**Nihilism**

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**I. INTRODUCTION:   
The Question of Truth**

What is the Nihilism in which we have seen the root of the Revolution of the modern age? The answer, at first thought, does not seem difficult; several obvious examples of it spring immediately to mind. There is Hitler's fantastic program of destruction, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Dadaist attack on art; there is the background from which these movements sprang, most notably represented by several "possessed" individuals of the late nineteenth century--poets like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, revolutionaries like Bakunin and Nechayev, "prophets" like Nietzsche; there is, on a humbler level among our contemporaries, the vague unrest that leads some to flock to magicians like Hitler, and others to find escape in drugs or false religions, or to perpetrate those "senseless" crimes that become ever more characteristic of these times. But these represent no more than the spectacular surface of the problem of Nihilism. To account even for these, once one probes beneath the surface, is by no means an easy task; but the task we have set for ourselves in this chapter is broader: to understand the nature of the whole movement of which these phenomena are but extreme examples.

To do this it will be necessary to avoid two great pitfalls lying on either side of the path we have chosen, into one or the other of which most commentators on the Nihilist spirit of our age have fallen: apology, and diatribe.

Anyone aware of the too-obvious imperfections and evils of modern civilization that have been the more immediate occasion and cause of the Nihilist reaction--though we shall see that these too have been the fruit of an incipient Nihilism--cannot but feel a measure of sympathy with some, at least, of the men who have participated in that reaction. Such sympathy may take the form of pity for men who may, from one point of view, be seen as innocent "victims" of the conditions against which their effort has been directed; or again, it may be expressed in the common opinion that certain types of Nihilist phenomena have actually a "positive" significance and have a role to play in some "new development" of history or of man. The latter attitude, again, is itself one of the more obvious fruits of the very Nihilism in question here; but the former attitude, at least, is not entirely devoid of truth or justice. For that very reason, however, we must be all the more careful not to give it undue importance. It is all too easy, in the atmosphere of intellectual fog that pervades Liberal and Humanist circles today, to allow sympathy for an unfortunate person to pass over into receptivity to his ideas. The Nihilist, to be sure, is in some sense "sick," and his sickness is a testimony to the sickness of an age whose best--as well as worst--elements turn to Nihilism; but sickness is not cured, nor even properly diagnosed by "sympathy." In any case there is no such thing as an entirely "innocent victim." The Nihilist is all too obviously involved in the very sins and guilt of mankind that have produced the evils of our age; and in taking arms--as do all Nihilists not only against real or imagined "abuses" and "injustices" in the social and religious order, but also against order itself and the Truth that underlies that order, the Nihilist takes an active part in the work of Satan (for such it is) that can by no means be explained away by the mythology of the "innocent victim." No one, in the last analysis, serves Satan against his will.

But if "apology" is far from our intention in these pages, neither is our aim mere diatribe. It is not sufficient, for example, to condemn Nazism or Bolshevism for their "barbarism," "gangsterism," or "anti-intellectualism," and the artistic or literary avant-garde for their "pessimism" or "exhibitionism"; nor is it enough to defend the "democracies" in the name of "civilization," "progress," or "humanism," or for their advocacy of "private property" or "civil liberties." Such arguments, while some of them possess a certain justice, are really quite beside the point; the blows of Nihilism strike too deep, its program is far too radical, to be effectively countered by them. Nihilism has error for its root, and error can be conquered only by Truth. Most of the criticism of Nihilism is not directed to this root at all, and the reason for this--as we shall see--is that Nihilism has become, in our time, so widespread and pervasive, has entered so thoroughly and so deeply into the minds and hearts of all men living today, that there is no longer any "front" on which it may be fought; and those who think they are fighting it are most often using its own weapons, which they in effect turn against themselves.

Some will perhaps object--once they have seen the scope of our project--that we have set our net too wide: that we have exaggerated the prevalence of Nihilism or, if not, then that the phenomenon is so universal as to defy handling at all. We must admit that our task is an ambitious one, all the more so because of the ambiguity of many Nihilist phenomena; and indeed, if we were to attempt a thorough examination of the question our work would never end.

