

A History of Nihilism as a Reflection on Western Values since the 19th Century

by

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## Abstract

The object of this text is to discuss aspects of the intellectual history of the Western civilization that reflects the doctrine of nihilism and how the precept is manifest in the culture of postmodern twenty-first century society. The pith of the essay is to conclude that, **nihilism, as an intellectual supposition, hinges on the philosophies of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.** Nihilism is a worthy discussion because the concept has permeated Western thought at least since the time of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and has become essential to Western culture in the twenty-first century. Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him..."<sup>1</sup> in tandem with Dostoevsky's rejoinder "But what will become of men then? ... without God... All things are permitted then, they can do what they like"<sup>2</sup> is a notable definition for nihilism.

Nihilism is a philosophical position that reflects a belief in nothingness and/or everything. Nihilism is "the belief that life is meaningless."<sup>3</sup> "Nietzsche defines nihilism as the situation which obtains when 'everything is permitted' or when nothing is permitted."<sup>4</sup> Nihilism occurs as a result of the distrust of the highest value (killing God, which results in a belief in nothing) hence the reception to all eventuality (everything is permissible). In short, nihilism is a collection of ideas that denies generally believed interpretations of the human existence like morality, knowledge and meaning. This text is a discussion of the concept of nihilism and its repercussions on society.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a prelude in Rhyme and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), 672.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century: Confrontations with Nothingness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), I.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press), xiii.

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## **Introduction**

“All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”<sup>5</sup>

In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “nihilism occurs at that point in the history of an individual or a culture when ‘the highest values devalue themselves.’”<sup>6</sup> Nihilism ensues when established beliefs of a civilization become questionable, prompting the notion that “nothing is true; everything is possible/permissible.” History unveils that as societies expand, realities change, and rules are revised to suit the growing demands of the new society. The phase where the community admits the need for groundbreaking intellectual or practical change to explore varied possibilities is the nihilistic stage – it is the stage where the community recognizes that the strictures of old institutional rules must be denied and broken down to allow the freedom to think differently. Individually, the moment that one denies established beliefs that one previously held in high esteem is the point of nihilism. This intimates that the triggers for nihilism are the moments when beliefs change or when God is redefined, but nihilism ensues based on the interpretation after the moment.

According to the nihilist, there can never be an objective truth, perfection or certainty, everything is inconclusive and open to interpretation. This means that one should not believe in one ultimate truth (God) but must believe in all possibilities, thus believing in nothing. Atheism differs from nihilism in that, although atheism has nihilistic undertones, an atheist can believe in

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<sup>5</sup> Marvin Perry, et. al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, vol II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 43.

<sup>6</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 21.

something else apart from God (for instance, it is good to be moral). Nihilism is far more radical and wide reaching; it is the general disbelief in every conclusion or that if one will believe anything then one has to believe everything else (thus making “belief” a pointless exercise in opposition to nothing). Consequently, there is no forthright distinction between good and evil, for all things are tolerable. Nihilism conjectures the search for meaning, exploring all untapped possibilities in the unknown.

Karen Carr groups nihilism into five distinct themes – epistemological, alethiological, metaphysical, ethical, and existential nihilism. Epistemological nihilism attacks the veracity of knowledge. Alethiological nihilism refutes the exactness of truth. Metaphysical nihilism contests the reality of existence. Ethical nihilism opposes the authenticity of moral values. Existential nihilism is a feeling of nothingness as a being.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that the nihilist differentiates scientific truth from realistic (nihilistic) truth. Scientific truths are descriptive observations and cannot be contested but realistic truths are grounded in action, philosophical, cultural: a way of being and not an assemblage of descriptions. Nihilists, particularly the existentialists are interested in the reality of subjective experience, therefore conclude that experience is the ultimate reality. Nihilists focus on action rather than words, beliefs or scientific truth.

Karr’s definitions and inferences from the characteristics of the concept of nihilism posit that nihilism is a belief that all values, knowledge, existence, morals, truth, and meanings are void and end in nothingness. It follows indubitably that the notion of nihilism has negative connotations. It conjectures skepticism, cynicism, pessimism, dissolution, chaos, and despair as the dominant moods and modes of human consciousness. Yet nihilism has profound positive undertones as well. It is a human condition and unavoidable to question the foundations of human existence and its

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<sup>7</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 10.



moral underpinnings. Scholars like the French existentialist novelist Albert Camus and the American philosopher Stanley Rosen share this assertion. Nihilism embodies the human instinct to doubt, change, destroy, create and exercise one's will. The history of nihilism cogitates the history of the study of change across society.

The notion that everything is permissible because nothing is true, making life meaningless, is not meant to project a gloomy outlook but to demonstrate that the point of disbelief is the moment of creativity, change, search for affirmation or affinity. This is to say, nihilism has both negative and positive gradations. "One does discover the absurd (nihilism) without being tempted to write (create) a manual for happiness."<sup>8</sup> Whether one believes in something (highest value or God) or nothing, life will go on, humanity cannot and does not have to share the same beliefs in order for society to exist. "I believe that everyone has feelings of anxiety, despair, hopelessness, and dark thoughts about death. There are times when all of us struggle to find meaning in life. Thus, nihilism is a topic that concerns everyone and is part of the human condition."<sup>9</sup>

Nihilistic thought, as derived from many cultural actors and philosophers over centuries, highlight that humanity should not take things as given but pursue knowledge, investigate existing orders, rules, science and institutions and inquire why and how things became traditional or institutional. Nihilists argued that people should know why it is good to be good and why it is bad to be evil, why and how rules are made and when to create new rules if old ones become obsolete. Nihilists seek deeper meaning into existence and search for both truth and untruth. Nihilism implies unbridled freedom, the innate will of the individual or a society to be expressive without

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<sup>8</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, ix.

restraint. “All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”<sup>10</sup>

Nihilism is an existential phenomenon and a historical atavism; it is an expected fate in the process of existence. The biblical God created the universe out of nothingness in Genesis 1:2 – “And the world was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep...”<sup>11</sup> God created heaven and the earth from that void, and hence provided his “manual for happiness” – with reference to the Bible, all of the universe derives from the entropic conception of a lack of rules, or a void. There was the big bang to replace the old world. Children come from nothingness and eventually transition into adulthood. From an anarchic state of nature came the state of natural law. Later, as men established their own laws and rules, the same principle applied to the development of institutions. The capricious nature of despotism was replaced by the principled structure of constitutionalism. Life, society, the world, and existence will always change, something will come from nothing, order will emerge from chaos – so long as one accepts chaos as a necessary beginning.<sup>12</sup>

Having affirmed that nihilism is a recurring theme in the histories of all societies and every individual, this text will rely heavily on the history of intellectual thought in Europe and America to draw appropriate conclusions. **The paper argues that nihilism was/is the practical sequel of the Enlightenment and has become essential to Western culture in the twenty-first century.** The Enlightenment set the table for nihilism for the Enlightenment established secularism against the religious teachings of the time. The tenets of the Enlightenment were pointing towards nihilism because they were in opposition to the established knowledge base and structures of the old

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<sup>10</sup> Marvin Perry, et. al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, vol II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Bible, KJV. *Genesis 1*.

<sup>12</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*; Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

Christian/Catholic world of the medieval era. The philosophers, scientists and thinkers of the Enlightenment were either disputing the old values, creating new beliefs, or inventing alternatives that would supplant traditional standards. They assumed nothing of the old knowledge was true until proven through scientific method and examination (distrust of traditional values) and that everything was therefore possible. This thread of thought simmered through the intellectual and cultural milieu of Western civilization and has become particularly inseparable from the postmodern twenty-first century world. Whether nihilism should be embraced or shunned, society has lived through it for more than two centuries since the Enlightenment.

Developments in history, particularly in the twenty-first century, point out that society is receptive to “unconventionalities” and new developments, as manifest in the popular saying that culture is not static but dynamic. Today, legality has assumed the utmost power like the Judges in early Jewish history as evident in the Bible, but legal conclusions are based on convincing arguments (amoral, sometimes arbitrarily), not on truth. Rightness and wrongness are only settled in courtrooms and no longer in our conscience as Hobbes and Locke suggested. The twenty-first century postmodern world is tilted more towards nihilism than at any other period in history. Tolerance, advocacy, focus on personal life (individuation) and concepts that obviate the need for a creator/God or an uppermost value are some of the basic cultural tenets upheld by twenty-first century Western civilization, and through imperialism, world civilization. The modern campaign for authoritarian/fundamentalist religion whispers reactions against postmodern Western culture and its nihilistic terms (which in principle also has nihilistic traces). How did these developments start? What are the circumstances for the development of the idea of nihilism then and now? How has it evolved? And what has been the intellectual discussion among scholars who predicted nihilism was imminent?

Across history and in different cultures, getting the existing moral codes ingrained in the minds and hearts of the citizenry has always been the core function of society and its leadership. For a major part of the histories of the world, enforcing moral uprightness superseded every other societal value. Institutions whose primary functions have been to promote the continuity of moral standards – religion, court of law, schools, and police force – have been central components of societal leadership and kingship. On this assumption, it is evident that from the very beginning of community or societal formation, humans assumed that a universal morality could be asserted i.e., a state of law. We distinguished rightness from wrongness, good from better, bad from worse and positive from negative. Every society traditionally formed an institution that would serve as custodians of morality, mostly religious institutions and in the modern era governmental institutions. These institutions became identical to their societies, their teachings and practices became cultural, and they became integral parts of societal leadership and often leaders of entire communities.<sup>13</sup> If the societies territorially or ideologically expanded, so did the coverage of these institutions and this is evident throughout history. Western civilization is an archetypical example for this evolution of society through time, particularly around the world through imperialism. Countless relatable moments in the histories of the West can be used to support these evolutionary occurrences in world history.

Nietzsche's pronouncement that "God is dead" and Dostoevsky's riposte that "without God...? All things are permitted... they can do what they like...".<sup>14</sup> simultaneously serve as the reference for what popularized the doctrine of nihilism. Michael Gillespie in *Nihilism before Nietzsche* on the other hand pronounces that "it was not the death of God, but the birth of an

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<sup>13</sup> Mukherjee and Ramasway, *A History of Political Thoughts: Plato to Marx* (New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 672.

inscrutable and all-powerful God, leading to the emphasis of will over reason, that defines the nihilistic impulse.”<sup>15</sup> In this, Gillespie meant that the creation of a pristine (God) and a topmost value inevitably leads to nihilism; the conception of an inviolable creature or entity limits reason because it presages faith and inherently incites doubts. Ultimately a distrust of its minutest characterization infers the collapse of the whole structure. This is to underscore that both the creation and/or the decline of the highest value presupposes nihilism.

In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Donald Crosby ascribed the spread of the concept of nihilism to the writings of Turgenev, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Camus remarks that “with him [Nietzsche] nihilism becomes conscious for the first time”.<sup>16</sup> However, scholars before Nietzsche like Machiavelli, Kant, and Schopenhauer provided the philosophical background that informed Nietzsche and Dostoevsky to draw their conclusions. Conversely, after Nietzsche, several scholars have also addressed the concept. Carl Jung, Piaget, Freud, Heidegger, and Karl Jasper are direct progenies of Friedrich Nietzsche and each of them implicitly addresses nihilism in their writeups. After the two World Wars it was evident that the highest values of Western civilization had lost their vitality, nothing was true, and people had to create their own values. Oddity and unconventionality became the new normal for the old values had failed society. Nihilism became part and parcel of the everyday life in art, music, and academia, the Western civilization became a postmodern society. Through formal education and highlighting the idea that humans should not take anything as given but search to verify for truth, authenticity, and objectivity, the zeitgeist for the advocacy of individual discernment and how existential life became during the two world wars with its ensuing recession and cold war, nihilism translated into Western culture and permeated everyday life.

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<sup>15</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 6; Michael Gillespie is the author of *Nihilism before Nietzsche*.

<sup>16</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 21.

This text then seeks to discuss an array of philosophers and intellectual threads that gave rise to the doctrine of nihilism, and scholars whose central premise was to answer the question “what happens after the death of god?” Nicolo Machiavelli answered this question in his book *The Prince*.<sup>17</sup> John Locke and Thomas Hobbes presented the state of nature and social contract. Kant, generations before Nietzsche, suggested his Categorical Imperative.<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx mentioned communism which was born of Thomas More’s Utopia.<sup>19</sup> Dostoevsky had his take, in the *Underground Man*.<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche himself propounded the Superman. Most of these philosophers were/are not nihilist and did not explicitly purport nihilism but nihilistic undertones can be inferred from their methodologies.

There are a plethora of books and articles that are referred to in this writeup. Some of these texts do not explicitly discuss nihilism, but lots can be inferred from them to draw out nihilistic conclusions. Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramasway’s *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx* reflects on the history and political theories in Europe from the classical period to the nineteenth century. Mukherjee and Ramasway outline the history of Europe and how that history directly impacted philosophical thinking at the time and how the thoughts in turn affected the history of Europe. The book thus provides a clear understanding of the dovetailing relationship between the history of Europe and the philosophical ideas that developed in Europe from the classical era to the nineteenth century. Mukherjee and Ramasway do not explicitly mention

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<sup>17</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Fredrich Engels, and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015); Thomas More, *Utopia* (New York: Appleton- Century-Crofts, 1949).

<sup>20</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992).

nihilism, but so much can be inferred from the development of philosophical ideas in Europe if nihilism is the topic.

Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* discusses how globalization implies equality and the end of polarization in human history. The background to his conclusions is the entire history of the world up to the end of the cold war. This book is germane to the topic of nihilism because implicit in his understanding of globalization is the nullification of all other systems of governance for an anarchic/global perfection of concepts of peace in capitalism and liberal democracy. Fukuyama opines that Capitalism and liberal democracy is the consummate answer to the problem of nihilism and the death of God. Stanley Rosen's *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* and *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* both speak to nihilism and how the topic revolves around Nietzsche. Gregory Smith's book *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity*, as evident in its title, examines how Nietzsche and Heidegger influenced postmodernism. Contained in postmodernist ideologies is existentialism and nihilism.

Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* also discusses some of the relevant philosophers whose philosophies are central to the doctrine of existentialism and nihilism. Kaufman has also translated a number of philosophical texts from the German language into English including all of Nietzsche's works. Kaufman's texts are thus used on multiple occasions in this paper. H.J. Blackham's *Reality, Man and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism – Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Buber, Merleau-Ponty* and William Hubben's *Four Prophets of Our Destiny: Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kafka* are also referred to because both books meticulously recount the lives and works of the existentialists and nihilistic philosophers that this writeup seeks to discuss. The works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Jaspers, and Merleau-Ponty all have existential and nihilistic themes. John Marmysz

evaluates the history of nihilism and its relevance in contemporary times in his book *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. Marmysz examines the history and evolution of the concept of nihilism, and its impacts on world civilization. In *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, Andrzej Walicki discusses the evolution of intellectual ideas since the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century in Russia. Walicki touches on the key philosophies of the core philosophers in Russian and the historical milieu in which their ideas evolved. A high point in the history of Russia was when nihilism was a popular philosophy. Isaiah Berlin's *Russian Thinkers* has a similar outlook as Walicki's *History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*. Gianni Vattimo in *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethic, Politics, and Law* suggest that nihilism is the appreciation of plurality as the meaning of life. The book reviews how nihilism became a liberating force in modern society, freeing people from the condemnation of religious morality. The books mentioned above are different in scope and topic, yet they all speak coherently to the topic of nihilism. This text draws knowledge from these books to establish that the Enlightenment set the bases for Nietzsche and Dostoevsky to pronounce the death of God and suggest nihilism. After Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, the concept of nihilism reached fruition, and its principles are now inseparable from the tenets of postmodernist philosophy in twenty-first century Western cultural life.

Most of the primary sources that will be used in this text are the books of the philosophers to be discussed. Books of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Immanuel Kant, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Nicolo Machiavelli, Schopenhauer, Jean-Paul Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein and a few others will be used to explain the evolution of the doctrine of nihilism. Books by John Locke and Thomas Hobbes provide a background for the first



step into nihilism because the state of nature they each posit as the roots of societal organization is nihilistic in principle. Rene Descartes's *Discourse on Method* also engendered the idea of doubt which was central to the Enlightenment and a core component of nihilism. Schopenhauer is known for his pessimism which is in line with Descartes' idea of doubt. Schopenhauer influenced Nietzsche's thinking; thus, his thought is also relevant to nihilism and its development.

Immanuel Kant in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* and three *Critiques* was one of the first to answer the question, what happens after the death of God? when he presented his theory of the categorical imperative. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky need no introduction if we are discussing nihilism, for they will both be discussed extensively in this essay. Sartre, Kafka, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Piaget will be discussed in tandem with Nietzsche because he influenced each of them in different ways. Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is important because he demonstrates the ambiguity in language, hence practically implies that nothing is certain. Implicit in his conclusion is that we cannot trust ourselves to have communicated exactly what we feel or wanted to say. Wittgenstein thus reiterated the concept of doubt which is an integral characteristic of nihilism.

## **Chapter One: The Roots of Nihilism**

“I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism...For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as towards catastrophe...”<sup>21</sup>

This chapter discusses recurring leitmotifs in European intellectual history that reflect the concept of nihilism, with the aim of drawing out the historical thread that contributed to the concept’s development in the era of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. The object of the sections is to give an account of the sequence of philosophical trends in Europe that led to the concept of nihilism. Renaissance thinkers Machiavelli and Martin Luther are some of the capstone names whose viewpoints laid the bedrock for the Enlightenment but also implicit in their ideations were nihilistic undercurrents that would be reverberated by Nietzsche and Dostoevsky centuries later. After the Renaissance, the Enlightenment similarly highlighted certain principles that would later be adopted by nihilistic philosophers. The philosophies of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard are explored as prepositions that gave Nietzsche the impetus to announce the death of God.

Preceding all of these thinkers was a Christian philosopher who tried to apply human reason to the existence of God and the principles of Christianity. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1374), portended the influence of reason and science on Christianity and thus counselled Christians to be open-minded to the reception of secularism in society. He suggested a combination of both faith and reason as the essential ingredients in a moral life.

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<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 3.

Aquinas moralized on how Christians could combine religion with science and faith with reason. He argued that God's greatest gift to humans was their reason. Therefore, all humans regardless of their creed or background can have access to profound truths and create worthwhile ideas if they used their reason. Thus, landmark positive changes in society are not reserved for Christians but all humanity; in fact, Aquinas admits that some of the greatest ideas and insights that benefited humankind did not come from Christians but pagans. Aquinas universalized intelligence and opened the Christian mind to be receptive to all forms of knowledge and not just faith. He taught that knowledge can and should come from multiple sources – from science, revelation, intuition, rationality, pagans or monks. Aquinas taught openness to all forms of possibilities in an era when his sentiments sounded almost heretic. He therefore became a progenitor for future philosophers who learned to use their reason to questions the parameters of faith.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the Enlightenment, the Renaissance ushered Europe into a paradoxical idea of progress, based on a rebirth of Greco-Roman values. The Enlightenment, the scientific, the industrial revolutions and later, the demonstration of humanistic ideals in practical politics in the nineteenth century meant that progress became a standard by which Western civilization was measured. Europeans explored the whole earth from the 1400s through the 1800s, but when it was time to reflect on what had changed as their knowledge of the universe grew, a concept of nihilism also reached maturation in the nineteenth century. The philosophies of Machiavelli, Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and Arthur Schopenhauer beckoned progress yet also held within them the preconditions for nihilism, as these same thinkers also anatomized the standards of Christian civilization.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings* (London: Penguin Group, 1999).

Critically, the impact of modern European civilization on the entire history of the contemporary world cannot be gainsaid. By 1914, European empires dominated more than eighty percent of the total earth's surface.<sup>23</sup> This dominance necessitated the spread of European traditions, culture, and intellectual dogmas around the globe. Western civilization has influenced aspects of the culture of every country in the world today in governance, law, education, fashion, marriage, transportation, science, economics, communication, technology, architecture, music, art, morality, beliefs, language, customs, and practices. This is to say, a shift in intellectual trends in Europe also eventually affected all countries around the globe.

The Renaissance was an attempt to renew, apply and transcend the philosophies and realizations of classical antiquity. The Renaissance borrowed Greek ideals of freedom, self-confidence, optimism, and an emphasis on the present (here and now) to redefine fifteenth century European civilization. The Renaissance sages also copied features of pre-Christian Greek politics, education, literature, and architecture. Implicit in pre-Christian Greek values was the Socratic principle of critical thinking, to question and examine everything. The Renaissance expounded humanism and stressed the liberation of the human spirit in opposition to the asceticism of medieval Christianity. The Renaissance was a jump backward in time over the Christian era to relearn the principles of the pre-Christian era. The Renaissance thus signaled a challenge to the cohesive Christian society in Europe.<sup>24</sup> It was an era of massive social change in art, science, literature, architecture, exploration, education, diplomacy, banking, and other fields.

In Florence, Italy, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) indelibly altered European political philosophy. In his famous book *The Prince*, Machiavelli taught princes (leaders) how to gain power

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<sup>23</sup> Christopher Brooks, *Western Civilization: A Concise History* 3 (Portland Community College), 116. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EBnW\\_EGvY6s-WZpEb4WZlwG1i9ELTAoCzfarNx1pdeM/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EBnW_EGvY6s-WZpEb4WZlwG1i9ELTAoCzfarNx1pdeM/edit#heading=h.gjdgxs) [accessed April 16, 2024].

<sup>24</sup> Mukherjee and Ramasway, *A History of Political Thoughts*. 153.

and how to keep it.<sup>25</sup> *The Prince* was shocking now as it was then; the book departs massively from traditional political models of the time: "...the code of conduct I'm offering will be rather controversial."<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli knew his book was a complete aberration from the normal. Today, the word "Machiavellian" is colloquially synonymous with evil. Machiavellianism according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is the "view that politics is amoral and that any means however unscrupulous can justifiably be used in achieving political power."<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli avows that "It is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain his position to learn how to be able not to be good."<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli's *Prince* disregarded the highest values of the time and projected an amoral outlook upon practical politics. He made "not to be good" (amorality) an option.

It is important to mention that in order to fully understand Machiavelli, one also has to read his *Discourse on Livy* which illuminates liberty and republicanism. The treatise in the *Discourse* diverges completely from *The Prince* in approach and in message. The *Discourse* highlights the importance of the study of history to draw out the best system of government ideal for ensuing generations – "all worldly things in every time have their counterparts in ancient times."<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli proposes a system of government that serves the people as a whole and not just the holders of power analogous to modern democracy. He underscores the importance of well-structured institutions, the development of civic virtues and the value of diplomacy and foreign relations. He lauds democratic governance, the need for checks and balances, freedom of worship, the general freedom of the citizenry and accords significance to the protection of the citizens of the republic. Machiavelli describes himself in the first lines of the book as "driven by that natural

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<sup>25</sup> Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: E.P Dutton & CO, 1908), 60.

<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Merriam- Webster's Collegiate Dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> [4<sup>th</sup> March 2024].

<sup>28</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, 2.

desire that has always been in me to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone.”<sup>30</sup> He avers that there is as much good in the world as there is also evil. The highpoints of the book address how to preserve a strong republic and keep its citizens free to achieve workable benefits for the republic, how to marry the wishes of the people and the aspiration of the leadership in line with the common good and how to bound the republic knowing the shortcomings of human nature.

Italy around this time was not a unified state as it is today and was made up predominantly of five different principalities (city states), notably Florence, the Kingdom of Naples, Venice, Milan, and the Papal States centered in Rome. One faction could attack the other at any time, and there were numerous smaller principalities to vie with as well. One could be a prince in the morning and a prisoner in the evening. City states could partner to attack another in one year but become enemies in the next year and reunite again three years later. It was an era of chaos and political insecurity amidst Christian teachings and principles. Rome was the citadel for Christianity. Machiavelli worked as a diplomat for a group that deposed a Medici regime. Soon the Medici reorganized and ousted Machiavelli’s group as he was sent into exile. In exile, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. His work as a diplomat made him savvy in the actual dealings of politics. Italy at the time was in a political state of nature: nothing about Renaissance republican government was true, thus everything was permissible, so long as a prince could activate the amoral side of his political nature. Machiavelli thus observed events of the day and illustrated how not just a prince, but anyone could master political life in a state of nature, where only surviving mattered.

*The Prince* was against every conventional ideal of the time and even now, but it is also extremely pragmatic for leaders, states, and individuals. In short, the book teaches how to deal

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<sup>30</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, 1.

with any form of opposition using brutality in the interest of the common good of the ruler – the prince – and his people. In modern times the book is practicable in international politics because in the international scene, only the fittest survives. Against the principles of the divine right of kings, the bible and existing traditional values, Machiavelli spelt out how evil can be combined with good to make the best out of leaders. One of the core deductions from the book can be read as the nihilistic assertion that the ends justify the means. While it is not necessarily an affirmation that nothing is true, it is a proclamation that all is permissible in the quest to achieve the worthwhile goal of the prince’s survival and that of his people.<sup>31</sup> Machiavelli taught realism, and how politics should be “examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings.”<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli’s observations diluted his faith and that of his audience in the old ways of thinking. He incited the attitude of how to be eccentric in the quest for a worthwhile goal or in the vicissitude of life.

In 1517, ten years before Machiavelli’s death (1527), Martin Luther (1483-1546) sparked the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation is singularly the most important religious reform in modern European history, religion and Christianity transformed for good. The Protestant Reformation was a Christian reform movement in sixteenth century Europe. The Roman Catholic church was the nonpareil church in Europe at the time, but people became agitated by the doctrines of the church and its institutional corruption; thus, they demanded improvements. Contrary to Catholic standards to keep the doctrines of the church immaculate, the reformers contested the authority of the pope and maintained that the Bible alone was the guide for Christianity, and that every Christian alive could interpret it for themselves. The reformers therefore demanded the wide circulation of the Bible in different languages in all Christendom. The reformers condemned the

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<sup>31</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

<sup>32</sup> Marvin Perry, et. al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, 43.

sale of indulgences, the celibacy of priests, the opulence of the papacy, and offered alternatives. Following several unsuccessful attempts to reform the church, Martin Luther led a revolt when he published his ninety-five theses, taking advantage of the nascent printing industry to reach the Christian public, a gesture which garnered massive and widespread support.

After the Reformation, everything was permissible for anyone could now dictate what he/she felt were the true doctrines of Christianity and found his/her own church. Luther was NOT a nihilist – he did not deny the entire legitimacy of Christianity’s existence, he did not believe that “nothing is true”. Yet Luther shook the core foundations of Christianity and inspired an attack on everything that was seen as pristine by saying that “everything” – however an individual wanted to interpret the Bible – “is permissible.” The papal supremacy was never the same. What’s more, a decisive attack against the Catholic church implied that every established tradition could collapse no matter how long it had existed. The divine right of kings and feudalism implicitly were also threatened. Luther taught Europe how to theorize as religious tolerance triumphed.

In the spirit of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe that preached emphasis on rationalism and science over existing cultural values like feudalism and the divine right of kings. Liberty, reason, tolerance, skepticism, republicanism, and deism were some of the central tenets of the Enlightenment. The aim of the Enlightenment philosophes was to advance the human condition on earth here and now rather than simply accept Christianity’s emphasis on avoiding sin to carry the soul into an afterlife. The Enlightenment culminated in the American, French, Scientific, and Industrial Revolutions and not just Europe, but the whole world changed for good, due to European imperialism. Democracy, constitutionalism, and revolutionary technological advancement prevailed where once such ideas



did not even exist. The celebration of the idea of change ultimately would bring about the rise of nihilism in a later century.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was one of the first intellectual products of the Enlightenment. He practiced physics, metaphysics, geometry, and mathematics, but Descartes' philosophical ideas were like silent missiles with incisive intellectual acuity. He provided massive depth to the field of philosophy. Descartes is famous for saying "I think therefore I am", a simplistic statement but puissant. He arrived at this conclusion as an attempt to answer the metaphysical question, how can one know with certainty that anything including oneself exists?

Descartes' *A Discourse on Method* revolutionized philosophy with his method of doubts. It influenced several philosophers including Immanuel Kant. The book illustrates the search for certainty through questioning and doubt. In the *Discourse*, Descartes denies the existence of everything else, but eventually proves his own existence. He proclaimed that humans should establish our ideas through individual experience and rationality rather than through authority and tradition, for one always has to dissect big problems into small comprehensible sizes. According to Descartes, in the course of dreaming, it is almost impossible to differentiate the experiences in the dream from realities in regular life. Hence, what we call regular life could also be a dream or an illusion: "we ought also to consider as false all that is doubtful."<sup>33</sup>

From this assumption, Descartes doubted everything and declared that it is even possible that he did not exist. After pondering about his existence, he became convinced that because he could think and doubt, he could prove indubitably that he existed. Thus, the conclusion "I am because I doubt" – "I think therefore I am".<sup>34</sup> Consequently, Descartes reasoned that the only way to find certainty was to doubt: "...in order to seek truth, it is necessary once in the course of our

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<sup>33</sup> Rene Descartes, *A Discourse of Methods* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), 125.

