

Nihilism

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Philosophical Concept

As its name implies (from Latin *nihil*, 'nothing'), philosophical nihilism is a philosophy of negation, rejection, or denial of some or all aspects of thought or life. Moral nihilism, for example, rejects any possibility of justifying or criticizing moral judgments, on grounds such as that morality is a cloak for egoistic self-seeking, and therefore a sham; that only descriptive claims can be rationally adjudicated and that moral (prescriptive) claims cannot be logically derived from descriptive ones; or that moral principles are nothing more than expressions of subjective choices, preferences or feelings of people who endorse them.

Similarly, epistemological nihilism denies the possibility of justifying or criticizing claims to knowledge, because it assumes that a foundation of infallible, universal truths would be required for such assessments, and no such thing is available; because it views all claims to knowledge as entirely relative to historical epochs, cultural contexts or the vagaries of individual thought and experience, and therefore as ultimately arbitrary and incommensurable; because it sees all attempts at justification or criticism as useless, given centuries of unresolved disagreement about disputed basic beliefs even among the most intelligent thinkers; or because it notes that numerous widely accepted, unquestioned beliefs of the past are dismissed out of hand today and expects a similar fate in the future for many, if not all, of the most confident present beliefs.

Political nihilism calls for the complete destruction of existing political institutions, along with their supporting outlooks and social structures, but has no positive message of what should be put in their place. Cosmic nihilism regards nature as either wholly unintelligible and starkly indifferent to basic human concerns, or as knowable only in the sense of being amenable to scientific description and explanation. In either case, the cosmos is seen as giving no support to distinctively human aims or values, and it may even be regarded as actively hostile to human beings. Existential nihilism negates the meaning of human life, judging it to be irremediably pointless, futile and absurd. Cosmic and existential nihilism are the focus of this entry.

1. Historical background

Scattered uses of the term 'nihilism' can be found in philosophical, theological, political and literary writings of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe. In that period, the term was sometimes used to refer to atheism and its alleged inability to provide support for knowledge and morality, or to impart purpose to human life; sometimes to any sort of

uncommitted, sceptical or despairing outlook on existence; sometimes to philosophical idealists (especially proponents of the 'critical' philosophy of Immanuel Kant), on the basis that they negate any possibility of knowing or relating to objective, in-itself facts of the world by insisting that all experienced objects are constructions of the mind; and sometimes to socialists or anarchists, because their revolutionary philosophies were judged to be destructive of all political and social order. But the term first came into wide use in the period extending from the 1870s into the early years of the twentieth century, due largely to the influence of three writers: the Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev and Fëdor Dostoevskii, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

A character named Bazarov, in Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), proclaims himself a nihilist and explains that nihilists 'act by virtue of what we recognize as beneficial'. What is most beneficial for the present, he continues, is 'negation, and we deny...everything'. Bazarov's nihilism quickly became famous in Russia and was warmly endorsed by certain revolutionary groups there in the 1860s, as well as being denounced by defenders of traditional beliefs and existing religious and political institutions. Dostoevskii was one such adamant defender, and his novel *The Possessed* (1871–2) gives a lurid portrayal of the lives of three members of a nihilist society, two of whom die by their own hand, the third at the hands of his comrades. Their existence is wretched and empty, the author implies, because they have lost faith in God and think that they must now arrogate to themselves God's absolute freedom. But theirs is an absurd freedom, without guidance or norms. It ravages their lives and brings them to pointless deaths. Dostoevskii propounded the theme of ruinous nihilism following inevitably from atheism through much of his literary career.

In notebooks composed between 1883 and 1888, parts of which were later published under the title *The Will to Power* (1901), Nietzsche announced 'the advent of nihilism' in European culture and ruminated at length on its character and causes (see Nietzsche, F. §7). There was one sense, he thought, in which nihilism could be attributed to the declining influence of Christianity and loss of faith in God, for without God human life seemed deprived of purpose and value. But in another sense, Western civilization was now coming to realize that Christianity had stripped the world of immanent meaning - thus containing in itself the seeds of the most thoroughgoing nihilism - by insisting on the necessity for a transcendent ground of truths and values, and focusing most of its attention on attainment of a paradise beyond the grave where the trials and sorrows of earthly existence would be redeemed.

The task to which Nietzsche devoted much of his writing, therefore, was twofold. The first part was to do relentless battle with Christianity and lay bare what he regarded as its implicit nihilism, thus freeing European culture from its spell. The second was to find some way to move beyond the nihilistic desolation that Nietzsche's character Zarathustra foresees in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), following hard on the heels of his startling discovery of 'the death of

God'. Nietzsche condemned as 'passive nihilism' the despairing resignation with which Arthur Schopenhauer and other radical pessimists responded to the looming crisis of the West. He sought to develop a vision of an 'active nihilism' that would fully acknowledge important findings of epistemological, moral and cosmic nihilism, but convert them into stepping stones to a new affirmation of life.

