**Considering Nihilism as a Social Force**

Nihilism as a concept is denotatively thorny to the point of paradox, yet connotatively quite catchy. People more versed in the formal study of philosophy tend to shy away from it for denotative reasons, while others just getting their feet wet flock to it as a provocative, even attractive proposition. It is not rare, especially in more recent times, that those just becoming aware of my own connection to philosophy ask me about it excitedly. The conversation typically stalls, for reasons discussed below; yet I am left disheartened not to be able to bring their enthusiasm for nihilism to some meaning plateau. I have felt like I have been missing something.

Can this all be written off as some misguided *Zeitgeist*? In favor of this possibility is the recognition of nihilism’s emergence from the Existentialist movement of the nineteenth century, culminating most famously in Nietzsche, whose tongue-in-cheek style makes him difficult to interpret. It does have roots in classical Greek philosophy – or more precisely, sophism - in the person of Gorgias (483 to 378 BCE) who is famous for having said: “Nothing exists. If anything did exist it could not be known. If it was known, the knowledge of it would be incommunicable.” (<https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-nihilism-history-250581>).

After serious consideration, I turn down this suggestion, since nihilism, far from being monolithic, is represented in contrary or at least unrelated camps. Its predominant association has been with libertarianism, a socio-political movement focusing on maximizing liberty without social or legal constraint. Even though libertarianism has both left-leaning and conservative forms, it does not seem to capture or explain the occasional waves of anti-democratic, authoritarian fervor that many see to have their roots in nihilism as well; such as in the times in which we are currently living, which many have labeled as “post-truth politics”, a movement seemingly about as far from being inspired by existentialism than anything that can be imagined.

Nihilism is a troubling label in part because the movement or movements to which it may refer typically have one thing in common, which is resentment of self-definition or of being defined by others. Loosely speaking, it refers to attitudes more than beliefs and is not meant to be taken literally.

Part of the reason for this might come from the fact that is so hard to take nihilism literally, even enough to be able to figure out whether to believe in it or not.

Were nihilism to be taken literally, it would fall into one of three types, which might be held separately or in various combinations, roughly:

Epistemic nihilism: there is no meaning.

Ethical or moral nihilism: there are no values; nothing is of value.

Metaphysical nihilism: nothing exists.

We can return to these shortly  after a brief query into what self-proclaimed nihilists are really trying to communicate, if not - as usually seems to be the case, one or any combination of these three.

Self-proclaimed nihilists usually have beefs with specifically recommended and particularly favored claims regarding meaning, existence, or value. In their criticism of these, they don't seem to feel the onus, as many thinkers would, of giving an alternate theory, but just criticize all the way through, often expressing resentment that critics of any theory of meaning, existence or value should be expected to offer their own theory in order to validate or make sense of their criticism. How might this stance be defended?

If they say that it is not possible for anyone to state a worthwhile theory, that might make them be seen as a skeptic rather than as a nihilist. If they say every society or culture has their own objective and incommensurable theory between which there, they are liable to be labeled a relativist. If they say theoretical truth is intrinsically not objective, but is itself just a matter of personal taste, then they are liable to be labeled subjectivists. Those who identify as nihilist typically do not want to be confused with these other forms of denial of universal theory. So, it might be said,  they remain in limbo as critics without their own theories. I say this with reservations, because some who identify as nihilists may have theories and those theories may not be nihilist. This is another claim that might make a nihilist chafe, except that it is true of all of us. It is common to discover that one does not believe all that one claims to believe and that one  really does believe some things one does not acknowledge. Nihilism can be a cover for a critic who just wants to criticize without being put into a box as a something-or-other-ist.

Martin J White,  who writes on nihilism and identifies with the term, has three works whose titles (published, but hard to find) all prominently figure the term 'macro-futilism'. This gives me a hint as to what he sees nihilism to be: not necessarily as a rejection of all meaning, but a rejection of all "big picture" meaning, as well as all moral and metaphysical narratives related to or depending on it. With a bit off tongue-in-cheek, he expresses resentment against the claim that his futilism should not count as real nihilism, since it doesn't attack what might be called 'micro-meanings', like good feelings between friends, etc.; or even because futilism itself is more akin to cynicism, which does not deny values, meanings, or the reality of things, but only that good prevails against evil and thus recommends against combatting it.  So, with Martin White, we can add yet another label nihilists struggle against.

All this prompts the question: are there really any nihilists? Is the very asking of this question just a rhetorical tool that could be used to dismiss any other theory  just as easily? Or is nihilism's identity problem unique in some significant way?

The difficulty of the three denotatively simple forms of nihilism mentioned above are in their very statement. Any attempt seems to lead directly to paradox, the main one being that of reflective self-defeat.

