NIHILISM

Most broadly, nihilism is the rejection of meaningful moral or religious values. Nihilism is often associated with moral relativism, extreme skepticism or pessimism. First used by the novelist Ivan Turgenev in *Fathers and Sons* to describe the view of his iconoclastic hero, Bazarov, the term commonly suggests, especially within later existentialism, that existence is without objective meaning or value. Values are “devalued” due to their lack of objective standing. The word is also considered a blanket term used to characterize those who reject predominant cultural norms, or a specific label for those engaged in such a practice. Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche each made use of the term. Nietzsche proclaimed nihilism mankind’s greatest modern burden, and devoted most of his works to chronicling its effects on the human spirit. Nihilism, Nietzsche states, means that “every belief…is necessarily false because there simply is no true world,” or a universally true realm of facts, but only individual “worlds” and endless subjectivities. Later existentialism deals largely with the individual’s attempt to generate subjective meaning in the face of nihilism. Beginning in the 1930s, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Martin Heidegger explored variants of the concept and its implications for ontology.

Bibliography: Cunningham, Connor. *A Genealogy of Nihilism*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

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