2. Cosmic nihilism

The absolute form of cosmic nihilism denies to the universe any sort of intelligibility or meaning. It is blank and featureless, giving no response to the age-old human search for understanding and no support to distinctively human aims, aspirations or purposes. All attempts to comprehend the world, including those of the various natural sciences, are doomed to failure. Whatever meanings or values we may think we have found in it stem from unconscious projections of our own suppositions and wishes, because it contains no knowable traits, principles or patterns that would enable it to be understood, and it is utterly lacking in discernible value. This total alienation of human understanding and need from the surrounding universe is asserted by the German thinker Max Stirner, when he states that the world 'cannot be regarded as a comprehensive structure of objective meanings' but must rather be seen 'as a metaphysical chaos'. This conclusion follows from Stirner's radical nominalism, which views the world as a loose aggregation of unique, self-contained particulars which exhibit no intelligible relations to one another. As for values, Stirner's nominalism led him to the view that we must fend for ourselves; individuals are left isolated in a chaotic world to find as much private enjoyment and achieve as much power over others as they can.

A similar bleak view of the cosmos is taken by Antoine Roquentin, a character in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938). The fundamental discovery he makes is that 'the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence'. An uncrossable chasm yawns between the concepts, descriptions, explanations and valuations of human beings on the one hand, and the world on the other. From the perspective of his recurring experiences of 'nausea,' Roquentin perceives the world to be like a thick paste or oozing slime, without character or distinction, and impenetrable to the mind (see Sartre, J.-P. §4). In much the same fashion, Albert Camus speaks in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) of the world as 'dense' and 'strange', a 'vast irrational' wholly unresponsive to human attempts to find a home within it or to comprehend its meaning. Schopenhauer, in the early nineteenth century, went even further than these thinkers in denuding the world of value. He argues in *The World as Will and Idea* (1818) that the cosmos is steered by a blind impulse or energy that is not merely oblivious to matters of good and evil but actively hostile to human beings, generating a horrible preponderance of sufferings over pleasures and disappointments over satisfactions.

The relative form of cosmic nihilism sees the world as fully open to scientific understanding but denies to it any normative significance. The real universe, in this outlook, is the purely

descriptive one being brought steadily into view by the natural sciences, a universe of factual principles and laws that gives no place or support to the moral, aesthetic and religious concerns that preoccupy human life. The French biochemist Jacques Monod develops this idea in *Chance and Necessity* (1970), where he identifies 'the essential message of science' as an objective portrayal of the cosmos that 'outrages values' by making them 'seem to melt into the world's uncaring emptiness'. Humans must somehow reconcile themselves to living 'on the boundary of an alien world' just as indifferent to their hopes as it is to their sufferings or crimes.

3. Existential nihilism

Existential nihilists contend that human existence has no purpose, value, or justification. There is no reason to live, and yet we persist in living. The human situation is therefore absurd. The philosophical position of existential nihilism is not just that this or that person may fail to find meaning in life; it is rather that a genuinely meaningful life is impossible. In the face of this conclusion, Schopenhauer counsels us to quench the flame of affirmation and desire, to resign ourselves to the span of our days without hope of respite and calmly await an annihilating death, the last sure sign of the utter futility of our existence. Sartre too hammers at the absurdity of existence but counsels us in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to invent meanings for our lives through sheer acts of freedom, creating those meanings - in the manner of the God of traditional religion - out of nothing. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finds the absurdity of the human situation to lie in our restless, futile search for comprehensive meaning in a universe that has no discoverable significance or value. He advises us not to commit suicide when we realize that our lives have no point - that would be the coward's way out. Instead, we should heroically rebel against the abyss of meaninglessness and in that very act of defiance find some semblance of a reason for being (see Existentialism).

A relentless, uncompromising exponent of existential nihilism is the Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran. In *A Short History of Decay* (1949), he notes that most of us strive throughout our lives to 'keep deep down inside a certitude superior to all the others: life has no meaning, it *cannot* have any such thing'. Civilizations, philosophies, religions - all are ways of masking this inescapable truth, of seeking to divert our attention from its shattering impact. How, then, can we cope with it? As against Schopenhauer, Cioran insists that we cannot escape torturing ourselves with awareness of the 'disease', 'shame' and 'curse' of our existence. Our probing, questioning minds give us no peace; only those living in shallowness and illusion can avoid their constant torture. As against Camus, Cioran argues that we all *should* commit suicide: this is the only consistent way of dealing with the absurdity of our lives. But we foolishly compound the absurdity by refusing, in our cowardice, to do away with ourselves. As against Sartre, Cioran contends that 'the intoxication of freedom is only a shudder within a fatality, the form of [our]...fate being no less regulated than that of a sonnet or a star'. For beings born only to experience the crushing inevitabilities of disappointment, suffering and death, a freedom thrown defiantly against the void can give no respite. From 'spermatozoon to sepulchre' we are pawns of

