

What is nihilism according to Nietzsche? What are the sources of nihilism according to Nietzsche? How does he propose to overcome nihilism with regards to love? Do you think his proposal succeeds in overcoming nihilism or not? Why?

A1809024
Phil_3018: Existentialism
Essay 1

What is nihilism according to Nietzsche? What are the sources of nihilism according to Nietzsche? How does he propose to overcome nihilism with regards to love? Do you think his proposal succeeds in overcoming nihilism or not? Why?

Nihilism is one of the main themes in Nietzsche's philosophy. It exposes the meaninglessness of fundamental structures within human existence, such as purpose, desires, and morality. Nietzsche's reflections on the problem of nihilism are complex. His conception of its nature and sources are elusive. The purpose of this essay is to explicate Nietzsche's conception of nihilism and investigate the sources of nihilism suggested by him. Moreover, it aims to explore Nietzsche's proposal to overcome nihilism by reevaluating one's values with regards to love. I will show Nietzsche's proposal only successfully overcomes one source of nihilism. Firstly, using Schiemann's (2016) overview of the different types of nihilism, I will show the commonalities between nihilism's different connotations and contrast this with Nietzsche's view. I will suggest that his philosophy best refers to an existential nihilism, which concerns the meaninglessness of *all* values. Secondly, I will identify two sources of nihilism within Nietzsche's work, termed *disorientation*, and *despair*. Furthermore, I will show that each of these sources follow a different logical path to reach the conclusion that all values are meaningless. Lastly, I will express Nietzsche's proposal to overcome nihilism by presenting his reevaluation of selfless love into a gift-giving/selfish love. I conclude by showing that Nietzsche's proposal to reevaluate values successfully overcomes nihilism sourced from despair. However, it fails to adequately respond to nihilism sourced from disorientation. I argue that this failure results from his subjectivist position which entails illogical justifications.

1. Nietzsche and Conceptions of Nihilism

Nihilism is the conclusion that values are meaningless (Reginster, 2006). Some have characterised that this conclusion motivates a rejection of values and their transcending structure (Deleuze, 1983; Gemes, 2022; Schiemann, 2016). However, nihilism's conclusion may not necessitate a rejection of values (see Appendix A). Generally, the concerned values involve meaning, morality, and truth. Nihilism asserts that these values are either unrealisable or missing an objective justification. There have been different connotations of nihilism within the widespread discourse that emphasise different structures. For overview, Schiemann (2016) classifies these connotations into types of nihilism: *political*, *moral*, *existential*, *cosmic*, *epistemic*, and *metaphysical*. In Schiemann's (2016) overview, the features of *epistemic*, *cosmic*, and *metaphysical* nihilism may reflect a broader understanding of nihilism as a doctrine of denial or rejection. However, the first three types of nihilism commonly make claims about the realisability of these values, and their objective foundation.

Firstly, *political*¹ and *moral*² nihilism reject the structures and views within their specified domain. The former rejects socio-cultural modes of understanding that are used to support any given political position. The latter rejects all moral positions and claims by denying the existence of their objective ground.³ Expressly, *moral* nihilism views that one's moral values are not inherently right or wrong, as there is no objective foundation on which to judge them. *Political* nihilism views that all socio-political goals, institutions, and positions are unattainable or aimless. *Existential* nihilism asserts that the meaningfulness of *all* structures in life are devoid. It emphasises the insignificance and purposelessness of existence by appealing to a lack of objective foundation for all values and their potential

¹ This form of political nihilism is characterised by Strauss and Janssens (1999), who argued that political reflection and contemporary liberalism leads to a form of political relativism. Subsequently, this political relativism rejects an objective foundation of political structures and goals.

² An example of moral nihilism was developed by Mackie (1977). This view, termed an 'Error Theory', denies that objective moral properties or values exist in the world.

³ If an objective foundation for morality is rejected, moral claims may still be justified on subjective grounds. However, moral nihilism further rejects relativism on the basis that a subjective construction of morality is artificial (Mackie, 1977). Furthermore, if moral nihilism is the rejection of all moral positions, this type of nihilism cannot be a moral position itself. Cooper (2015) responds to moral nihilism by explicating that moral nihilism is a morality, and therefore it rejects itself.

unrealizability (see Section 2). Importantly, ‘structures’ in this form of nihilism, extends to *all* moral/ethical values, such as love, purpose, justice, meaning, equality, and desires.⁴ In summary, these types of nihilism classified by Schiemann (2016), assert that the structures within their domains are meaningless, due to the aimlessness and unrealizability of their values.

