

nihilism

[from the Latin *nihil*, nothing]

1a: a viewpoint that traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless

b: a doctrine that denies any objective ground of truth and especially of moral truths

2a: a doctrine or belief that conditions in the social organization are so bad as to make destruction desirable for its own sake independent of any constructive program or possibility

B capitalized : the program of a 19th century Russian party advocating revolutionary reform and using terrorism and assassination

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary

Nietzsche Nihilism and Meaning

- Lawrence Hatab

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Traditional western value belief systems: “a) values have some kind of objective validity and justification, b) human existence has an ultimate meaning and purpose c) there are objective knowable truths about the world.”

Nihilism: “ ... a denial of meaning, value or truth... the world itself possesses no value, human existence is ultimately meaningless and knowledge claims are without foundation.”

“Nietzsche criticizes more radically than anyone before him the foundations of western thought.”

Greek Classicism: Myth (Apollonian, Dionysian) Logos, Platonism

Roman Era: Paganism, Neo-platonism, Stoicism, Christianity.

Middle Ages: Christianity

Renaissance/Scholasticism: Christianity + Classicism), Aesthetics, Heliocentricity

Enlightenment: Reason, Science/empiricism, Cartesian ego/the individual, Natural Rights, Capitalism, Democracy, Progress, Deism

Romanticism: Retreat from reason and science: Art, Will, Nature, Intensity, and Turbulence...

Nietzsche's "GOD IS DEAD", would upend **the traditional western belief system grounded primarily in**

a) Christianity (foremost) but also Platonism
(transcendentalism)

b) Enlightenment Rationality (Apollonian) and Morality
(Christianity, Natural Rights).

This would yield a crisis of meaning, knowledge and value--
"catastrophe... nausea".

Active and Passive Nihilism

“Nihilism. It is ambiguous: A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as active nihilism. B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as passive nihilism.”

(The Will to Power, Friedrich Nietzsche)

Passive Nihilism: despair, futility, confusion; these weaken most people, become (along with distraction) **end points, giving up**

Active Nihilism: futility, confusion, despair are transitional states; endurance, and destruction yield creativity, transcendence of the old order

Tradition (Europe)	Passive Nihilism GOD IS DEAD	Active Nihilism GOD IS DEAD
God Heaven (Other worldliness) Eternity Denial Fixity/Certainty/ Reduction Objectivity Being Dead Standards/ Meaning	Confusion Anxiety, Fear Despair Disorientation Inertia Meaninglessness Chaos (Distraction)	passive nihilism can to yield Human Affirmation This Worldliness Fluidity, Primal Flux Immediacy / Assertion Destruction -Creativity Becoming, ART Openness, Overcoming Bringing Forth New Standards/ New Meaning

Hatab: Nietzsche is “not a nihilist in the strict sense”:

“Nietzsche has a dual attitude toward nihilism: affirming it if it is a *destructive transition* to a new world view; denying it if it is taken as an end in itself.” -Hatab

Art and Will to Power

Art: “The phenomenon of art display features that are opposite to the traditional criteria of being and fixed standards of objective truth....Art involves creation... open-ended activity that can never be reduced to any fixed form.” -Hatab

The other related force for Nietzsche that conquers passive nihilism is the **Will to Power**. It too **asserts, affirms, emerges, becomes** – and also negates, destroys, overcomes...

“Nietzsche saw his philosophy moving away from traditional standards *through* nihilism... Nihilism must be faced and experienced so that previous values can be understood and new values prepared (*Will*, preface 4); it seems historically necessary as a destructive dismantling of traditional belief systems (*Will*, sections 22, 24).” -Hatab

Transitional Nihilism: both “brutal and sublime”

“Nietzsche refers to the “man of the future” (Overman) who is both “Antichrist” and “anti-nihilist” in that he transcends them both:

“The man of the future who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal [GOD] but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the **great nausea**, the will to nothingness, nihilism; this bell stroke of noon and of the great decision that **liberates the will** again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist and anti-nihilist; this victor over God and nothingness - he must come one day.” (Nietzsche, Genealogy, II, Section 24.)

The rest of Hatab's essay is devoted to an examination of the role of "negation" --or the "negative-positive interplay" in existential "becoming".

"Awareness of being cannot be separable from awareness of non-being..."

"The very being and meaning of the world is disclosed through negativity..."

"...emotional responses, hopes and fears, success and failure, gain and loss, life and death...human experience is never fixed and settled, but rather a continuing confrontation with change."

Hatab then applies this “negative-positive” framework to various aspects of self-as-becoming:

The Metaphysical Self, The Political-Legal Self, The Moral Self, The Personal Self.

PART II: Existentialism (Existence Precedes Essence, Facticity Transcendence)

Sartre:

Human life is and meaning are not pre-defined or “given”, so humans must make themselves through active engagement, free and authentic choice, on-going scrutiny of self-in-the-world and ultimate responsibility. A recognition of this open-endedness is terrifying and yields anxiety/anguish but also present us with the possibility of freedom...

“Existence Precedes Essence”

Essence: the essential attributes or characteristics of a thing –the essence of what something is.

Existence: the raw fact of “being” –the fact that a human is.

Humans, because they’re conscious and free, have no pre-defined “essence” or “human nature”.

We are NOT, essentially, “made in **God’s image**, an immortal soul” (theism); “a rational animal... **a thinking self**”(Aristotle, Descartes); part of a “natural or cosmic order” or “**mechanistic universe** ” (karma, natural science); **social constructions**, what our societies/ideologies/up-bringsings would have us define ourselves as; mere psyches or “**psychological complexes**” (Freud).... and so on.

This absence of definition is terrifying, because humans must *constantly* make their own lives/meaning, and take full responsibility for each act. We are --on an ongoing basis-- “raw” in the self-making. We make ourselves through choice, commitments to “projects” –and these acts define us.

Facticity/Transcendence

The self emerges through an ongoing tension between “facticity and transcendence”.

Facticity: the “givens” or factors with which we must contend:

biological/genetic attributes (height, race); upbringing; social class and position; historical, cultural political contexts and events; psychologies....

These facticities threaten to define us as fixed “essence” and can easily provide us with **excuses for avoiding freedom and responsibility**: “I had no choice but to kill my uncle: I was a Prince raised in society where exacting revenge for the murder of kin was regarded as a sacred and noble duty.”

To complicate things further, Sartre says that, paradoxically, **even our own self-definitions, our former choices and our current “projects” and values, constitute facticities.**

Transcendence: the “attitude” or “stance” we take toward our facticities. Transcendence provides us with the possibility for freedom: “man is nothing but what he makes of himself” -- facticities notwithstanding.

Note it’s not that a transcendent “self” trumping (or triumphing over) facticities:

“Facticity and transcendence remain irreducible aspects of one and the same being... Because existence is **co-constituted** by facticity and transcendence, the self cannot be conceived as a Cartesian ego but is embodied in being-in-the-world, a self-making in situation. It is through transcendence [“projects”] that the world is revealed, takes on meaning; but such projects are themselves are factic or “**situated**” –not the product of some antecedently constituted “person” of intelligible character... (Plato Stanford 4)

