KEVIN STOEHR, NIHILISM IN FILM AND TELEVISION (McFARLAND, 2006).

# *Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Existentialism*

## Nihilism as Detachment

"Nothing matters," says the nihilist. "I mean ... well, I don't *mean* anything at all. Whatever happens ... just happens. Nothing makes a difference anyway."

An expression of outright apathy and even desperation, you might say.

From a philosophical point of view, apathy is not always viewed by moral thinkers as a purely negative stance that might lead to the disintegration of one's values. An attitude of indifference may well be, in certain instances, therapeutic and morally sustaining.

The ancient and medieval Stoics, for example, transformed the frequent need for detachment into a moral creed, though they did not go so far as to say that *nothing* matters. Many of the great Stoic thinkers, like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius and Seneca and Cicero, were quite selective in their methods of detachment from the things that frequently troubled them, relying upon reason and life-experience to guide them in this selection. According to these thinkers, we should focus only upon *intrinsic* values and upon those internal opinions, judgments, attitudes, desires, etc. that can be determined or regulated through the power of reason and the human will. We should not worry about what is not up to us.

The Stoics (much like Buddhists and Hindus of different varieties) typically urge us to transcend our fixation on *extrinsic* (and thus uncontrollable) interests and goods. In the case of religiously minded Stoics, we ought to eliminate these concerns and cravings as much as possible and leave the realm of external objects and events to the infinite care of God's Providence. The Christian philosopher Boethius, for example, adopts such a stance in his work *The Consolation of Philosophy*, modeling himself after the cool and rational detachment of Socrates at the conclusion of Plato's *Crito*. Both Socrates and Boethius arrived at the need for reasonable detach-

ment, particularly in the face of false accusations, imprisonment, and their own impending executions. Even Epicureanism, as a brand of hedonistic and materialistic moral philosophy that takes long-term pleasure as its highest good, advocates a rationally justified withdrawal from sources of pain and misery in order to attain serenity. Epicurus' famous "Garden," one of the four great schools of antiquity, was the embodiment of such a legitimate retreat from the trials and tribulations of the world.

So for thinkers like the Stoics and the Epicureans, there are at least some things that should not matter to us and that demand an attitude of detachment in certain circumstances. But the idea that *nothing* matters is another story altogether.

## Nihilism from a Philosophical Point of View

From a more theoretical or philosophical perspective, the nihilistic proposition that "nothing matters" invites the greatest degree of ambiguity and perplexity. And this has to do with the very concept of *Nothing* that serves as the subject of this proposition. What do we mean by "Nothing" when we proclaim "Nothing matters"? Furthermore, what is the standard involved that permits us to distinguish things that "matter" to us from things that do not? Is there such a standard, or is one even needed, especially when *nothing* matters?

The ambiguity and confusion concerning the philosophical meaning of "nihilism" heightens when we consider other possible interpretations of the claim that nothing matters. Beyond the everyday sense of that proposition, we might understand the statement as implying that no *thing* ("nothing") matters. This would indicate that, if "something" did indeed matter, it would not be some "thing." That which possesses significance (at least to a minimal degree) would rather be a non-thing or a non-object: perhaps a context or relation of ideas or values, but not a "some-thing" that could be reified or objectified and therefore set apart from other seemingly separable things. On the other hand, one might interpret the statement "Nothing matters" in a uniquely theoretical manner — in the sense that *Nothing* or *Nothingness* (that which philosophers also call "Non-Being") has special relevance. This would indicate that Nothing (or at least the *concept* of Nothingness) does somehow matter and make a difference, even if "it" is not some *thing*.

Well, you can see how puzzling the simple statement "nothing matters" can get when you begin to think about it beyond the realm of ordinary everyday understanding. But if someone does indeed make this

statement and *means* it in a way that is halfway intelligible, I assume that she should be able to explain what she means and attempt to justify it. And yet this is a difficult task to require of the person who claims not to care in the least about *anything*. Why bother to explain and justify one's nihilistic attitude if nothing makes a difference anyway?

It may be understandable from the foregoing, then, that the term "nihilism," which has been especially prevalent in the moral and cultural philosophies of the 20th century, has been defined so variously since its alleged coinage by the German Enlightenment thinker Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) over two centuries ago.[1] After all, the term itself typically connotes vagueness, ambiguity, indeterminacy, and even nonmeaning, whether on a theoretical or a practical level or both.

In order to appreciate the obscurities and ambiguities involved in the project of understanding the basic idea of nihilism, it might prove fruitful to glance preliminarily at a selective survey of several definitions that have been offered to us over the past few centuries since the days of Jacobi:

Russian author Ivan Turgenev, from his novel *Fathers and Sons*:

> [A] nihilist is a man who ... looks at everything critically ... who does not take any principle for granted, however much that principle may be revered.[2]

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, from a collection of his unpublished writings:

> What does nihilism mean?—*That the highest values devaluate themselves.* The aim is missing; "Why?" finds no answer.[3]

Also from Nietzsche:

> 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.[4]

German philosopher Martin Heidegger, from his collection of lectures on the thought of his forebear Nietzsche:

> "Nihilism" is the increasingly dominant truth that all prior aims of being have become superfluous.[5]

Also from Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche:

> The essence of nihilism proper is Being itself in default of its unconcealment, which is as its own "It," and which determines its "is" in staying away.[6]

From German scholar Helmut Thielicke, whose approach to the problem of nihilism is rooted in the Christian religion:

Nihilism literally has only one truth to declare, namely, the truth that ultimately Nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless.[7]

Also from Thielicke:

Thus nihilism, which means the separation of the world from its absolute relation to God, leads to the destruction of the self. The self is "unselfed," in Kierkegaard's sense, and becomes merely a representation of a thing or an energy, with all the consequences of self-annihilation that this involves.[8]