“Nihilism: the aim is lacking: ‘why?’ finds no answer. What does nihilism mean? – that the highest values devalue themselves.” (WP 2).

Nietzsche’s contemplation of nihilism is complex, as some of his writing cannot be easily classified into one of Schiemann’s (2016) types of nihilism. What nihilism means for Nietzsche depends upon the value structures he refers to. In WP 2 above, the “highest values” may refer to the primary values which justify pursuing one’s lower values, which provide the reasons for our goals and actions. For example, a lower value to keep one’s dog healthy motivates a daily dog walk to the park. This lower value, health, is justified by a higher value, love. Arguably, Nietzsche’s values refer generally to the overarching structures that justify the meaningfulness of existence. Specifically, these structures give reason/purpose for goals, action, suffering, and desires. Regularly within Nietzsche’s writing, these values refer to a moral and existential nihilism. For instance, within GS 343, Nietzsche states “European Morality” as an example of a structure that will be devaluated. Importantly, his consideration of nihilism extends to *all* values, concerning more than one’s personal moral structures. He asserts in GS 301 that “Whatever has value in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature - nature is always value-less...”. Nietzsche is denoting *all* values when he writes “Whatever has value” and refers to “nature” as valueless.⁵ The following discussion will regard Nietzsche’s consideration of existential nihilism concerning the metaphysics and realisability of values.

2. The Source of Nietzsche’s Nihilism

Nietzsche identified two sources of nihilism in what he calls the ‘death of God’ (GS, 125). The interpretations of the ‘death of God’ may be a metaphysical claim about values (Section 2.1) and a claim about the realisability of values in *this* world (Section 2.2). From these interpretations, the two sources of nihilism identified in Nietzsche’s work have been termed *disorientation* and *despair* (Reginster, 2006). Each of these sources follow a different logical path to reach the conclusion of nihilism, that all values are meaningless.

2.1. Disorientation

Nietzsche’s nihilism, interpreted as disorientation, makes a metaphysical claim about the foundations for our values. Disorientation as a source of nihilism rests upon the assumption that the justification of our values depends on their objective standing. Essentially, the objective foundation for values must be independent from their subjective standing. Reginster (2006) terms this assumption ‘normative objectivism’. If God represents the objective justification for values, the death represents the decline of one’s belief in an objective foundation for these values. Without a justification, such as a theological/divine ground (God)⁶, one’s values are groundless. Therefore, normative objectivism and the death of God necessarily entail nihilistic disorientation. This reasoning is illustrated below.

⁴ Similarly, to *existential* nihilism, *cosmic* nihilism claims that an objective ground for meaning, or value is lacking, providing no foundation for the significance of human values. *Cosmic* nihilism differs from *existential* nihilism in its emphasis on the unintelligibility of reality, the vastness of the universe, and nature’s indifference to human existence.

⁵ Evidence that Nietzsche is referring to an existential form of nihilism can also be seen in Nietzsche’s WP 36, “The philosophical nihilist is convinced that *all* that happens is meaningless...” (emphasis added).

⁶ Importantly, the death of God extends metaphorically beyond theological justifications to any absolute objective justification of values. For example, using the theory of evolution to justify higher values, such as survival and health. The nihilistic response to this appeal would demonstrate that embracing an evolutionary account implies that values are the product of random physical processors. Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically meaningful about them.

