and
ends, and I gazed out into the gulf beyond, and cried, "Father, where art
Thou?" But answer came there none, save the eternal storm which rages
on, controlled by none; and towards the west, above the chasm, a gleaming
rainbow hung, but there was no sun to give it birth, and so it sank and fell
by drops into the gulf. And when I looked up to the boundless universe
for the Divine eye, behold, it glared at me from out a socket, empty and
bottomless. Over the face of chaos brooded Eternity, chewing it forever,
again and yet again. Shriek on, then, discords, shatter the shadows with
your shrieking din, for He is not!¹⁷

Since Christ was responsible for so many people believing in God, it seems fitting that he be the one to announce that in fact God does not exist. In some ways it is difficult to imagine anyone else making such an announcement and

¹³ Matthew 27:52.

¹⁴ Matthew 27:45.

¹⁵ Matthew 27:51.

¹⁶ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 6 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 262).

¹⁷ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 7 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 263).

having any credibility. There are many atheists who make the same claim, but when it comes from Christ, it is a much more powerful statement. There is, however, something odd in the fact that Christ seems to go to work like a natural scientist who looks for God in some physical space in the universe in the way that one might look for a star or galaxy. According to this depiction, Christ possesses the ability to travel quickly to any place in the universe, and due to this he has been able to make a complete survey. Apart from the role of Christ, Jean Paul's description of the universe is the one presented by the sciences. The universe contains numerous suns and galaxies in the vastness of space. Further, it endures seemingly for eternity. The idea of the absence of God is clearly motivated by the breakthroughs in science, which have left no place for the divine. The passage speaks of the great movements of the universe as an "eternal storm which rages on, controlled by none." These are natural forces at work without any need of a conscious guiding deity.

The scenario that Jean Paul seems to want to invoke is an alternative version of the Second Coming, the Last Judgment, and the Resurrection of the Dead. The end of time has come, and Christ returns. The dead arise in bodily form in order to meet him and be judged. But to their great surprise and disappointment, he declares that there is no God, thus dashing their hopes for eternal life. Instead of taking up residence in heaven, they immediately dissolve into the dust of nothingness. They do not have the opportunity to be judged, and their good deeds go unrecognized and unrewarded. All the people are subject to the same fate: complete destruction. No exceptions are made. Jean Paul invites his readers to imagine what the end of the world would look like according to a purely scientific view and without the aforementioned Christian dogmas. What results is a terrifying, comfortless vision.

The dead children then awaken and ask Christ, "Jesus, have we no Father?" He made answer, with streaming tears, "We are orphans all, both I and ye. We have no Father."¹⁸ This is a play on the passage in John, where Christ promises exactly the opposite: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."¹⁹ Jean Paul's inversion of this contains great pathos since the dead children were cheated out of a full life on earth, and now they too are denied an afterlife in heaven. The children asking for a father can be regarded as a metaphor for human existence: humans are all orphans in a strange and hostile world with no one to protect or look after them. Everyone is utterly alone in the vast universe governed only by mechanical forces. There is no deity to help us in times of need or to comfort us in our moment of distress.

Everyone has a yearning for peace, comfort, and reconciliation. Much of the success of religion can be ascribed to this deep inner need of people, who

¹⁸ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, pp. 7f. (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 263).

¹⁹ John 14:18.

live their lives with restlessness, anxiety, and sorrow. One wants to believe that there is a caring, loving God looking over one's life as an individual. But now, in Jean Paul's frightening dream scenario, Christ declares that, despite our deep-seated need, our "wounds will not be healed [T]here is no healing hand, no everlasting Father."²⁰ According to this view, there is no solution to the anguish in the human soul. This is a permanent fixture of the human condition. We cannot expect any liberation from this when we die. Instead, all that awaits us after death is annihilation.

In the dream the end of time has come but without God to redeem anyone. The final destruction of the universe is then a purely natural event that takes place according to the laws of physics. Christ is portrayed as witnessing this end of the universe on a grand scale. He observes all the galaxies, planets, and stars being destroyed (presumably in an event such as the Big Crunch – the opposite of the Big Bang – when the gravity of the universe causes all matter to contract):

And as he gazed upon the grinding mass of worlds, the wild torch dance of starry will-o'-the-wisps, and all the coral banks of throbbing hearts – and saw how world by world shook forth its glimmering souls on to the ocean of death – then He, sublime, loftiest of finite beings, raised his eyes towards the nothingness and boundless void, saying, "Oh dead, dumb, nothingness! necessity endless and chill! Oh! mad unreasoning chance – when will ye dash this fabric into atoms, and me too?"²¹

The image that Jean Paul tries to evoke is that Christ can observe the universe as a whole in all of its workings. He can see everything, for example, how stars and galaxies develop and die. Now, he can see the apocalyptic end of all things. In all the vastness and the majesty of the universe, he can find ultimately only nothingness. However many tiny dots of light there might be, they are all overwhelmed by darkness. Being is vastly outweighed and destroyed by nothingness. There seems something mad about the idea that the vast universe with all its components will in the end disappear into nothingness. Star after star will be extinguished and reduced to atoms. The universe is an "ocean of death," one "great corpse trench."²² In the passage the role of chance is also emphasized. In contrast to the old view of a wise entity ruling the universe, now chance simply goes its way, destroying star after star, life after life, without having any conscious agency. All human existence is simply a matter of a fortuitous combination of events that arose by chance. There was no grand design, plan, or meaning. It was simply atoms interacting in the void of space according to fixed laws.

²⁰ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 10 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, pp. 264f.).

²¹ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, pp. 8f. (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, pp. 263f.).

²² Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 9 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 264).

In the vast universe, the tiny and insignificant role of human life is emphasized. Christ continues, "Wretched being! That petty life of thine is but the sigh of nature, or the echo of that sigh. Your wavering cloudy forms are but reflections of rays cast by a concave mirror upon the clouds of dust which shroud your world – dust which is dead men's ashes."²³ As Ecclesiastes claimed, after death we all turn to dust.²⁴ Human life itself is just one small outcome of many natural processes. The lives of individuals, or even the entire species, are miniscule in this picture, given the vast number of other planets and species, and given the enormous time scale of the universe in comparison to human life.

This frightening dream ends with an apocalyptic vision: "And then a great immeasurable bell began to swing ... to toll the last hour of time and shatter the fabric of the universe to countless atoms – when my sleep broke up, and I awoke."²⁵ At the end of the universe everything, large and small, is destroyed. When the narrator awakens, he is greatly relieved that it was all only a bad dream. He rejoices that he can return to his belief in God and meaning in the universe. This happy end is presumably the reason why Jean Paul dubs this a "flower piece" instead of a "thorn piece." Now instead of hearing the bells announcing the end of the world, it is as if he hears the joyous bells of nature ringing in "a rich, soft, gentle harmony."²⁶ Since his vision was just a nightmare, it is safe to return to the happy world that he always knew. This seems a strange way to end the text since after such a dramatic and disturbing description, the narrator seems to tell the reader that none of it really matters. The described events have made no impact on his belief system.

