

Nihilism

Nihilism (/nai(h)ɪlɪzəm, 'ni:-/; from Latin nihil, meaning 'nothing') is the philosophical viewpoint that suggests the denial of, or lack of belief in, the reputedly meaningful aspects of life. Most commonly, nihilism is presented in the form of existential nihilism, which argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value.^[1] Moral nihilists assert that there is no inherent morality, and that accepted moral values are abstractly contrived. Nihilism may also take epistemological, ontological, or metaphysical forms, meaning respectively that, in some aspect, knowledge is not possible, or reality does not actually exist.

The term is sometimes used in association with anomie to explain the general mood of despair at a perceived pointlessness of existence that one may develop upon realising there are no necessary norms, rules, or laws.^[2]

Nihilism has also been described as conspicuous in or constitutive of certain historical periods. For example, Jean Baudrillard and others have called postmodernity a nihilistic epoch^[3] and some religious theologians and figures of religious authority have asserted that postmodernity^[4] and many aspects of modernity^[5] represent a rejection of theism, and that such rejection of theistic doctrine entails nihilism.

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Forms

Nihilism has many definitions, and thus can describe multiple arguably independent philosophical positions.

Metaphysical

Metaphysical nihilism is the philosophical theory that posits that concrete objects and physical constructs might not exist in the possible world, or that even if there exist possible worlds that contain some concrete objects, there is at least one that contains only abstract objects.

Extreme metaphysical nihilism is commonly defined as the belief that nothing exists as a correspondent component of the self-efficient world.^[6] The American Heritage Medical Dictionary defines one form of nihilism as "an extreme form of skepticism that denies all existence."^[7] A similar skepticism concerning the concrete world can be found in solipsism. However, despite the fact that both deny the certainty of objects' true existence, the nihilist would deny the existence of self whereas the solipsist would affirm it.^[8] Both these positions are considered forms of anti-realism.

Epistemological

Epistemological nihilism is a form of skepticism in which all knowledge is accepted as being possibly untrue or as being impossible to confirm as true.

Mereological

Mereological nihilism (also called compositional nihilism) is the position that objects with proper parts do not exist (not only objects in space, but also objects existing in time do not have any temporal parts), and only basic building blocks without parts exist, and thus the world we see and experience full of objects with parts is a product of human misperception (i.e., if we could see clearly, we would not perceive composite objects).

This interpretation of existence must be based on resolution. The resolution with which humans see and perceive the "improper parts" of the world is not an objective fact of reality, but is rather an implicit trait that can only be qualitatively explored and expressed. Therefore, there is no arguable way to surmise or measure the validity of mereological nihilism. Example: An ant can get lost on a large cylindrical object because the circumference of the object is so large with respect to the ant that the ant effectively feels as though the object has no curvature. Thus, the resolution with which the ant views the world it exists "within" is a very important determining factor in how the ant experiences this "within the world" feeling.

Existential

Existential nihilism is the belief that life has no intrinsic meaning or value. With respect to the universe, existential nihilism posits that a single human or even the entire human species is insignificant, without purpose and unlikely to change in the totality of existence. The meaninglessness or meaning of life is largely explored in the philosophical school of existentialism.

Moral

Moral nihilism, also known as ethical nihilism, is the meta-ethical view that morality does not exist as something inherent to objective reality; therefore no action is necessarily preferable to any other. For example, a moral nihilist would say that killing someone, for whatever reason, is not inherently right or wrong.



The Nihilist by Paul Merwart (1882)

Other nihilists may argue not that there is no morality at all, but that if it does exist, it is a human construction and thus artificial, wherein any and all meaning is relative for different possible outcomes. As an example, if someone kills someone else, such a nihilist might argue that killing is not inherently a bad thing, or bad independently from our moral beliefs, because of the way morality is constructed as some rudimentary dichotomy. What is said to be a bad thing is given a higher negative weighting than what is called good: as a result, killing the individual was bad because it did not let the individual live, which was arbitrarily given a positive weighting. In this way a moral nihilist believes that all moral claims are void of any truth value. An alternative scholarly perspective is that moral nihilism is a morality in itself. Cooper writes, "In the widest sense of the word 'morality', moral nihilism is a morality."^[9]