Premise 1: **God is dead** (the objective foundation for values has declined)

Premise 2: **Normative objectivism** (objective grounds are required for the justification of values)

Conclusion: **Values are meaningless/unjustified** (nihilistic disorientation)

Nietzsche's consideration of nihilism is consistent with this argument from disorientation. Firstly, in relation to **premise 1**, he tries to discredit the belief in God (implying that the objective foundation for values is not a belief that should be taken seriously). Nietzsche argues that God is dead due to the origin and uselessness of the belief in God. He states that what has produced the belief is "...passion, error, and self-deception; the very worst methods of knowledge, not the best..." (HH I 9). Additionally, in WP 12 he claims that the belief in God is "fabricated solely from psychological needs". For Nietzsche, the origins of the belief are not reasonable epistemic grounds for taking it seriously, and therefore Nietzsche reasons that "God has become unbelievable" (GS 343).⁷ Furthermore, God is dead because the belief is useless, "we can do absolutely nothing with it" (HH I 9).⁸ Distinctly, Nietzsche's reasoning in HH I 9 concerns what we can know about God, and he asserts that we cannot know anything about him or his will.⁹ Therefore, Nietzsche discredits God, "...the belief in the Christian god has become unworthy of belief" (GS 346) and believes that he "...remains dead! And we have killed him!" (GS 125).

Secondly, in relation to **premise 2**, his response to the death of God is consistent with normative objectivism. "Nothing is true, all is permitted!" (Z, IV 9). "We have created the world that possesses values! [...] Everything is false! Everything is permitted!" (WP 602). He declares that if God is dead, and if values are a subjective creation, everything is permitted because nothing has value. This implies that value is dependent on objective justification.

In relation to the **conclusion** from these premises, nihilistic disorientation is expressed by Nietzsche in WP 2, which asserts that when the aim (objective foundation) is lacking, 'why?' finds no answer. Additionally, WP 7 suggests that when the subjective origin of values is clear, everything loses justification, "Now that the shabby origin of these values is becoming clear, the universe seems to have lost value, seems 'meaningless.'" Lastly, the consistency between Nietzsche's works and nihilistic disorientation is characterised by the disorientation conveyed by *the madman*:

"What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?" (GS 125).

2.2. Despair

Nietzsche's nihilism, interpreted as despair, makes a claim about the realisability of values in *this* world.¹⁰ Nihilistic despair concerns our ability to realise/achieve/implement our highest values in *this* life. Unlike nihilistic disorientation, this interpretation does not make a metaphysical claim about the objective grounding of values. In this case, nihilism results from the conviction that our values cannot be realised if the requirements to realise those value are unattainable. For example, if the value of justice requires that all people receive that which they deserve, and it is not possible that all people receive what they deserve, the value is unrealisable. Furthermore, the death of God within nihilism as despair

⁷ The scientific method and deductive reasoning would likely be accepted as more reasonable epistemic grounds for the belief. For Nietzsche, these methods do not provide adequate evidence for the belief in God (objective ground for value).

⁸ This discreditation is analogous to the method used by Russell (1952) in his teapot thought experiment. Russell (1952) claims that there is a teapot floating in space that is too small to be seen with a telescope. This thought emphasises that the burden of proof lies upon the person making the unfalsifiable claim. Without sufficient proof, holding the belief is useless.

⁹ If there was an objective ground, we could not know anything about it, therefore we would not know what values may have justification.

¹⁰ Reginster (2006) calls this interpretation despair, since despair is the belief that what is most important to us is unattainable.

may be interpreted as the death of a divine world, whereby all values will be realised eternally. Nietzsche rejects the existence of a divine world because it is “fabricated solely from psychological needs” (WP 12), and “we can do absolutely nothing with it” (HH I 9). Consequently, he claims that our highest values are not realised in this world, and the belief that they may be realised in a divine world should not be taken seriously.

“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” (WP 585).

For Nietzsche, the world as it should be, according to our highest values, does not exist. He is asserting that the highest values are not realised in this world. Conversely, in GS 346, he explicates the world that *does* exist, emphasising the absence of rationality and justice in this world.

“We have become cold, hard, and tough in the realization that the way of this world is anything but divine; even by human standards it is not rational, merciful or just. We know it well, the world in which we live is ungodly, immoral, inhuman” (GS 346).

Nietzsche’s nihilism as despair suggests that there is no point in trying to attain the unattainable. The pursuit of unattainable values is meaningless. He does not believe that a truly just world whereby our highest values, such as love, truth, wellbeing, and purpose, can be attained. This despair does *not* imply that values are valueless, it affirms that pursuing them is meaningless. This meaninglessness of existence is a consequence of the pointlessness of trying to attain the unattainable. For Nietzsche, if existence does not realise the highest values, and belief in a divine world of attainment should not be taken seriously, “it would be better if the world did not exist” (WP 701).