This is an intense and powerful story that seems intended to shock and provoke the reader. It is designed to show what a terrible picture the secular, scientific worldview leads to if it is carried through to the end. Jean Paul's intent seems to be to say that this picture is so frightening that no one can live with it. If one were to regard this as a philosophical argument, then it can be seen in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. As its first premise it assumes the truth of the scientific worldview. Then it sets about to develop the consequences of this. Finally, it demonstrates that these consequences, if not contradictory (or absurd), are in any case impossible to accept. In this sense the text can be interpreted as a refutation of a purely scientific conception of the universe. It will be noted that no attempt is made to demonstrate that the scientific worldview is wrong on any given point. But rather

²³ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 9 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 264).

²⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:20.

²⁵ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 11 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 265).

²⁶ Jean Paul, *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, vol. 1, p. 11 (*Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, p. 265).

the argument is simply that humans cannot lead their lives with this belief. The implication is that some space must still exist for some form of religious belief that offers us peace of mind.

There is a point to the fact that this episode is portrayed as a bad dream. The idea of a world without God is a terrifying prospect. Visions like the one that Jean Paul depicts haunt the consciousness of even the most pious Christian. Even if one is quick to reject the scientific worldview, there always remains a degree of doubt. One can never be completely certain. This doubt returns to us periodically when we have a crisis of faith. But it is always there in the recesses of the mind. The followers of psychoanalysis would say that the idea of a universe without God and meaning is so frightening that we repress it from our consciousness, and as a result it comes out in our dreams.

The text emphasizes the natural processes of the universe, mentioning key ideas from physics and astronomy: atoms, the void, movement, eternity, necessity, and so on. The developments of eighteenth-century science are clearly foremost in Jean Paul's mind. The point of departure for his analysis of nihilism and the related issues is thus the result of modern science, which, to his mind, represents a menacing specter.

1.2 The Beginning of *The Valley of Campan*

Jean Paul returns to the issue of nihilism in his novel *The Valley of Campan* from 1797.²⁷ While "The Dead Christ" was concerned with refuting the denial of God, this work is concerned with refuting the denial of the doctrine of immortality. This novel, which has as its subtitle *Discourses on the Immortality of the Soul*, contains elements of a dialogue in the spirit of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) and Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Although primarily known as a *littérateur*, Jean Paul was also very familiar with philosophy. With his *Clavis Fichtiana* (from 1800),²⁸ he raised a polemic against Fichte, and, in many works, he often mentions thinkers such as Kant and Leibniz. Despite the subtitle of *The Valley of Campan*, the importance of this text has not been appreciated by mainstream philosophy. In the Preface or "Vorbericht" Jean Paul explains that Kant's critical philosophy has offered an argument for the belief in God and immortality, but not everyone is able to understand or appreciate this given that it appears in the

²⁷ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele; nebst einer Erklärung der Holzschnitte unter den 10 Geboten des Katechismus*, Erfurt: bei Wilhelm Hennings 1797 (English translation: *The Campaner Thal and Other Writings*, Boston: Ticknor and Fields 1864).

²⁸ Jean Paul, *Clavis Fichtiana seu Leibgeberiana*, Erfurt: in der Henningssschen Buchhandlung 1800. See Wolfgang Harich, *Jean Pauls Kritik des philosophischen Egoismus: Belegt durch Texte und Briefstellen Jean Pauls im Anhang*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1968.

context of a complex philosophical system.²⁹ The idea is that Jean Paul's novel can offer a kind of proof that will be considerably more accessible to the reader than Kant's account. So once again, as with "The Dead Christ," Jean Paul is proposing an alternative kind of philosophical argumentation and persuasion in the form of a narrative.

At the end of the work Jean Paul adds a series of woodcuts that are the occasion for reflections on the Ten Commandments in the Catechism. This appendix, which proved controversial, uses as its model a work entitled *Ausführliche Erklärung der Hogarthischen Kupferstiche* by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99).³⁰ In this text Lichtenberg gives detailed descriptions and analyses of the then quite popular satirical pictures by the English painter and engraver William Hogarth (1697–1764).

The storyline of Jean Paul's novel is fairly straightforward: a small group takes an excursion in the Valley of Campan in the Pyrenees, and they discuss the issue of immortality as they go. The unnamed first-person narrator, who, the reader later learns, is Jean Paul himself, writes regular updates about the journey to his friend Victor. The novel purports to be a collection of these. The events are said to take place in 1796, that is, a year before the publication of the work. The text is divided into chapters called "stations" that the author uses to give an account of each segment of the journey.

The handful of characters each have an opinion about the issue of immortality. The narrator's friend Karlson has training in chemistry and is presumably a natural scientist. He represents the position of naturalism and does not believe in the immortality of the soul. This is the position that all the others try to refute in one way or another. There is also a chaplain, who is a Kantian and thus believes in both God and immortality. This is significant since at the time Kant represented perhaps the important scholarly attempt to rescue the doctrine of immortality. Given this, one might think that Jean Paul would be sympathetic to the Kantian approach, but this is not the case. The chaplain cuts an arrogant and unsympathetic figure who is pedantic and blind to the beauties of nature. His aloof disposition to such issues is the object of criticism. The narrator jokingly calls the disagreeable and humorless man "Phylax."³¹ Also in the group are Baron Wilhelmi with his fiancée Gione and her sister Nadine. These three

²⁹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. ii (n.b. the "Vorbericht" is not translated in the English translation).

³⁰ G. C. Lichtenberg, *Ausführliche Erklärung der Hogarthischen Kupferstiche, mit verkleinerten aber vollständigen Copien derselben von E. [rnst Ludwig] Riepenhausen*, vols. 1–13, Göttingen: Heinrich Dieterich 1794–1833 (in English, see *The World of Hogarth. Lichtenberg's Commentaries on Hogarth's Engravings*, trans. by Innes and Gustav Herdan, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1966; *Hogarth on High Life. The Marriage à la Mode Series, from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's Commentaries*, trans. and ed. by Arthur S. Wensinger and W. B. Coley, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1970).

³¹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 42 (*The Kampaner Thal*, p. 22).

are less educated philosophically. They represent the voice of common sense. They believe in immortality but do not have developed philosophical positions to ground their views. They tend not to lead the discussion but instead mostly to chime in on occasion to support the one argument or the other in favor of immortality. Finally, there is the narrator, Jean Paul.³² He provokes the chaplain and offers a number of arguments in refutation of Karlson's naturalism.

The setting of the story in the Valley of Campan is significant. It is portrayed as a kind of earthly paradise, and Jean Paul dwells in some detail on the beauty of nature found there. This picture of a happy and harmonious nature, which is pleasant to human beings, stands in stark juxtaposition to the hostile picture of nature found in "The Dead Christ." In *The Valley of Campan*, this positive view in a sense anticipates Jean Paul's case for human immortality. Death and finitude would be antithetical to such a natural world. The idea is that the beautiful and harmonious world of nature would in itself seem to imply human immorality.