Political

Political nihilism follows the characteristic nihilist's rejection of non-rationalized or non-proven assertions; in this case the necessity of the most fundamental social and political structures, such as government, family, and law. An influential analysis of political nihilism is presented by Leo Strauss.^[10]

Russian movement

The Russian Nihilist movement was a Russian trend in the 1860s that rejected all authority.^[11] After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the Nihilists gained a reputation throughout Europe as proponents of the use of violence for political change. The Nihilists expressed anger at what they described as the abusive nature of the Eastern Orthodox Church and of the tsarist monarchy, and at the domination of the Russian economy by the aristocracy. Although the term Nihilism was coined by the German theologian Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1818), its widespread usage began with the 1862 novel Fathers and Sons by the Russian author Ivan Turgenev. The main character of the novel, Yevgeny Bazarov, who describes himself as a Nihilist, wants to educate the people. The "go to the people – be the people" campaign reached its height in the 1870s, during which underground groups such as the Circle of Tchaikovsky, the People's Will, and Land and Liberty formed. It became known as the Narodnik movement, whose members believed that the newly freed serfs were merely being sold into wage slavery in the onset of the Industrial Revolution, and that the middle and upper classes had effectively replaced landowners. The Russian state attempted to suppress the nihilist movement. In actions described by the Nihilists as propaganda of the deed many government officials were assassinated. In 1881 Alexander II was killed on the very day he had approved a proposal to call a representative assembly to consider new reforms.

History

Buddhism

The concept of nihilism was discussed by the Buddha (563 B.C. to 483 B.C.), as recorded in the Theravada and Mahayana Tripiṭaka.^[12] The Tripiṭaka, originally written in Pali, refers to nihilism as 'natthikavāda' and the nihilist view as 'micchādiṭṭhi'.^{[13][14]} Various sutras within it describe a multiplicity of views held by different sects of ascetics while the

Buddha was alive, some of which were viewed by him to be morally nihilistic. In the Doctrine of Nihilism in the Apannaka Sutta, the Buddha describes moral nihilists as holding the following views^{[15][16]}:

- Giving produces no beneficial results
- Good and bad actions produce no results
- After death, beings are not reborn into the present world or into another world
- There is no one in the world who, through direct knowledge, can confirm that beings are reborn into this world or into another world

The Buddha then states that those who hold these views will not see the danger in misconduct and the blessings in good conduct and will, therefore, avoid good bodily, verbal and mental conduct; practicing misconduct instead^[17].

Nirvana and nihilism

The culmination of the path that the Buddha taught was Nirvana, "a place of nothingness... nonpossession and... non-attachment... [which is] the total end of death and decay"^[18]. In an article Ajahn Amaro, a practicing Buddhist monk of more than 30 years, observes that in English 'nothingness' can sound like nihilism. However the word could be emphasised in a different way, so that it becomes 'no-thingness', indicating that Nirvana is not a thing you can find, but rather a place where you experience the reality of non-grasping^[19].

In the Alagaddupama Sutta, the Buddha describes how some individuals feared his teaching because they believe that their 'self' would be destroyed if they followed it. He describes this as an anxiety caused by the false belief in an unchanging, everlasting 'self'. All things are subject to change and taking any impermanent phenomena to be a 'self' causes suffering. Nonetheless, his critics called him a nihilist who teaches the annihilation and extermination of an existing being. The Buddha's response was that he only teaches the cessation of suffering. When an individual has given up craving and the conceit of 'I am' their mind is liberated, they no longer come into any state of 'being' and are no longer born again^[20].

The Aggivacchagotta Sutta records a conversation between the Buddha and an individual named Vaccha that further elaborates on this. In it Vaccha asks the Buddha to confirm one of the following, with respect to the existence of the Buddha after death^[21]:

- After death a Buddha reappears somewhere else
- After death a Buddha does not reappear
- After death a Buddha both does and does not reappear
- After death a Buddha neither does nor does not reappear

To all four questions, the Buddha answers that the terms 'appear', 'not appear', 'does and does not reappear' and 'neither does nor does not reappear' do not apply. When Vaccha expresses puzzlement, the Buddha asks Vaccha a counter question to the effect of: if a fire were to go out and someone were to ask you whether the fire went north, south east or west how would you reply? Vaccha replies that the question does not apply and that a fire gone out can only be classified as 'out'^[22].

