

James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*
Zero Point: Nihilism

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Introduction:

Today, many students, as well as people in general—despite a middle class (or higher) background, education, friends, the prospect of a good job and fulfilling career, advances in medicine and technology, access to the riches of culture past and present, opportunities for travel and other leisure activities, a democratic society with its abundant liberties—still seemed to be possessed by a spirit of dark disquiet and extreme discouragement.

They feel as if the end of the age is at hand and there is no future; they are cynical about the motives and competence of the leaders and decision makers of the day (politicians and business leaders, etc.); they feel impotent to make any real difference in today's overpowering society; they feel swept along by forces outside of their control; they see moral failure, lack of direction, or indifference when it comes to the fundamental issues of our times; they see economic, political, and environmental crises of gargantuan proportions; they see the wholesale bureaucratization and dehumanization of life, political corruption, famine, terrorism, natural disasters (earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes), violence and crime, the population glut, the specter of nuclear holocaust and disaster; they observe the loss of religious faith, pluralism, complexity, skepticism, fragmentation, irrationalism, MTV, drugs, alcoholism (and other substance abuse), disorientation, rootless, etc., etc.

This is nihilism which is one of the most important trends in recent times; the nihilistic mood is part of the air we breathe. Although the roots of nihilism lie in the beginning of the modern period, it has become especially prominent in the last hundred or so years, especially since WW I.

Nihilism is more of a **feeling** (angst, ennui, despair, anxiety, etc.) than a philosophy. Nihilism is not a philosophy at all but a denial of philosophy, of knowledge, of anything valuable, even existence itself. Nihilism is the negation of everything—knowledge, ethics, beauty, reality, persons, meaning, etc.

One of the possible reasons why Christians refuse to study philosophy (and fear it) is because they secretly feel that their Christianity cannot stand up to intense questioning, and that if led to do so, they would end up losing their faith and thereby fall headlong into the specter of the absurd—nihilism. Once set in motion, the process of questioning could come to but one end: the erosion of conviction and certitude and the collapse into despair. This process could prove fatal to moral conviction and social consensus and thus lead to civilization's general decline. Hence, it could be that the fear of Christian students, with their desperate attempt to avoid asking questions and to shield themselves against the uncertainties of intellectual inquiry, could be because of the mood of nihilism, or the susceptibility to nihilism, which is the mark of our times.

I. Definition, Issues and Illustrations of Nihilism

A. Definition

The term nihilism [Ltn. *nihilum*—*nehilum*—*ne*, not; *hilum*, little thing, trifle; nothing, a thing of slight value or importance) was probably coined in Russia sometime in the second quarter of the 19th century. It was not widely used, however, until Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* in the early 1860s. The central character in this novel — Bazarov — a young man under the influence of the most advanced ideas of his time, proudly bore the title "nihilist" which most people in his day disdained. He embraced disdain for tradition and authority, believed in the ability of human reason, was committed to materialist philosophy, and was possessed of an ardent desire to see radical changes in society. For him, nihilism was a matter of "just cursing."

At the outset, the term bore radical political and revolutionary connotations. Here is a famous statement of Dimitri Pisarev of the nihilist political position:

Here is the ultimatum of our camp: what can be smashed should be smashed; what will stand the blow is good; what will fly into smithereens is rubbish; at any rate, hit it out right and left — there will and can be no harm from it.

B. Issues

The mood of nihilism originally bore two main meanings which grew out of the denial of God's existence:

- (1) The doctrine that moral norms or standards could not be rationally justified and if God did not exist, then no one would feel or be bound by any man made ethic.
- (2) The mood of despair over the emptiness and triviality of life. If there are no moral norms, then people would be callous and selfish and thus, without God, life would have no meaning and people would tend to despair and suicide. Hence the three issues are atheism, moral skepticism, and the meaninglessness of life.