<sup>34</sup> Descartes, *A Discourse of Methods*, 90.

life to doubt, as far as possible, of all things”, which would eventually be the first, though not final step in nihilism.<sup>35</sup> Descartes states that “I shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain.”<sup>36</sup> Descartes taught why and how to seek for both truth and untruth. Like Machiavelli and Luther, Descartes did not adhere to nihilism, but he epitomized one of its core principles: doubt.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is another illustrious product of the Enlightenment; Mukherjee and Ramasway in *A History of Political Thoughts* called Hobbes the “greatest [British] political thinker.”<sup>37</sup> Hobbes is famous for his book *Leviathan*. The book broadly underscores the need for peace, order, security, and prodigious living for the citizens of a sovereign state. Hobbes’s narrative design was to frighten humans into submitting to absolute sovereigns. As a product of the English Civil War, Hobbes lamented the inhumane, divisive, expensive, and lethal effects of conflicts and expounded on why humans should obey government authority, even of an imperfect kind. Hobbes considered peace to be paramount over any other societal canon. According to Hobbes, “the only thing that will permanently unify men is a universal interest in peace.”<sup>38</sup> He paints a picture of how bad society would be without enforcing law and order. The book is said to be an elaborate extension of Machiavelli’s *Prince* and the *Discourse* as Hobbes was markedly influenced by Machiavelli.<sup>39</sup> The *Leviathan* morphs princely rule into a sovereign state. Both Hobbes and Machiavelli saw the inherent badness in humans. What was for Machiavelli the common good was for Hobbes the commonwealth. Security and protection of the state is supreme for the *Prince* as it is for the *Leviathan*.

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<sup>35</sup> Descartes, *A Discourse of Methods*, 143.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Mukherjee and Ramasway, *A History of Political Thoughts*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, xxii.

<sup>39</sup> Mukherjee and Ramasway, *A History of Political Thoughts*, 131.

Hobbes concluded that the human in nature is inherently bad but has conscience to reason, although he mostly refuses to use his conscience. He referred to this version of human society – a civilization with no rules, where nothing is true – as the “state of nature”. The state of nature is the most primordial form of society i.e., a community before government, law, or civil authority. Hobbes asserts that the state of nature is the state where human beings are free, boundless, and equal beings. There is no natural hierarchy, a state of nature is a state where everyone can do as they will. In the state of nature, everyone is his own judge and can hurt, kill, offend, or take vengeance on anyone at any time. Since Hobbes believed human nature was basically bad, the state of nature is a state of all against all and a condition for war. It follows that the man in nature’s most existential concern is to guard himself against other men. In the state of nature “men are constantly afraid of death”, so Hobbes postulated that life in the state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>40</sup> Hobbes’ goal is not ideally nihilistic; fundamentally, he wrote to justify the existing political institution of monarchy. However, Hobbes’ idea of stripping man of his civilization to operate in a self-made world where his only limitation was imposed by his own will would be essential to the development of nihilism.

From this world (state of nature) where nothing is true, Hobbes asserted that mankind defined what was possible – that government was a necessity. If humans in the state of nature wished to live a communal, wealthy, refined, peaceful, and prolonged life, they had to use their conscience by assenting to a state of law through a social contract. The social contract is the collective consent of the people to submit their individual freedom of action to the state for fear of chaos if each person wields the power to decide what is right for themselves. The state will in turn protect the individual against external aggression and maintain peace and order within the

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<sup>40</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, iv.

citizenry. The “Leviathan” of the state institutions created by man will thus become the supreme law manifest through the chosen leader. In other words, Hobbes infers that, for a society to be peaceful, the members of the community must submit themselves to be ruled by an absolute power who would protect them from civil wars and external antagonists.

John Locke (1632-1704) provided a counterargument to Hobbes but implied a similar conclusion. Unlike Hobbes, in Locke’s state of nature, humans were inherently good. The man in nature, according to Locke, is governed by natural laws, the law of reason, his rational capacity, or his conscience, hence the state of nature is peaceful and sociable. Everyone is guided by his conscience not to covet the life, liberty, or property of the other. However, the state of nature is also a state of perfect freedom where one could ignore his conscience and act as he wills. Locke acknowledged that the state of nature could ultimately turn into a Hobbesian condition of everyone for himself, all against all. Ultimately, for the purpose of universal peace, the state of nature had to transform into a state of law. Property is a leitmotif in Locke’s *Two Treaties of Government*. Locke argued that the state of law would soon become a commercial state, for commerce makes men civil and less warlike. Humans get properties when they add value or labor to nature and can also exchange that value for money or with others through consent. The state of law is needed to protect the lives and properties of the citizenry and the state from foreign control just as Hobbes suggested.<sup>41</sup>

The state of nature and state of law analogy implies that society is a human creation, hence the state of law can always be altered to suit present demands – nothing is true; everything is possible. This is evident in the postmodern twenty-first century where laws (advocacy) are frequently altered to meet present demands. On the premise that ethical and moral uprightness

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<sup>41</sup> John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government* (London: Phoenix, 1993).

takes preeminence over any other value in society, Hobbes and Locke concluded that the state of nature was doomed to fail, and society would only survive when we make laws. In this, it is not surprising that religion became equivalent to leadership in the formation of many ancient societies and in recent times legality is inseparable from governance. Thus, Hobbes and Locke are fundamentally not nihilists. Yet they provided a probable logical explanation to the evolution of humans, from single entities in nature to how communities and societies were formed. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke provided a vision of what a nihilistic world would look like.

As the Enlightenment reached fruition, its philosophers borrowed, sustained, and upgraded Machiavelli's realism, Descartes' dialectics, Luther's rebellion and Locke's and Hobbes' rationalism. The Enlightenment thinkers undermined traditional beliefs, threw away everything lacking a rationale and created new values. The Enlightenment set the table for the future academic inquest of nihilism.

David Hume (1711-1776) is the consummate Enlightenment thinker, known to be an empiricist and a skeptic. Hume greatly influenced Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham and the utilitarians, logical positivism, religion, political theories that separated church from state, deism, agnosticism, and atheism. He was one of the first to "kill" God explicitly by admitting to his own atheism, albeit after his death. His book *Natural History of Religion* was one of the earliest philosophical works to openly attack religion and doubt the existence of God. He concluded that it was not possible to believe in God because God could not be scientifically proven to exist.<sup>42</sup> Hume argued that religion, rather than a series of divine ideas implanted in men's brains by a higher power, was man's own idea of nature, hence a human creation. Hume's atheist claims hinted that God was not coming back from heaven to destroy the earth or demand anything of humans as

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<sup>42</sup> David Hume, *Natural History of Religion* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1957), 12.

Christianity had admonished them. Hume also wrote on hedonism and attacked the rationalization of everything that Descartes urged; he asserted that humans are motivated by feelings other than reason. Jeremy Bentham and the utilitarians assented to Hume's hedonistic idea that humans are driven by the pursuit of pleasure, therefore concluded that society must aim at providing its individuals with the things that provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In this, the pursuit of happiness replaced the traditional Christian idea of asceticism. European intellectual thought was transforming from servicing a religious society, as Luther and Descartes did, into a secular service where everything became tolerated because no institution was deemed capable of asserting a valid and uniform moral code.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is ranked as one the greatest philosophers of all time, known for his moral philosophy: "to be a philosopher one must first have been a Kantian."<sup>43</sup> Kant is recognized for his outstanding faith in human rational capacity and perfectibility and his advocacy for international peace. His cardinal proposition was to make politics a subset of morality, a contrast to Machiavelli's cynicism in *The Prince*. Kant intimated that if humans were moral in their individual daily dealings, it would reflect in their political endeavors. Kant's works explore how humans can attain moral certainty through reason alone. He taught the supreme principles of morality, the autonomy of the human will, what freedom meant, how the power of reason could supplant the authority of religion, and how and why humans ought to be good outside of traditional beliefs. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Judgement* are some of his popular works.

Kant's works aim to provide a barograph for measuring the intrinsic moral value of actions. All human action should be geared towards striving for the highest good. Kant's barometer for

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<sup>43</sup> Will Durant, "Will Durant and Friends", *YouTube* (June 20, 2014) [https://youtu.be/Yntk1Zi6iC4?si=q\\_uTGTbzplGvkxv](https://youtu.be/Yntk1Zi6iC4?si=q_uTGTbzplGvkxv) (accessed April 3, 2024).

morality was his categorical imperative – “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” and “act so as to treat people always as ends in themselves, never as mere means.”<sup>44</sup> In this, Kant echoed the golden rule (do unto others as you want them to do unto you) and the need to treat all humans with love. He argues that the motive of an action confirms the moral worth of the act. In other words, the intent of an act determined the goodness or the badness of that act. Contrary to Machiavelli’s logic that the end justifies the means, Kant opines that humans ought to do good only for the right reason. According to Kant, freedom is the ability to decide what is good devoid of any external motivation. He further affirms that good and bad are categorical (clear-cut) and not open to argument; thus, what is good is good at all times and what is bad is bad at all times. He insists that only actions done for the sake of duty (duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law) and not for desire or inclinations are actions that should be considered moral.<sup>45</sup>

Kant gave reasons to be moral against the traditional belief in doing good or bad for the sake of the biblical heaven and hell. If Hume wished to show that it was impossible to prove that God exists, Kant posited that men, through reason, were god enough over their own lives to pronounce judgment upon their motivations and the results. Kant showed how humans could create heaven on earth by pursuing morality outside of religion. The categorical imperative was a secular outlook for how all humans can live harmoniously. He inferred religious tolerance and love for humanity, in part by reasoning that there was no need for a god to set the terms for morality. It is noteworthy that Kant acknowledged the importance of religion on society and on his worldview as a philosopher. In the end Kant taught individual freedom, examination of established traditions, the ability to create alternatives for even the highest value, a belief in nothing and the ability to use

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<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 30, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Kant *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 14.

one's conscience. He taught how humans could live in harmony even in the state of nature, like Locke.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) called Kant's *Critiques* the most important work in German literature and mentioned that one ought to read Kant in order to fully understand his own works.<sup>46</sup> Unlike Kant, however, Schopenhauer was a great German thinker celebrated for his pessimistic thinking. "Life itself is a sea full of rocks and whirlpools that man avoids with the greatest caution and care, although he knows that, even when he succeeds with all his efforts and ingenuity in struggling through, at every step he comes nearer to the greatest, the total, the inevitable and irremediable shipwreck, indeed even steers right on to it, namely death. This is the final goal of the wearisome voyage and is worse for him than all the rocks that he has avoided."<sup>47</sup> Schopenhauer's masterpiece *The World as Will and Representation* is one of the most renowned books in modern philosophy. The book had profound influence on the writings of Nietzsche, Jung, Freud, Wittgenstein, and many other intellectuals.

Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* discusses the nature of life with respect to human suffering and pleasure. The book emphasizes the primacy of the human will over our intellect. The will impulsively strives to achieve desires and goals since humans are not content with peace and happiness. Schopenhauer argued that individuals assume that the achievement of a desired goal will mean lasting satisfaction but get disappointed after attaining that anticipated aim because humans always want more. Man thinks happiness is in the future or past, never in the moment or present. In the end, "everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated or recognized as an illusion. The grounds for this lie deep in the very nature of

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<sup>46</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 313.



things.”<sup>48</sup> However, when humans stop suffering, they get bored, alas, life is a tragedy. “Not merely that the world exists, but still more that it is such a miserable and melancholy world, is the tormenting problem of metaphysics.”<sup>49</sup>

The genius after knowing this will become ascetic and deny the “will” to live, he will become indifferent to the happenings in life and realize that all is vanity and ends in nothingness. “For if anything in the world is desirable, so desirable that even the dull and uneducated herd in its more reflective moments would value it more than silver and gold, it is that a ray of light should fall on the obscurity of our existence, and that we should obtain some information about this enigmatical life of ours, in which nothing is clear except its misery and vanity.”<sup>50</sup>

Schopenhauer provided no reason why life is all suffering and yet ends in nothingness. He is projected as an atheist for at one point he declared that no loving God would create such a world full of suffering.<sup>51</sup> *The World as Will and Representation* is thus a precursor to existentialism and nihilism. Dostoevsky was privy to the works Schopenhauer, similarly, Nietzsche bought into this pessimistic outlook of Schopenhauer and his (Nietzsche’s) followers developed it into existentialism and subsequently nihilism: life is full of suffering and meaninglessness.

Machiavelli, Martin Luther, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant and Schopenhauer were all products of their time who defied the intellectual currents that had spawned them. They each either denied the legitimacy of given Christian moral pillars or provided alternatives to replace them. In the end, all these personalities disregarded existing values and provided substitute ideas, but their logic demonstrated that everyone else could also refute theirs and create different ones. These sages introduced the intellectual threads to doubt, the essential element in nihilism, to

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<sup>48</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 137.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 248.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 249.

<sup>51</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*. 245.

question and turn over established beliefs. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky wove these philosophical ideas together and nihilism as an academic inquest was born.

The Renaissance thinkers were torn between divine revelations and reason; ultimately, reason triumphed. In the Enlightenment era, there was a conundrum to choose between religion and rationality; rationality prevailed. Subsequently there was a choice between science and morality; science won at the summit of Darwinism. The conclusion was that nothing was permanent, even the most ingrained social value was subject to change. Nietzsche later mused over the recurring changes of events through history and concluded that European society had lost its vitality.<sup>52</sup> It is noteworthy that the French Revolution, the apogee of the application of Enlightenment principles, happened just half a century before Nietzsche was born in 1844. In addition, the 1840s was the peak of Nationalistic ideas in Europe with a series of revolts and widespread changes. The nineteenth century was simply a time of sweeping changes across Europe, as everything could turn around in a short span of time. Everything and nothing could be true, all was becoming permissible.

Another noteworthy mention is Pyotr Chaadaev (1794-1856), a frontrunner of Russian philosophy noted for his *Philosophical Letters* and *Apologies of a Madman*. Chaadaev was one of the first Russian thinker to explicitly decry the Tsarist regime and the Russian civilization as a whole. He labeled Russia as backward and behind other great Western European powers in term of progress. Chaadaev extolled the accomplishments of the European civilization in rational and logical thoughts, its footprints in freedom and liberal ideas, its progressive bent and its headship in science. Appositely, he wanted Russia to imbibe aspects of the European culture that would be germane for the progress of the Russian society albeit these borrowed cultures ought to be defined

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<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 9.

and only adapted through the lens of the Russian traditions and people.<sup>53</sup> On this account, Chaadaev kindled the tension between Slavophiles (a philosophical movement that rejected Western values and required the Russian Empire to be modeled on the basis of Russian conventional practices and values) and Westernizers (Russians ideologues who wanted Russia to enculturate European customs in order to hasten the development of the nation) in Russia. An ideological conflict that drove Russian philosophy for over a century. The *Philosophical Letters* were censored, and Chaadaev was declared clinically insane for his *Letters* were considered perilous and illogical by the Tsarist regime. Instructively, he wrote another pamphlet and titled it *Apologies of a Madman*.