Thanissaro Bhikkhu elaborates on the classification problem around the words 'reappear' etc. with respect to the Buddha and Nirvana by stating that a "person who has attained the goal [Nirvana] is thus indescribable because [they have] abandoned all things by which [they] could be described".^[23] The Suttas themselves describe the liberated mind as 'untraceable' or as 'consciousness without feature', making no distinction between the mind of a liberated being that is alive and the mind of one that is no longer alive^{[24][25]}.

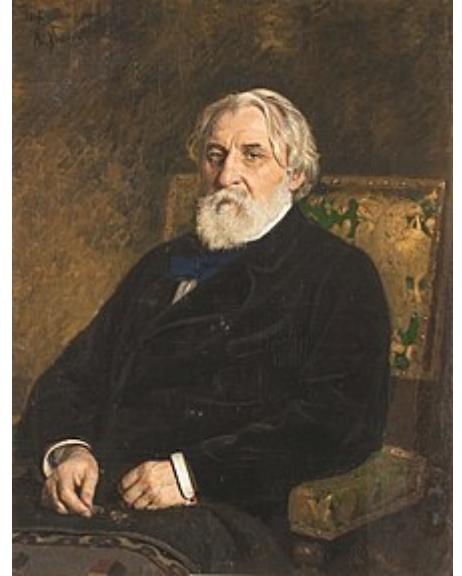
Despite the Buddha's explanations to the contrary, Buddhist practitioners may, at times, still approach Buddhism in a nihilistic manner. Ajahn Amaro illustrates this by retelling the story of a Buddhist monk, Ajahn Sumedho, who in his early years took a nihilistic approach to Nirvana. A distinct feature of Nirvana in Buddhism is that an individual attaining it is no longer subject to rebirth. Ajahn Sumedho, during a conversation with his teacher Ajahn Chah comments that he is

"determined above all things to fully realize Nirvāna in this lifetime... deeply weary of the human condition and... [is] determined not to be born again". To this Ajahn Chah replies "what about the rest of us, Sumedho? Don't you care about those who'll be left behind?". Ajahn Amaro comments that Ajahn Chah could detect that his student had a nihilistic aversion to life rather than true detachment. With his response, Ajahn Chah chided Ajahn Sumedho about the latter's narrowness and opened his eyes to this attitude of self centred nihilism^[26].

19th century

The term nihilism was first used by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). Jacobi used the term to characterize rationalism^[27] and in particular Immanuel Kant's "critical" philosophy to carry out a reductio ad absurdum according to which all rationalism (philosophy as criticism) reduces to nihilism –and thus it should be avoided and replaced with a return to some type of faith and revelation. Bret W. Davis writes, for example, "The first philosophical development of the idea of nihilism is generally ascribed to Friedrich Jacobi, who in a famous letter criticized Fichte's idealism as falling into nihilism. According to Jacobi, Fichte's absolutization of the ego (the 'absolute I' that posits the 'not-I') is an inflation of subjectivity that denies the absolute transcendence of God."^[28] A related but oppositional concept is fideism, which sees reason as hostile and inferior to faith.

With the popularizing of the word nihilism by Ivan Turgenev, a new Russian political movement called the Nihilist movement adopted the term. They supposedly called themselves nihilists because nothing "that then existed found favor in their eyes".^[29] This movement was significant enough that, even in the English speaking world, at the turn of the 20th century the word nihilism without qualification was almost exclusively associated with this Russian revolutionary sociopolitical movement^[30].



The novelist Ivan S. Turgenev made the term nihilism popular.

Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) posited an early form of nihilism, which he referred to as leveling.^[31] He saw leveling as the process of suppressing individuality to a point where an individual's uniqueness becomes non-existent and nothing meaningful in one's existence can be affirmed:

Levelling at its maximum is like the stillness of death, where one can hear one's own heartbeat, a stillness like death, into which nothing can penetrate, in which everything sinks, powerless. One person can head a rebellion, but one person cannot head this levelling process, for that would make him a leader and he would avoid being levelled. Each individual can in his little circle participate in this levelling, but it is an abstract process, and levelling is abstraction conquering individuality.