The story begins *in medias res* with the 501st Station, with the narrator and his friend Karlson at an inn where a wedding and a funeral are taking place at the same time. The funeral is for the youngest daughter of the owner of the inn, and the juxtaposition between the two events – the death of the daughter and the beginning of married life for the bride – create a tension that underscores the fragility of human existence. Here Jean Paul seizes the occasion to make a comparison between happiness and sadness, tragedy and comedy, in human life:

When fate harnesses to Psyche's car, the merry and the mourning steed together, the mourning one ever takes the lead; i.e. if the muses of Mirth and Sorrow play on the same stage in the same hour, man does not, like Garrick, follow the former; he does not even remain neutral, but takes the side of the mourning one. Thus we always paint, like Milton, our lost Paradise more glowingly than the regained one, – like Dante, hell better than purgatory.³³

Without any real argument, Jean Paul claims that tragedy is more primary or higher than comedy. It has often been noted that Milton's *Paradise Lost* is more compelling than his *Paradise Regained* and Dante's *Inferno* is the most vivid part of the *Divine Comedy*. Jean Paul alludes to a painting by the English artist Joshua Reynolds (1723–92) entitled *David Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy* (Figure 1.1). This painting depicts Thalia, the muse of comedy, and Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, trying to induce the English playwright and theater manager David Garrick (1717–79) to write and perform something in their genre. As Jean Paul indicates, Reynolds portrays Garrick as somewhat apologetically going with Thalia, despite the angry protest of Melpomene.

³² Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 75, p. 101 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 37, p. 49).

³³ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 20 (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 7f.). Translation slightly modified.



Figure 1.1 Joshua Reynolds, *David Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy* (1761)

Jean Paul's preference for tragedy over comedy (and his implicit critique of Reynolds) is relevant for his treatment of nihilism. As we have seen in "The Dead Christ," the scientific worldview that Jean Paul presents leads to an unbearable nihilism. This is portrayed with a high degree of pathos with crying dead children and the apocalyptic vision of the end of the universe. This is a tragic picture, and there is nothing to laugh at. *The Valley of Campan*, while more subtle, follows in this same spirit of pathos. However, as we will see in Chapter 2, humor is also a possible response to nihilism.

Karlson is disproportionately moved by the death of the daughter of the innkeeper and especially the grief of her young lover. When the narrator asks him why he is so disturbed, Karlson reveals his story. When he was in Lausanne with the others, Karlson had secretly fallen in love with the already engaged Gione, who suddenly fell seriously ill. After a deep swoon, it was believed that she had died, and her apparent death was immediately reported to him. Overwhelmed with grief over the death of his secret love, Karlson precipitously left the group and returned to the Rhein Falls near Schaffhausen in Switzerland. Karlson explains that he was particularly grieved since he does not believe in immortality: "For he believed, as most world-men among whom he had grown

up do – perhaps, also, too much accustomed to analyzed ideas and opinions by his favorite study, chemistry – that our last sleep is annihilation.”³⁴ Here the narrator seems to imply that Karlson was educated by men of the Enlightenment, who disdainfully rejected any religious view of the world. The narrator explains that the experience threw Karlson into a nihilistic state: “he was long imprisoned in the dark, cold, serpent’s nest of envenomed pains; they entwined and crawled over him, even to his heart.”³⁵ This description recalls some of the images from “The Dead Christ.” The point is clear that the rejection of the idea of human immortality leaves one in complete despair.

Sad and alone, Karlson writes a short text called “Grief without Hope” that he sends as a condolence to his friend Wilhelmi for the loss of his fiancée. Here at the beginning the text is only mentioned, but towards the end of the work a full paraphrase of it appears. When Wilhelmi receives Karlson’s letter, he writes back immediately and explains that the whole thing was a mistake and that thankfully Gione had just fallen unconscious for a time but was revived and is now alive and well. Wilhelmi then invites Karlson to rejoin them for their tour of the Pyrenees. Thus ends Karlson’s story.

Upon hearing this, the narrator is happy to accompany Karlson back to meet his friends in the Valley of Campan, where the group is waiting to celebrate the nuptials of Wilhelmi and Gione. This gracious gesture cannot hide the somewhat awkward element that Karlson, in his letter, more or less revealed his love for Wilhelmi’s fiancée. Despite this, Wilhelmi is not angry with his friend, and Gione is likewise not upset.

Karlson and the narrator depart for the valley. They arrive in the evening and rejoin the others in a large cave that is referred to as a paradise and Elysium, suggesting that they have died and this was their reward, a place where everyone was happy and friends find each other again: “it seemed as if the world had ceased, Elysium had opened, and the separated, covered, sub-terrestrial regions cradled only tranquil, but happy souls.”³⁶ This makes sense in that Gione appeared to have died. The meeting in the cave is full of gracious gestures on all sides with everyone glad to see each other again, despite the fact that it is now known to all that Karlson was or is in love with his friend’s fiancée. But as in heaven, in this cave of paradise there are no conflicts or bouts of envy or jealousy. Everyone is happy, and the mood is harmonious. This image can be said to prefigure Jean Paul’s case for immortality. By enjoining his readers to envision a scene from Elysium where old friends are reunited in joy, the idea of life in heaven seems less far-fetched. It is after all in some respects similar to happy experiences with which we are already familiar from our mundane existence. The suggestion is that this might count for some kind of empirical evidence for

³⁴ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 15 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 10).

³⁵ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 15 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 10).

³⁶ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 24 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 14).

immortality that the scientists could accept. As was the case with "The Dead Christ," visualization is an important tool that Jean Paul uses to make his literary *argument* for immortality. In his view, this is more effective than barren proofs about abstract concepts.

The narrator describes the great feeling of happiness that everyone felt at the moment. The power of joy is prior to that of grief: "And therefore fatherly fate, thou spreadest the flowers of joy, as nurses do lilies in the nursery of life, that the awakening children may sleep the sounder! O, let philosophy, which grudges our *pleasures*, and blots them out from the plans of Providence, say by what right did torturing *pain* enter into our frail life?"³⁷ Joy is what God and the prospect of immortality offer. However, philosophy looks at this with a critical eye and cannot accept it, thereby taking away from us the comfort that this view gives. But the idea is that humans deserve this joy and even have a right to it. This seems to be a criticism of the Stoics or Kant for their negative view of pleasure. Enjoying life is human, and so why should we try to deny or repress it in the name of abstract ethical principles?

Karlson learns that Gione and Wilhelmi are to be married the next day, and here the chapter closes as it began, with the juxtaposition of a wedding and death. The young Gione, once mistakenly taken for dead, now prepares for her wedding ceremony and a new life with Wilhelmi. But in contrast to the depressing mood at the beginning of the chapter with the death of the young daughter of the owner of the inn and the image of her grieving lover, now the mood is one of joy, harmony, and hope.