1. Atheism

For many, there is a necessary link between atheism and nihilism. If God is dead, then everything for which God gives the meaning and provides the answer for, is dead as well. As Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamozov* said, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted. The atheistic existentialists have keyed in on this linkage and argued along these lines (esp Jean Paul Sartre)—if God does not exist, the most meaningful reality is individual freedom and the supreme expression of human freedom is suicide.

Nietzsche was the first philosopher to make full use of the term nihilist. He also disputed the claim that atheism created nihilism. In other words, it was still possible to lead a meaningful life **even if God does not exist**. Nevertheless, he felt that as a historical fact, the ushering in of the age of atheism was leading Western man into nihilism (and so he sought to establish a philosophy to stop the slide toward nihilism). He said: "One interpretation of existence has been overthrown (Christianity), but since it was held to be the interpretation, it seems as though there were no meaning to existence at all, as though everything were in vain" (*Complete Works*, 14: 480). Albert Camus deals with this fact in his book, *The Rebel* (1951).

For many, nihilism is the natural consequence of atheism, that nihilism is the natural child of naturalism in that nihilism is naturalism carried to its logical conclusions (see theologian Helmut Thielicke's *Nihilism*, 1950, in the DBU library).

This is not the case for everyone. Others suggest that nihilism is caused not so much by atheism as by modernism, by industrialization, by social and political pressures, and

that the typical consequences are not selfishness or suicide but indifference, detachment, perplexity, etc. Still others suggest that it is possible to live full, complete, meaningful lives in face of the fact that there is no God and that other transcendental foundations give life meaning, even if they are found in this world.

2. Moral skepticism

If there is no God, then are there no morals? Dostoyevsky feared that disbelief in God would lead to selfishness and crime. If there is no divine lawgiver, each man will be a law unto himself. If God does not exist, the individual must choose for him or herself what is right and wrong and assume the prerogative of God.

Jean Paul Sartre took up this theme in his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and argued that moral values are the product of free choice—that is, of uncaused, unmotivated, non-rational will and decision. Theistic anti-nihilists would argue against Sartre that ethics must have divine sanction or they are worthless.

Another view that has been developed to replace theistic ethics is that of emotivism—that moral statements ultimately a product of social conditioning or the emotions and preferences of individual people. For example, I think murder is wrong really means, I don't like murder, it is distasteful to me. Non-theistic anti-nihilists would argue that ethics must have some standard or touchstone more substantial than mere feeling and sentiment as its base—reason, empirical grounding, critical intelligence, etc.

3. The meaninglessness of life (the sociological and psychological issue)

Is it true that a loss of faith in God or cosmic purpose produces a sense of despair over the alleged emptiness of life and its triviality, consequently stimulating greed and selfishness?

Yes, for many people this seems to be the case. Leo Tolstoy is a case in point who suffered a religious crisis in middle age and concluded that he must have a relationship with God to survive. St. Augustine said:

"O Lord, thou has made us for thyself and our spirits are restless (nihilistically so) until they rest in Thee."

J. P. Sartre said that atheism is a cruel, long, hard existence.

No, for many, it would be an overgeneralization to say that atheism breeds of necessity nihilistic meaningless and callousness. Bertrand Russell is a case in point, who despite his loss of faith and consequent atheism sought to live a full and meaningful life, that he was no less morally earnest or less wholeheartedly happy and engaged in the process of life. See his "A Free Man's Worship" (1902). Dr. Luann Frank, UTA.

Is it true that industrialization and the whole of modern life have trivialized life and caused a drift for many toward nihilism? Again, this may be the case, but not necessarily so. Many would assert that the malaise of the times is the stimulus to changing the times, and that instead of being an avenue to nihilism, contemporary conditions are the spur to a fruitful and challenging life in the attempt to change things (Wilhelm Dilthey as an example:

"The great crisis of the sciences and European culture which we are now living through has so deeply and totally taken possession of my spirit that the desire to be of some help in it has extinguished every extraneous and personal ambition."