**If there are no meanings**, does that make the very statement of this theory meaningless?  It is generally accepted that for a claim to be knowable, it must be true, and that for a claim to be true, it must be meaningful. Therefore, to deny meaning denies the possibility of truth as well as knowledge. If there is no knowledge, then the theory  presently under consideration not only cannot be known, but cannot be true.

The latter paradox is the worse, since if nothing can be true, then nothing can be false either, since any falsehood is the simple denial of a truth. If the possibility of truth and falsity is out of question, then even logic itself is non-sensical.

To be sure, logic might be "saved" if the claim of epistemic nihilism not taken not entail the negation of all possible meaning *quoad se*but only *quoad nos*. In this case, the deficiency of meaning would not be universal, but something peculiar to human life or to finite rational beings. But this leaves paradox in its wake: to whom is logic of service if not to us? Only to angels and God, if either exists? But what need has God of logic? And what business do we have to speak of such things if not even logic can be of use to us?

**If there are no values**, i.e., nothing is either good or bad, then there are no conceivable criteria upon which to make decisions, and therefore no conceivable motivation for making decisions. But to exist as organisms, whether rational or not, we must make and carry out decisions. Thus, the denial of all values defeats the purpose of all life, including organismic life.

Perhaps this denial of values is only intended to count for what we would call moral values, in which case, we might be thought to avoid having defeated the purpose of organismic life *per se.* But what we call moral values are just values involved as the pros and cons considered in our rational choices. The values themselves are in large part at least not unique to moral decision-making. It is immoral to arbitrarily harm myself by failure to have a healthy diet, as well as being contrary to my organismic survival. There does not seem to be a place where we can draw a line between values that might count in organismic decisions and values that purely count for moral decisions. Our moral awareness itself - that is, our rational awareness, receives most if not all of its input from organismic awareness. One would be hard-pressed to find any purely moral concerns that are utterly irrelevant to our organismic awareness,

If we nonetheless want to insist in spite of these troubles that there is no reality to moral values, then this would cause troubles going back in the other direction to contradict our organismic survival values, which are intimately entwined in so many ways to moral decisions.

**If there is no reality,** then we are faced with an absolute contradiction between appearance and reality. Even false appearances are not simply to be dismissed, but to be explained away. The only way to do this is to explain away the falsehood in terms of something real. If nothing is real, then no explanation at all for the false appearance can be given.

This, in turn, raises the question of justification. If metaphysical nihilism is true, then belief in it can only be by blind faith, with no possible explanation. This is an absolute contradiction of the rational mandate.

Of course, one identifying as a nihilist, especially this type of nihilism can simply answer back, "well then F. the rational mandate!"

If nihilism or any form of nihilism is to be recommended as something that warrants acceptance without warrant, this is a pure circle of reasoning as well as a blatant form of “blind faith” reasoning, tantamount to idolatry.

Instead, identification with some form of nihilism or even with the appellation itself is usually as a form of radical criticism of some favored theory - of knowledge, values, or reality - that rejects the onus of proffering a theory in its stead.  Is this a reason to refuse dialogue with nihilists?

Not as long as they, too, choose to remain in dialog with others who differ from them, for in that case they are tacitly accepting, as perhaps we all should, that wisdom does not exist so much in the form of any stated thesis, but as a process of rational scrutiny; not so much unlike a group of people cooking together. If at a certain point in the cooking process, some of the cooks have to exit the kitchen momentarily, they might ask the remaining cooks to maintain watch over what is simmering in the pot, adjusting for flavor as they see fit. If these cooks, tasting the contents of the pot, find the flavor insipid or too sweet, and adjust by adding certain ingredients, should they then be labeled as cooks specialized in or limited to the ingredients they just added? We might judge so only if they persist in adding those same ingredients to the pot no matter what is cooking and regardless of the flavor. Otherwise, we shouldn’t accuse them of violating the recipe just for fine-tuning it, nor demanding them to write out an exact recipe, since it may vary according to situation.

Nihilists among us may be like these cooks, who sense something not quite right with our theoretical concoctions. Their denial might not be analogous with the refusal to cook at all, but the refusal to accept the existence of a perfect recipe. This might in fact motivate them to have something to contribute to the improvement of our recipes. In such case, we should welcome them in ongoing conversation. Although some reject nihilism as distorted, its worst distortion may derive from its non-acceptance by us, which in turn may lead to calamitous political results. Some toying for years with liberal nihilist notions may not have been mindful that their ideas were being appropriated for illiberal purposes on the right, which now, abetted by a considerable amount of disinformative social engineering, are coming to fruition.