From Japanese scholar Nishitani Keiji:

... [N]ihilism is the transition from the standpoint of observation to that of "passionate" Existence. It means taking the entirety of history upon oneself as a history of the self, shifting the metaphysical ground of that history to the ground of the self, and saying "No" to it in this ground. It is at the same time to deny oneself the ground of the being of the self given by history and voluntarily to demolish the ground which has become false, turning the being of the self into a question mark.[9]

From American scholar Stanley Rosen:

[N]ihilism may be defined as the view that it makes no difference what we say, because every definition of "difference" is itself merely something that we say.[10]

Perhaps we should first ask ourselves: Is there *one* generic or universal meaning of nihilism that underlies the many prior attempts at defining this primal attitude, or are we left only with a multiplicity of different meanings of the term? And furthermore: Is the very goal of clarifying the concept of nihilism paradoxical, perhaps self-refuting, in that the goal requires an attempt to make clear and more certain a fundamental belief that clarity and certainty are impossible goals in human life?

The English word "nihilism," like its German sibling "Nihilismus," is derived from the Latin term "*nihil*," referring to *nothing whatsoever* (as an absence of existing objects). In the practical and moral sense, the *nihil* implies indifference, as an absence of values, since values result from our judgments concerning those "things" that matter and make a difference. In terms of everyday human experience, nihilism typically indicates a negative attitude or orientation toward conventional values, interests, and institutions. Nihilism implies most often a critique and eventual rejection of "bourgeois" or mainstream morality — the rejection of a belief in some traditional "moral structure" that subsists in the hearts and minds of human beings. But in its most extreme form, this attitude also attempts to negate the belief in any *natural order* as well — the negation of faith in some "moral structure" that is inherent in the very nature of things.

A *radical* nihilist is usually taken to be someone who has completely rejected the hope of attaining any objective knowledge and who has denied

the need to adhere to some over-arching life-goal. Such a nihilist typically forsakes belief in some universal moral standard or unconditional principle of rationality. In fact, the radical nihilist may be said to deny the intrinsic value and innate intelligibility of *life itself*. A nihilist in this extreme sense is to be understood as one who no longer attempts to base his or her existence on any fixed belief-system or moral principle, especially a system or principle that lays claim to the status of universality or permanence. Within the "flux" or "stream" of everyday existence, then, the committed nihilist (as paradoxical as that description might appear) interprets his or her experiences and acts of cognition in terms of a kaleidoscope of fleeting viewpoints. None of these perspectives can be anchored or ordered by any stable foundation of knowledge or morality. "Beneath" the colors and shapes of human experience, the life-denying nihilist sees only the darkness of the Void or the Abyss, the *nihil* or Nothing that is said to pervade our (allegedly) contingent and perishable existence.

As a philosophical stance, attitude, or orientation, nihilism is therefore rooted in the recognition of Nothingness or Negativity. This recognition certainly does not involve a belief in *the world's* non-existence, which would be (to say the least) foolhardy, even insane. Ordinary lived experience discloses, of course, the ineluctable truth that there is *something* rather than *nothing whatsoever*: the existence of a world and of objects in that world. Experience *per se* is always intentional or object-related, as is the knowledge that is founded upon experience. As long as there is the fact of experience, no matter what the "subject" or "self" who experiences is taken to be, then there must be *something* that is experienced. Furthermore, ordinary lived experience also reveals a *valued* world of objects and events in which things and their qualities gain meaning and significance (whether positively or negatively valued) within various contexts—at the very least by being related to interest-driven, value-oriented subjects such as ourselves.

So from whence emerge the attitude of nihilism and the proposition, if taken literally, that *nothing* matters?

Aside from questions of existence, the nihilist does not usually deny the fact that objects and events in the world can have extrinsic or external value in external relation to the utilitarian interests of living creatures such as humans. Rather, the nihilist is typically that individual who consistently rejects that which has traditionally been claimed to have intrinsic or inherent value (i.e., that which is valuable in and for itself, apart from its usefulness for human beings). In the broadest and most radical sense of the term, nihilism is a denial of the *world*'s intrinsic value, and not merely the intrinsic values of particular objects or events or persons *in* the world—

those entities that exist within our shared universe of discourse, experience and concern.

Nihilism also includes, of course, a rejection of the intrinsic value o: entities or powers residing (hypothetically) beyond the limits of our shared universe: e.g., some transcendent deity or form of the divine. The nihilist who denies belief in some transcendent or supernatural reality is not always concerned with questions about the existence of such a reality. The nihilist may be interested much more in denying that this extra-worldly reality could have any *value* or *meaning* whatsoever. That is to say, even if some super-natural or otherworldly reality exists (whatever that could mean), then this reality might nonetheless make no difference value-wise in our natural and worldly lives.

Yet the rejection of the intrinsic value of *everything*, including the world itself, would appear to border on the pathological. An "extremist" brand of world-negating nihilism is a rejection of the very possibility of intrinsic value *per se*. It results most often from the adoption of an unrelenting skepticism that becomes irrational and obsessive. Such a radically skeptical attitude would cast into doubt the very assumptions that we make in our everyday, pre-theoretical lives. Skeptical doubt begins either in theory or in practice but, in its extreme form, eventually saturates both dimensions of human experience and reflection.

Skepticism is usually taken to be an adoption of doubt in which the inquirer recognizes a lack of evidence or justification. In other words, skepticism is a *rational* stance in many situations because there is good reason for doubting something in particular. I can doubt that my significant other loves me, for instance, when his or her words and actions strike me on a regular basis as cold or indifferent. But skepticism can also become *compulsive* and *obsessive* when the motivation for questioning or doubting is no longer reasonable. The skeptic can become *irrational* when he or she adopts an impossible (even non-human) standard of justifying a decision, action, or knowledge-claim. It would be unreasonable for me to doubt that my significant other loves me, for example, simply because he or she does not pay attention to me every moment of every day. It might be irrational, say, to measure my every concrete action or decision against some abstract ideal of godly perfection.