3. Overcoming Nihilism

3.1. Revaluating Love

Nietzsche offers a solution to nihilism through his attempt to reevaluate values into structures that can be realised in this world. His response confronts an underlying premise within nihilism as despair, namely, that our highest values cannot be realized in this world. Nietzsche concedes that all values are subjective, allowing them to be evaluated and redefined. This is expressed in GS 301:

“But a delusion remains his constant companion: he thinks himself placed as spectator and listener before the great visual and acoustic play that is life; he calls his nature contemplative and thereby overlooks the fact that he is also the actual poet and ongoing author of life...” (GS 301).

Through a “revaluation of all values” (WP 1059), there can potentially be a future world where our highest values may be realised. This would allow for a meaningful existence in a future world. To exemplify this, Nietzsche examines the value of love. Specifically, Nietzsche questions the ‘Christian’ form of love, which is described as a selfless love. “You crowd around your neighbour and have fine words for it.” (Z I 16). To realise the value of love, one must give up everything for the beloved’s life. Nietzsche identifies a problem with this form of love. One cannot love and be loved, as love requires giving up oneself for the other. If lover X and Y give up everything for each other’s life projects, the life projects they are committing to are *their own* life projects. It is a contradiction to give up one’s life for a life that has been given up for the sake of the other. Nietzsche asserts that one must “sit firmly upon *oneself*...”, and the value of love must be reevaluated “... otherwise one is simply *incapable* of loving” (EH III 5).

To realise the value of love between individuals, Nietzsche suggests that the traditional concept of selfless love should be reevaluated as a selfish/gift-giving love. “You force all things to and into yourself that they may flow back out of your well and the gifts of your love. Verily, such a gift-giving love must

approach all values as a robber; but whole and holy I call this selfishness.” (Z I 22). He is supporting that to love another, one must first force all things, such as energy, time, and commitment, into oneself to give love. Receiving love is only possible if one first loves oneself. He explains in Z I 16, that one can only realise love if they have a world to give away, “the gifts of your love”, or the love of oneself. “I teach you the friend in whom the world stands completed, a bowl of goodness –the creating friend who always has a completed world to give away.” (Z I 16). Loving oneself creates subjective properties, which Nietzsche calls “gifts”, that another can love. Subsequently, one can then love the “gifts” of another without giving up their own “gifts”, and the value can be realised in this world. By revaluating love to a selfish/gift-giving love, Nietzsche thus overcomes the nihilistic despair associated with unrealisable selfless love.

3.2. Does the Revaluation of Values Overcome Nihilism?

Nietzsche’s revaluation of values tries to overcome nihilism. However, one must have an adequate response to both sources of nihilism, as each source provides an independent argument for nihilism. Nietzsche’s revaluation of love does not offer a response to nihilistic disorientation. Therefore, independently, Nietzsche’s revaluation is not adequate to overcome nihilism. His attempt to overcome nihilism appeals to subjectivism “Only we have created the world that concerns human beings!” (GS 301). This subjectivist position, whereby all values become relative, allows him to reevaluate his values and overcome nihilistic despair. Although values are subsequently realisable for Nietzsche, it entails that the truth of those values are relative to the beholder. Nonetheless, the problem remains as to which realisable values *should* be held. Which values are justified and thus meaningful?

Values require sufficient reasons as to why they should be held, otherwise any value that may be realisable is justified. If subjective justifications are satisfactory, different people can reasonably hold contradictory values, and the truth of value claims are relative. In response to Nietzsche’s subjectivist resolution to nihilism, the newly refined and realisable values *still* lack an adequate justification. This is because subjective reasons will never provide a grounding justification.

Arguably, objective normativism is required for our values to be rationally justified. When asked ‘why should you love your dog?’, without an objective ground, you will be unable to find an answer that does not appeal to circular reasoning or an infinite regress. For example, you love your dog because he loves you, he loves you because you feed him, you feed him because you have a duty to keep him healthy, your duty is justified by your love for him. There is nothing to fundamentally justify the answer, therefore, the lower values will illogically circulate or infinitely regress. The primary justification for values is not persuasive if the reason is circular or ad infinitum. Therefore, the subjectivist response is inadequate, as the aim will be unable to find a persuasive justification. For the subjectivist, the aim is *still* lacking “... ‘why?’ finds no answer” (WP 2). Consequently, Nietzsche’s subjectivist revaluation of values cannot provide rational justifications to overcome nihilism as disorientation. Thus, if no objective ground is identified and rational justification is absent, values are meaningless.