C. Illustrations: nihilism in modern art:

Behold, the pangs of human emptiness, of life without value, purpose or meaning:

- Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain"
- Samuel Beckett's *End Game*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Breath*
- Douglas Adams cosmic science fiction novels: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; *The Restaurant at the end of the Universe*; *Life, the Universe and Everything*; *So Long and Thanks for all the Fish*.
- See also the writings of Franz Kafka, Eugene Ionesco, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

II. Models or Types of Nihilism (Donald A. Crosby, *The Spector of the Absurd: Sources and Criticism of Modern Nihilism*, SUNY Press).

A. Political nihilism

Ivan Turgenev's novel, *Fathers and Sons* (1862) was the means by which the political nuance of the word nihilism came into prominence. In this novel, Arkady, the young disciple of Bazarov (the novel's chief character) calls his hero a nihilist which he defines as "a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in." Bazarov describes himself to Arkady's father and uncle as a nihilist in these words: "We act by virtue of what we recognize as beneficial. . . . At the present time, negation is the most beneficial of all—and we deny everything." Arkady's father states, "You deny everything But one must construct too, you know." Bazarov responds: "That's not our business now The ground wants clearing first" (pp. 24, 56).

Hence, in the late 19th century Russia, through the influence of Turgenev's novel, the nihilist outlook came to be associated with programs of political revolution and terrorism in which negation or destruction for its own sake seemed to be the dominant aim. They stood for the negation of traditional beliefs and practices that obstructed radical reform and for the destruction of the institutions in which these beliefs and practices were imbedded. They were the confirmed enemies of the political and social order, and offered precious little in its place as an alternative. Hence, it seems as if they favored a destruction for destruction's sake approach to revolution.

Nihilistic political groups in Russian in the 1860s-1890s included "Land and Freedom," "The Organization," "Hell," "Troglodytes," "Revolutionary Populist Group of the North," "People's Will," and they employed such strategies as publishing radical journals, propaganda, terrorism, etc.

Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to label current terrorist and revolutionary groups today as nihilistic in light of their bent toward the destruction of the present order.

B. Moral nihilism

There are three basic types of moral nihilism.

1. Amoralism: the rejection of all moral principles and the determination to live without morality altogether. It rejects moral conscience or concern, seeing no reason to submit his actions to any moral principle. An amoralist would seek to live entirely for himself, and even for this there is no justification, he just has no other choice. He dispassionately conceives of life as absurd and worthless, like all forms of life.

Literary example: Jack London's character Wolf Larson in *The Sea Wolf* (1903).

2. Moral subjectivism: the theory that moral judgments are purely individual and arbitrary and admit of no rational justification or criticism (emotivism). Moral utterances are really not claims at all, but expressions of choice, preference, attitude, emotion, or desire. To think of these being true or subject to any kind of rational choice makes no sense. "If by nihilism one means a disbelief in the possibility of justifying moral judgments in some rational way, and if philosophers reflect the intellectual climate of the times in which they live, then our age is truly nihilistic. At no period in Western history, with the possible exception of the Hellenistic age, have so many philosophers regarded moral statements as somehow arbitrary" (Robert Olson).

Philosophical example: Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science*, (1935) esp. the chapter "Science and Ethics."

3. Egoism: the view that the sole obligation of any individual is to himself. Thus, he need have no moral concern for the effects of his actions on others, except to the extent that he perceives these effects to bear on his private interests. One is morally obligated to realize or to fulfill oneself at whatever price to others. This is the only moral law in egoism. The typical moral point of view is to put yourself in the place of others and treat them the way you would want to be treated. This is the perspective that egoism rejects. The entire obligation of each individual is to himself and not to any external principle, person, institution, or authority. As Max Stirner says in *The Ego and His Own*,

To the egoist nothing is high enough for him to humble himself before it, nothing so independent that he would live for love of it, nothing so sacred that he would sacrifice himself to it. The egoist's love rises in selfishness, flows in the bed of selfishness, and empties into selfishness again (1971: 203).

