

# Postnihilism

Meaning is not necessary

# Preview

Here's what we're going to cover

1. History of Western Philosophy
2. The Rise of Secularism & Nihilism
3. The Death of Meaning
4. Postmodernism and Absolute Truth
5. Contemporary Thinkers
6. The Meaning (Nihilistic) Crisis
7. Moving Beyond Nihilism
8. Postnihilism Defined
9. Origin & Genesis of Postnihilism
10. Influences on Postnihilism
11. Letting Go The Demand for Meaning
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# History of Western Philosophy

- Ancient **Greek** Philosophy
  - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle
- **Roman** Empire
  - Stoicism, Marcus Aurelius
- Medieval Philosophy
  - Thomas Aquinas (Natural Law)
- Renaissance
  - Humanism, **Intellectualism**, Universal Man
- **Enlightenment** Philosophy
  - Empiricism, **Rationalism**, and the Scientific Method
- 19th Century Philosophy
  - Existentialism, Nietzsche, **Nihilism**
  - **Transcendentalism**, Manifest Destiny
- 20th Century Philosophy
  - Existentialism to **Absurdism**: Sartre, Camus
  - The advent of **Postmodernism**



# The Rise of Secularism

- Enlightenment & Industrial Revolution
  - Increased **focus on human reason**, science, and empirical evidence
  - **Decline of religious authority** in societal institutions
  - Emergence of secular humanism: ethical frameworks outside religious doctrine
- The **Shift Towards Nihilism**:
  - Nietzsche's proclamation of the "**Death of God**"
  - Rise of **existential angst** and absurdism in the face of secularism (Seraphim Rose, Jordan Peterson)
  - Growth of **materialist philosophies** and **science's inability to provide life's ultimate meaning**
  - Response to industrialization, urbanization, and societal **alienation**
- **Consequences of Secularism & Nihilism**:
  - The **existential crisis**: searching for meaning in a secular world
  - Nihilism as a **philosophical dilemma**: life without inherent meaning or value
  - Rejection of **moral absolutes**, leading to **moral relativism**
  - The double-edged sword: **freedom from religious doctrine** but also absence of a pre-defined purpose





# The Death of Meaning

- **Embedded in Western culture** through **religious narratives**
  - Manifested in pursuit of **objective truth** and **morality**
  - Sustained through **philosophical traditions**, from Plato to Kant
  - Challenges to Meaning:
- **Modern scientific understanding** undermines traditional narratives
  - **Darwin's** evolution theory challenges **human exceptionalism**
  - Freud's psychoanalysis questions the primacy of **rational self**
  - **Quantum mechanics** and its implications for **determinism** and **objectivity**
- The "Death" of Meaning:
  - **Postmodernism** and the critique of **grand narratives** (Lyotard)
  - **Deconstruction** of texts and meanings (Derrida)
  - The **relativity of truth** and the **problem of interpretation** (Foucault)



# Postmodernism & Truth

- Definition of Postmodernism:
  - Philosophical and cultural movement that **questions foundational assumptions and grand narratives**
  - Advocates for **relativism, skepticism**, and the importance of **discourse** and power relations
- Influential Thinkers:
  - Jacques Derrida: **Deconstructionism** and the instability of meaning
  - Michel Foucault: Power-knowledge relations and the concept of **discourse**
  - Jean-François Lyotard: The end of grand narratives ('**metanarratives**')
- Key Themes of Postmodernism:
  - **Rejection** of **absolute truth** and **universal morals**
  - Emphasis on **local and specific narratives** over global or universal ones (my truth is different from your truth)
  - The **fluidity of identities** (cultural, gender, etc.)
  - Celebration of **difference and marginality**