In conclusion, Nietzsche’s nihilism can be interpreted as a claim about the objective justifications for one’s values, and the realisability of one’s values in this world. These two independent sources for nihilism, disorientation, and despair, must both be undermined to overcome nihilism. Nietzsche’s subjectivist position allows him to reevaluate values. This successfully allows values to be realised in this world, as exemplified within his revaluation of love. One can reevaluate and redefine all values so as they can be necessarily realisable in this world. However, this proposal does not provide an adequate response to nihilistic disorientation. A subjectivist position cannot provide a rational justification as to which values *should* be held. This is because subjective justifications will circulate or infinitely regress. In summary, Nietzsche successfully overcomes nihilistic despair, but fails to adequately account for the problem of nihilistic disorientation.

Abbreviations

GS = (1974) *The Gay Science*
 WP = (1968) *The Will to Power*
 HH = (1996) *Human All Too Human*
 Z = (2006) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
 EH = (2007) *Ecce Homo*
 BGE = (1998) *Beyond Good and Evil*
 GM = (1998) *The Genealogy of Morality*

Word count: 2320

References

- Cooper, N. (2015). *Moral Nihilism*. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 74(1), 75-90.
- Deleuze G. (1983). *Nietzsche and philosophy*. Columbia University Press
- Gemes, K. (2022). 16C1 *Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Paradox of Affirmation*. In D. Came (Ed.), *Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin,
- Nietzsche, F. W., Kaufmann, W., & Hollingdale, R. J. (1968). *The will to power*. (WP) Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844-1900. (1974). *The gay science; (GS) with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*. New York: Vintage Books
- Nietzsche F. W. & Hollingdale R. J. (1996). *Human all too human*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1998). *Beyond good and evil*. Dover Publications.
- Nietzsche, F. (1998). *On the genealogy of morality* (M. Clark & A. J. Swensen, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
- Nietzsche, F. W. 1844-1900. (2006). *Thus spoke Zarathustra: a book for all and none*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Nietzsche F. W. & Large D. (2007). *Ecce homo: how to become what you are*. Oxford University Press.
- Reginster, B. (2006). *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Harvard University Press.
- Russell, B. (1952) *Is There a God*, in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Volume 11: Last Philosophical Testament, 1943-68, ed.
- Schiemann, G. (2016). *The Objectivity of Nihilism*. *Divinatio. Studia Culturologica*, 41(Autumn-winter 2015), 7-29.
- Strauss, L., Janssens, D. (1999). *German Nihilism*. *Interpretation*, 26 (3):353-378.

Appendix A

Does Nihilism Demand that we Reject Values?

The overviews of nihilism portrayed by Deleuze (1983), Gemes (2022), and Schiemann (2016) support that its conclusion, that all values are meaningless, may motivate the rejection of all values. Notably, an underlying condition may be acting between the conclusion and the assertion that values must be rejected. This condition is that one cannot hold unjustified/meaningless values. Presumably, one cannot hold such values because it would be unreasonable/irrational. I will term the line of reasoning portrayed by Deleuze (1983), Gemes (2022), and Schiemann (2016), *rational rejection*. The argument is expressed below:

- Premise 1:** All values are meaningless (nihilism)
- Premise 2:** It is irrational to hold meaningless values
- Premise 3:** Therefore, one must reject meaningless values
- Conclusion:** Nihilism motivates a rejection of all values

Rational rejection is flawed, as rationality may be considered a value. If the nihilist asks “why?” they should act rationally, the question “finds no answer” (WP 2). If premise 1 and 3 are true, premise 2 must be rejected. This is because rationality is a value. If all values are meaningless (premise 1), and meaningless values must be rejected (premise 3), rationality must be rejected (premise 2). However, premise 3 depends upon premise 2, therefore, the argument is contradictory. Accordingly, the response to nihilism should be indifference, as rational rejection is undermined by this contradiction.