4. Summary: Since there is no God, there is no ultimate basis for morality or ethics. What is done by a culture becomes what ought to be done by a culture; the description of a culture's ethics becomes the prescription of the culture's ethics; "is" equals "ought." All values are relative to a culture. Since there is no God, there is no such thing as true moral guilt; humans are left not with the fact of guilt, but only guilt feelings. But relativism can lead to conflict, personally and globally. Whose values are right? Where is oughtness to be found? The nihilist says: nowhere. Hence, ethical nihilism.

C. Epistemological nihilism

Epistemological nihilism is of two types. The first makes the claim to truth entirely relative to particular individuals or groups. The second holds semantic intelligibility to be entirely relative to self-contained, incommensurable conceptual schemes.

1. Perspectivalism: This first view which says that all truth is dependent on the relative perspective of its proponents, the scope and power of reason is sharply restricted. Reason can operate within a system which gives reason its character and value; but, reason cannot operate among systems as their arbiter. Reason has no power to address fundamental disagreements arising from the conflicts of systems. And if reason is incapable of adjudicating between competing systems, then there is no real way to choose one system as better than another. There is a loss of confidence in the power of reason to settle important issues, and there is the consequent collapse into skepticism of any kind of ultimate truth.

Friedrich Nietzsche asserted that out of the human will to power, only perspectives exist and each human interpretation or claim to truth, no matter how familiar, obvious, or convincing, is just one more perspective or expression of will. Because all interpretations or world views are merely expressions of the will to power, and because there is no intelligible world as such, but only a welter of world views vying with each other for dominance, to ask if a given perspective is "true" or "truer" than another makes no sense. Truth is purely relative and a product of this or that perspective. The search for transperspectival criteria of truth or for "objective knowledge" is doomed to failure, for it wrongly assumes that truth can be gained independently of particular perspectives or that there is a world out there, a real world, to which perspectives are approximations. Take away perspectives and nothing is left. The world for any

individual or group is nothing other than the set of values and beliefs constituting its perspective.

2. Incommensurability: the focus here is on semantics and conceptual meaning. It begins with Nietzsche's perspectives and asserts an incommensurability of fundamental meanings among different conceptual schemes and contends that cultures, historical periods, groups, or individuals are locked into such schemes. No commonality of meaning is possible or discoverable for the basic concepts of the different schemes, and thus their claims cannot be comparatively understood, much less compared as to their truth value (good bye to comparative world view study and comparative religion, etc.).

Fritz Mauthner, *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901-02, 1923) seeks to establish this viewpoint which builds on Nietzsche's. He believes that language and hence, reason and thought, are incapable of describing reality lending itself to the first view which denies the possibility of objective truth. His reasons for his view that reason and thought cannot describe reality are the following: 1. First, we cannot know the world but only its effects on our senses; 2. These effects vary greatly among individuals; 3. Our five senses are accidental; were we possessed of different sense faculties, the world would appear quite differently; 4. Languages themselves which make concepts and beliefs possible are mere conventions and games based on arbitrary rules; 5. Words are forever being born and changing and developing in new ways, and cannot describe anything permanent. Language and culture in this heraclitian world are continuously changing and with the changes in language and culture come the change of perspectives.

Epiphenomenalism (?): Naturalism holds that mind and reason arise from the functioning of matter, that is, the interaction of physical and chemical properties we do not fully understand. But is there any reason to believe that such functioning matter has any capacity or concern to lead a conscious human being to truth, accurate perceptions or logical conclusions? Why should what the material brain is conscious of be related to whatever is there? The mind cannot be trusted and the result is epistemological nihilism.

"The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the conviction of a monkey's mind, if there are any

convictions in such a mind?" —Charles Darwin. [If Darwin's theory is true, then how can one be sure?]

"If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true. . . and hence, I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms." —C. S. Lewis.