1.3 The Refutation of the Kantian View of Immortality

The 503rd Station sees the group set out on their excursion through the valley. It features a discussion primarily between the narrator and the Kantian chaplain. Given that Kant was the leading philosopher at the time and that his theory of immortality enjoyed a following, Jean Paul feels the need to address it. The narrator begins with some critical reflections about Kant for neglecting poetry and human emotion. He then turns to refute Kant's theory of immortality. This might seem odd given that Jean Paul also ultimately wants to argue for the same conclusion. Although he agrees with Kant that humans are immortal, he finds Kant's reasoning dubious. Indeed, Jean Paul believes Kant's general approach to the issue to be mistaken. Instead of addressing the individual with issues of real concern, Kant's philosophy is an arid exercise in logic and abstraction. On this point Jean Paul anticipates the existentialists' criticism of abstract reasoning and their call for philosophy to address the lived experience of the individual.

³⁷ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 28 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 15).

The discussion is prompted by Nadine, who playfully considers the idea that flowers have souls. The materialist Karlson soberly rejects the notion. At this point the ever-serious chaplain, who has no sense for persiflage, gives a brief account of Kant's notion of immortality with the following argument:

No immortality but that of moral beings can be discussed, and with them it is a postulate or apprenticeship of practical sense. For as a full conformity of the human will to the moral law, with which the just Creator never can dispense, is quite unattainable by a finite being, an eternally continuing progress, i.e., an unceasing duration, must contain and prove this conformity in God's eyes, who overlooks the everlasting course. Therefore, our immortality is necessary.³⁸

Immortality only makes sense for rational beings created by God and not for flowers. According to Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,³⁹ God created humans and endowed them with the faculty of reason so that they could act morally. The *telos* or ultimate goal is then to achieve moral perfection. Since our life in this world is too short for us to attain this, it follows that we must have another life after death, where we continue on the way to the moral perfection that God demands of us. The eternity of immortality must exist since we must continue forever to try to approach moral perfection, which is an unreachable goal. While Jean Paul clearly addresses himself to this argument from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, it should be noted that Kant's view changes in his later work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, published in 1793, where the highest good is in fact attainable but only by means of divine grace.⁴⁰

Karlson issues a series of penetrating criticisms of this Kantian view. He asks for details about exactly what the development towards the goal of moral perfection will look like:

How can a righteousness, scattered and dispersed over an interminable period of time, satisfy Divine Justice, which must require this righteousness in each portion of the period? And has the constant approximation of man towards this state of purity been proved? And will not the number, if not the grossness of faults, in this infinite space, increase with the number of virtues? And what comparison will the list of faults bear to that of the virtues at the examination?⁴¹

³⁸ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 58f. (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 29f.).

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critik der praktischen Vernunft*, Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch 1788, pp. 219–223 (English translation: *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill 1956, pp. 126–128).

⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft, zweyter vermehrte Auflage*, Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius 1794, pp. 84–105 (English translation: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason in Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 108–117).

⁴¹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 59f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 30).

With these questions, suddenly Kant's theory appears complicated to the point of being implausible. There is no evidence that people improve morally and get closer to moral perfection over time. Indeed, many get worse. In an infinity of time, one's immoral acts would also increase as would one's moral acts. But even if one managed to make some progress, this would not remove the guilt of past infractions (or the continued accumulation of them). The change in the temporal framework would not alter the mental disposition of the individual, which, for Kant, is the locus of morality, specifically in the good will. What is required is a change in the individual's way of thinking. But an infinity of time is neither required for this nor a guarantee of it. Karlson also critically asks about how moral comparisons of people might look according to this view:

Will, in the sight of the Divine eye, the moral purity of two different beings – for instance, a seraph and a man, or of two different men, as Robespierre and Socrates – be equally contained in two equally long, i.e., eternal, courses of time? If on comparing the two, a difference appears, then one of them cannot have attained the so-called perfection and must still be mortal.⁴²

Kant's view seems to make moral comparisons of people impossible. The *Critique of Practical Reason* seems to confuse moral imperfection with being mortal, while associating immortality with moral perfection. But Kant then has problems with accounting for the moral differences between different people. He simply suggests that everyone makes essentially the same progress towards the good. This view levels all human beings since everyone is striving towards perfection for eternity, which implies that everyone will at some point pass through the same stages of increasing perfection, even if they might have started from a fairly low or fairly high position. But this is counterintuitive since we want to make moral distinctions between such different characters as Robespierre and Socrates.

The chaplain hastens to remind Karlson that Kant does not mean this as an argument that demonstrates the truth of immortality. Instead, Kant believes that it cannot be proven, but rather that it must be presupposed as a postulate of practical reason, which is demanded for ethics to make sense. Karlson also objects to this idea: "It is a strange axiom to presuppose the truth of an opinion from its indemonstrability."⁴³ Thus the chapter ends with Karlson's materialism clearly having refuted the Kantian conception of immortality based on ethics.

The argument between the chaplain and Karlson continues in the next chapter, the 505th Station. The chaplain asks for permission to present some arguments for immortality, and Wilhelmi agrees. He supports the idea of

⁴² Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 60 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 30).

⁴³ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 61 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 31).

giving scholarly proofs for such things, adding, “The Owl of Minerva, as all other owls, is said to forebode destruction to a household, by settling on its roof. But I hope it is not so.”⁴⁴ The Owl of Minerva of course represents scientific knowledge. Wilhelmi recalls that some believe that this kind of knowledge is destructive (as it was to the initiate at the Temple at Sais in Schiller’s poem, “The Veiled Statue at Sais”).⁴⁵ So Wilhelmi is in favor of allowing science to try to prove the existence of immortality, hoping that it will not backfire and leave everyone in despair. The narrator emphasizes that the fate of everyone is tied to the issue of immortality, and so everyone has a deep personal interest in such a proof being successful.

The skeptic Karlson catches a day-fly that changes forms throughout its development, only to die after a single day. Karlson seems to want to draw an analogy to the human wishes for immortality. He argues from the perspective of the day-fly:

In my opinion, a philosophical ephemera would argue thus. What! I should have uselessly accomplished all my various changes, and the Creator had no other intention in calling me from the egg to the grub, then to a chrysalis, and at last to a flying being, whose wings must burst another covering before death, with this long range of spiritual and corporeal developments, he should have had no other aim than a six hours’ existence, and the grave must be the only goal of so long ... a course?⁴⁶

From the perspective of the fly, all of this effort would seem absurd if the whole thing only ends in death after a short life anyway. The implication seems to be that this is also the human perspective, only on a smaller scale. Although humans live longer lives than day-flies, they find it difficult to believe that all their efforts and strivings serve no purpose and end only in destruction.

The example of the day-fly raises the question of scale. Of course, from the human perspective a day-fly seems completely small and insignificant. But this is not the case for the day-fly itself since its life is all that it knows. In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach makes the same point about how the worldview of each creature is limited to its own horizon of experience. He claims that for the day-fly its short lifetime seems normal since this is all that it knows.⁴⁷ Thus, everything has its own specific relative place in the grand scheme of things.

⁴⁴ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 69 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 35).