Nihilism as a completely negative or "pathological" stance presupposes this kind of irrational skepticism. But that does not imply that all forms of nihilism are completely negative or "pathological," as we shall see. Nihilism in general presents dangers as well as creative opportunities for the human personality.

## Nihilism as an Existential Attitude

Nihilism is sometimes defined as an *existential* attitude or orientation according to which the activities of self-creation and the search for self-knowledge are either forsaken or undertaken against a backdrop of rejected values and decaying institutions. Existential philosophers tend to concern themselves with issues such as nihilism. But what do we mean by "existential"?

The seeds of the philosophical movement known as "Existentialism" (or "existential philosophy") were planted, according to many scholars, with the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and his critique of "Christendom." Kierkegaard was concerned first and foremost with the decline of Christianity as a *living faith*, as a religion that addresses the inner spirit of the individual rather than responding only to the external needs of some ritualized, mass-minded collective. According to Kierkegaard, Christianity as an organized institution had progressively over-rationalized God, transforming the Divine into a mere concept or thing, thus producing a sense of alienation from God (rather than communion or redemption) on the part of the believer. Alienation is, in essence, a sense of estrangement or "not-belonging." To overcome this feeling of "being a stranger to God," Kierkegaard advocated an "absolute leap of faith" that required the ultimate commitment of one's entire *inner* being, a dedicated belief in the mysteries and paradoxes of the Christian religion. Through this commitment, the schism between the human and the Divine (or, in more philosophical language, between the finite and the Infinite) might be bridged to some degree. For such a "leap" to occur, rationality and logic must be surrendered at some point, since the nature of the Divine cannot be grasped by the limited power of human reason. It must be accepted through sheer faith.

Existentialism is, in many ways, concerned with the internal attitudes and choices of the individual, much as Kierkegaard had emphasized, but not always from a religious or even spiritual standpoint. This philosophical "movement" (it did not really become an official "school" with an articulated agenda until well into the 20th century) was amplified by the radical writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche espoused an *atheistic* form of existentialism, represented most famously by the proclamation in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that "God is dead." But like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche emphasized the need to supersede the limitations of the traditional focus upon rational and conventional order (what he calls "the Apollonian" side of human existence) and to recognize the more irrational and unconscious impulses of our inner lives (what he calls "the Dionysian"

aspects of life). Nietzsche first emphasized this distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in his early analysis of ancient Greek culture, *The Birth of Tragedy (Out of the Spirit of Music).* Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stress a general but fundamental point that is a hallmark of existentialist thinking: Human existence should be defined not in terms of the universalizable abstractions of reason alone, but rather in terms of the irreducible uniqueness of the individual as well as the situated choices that he or she makes in everyday life.

In the 20th century, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) would expand and enrich the existentialist viewpoint, joined by novelists such as Franz Kafka (1883–1924), Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), and Albert Camus (1913–1960). For such thinkers and writers, the "universal" and "objective" ideas that had been handed down through the tradition — in the attempt to define *essential* meanings and to determine human nature in a *fixed* or *static* manner — are ultimately superficial classifications and generalizations. Rather, we should not deny the basic fact that each individual is fundamentally unique and ever changing. Abstract ideas and principles typically ignore the specific qualities that make up each person or personality and usually deny the fluctuating, manifold character of life.

Existential thinkers ponder questions and issues concerning the moving, changing, living human being. Human existence is not a quantitative object or a thing, like a table or a chair, and "it" cannot simply be reduced to our material bodies and thus explained merely in biological, chemical, or physical terms. Human life is specific, concrete, situational, conditioned, and dynamic — not abstract, universal, unconditional, and fixed (like some philosophical idea, for instance).

Human existence consists of the meanings and patterns formed by the living of our lives and by the choices that we make on a daily basis. Human existence is not always about knowing something (i.e., cognition), and human life is sometimes composed of events or qualities that cannot be fully explained in a rational, logical manner. There are aspects of being human — like falling in love or hating an enemy — that cannot be comprehended through mathematical equations or through some scientific theory such as atomism or quantum mechanics or biological determinism. In other words, human existence cannot be reduced to concepts and so ultimately evades theoretical fixation. It is the inner person that determines the meaning and value of human existence.

One adjective that is used in modern parlance to discuss the inner person is "subjective." You are a "subject" because you are an individual to which all other things in the world are related. Just as the subject of a sen-

tence, the nominative noun, "anchors" the other parts of the sentence (verbs, adjectives, etc.) by providing a point of reference, a living subject or self provides a *point of reference, a point of view, a perspective.* Just as the respective meanings of sentences are fundamentally different when you change the subject, so does life and experience (indeed, an entire "world" of life and experience) differ when you replace the person or self who is doing the living and the experiencing. This is due to the fact that selves or subjects are individuals, and individuals are by nature unique.

As Kierkegaard noted, it was Socrates (469?-399 BC) who made a giant step forward in philosophy when he forsook the study of physical nature (the chief study of pre–Socratic thinkers like Parmenides and Heraclitus) and focused on the human individual. In other words, Socrates re-defined philosophy by transforming it into a study of human life and human nature, of what it means to be a unique human subject or self — rather than a study of the heavens and the earth. His confessional defense in Plato's *Apology* tells us as much. He was concerned primarily with *self*-knowledge, not with the knowledge of material reality. Such an emphasis requires, of course, a focus upon the *inner* (rather than outer) person.