It is possible, however, to set our net wide and still catch the fish we are after--because it is, after all, a single fish, and a large one. A complete documentation of Nihilist phenomena is out of the question; but an examination of the unique Nihilist mentality that underlies them, and of its indisputable effects and its role in contemporary history, is surely possible.

We shall attempt here, first, to describe this mentality-in several, at least, of its most important manifestations-and offer a sketch of its historical development; and then to probe more deeply into its meaning and historical program. But before this can be done, we must know more clearly of what we are speaking; we must begin, therefore, with a definition of Nihilism.

This task need not detain us long; Nihilism has been defined, and quite succinctly, by the fount of philosophical Nihilism, Nietzsche.

**"That there is *no truth*; that there is no absolute state of affairs-no 'thing-in-itself.' *This alone is Nihilism, and of the most extreme kind*."[[1](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/nihilism.html" \l "n1)]**

"There is no truth": we have encountered this phrase already more than once in this book, and it will recur frequently hereafter. For the question of Nihilism is, most profoundly, a question of truth; it is, indeed, the question of truth.

But what is truth? The question is, first of all, one of logic: before we discuss the content of truth, we must examine its very possibility, and the conditions of its postulation. And by "truth" we mean, of course--as Nietzsche's denial of it makes explicit--absolute truth, which we have already defined as the dimension of the beginning and the end of things.

"Absolute truth": the phrase has, to a generation raised on skepticism and unaccustomed to serious thought, an antiquated ring. No one, surely--is the common idea--no one is naive enough to believe in "absolute truth" any more; all truth, to our enlightened age, is "relative." The latter expression, let us note-"all truth is relative"-is the popular translation of Nietzsche's phrase, "there is no (absolute) truth"; the one doctrine is the foundation of the Nihilism alike of the masses and of the elite.

"Relative truth" is primarily represented, for our age, by the knowledge of science, which begins in observation, proceeds by logic, and progresses in orderly fashion from the known to the unknown. It is always discursive, contingent, qualified, always expressed in "relation" to something else, never standing alone, never categorical, never -absolute."

The unreflective scientific specialist sees no need for any other kind of knowledge; occupied with the demands of his specialty, he has, perhaps, neither time nor inclination for "abstract" questions that inquire, for example, into the basic presuppositions of that specialty. If he is pressed, or if his mind spontaneously turns to such questions, the most obvious explanation is usually sufficient to satisfy his curiosity: all truth is empirical, all truth is relative.

Either statement, of course, is a self-contradiction. The first statement is itself not empirical at all, but metaphysical; the second is itself an absolute statement. The question of absolute truth is raised first of all, for the critical observer, by such self-contradictions; and the first logical conclusion to which he must be led is this:, if there is any truth at all, it cannot be merely "relative." The first principles of modern science, as of any system of knowledge, are themselves unchangeable and absolute; if they were not there would be no knowledge at all, not even the most "reflective" knowledge, for there would be no criteria by which to classify anything as knowledge or truth.

This axiom has a corollary: the absolute cannot be attained by means of the relative. That is to say, the first principles of any system of knowledge cannot be arrived at through the means of that knowledge itself, but must be given in advance; they are the object, not of scientific demonstration, but of faith.

We have discussed, in an earlier chapter, the universality of faith, seeing it as underlying all human activity and knowledge; and we have seen that faith, if it is not to fall prey to subjective delusions, must be rooted in truth. It is therefore a legitimate, and indeed unavoidable question whether the first principles of the scientific faith--for example, the coherence and uniformity of nature, the transsubjectivity of human knowledge, the adequacy of reason to draw conclusions from observation--are founded in absolute truth; if they are not, they can be no more than unverifiable probabilities. The "pragmatic" position taken by many scientists and humanists who cannot be troubled to think about ultimate things--the position that these principles are no more than experimental hypotheses which collective experience finds reliable--is surely unsatisfactory; it may offer a psychological explanation of the faith these principles inspire, but since it does not establish the foundation of that faith in truth, it leaves the whole scientific edifice on shifting sands and provides no sure defense against the irrational winds that periodically attack it.