⁴⁵ Friedrich Schiller, “Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais,” *Die Horen*, vol. 1, no. 9, Tübingen: J. G. Cotta 1795, pp. 94–98 (English translation: “The Veiled Statue at Sais,” in *The Poems of Schiller*, trans. by Edgar A. Bowring, New York: Hurst & Co. Publishers 1884, pp. 182–184). This poem was discussed in the Introduction above, pp. 27–28.

⁴⁶ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 70f. (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 35f.).

⁴⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums, Zweite vermehrte Auflage*, Leipzig: Otto Wigand 1843, p. 11 (English translation: *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by Marian Evans, New York: Calvin Blanchard 1855, p. 27).

There is a great ladder or chain of being where the individual members are separated only by degrees. When we talk about meaning, it is always something relative that is determined by the entity's place in the big picture. From the human perspective, it would appear that the human world is invested with great importance vis-à-vis the day-fly. But this forgets that there is a much higher and grander perspective that transcends the human, namely, the macrolevel perspective of planets, solar systems, and galaxies. From this point of view, the human world looks as tiny and insignificant as the world of the day-fly from the human perspective. The argument is that everything appears relative, yet each has its own significance and relevance from the position of a divine observer who can see everything: "every relative conclusion must be based on something positive, which only eternal eyes, which can measure the whole range of innumerable degrees, can truly weigh."⁴⁸ Paradoxically, the relative standard presupposes an absolute one. Therefore, even the day-fly has its significance, although it might seem negligible from the human perspective. While this might seem very small, it is not nothing. Note that the examples here are drawn from the natural sciences. It is specifically from the side of scientific observation that the idea of immortality and meaning seems impossible. These ideas make no sense when it is a question of day-flies and planets. Why then would it make sense for human beings who find themselves in some intermediary stage in the chain of being? The narrator, Jean Paul, concludes that the universe must represent a continually developing system and not something that is created once and for all. This system is harmonious, and everything has its proper place and role in the grand scheme.⁴⁹

1.4 Karlson's Two Arguments against Immortality

The arguments concerning immortality continue in the next chapter, the 506th Station. Now the focus turns to Karlson's objections to immortality, which are grounded in his scientific worldview. The narrator asks the skeptic and scientifically educated Karlson to explain his objections. To initiate the discussion, he provides Karlson with prompts to two oft-heard arguments against immortality that he asks Karlson to elaborate on. The first argument the narrator suggests is "the simultaneous decay and destruction of the body and the soul."⁵⁰ Karlson takes up the challenge and gives materialist arguments that are intended to show how everything that is taken to be mental or spiritual is actually tied necessarily to the physical body. Memory, imagination, and all other mental faculties are made possible by the brain and would not exist without it. The motif of the chapter is the inner and the outer sides of the human being.

⁴⁸ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 72 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 36).

⁴⁹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 75 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 37).

⁵⁰ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 84 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 41).

There is an outward side, namely, the body, but there is also an inward side, our personalities, with all our mental and ethical faculties, that seem to be something spiritual or nonphysical. This represents something invisible within us. Karlson's argument is that the two sides are necessarily connected, and it is an illusion to think of the inward side as something free and independent from the physical body. Both sides die together. All human experience shows that when the body dies, all the spiritual or inner qualities also die. There is thus no verifiable evidence that any part of a human being survives death.

The second argument suggested by the narrator is "the absolute impossibility of ascertaining the mode of life of a future existence, or as the Chaplain would say, to see into the spiritual world from the sensuous one."⁵¹ At the prompting of the narrator, Karlson then turns his attention to an elaboration of this refutation of immortality. Karlson argues that there is no evidence of any second sphere beyond the physical one. People tend to imagine such things based on their own experience with this world, but these are only vague analogies, which have no confirmation in empirical reality.⁵² There is no scientific grounding for human immortality, which is a sheer product of the imagination. The idea of spiritual beings living without bodies eternally after death flies in the face of every principle of science. It is impossible to explain how such a thing could even be vaguely consistent with a scientific worldview.

The narrator issues a counterargument to Karlson's positions. He first takes up the reductionist argument that the soul is just the physical brain and thus dies with it. He reasons that there is a second world, that is, the sphere of immortality, which "is already contained in this physical first one."⁵³ The world of immortality is not some transcendent sphere but exists here and now in "*Virtue, Truth, and Beauty*," which cannot be explained by the "dark, dirty clump of the sensuous world."⁵⁴ The triad of virtue, truth, and beauty is repeated like a mantra throughout the rest of the text. These are things that even the scientist believes in, yet they are not physical entities. The narrator argues that the mental and the physical or the inner and the outer are not identical, or rather the inner cannot be simply reduced to the outer as the materialists try to do. He gives the following examples: "Grief has no resemblance to a tear, – shame, none to the cheek-imprisoned blood, – wit, none to champagne, – the idea of this valley, none to its portrait on the retina."⁵⁵ The materialists constantly attempt to make reductions of this kind in order to show that the inner or mental sphere is nothing more than the physical. But the objection is that these things are not the same. Our inner feeling of sadness and grief might be expressed by a tear, but

⁵¹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 84 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 41).

⁵² Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 88 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 43).

⁵³ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 88 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 43).

⁵⁴ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 88f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 43).

⁵⁵ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 90 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 44).

the experience of it is very different from the physical shedding of the tear. The tear does not explain sadness and is not identical to it. Likewise, we know how images are formed by means of their imprint on our retina, but this in no way explains the full idea of the thing that we have in our minds and that seems to have nothing to do with the physiology of our eyes. The inner experience of being in love cannot be understood as the hormones that are released by the glands in our endocrine system. There thus seems to be something separate that transcends the physical being of our bodies.

The suggestion is also made that the inward, nonphysical element is the will. This is what makes it possible to move the physical body, although the will itself is not something physical.⁵⁶ As an additional argument, Wilhelmi uses the example of Socrates as a moral character. If something were to cause damage to Socrates' brain, this would not mitigate the fact that he was a moral character, even though his behavior might change. So, the character of being moral is independent of the physical body. This is further demonstrated by the fact that our mental exertions are quite different from our physical exertions and seem generally to be separate from them. Even if we are physically very tired, we can still move our bodies by means of our will. Thus, the narrator, Wilhelmi, and to a lesser degree the chaplain, are all keen to refute Karlson's view that immortality is impossible. With this ends the 506th station.

The final station is number 507. This is the longest chapter, and it represents the narrator's, that is, Jean Paul's view on immortality. Specifically, he offers several arguments to contradict Karlson's naturalistic position. Having refuted the reductionist, materialist view, he continues by taking up the second objection presented by Karlson, namely, the lack of evidence for any other world beyond the empirical one that we know. It is conceded that the more we learn about the natural sciences, the more impossible it seems that there is any reason to believe in the continuation of some life or existence after death in some other place. According to the modern scientific view, that is, "the increasing proofs and apparatus of chemistry and physiology," death is complete annihilation, and there is no escaping this.⁵⁷

Jean Paul addresses the second argument of Karlson with a kind of agnosticism. It is true that we have no knowledge or experience of another world where the dead souls dwell, but this does not rule out the possibility that such a world does in fact still exist.⁵⁸ We cannot clearly imagine or portray such a world, but there is nothing wrong with this. There are many cases where we believe in things that we do not immediately see. When we see a mountain descending into the sea, we assume that it continues under the water, even though we do not see this part directly. It might be argued on Jean Paul's behalf that even

⁵⁶ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 92 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 44).