D. Cosmic or metaphysical nihilism:

Cosmic nihilism asserts the meaninglessness of the cosmos in the sense that it possesses any intelligibility or knowable structure or in the sense of denying that it gives any place or support to the kinds of value and meaning that humans aspire to. This latter view has best been expressed by Bertrand Russell in "A Free Man's Worship" (1903). The world is alien and inhuman and that the values humans cherish have no real place in it. The world is oblivious between good and evil and is nothing but an arena of blind powers and forces that combined in the past by sheer chance to effect the conditions necessary for the emergence of life. These same forces are leading inexorably to human extinction. Each human being is a "helpless atom" and is an insignificant pawn in the universe ("thinking protoplasm"). Yet despite this predicament, we must cultivate those ideals which make human community possible and insure some happiness however fleeting and precarious.

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere the blow falls, *the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day*; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power (1957: 54).

Arthur Schopenhauer, whose views were anticomic in the extreme, speaks of the world as a kind of penal colony or place of

punishment and expiation for the crime of being born. Once we see the world in this way we will give up any futile hope of happiness and we will not see the struggles of life as unusual, and we will resign ourselves to asceticism and self-negation in order to escape the restless craving that holds us in thrall and causes so much misery by its unfulfillment.

Life . . . is a sea, full of rocks and whirlpools, which man avoids with the greatest care and solicitude, although he knows that even if he succeeds in getting through with all his efforts and skill, he yet by doing so comes nearer at every step to the greatest, the total, inevitable, and irremediable shipwreck, death; nay, even steers right upon it; this is the final goal of the laborious voyage, and worse for him than all the rocks which he has escaped (1957: I, 403).

Cosmic nihilism results in the facts that everything is determined or everything is chance. Determinism: Since in naturalism, all things (including human beings) operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system, there is no basis on which a person can act significantly or freely. Freedom is perceived but not real, a determinacy not recognized. Human beings are a toy of impersonal cosmic forces. Things may be determined by at least two forces:

- a. Behaviorism All actions are determined by environment (nurture): (B. F. Skinner)
- b. Sociobiology: All actions are determined by genetic structure (nature): (Edward O. Wilson)

Chance: On the other hand there are those (e.g., Jacques Monod) who say that all change and action is to be attributed to chance. By chance life began (the formula is: time, energy, matter and chance) and then necessity took over from that point and the result is life as we know it today: determined in a closed system with only the appearance of freedom and significance. But chance itself can be viewed in two ways:

- a. Chance as unknown determinism (i.e., things appear to be chance events but we are just ignorant of their causes). No event, human or otherwise, is significant.
- b. Chance as irrationality. All things are capricious, causeless, purposeless, directionless and therefore absurd. No event, human or otherwise, is significant.

E. Existential nihilism:

This view is beyond all ambiguity: it asserts to describe, not some passing mode, mood, or phase of life, but the human condition as such—namely, that human existence in all its manifestations exhibits an inescapable and unalterable absurdity. Strut, fret, and deceive ourselves as we may, our lives are of no significance, and it is futile to seek or affirm meaning when and where there is none to be found. This seems to be the message of portions of the book of Ecclesiastes, a famous passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and numerous existential writers like Tolstoy and Camus.

1. Ecclesiastes 1: 2-11 and 2: 1-23

Ecc. 1:2 # "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Ecc. 1:3 ¶ What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?

Ecc. 1:4 A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever.

Ecc. 1:5 Also, the sun rises and the sun sets; And hastening to its place it rises there {again.}

Ecc. 1:6 Blowing toward the south, Then turning toward the north, The wind continues swirling along; And on its circular courses the wind returns.

Ecc. 1:7 All the rivers flow into the sea, Yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, There they flow again.

Ecc. 1:8 All things are wearisome; Man is not able to tell {it.} The eye is not satisfied with seeing, Nor is the ear filled with hearing.

Ecc. 1:9 That which has been is that which will be, And that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun.

Ecc. 1:10 Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new"? Already it has existed for ages Which were before us.

Ecc. 1:11 There is no remembrance of earlier things; And also of the later things which will occur, There will be for them no remembrance Among those who will come later {still.} #

Ecc. 2:1. I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself." And behold, it too was futility.