# Contemporary Thinkers

- **John Vervaeke**
  - Cognitive scientist with a focus on cognitive psychology and cognitive science
  - His "**Awakening from the Meaning Crisis**" series discusses how the historical unfolding of the Western worldview led to the current crisis of meaning.
  - Proposes a solution via '**dialogos**': a **practice of authentic dialogue** aimed at insight and transformation, grounded in both cognitive science and **ancient wisdom traditions**.
- **Seraphim Rose**
  - Orthodox Christian monk and priest known for his writings on religion and modernity.
  - In "**Nihilism: The Root of the Revolution of the Modern Age**," he argues that the modern crisis of meaning stems from **nihilistic philosophies** and the **loss of faith** in a **transcendent order**.
  - Advocates for a **return to spiritual values** and **Orthodox Christian** teachings as a **remedy to nihilism**.
- **Jordan Peterson**
  - Clinical psychologist and professor known for blending psychology with philosophical and religious ideas.
  - Explores the human search for meaning in "**Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief**," arguing that **myths and religious narratives** provide a framework to navigate life's complexities.
  - Emphasizes **personal responsibility**, **pursuit of truth**, and the integration of chaos and order as ways to derive individual meaning in life. (No, not like that!)



# Nihilistic (Meaning) Crisis

- **Childhood Abandonment:**
  - The universal experience of **childhood trauma**, from mild **emotional neglect** to severe **existential terror**
  - The **shortcomings of all parents**, reinforced by societal structures and **often unaddressed** due to **religious narratives, social paradigms, and intergenerational trauma**
  - Resulting impact on individual's sense of self-worth, security, and ability to form healthy relationships
- **Social Abandonment:**
  - The emphasis on **personal responsibility, individualism, and self-sufficiency**, often at the **expense of community** and mutual support (rugged individualism)
  - The **alienation and disconnection** inherent in modern **global societies**, exacerbated by the **cognitive limitations** of our **primate brains**
  - The societal **failure to adequately support each other** and create nurturing, supportive communities
- **Cosmic Abandonment:**
  - The shift towards secularism and scientific understanding, revealing an **indifferent cosmos** devoid of inherent meaning or purpose (or any other life, creating a sense of **cosmic loneliness**)
  - The **existential crisis** this indifference precipitates, questioning the value and purpose of human life
  - The struggle to find **individual meaning** and purpose in an **uncaring, impersonal universe**
- **Self Abandonment:**
  - The **overwhelming sense of despair**, futility, and fatalism that can result from these combined abandonments
  - The **self-destructive behaviors** that can arise in response, such as substance abuse, self-harm, and suicide
  - The **loss of self-love, self-care, and self-compassion**, leading to a profound existential crisis



# Moving Beyond Nihilism

- The Limitations of **Going Backward**:
  - The **impossibility** or **undesirability** of returning to **previous beliefs** systems or societal structures
  - Recognition that progress often involves moving forward, not backward (and can be **difficult and painful!**)
- **Optimistic Nihilism**: A Temporary Solution?
  - The concept of "optimistic nihilism": embracing the lack of inherent meaning **as freedom to create our own**
  - The limitations of this perspective: **Does it fully address the pain of the Nihilistic Crisis?** (short answer: no)
- The Need for Progress:
  - Challenging the view that nihilism is the end point of philosophical progression
  - Begging the question: **"What comes after Nihilism?"**



# Introducing Postnihilism

Central Axiom:  
“**Meaning is not necessary**”

- Challenges the **traditional emphasis** on cosmic or societal meaning
- Emphasis on **Individual Journey**
- Values **unique experiences** and **struggles**
- Celebrates the **transient moments** of life
- Fulfillment found in **satisfying basic human needs** and drives
- Encourages **engagement of intrinsic curiosity** and sociability
- Doesn't **negate the concept** of **meaning** or purpose altogether

# Origin of Postnihilism

1. I was about 4 or 5: asked my dad “Why are we here?”
  - a. He said “there is no reason”
  - b. Radical acceptance of intrinsic meaninglessness from young age
  - c. Me: “Oh, okay”
  - d. I never had a need for cosmic meaning, seemed strange to me that others did
2. Returned to this idea when writing my novel
  - a. Envisioned a post-scarcity, hyper-abundant society
  - b. Needed to understand the underpinning philosophy that could drive a healthy, vibrant society
  - c. Especially if AI removes all need for human labor or effort
  - d. Importance of stories and (modern) myths
  - e. Question: What is left? How do you move beyond the Nihilistic Crisis?