— Søren Kierkegaard, The Present Age, translated by Alexander Dru with Foreword by Walter Kaufmann, 1962, pp. 51–53

Kierkegaard, an advocate of a philosophy of life, generally argued against levelling and its nihilistic consequences, although he believed it would be "genuinely educative to live in the age of levelling [because] people will be forced to face the judgement of [levelling] alone."^[32] George Cotkin asserts Kierkegaard was against "the standardization and levelling of belief, both spiritual and political, in the nineteenth century," and that Kierkegaard "opposed tendencies in mass culture to



unfinished sketch c. 1840 of Søren Kierkegaard by his cousin Niels Christian Kierkegaard

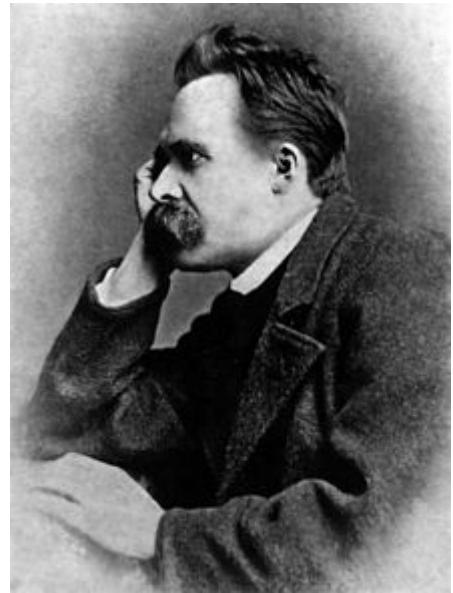
reduce the individual to a cipher of conformity and deference to the dominant opinion."^[33] In his day, tabloids (like the Danish magazine Corsaren) and apostate Christianity were instruments of levelling and contributed to the "reflective apathetic age" of 19th century Europe.^[34] Kierkegaard argues that individuals who can overcome the levelling process are stronger for it, and that it represents a step in the right direction towards "becoming a true self."^[32]^[35] As we must overcome levelling,^[36] Hubert Dreyfus and Jane Rubin argue that Kierkegaard's interest, "in an increasingly nihilistic age, is in how we can recover the sense that our lives are meaningful".^[37]

Note, however, that Kierkegaard's meaning of "nihilism" differs from the modern definition, in the sense that, for Kierkegaard, levelling led to a life lacking meaning, purpose or value,^[34] whereas the modern interpretation of nihilism posits that there was never any meaning, purpose or value to begin with.

Nietzsche

Nihilism is often associated with the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who provided a detailed diagnosis of nihilism as a widespread phenomenon of Western culture. Though the notion appears frequently throughout Nietzsche's work, he uses the term in a variety of ways, with different meanings and connotations. Karen L. Carr describes Nietzsche's characterization of nihilism "as a condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate."^[38] When we find out that the world does not possess the objective value or meaning that we want it to have or have long since believed it to have, we find ourselves in a crisis.^[39] Nietzsche asserts that with the decline of Christianity and the rise of physiological decadence, nihilism is in fact characteristic of the modern age,^[40] though he implies that the rise of nihilism is still incomplete and that it has yet to be overcome.^[41] Though the problem of nihilism becomes especially explicit in Nietzsche's notebooks (published posthumously), it is mentioned repeatedly in his published works and is closely connected to many of the problems mentioned there.

Nietzsche characterized nihilism as emptying the world and especially human existence of meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth, or essential value. This observation stems in part from Nietzsche's perspectivism, or his notion that "knowledge" is always by someone of some thing: it is always bound by perspective, and it is never mere fact.^[42] Rather, there are interpretations through which we understand the world and give it meaning. Interpreting is something we can not go without; in fact, it is something we need. One way of interpreting the world is



Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

through morality, as one of the fundamental ways that people make sense of the world, especially in regard to their own thoughts and actions. Nietzsche distinguishes a morality that is strong or healthy, meaning that the person in question is aware that he constructs it himself, from weak morality, where the interpretation is projected on to something external.