a taunting fate that arbitrarily selects some for good fortune and others for bad. Each life is a useless 'hyphen' between birth and death. Human history, as evolutionary biology and scientific cosmology show, is that of one more organic species doomed, like all the rest, to extinction, and of a mere fleeting breath in the universe's onrush to entropic death. Analogous to Sartre's descriptions of 'nausea' is Cioran's acknowledgement of a sickening 'disgust' welling up from such recognitions: 'that *negative* superfluity which spares nothing...[and] shows us the inanity of life'.

4. Critical comment

That the threat of nihilism is still very much with us is indicated by Loyal Rue's book, *By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs* (1994). Rue states that he is convinced of two things: that nihilism is true and that human beings cannot live with its truth. Rue does not so much systematically argue for nihilism as confess himself to be firmly in its grasp. The solution he proposes is that of a 'Noble Lie', that is, a programme of mythical re-enchantment of the universe which will deceive people into believing that it and they both have significance, even though neither has. This desperate and implausible strategy shows the continuing power of nihilism, here regarded as a kind of foregone conclusion.

Martin Heidegger, a prominent critic of nihilism in its various forms, attributes what he regards as the nihilistic malaise of the West - astutely predicted by Nietzsche - to an inherited tangle of epistemological and metaphysical misconceptions that have led to a disastrous 'forgetfulness of being'. Only if we go back to the philosophical roots of the Western world, in the profound reflections of the Presocratic philosophers that Heidegger considers to have been distorted by Plato and Aristotle (these distortions having plagued us ever since), can we come to understand how the objectifying, separating, controlling and ego-centred modes of present thought and experience have led us to nihilism. Heidegger's solution lies in our learning radically to 're-vision' reality, to become receptive to the healing presence of being that shines through all beings and binds us to one another and to the world (Heidegger 1953). A powerful explication and defence of Heidegger's general approach to nihilism is contained in Levin (1988).

Arguments for cosmic and existential nihilism, like those for the other forms of nihilism, are complex and varied. Detailed analysis and criticism of some of them can be found in Crosby (1988), which probes beneath the arguments themselves to the crucial assumptions that underlie them, many of which stem from the legacy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western thought (some examples of these assumptions are given below). The book concludes that, while philosophical nihilism has important lessons to teach us, it is ultimately a distorted and one-sided view of ourselves and the experienced world, one that turns on highly questionable assumptions.

Many such assumptions lie behind some of the arguments put forward in support of cosmic nihilism. Proponents believe that if claims about the universe cannot be convincingly shown to correspond to what it is in and of itself, apart from human experience and conceptualization, then we cannot be said to have any significant understanding of the universe. Additionally, they sometimes think that the presence of purposive activity in the universe (for example, in human beings and other animals on earth) is not enough to give it meaning - for this there must be a discernible purpose of the universe *as a whole*. Such thinkers often demand that the universe must have a 'human face', have its ground in a personal divine Being and be centred on humans and their distinctive concerns. Others rely on natural science as the final arbiter of the nature of nature and assume that, since science discovers no values in nature but only descriptive facts and relations, nature is devoid of value. Some suppose that if, as natural science claims, the universe had an accidental beginning (the Big Bang) and will eventually come to an absolute end (its inevitable entropic death, assuming that the universe is a closed system) then it follows that the universe can have no meaning.

Similarly, proponents of existential nihilism use arguments which are informed by a number of disputable assumptions. They may believe that a life which ends in annihilating death cannot be said to have meaning, or that there is too much suffering, or constant threat of suffering, in human life for it to be meaningful. They sometimes conceive of time as a series of disconnected moments, and hence believe that our lives in time can have no cumulative pattern or significance. Often they assume that meaningful values, including the existential ones that relate to the course and direction of our lives, must be conferred on us from on high and thus have a transcendent source and sanction. Others believe that values, including existential ones, can have no significance or weight unless they are absolute, unconditioned, timeless and universal, or that our lives are meaningless if they are the outcome of a process of biological evolution, guided by the principle of natural selection that is non-purposive and non-designed. That human beings are locked in their individual subjectivities and doomed to invent arbitrary meanings for themselves, with no objective rules or standards, is yet another assumption that often underlies the existential nihilist's argument.

All these suppositions are open to serious criticism. When they are brought under careful scrutiny, arguments that depend on them lose much of their force. Still, there is considerable truth about the world and the human condition that nihilistic arguments in general can bring home to us. Reflection on such arguments can sharpen our philosophical vision in fundamental and positive ways.