The pith of Chaadaev's works highlights the need for the unity of the Russian society dovetailed around a universal belief in the Russian orthodox church akin to the papacy of the Middle age Catholic church. He proposed absolute sociality of the Russian people.<sup>54</sup> He thus urged Russians to have a universal believe in the orthodox church and maintained that religion ought to be the main cultural drive of the Russian society. Chaadaev preached a deliberate attempt to return religious interpretations of phenomena and history which he thought had been secularized by the Enlightenment. He admonished the Russia orthodox church to reintegrate with the catholic church and seek closer relations with Western countries. His first *Letter* assailed the enormity of the Russian past and derided the Russian orthodoxy for failing to provide a watertight spiritual foundation for the Russian people.<sup>55</sup> Chaadaev however, amidst his eulogies of the Western civilization condemned the reformation because of its individualistic egalitarianism and its deflation of the significance of the church. It is indicative that Chaadaev foresaw that schism of all

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<sup>53</sup> Raymond McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 25-30.

<sup>54</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thoughts*, 82-85.

<sup>55</sup> McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, 30-34.

kinds led to nihilism so implored Russians to be united around the Russian orthodox Church. In European standards, Chaadaev would be a conservative but in Russian at the time, he proposed eccentric ideas and engendered the reevaluation of all the values of the Russian society, which steered Russian philosophy in the nineteenth century.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Christian philosopher of the age who queried the rational, atheistic and secular views of the Enlightenment. Kierkegaard's thought emphasized why one should continue to be a believer amidst the materialistic dogmas of the day. Kierkegaard is akin to Martin Luther as they both morphed certain principles of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (like questioning) with the doctrines of medieval Christianity – “My task is a Socratic task to rectify the concept of what it means to a Christian.”<sup>56</sup> They both objected to certain creeds of traditional Christian beliefs and taught Christians to search for their own truth in the bible. Kierkegaard assented to Hume's conclusion that God cannot be proven empirically or scientifically to exist but implored that Christians should take a leap of faith and believe in God regardless.

Kierkegaard was not interested in rationalizing or justifying attachment to Christianity. He declared that Europeans should have faith, period. “To have faith is lose your mind and to win God”<sup>57</sup> - jump into the idea of God as the total solution. He provided an anti-thesis to the rational tenets of the Enlightenment and entreated a return to Christianity. Kierkegaard asserts that it is a condition of nature that humans will regret any decision they make, for neither pure subjectivity nor pure objectivity is pristine. Therefore, humans should damn the consequences, boldly take decisions and stick to them. “Freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness

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<sup>56</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>57</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 34.

to support itself’ – freedom causes anxiety, so man should choose God to alleviate that anxiety.<sup>58</sup> Kierkegaard saw himself as a critic of the Christian churches and their teachings, but a defender of Christianity as it was presented in the New Testament which he interpreted as having a personal relationship with a personal god. He stated that it was up to the individual to find God within himself, for as Hume said, God cannot be found outside of the individual. This means that salvation and judgement are individualistic, so each individual should seek truth for themselves and not rely on church doctrines, traditional values, society or history. In this, he was inferring that nothing and everything could be true or false; all things are permissible.

Kierkegaard imparted faith, sacrifice, individuality, compassion, and obedience in the era of the 1848 revolutions and its ensuing consequences, as liberalism and nationalism were taking shape and feudalism was becoming obsolete. The era also saw the publication of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* in the midst of the spread of other communist anarchic utopian ideologies such as those of Fourier, Proudhon, the transcendentalists and Owen. Darwinism was emerging just after Kierkegaard died, it was a time of change. Yet Kierkegaard advocated for conviction in the old values.

Kierkegaard’s works encompassed theology, religion, psychology, and philosophy. He was the last born of seven siblings of a wealthy family in Copenhagen. Soren Kierkegaard’s father Michael Kierkegaard was a devout Christian chagrined by the memory of once blaspheming God as a young shepherd boy. On this account, Michael blamed the struggles of his family on a wrath of God because of this boyhood act of cursing God. Soren Kierkegaard lived life thinking that he was suffering from the curse on his father by God, which casted a shadow of melancholy on him and caused him to write shrewdly on anxiety. Indeed, only two of his seven siblings lived past the

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<sup>58</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: a Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 75.

age of thirty-three. Perhaps wanting to dodge a similar fate as that of his father. Kierkegaard chose to defend God like the biblical Job. Again, he preached individuality, probably to distance himself from his father's curse. Kierkegaard did an undergraduate degree in theology, a doctoral degree in philosophy and completed a pastoral seminary program, though he never became a minister. Kierkegaard was a prolific writer with over twenty-two books credited to his name. Some of his works were written under pseudonyms. Kierkegaard used pseudonyms for the same reasons as Dostoevsky used different characters in his novels – to present different viewpoints in complex dialogues or opposing arguments or probably to mask his ideas and true feelings. Kierkegaard was a master of ironies and skepticism.

Kierkegaard's philosophical works were some of the earliest texts to speak to how one can live as a "single individual" in existence with no institutions to count on as pillars on which to base any sense of a collective morality. For this reason, he is dubbed the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard avowed that life does not have any intrinsic meaning; the individual alone is responsible for his/her actions, decisions and purpose. Life's chief task is to become an individual, to know oneself, for life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced. He was one of the first to emphasize the subjectivity of the individual experiences - "Subjectivity is truth."<sup>59</sup> He accentuated the absurdity of existence; all is meaningless apart from God, so one must have faith by virtue of the fact that life here on earth is absurd. He borrowed excerpts of Schopenhauer's philosophy and stressed on the difficulty of the human existence process: "...when all combines in every way to make everything easier, people will want difficulty."<sup>60</sup> Life is difficult because humans are thrown into this world and reality is the process of becoming.

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<sup>59</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 203.

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 123.

Kierkegaard had profound influence on Nietzsche and on existentialist philosophers like Wittgenstein, Kafka, Heidegger, Sartre, and Jasper. The existentialists took cues from his Christian teachings on individuality and gave it atheistic or secular interpretation. Kierkegaard reflects that although observations and objectivity are key to establishing truths and facts, real truth is how individuals connect to objective facts. He explains that two people can have the same belief (for instance a belief in god) but their interpretations and manifestations of the belief may be different. He thus emphasizes the authenticity of subjective experiences as the ultimate reality. Kierkegaard further asserts that doubt is key to having faith for faith means believing amidst doubt. Faith means action in the mix of skepticism. He opines that life is existential, it is nothingness and meaninglessness, there are no conclusions, you will regret whatever you choose. Therefore, choose God even though you will regret it, and live with it for God is an embodiment of love and the surest bet for the hope that there is a heaven.

Kierkegaard's notion of individuality was a novel idea at the time for it challenged the authority of the church. "Everyone shall be remembered, but everyone becomes great in proportion to his expectations."<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard did not make a strong argument for the church or for God, he could not break down the rationalistic ideology of the Enlightenment sages who eradicated the potency of divinity. In the end, the continuing reinterpretation of values since the Enlightenment intimated that it was incumbent on each individual to decide what they deemed as truth. Belief in God was dying, and all things were becoming permissible.

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<sup>61</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 12.

## Chapter Two: Nietzsche and Dostoevsky

“It was *against* morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life and that discovered for itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life – purely artistic and *anti-Christian*.”<sup>62</sup>

The thrust of this chapter is to intimate that nihilism as an academic inquest is centered around the philosophies of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky – “after Nietzsche the concept of nihilism became respectable.”<sup>63</sup> “‘The will to power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values’ ... 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.”<sup>64</sup> This extract from Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* teases out some of the core components of Nietzschean philosophy and reiterates that nihilism was the practical sequel of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky imbibed the tenets of the Enlightenment and asked what was next? “Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center towards X.”<sup>65</sup> If Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer, the Scientific, the Industrial, and French Revolutions had replaced divine authority with alternatives, what was next? Nietzsche and Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man* concluded that nihilism was the only possible outcome. “I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.”<sup>66</sup> The chapter maintains that the concept of nihilism was crystalized in print by the brainwaves of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, for their viewpoints addressed the doctrine of nihilism

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<sup>62</sup> From Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, as collected in Walter Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 24.

<sup>63</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*; 3.



head on. Nietzsche, a German philologist, and Dostoevsky, a Russian novelist, were arguably the greatest philosophers of the nineteenth century, their influences in cultural Europe and in academia were supreme.

Nietzsche observed that, in the era after Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, European intellectual society needed to reflect upon and reevaluate all understandings of God and all the religious pillars that Christians used to define their civilization. Nietzsche proposed in place of a Christian God his Übermensch, Superman, Overman: a person who could effectively practice Kant's categorical imperative, making moral judgments based entirely on his own determination of what a moral good amounted to in the universe. Nietzsche implied that all humans should be Übermensch, each person should be an individual who should know what is good and do good without external motivations like the paradise of Christianity.

Elsewhere, Dostoevsky pondered about the same concerns and his character, the Underground Man, concluded in his *Notes from Underground* that man is not a piano key, therefore humans cannot be expected to be confined to particular rules and be predicted to always abide by those rules. Therefore, man is nihilistic by nature – insanity and impulsiveness are part of the human condition. Dostoevsky was NOT a nihilist himself but set up characters like Raskolnikov and the underground man to provide counter arguments to his original propositions: to demonstrate why society should choose orthodox Christianity over nihilism. Dostoevsky wanted to inspire an Orthodox religious awakening, but instead his characters became popular and inspired Russian political radicals to challenge the tsarist state and European civilization itself. The Underground Man affirms that even if man is buried in a “sea of bliss” he will complain that life is too blissful.<sup>67</sup> Like Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky details the difficulties in the human existence. The Underground

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<sup>67</sup> From Fyodor Dostoevsky *Notes from Underground*, as collected in Charles Neider, *Short Novels of the Masters* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc, 1958), 150.

Man inferred that society would end in dissolution because the human “will” cannot comply with any effort to make society “better.” In this, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky urged that everything should be permitted. Nihilism became a cultural concern in Europe in the late nineteenth century. Should society agree to this gloomy outlook and use the destruction of morality to open up possibilities for human development and supreme happiness, or should society be optimistic about the institutional morality it maintained already and plan for a better future? Nietzsche gave an atheistic viewpoint, but Dostoevsky suggested a return to Christian values: “Vast masses find meaning in life on the basis of irrational understanding or faith.”<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche and Dostoevsky’s underground man summed up the history of the nineteenth century and declared that nihilism was the only possible ending.

Fredrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) is one of the outstanding erudite brains in modern intellectual history. “No other philosopher since Plato and Aristotle, with the exception of Kant and Hegel, has influenced so many widely different thinkers and writers so profoundly.”<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche’s published works and his incisive thinking made him a philosophical jack of all trades – a philosopher, philologist, historian, moralist, psychologist, naturalist, political realist, and litterateur. “His influence deserves more study than it has yet received.”<sup>70</sup> “Hardly any... philosopher of note since [1900] has escaped the impact of Nietzsche’s thought.”<sup>71</sup> Sigmund Freud is on record saying that Nietzsche “had a more penetrative knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live.”<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche’s philosophy was so pervasive in the twentieth century that he is (erroneously) accused of being one of the causes of the First World

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<sup>68</sup> Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (California: Stanford University Press), 330.

<sup>69</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, xii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

War and a Nazi philosopher. Indeed, he predicted a great war to come in the future, based on the anti-Semitic sentiment of his day, which he despised.<sup>73</sup> It is arguable whether he decisively impacted the two World Wars; certainly, the Nazis distorted his philosophy, based on Hitler's relationship with Nietzsche's anti-Semitic sister Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche.<sup>74</sup> Yet Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on twentieth century popular culture cannot be denied. So many artistic and intellectual movements in postmodern culture are derivations from Nietzsche.

Like all philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche's personal life markedly influenced his thoughts. He was born in Rocken, near Leipzig in Prussia to Carl Ludwig Nietzsche, a Lutheran pastor and Franziska Nietzsche. Friedrich had two other siblings, Elisabeth and Joseph. Carl died from a brain disease when Friedrich Nietzsche was only four years old. Six months later, Friedrich's younger brother, Joseph also lost his life. Any child aged just four years will be profoundly influenced by the death of a father and a younger sibling, perhaps what caused him to doubt the existence of God and the reason for his pessimism. Later in his life Nietzsche studied theology and classical philology at the University of Bonn with the aim of becoming a minister like his father. Yet he abandoned theology and concentrated on philology.<sup>75</sup>

Nietzsche had a predilection for the works of Kant, Schopenhauer and Darwin and was also intrigued by the general disregard of traditional principles in Europe that Darwin inspired in the later nineteenth century. Nietzsche was opposed to nationalism, racism, Marxist and socialist trends of the time but the zeitgeist of the time was "change" which profoundly influenced his world view.

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<sup>73</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, *Ecce Homo*, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche's Women: Beyond the Whip* (New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1996), 25-30.

<sup>75</sup> William Hubben, *Four Prophets of our Destiny: Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Kafka* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 82.

At the young age of just twenty-four, Nietzsche accepted an offer to become a Professor of classical philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. This illustrates his shrewd knowledge as an academic at that young age. He witnessed, experienced and served in the military during the Franco-Prussian War, which significantly impacted his worldview for he maintained a strong hatred for militarism for the rest of his life. Nietzsche also observed the formation of the German Empire under Otto Von Bismarck. He was a good friend of the great German composer Richard Wagner, whom he learnt much from, though their friendship did not last.

Nietzsche battled with health issues and was forced to resign his position as a professor of philology at Basel. His health made him develop a good understanding in physiology, psychology, pain, and solitude. About a decade before his death in 1900, he suffered a mental breakdown.<sup>76</sup> It is likely he had syphilis, though there is some question as to the diagnosis. Some of his popular works include *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *Ecce Homo* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is noteworthy that *The Will to Power* was assembled by his sister Elizabeth in 1901 after his death, allegedly from his notes, but her editorship makes it questionable in intent and cannot solely be ascribed as his work. Nietzsche once said that his grand ambition was to be a master of chaos. On that account, his style of writing is not as coherent or systematically centered around a single comprehensively structured theme like the other philosophers discussed. He is most famous for a statement he took as an aphorism, “God is dead”.