Nietzsche discusses Christianity, one of the major topics in his work, at length in the context of the problem of nihilism in his notebooks, in a chapter entitled "European Nihilism".^[43] Here he states that the Christian moral doctrine provides people with intrinsic value, belief in God (which justifies the evil in the world) and a basis for objective knowledge. In this sense, in constructing a world where objective knowledge is possible, Christianity is an antidote against a primal form of nihilism, against the despair of meaninglessness. However, it is exactly the element of truthfulness in Christian doctrine that is its undoing: in its drive towards truth, Christianity eventually finds itself to be a construct, which leads to its own dissolution. It is therefore that Nietzsche states that we have outgrown Christianity "not because we lived too far from it, rather because we lived too close".^[44] As such, the self-dissolution of Christianity constitutes yet another form of nihilism. Because Christianity was an interpretation that posited itself as the interpretation, Nietzsche states that this dissolution leads beyond skepticism to a distrust of all meaning.^[45]^[46]

Stanley Rosen identifies Nietzsche's concept of nihilism with a situation of meaninglessness, in which "everything is permitted." According to him, the loss of higher metaphysical values that exist in contrast to the base reality of the world, or merely human ideas, gives rise to the idea that all human ideas are therefore valueless. Rejecting idealism thus results in nihilism, because only similarly transcendent ideals live up to the previous standards that the nihilist still implicitly holds.^[47] The inability for Christianity to serve as a source of valuating the world is reflected in Nietzsche's famous aphorism of the madman in The Gay Science.^[48] The death of God, in particular the statement that "we killed him", is similar to the self-dissolution of Christian doctrine: due to the advances of the sciences, which for Nietzsche show that man is the product of evolution, that Earth has no special place among the stars and that history is not progressive, the Christian notion of God can no longer serve as a basis for a morality.

One such reaction to the loss of meaning is what Nietzsche calls passive nihilism, which he recognises in the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's doctrine, which Nietzsche also refers to as Western Buddhism, advocates separating oneself from will and desires in order to reduce suffering. Nietzsche characterises this ascetic attitude as a "will to nothingness", whereby life turns away from itself, as there is nothing of value to be found in the world. This mowing away of all value in the world is characteristic of the nihilist, although in this, the nihilist appears inconsistent:^[49]

A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of 'in vain' is the nihilists' pathos – at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, KSA 12:9 [60], taken from The Will to Power, section 585,
translated by Walter Kaufmann

Nietzsche's relation to the problem of nihilism is a complex one. He approaches the problem of nihilism as deeply personal, stating that this predicament of the modern world is a problem that has "become conscious" in him.^[50] According to Nietzsche, it is only when nihilism is overcome that a culture can have a true foundation upon which to thrive. He wished to hasten its coming only so that he could also hasten its ultimate departure.^[40]

He states that there is at least the possibility of another type of nihilist in the wake of Christianity's self-dissolution, one that does not stop after the destruction of all value and meaning and succumb to the following nothingness. This alternate, 'active' nihilism on the other hand destroys to level the field for constructing something new. This form of nihilism is characterized by Nietzsche as "a sign of strength,"^[51] a willful destruction of the old values to wipe the slate clean and lay

down one's own beliefs and interpretations, contrary to the passive nihilism that resigns itself with the decomposition of the old values. This willful destruction of values and the overcoming of the condition of nihilism by the constructing of new meaning, this active nihilism, could be related to what Nietzsche elsewhere calls a 'free spirit'^[52] or the Übermensch from Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Antichrist, the model of the strong individual who posits his own values and lives his life as if it were his own work of art. It may be questioned, though, whether "active nihilism" is indeed the correct term for this stance, and some question whether Nietzsche takes the problems nihilism poses seriously enough.^[53]

Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche

Martin Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche influenced many postmodern thinkers who investigated the problem of nihilism as put forward by Nietzsche. Only recently has Heidegger's influence on Nietzschean nihilism research faded.^[54] As early as the 1930s, Heidegger was giving lectures on Nietzsche's thought.^[55] Given the importance of Nietzsche's contribution to the topic of nihilism, Heidegger's influential interpretation of Nietzsche is important for the historical development of the term nihilism.

Heidegger's method of researching and teaching Nietzsche is explicitly his own. He does not specifically try to present Nietzsche as Nietzsche. He rather tries to incorporate Nietzsche's thoughts into his own philosophical system of Being, Time and Dasein.^[56] In his Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being (1944–46),^[57] Heidegger tries to understand Nietzsche's nihilism as trying to achieve a victory through the devaluation of the, until then, highest values. The principle of this devaluation is, according to Heidegger, the Will to Power. The Will to Power is also the principle of every earlier valuation of values.^[58] How does this devaluation occur and why is this nihilistic? One of Heidegger's main critiques on philosophy is that philosophy, and more specifically metaphysics, has forgotten to discriminate between investigating the notion of a being (Seiende) and Being (Sein). According to Heidegger, the history of Western thought can be seen as the history of metaphysics. And because metaphysics has forgotten to ask about the notion of Being (what Heidegger calls Seinsvergessenheit), it is a history about the destruction of Being. That is why Heidegger calls metaphysics nihilistic.^[59] This makes Nietzsche's metaphysics not a victory over nihilism, but a perfection of it.^[60]