⁵⁷ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 102 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 49).

⁵⁸ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 105f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 51).

science makes assumptions about things that it cannot empirically observe, for example, the inside of black holes or dark matter. However, the objection here is obvious: such entities can be observed *indirectly* by their effects on things that can be observed. Moreover, they are completely in harmony with the laws of physics in contrast to the idea of immortal souls.

Wilhelmi and Nadine propose a view that was well known at the time, namely, that other planets were inhabited with the souls of the dead. This seemed in some ways logical given that science had postulated that there were presumably other habitable planets in orbit around other stars. Given that we do not see any dead souls here on earth, might it not be the case that they have simply migrated to one of these other planets? Wilhelmi and Nadine draw analogies with well-known natural phenomena in the world in order to give their views a scientific grounding: "Nadine said: 'One day I so pictured the inhabitants of a lemon-tree to myself. The worm on the leaf may think it is on the green earth, the second worm on the white bud is on the moon, and the one on the lemon believes itself to be upon the sun.'"⁵⁹ The worms on the one part of the tree cannot imagine that there is life on the other parts since these are so far away and their environments appear so different. So also, by analogy, there might well be inhabited planets with other human beings that we are unaware of simply because of their great distance from us.

There is nothing in itself to object to this, but it will be noted that this is not, strictly speaking, an argument for immortality. An additional argument is needed to explain how the inhabitants of the second world are in fact the deceased souls from the first. How, after death, could the souls miraculously fly to another planet where they would live a new existence? Karlson points out that if one were dead, one would need a new body to be transported to another planet. How would the dead be able to receive a new body for their journey and new life? To this the narrator Jean Paul can only respond that this must be a miracle, just as one's first body can be regarded as a miracle.⁶⁰ The new body would need to be one suited to the chemical and atmospheric conditions of the host planet, and thus there would be a variation among human beings such as is the case on earth between peoples who live in, for example, very hot or very cold climates.

Karlson points out that if it is true that the other planets are inhabited, they will have their own inhabitants and will not be the home of migrant dead souls from earth. Jean Paul is forced to concede that this cannot be a satisfying argument for immortality. While it might well be that the universe is teeming with life on different planets, this has nothing to do with the idea of a continued life after death for humans.

⁵⁹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 107 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 52).

⁶⁰ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 106 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 51).

1.5 The Argument for Immortality and Karlson's Conversion

Jean Paul then makes his strongest case for immortality. He believes that it is a mistake to conceive of immortality as being in some other physical place such as heaven or on another planet. Instead, we have the seeds of immortality already within us as living beings. He earlier distinguished between the inner and the outer world. While the outer world is simply our physical bodies, we also have an inner life that cannot be reduced to our bodies. Continuing from the earlier discussion, he returns to the three key elements of our inner world: virtue, truth, and beauty.⁶¹ These three elements are completely separate from our physical being and cannot be explained by it. It is commonly thought that we develop these ideas in our character as we grow and are educated. But this is mistaken. Instead of creating them ourselves, they exist in us already, and "we merely recognize them."⁶² This sounds similar to Socrates' doctrine that learning is merely recollection of what we know from past lives. For Jean Paul, these are proofs that we possess something that is higher than the physical body and that endures when the body perishes. Thus, the second world of immortality is not another physical place outside us, but rather it is within us the whole time. It always already exists in every human being and is the part of us that lives on when our physical bodies die. The misunderstanding lies in how philosophers have understood this inner world as something that we create or that arises by socialization. Instead, it is something that is implanted within us at birth and that ensures our continued existence. Virtue, truth, and beauty extend far beyond the physical body and point to a higher, nobler sphere of human existence, where humans rise above nature.

Wilhelmi raises the objection that these things might well have been implanted in us "for the enjoyment and preservation of the present life."⁶³ Jean Paul quickly dismisses this objection by pointing out that this would mean that these noble qualities would be subordinated to our base, physical inclinations and desires and would serve as a means for them. Only when our physical desires are met do humans long for something higher, for example, virtue, truth, and beauty. So there is a qualitative difference between the physical needs of our body and our intellectual or spiritual side. Due to the fact that we recognize these things within ourselves, we realize that we have an immortal nature that is different from our physical body. Since we are immortal or have immortal elements, we are not entirely at home in the world where we are born. We belong to a higher place and thus feel a sense of alienation with the world we see around us. Jean Paul concludes the argument as follows: "we are immortal, and ... the second world in us demands, and proves a second world beyond us."⁶⁴ The world of

⁶¹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 110 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 53).

⁶² Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 111 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 53).

⁶³ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 114 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 55).

⁶⁴ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 119 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 57).

virtue, beauty, and truth that we find within ourselves implies that there must be an immortal sphere outside us where these things exist, unburdened by the physical sphere.

Both Nadine and Gione are moved by the argument for immortality that Jean Paul gives. In this mood, Nadine presents to Jean Paul the letter of condolence that Karlson wrote to Wilhelmi at the beginning of the work when he believed that Gione had died. The introduction of the letter marks an important shift in the conversation. Until now the discussion covered well-known arguments for and against immortality. It had the character of a scholarly debate. But now by presenting the letter, Nadine moves the discussion from a detached academic issue to one of deep personal interest that involves a large emotional element. Nadine presumably sees that the arguments back and forth are not leading anywhere. But she knows of Karlson's love for Gione, and she uses his letter to remind him of his grief for her. This puts Karlson in a completely different frame of mind. Now it is no longer a dry academic debate, but instead it concerns him intimately. This proves to be the key to convince Karlson of the importance of believing in immortality.

In the short note, "Grief without Hope," Karlson expresses his *grief* for Gione, but he cannot entertain any *hope* of ever seeing her again since he does not believe in immortality and is convinced that in death humans meet with complete and final destruction. Karlson contrasts his view with that of Nadine, who shares his grief but, by contrast, maintains hope in immortality. He writes,

Human blood paints the fluid figure called man on the monument, as oil on marble forms forests. Death wipes away the man and leaves the stone. O Gione! I would have some consolation, if thou wert but far away from us all, on a clouded forest, in a cave of the Earth, or on the most distant world in space. But thou art gone, thy soul is dead, not only thy life and thy body.⁶⁵

Karlson has difficulties reconciling his scientific knowledge that there is no life after death with his deep wish that there would be an afterlife at least for his beloved Gione, whose apparent sudden death he was struggling to accept. By contrast, Gione's sister Nadine, while also sad, can at least take comfort in the consolation of believing that Gione continues in some postmortem existence. The point is that Karlson's worldview offers him no form of consolation whatsoever: "But I, Gione, stand beside your ruins with unalleviated pain, with undestroyed soul; and grieving, think of you until I also dissolve. And my grief is noble and deep for I have no hope!"⁶⁶

Karlson's letter underscores the split between the intellectual and the emotional side of human beings. The scientist Karlson has no problem denying the

⁶⁵ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 125 (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 59f.).