At a point in the evolution of a society, there becomes a need to assess the values of the institutional pillars of that society as established against new definitions of what is good or bad, for part of progress is self-evaluation. This point of revaluation is the moment of nihilism – nothing

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<sup>76</sup> Hubben, *Four Prophets of our Destiny*, 82.

about earlier institutions is true, everything the individual or society deems moral is possible. In Europe several historical turning points signaled the need for these internal self-assessments. Intellectuals realized that culture is not static, hence there was the need to look beyond what was established and project new ways of doing things. Yet the new also becomes old over time. Nietzsche mused over this repetitive vicissitude of European society and called it “the eternal recurrence of the same”.<sup>77</sup> He implied that society will never cross a finish line to happiness no matter the effort humans put in; things will always be the same because everything is cyclical. Societal evolution means that our effort as humans and societies either in the state of nature or a state of law add up to nothingness at some future point. In the words of Dostoevsky, “man is not a piano key”, and will act as he wills.<sup>78</sup> So an intelligent society should let everything become as it will, without the influence of institutional prerogatives: this is the heart of nihilistic thinking.

Nietzsche’s philosophy predominantly has two central themes. One explores what he called the problem of the end of the nineteenth century – the threat of decadence, a lack of vitality, or a loss of meaning. The other addresses the vitality and the value of morality and truth. Nietzsche’s discussions of the will to power, *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, existentialism, pessimism and Übermenschen are subcategories of these two themes. On the value of morality and truth, Nietzsche asserts that traditional philosophy presumes that truth and morality are inherently good without investigating why. “The moralist assumes truth is harmless and conceals the effects it will have on those who will use it badly.”<sup>79</sup>

Consequently, he reflects that good and bad are not categorical, what may be good in one instance may not be good in another, different times require different values, and bad is different

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*.

<sup>78</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 32.

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*; 10.

from evil. “‘Good’ is what one calls those who do what is moral as if they did it by nature, after long heredity, easily or gladly... Being evil is being ‘not moral’ (immoral), practicing immorality, resisting tradition, however reasonable or stupid tradition may be.”<sup>80</sup> Fittingly, he argues that to know the intrinsic value of a moral act or a simple truth, humans have to search for the vitality in each moral act or truth. Humans ought to ask why it is beneficial to do what we call good. Why is it useful to be obedient, honest or kind? Humans have to reason beyond good and evil because intrinsically there is no good or bad, only interpretations. “Being too moral implies offending people.”<sup>81</sup>

In addition to the value of morality and truth, Nietzsche delves into his favorite dichotomy, that between Apollo and Dionysus. He states that Apollo, the Greek sun god, connotes what is good, while Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and pleasure, denotes baseness. Yet “Apollo could not live without Dionysus”<sup>82</sup> for they are brothers. In other words, good and bad, conscious and unconscious, day and night complement each other, nothing is good – nothing is bad. Good is only good because there is bad. Humans find value through comparison between good, better, bad, worse, or extreme, and each of them connotes value in comparison to one another, but none of them necessarily represents evil: that which has negative value. Nietzsche contends that it is only when we reassess our values that we can know the true vitality of morality and truth and realize the importance of both Apollo and Dionysus distinctly, because “truth is not a self-evident value.”<sup>83</sup>

“Just as it sometimes happens in the realm of the stars that two suns determine the orbit of the planet, and in some cases suns of different colors cast their lights around a single planet, sometimes red light, sometimes green light, and then again lighting both at once, flooding it with

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<sup>80</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 53.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 290.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*; 14.

colors, in the same way we modern men, thanks to the complicated mechanics of our ‘starry heaven’ are determined by different moralities; our actions change their light into different colors. They are rarely unambiguous – and there are enough cases where we carry out actions with many colors.”<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche meant that humans individually have to seek their own truth from their own valuation and not to be influenced by any external motivation; this he defines as the will to power and truth (self-determination).

Furthermore, Nietzsche signaled that nineteenth century Europe was pointing towards dissolution, because “God is dead.” “Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center towards X.”<sup>85</sup> (X presumably meant knowledge, entropy, or dissolution) Nietzsche did not kill God himself; he only announced and echoed the Death of God. Previous philosophers and intellectuals like Machiavelli, Locke, Hume and Schopenhauer had counseled men to reduce human reliance on God – Nietzsche read them all and added volume to what he observed. The backstory to this declaration of the Death of God was that Nietzsche reflectively ruminated over the history of Europe since the classical era and got the epiphany that God no longer occupied the center stage in discussions, Europe was becoming more and more secular by the day. The rise of Darwin and evolution denied the biblical conception of how the earth came to be, and many people questioned the necessity of having a creator at all. The death of God for Nietzsche presaged nihilism, it meant the death of the original impetus behind science and philosophy, the distrust of the highest value, loss of meaning and lack of vitality. Only art could thrive “because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what values these values really had—we require sometimes, new values.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), 215

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 11.

As a professor of philology and a lover of history, Nietzsche was schooled in the central tenets of the Enlightenment. He knew the zeitgeist of the times, the ideas that motivated philosophes, the privations that caused the storming of the Bastille in France which culminated in the French Revolution. He was aware of how the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution had been distorted to spark racial nationalist ideologies in Europe. Nietzsche had been alive through the series of revolutions and revolts in 1848 and learned about their principles later in life. He knew the era he lived in was a time of sweeping changes in all spheres of life – politics, science, religion, culture, industrialization, mass culture and literature. He understood the growing influence of Kant, Marx, Hegel, and rational ideals. He deciphered that God (divine revelation) was relegated to the background in intellectual discussions and everything traditional was becoming obsolete. "One still hopes to get along with a moralism without religious background: but that necessarily leads to nihilism."<sup>87</sup>

"Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape in some beyond, leads to nihilism. 'Everything lacks meaning.'<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche thought that it was only right to openly declare the death of God, as the cultural values of the day had devalued Christian institutions while the Enlightenment and the ensuing scientific revolutions were discovering, rediscovering and inventing new things daily. "Every purely moral value system ends in nihilism: this is expected in Europe."<sup>89</sup> He cogitated that it was time to reevaluate and transvalue all moral codes to replace what was traditional.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>88</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche; The Will to Power*, 230.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 9.



Nihilism, then, is a vehicle for change and not the goal of change itself i.e., the transvaluation process and not the new creation. Nietzsche portended Gillespie's sentiments that "it was not the death of God, but the birth of an inscrutable and all-powerful God, ... that defines the nihilistic impulse."<sup>90</sup> This surmises that nihilism is a human condition, a cyclical phenomenon or a historical atavism because anytime there is an inviolable moral supposition it becomes imperative on society to search for loopholes to set the grounds for remodeling. This nihilistic (eternal return) forecast formed the basis of what later became postmodern culture. Postmodernists argue that no institution is sacred because humans are constantly living in a vehicle of change as opposed to achieving any sort of cultural goal. There is no ultimate good or a highest value, every generation will define their own good and even that is subject to change in the generation itself and/or subsequent generations. Every purely moral value system, the creation of an inscrutable and all-powerful God in due course leads to nihilism. Life, existence, morality, culture and society keeps moving towards an endless modification into the abyss, for perfection is quixotic. Nihilism is a constituent for change and not the end product, it is a stage to attaining an intended result perhaps the result will change too.

On this background, Nietzsche thought that every remnant of the old tradition that had escaped to the modern society needed to be destroyed by the new society: "I philosophize with a hammer." "Perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what 'truthfulness' is."<sup>91</sup> In other words, if God (the culmination of all finite good), philosophy and science were dead, everything else worth destroying must also be destroyed in order to create new values. Nietzsche launched into an open attack on traditional philosophy and Christianity and called himself the anti-Christ.

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<sup>90</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 177.

“Suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth? and uncertainty? Even ignorance?”<sup>92</sup> He concluded that Christianity is slave morality because it denied the “will to power”. Christianity teaches meekness, pity, afterlife and submissiveness – according to Nietzsche, Christianity demonstrated mediocrity. “Finally in Christianity it became whatever is comforting – holy, healing, all hope, all faith in hidden harmony, in future bliss and Justice?”<sup>93</sup> He then attacked the moral principles behind justice: “The initial character of Justice is the character of a trade: Each satisfies the other as much as each receives what he esteems more than the other does.”<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche called everything that is aimed at universality madness: “madness is rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, nations and ages it is the rule.”<sup>95</sup> For Nietzsche, existence itself in a Christian world was valueless and ends in nothing, everything ends in depravity.

In answer, Nietzsche proposed the *Übermensch*, the Superman, the Overman in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. “What? a great man? I always see only the actor of his own ideal.”<sup>96</sup> The Superman is the person who comes out of this decadence to look beyond good and evil and create his own morals. He achieves his “will to power” by acting only according to his own valuation of good and evil without any external influence. “Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as a law?”<sup>97</sup> If all men became Supermen, we could escape the moment where nihilism becomes necessary to reassess a society’s values – because those values would no longer be societally-based but based upon individual preference. “This is my good; this

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<sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 34.

<sup>93</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 53.

<sup>94</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 200.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>96</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>97</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 30.

I love; it pleases me wholly; thus, alone do I will the good. I do not will it as human statute and need.”<sup>98</sup> Ultimately the Superman lives in his own state of nature.

Hobbes feared war, Nietzsche feared the decay of Europe. He cautioned that “distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect cannot of itself give birth to nihilism (i.e., The radical repudiation of value, meaning and desirability).”<sup>99</sup> In this statement Nietzsche meant that existential conditions need not cause nihilism but only the mistrust of the highest value should cause nihilism. He continued that “the meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far.”<sup>100</sup> “Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure of existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any ‘meaning’ in suffering, indeed at all in existence as if everything were in vain.”<sup>101</sup>

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) remarkably influenced Nietzsche. If one juxtaposes their works, it looks as if Dostoevsky provided the drama and Nietzsche wrote a philosophical commentary on the drama. Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy are considered the best Russian novelists of all time. Dostoevsky’s prose is so penetrating that multiple inferences can be drawn from his stories and characters. Like Nietzsche, one central theme in Dostoevsky’s works is nihilism. *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes from Underground*, *The Idiot* and *Brothers Karamazov* reflect nihilistic themes. Unlike Nietzsche, who for the most part wrote for an intellectual audience, Dostoevsky was a novelist, short story writer, essayist and journalist, writing for the edification of any reader willing to buy his works. Dostoevsky’s grand scheme was to persuade his readers to choose Orthodox Christianity amidst the insurgent nihilistic worldview of the time.

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<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 13.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Kaufman, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 121.

<sup>101</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 3.

Dostoevsky's literary works examine the unsettling conditions of life in nineteenth century Russia on themes like politics, religion, philosophy, spirituality and social life. The harsh censorship practiced by the Tsarist regime in Russia meant that Russian writers needed to conceal and be discreet in their attempt to openly review the events of the day. After publishing his first book *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky was accused of being a part of a literary group that spoke against the Tsarist regime under Nicholas I. He was arrested by the tsarist police and sentenced to death, only to have his sentence commuted at the very last minute as he faced a firing squad. After this horror he was sent to a prison camp in Siberia where he spent four years before he was freed. These experiences perhaps gave him a gloomy outlook of life but at the same time made see himself as destined for a worthy cause or protected by a divine power hence his tilt towards Christianity. Other Russian intellectuals like Herzen, Kropotkin and Bakunin had to leave Russia for fear of being sent to Siberia themselves – basically, anyone who was political and who could think knew better than to stay in Russia. Dostoevsky's books reveal detailed soliloquys from his characters, some of whom are nihilistic. Other instances demonstrate the suffering and harsh conditions of the characters physically and emotionally. Like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky is a deconstructionist and can tear apart everything established. Dostoevsky explores nihilism in great details through his characters. Yet unlike Nietzsche who had an atheistic outlook, Dostoevsky suggested that a return to orthodox Christianity was a better way of dealing with the problem of nihilism.<sup>102</sup>

The general climate in Europe from the mid-nineteenth century was a shift towards rationalism and science. Russia was going through a series of acculturations from the West after the Napoleonic Wars. Rationalism had swept God aside in intellectual circles and secularism was the order of the day. Dostoevsky saw the possible chaos that the death of God might cause. Like

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<sup>102</sup> Neider, *Short Novels of the Masters*; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*.

Nietzsche he predicted anarchy, and it came to pass. Dostoevsky demonstrates in his novels that nihilistic positions lead to despair. He set up characters who have genuine arguments to be nihilistic and leads them on until they crash because of their nihilistic positions. Then they embrace Christianity (among them Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* and Ivan in *Brothers Karamazov*).

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky's protagonist is a character called Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is an intelligent law student at St. Petersburg who is struggling with life. He is from a poor family and striving to pay his rent and eat healthily. Raskolnikov is an academic, therefore buys into the materialistic rationalist ideas of the time. For him God was dead and only cowards lived by the traditional moral standards of the age. Raskolnikov is a bit of a narcissist too. He is ambitious and has a liking for great men like Napoleon. Raskolnikov esteems the idea of an exceptional man or a superior man and sees himself as such, he is destined for greatness. Raskolnikov's aspiration to be a superman is akin to Nietzsche's superman and he makes his own laws. Raskolnikov is a nihilist and for him there is no good and evil, everything is permitted, morals are for Untermensch.

There is a pawnbroker in town whom Raskolnikov and other people hate because she is old, unattractive, exploitative, unkind and cruel. The pawnbroker also lives with her niece whom she is also unkind to. As a superior man Raskolnikov intends to kill this old pawn broker, thinking that if his purpose is justifiable to himself, he will have no regrets. His justification was to steal the pawnbroker's wealth, pay his rent and school fee, solve his family problems, free the pawnbroker's niece from bondage and be benevolent with what he acquires. He set out to kill the pawnbroker but Elizabeth, the pawn broker's niece, appears at the crime scene. Raskolnikov is forced to kill her too because she would report him if he let Elizabeth go. After the crime he is

inundated with guilt and delirium. In the denouement he reports to the police, and he is sentenced to a short prison term in Siberia. In prison he is disgusted because he could not be the superior man he wanted to be. After a serious ailment Raskolnikov wakes up one day and becomes a born-again Christian.<sup>103</sup>

Dostoevsky's aim was to criticize Raskolnikov's nihilistic position to point out that nihilism only ends in chaos. Raskolnikov assumed audacious ideas that he could not carry through. Other characters who assumed similar positions in the novel like Svidrigailov wished death on himself and Raskolnikov was saved because he tilted towards Christianity. Dostoevsky implied that Raskolnikov only wished to be a nihilist and did not really understand what it meant to choose a path that led to chaos. In that analogy Raskolnikov represented Russia. Dostoevsky pointed out that no matter how rational it was to abandon traditional ideas and take up untested ideas, if those ideas are tilted towards immorality, such a decision will end in dissolution and regrets. For Dostoevsky, it is eternal to return to Christianity to keep order.