Heidegger, in his interpretation of Nietzsche, has been inspired by Ernst Jünger. Many references to Jünger can be found in Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche. For example, in a letter to the rector of Freiburg University of November 4, 1945, Heidegger, inspired by Jünger, tries to explain the notion of "God is dead" as the "reality of the Will to Power." Heidegger also praises Jünger for defending Nietzsche against a too biological or anthropological reading during the Nazi era.^[61]

Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche influenced a number of important postmodernist thinkers. Gianni Vattimo points at a back-and-forth movement in European thought, between Nietzsche and Heidegger. During the 1960s, a Nietzschean 'renaissance' began, culminating in the work of Mazzino Montinari and Giorgio Colli. They began work on a new and complete edition of Nietzsche's collected works, making Nietzsche more accessible for scholarly research. Vattimo explains that with this new edition of Colli and Montinari, a critical reception of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche began to take shape. Like other contemporary French and Italian philosophers, Vattimo does not want, or only partially wants, to rely on Heidegger for understanding Nietzsche. On the other hand, Vattimo judges Heidegger's intentions authentic enough to keep pursuing them.^[62] Philosophers who Vattimo exemplifies as a part of this back and forth movement are French philosophers Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida. Italian philosophers of this same movement are Cacciari, Severino and himself.^[63] Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard and Richard Rorty are also philosophers who are influenced by Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche.^[64]

Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche

Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's concept of nihilism is different - in some sense diametrically opposed - to the usual definition (as outlined in the rest of this article). Nihilism is one of the main topics of Deleuze's early book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962).^[65] There, Deleuze repeatedly interprets Nietzsche's nihilism as "the enterprise of denying life and depreciating existence".^[66] Nihilism thus defined is therefore not the denial of higher values, or the denial of meaning, but rather the depreciation of life in the name of such higher values or meaning. Deleuze therefore (with, he claims, Nietzsche) says that Christianity and Platonism, and with them the whole of metaphysics, are intrinsically nihilist.

Postmodernism

Postmodern and poststructuralist thought has questioned the very grounds on which Western cultures have based their 'truths': absolute knowledge and meaning, a 'decentralization' of authorship, the accumulation of positive knowledge, historical progress, and certain ideals and practices of humanism and the Enlightenment.

Derrida

Jacques Derrida, whose deconstruction is perhaps most commonly labeled nihilistic, did not himself make the nihilistic move that others have claimed. Derridean deconstructionists argue that this approach rather frees texts, individuals or organizations from a restrictive truth, and that deconstruction opens up the possibility of other ways of being.^[67] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, uses deconstruction to create an ethics of opening up Western scholarship to the voice of the subaltern and to philosophies outside of the canon of western texts.^[68] Derrida himself built a philosophy based upon a 'responsibility to the other'.^[69] Deconstruction can thus be seen not as a denial of truth, but as a denial of our ability to know truth. That is to say, it makes an epistemological claim, compared to nihilism's ontological claim.

Lyotard

Lyotard argues that, rather than relying on an objective truth or method to prove their claims, philosophers legitimize their truths by reference to a story about the world that can't be separated from the age and system the stories belong to—referred to by Lyotard as meta-narratives. He then goes on to define the postmodern condition as characterized by a rejection both of these meta-narratives and of the process of legitimation by meta-narratives.

In lieu of meta-narratives we have created new language-games in order to legitimize our claims which rely on changing relationships and mutable truths, none of which is privileged over the other to speak to ultimate truth.

This concept of the instability of truth and meaning leads in the direction of nihilism, though Lyotard stops short of embracing the latter.

Baudrillard

Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote briefly of nihilism from the postmodern viewpoint in Simulacra and Simulation. He stuck mainly to topics of interpretations of the real world over the simulations of which the real world is composed. The uses of meaning were an important subject in Baudrillard's discussion of nihilism:

The apocalypse is finished, today it is the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference...all that remains, is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us. Now, fascination (in contrast to seduction, which was attached to appearances, and to dialectical reason, which was attached to meaning) is a nihilistic passion par excellence,

it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance. We are fascinated by all forms of disappearance, of our disappearance. Melancholic and fascinated, such is our general situation in an era of involuntary transparency.

— Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, "On Nihilism", trans. 1995

Transcendental nihilism / methodological naturalism

In *Nihil Unbound: Extinction and Enlightenment*, [Ray Brassier](#) maintains that philosophy has avoided the traumatic idea of extinction, instead attempting to find meaning in a world conditioned by the very idea of its own annihilation. Thus Brassier critiques both the phenomenological and hermeneutic strands of Continental philosophy as well as the vitality of thinkers like [Gilles Deleuze](#), who work to ingrain meaning in the world and stave off the "threat" of nihilism. Instead, drawing on thinkers such as [Alain Badiou](#), [François Laruelle](#), [Paul Churchland](#), and [Thomas Metzinger](#), Brassier defends a view of the world as inherently devoid of meaning. That is, rather than avoiding nihilism, Brassier embraces it as the truth of reality. Brassier concludes from his readings of Badiou and Laruelle that the universe is founded on the nothing.^[70] but also that philosophy is the "organon of extinction," that it is only because life is conditioned by its own extinction that there is thought at all.^[71] Brassier then defends a radically anti-correlationist philosophy proposing that Thought is conjoined not with Being, but with Non-Being.

In culture

Dada

The term Dada was first used by [Richard Huelsenbeck](#) and [Tristan Tzara](#) in 1916.^[72] The movement, which lasted from approximately 1916 to 1922, arose during World War I, an event that influenced the artists.^[73] The Dada Movement began in the old town of Zürich, Switzerland – known as the "Niederdorf" or "Niederdörfli" – in the Café Voltaire.^[74] The Dadaists claimed that Dada was not an art movement, but an anti-art movement, sometimes using found objects in a manner similar to found poetry.

The "anti-art" drive is thought to have stemmed from a post-war emptiness. This tendency toward devaluation of art has led many to claim that Dada was an essentially nihilistic movement. Given that Dada created its own means for interpreting its products, it is difficult to classify alongside most other contemporary art expressions. Due to perceived ambiguity, it has been classified as a nihilistic modus vivendi.^[73]

Literature

The term "nihilism" was actually popularized in 1862 by [Ivan Turgenev](#) in his novel Fathers and Sons, whose hero, Bazarov, was a nihilist and recruited several followers to the philosophy. He found his nihilistic ways challenged upon falling in love.^[75]

[Anton Chekhov](#) portrayed nihilism when writing Three Sisters. The phrase "what does it matter" or variants of this are often spoken by several characters in response to events; the significance of some of these events suggests a subscription to nihilism by said characters as a type of coping strategy.

The philosophical ideas of the French author, the Marquis de Sade, are often noted as early examples of nihilistic principles.^[76]

See also

- [Absurdism](#)
- [Acosmism](#)
- [Agnosticism](#)
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- [Anti-art and Anti-anti-art](#)
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- [U. G. Krishnamurti](#)
- [Misanthropy](#)
- [Misotheism](#)
- [Moral nihilism](#)
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- [Paradox of nihilism](#)
- [Pessimism](#)
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- [Post-structuralism](#)
- [Radical skepticism](#)
- [Russian nihilist movement](#)
- [Solipsism](#)
- [Therapeutic nihilism](#)
- [Trivialism](#)