References and further reading

Camus, A. (1942) *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. J. O'Brien, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

(Sisyphus is a symbol of human beings learning to live defiantly despite their inability to find meaning in the universe; see §2 above; relatively easy.)

Carr, K. (1992) *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

(Examines Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism as an impending crisis of the West and compares responses to it given by Karl Barth and Richard Rorty; warns that nihilism has become so 'banal' in its postmodern form as to sanction a dangerous complacency about existing structures of thought, practice and value; moderately difficult.)

Cioran, E.M. (1949) *A Short History of Decay*, trans. R. Howard, Oxford: Blackwell, 1975. (Plumbs the depths of the mood and outlook of existential nihilism; mentioned in §3 above; relatively easy.)

Crosby, D.A. (1988) *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

(Explicates and critically examines arguments for moral, epistemological, cosmic and existential nihilism, with an emphasis on existential nihilism and ways the other types relate to it; see §4 above; moderately difficult.)

Dostoevskii, F. (1871–2) *The Possessed*, trans. C. Garnett, New York: Heritage Press, 1959. (A novel about the destructive lives of members of a revolutionary nihilist society in nineteenth century Russia; see §1 above; relatively easy.)

Evans, F.J. (1993) *Psychology and Nihilism: A Genealogical Critique of the Computational Model of Mind*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

(Argues that cognitive psychology not only reflects the currents of nihilism rampant in our time, but also reinforces them with truncated, technocratic, inadequate conceptions of human mind, human language, human creativity and human beings themselves; moderately difficult.)

Heidegger, M. (1953) *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Anchor Books, 1959.

(Traces the rise of nihilism in the West to epistemological and metaphysical ideas going back to the Hellenic Age in Greece; see §4 above; difficult.)

Levin, D.M. (1988) *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*, New York and London: Routledge.

(Argues that the advent of nihilism is both cause and consequence of a corrupted egocentric and patriarchal vision; pleads for a new metaphysical and social vision that draws on the thought of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault and others; see §4 above; difficult.)

Monod, J. (1970) *Chance and Necessity*, trans. A. Wainhouse, New York: Vintage Books, 1972. (Natural science's 'postulate of objectivity' shows the world and human life to be devoid of value, so values must be arbitrarily created; see §2 above; moderately difficult.)

Nietzsche, F. (1883–5) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Viking, 1966. (Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra proclaims the death of God and its consequences; see §1 above; moderately difficult.)

Nietzsche, F. (1901) *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

(Excerpts from Nietzsche's notebooks in the 1880s that announce the advent of nihilism in the West and defend 'active' nihilism against 'passive' nihilism; see above §1; moderately difficult.)

Ritter, J. and Gründer, K. (1971-) 'Nihilismus', *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Historical dictionary of philosophy), Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe & Company, vol. 6, 846–854. (Extensive survey of uses of the term 'nihilism' in literature, philosophy, theology and politics, going back to the twelfth century.)

Rosen, S. (1969) *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Attributes the presence of nihilism in today's world to a series of past philosophical decisions; especially attacks the modern detachment of 'reason' from its traditional close association with 'good'; moderately difficult.)

Rue, L.D. (1994) *By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs*, New York: Oxford University Press.

(Accepts the truth of what he regards as epistemological, moral and cosmic nihilism, and argues that only deception or illusion can enable human beings to live in the face of this truth; discussed in §4 above; moderately difficult.)

Sartre, J.-P. (1938) *Nausea*, trans. L. Alexander, New York: New Directions, 1964.

(A novel about a character who lives nihilism through in its various forms and experiences a sickening loathing for himself, other humans, and the world; see §2 above; relatively easy.)

Sartre, J.-P. (1943) *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.

(An approach to existential meaning, epistemic truth and moral values that turns on a radical doctrine of human freedom; see §3 above; difficult.)

Schopenhauer, A. (1818) *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 2nd edn, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 3 vols, 1957.

(Portrays the world and humans as expressions of the inexorable workings of a cosmic will that is without purpose or meaning and causes an overbalance of suffering in all forms of sentient life, including our own; see §2 above; difficult.)

Stirner, M. (1845) *The Ego and His Own*, trans. J. Carroll, New York: Harper & Row, 1971. (Presents an ego-centred nominalism implying moral, epistemological and cosmic nihilism; see §2 above; relatively easy.)

Tillich, P. (1953) *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

(Draws on the ideas of Heidegger, among others, to discover resources for coping with the threats of 'non-being' in the forms of fate and death, guilt and moral self-condemnation, emptiness and meaninglessness. Finds 'the courage to be' in the 'God above God,' that is, the power of 'being-itself'; moderately difficult.)

Turgenev, I. (1862) *Fathers and Sons*, trans. M.R. Katz, New York: W.W. Norton, 1994.

(A novel about the seductions of nihilism for youths in nineteenth-century Russia; see §1 above; relatively easy.)

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