Kierkegaard tells us that Socrates was the first person in the history of Western philosophy to stress the principle of *subjectivity* or "inwardness" in that Socrates recognized the knower or thinker as an *existing individual,* not as some ethereal mind floating in space. By having repeatedly revealed and confessed his own ignorance — "Socratic wisdom" is knowledge of what one does *not* know — Socrates revealed the conditioned and limited nature of human knowing. Again, by simply existing, the knower is already "embedded" or "located" within the world and thereby afforded a unique perspective on things. By existing, the knower is not afforded any "Archimean" or "God's eye" point of view, some transcendent or transcendental standpoint. The knower stands "over against" and yet also "beside" all that he or she knows or might come to know, and so the knower is necessarily a finite, situated being. As Kierkegaard points out, Socrates emphasized his very subjectivity or "inward" being by drawing a contrast with all that he does *not* know, all that lies "outside" or "beyond" his limited grasp. Once an "outside" has been established, the reality of an "inside" (subjectivity, inwardness) emerges necessarily in a dialectical or reciprocal manner.

Kierkegaard points out that, while mathematicians and scientists and philosophers typically attempt to attain objective knowledge (i.e., what is true apart from the knower's personal viewpoint), truth is inherently subjective. Truth is subjective because "it" must be defined in terms of an individual's changing perspectives or situations and cannot be fixed or generalized by some abstract, static concept or principle. The truth of life

is, like life itself, always "on the move" and oriented by a situated ar dynamic point of reference.

So above all else, existentialism — rooted in the philosophies o Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and echoing a fundamental concern o Socrates— rejects traditional attempts of philosophy to define *reality as really is* (i.e., objectively) and to analyze the human being as if "it" wer some lifeless, mummified specimen in a museum.

## Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Nihilism

Nihilism might be said, therefore, to be an existentialist attitude or orientation in that it typically denies the belief in some "transcendent reality" or "essential" human nature that can serve as a basis of universal, absolute principles of knowledge and moral action. At its core, nihilism is the human encounter with negativity and contingency. This primal attitude or condition either leads to a rejection of any stable system of beliefs and standards or is occasioned by such a rejection. Nihilism, then, is the overturning of our trust in the conventional and traditional order, a human-created order that is usually taken to be a bedrock and guideline in our quest to be a good person and to live a good life. At its deepest level, nihilism is a loss of faith in the *natural order* as well. The rejections of religious faith and trust in the law are only two of the major symptoms of these radical forms of skeptical doubt and loss of conviction.

Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers in the tradition of Western philosophy to point explicitly to the dangers, as well as to the creative opportunities, of nihilism as a cultural and historical phenomenon. He indicates that the nihilist typically recognizes the transience ("flux" or "becoming") of Life and subsequently loses faith in conventional ideas and standards that had been viewed previously as fixed or permanent. These idealized abstractions do not do justice to the fleeting, fragile nature of human existence and are therefore acknowledged as merely illusory and deceptive. Nihilism involves the deflation, and then disintegration, of those values that were formerly viewed as central to one's life. The very *purpose* of one's existence is put into question.

According to Nietzsche, one cannot escape the inherent perspectivism of life. Simply put, one is forced to recognize the gap that exists between the "confines" of finite subjectivity and the infinite richness of the world. One must actually *live through* changing viewpoints and limited life-situations in order to experience and know the world. Now, the acknowledgement of our situated-ness and finitude may be viewed as simply another

position and perspective. Yet it is one that admits of its own limitations, surrendering any pretense of some unconditional or absolute standpoint from which we might somehow view the totality of existence. Nietzsche points us emphatically toward the reality of the inescapable Flux of Becoming (i.e., the changing "stream" of life) and our dynamic role within it. Those dogmatists and metaphysicians who cling to a fixed perspective, as though it were the *only* viewpoint possible, also deny their own opportunity for self-transformation and life-enhancement. They falsely deny the need for change. Nietzsche asks us not to accept blindly any fixed ideas that merely conceal and deny the dynamic richness of Life.

Nietzsche urges his self-aware reader to become liberated, not by trying to escape the inherent limits of his or her perspectives, which is impossible, but by recognizing the truth and reality of these limits. For those who heed Nietzsche's call, they should live according to the Stoic principle of *amor fati* (love of fate) because they have been "thrown" into life and into changing circumstances with very little choice in the matter. And yet within the boundaries of our conditioned existence, where we cannot override the very presence of limits and change, real freedom begins, paradoxically. Genuine choice is possible in our acts of overcoming particular limitations and thereby gaining *some* control over our fluctuating circumstances. Nietzsche's brand of *amor fati* requires an acceptance of our situated-ness within the moving currents of life, but also demands that we actively engage in life rather than passively submit to its waves of change.

A strong influence on Nietzsche in the beginning stages of his philosophical development was the German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), known sometimes as "The Great Pessimist." Nietzsche had been, at one point in his early professorial career, a devoted disciple and friend of the legendary composer Richard Wagner (though Nietzsche broke off this friendship in later years, allegedly due to his rejection of Wagner's pompous nationalism, "closeted" Christianity, and vicious anti-Semitism). Nietzsche had shared with his mentor Wagner a deep appreciation of Schopenhauer's anti-religious, anti-rationalist philosophy. And Schopenhauer represented a paradox that Nietzsche no doubt recognized in himself: the famous pessimist was, in many ways, an *anti-intellectual* intellectual. That is to say, Schopenhauer was a thinker who, by means of rational and philosophical prose, pointed emphatically *beyond* the limits of our feeble reason and fragile self-consciousness.