# Influences on Postnihilism

## - Wabi-sabi

- Embraces the beauty in **imperfection**, **transience**, & **incompleteness**
- A mindfulness towards the innate authenticity and **impermanence** of life

## - Ichi-go ichi-e

- “One time, one meeting”
- Encourages awareness and appreciation of the fleeting nature of every moment (cherry blossom festival)

## - Shinto & Kami

- Appreciation for the **divine**, **sublime**, and **awe-inspiring** in the **mundane world** (celestial origins not necessary)
- We are surrounded by *kami* in fleeting moments

## - Zen Buddhism

- **Radical acceptance**, challenging assumptions, and **letting go**





# Let Go of the Demand for Meaning

- **Challenge the Necessity of Meaning:**
  - Question whether the demand for meaning has been a **false pretense all along**
  - Note that the **universe hasn't changed** due to human developments like writing or the internet; it's **only our perception that has changed**
- **The Narrative of Meaning:**
  - Acknowledge that "meaning" is **merely a narrative**, a human **construct of words** and concepts
  - Realize this can help us to **let go of the demand** for meaning
- **Moving Beyond, Letting Go:**
  - Postnihilism isn't only about discarding the need for meaning, but about advancing towards something else
  - It's about growth, not just rejection
- **Embrace Your Individual Experience:**
  - Celebrate your unique **journey, struggles, and challenges**
  - Appreciate the **transience** and **uniqueness** of your individual moments
  - **Replace the demand for universal Meaning** with a focus on personal, moment-to-moment significance