In actual fact, however,--whether it be from simple naivete or from a deeper insight which they cannot justify by argument-most scientists and humanists undoubtedly believe that their faith has something to do with the truth of things. Whether this belief is justified or not is, of course, another question; it is a metaphysical question, and one thing that is certain is that it is *not* justified by the rather primitive metaphysics of most scientists.

Every man, as we have seen, lives by faith; likewise every man--something less obvious but no less certain--is a metaphysician. The claim to any knowledge whatever--and no living man can refrain from this claim--implies a theory and standard of knowledge, and a notion of what is ultimately knowable and true. This ultimate truth, whether it be conceived as the Christian God or simply as the ultimate coherence of things, is a metaphysical first principle, an absolute truth. But with the acknowledgement, logically unavoidable, of such a principle, the theory of the "relativity of truth" collapses, it itself being revealed as a self-contradictory absolute.

The proclamation of the "relativity of truth" is, thus, what might be called a "negative metaphysics"--but a metaphysics all the same. There are several principal forms of "negative metaphysics," and since each contradicts itself in a slightly different way, and appeals to a slightly different mentality, it would be wise to devote a paragraph here to the examination of each. We may divide them into the two general categories of "realism" and "agnosticism," each of which in turn may be subdivided into "naive" and "critical."

"Naive realism," or "naturalism," does not precisely deny absolute truth, but rather makes absolute claims of its own that cannot be defended. Rejecting any "ideal" or "spiritual" absolute, it claims the absolute truth of "materialism" and "determinism." This philosophy is still current in some circles--it is official Marxist doctrine and is expounded by some unsophisticated scientific thinkers in the West but the main current of contemporary thought has left it behind, and it seems today the quaint relic of a simpler, but bygone, day, the Victorian day when many transferred to "science" the allegiance and emotions they had once devoted to religion. It is the impossible formulation of a "scientific" metaphysics--impossible because science is, by its nature, knowledge of the particular, and metaphysics is knowledge of what underlies the particular and is presupposed by it. It is a suicidal philosophy in that the "materialism" and "determinism" it posits render all philosophy invalid; since it must insist that philosophy, like everything else, is "determined," its advocates can only claim that their philosophy, since it exists, is "inevitable," but not at all that it is "true.' This philosophy, in fact, if consistent, would do away with the category of truth altogether; but its adherents, innocent of thought that is either consistent or profound, seem unaware of this fatal contradiction. The contradiction may be seen, on a less abstract level, in the altruistic and idealistic practice of, for example, the Russian Nihilists of the last century, a practice in flagrant contradiction of their purely materialistic and egoistic theory; Vladimir Solovyov cleverly pointed out this discrepancy by ascribing to them the syllogism, "Man is descended from. monkey, consequently we shall love one another."

All philosophy presupposes, to some degree, the autonomy o ideas; philosophical "materialism" is, thus, a species of "idealism." It is one might say, the self-confession of those whose ideas do not rise above the obvious, whose thirst for truth is so easily assuaged by science that they make it into their absolute.

"Critical realism," or "positivism," is the straightforward denial of metaphysical truth. Proceeding from the same scientific predisposition as the more naive naturalism, it professes greater modesty in abandoning the absolute altogether and restricting itself to "empirical," "relative" truth. We have already noted the contradiction in this position: the denial of absolute truth is itself an "absolute truth"; again, as with naturalism, the very positing of the first principle of positivism is its own refutation.

"Agnosticism," like " realism," may be distinguished as "naive" and "critical." "Naive" or "doctrinaire agnosticism" posits the absolute unknowability of any absolute truth. While its claim seems more modest even than that of positivism, it still quite dearly claims too much: if it actually *knows* that the absolute is "unknowable," then this knowledge is itself "absolute." Such agnosticism is in fact but a variety of positivism, attempting, with no greater success, to cover up its contradictions.