It was Schopenhauer's thesis, articulated most tellingly in his masterpiece *The World as Will and Representation*, that human nature is inherently chaotic and irrational and that human existence is filled with misery and suffering. The only way to deal with life, according to this thinker, is

to remove oneself from it as much as possible and to say "No" to everything having to do with one's deepest cravings. In this sense, Schopenhauer based his philosophical worldview on the principle of *life-negation.* He appreciated the Buddhist teachings concerning human suffering, the origin of suffering being our desires, and the need to detach ourselves from these desires, with the goal being an escape from life's trials and tribulations. But this also entails an escape from life itself, despite our inherent drive to biological self-preservation. Since life is always changing in unpredictable ways, "it" always frustrates our desires. It is better to retreat as far as possible from the active pursuit of pleasure and, in good stoic fashion, to refrain from worrying about what one cannot control. The ideal state of such detachment, according to Schopenhauer, is the cool contemplation of aesthetic beauty, the paradigm of withdrawal from active life-participation.

Nietzsche admired Schopenhauer's radical rejection of Christianity, agreeing with him that Christianity (and ultimately organized religion as a whole) is basically a religion of the weak and the suffering, created by dogmatic believers in order to provide themselves with a sense of false security. Their faith results from the delusion that life has some higher unity and purpose and that there exists some divine plan or providence which humans cannot fully comprehend. For Schopenhauer, as we have said, Life is fundamentally chaotic and produces only suffering and misery. No one's life goes as planned. There is no God who cares for us all and who, through divine intelligence, creates "the best of all possible worlds." Rather, Life is the dynamic configuration of mostly irrational forces, like the Furies in Aeschylus' tragic trilogy *The Oresteia.* The Furies are spirits who weave their web of irrational vengeance and bloodlust. Such forces constitute what Schopenhauer calls "the Will" (*der Wille*), a primal source of blind creative energy that underlies all organic life-processes. Human life at its most fundamental level (as with Thomas Hobbes's conception of the "state of nature," a condition of humanity devoid of government and morality and civilized society) is motivated purely by self-interest and self-preservation. Reason or rationality exists in such a condition of "humanity" but is extremely limited in what it can accomplish.

Schopenhauer's worldview, of course, was a radical departure from Western philosophy's traditional emphases upon the primacy of reason and the need for some universal standard of intelligibility and virtue. Schopenhauer rejected outright this "rational optimism." Nietzsche agreed with his teacher that Life transcends the limits of mere human reason and its seat in the human ego. The history of Western philosophy in its most general aspects was mistaken in its over-emphasis on ego-centered rationality and on universal laws and ideas. If we prioritize reason above all other powers

or faculties, including the will, then we ignore the more creative and powerful elements of our personalities, the instinctual elements that cannot be fully explained. For example, Nietzsche (like Wagner) especially prized Schopenhauer's philosophical remarks on music, an art form that expresses the subconscious and instinctual life of the human psyche. Nietzsche called this "darker" instinctual side of human nature (as in his first great work, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, which was dedicated in large measure to Wagner) the "Dionysian." Nietzsche opposed the Dionysian or irrational aspects of human nature, like the instincts, to the "Apollonian," the rational and order-giving side of the personality. Trained in classical languages and literature, Nietzsche made a name for himself as a young philologist who broke from scholarly tradition by emphasizing the importance of the Dionysian elements in ancient Greek culture. He did this to the scorn of old-fashioned classicists who could only recognize in the early Greek way of life those Apollonian qualities of light, beauty, order, and lawful symmetry.

Though interested initially in Schopenhauer's philosophy of detachment and the unconscious side of human nature, Nietzsche came to realize that one should *engage actively in life* in the manner of an ancient Greek hero (Odysseus, for example) rather than removing oneself from life in the manner of an ascetic monk. Nietzsche's mature teachings revolve around the ineluctable need to participate in life, due to our own situated-ness within it, despite the ironic fact that Nietzsche's own frail physical health dampened his personal attempts at active engagement in the everyday world. At one point as a young man, Nietzsche tried to volunteer as an ambulance assistant in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, but his weak health forced him to return to the university to teach. When he was 35 years old, in bad shape, he quit his post as university professor and traveled throughout Switzerland, Italy, and Germany, trying to regain his health. In the meantime he penned several brilliant philosophical works, including *The Genealogy of Morals, Beyond Good and Evil, Twilight of the Idols,* and his masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, an epic allegory that details the coming of the powerful personality-type of the future, the "Superman" or *Übermensch*. The "Superman" (sometimes also translated as "Overman") is the paradigm of a creative individual who summons the full instinctual resources of his or her personality for purposes of flourishing and self-enhancement, thereby recognizing both the rational and irrational aspects of the self.

Nietzsche disagreed sharply, then, with the philosophy of Schopenhauer on one special point, and this point helped to shape Nietzsche's entire philosophy. Even though life and human nature involve irrational forces as well as rational ones, and even though we sometimes encounter more obsta-

cles than rewards, we should refrain from saying "No" to Life. Rather, we should affirm our existence, since this is the only existence that we have no matter how painful it may be. Life is a gift, better than no life at all, and we have infinite possibilities of creating our lives in new and different ways. Nietzsche recognizes human nature as constantly fluctuating and self-diversifying, like Nature itself. In this sense, Nietzsche echoes the ancient pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who said that the World is based on the principle of dynamic change. But unlike Schopenhauer, Nietzsche views the Flux of Life as occasioning creative challenges and opportunities rather than disappointments and sources of despair.