⁶⁶ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 126 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 60).

idea of immortality from an intellectual point of view. But when his own secret love, Gione, appears to die, his emotional side is left completely vulnerable and without any resources to deal with the situation. A life without hope seems unbearable. By introducing the letter, Nadine confronts Karlson directly with the nihilistic consequences of his view in order to show that no one can in good faith live without the belief in immortality. The narrator, Jean Paul, is terrified to witness Karlson's condition: "how horrible and fearful the eternal snow of annihilating death seemed to me, placed beside the noble form it should have covered; how frightful the thought."⁶⁷ The very idea of the wonderful Gione being annihilated forever is too much even to imagine. He asks if anyone can really truly believe in this as Karlson claims. He conjures up a number of powerful images suggesting the meaninglessness of human existence if everything is destined for destruction:

But let the disbeliever of immortality imagine a life of sixty minutes instead of sixty years, and let him try if he can bear to see loved, noble, or wise men only aimless, hour-long air-phantoms, hollow thin shadows which fly towards the light and are consumed by it, and who, without path, trace, or aim, after a short flight, dissolve into their former night. No; even over him steals a supposition of immortality.⁶⁸

Not even the most ardent atheist scientist can maintain this view consistently. Jean Paul notes that the sober, scientific, rationalistic view ignores the important emotional side of human beings, which must also be acknowledged: "all arguments were poeticized into feelings."⁶⁹ This proves to be key to Jean Paul's case for immortality that causes Karlson's conversion. Abstract thinkers such as followers of Kant are focused on vapid "word arguments,"⁷⁰ and they thus completely neglect their own feelings, which in cases such as death and suffering are far more profound than abstract logical argumentation.

Jean Paul invokes another powerful image about the end of the earth as it is consumed by the sun – an image akin to the picture presented in "The Dead Christ":

And when at last, after a thousand, thousand years, our earth is dried up by the sun's heat, and every living sound on its surface silenced, will an immortal spirit look down on the silent globe, and gazing on the empty hearse moving slowly on, say: "There the churchyard of humanity flies into the crater of the sun; on that burning heap many shadows, and dreamers, and wax-figures, have wept and bled, but now they are all melted and consumed: Fly into the sun, which will also dissolve thee, thou silent desert with thy swallowed tears, with thy dried up-blood." No, the crushed worm dares raise himself to his Creator, and say: "Thou canst not have made me only to suffer."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 127 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 60).

⁶⁸ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 127f. (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 60f.).

⁶⁹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 228 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 61).

⁷⁰ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 127 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 60).

⁷¹ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 129f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 61).

Karlson objects to this by asking by what right the worm, that is, human beings, can raise such a question. The answer that Gione gives is that God himself gives us the right to do so since he created us for a purpose. But this response is obviously question-begging since it presupposes a Christian or theistic worldview that includes a conception of immortality and meaning, which is precisely what is at issue.

Jean Paul makes a final impassioned plea to Karlson by returning to the two difficulties that were discussed above: (1) the lack of evidence to explain our continued existence apart from the body, and (2) the lack of evidence for a second world or sphere of existence where the dead souls dwell. With this he seems to grant that the previous responses to these difficulties were inadequate. He asks,

Are two difficulties, based too on the *necessary ignorance* of man, sufficient to overthrow a belief, which explains a thousand greater difficulties, without which our existence is without aim, our sufferings without explanation, and the holy Trinity in our breast three furies, and three terrible contradictions?⁷²

The idea seems to be that the notion of immortality solves so many other problems for one's worldview in general that it would be absurd to abandon it out of concern for the much smaller problems raised by the two objections against it. The "holy Trinity" alludes to virtue, truth, and beauty, which science cannot explain by means of physical objects. So it is best, for the sake of consistency, just to assume immortality, so that the other elements of one's worldview will fall into place. This is legitimate since it is impossible for humans to know everything, and some assumptions must be made anyway. This sounds very similar to Kant's argument with the postulates of practical reason, despite the fact that his approach was dismissed earlier. Jean Paul's claim is that it is absurd to believe that "there can be no aim and no object in the whole spiritual universe."⁷³ This is, however, the nihilistic view of Karlson, according to which the world is not in harmony but rather represents an "eternally jarring discord."⁷⁴

By this point in the narrative most all of the interlocutors are emotionally moved to tears. The beautiful Gione, harboring her secret love for Karlson, goes to him and takes him by the hand, saying, "You are the only one among us who is tormented by this melancholy belief, – and you deserve to have one so beautiful!"⁷⁵ This is too much for Karlson to bear, and finally he capitulates, abandoning his scientific view of human mortality:

This word of concealed love overpowered his long-filled heart, and two burning drops fell from the blinded eyes, and the sun gilded the holy tears,

⁷² Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 133f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 63).

⁷³ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 136 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 64).

⁷⁴ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 137 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 65).

⁷⁵ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 138 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 65).

and he said, looking towards the mountains: "I can bear no annihilation but my own, – my whole heart is of your opinion, and my head must slowly follow."⁷⁶

He allows his reason ("my head") to yield to his deep emotion ("my whole heart"). Karlson, who formerly had "blinded eyes," can now finally see the truth. With this, the debate finally ends with victory for the advocates of immortality, although its specific details remain sketchy. The key is Karlson's love for Gione, which is more powerful than his rational scientific disposition. Under normal circumstances, he would presumably have stuck firmly to the scientific view. But his recent, highly emotional experience of being mistakenly informed of the death of Gione produced a great inner turmoil in his heart. Despite his scientific reason, he cannot bring himself to believe that his beloved Gione, now happy and healthy, will truly die one day, and nothing will survive of her. There is a real point to his appeal to the emotions in contrast to sterile reason. Jean Paul clearly believes that reason alone can be misleading. His point was to make immortality persuasive to people in a way that philosophy, for example, in the form of Kantian reasoning, could not. The appeal to human emotion, he believes, can do this. The emotions can be understood as a kind of argument, although science does its best to exclude them from all discussion in order to keep up the pretense of objectivity.

Jean Paul seems not to note the inconsistency in the argument between the transcendent value of truth and the willingness to change it due to emotional need. Along with virtue and beauty, truth was one of the transcendent characteristics listed as evidence of an immortal side of human beings. But this would suggest that the truth has an unshakable and sacred position in human life. Yet, with the argument that is ultimately given, Karlson is prevailed upon to give up what he knows to be true for the sake of what is in effect an emotional need. But, of course, for the scientist something is true regardless of what we might feel about it. We cannot change the truth simply due to our personal wishes. The truths of mathematics and geometry are what they are independent of whether we think that they are good or bad, interesting or boring, vexing or emotionally fulfilling. Thus, if Karlson is certain that the doctrine of annihilation is supported by the best scientific evidence, it would seem contradictory for him to give this up merely because he does not like the idea, and it does not suit his emotional commitments. In science the two views must be kept strictly separate: what is the case, based on scientific evidence, and what we personally think about this. The moment that these two perspectives are mixed, science is compromised. There can, of course, be no doubt that we have a strong interest in such things as our mortality, but this merely means that we should be doubly cautious not to let this interfere with our scientific evaluation of the matter.