Notes

1. Alan Pratt defines existential nihilism as "the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value, and it is, no doubt, the most commonly used and understood sense of the word today." [Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy \(http://www.ut.edu/research/iep/n/nihilism.htm\)](http://www.ut.edu/research/iep/n/nihilism.htm)
2. Bazarov, the protagonist in the classic work [Fathers and Sons](#) written in the early 1860s by [Ivan Turgenev](#), is quoted as saying nihilism is "just cursing", cited in Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Macmillan, 1967) Vol. 5, "Nihilism", 514 ff. This source states as follows: "On the one hand, the term is widely used to denote the doctrine that moral norms or standards cannot be justified by rational argument. On the other hand, it is widely used to denote a mood of despair over the emptiness or triviality of human existence. This double meaning appears to derive from the fact that the term was often employed in the nineteenth century by the religiously oriented as a club against atheists, atheists being regarded as ipso facto nihilists in both senses. The [atheist](#), it was held [by the religiously oriented], would not feel bound by moral norms; consequently, he would tend to be callous or selfish, even criminal" (at p. 515).
3. For some examples of the view that postmodernity is a nihilistic epoch see Toynbee, Arnold (1963) A Study of History vols. VIII and IX; Mills, C. Wright (1959) [The Sociological Imagination](#); Bell, Daniel (1976) The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism; and Baudrillard, Jean (1993) "Game with Vestiges" in Baudrillard Live, ed. Mike Gane and (1994) "On Nihilism" in Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glasser. For examples of the view that postmodernism is a nihilistic mode of thought, see Rose, Gillian (1984) Dialectic of Nihilism; Carr, Karen L. (1988) The Banalization of Nihilism; and Pope John-Paul II (1995), Evangelium vitae: Il valore e l'inviolabilita delta vita umana. Milan: Paoline Editoriale Libri.", all cited in Woodward, Ashley: [Nihilism and the Postmodern in Vattimo's Nietzsche \(http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol6/nihilism.html\)](http://www.ul.ie/~philos/vol6/nihilism.html), ISSN 1393-614X (<https://www.worldcat.org/search?fq=x0:jrn1&q=n2:1393-614X>) Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 6, 2002, fn 1.
4. For example, Leffel, Jim; Dennis McCallum. "[The Postmodern Challenge: Facing the Spirit of the Age](https://web.archive.org/web/20060819165839/http://www.equip.org/free/DP321.htm)" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20060819165839/http://www.equip.org/free/DP321.htm>). Christian Research Institute. Archived from the original (<http://www.equip.org/free/DP321.htm>) on 2006-08-19. "...the nihilism and loneliness of postmodern culture..."
5. Phillips, Robert (1999). "[Deconstructing the Mass](https://web.archive.org/web/20040417084147/http://www.latinmassmagazine.com/articles/articles_1999_WI_Phili...)" (https://web.archive.org/web/20040417084147/http://www.latinmassmagazine.com/articles/articles_1999_WI_Phili...). Latin Mass Magazine (Winter). Archived from the original (http://www.latinmassmagazine.com/articles/articles_1999_WI_Phili...) on 2004-04-17. "For deconstructionists, not only is there no truth to know, there is no self to know it and so there is no soul to save or lose." and "In following the Enlightenment to its logical end, deconstruction reaches nihilism. The meaning of human life is reduced to whatever happens to interest us at the moment..."

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10. L. Strauss, "German Nihilism", Interpretation 26 (3) (1999): pp. 353–378.
11. Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=nihilism&searchmode=none>) s.v. "nihilism"
12. <https://www.history.com>this-day-in-history/buddhists-celebrate-birth-of-gautama-buddha>
13. Pali-English Glossary, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikkaya, by Bikkhu Bodhi
14. Index of Subjects, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikkaya, by Bikkhu Bodhi
15. Apannaka Sutta, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bikkhu Nanamoli & Bikkhu Bodhi
16. Note 425, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bikkhu Nanamoli & Bikkhu Bodhi
17. Apannaka Sutta, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bikkhu Nanamoli & Bikkhu Bodhi
18. http://www.fsnewsletter.amaravati.org/pdf/FSN_88_October_2009.pdf
19. http://www.fsnewsletter.amaravati.org/pdf/FSN_88_October_2009.pdf
20. Alagaddupama Sutta, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bikkhu Nanamoli & Bikkhu Bodhi
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<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.072.than.html>
22. Aggivacchagotta Sutta, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu,
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.072.than.html>
23. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/likefire/2-1.html>
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<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.11.0.than.html>
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37. Wrathall, Mark et al. Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity, p. 107.
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42. F. Nietzsche, KSA 13:14 [22]
43. F. Nietzsche, KSA 12:5 [71]
44. F. Nietzsche, KSA 12:2 [200]
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62. Müller-Lauter, Heidegger und Nietzsche, pp. 301-303.
63. "Er (Vattimo) konstatiert, in vielen europäischen Philosophien eine Hin- und Herbewegung zwischen Heidegger und Nietzsche". Dabei denkt er, wie seine späteren Ausführungen zeigen, z.B. an Deleuze, Foucault und Derrida auf französischer Seite, an Cacciari, Severino und an sich selbst auf italienischer Seite.", Müller-Lauter, Heidegger und Nietzsche, p. 302.
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