So according to Nietzsche, human nature is not fixed or constant. Our existence is therefore constituted through changing perspectives, each perspective framed by horizons of creative possibility. We have the ability to view our lives as artworks-in-progress, as it were, making of our lives what we will, like artists before a half-painted canvas, given the conditions handed to us by Fate. The implicit principle here is one of "finite freedom," of a liberty circumscribed by certain boundaries. This is why Nietzsche emphasizes the *creative power* of the individual. With concentrated willpower, one can choose to transform negative energy into positive achievements in his or her pursuit of individualized self-enhancement. As Nietzsche has famously said: "What does not kill me makes me stronger."[11] Each person addresses her obstacles and challenges in her own personal, creative way. Barriers in life present occasions for self-overcoming. (Sigmund Freud, borrowing from or at least echoing the ideas of Nietzsche, later emphasized this transformation of instinctual energies in terms of sublimation, the counterpart of psychological repression.)

Nietzsche's conception of nihilism in general and his important distinction between two types of nihilism center, in fact, upon the fundamental difference between those who possess a self-affirming, life-enhancing attitude and those, like the Schopenhauerian ascetic, who do not.

Nietzsche's deep concern with problems of human existence, particularly those involving the decline and loss of traditional values, was undoubtedly rooted in his early studies of ancient Greek culture—*and*, of course, in his own personal experiences and sensitivities. He was especially interested in the inherent tension between the optimistic and pessimistic sensibilities of the ancient Greeks. And his critical reaction to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy merged with his initial interest in the issue of nihilism. After all, as Nietzsche declares in his later unpublished writings: "Pessimism ... [is] a preliminary form of nihilism."[12] And further: "The logic of pessimism down to ultimate nihilism: what is at work in it? The idea of valuelessness, meaninglessness ..."[13]

In a fragment at the very beginning of Book One ("European Nihilism") in the volume *The Will to Power* (the posthumously edited collection of his previously unpublished writings), Nietzsche defines nihilism as follows: "What does nihilism mean?—*That the highest values devaluate themselves.* The aim is missing; 'Why?' finds no answer."[14] He also tells us in another fragment from a later book of that same collection:

> 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.[15]

Nietzsche views the nihilist as one who rejects "the world as it is" but who also renounces those fixed values (ideals or norms) that falsify the fluctuating character of life. Such a person relinquishes faith in fixed ideals and surrenders the traditional pursuit of an overall meaning and purpose in life, one that lies somehow "behind" or "beyond" the veil of surface-level appearances. Admittedly, not all forms of nihilism are as extreme. For example, as indicated earlier, the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, in his novel *Fathers and Sons*, offers an alternative definition of the nihilist, portraying such an individual as a devoted skeptic but not necessarily as an outright nay-sayer. As Turgenev puts its: "[A] nihilist is a man who ... looks at everything critically ... who does not take any principle for granted, however much that principle may be revered."[16]

However, one might well view Nietzsche's more extreme view of the nihilist as the radical consequence of a *skepticism* that has become compulsive and even "pathological."[17] Once we begin to question the underlying or over-arching structures of our personal and collective existence, even if they are indeed illusory, we may well initiate the undermining of the very threads that seem to hold our lives together. The "pathological" skeptic is one who emphasizes the transient nature of the experienced world to such a degree that basic beliefs that structure his or her everyday existence become undermined. Obsessive skepticism, in putting these fundamental beliefs in question, may result in moral ambiguity, psychological instability, existential anxiety, spiritual vacancy, and social alienation. As Nietzsche tells us in his unpublished fragment "Toward an Outline":

> Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. "Everything lacks meaning."[18]

In sum, transcendent or otherworldly ideals (God, Plato's Idea of the Good, etc.) have led humans to de-value this-world of the "here and now."

Once we discover that these ideals are false, illusory, or empty of meaning, we are left with *absolutely nothing* of value in our lives.

Nietzsche's teachings grow out of his concern with the dangers *and* opportunities of nihilism, as we can also see from a "prophetic" fragment that can be found in the Preface to Book One of *The Will to Power*:

> What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism.* This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here ... For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.[19]

Despite the pessimistic tone of this passage concerning the moral and cultural decline of Europe, it is clear that Nietzsche intends to stress the dangers of nihilism in the hope that at least *some select* individuals may find the strength to *rise above* these dangers. In the fragment following this one, Nietzsche describes himself as "the perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself."[20] Unless we assume that Nietzsche is writing from some fictional point of view, he claims here to have suffered and (allegedly) transcended a "collapse" of values, through his own personal experience and reflection. This is the type of collapse that constitutes nihilism on both the individual *and* collective (or cultural) level. And he is warning us that *we,* his future readers, may suffer the same collapse if we reflect deeply enough on our current values and ideals, and so we should seek to overcome the specter of this moral and spiritual abyss. Nietzsche does not pretend, however, that *everyone* will be psychologically strong enough to accomplish this overcoming successfully.

Nietzsche's deep concern with the dangers of nihilism is evident from other fragments that pertain to the topic in the first part (Book One: "European Nihilism") of *The Will to Power.* Here he argues (though in fragmented and chiefly aphoristic fashion) that much of European culture in the modern age is rooted in Christianity and in ancient Greek rationalism (or "Platonism," leading to the reign of rationalism through the rise of science during the Age of Enlightenment). Modern European culture has erected illusory ideals (particularly those ideals of religion and traditional morality) that mistakenly measure life in terms of fixed, absolute, universal, and unconditional standards. Again, such standards or ideals deny the dynamic and situated character of human existence, and so make this existence "untenable" and even "disgusting." And when these dogmatic and idealistic "measures" of human life are finally seen for what they are (i.e., as being

illusory or mistaken) and have been rejected, we are left with *nothing whatsoever* in the attempt to value our own lives and selves.