Only in "critical" or "pure agnosticism" do we find, at last, what seems to be a successful renunciation of the absolute; unfortunately, such renunciation entails the renunciation of everything else and ends--if it is consistent--in total solipsism. Such agnosticism is the simple statement of fact: we do not know whether there exists an absolute truth, or what its nature could be if it did exist; let us, then--this is the corollary--content ourselves with the empirical, relative truth we *can* know. But what is truth? What is knowledge? If there is no absolute standard by which these are to be measured, they cannot even be defined. The agnostic, if he acknowledges this criticism, does not allow it to disturb him; his position is one of "pragmatism," " experimentalism," "instrumentalism": there is no truth, but man can survive, can get along in the world, without it. Such a position has been defended in high places--and in very low places as well--in our anti-intellectualist century; but the least one can say of it is that it is intellectually irresponsible. It is the definitive abandonment of truth, or rather the surrender of truth to power, whether that power be nation, race, class, comfort, or whatever other cause is able to absorb the energies men once devoted to the truth.

The "pragmatist" and the "agnostic" may be quite sincere and well-meaning; but they only deceive themselves--and others--if they continue to use the word "truth" to describe what they are seeking. Their existence, in fact, is testimony to the fact that the search for truth which has so long animated European man has come to an end. Four centuries and more of modern thought have been, from one point of view, an experiment in the possibilities of knowledge open to man, assuming that *there is no Revealed Truth*. The conclusion--which Hume already saw and from which he fled into the comfort of "common sense" and conventional life, and which the multitudes sense today without possessing any such secure refuge--the conclusion of this experiment is an absolute negation: if there is no Revealed Truth, there is no truth at all; the search for truth outside of Revelation has come to a dead end. The scientist admits this by restricting himself to the narrowest of specialties, content if he sees a certain coherence in a limited aggregate of facts, without troubling himself over the existence of any truth, large or small; the multitudes demonstrate it by looking to the scientist, not for truth, but for the technological applications of a knowledge which has no more than a practical value, and by looking to other, irrational sources for the ultimate values men once expected to find in truth. The despotism of science over practical life is contemporaneous with the advent of a whole series of pseudo-religious "revelations"; the two are correlative symptoms of the same malady: the abandonment of truth.

Logic, thus, can take us this far: denial or doubt of absolute truth leads (if one is consistent and honest) to the abyss of solipsism and irrationalism; the only position that involves no *logical* contradictions is the affirmation of an absolute truth which underlies and secures all lesser truths; and this absolute truth can be attained by no relative, human means. At this point logic fails us, and we must enter an entirely different universe of discourse if we are to proceed. It is one thing to state that there is no logical barrier to the affirmation of absolute truth; it is quite another actually to affirm it. Such an affirmation can be based upon only one source; the question of truth must come in the end to the question of Revelation.

The critical mind hesitates at this point. Must we seek from without what we cannot attain by our own unaided power? It is a blow to pride--most of all to that pride which passes today for scientific "humility" that "sits down before fact as a little child" and yet refuses to acknowledge any arbiter of fact save the proud human reason. It is, however, a particular revelation--Divine Revelation, the Christian Revelation--that so repels the rationalist; other revelations he does not gainsay.

Indeed, the man who does not accept, fully and consciously, a coherent doctrine of truth such as the Christian Revelation provides, is forced--if he has any pretensions to knowledge whatever--to seek such a doctrine elsewhere; this has been the path of modern philosophy, which has ended in obscurity and confusion because it would never squarely face the fact that it cannot supply for itself what can only be given from without. The blindness and confusion of modern philosophers with regard to first principles and the dimension of the absolute have been the direct consequence of their own primary assumption, the non-existence of Revelation; for this assumption in effect blinded men to the light of the sun and rendered obscure everything that had once been clear in its light. To one who gropes in this darkness there is but one path, if he will not be healed of his blindness; and that is to seek some light amidst the darkness here below. Many run to the flickering candle of "common sense" and conventional life and accept--because one must get along somehow--the current opinions of the social and intellectual circles to which they belong. But many others, finding this light too dim, flock to the magic lanterns that project beguiling, multicolored views that are, if nothing else, distracting, they become devotees of this or the other political or religious or artistic current that the "spirit of the age" has thrown into fashion. In fact no one lives but by the light of some revelation, be it a true or a false one, whether it serve to enlighten or obscure. He who will not live by the Christian Revelation must live by a false revelation; and all false revelations lead to the Abyss.