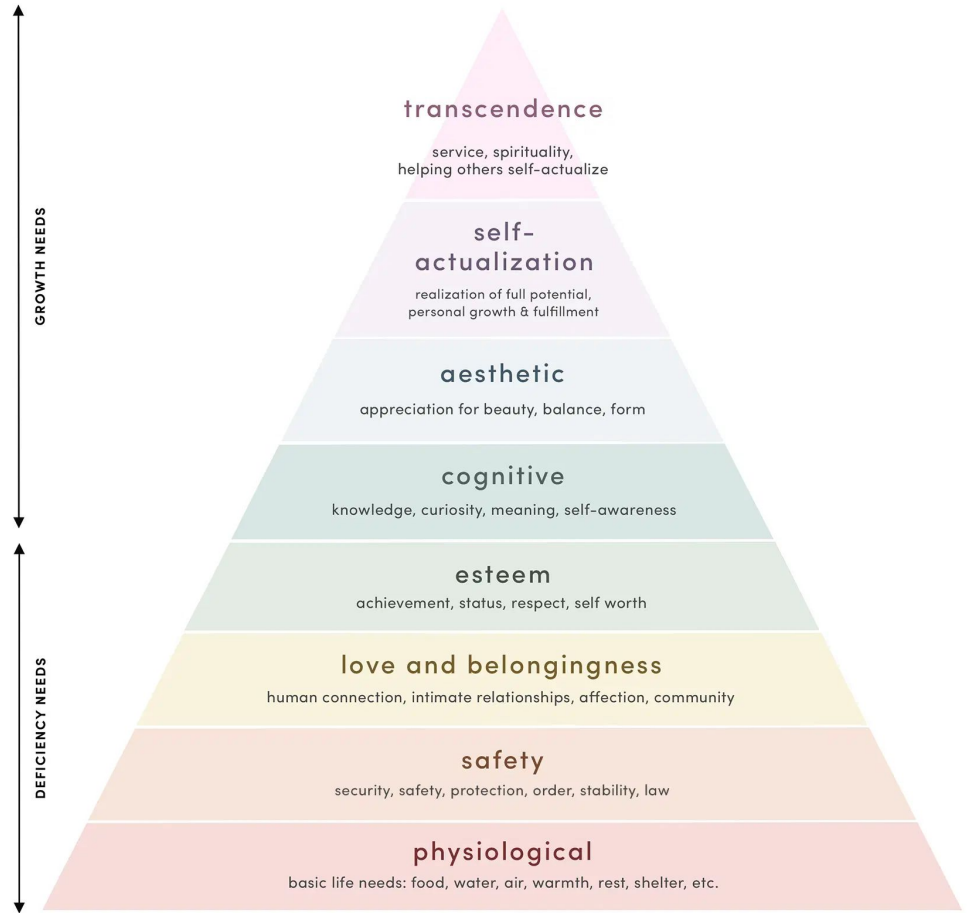
# Principles of Postnihilism

1. **Embrace of the Ephemeral:** Postnihilism encourages an appreciation for the transient, the fleeting, and the impermanent. Life is seen as a series of unique, **unrepeatable moments**, each valuable in its own right.
2. **Intrinsic Motivation:** The philosophy promotes the idea that actions and **experiences can be fulfilling in themselves, without needing to contribute to a larger purpose or meaning**. This aligns with the concept of intrinsic motivation, where activities are undertaken for their own sake, for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from performing them.
3. **Individual Journey:** Postnihilism emphasizes the **importance of the individual journey**, with its unique experiences and **struggles**. It suggests that personal **growth** and **self-understanding** can be more fulfilling than the pursuit of an externally imposed purpose.
4. **Rejection of Cosmic Necessity:** The philosophy **challenges the idea that there is a cosmic or universal purpose** that all individuals must strive towards. Instead, it posits that meaning can be personal and subjective, and that it's not even necessary for a fulfilling life.
5. **Biological Grounding:** Postnihilism recognizes the **influence of our biology on our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors**. It suggests that a fulfilling life can be found in satisfying our **basic human needs** and drives, and in engaging our **natural curiosity** and sociability.
6. **Holistic Approach:** The philosophy promotes a holistic approach to life, recognizing the **interconnectedness** of all aspects of our **existence**. It encourages us to engage with life in a more **integrated** and **authentic** way, rather than compartmentalizing different aspects of our lives.
7. **Challenge to Transcendental Narratives:** Postnihilism **challenges the transcendental narratives** that dominate much of Western thought. It offers a more grounded and realistic perspective on life, one that is **rooted in our lived experience**, rather than in **abstract cosmic narratives**.

# Helpful Frameworks

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**
  - Universal across all humans
- **Self-Determination Theory**
  - Belonging, Mastery, Autonomy
- **Choice Theory**
  - Survival, Love, Power, Freedom, Fun
- **Walsh's Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes**
  - Exercise, Nutrition, Nature, Relationships, Recreation, Relaxation, Spirituality, Service

These frameworks all basically say the same thing and they **transcend cultural boundaries**. These frameworks represent **universal truths about being human**.



# Criticisms of Postnihilism

- **Perceived as "Giving Up":** Some might interpret postnihilism as a form of **resignation or defeatism**, a "giving up" on the search for meaning or purpose. However, it's important to clarify that postnihilism is not advocating for a lack of engagement or effort in life. Rather, it's a **shift in perspective** about what constitutes a fulfilling life.
- **Potential for Misinterpretation:** The central axiom of postnihilism, "Meaning is not necessary," could be misinterpreted as a **dismissal of all forms of meaning or purpose**, including personal or subjective ones. However, postnihilism **does not negate the value of personal meaning**; it simply posits that it's not necessary for a fulfilling life.
- **Challenges to Traditional Masculinity:** Some might see postnihilism as a **threat to traditional notions** of masculinity, which often emphasize strength, dominance, and achievement. However, postnihilism does not require men to "castrate their masculinity." Instead, it offers a broader and more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a human being, beyond traditional gender roles. See: The Strenuous Life.
- **Difficulty in Implementation:** Implementing a postnihilist perspective in a **society deeply ingrained** with the pursuit of **external markers of success** could be challenging. It requires a significant shift in societal values and priorities, which is not easily achieved. Some people still believe we **require a unified theory of meaning**. (we don't, never did)
- **Potential for Complacency:** There might be a concern that postnihilism **could lead to complacency** or a lack of ambition, as individuals no longer feel the need to strive for a larger purpose or meaning. However, postnihilism does not **discourage ambition or striving**; it simply suggests that these are not the only paths to a fulfilling life.
- **Reliance on Intrinsic Motivation:** Postnihilism's emphasis on **intrinsic motivation** assumes that individuals are capable of finding and pursuing their own **interests and passions**. However, not everyone may have the resources, opportunities, or self-awareness to do so. **Biological imperatives** and the **struggles** you face are **inevitable**.