Nihilism, then, is born of *indignation* toward the loss of these ideals (God, the idea of intrinsic or universal goodness, etc.), resulting in even deeper indignation toward that which is non-ideal (i.e., the earthly world and human existence itself). We thereby lose our very sense of *dignity*, degraded by false ideals and then by a meager conception of our very own "being." Nietzsche's own words speak best here, even in translation. For example:

> *Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes....[21]
>
> Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached, *first*, when we have sought a "meaning" in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long *waste* of strength, the agony of the "in vain," insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure—being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had *deceived* oneself all too long.... [N]ow one realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*.... [U]nderneath all becoming there is no grand unity in which the individual could immerse himself completely as in an element of supreme value....
>
> What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of "aim," the concept of "unity," or the concept of "truth."[22]
>
> Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*.[23]
>
> The most universal sign of the modern age: man has lost *dignity* in his own eyes to an incredible extent.[24]
>
> Every purely moral value system (that of Buddhism, for example) ends in nihilism: this to be expected in Europe.[25]
>
> The nihilistic question "for what?" is rooted in the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given, demanded *from outside*—by some *superhuman authority*.[26]

Ideals and idols that transcend our present world rob us of a proper appreciation of our own worldly existence, including our own dignity or moral worth as human beings. Nihilism results when those ideals and idols are shattered, leaving us with nothing of value in this world, our *only* world, according to Nietzsche. Yet despite the associated dangers of moral and spiritual decline, nihilism is *necessary*, it would appear. Here we arrive at the crux of his overall teaching. Nihilism *occasions* the very drive toward the type of self-affirming individuality that Nietzsche so dearly prized. In general terms, the positive can only grow out of a recognition of the negative. As Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* teaches us through horrifying tragedy,

truth or wisdom is discovered in many cases only in suffering. In the final fragment of the above-mentioned Preface, Nietzsche speaks of

> a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism — but presupposes it, logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it. For why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals— because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what values these "values" really had.— We require, sometime, *new values.*[27]

And so nihilism can also be viewed in a positive manner as the necessary occasion for the emergence of a new type of individuality, on the personal level, or a new form of value system and even "humanity," on the collective level. Old values that have become stagnant and thus life-negating must be eliminated or allowed to fade away (Nietzsche's "twilight of the idols") in order to give rise to newly created values that express our currently situated drives and desires, ones that vitalize rather than fossilize. Nietzsche calls this transformation a "trans-valuation" of values.

So while nihilism in general expresses a basic loss of conviction in conventional and traditional values, Nietzsche does make a clear distinction between negative and positive conceptions of nihilism. And this distinction is crucial for our overall exploration in the following chapters. He tells us that passive or negative ("incomplete," "pathological") nihilism is a rejection of seemingly fixed values and institutions without the spiritedness that allows one to become a creative individual. Passive nihilism is an existential attitude or orientation that is born of resentment and indignation toward the value of life itself. On the other hand, active or positive ("complete," "healthy") nihilism is the process of becoming a creative individual while rising above mere resentment and life-negation, thereby acquiring the principle of life-affirmation in the face of existential and spiritual crisis.[28] Nietzsche associates active nihilism with the ascent of the individual to a form of "master-morality," an existential attitude that is embodied in its most superlative sense by his ideal personality-type of the *Übermensch* or "Superman." As he tells us in a further fragment from of his unpublished writings:

> Nihilism. It is *ambiguous*:
> Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism.
> Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism.[29]

In the fragment following this one, Nietzsche tells us that nihilism in its active form can be "a sign of strength" in that "the spirit may have grown so strong that previous goals ('convictions,' articles of faith) have become

incommensurate...." He then refers to "passive" nihilism as "the weary nihilism that no longer attacks...."[30] ("Attack" may be interpreted here as an attempt of the will to eliminate those "old" values that are stagnant and no longer vitalizing or life-affirming.) A later fragment in *The Will to Power* articulates the general ambiguity or dual meaning at play here: "Nihilism as a normal phenomenon can be a symptom of increasing *strength* or of increasing *weakness*...."[31]

And so, when we speak of nihilism, we should be careful (following Nietzsche) and recognize whether we are speaking of nihilism *in general* or of a *particular form* of nihilism (i.e., active or passive). But to understand these forms of nihilism more clearly, we should gain a broader view of Nietzsche's teachings.

Life is complex and always changing, according to Nietzsche, and we are not all born with the same potential. Nietzsche eschews the notion of equality and stresses the falsity of any egalitarian theory. Each of us is bestowed with very individualized gifts. So we must make do with the capacities that we possess and seek as much as possible to rise above the crowd with those talents that Nature has bestowed upon us. Nietzsche's philosophy of the human individual, as it developed over the course of his writings, stressed the inherent *fated-ness* as well as the innate *freedom* of our existence. There is an inherent and necessary tension at play here. We are not creatures of infinite power and aptitude, and yet we have the creative capacity to transcend *particular* limitations within those inescapable conditions that have been established by Nature. We are not infallible gods, as the ancient Greeks had already discovered through the tragic consequences of hubris, and yet we can always seek heroically to transcend the boundaries of our *current situation* and *conventional state of humanity*.

One must be a creative individual first and foremost by being willing to rise above traditions and conventions, according to Nietzsche, since conforming to the masses is a sign of mediocrity. Creative individuality (or *active* nihilism) is one's rejection of the primacy of fixed, conventional, traditional values and a subsequent turn to the task of creating of one's own *individual* values. These latter values grow out of, as well as help to mirror, our situated role within the fluctuating "stream" of Life itself. One must create one's life as one proceeds, gaining self-knowledge by expanding one's horizons and experiencing different perspectives. Otherwise, one would simply be "mass-minded," choosing to act so as merely to meet the expectations of others, thereby conducting life as if one were part of a herd of lazy, "motley" cattle.[32] When the situation demands it, we must rise above conventional rules and standards. In short, one must be a *hero* in one's own everyday existence. An individual should live by "seizing the day," since this

life is all that we have and the clock is ticking. One would only waste time if he or she were to sit around, for example, and dream of a distant future that is not here yet or reflect remorsefully upon an unchangeable past that is no longer there. Each of us is always *in the moment*, and one can never escape the moment that is at hand, so one should make the best of it, Nietzsche teaches us. Being heroic means being actively engaged in expressing one's creative instincts. Nietzsche refers to this underlying creative and instinctual energy as "the Will to Power," which is really nothing other than a drive toward life-affirmation and self-enhancement.