Dostoevsky's aim was to criticize Raskolnikov's nihilistic position, to point out that nihilism only ends in chaos and hopelessness. Raskolnikov allowed himself the audacious idea that he was above morality; he committed an audacious act, a murder, which he could not accept the consequences of because they pointed only toward depravity. Raskolnikov's "Crime" was to become a nihilist; his "Punishment" was his chaotic state, and he was only safe because he chose God and Christianity. Raskolnikov's experiment in nihilism and his own superiority were meant to illustrate the fallacy in the assumption that "everything is permissible."

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is one of his popular works that also speaks to nihilism. The book is a story narrated by a man Dostoevsky calls the "underground man". The

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<sup>103</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Signet Classics, 2001)

underground man is a forty-year-old retired civil servant. He knows he is nihilistic and has no clear conclusion as to what is good or evil yet. He is aware of all his evil doings and thoughts – at least, in the moral vision of Western civilization – and their repercussions, but he is not bothered by them. “I invented adventures for myself and made up a life, so as at least to live in some way.”<sup>104</sup> He calls himself sick, unattractive and spiteful and believes he has a disease but knows nothing about the sickness or what exactly it is (the reader might speculate that the disease is nihilism itself). The underground man is aware he is an intelligent man but has conflicting emotions and does not know how to become anything different than what he is – good or bad, he just exists.

The underground man knows that the paths he takes only end in dissolution, but he still takes them because of his sense of adventure and his boredom with being restrained. He continues that “in despair there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of hopelessness of one’s position.”<sup>105</sup> Amidst all this the underground man blames himself and no one else for his adventures. The underground man loves pain and claims that there is enjoyment in pain. He has no respect for himself because “can a man who attempts to find enjoyment in the very feeling of his own degradation possibly have a spark of respect for himself?”<sup>106</sup>

The underground man goes on to address humans in general. He reflects that men fully understand their real interest (peace, wealth, prosperity and freedom) but find it difficult to clearly spell out how those goals are of benefit to them. “What if it so happens that a man’s advantage, sometimes, not only may, but even must, consist in his desiring in certain cases what is harmful to himself and not advantageous?”<sup>107</sup> The underground man concludes that each individual man is a

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<sup>104</sup> Neider, *Short Novels of the Masters*; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 125.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>106</sup> Neider, *Short Novels of the Masters*; Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 125.

<sup>107</sup> *Notes from Underground*, 138.

compound personality and not simply an individual. What interests a man most “is [his] ready[ness] to act in opposition to all laws... in fact in opposition to reason, honor, peace and prosperity.”<sup>108</sup> In this Dostoevsky meant that all humans have the potential to be like the underground man: to be nihilistic. Dostoevsky emphasizes that the argument that civilization makes mankind reasonable is a “mere logical exercise.” “Man has such a predilection for systems and abstract deductions that he is ready to distort the truth intentionally, he is ready to deny the evidence of his senses only to justify his logic.”<sup>109</sup> This means that humans are not reasonable as the Enlightenment preached, and the corollary of rationalism is anarchy. Like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky’s underground man assumed that the death of God meant everything else can thrive.

The underground man ruminates that man once justified wars and capital punishments with religion, yet even with the reduction of religion’s power in the modern world, civilizations engaged in war more than ever – at the time, the American Civil War and the Second Schleswig War were ongoing in 1864. Dostoevsky infers that times have changed but humans and everything remains the same, man is nihilistic at core and will continue to behave like he lives in a state of nature. The underground man keeps mocking society for abandoning God and choosing science and rationality instead, - “man is stupid... phenomenally stupid or rather he is not at all stupid, but he is so ungrateful (to God) that you could not find his like in all creation.”<sup>110</sup> This is because man does not want rationality, but rather the total freedom of his own will, whether the results are rational or not.

Dostoevsky and his underground man further avow that life is worthless and ends in nothingness because nothing good can come out of man. These conclusions from Dostoevsky are

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>109</sup> *Notes from Underground*, 140.

<sup>110</sup> *Notes from Underground*, 141.



central to any deconstructionist theories – man is irrational and incapable of achieving anything worthwhile.

Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then, out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick. He would even risk his cakes and would deliberately desire the most fatal rubbish, the most uneconomical absurdity, simply to introduce into all this positive good sense his fatal fantastic element. It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself—as though that were so necessary—that men still are men and not the keys of a piano, which the laws of nature threaten to control so completely that soon one will be able to desire nothing but by the calendar. And that is not all: even if man really were nothing but a piano key, even if this were proved to him by natural science and mathematics, even then he would not become reasonable, but would purposely do something perverse out of simple ingratitude, simply to gain his point. And if he does not find means he will contrive destruction and chaos, will contrive sufferings of all sorts, only to gain his point! He will launch a curse upon the world, and as only man can curse (it is his privilege, the primary distinction between him and other animals), may be by his curse alone he will attain his object—that is, convince himself that he is a man and not a piano-key! If you say that all this, too, can be calculated and tabulated—chaos and darkness and curses, so that the mere possibility of calculating it all beforehand would stop it all, and reason would reassert itself, then man would purposely go mad in order to be rid of reason and gain his point! I believe in it, I answer for it, for the whole work of man really seems to consist in nothing but proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano key!... And what leads you to the conclusion that man's inclinations *need* reforming? In short, how do you know that such a reformation will be a benefit to man?... I agree that man is pre-eminently a creative animal, predestined to strive consciously for an object and to engage in engineering—that is, incessantly and eternally to make new roads, *wherever they may lead*. But the reason why he wants sometimes to go off at a tangent may just be that he is *predestined* to make the road... Man likes to make roads and to create, that is a fact beyond dispute. But why has he such a passionate love for destruction and chaos also?... And who knows (there is no saying with certainty), perhaps the only goal on earth to which mankind is striving lies in this incessant process of attaining, in other words, in life itself, and not in the thing to be attained, which must always be expressed as a formula, as positive as twice two makes four, and such positiveness is not life, gentlemen, but is the beginning of death. In fact, man is a comical creature; there seems to be a kind of jest in it all... I admit that twice two makes four is an excellent thing, but if we are to give everything its due, twice two makes five is sometimes a very charming thing too.

And why are you so firmly, so triumphantly, convinced that only the normal and the positive—in other words, only what is conducive to welfare—is for the advantage of man? Is not reason in error as regards advantage? Does not man, perhaps, love something besides well-being? Perhaps he is just as fond of suffering? Perhaps suffering is just as great a benefit to him as well-being? Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering, and that is a fact. Whether it's good or bad, it is sometimes very pleasant, too, to smash things.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Notes from Underground*, 160.

Dostoevsky's underground man concluded that "the long and short of it is... that it is better to do nothing! ... there is not one thing, not one word of what I have written that I really believe... I believe it, perhaps, but at the same time I feel and suspect that I am lying."<sup>112</sup> Dostoevsky and his character's like Raskolnikov and the underground man preaches a return to Christianity: "give anyone of us... a little more independence, untie our hands, widen the spheres of our activity...I assure you – we'd be begging to be under control again at once... leave us alone without books and we'll be lost and in confusion at once."<sup>113</sup>

A close assessment of the underground man suggests that he is in a dilemma of choosing between Christianity and rationality. Dostoevsky prefers Christianity, but the underground man wants unbridled freedom, so will chose something else. In the end, Dostoevsky accepts, through his underground man character, that humans are controlled by their will and that leads to nihilism, yet nothing can be done about it. Nihilism, dissolution, chaos is the ultimate human condition. Dostoevsky declares that life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced. The Enlightenment killed God, and Dostoevsky's underground man demolished every alternative that man came up with to replace God. He infers that freedom without God gives lust for power and ends in nihilism. "It was not enough to kill God – it was necessary to kill man."<sup>114</sup> Dostoevsky did not set out to herald nihilism but show its consequences for society so that society would eschew the principle of the doctrine and avoid the problem of nihilism. However, he explained the concept in great detail to the extent that the underground man and Raskolnikov, who were his philosophical antagonists, became protagonists for most of his readers. Today, his solutions are ignored, and Dostoevsky is synonymous with nihilism.

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<sup>112</sup> *Notes from Underground*, 160.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>114</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 315.

Nietzsche and Dostoevsky have influenced both the cultural and academic spheres of Western culture and the entire world since their time in the nineteenth century till today. Nihilism was a cultural movement by the turn of the twentieth century and had undertones in the causation of both the First and Second World Wars. Culturally, in twentieth century Europe, nothing was true; all was permissible for nihilism was complemented by Darwinism and relativist ideologies. Nothing was stable; everything was subject to change. Painters, musicians, composers, cultural movements, and politicians imbibed the teachings of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, as nihilism became a part and parcel of the Western and global culture. In academia new fields of studies expounded the philosophies of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky; existentialism, phenomenology, postmodernism, and psychoanalysis were born. Nietzschean ideologies cut across philosophy, history, law, sociology, psychology and almost all the social sciences and humanities. Dostoevsky influenced the nihilist and anarchist movement in Russia which culminated in the Russian revolution. In the end, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky summed up history through their time, and their proclamations and predictions continue to haunt the twenty-first century, nihilism has come to stay. The next two chapters discuss the influences of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky in relation to the concept of nihilism.

### **Chapter Three: Russian Nihilism and the Existentialists**

“My ambitions were not in themselves bad, but perhaps I took too much upon myself, being convinced that men might become rational, just, and happy.”<sup>115</sup>

This section examines the practical impacts of the philosophy of nihilism in Russia, mainland Europe and in academia. Nietzsche did not philosophize in a vacuum. Dostoevsky did not so much invent the underground man as he tried to empathize with radicals with whom he was familiar in Russia. In the spirit of the time, nihilism became a political movement in Russia in the 1860s and 1870s, a populist and anarchistic political movement in opposition to the Orthodox Christian tsarist autocracy. The death of God plunged Russian intellectuals into a bedlam as every philosopher was providing his model to replace God. The back and forth of different ideological movements meant that nothing was pristine, and everything was permissible. Meanwhile, existentialism was the progeny of nihilism, an extension of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

Part of what made the concept of nihilism widespread in nineteenth century Europe was Darwin's theory of evolution. Charles Darwin (1809-1882) was the most prominent intellectual of the nineteenth century after he published his celebrated *Origin of Species*, his theory and its derivatives became known as Darwinism. In *Origin of Species*, he expounds his theory of natural selection. Darwin concluded that organisms are born with mutations, and if those mutations made them likelier to survive in a given environment, they passed on those genetic mutation to their offspring through reproduction. The adaptive traits are passed on to offspring until the variations

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<sup>115</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 7. A quote of Catherine II

become a new species. Consequently, creatures who cannot adapt to their environment die off without descendants. What can be inferred is that every life would do anything to survive to preserve its lineage even if it takes changing form or shape for adaptive traits are random and keep changing. Thus humans, the universe and the environment will continuously change (mutate) in perpetuity. Darwin's declarations suggested that diversity, existence, nature and surviving are products of natural biological processes of evolution and not a divine process as upheld by Christian teachings. Implied in Darwin's theory is that living and surviving is so raw that there are no right or wrong ways of doing it, an organism just tries as much as possible to live beyond the present in order to dominate and preserve its longevity and progeny. Because no organism knows whether they are designed well enough to survive, therefore individuals will do whatever is necessary to be successful and ignore any institutional dictate which would hamper its existence. Survival connotes aloneness, hence selfishness because it is an existence trying to keep itself in a raw and timeless space with or without considering any other factor. Embedded in Darwinism is the nihilistic impulse.

Darwin's theory became widely accepted in Europe and the philosophical concepts behind evolution were applied not just in fields of science but also in the social sciences - social Darwinism. In the end, the theory enhanced the concept of nationalism, giving it a specious biological, "racial" dimension. Nationalism connotes ethnicities proving that they are the fittest group to survive, hence nationalists wanted to dominate others or simply create an identity to survive. The reception of Darwin's theory suggested or reiterated that the Bible was faulty as natural history. God became subtly dead, but Nietzsche announced it soon after. Darwinism and its interpretations were the zeitgeist of the day.

## Russian Nihilism

The Enlightenment in Russia was marked by rational universalism, anti-feudalism and freethinking. The advent of Enlightenment ideals and philosophy meant that people could now probe into affairs of the day and recommend alternatives. Russia was becoming secular, people were less superstitious, and the fear of heaven and hell and the tsar were declining. Several thinkers made their own recommendations on how they thought Russia ought to be governed. The spread of revolutionary ideas was making Russia ungovernable according to Catherine as people began to challenge the kind of changes she was trying to implement. Catherine started to imprison some of these “dissenters.” In the end, the pendulous views of the philosophers between secularism and religion were propelling the Russian citizenry towards nihilism because everyone had an opinion and no institution in Russia seemed to have answers to the empire’s backward development, in European terms.

“Modern Russian history began with the ‘negation of the past’ forced through by Peter the Great, which destroyed ‘all traditions so thoroughly that no human effort would be capable of restoring them.’”<sup>116</sup> Peter the Great and Catherine the Great started radical attempts to acculturate the Russian people along Western European lines. Core traditional Russian values were to be abandoned and new ethics were to be adopted. Rebellion, change and progress became the mantra in Russia. The principles of the French revolution were also simmering through Russian cultural life. The revolutionary events in 1848 mainland Europe stirred up radical, anarchists, socialist and communist ideas in Russia. The French Revolution was interpreted in Russia as a sign for abandonment of all traditional institutions and values, hence the need for new values and the modelling of Russia on Western ideals. Even before Nietzsche made his famous pronouncement,

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<sup>116</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 173.

Russian intellectual knew God no longer occupied center stage in discussions and new values needed to be created.