⁷⁶ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 138f. (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 65).

There is a long description of the beauty of nature, with the implication that it is a wonderful, harmonious system in which humans are at home. God has created these wonders for us, and human immortality is a natural part of it. Having been profoundly moved by the foregoing discussion, the narrator and the others experience a kind of ecstasy upon viewing the wonders of nature. This gives them a glimmer of the immortal life. The narrator reports to his friend Victor, "in this moment it was with each of our enraptured souls as if from its oppressed heart earth's load had dropped away; as if from her mother's arms, the earth were giving us, matured into the fatherly arms of the infinite spirit; as if our little life were over! To ourselves, we seemed the immortal, the exalted."⁷⁷

This ecstasy is also represented by their taking a trip in two hot air balloons floating in the valley. The trip in the air is a kind of preview of death and immortality as the soul ascends effortlessly, taking leave of its mundane existence. First, Gione ascends alone, and then the narrator, Jean Paul, makes the trip in the air with Nadine. By leaving the earth and the material sphere, they get a sense for the immortal life without a body. They float over the houses and the mountains and seem to touch the moon and the stars. This feeling of elation and rapture seems to serve as a kind of confirmation for the truth of the conclusion to their discussion. Immortality does truly exist, and it is possible for human souls to depart from their bodies and the mundane sphere. As the narrator and Nadine return to the ground, they are both so moved that they can hardly speak.

This account of rising in the hot air balloons as an anticipation of the after-life represents the counterpart or bookend corresponding to the scene of the friends being happily reunited in the Elysium-like cave at the beginning of the work. Both accounts are presented as a kind of ecstatic experience. This plays a role in Jean Paul's argument. The idea is that God shows us immortality in the beauties of this world. It will be recalled that in Jean Paul's introduction, the Campan Valley is described as a wondrous, magical place, a piece of the divine on earth.⁷⁸ It is unnecessary to seek abstract scholarly arguments for proofs of immortality since evidence for it is all around us if we are able to see it for what it is. We can feel the truth of immortality in ourselves when we have such experiences as the ones described here.

1.6 Jean Paul's Final Work and Death

After the publication of *The Valley of Campan*, Jean Paul was still not finished with the issue of immortality. In 1821, with the death of his son Max (1803–21), Jean Paul was plunged into a profound grief. This caused him to throw himself into a new project, *Selina or on Immortality*, which was to be the sequel

⁷⁷ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 141 (*The Campaner Thal*, p. 66). Translation slightly modified.

⁷⁸ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, pp. 4f. (*The Campaner Thal*, pp. 3f.).

to *The Valley of Campan*. He worked on this book during the last years of his life, and at his death it remained unfinished and was only published posthumously in 1827 by Jean Paul's friend Christian Georg Otto.⁷⁹ The work contains a similar set of characters who represent the next generation of those found in *The Valley of Campan*. The lead character Selina is the daughter of Gione, and Alexander is the son of Karlson. The new cast take up a discussion of the question of human immortality. There is a degree of pathos in the work in that Jean Paul presumably knew that he was dying as he was writing it. As early as 1824 he began experiencing health problems that only increased. His eyesight gradually became worse until he went completely blind. He died on November 14, 1825.

It is fair to say that Jean Paul struggled with the issue of immortality and meaning in the universe his entire life. His knowledge of the most recent developments in the natural sciences made it impossible for him to ignore the sober naturalistic worldview that was becoming increasingly popular at the time. But he was terrified by this picture and was desperate to find some way if not to demonstrate human immortality, then at least to make it plausible. In the end his argument rests not so much on a scientific foundation as a psychological one. For human beings the thought of our infinitesimal place in the universe and our complete annihilation with death is simply too much to bear. This idea is so vexing that it is better to have recourse to some more comforting view that gives us hope. Without this, our lives become impossible. While from a scientific point of view, it might appear that we are finite and meaningless beings in a vast universe, this surely cannot be the final word.

While Jean Paul clearly wants to argue for human immortality, he has great insight into the scientific worldview that denies this. For this reason he is able to portray such a view so colorfully in "The Dead Christ." In *The Valley of Campan* he writes insightfully,

On the whole, I find fewer men than one would imagine who decidedly believe in, or deny, the existence of a future world. Few dare to deny it, as for them this life would then lose all unity, form, peace, and hope; few dare to believe it, for they are startled at their own purification and at the destruction of the lessened earth. The majority, according to the promptness of alternating feelings, waver poetically between both beliefs.⁸⁰

This nicely captures the problem of nihilism at the time. Many people wanted to embrace the new scientific worldview, yet they also still wanted to maintain certain elements of the traditional religious worldview that offered them comfort. The struggle between these two views was an inner struggle in many individuals.

⁷⁹ Jean Paul, *Selina, oder über die Unsterblichkeit*, vols. 1–2, Stuttgart and Tübingen: J.G. Cotta 1827.

⁸⁰ Jean Paul, *Das Kampaner Thal*, p. 103 (*The Kampaner Thal*, p. 50).

Jean Paul frames the issue as an either/or proposition. Either one believes in immortality and can thus live a happy and flourishing life, or one rejects the idea and leads a miserable life filled with the fear of death and the absence of meaning. It might have appeared this way at the end of the eighteenth century, but today one could argue that the consequences of rejecting immortality are not nearly as grave as Jean Paul seems to think. Today there are many people who reject the idea of immortality but have not lapsed into a desperate nihilism. They are perfectly able to find other sources of meaning and purpose in their lives. In this sense it might be argued that Jean Paul exaggerates the problem of nihilism that comes with the development of Enlightenment science. There seems to be a lot of middle ground between the acceptance of either immortality or nihilism that Jean Paul fails to see.

For Jean Paul, the threat of the meaninglessness of the universe is closely connected to the question of human immortality. He believes that if humans are not immortal but simply perish forever with death, then the universe has no meaning or purpose. He does not make any attempt to sketch in a positive manner what this meaning might be, but for whatever it is, it has something to do with human existence continuing forever. Thus, he retains this part of the traditional Christian picture of the cosmos, where humans occupy a central role and are in a sense the very reason for the existence and course of the universe. Without human beings, the universe would be a dead, empty shell. Here the triad of concepts of God, meaning, and immortality are intimately connected.

Jean Paul's writings on this subject are couched in truly moving and powerful prose. His attempt to give an overview of the universe and at the same time touch the human heart is nothing short of breathtaking. He has a great gift for creating stirring images that hauntingly stick in the minds of readers. But the question is whether his argumentation is as good as his literary bluster.