Ecc. 2:2. I said of laughter, "It is madness," and of pleasure, "What does it accomplish?"

Eccl. 2:3. I explored with my mind {how} to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding {me} wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives.

Eccl. 2:4. I enlarged my works: I built houses for myself, I planted vineyards for myself;

Eccl. 2:5. I made gardens and parks for myself, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees;

Eccl. 2:6. I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.

Eccl. 2:7. I bought male and female slaves, and I had home born slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.

Eccl. 2:8 Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men-- many concubines.

Eccl. 2:9 Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.

Eccl. 2:10 And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor.

Eccl. 2:11 Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Eccl. 2:12 ¶ So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what {will} the man {do} who will come after the king {except} what has already been done?

Eccl. 2:13 And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.

Eccl. 2:14 The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.

Eccl. 2:15 Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity."

Eccl. 2:16 For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man {as} with the fool, inasmuch as {in} the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!

Eccl. 2:17 So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.

Eccl. 2:18 ¶ Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

Eccl. 2:19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity.

Eccl. 2:20 Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun.

Eccl. 2:21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil.

Eccl. 2:22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun?

Eccl. 2:23 Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

2. The words of Macbeth as he anticipates the siege of Malcom's avenging forces against his castle at Dunsinane:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V).

3. Leo Tolstoy's *Confession*.

I could give no reasonable meaning to any single action or to my whole life. I was only surprised that I could have avoided understanding this from the very beginning—it has been so long known to all. Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (they had come already) to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs, whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and I shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort? And how

go on living? That it is what is surprising to me! One can only live while one is intoxicated with life; as soon as one is sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere fraud and a stupid fraud (1940: 19-20; also 15).

4. Albert Camus' response to the absurdity of life. Rather than submit to a detached resignation as Schopenhauer did, Camus recommended three things in response to existential nihilism. First is revolt or defiance. One must live unreconciled to the absurdity of life and yet one must live without illusions as if life had meaning. Second is the fact of responsible freedom—one is free from all prescribed values and free to create responsibly one's own and one's own life. Third is the ambition to live not for the future, for there is none, but to live for the present, and to experience as much of life as possible.

F. Summary

Common to all these strains of nihilism is the attitude of reductionism, negation and denial as implied in the name nihilism itself. Hence,

1. Political nihilism negates the political structures and the social and cultural outlook within which life is lived.
2. Moral nihilism denies the sense of moral obligation, the objectivity of moral principles, or the moral viewpoint.
3. Epistemological nihilism: denies any form of objective truth and that all truth is relative and perspectival.
4. Cosmic nihilism: disavows intelligibility of the universe or value in nature, and sees it as hostile to humanity.
5. Existential nihilism: negates the meaning of life.

III. Critique: Five Reasons Why Nihilism is Unlivable

- A. From meaninglessness, nothing at all follows, or rather anything follows; any course of action is open. "It matters not whether one gets drunk or is a leader of nations." —Jean Paul Sartre.
- B. Every time nihilists think and trust their thinking, they affirm that thinking is of value and can lead to knowledge; but this is contradictory since the very essence of nihilism is that "there is no meaning in the universe" (which itself is a self-defeating statement for if it is true, then it is false).
- C. Though one can live out a limited sort of practical nihilism, eventually a limit is reached; for in order to deny God, one must have a God to

deny, something against which to do battle. What does a nihilist do since there is no God?

- D. Nihilistic art is a contradiction in terms. Much modern art has nihilism as its ideological core. But to the extent that these art works display the implications or meaning of nihilism, they are not nihilistic; to the extent they are nihilistic, they are not artworks since art implies meaning and structure.
- E. Nihilism leads to severe psychological problems. People cannot live with it consistently (i.e., an agonizing atheism) since it denies what every fiber of their being cries out for—meaning, value, significance, dignity, worth.

"God is dead! God is dead! Isn't He? I mean, surely he is, isn't he?
God is dead. Oh, I wish, I wish, I wish he weren't."
—Franz Kafka.