Pyotr Chaadaev was one of the earliest philosophical ideologues in Russia who presaged the need to alter the highest values in the Russian society. Nonetheless, the term nihilism in Russian literature was first used by Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) in *Fathers and Sons*. According to Turgenev the nihilist is “a person who does not accept any principle on faith, however much that principle may be honored.”<sup>117</sup> For Turgenev, nihilism or negation was important because “the ground wants clearing,” in order to create.<sup>118</sup> Turgenev’s description of nihilism in *Fathers and Sons* aimed to critique Russian youth’s denial of the Western philosophical idealism of their predecessors and represented Russian nihilists as disaffected, irritated, and cynical people who were insidious to society. Turgenev perhaps wanted to ward off Russian youth from revolutionary thinking to keep the peace in Russia and not mimic the revolutionaries in France. Thus, Turgenev attached derogatory connotations to his definition of nihilism. Yet, nihilism became a fashionable lifestyle as a cerebral attitude. Nihilists were against the tsardom, the Orthodox Church, law, family and any form of repression. They were anti-authoritarian, reversed official etiquettes but tried to identify with the underprivileged. The label “nihilist” became attached to the revolutionaries of the 1870s, particularly terrorists. The nihilists’ (Pisarevites) objective was to attain personal happiness at any price, yet they were also interested in the happiness of others; for that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives through assassinations, particularly through bombings.

On this background, Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828-1889) delineated the significance of nihilism in his book *What is to be Done?* The book defined revolutionary thinking as it inspired groups identifying as “nihilist” organizations. Chernyshevsky was a novelist, social critic and a

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<sup>117</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

<sup>118</sup> Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*

celebrated Russian philosopher who led the school of Russian nihilists in the 1860s. He was so influential that he was eulogized by popular figures like Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. He influenced the authorship of several literary and philosophical works not just in Russia but also in Europe. Dostoevsky's *Note from Underground* was partly motivated by, and was a reply to Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* Tolstoy and Vladimir Lenin both wrote books titled *What is to be Done?* inspired by Chernyshevsky. Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* was a fillip for radicals, revolutionaries and nihilist movements in Russia and Europe because it painted a picture of a textbook future world and a new perfect human who has transcended the old ways of life. Chernyshevsky's goal was to reconstruct a new society or values system for the good of humanity after destroying the old traditions. His design was to promote the creation of a utopian society in Russia and the world where all people would be socially and economically free and equal. There would be no government, nation or religion and everyone followed his/her will. Like Turgenev, nihilism was important to Chernyshevsky because it "cleared the ground" for the creation of a society where all things are permissible.

Dmitry Pisarev (1840-1868) and the pisarevites emerged and nihilism became allied to political violence. Pisarev is one of the first Russian philosophers whose works were explicitly classified as nihilistic. Pisarev was a social critic and a philosopher like his predecessor but changed the narrative of what nihilism was to become in Russian. His work is considered a prefix to Nietzschean philosophy. Dostoevsky's character Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is said to be a travesty of the pisarevites. The pisarevites were to be supermen thus free from all social and moral authorities. The depth of Pisarev's influence is evident in the Russian revolutionary activities as Lenin and his followers were Pisarev's ardent students. Anti-nihilists like Dostoevsky were actually inspired because of the momentum of the pisarevites.



Pisarev preached the radical denunciation of all conventional establishments – the tsarist autocracy, the Russian Orthodox Church, the aristocracy, any institution that defined Russian society. Pisarev was against immoral individualism, i.e., people who did not recognize regulations, morals or principles. Yet his aim was still to obliterate values which had devalued themselves and supplant them with new values for the common good. Most radically, Pisarev promoted agnosticism, which was a threat to the tsarist autocracy because the tsar was the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. This made his followers enemies of the state for they spearheaded the democratic- revolutionary movements in 1860 Russia.

Pisarev's version of nihilism argued that humans ought to pay attention to what gives them pleasure but should pursue pleasure that is in line with the social goal of solving the inescapable problem of hunger and shelter. All other revolutionary movements in Russia toed this line. Pisarev argued that humans should pursue "the willing subordination to the rigor of critical reflection and the taste for steadfast, 'socially useful' work."<sup>119</sup> For Pisarev, like Turgenev, nihilism is to be understood constructively as a rebellion against traditional beliefs, but the revolt should be aimed at creating the basis for a prosperous future. Pisarev's philosophy paved the way for revolutionary groups in Russia because he had taught them to rebel. "That which is dead, and decaying will come crushing down into the grave on its own; our role is merely to give it the final impetus and bury the stinking corpses in the mud."<sup>120</sup> In Russia nihilism was an attempt to demolish traditional institutions in favor of new ideas that were better suited for a more humane society and for the future.

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<sup>119</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 213.

<sup>120</sup> Dmitry Pisarev, *Selected Philosophical, Social and Political Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1938), 245.

Sergey Nechayev (1847-1882) was another nihilist philosopher, an anarchist (anarcho-communist) and a terrorist who was famous for his fervid advocacy for revolution in his *Catechism of a Revolution*. His goal was to create a movement for the “merciless destruction” of the Russian state and society.<sup>121</sup> He added momentum to the pisarevites and declared that “even the most immoral acts were justified if they promoted revolution”; he advocated for the “quickest and surest annihilation of the existing order.”<sup>122</sup> Nechayev is known for echoing Machiavelli’s statement “the end justifies the means.”<sup>123</sup> *Catechism of a Revolution* was a guide for revolutionists because a revolution for him was the means to an end for a better Russia. “The revolutionary is a doomed man, he has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no properties and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and a single passion for revolution.” His definition of a revolutionist is parallel to who a nihilist is. For Nechayev, if humans were the architects of their own destiny or values, then revolutionary activities were a moral duty. Soon, anti-radicals like Dostoevsky saw nihilism as causing violence, particularly after an attempted assassination on Tsar Alexander II in 1880. Dostoevsky’s aim was to paint nihilism dark to veer the youth away from any nihilistic intents. In the denouement his antagonists like Raskolnikov and the underground man in turn became the protagonists for the youth and the nihilists; ironically, he helped to popularize nihilism.

Nihilism was mostly identified with anarchist and populist movements in Russia. The anarchists wanted to eliminate any form of a state in Russia to free the individual without a state. For the populists, the idea was to purify Russia from any doctrines and make the common people decide what was good for themselves. Both the anarchists and the populists were markedly

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<sup>121</sup> Nechayev, *Catechism of a Revolutionist*.

<sup>122</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 164.

<sup>123</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 12-14.

influenced by Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876). Bakunin was one of the most influential revolutionary anarchists, a socialist, and a fecund political writer in nineteenth century Russia. Some of his major works include *God and the State*, *Stateless Socialism: Anarchism*, and *Revolutionary Catechism*. He is known for advocating for the abolition of the state and the liberation of the oppressed. He had an acute influence on the peasant socialist movements in Russia even after his death. Bakunin's anarchists' movement inspired both the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War. He is also famous for being a vehement opposer to both Marxism and Capitalism. Bakunin promoted the need for an overall revolutionary annihilation of the old order. Bakunin viewed himself as a materialist, atheist, and positivist. He thought religion should be destroyed because man created God and now man had become a slave of his own creation. "As heaven became richer, earth became poorer...the creation of deity was a historical necessity but at the same time a terrible error and misfortune... the idea of God is the most emphatic negation of human freedom."<sup>124</sup> Bakunin argued that "if there were really a God, one would have to make sure he ceased to exist."<sup>125</sup> For Bakunin, Satan was "the eternal rebel, first freethinker and first fighter for the emancipation of the universe."<sup>126</sup> The idea to highlight Satan implied that Bakunin meant revolutions should be ceaseless, nothing is true, and all things are permissible at all times, and nothing should ever be established.

Bakunin believed that the essential kernel of life is impulsiveness - the will. Nothing outward should oppose the freedom of the will: not science, theories or socialism. Bakunin propounded a social philosophy which stressed that humans should make laws governing social behavior because social norms, unlike political legislation, gratify an inner necessity. The state and

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<sup>124</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1916), 11.

<sup>125</sup> Bakunin, *God and the State*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Bakunin, *God and the State*.

the church assume that man in a state of nature is inherently evil and must be restrained, but social norms are created out of necessity and through trial and error. Like all nihilists, Bakunin's methodology and his conclusions are contradictory. Russian nihilists, and nihilist thinkers in general, are people of word and mind, and generally not of deed for some of their models were/are not practicable but mere chimeras. Russian nihilists in general were more than willing to promulgate that nothing is true, but rarely were they willing to demonstrate that everything is possible because they provided their own solution to limit the possibility of making everything permissible.

Another important nihilistic thinker of Russia was Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), known to be a populist. According to Herzen "history has no goal... and that each generation was an end in itself."<sup>127</sup> Herzen meant that in history nothing is predetermined, society or life has no intrinsic meaning; everything is possible, and it is unto every generation or individual to decide what they deem fit as the meaning of life. "If only people wanted to save themselves instead of saving the world, to liberate themselves instead of liberating humanity, how much they would do for the salvation of the world and the liberation of humanity."<sup>128</sup> Herzen proclaimed the total destruction of all myths and faiths, each individual should live for themselves. "After you have blown up the bourgeois society, when the smoke has settled and the ruins have cleared away, what will emerge – with certain modification – is just another form of bourgeois society."<sup>129</sup> Herzen implied eternal return to the same, that everything ends in nothingness, all human efforts to create or destroy yields emptiness and a return to the same. He also mentioned that "private property, church, state – all were once powerful training grounds serving the liberation and development of mankind, they will

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<sup>127</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 164.

<sup>128</sup> Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore and The Russian People and Socialism* (London: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 2011), 33.

<sup>129</sup> Herzen, *From the Other Shore and The Russian People and Socialism*, 45.

be left behind when they cease to be necessary.”<sup>130</sup> Herzen inferred that anything which has devaluated itself should be destroyed and new values adopted until they (new values) are no more relevant and in that case also have to be destroyed, he was the epitome of nihilism in Russia.

Naturalism also gained roots in the Russian intellectual milieu. Naturalism was the viewpoint that man can attain in material life a state of lasting joy only by development of his natural faculties. Naturalism saw the divine aspects of religion as a falsehood. “God is man, Man is God... men will only be free when they rejected all illusions.”<sup>131</sup> Naturalism, then, was one of the intellectual antecedents of Marxism in Russia – “Socialism was founded not so much on the desire for social justice as on the vainglorious attempt to put man in the place of God.”<sup>132</sup> Naturalists argued that “The joy of destruction is also a creative joy.”<sup>133</sup> Russian intellectual thought was skirting the boundaries of nihilism.

Dostoevsky pondered the pervasiveness of not just the movements but the doctrine of nihilism and its consequence on society and proposed that nihilism only led to despair. He opined that a return to Christianity was the perfect solution to the problem of nihilism in Russia. Dostoevsky’s conclusions were shunned but his methodology of explicating how a nihilist thought in his characters (Raskolnikov and the underground man) were adopted and imbibed by Russian youth and nihilistic thinkers as it increased the momentum of these radical groups. Amidst the bevy of Russian nihilistic ideologues mentioned above, whom all had reflective influence on the notion of nihilism and revolutionary thinking in Russia, Dostoevsky’s input most significantly made the notion widespread and worthy of scrutinizing in scholarly discourses. Dostoevsky’s anti-

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<sup>130</sup> Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1924), 21.

<sup>131</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 159.

<sup>132</sup> Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 164.

<sup>133</sup> Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 72.

nihilistic (anti-revolutionary) credos rekindled the growing nihilistic thinking among Russian youth. Furthermore, by the time Nietzsche's writings gained credence, some of these Russian nihilists had written most of their renowned books already but the new generation (their followers) turned to Nietzsche and Dostoevsky for inspiration to fuel their revolutionary activities. For instance, the Bolshevik deeply admired Nietzsche.<sup>134</sup> The nihilists gulped Nietzsche's hatred of the state. They also like the notion of the Übermensch for the nihilist (the new person) was to be neither a slave nor a master. Russian futurists similarly esteemed the cultural iconoclasm, anti-rational, and anti-historicist ideas of Nietzschean philosophy.

The Russian nihilists sparked student activism which was termed "go to the people". They stirred up the Russia people for revolution, and thus were integral in the causes of the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions. Their greatest practical "accomplishment" in Russian history beyond just writing and replying to each other, was the "propaganda of the deed", particularly through the assassination of Alexander II in 1881.<sup>135</sup> The nihilists made it necessary for Russian leaders to intensify the use of force as they could only be silenced with violent repressions or by brute force. The nihilists contributed to the conception of the Soviet Union because most of them proposed stateless free people and were vehemently against capitalism doctrines. The nihilists gained credence among intellectuals, radicals and the masses because they propagated their sentiments amidst tsarist censorship and were willing to do anything to be heard. Lenin consummated all that the nihilists had preached over the years. Without Lenin Russian nihilism would have been a mere footnote in history but such is history for without certain triggers or apposite personalities different

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<sup>134</sup> Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 167.

<sup>135</sup> Edvard Radzinsky, *Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 287.

historical narratives would have been told differently. The significance of Russian nihilists in Russian history cannot be gainsaid.

### **Existentialism**

Existentialism arose in Europe as a spinoff of the doctrine of nihilism; Kierkegaard is often considered its first exponent because he was one of the earliest to explore in detail the absurdity of existence as an individual in tandem with the complexity of choosing with certainty what is right or wrong. Generally, though, Nietzsche's statement "God is Dead" is what commenced modern existentialism. Similarly, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is "the best overture for existentialism ever written."<sup>136</sup> Nihilism was necessitated by the effect of the Enlightenment on intellectual perceptions of Christianity and the perceived condition of the individual as being forlorn in the midst of the multitude. Commensurately, the concept of nihilism presaged the doctrine of existentialism – if nothing is true, and everything is possible, then the individual must define the boundaries of possibilities for him/herself. The nihilistic teachings of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky segued into existentialism.

Existentialism was primarily an accessible literary movement that led many intellectuals to explore its ideas seriously. Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism* defined existentialism as "the attempt to draw all the consequences from a position of consistent atheism." In this, Sartre opined that existentialism is/was the corollary of the death of God. Existentialists absorbed all the nihilistic teaching of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky and resolved that indeed nothing is true, so everything is permissible. Existentialism as a philosophical supposition is pivoted around an inquest into the individual's unique existence in an enigmatic cosmos. The existentialist faces the conundrum to exist without allowing societal institutions to impose concepts upon them,

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<sup>136</sup>Blackham, *Reality, Man, and Existence*, 14.

defining what is good or bad or right or wrong. This illustrates that existentialism is akin to nihilism. Existentialism is the philosophical belief that each individual is accountable for creating purpose and meaning in his/her own life. In other words, existentialism is a philosophy that argues that whatever sustains and advances and enhances one's existence is morally correct – that life is absurd and has no meaning, “God is dead” and therefore it is each individual's life quest to find their own reason for existence. At the turn of the century, several thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Karl Jasper guzzled the ideas of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky and continued the mission of the deconstruction of Christian institutions and values. Subsequently, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Kafka scrounged excerpts from these sages and elevated the doctrine of existentialism.