It is Nietzsche's thesis that the Judeo-Christian tradition, along with *most* forms of philosophical rationalism, had become enraptured by such deadening abstractions as unconditional values, universal ideas, and absolute laws. He teaches that these context-free, collectivistic ideas or values are simply expressions of weak, mass-minded personalities who, out of a "slavish" attitude of *resentment*, try to suppress those heroic personalities who are able to rise above conventional morality. For previous thinkers like Plato and Augustine and Kant, the criteria of universality and unconditionality are essential characteristics of the Truth. For Nietzsche, the establishment of these criteria is a symptom of ignorance concerning the reality of human individuality and finitude. That which is good and true for *everyone*, at all times and in all situations, is hardly good or true *at all*. Nature itself, according to Nietzsche, manifests itself diversely in terms of unique instances. The "common good," as he tells us, is merely *common* in the sense of mediocrity. Christianity ("Platonism for the people") intensifies this problem of "slave-mentality," according to Nietzsche, since it converts self-defeating virtues like humility and altruism into universal, unconditional values.

As his teachings inform us, mainstream or bourgeois society's typical *resentment* toward the heroic personality of individualized genius (the execution of Socrates and crucifixion of Christ come readily to mind) is an expression of a group-minded "slave-morality" that is bent upon the task of universalizing its weak and vengeful spiritedness. Society's collective "will to truth" is a will toward conviction in some illusory and dogmatic ideal (e.g., God as a transcendent being) that is universal as well as unconditional, an ideal that ultimately reduces everyone to the same standards and conceptions. This desire to reduce and to conform may, however, lead not merely to mass-minded mediocrity, but also to certain individuals' indignant rejection of *all* values, including the value of life itself. Nietzsche calls this outright life-negating rejection "*passive* nihilism." So while the group-oriented and tradition-shaped "slave" represents the weakest form of personality who accepts the burdens of society and its externally imposed duties, the passive

nihilist represents the individual who is courageous enough to break out of the chains and duties of bourgeois conventionality. But the passive nihilist goes nowhere in his or her "negative freedom," turning eventually to life-negation and self-denial, since he or she lacks the self-knowledge and creativity that is required to become an *active* nihilist and "master." Freedom is gained but ultimately squandered by the passive nihilist.

At the beginning of Nietzsche's literary and philosophical masterwork, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he likens the slave to a burden-bearing camel, the passive nihilist to a freedom-loving lion, and the master or active nihilist to a creative and innocent child. As this allegory ("On the Three Metamorphoses") tells us:

> All these most difficult things the spirit that would bear much takes upon itself: like the camel that, burdened, speeds into the desert, thus the spirit speeds into its desert.
>
> In the loneliest desert, however, the second metamorphosis occurs: here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert. Here he seeks out his last master: he wants to fight him and his last god; for ultimate victory he wants to fight with the great dragon.
>
> Who is the great dragon whom the spirit will no longer call lord and god? "Thou shalt" is the name of the great dragon. But the spirit of the lion says, "I will." ...
>
> To create new values—that even the lion cannot do; but the creation of freedom for oneself for new creation—that is within the power of the lion....
>
> But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do? Why must the preying lion become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes." ... [H]e who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world.[33]

Nietzsche's distinctions among the slave (camel), the passive nihilist (lion), and the active nihilist or master (child) did not emerge purely through reflection upon the stages of his own personal development. These distinctions, in fact, resulted from his survey of the history of Western philosophy and religion. By tracing in speculative fashion the development of the traditional conceptions of "good" and "evil," Nietzsche was able to explain how traditional morality first emerged in the social division between those with self-mastery ("masters") and those who cannot attain it ("slaves"). This approach, which consists of a method of "tracing back" into the history of morality to explain the origins of our everyday ethical concepts, may be categorized as a "*genealogical*" approach to morality (as the title of Nietzsche's main work on ethics, *A Geneaology of Morals*, shows us). The genealogical method of moral inquiry is a way of explaining moral ideas and distinctions through a speculative "re-enactment" of their sociological and historical beginning points.

In ancient societies, according to Nietzsche (he was no doubt thinking typically of the early Greeks), there were masters and there were slaves, in the form of rulers and the ruled. The masters possessed strong personalities and expressed creative power as heroic individuals who commanded those "below" them. The slaves were those who were weak and vulnerable and submissive, subject to the masters' bidding. The masters, exercising their freedom and psychological energy, deemed things to be "*good*" or "*bad*" according to their own personal standards of excellence and their abundance of personal power. The slaves, feeling resentment toward the masters, labeled their own virtues and actions as "*good*" and the actions of their masters as "*evil.*" In a sense, the slaves ultimately based their morality on *utilitarian* principles, according to Nietzsche, since their standards were typically founded upon the desire for the best possible consequences for themselves and thus for the masses (i.e., the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number").

Through the rise of Christianity, the European Enlightenment, and the nation-state, the modern age became more and more defined by a collectivist slave-morality. As Nietzsche points out, there are indeed only two escape routes for those individuals who will not conform blindly to some abstract "common good" that levels everything that was formerly unique and inspiring to mere averageness. These individuals can either rise above the crowd as creators of their own values (active nihilists) or else sink into the dark and life-negating abyss of passive nihilism.