# The Strenuous Life

## - The Early Life of Teddy Roosevelt:

- Roosevelt suffered from **severe asthma** as a child
- Initially **timid**, he overcame physical challenges and anxiety through a rigorous exercise routine and a determination to conquer his own weaknesses

## - The Strenuous Life:

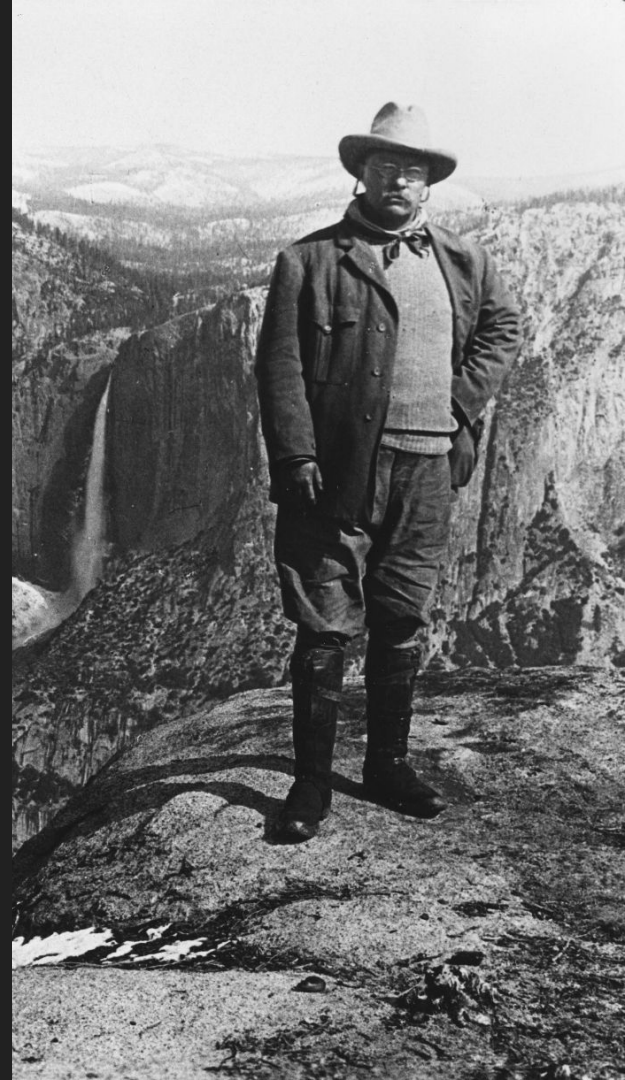
- Roosevelt developed the philosophy of "The Strenuous Life," promoting **hard work, perseverance**, and physical toughness as virtues
- He believed in **facing life's challenges head-on**, rather than seeking comfort and ease

## - The Transformation:

- Through a commitment to personal improvement and embracing individual challenge, Roosevelt **transformed from a frail child into a masculine powerhouse**
- His tenacious spirit and robust physical presence became defining characteristics of his persona

## - The Influence of Roosevelt's Philosophy:

- His advocacy for the strenuous life marked a significant cultural shift, encouraging self-reliance, resilience, and a proactive approach to adversity
- This mindset can be seen as a precursor to the **emphasis on individual journey and challenges** in Postmodernism



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