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was one of the renowned novelists of the twentieth century. Kafka did not only theorize but in real life lived an existential life. Kafka has a word named after him – “Kafkaesque” which shows his immortality as a human and as a philosopher. Kafkaesque means needless, labyrinthine, and vexing.<sup>137</sup> Some of his popular novels and short stories include *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*, *Amerika* and *The Hunger Artist*. *The Trial* examines the life of an individual, Josef K., who feels an unknown guilt, self-hatred, agony, alienation, shame, and powerless in front of authorities (life), and assumes that death is better than living.<sup>138</sup> Josef K is arrested for an unspecified crime, by people who do not identify themselves. After the arrest, he is released and made to go about his usual routines but told to report to a court on a certain date. Josef K becomes interested in defending his innocence to the authorities proving his guilt, although neither he nor the authorities know exactly what his charge or offense is. On the trial day, Josef K enters the courts and launches into a tirade to defend his guilelessness, but nobody seems to listen or care. He goes on to hire a lawyer but any attempt to prove his viridity only exacerbates his

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<sup>137</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>138</sup> Hubben, *Four Prophets of our Destiny*, 140.



plight. Josef K is trapped in a labyrinth that he cannot get out of, and it goes on to affect his entire life. In the end, he is arrested again and murdered. *The Trial* demonstrated how vexing life and living is amidst the plethora of unknowns. The meaninglessness and absurdity of existence amounts to mere toiling and ends in nothingness. Perhaps then, each individual should do as he wills for nothing is true because nothing is worth it, all is permissible. *The Trial* pointed out the facelessness and capriciousness of existing institutions, with the implied argument that they need overthrowing. *The Trial* predicted the rise of totalitarianism where anybody can be arrested for no reason.<sup>139</sup>

*The Metamorphosis* is the most venerated among Kafka's works. The book speaks to how the family of Gregor Samsa changed as a result of Gregor's own change. Gregor is the bread winner of his family and committed to family duties. His parents are retired, and Grete, his younger sister does not work. His family are therefore indebted to him and respect him for they are dependent on him. Gregor wakes up one morning only to realize that he has turned into a giant insect, who can hear people talk but humans cannot comprehend his speech. After his transformation, Gregor's father became hostile towards him and embarrassed by him. Gregor's supervisor at work fled from him because the supervisor was afraid of what he had turned into. His mom and sister (Grete) hoped Gregor would return to his previous state. As events unfold, Gregor eavesdrops on conversations his family holds. They lament his current state, and he finds their arguments undeserved because he thought his family would be more grateful for his commitment before his transformation. Eventually, Gregor died, and the family put themselves together to provide for themselves in his absence.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999).

<sup>140</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (New York; Dover Publications, 1996).

The book reflects how alienated individuals can be in existence, how friends and family will move on with or without one's help and how ungrateful and confusing people and life can be. One is a hero in one moment and irrelevant in another. The book surveys the misery and the absurdity of the human condition. Kafka does not explicitly explore nihilism, but his themes display the meaninglessness in existence and how humans fight a hopeless battle against life no matter how good or bad one is. Kafka's aim was to teach endurance, genuineness, humor, and the will to continue this absurd life no matter the pain. He preaches to not be afraid of failure because life is just about repeated failures. Knowing how uncomfortable existence is, is necessary because only then can one overcome. Kafka teaches optimism with a pessimistic approach. He communicates that the fundamental parameters or conditions of human existence are inescapable. Embracing fear like Kafka is a way to deal with the undefined processes of existence i.e., life after the death of God. Kafka became a cultural figure during and after the Great War as his works became widespread and existentialism was becoming a pervasive philosophy in the twentieth century. He explored new boundaries (additional possibilities) in the existence process that were hitherto overlooked.

During the twentieth century, the two World Wars changed people's view on life. The sheer destruction of trench warfare, the rise of totalitarian communism and fascism between the wars, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb seemed like all of the evidence any Westerner would need of the death of God. Obviously, there was a clear need for individuals to find their own meaning of life since societal institutions had devolved into such immorality. The existentialists merely laid bare how the Wars made life "existential" (pragmatic, really) in a European world now denuded of any previously held idea of the positive nature of institutional progress. If there was a God, why did he allow the Wars? Why had capitalism collapsed into the depression after the First World

War? Why did seemingly advanced conceptions of man's desire for community and equality result in the murderous totalitarianism of Soviet communism and German Nazism? From these events and the questions, they elicited from individuals, existentialism was born and demonstrated its relevance to Western life.

Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Victor Frankl are famous for professing that suicide is the ultimate philosophical question. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living, that is the fundamental question of philosophy."<sup>141</sup> Implicit in this quote is that life has no meaning and if an individual discovers that, the question to ask oneself is "is it (life) worth living." Camus' work spells out the cruelty, suffering, pain, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and the absurdity of the human existence. Camus concludes that existence is absurd, hence one has to acknowledge the difficulty in living and try to endure life for that is the only way one can overcome suicidal thoughts. "There are causes worth dying for, but none is worth killing for."<sup>142</sup> According to Camus, humans should not be hopeful about progress because that leads to disappointment. There is nothing better in living, hence existence should be embraced as a duty and not to be enjoyed. Like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Camus attacked the Christian doctrine of afterlife and pronounced that the hope for another life (in heaven) or a better life on earth is what causes despair. He urges humans to "live to the point of tears",<sup>143</sup> thus, knowing that life is intrinsically difficult is one way to overcome it. In this, Camus's existentialist philosophy was an atavistic version of the nihilistic and pessimistic principles of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky.

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<sup>141</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), 4.

<sup>142</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 4.

<sup>143</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 313.

Camus' *The Stranger* revolves around a brusquely detached, ironic hero character called Meursault. Meursault is a nihilistic character like Raskolnikov or the underground man as he cannot accept the standard answers for why things are the way they are. He sees love, work and friendship as pointless or needless – “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.”<sup>144</sup> One day, somewhat by mistake, Meursault shoots a man to death without knowing his own motivations. He is incarcerated and sentenced to death for committing murder because he does not show any remorse and does not really care about his fate. He declares to the prison chaplain that he is an atheist because life is meaningless, for each person will die no matter how good or bad they are. Meursault's character illustrates a languid, emotionless, and alienated condition where one feels completely cut off from others and cannot find a way to share their sympathies or values. Meursault is an archetypal nihilist.<sup>145</sup>

Camus intimates that life is absurd in the grandest scheme, but he resists nihilism. He argues that humans have to live with the awareness that our efforts will be futile, our lives shortly forgotten and our species incurably corrupt and violent, yet we should endure regardless. This suggests that Camus reiterated Kierkegaardian philosophy without the resource of God behind it. Humans are like Sisyphus, the Greek figure ordained by the gods to roll a ball up a mountain and to watch it fall back down in perpetuity. Humans have to embrace the intricacies of existence and triumph over the persistent possibility of hopelessness. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.<sup>146</sup> Existence means being on the verge of despair but also compelled to live life more intensely. Camus infers that humans should adhere to nihilism because life is existential, but he urges humans to aim for the good.

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<sup>144</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

<sup>145</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, 3.

<sup>146</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Victor Frankl (1905-1997) is another celebrated existentialist philosopher of the twentieth century. Frankl's credentials as a professional psychiatrist and a neurologist coupled with his near-death experiences as a Holocaust survivor in four different concentration camps during the Second World War explains his depth on the human condition and physiology. He published several books, but it was *Man's Search for Meaning* that immortalized his status as a philosopher. The book outlines his experiences in the concentration camps and his observations on human behavior. *Man's Search for Meaning* reiterates the existential theme that life is individualistic and full of agony and misery, perhaps nihilistic but it is the individual's ability to find a meaning to life that makes living worthwhile. "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives: This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning."<sup>147</sup>

On this account, Frankl founded logotherapy - a branch of psychotherapy that inquired into the individual's motivation, logos, purpose, meaning and reason for existing. It is the search for meaning by asking a patient – or oneself: "why is life worth living or why haven't you/I committed suicide yet?"<sup>148</sup> Frankl opines that God may be dead, life may be absurd and meaningless, life is difficult, but humans should create meaning and purpose for existing to make living productive, the will to meaning. He preaches that one should set a goal, hone it and persevere to achieve it; to do is to define the vicissitudes of existence. According to Frankl, meaning is elastic in time and space and thus can be changed at different times to suit different circumstances. Frankl further avers that ultimate freedom is the individual's ability to take a stance in whatever condition that confronts him/her. This means that one cannot control what happens in life or existence, but each

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<sup>147</sup> Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 82.

<sup>148</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 48.

individual has the freedom to decide their attitude (what they feel and do) about a situation. Frankl's philosophy is like a double-edged sword. Explicitly he counsels endurance, persistence and steadfastness yet implicitly he suggests that there is no universal truth to be achieved if one endures and persists, therefore everything is permissible.

Frankl encourages humans to have courage during any difficult time – finding a meaning for a challenge is the best way to overcome that obstacle. “If you know the why for doing you can endure almost any how.”<sup>149</sup> Getting a “why” to live makes one the fittest to survive. He states that in the concentration camps, people who had a purpose to live were more likely to survive than people who did not. He implores individuals to focus on the present (here and now) as against the past or the future. Frankl encourages individuals to find humor in dreadful situations, have hope, serve others, and love, as these are meanings humans can pursue as part of existing. During and after the Second World War, when life was literally nihilistic and existential, Frankl recommended that the best way to survive was for individuals to be the architects of their own destinies. Taking responsibility empowers individuals to create meaning and purpose. Finding purpose is what stimulates the psyche to continue living.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is one of the few philosophers to declare that he is an existentialist. Kaufmann opines that it is primarily through the works of Sartre that existentialism got global attention.<sup>150</sup> Implicit in Sartre's philosophy is the definition of modern existentialism. Sartre concludes that life and/or existence is inherently meaningless or absurd - the meaning of life is that it has no meaning. There is no preordained purpose for life, life is the here and now. There are no right or wrong choices in life so one should be willing to acknowledge, accept and try all possibilities. He further affirms that reality and existence are different from what we think

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<sup>149</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 48-50.

<sup>150</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 313.

they are, for being is when existence is stripped of all forms of prior beliefs and prejudices. In this existence, being or living means unbridled freedom to explore the unknown. Sartre's philosophy is nihilism in action.<sup>151</sup>

The major criticisms against existentialist philosophers are that they are defeatists who could not achieve what they wanted to in life, hence they seemed to want to make everyone else a failure like them. Existentialists generally equated failure, tragedy and pain to reality and never illuminated happiness as a component of reality. Skepticism and pessimism were their hallmark. Deconstructionism is another characteristic of the existentialist philosophy – existentialists existed, as it were, to tear down societal institutions' legitimacy, without replacing that legitimacy with anything other than the individual's spiritual journey and conscience. They suggested discontinuity and insecurity towards all institutional standards, values, ideas, and programs, including the solutions they themselves provided. Existentialists like Camus and Sartre even discarded philosophy for literature and distrusted pure and distinct ideas as products of the Western academy.

More importantly however, existentialist philosophy also has several acute positive connotations. The most profound impact of existentialism is that its principles gave birth to psychology as a distinct field of study. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, openly confessed his indebtedness to Nietzsche. Part of what engendered the birth of modern psychology was the question of whether God is dead, and if so, then what motivates human action? Existentialism is the culmination of philosophy for it focuses on the quest to ascertain truth, certainty, authenticity, reality, power, knowledge and meaning. Existentialism teaches optimism, endurance, pragmatism, inspiration, motivation, success and independence via revealing ways to overcome challenges.

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<sup>151</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1956).

Existentialists propagate that humans should know the distinction between good and evil and brace themselves for the worst so that anything better than the worst can be appreciated, and the best can also be strived for. Existentialism is a progressive advancement on nihilism for the philosophy provides answers to what happens after the loss of God to avoid despair and dissolution.

Existentialism illuminated Darwinism and capitalism by stressing individuality. The philosophy validates individuality in an increasingly atomized world. They urged that individuals should vent their frustrations, not conform for the sake of it. Existentialists advocated for change and the needs of the minority. Existentialism implores humans to dissect all things, question all things to make informed choices, all things may be true, all things may be false, all things may be possible: just search. After the Second World War, being a superman or an underground man was a way of assured happiness because all social institutions failed the world in the shadow of the Holocaust. Existentialist philosophy liberates the individual from all societal boundaries, thus goading the individual to create her own path and assert her own values. The existentialist taught that the radical freedom from the death of God can be used to find a meaning for one's life.



## **Chapter Four: Nihilism, Modernism and Postmodernism**

“The First World War exposed the profound crisis of Europe, and at the same time Nietzsche’s nihilism came to attract more attention than the ideas of any other thinker.”<sup>152</sup>

Nietzsche pronounced the death of God partly because of the effect of Darwinism and the enlightenment on the traditional beliefs of western civilization. Academics, intellectuals and artists took the death of God seriously. Artistic and cultural movements like dadaism emerged; phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, parapsychology, anarchism, deconstructionism, modernism, poststructuralism and postmodernism became widespread academic and social pursuits in Europe as postscripts of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. By the turn of the twentieth century, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky had become household names in intellectual and cultural discourses – nihilism became a mainstay in European history and popular culture. The biggest historical events of the twentieth century – two World Wars and the Cold War – evidently had overt nihilistic undertones. The Second World War for instance was promulgated in part because Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were inspired by Nietzschean philosophy, although the Nazis misunderstood or misinterpreted Nietzsche’s teachings. This chapter reviews the impacts of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky on the modernist and postmodernist movements and on the alleged “end of history”.

“What Nietzsche seeks to do as a thinker... is to prepare us for change... that the end of Christian-moral interpretation of the world offers the possibility of another beginning.”<sup>153</sup> Nietzsche and Dostoevsky wrote because they aimed at solving the problem of nihilism – they thought that nihilism without individual moral reckoning only led to decay. If all humans became

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<sup>152</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 44.

<sup>153</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 35.

nihilistic, it implied a return to the state of nature. Such could be a positive turn of events; the rejection of a static society devoid of change would bring about the freedom of the individual from institutional dictates, in which case nihilism was a necessary evil. The question was: how could a static moral system be replaced, and what should individuals replace it with? Different ideas arose in the twentieth century because of the attempt to answer the question, what happens after the death of God? The questions that both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky asked became the central focus of the development of philosophical ideas of ethics in the twentieth century.

After the two World Wars all religious beliefs diminished because the wars were an explicit demonstration that nothing was true except the individual's subjective understanding of phenomena. This was one way of understanding existence in order to soothe the nihilism the wars had revealed. The Great War made Europeans conclude that the enlightenment had failed society therefore new values needed to be reconstructed. Modernism was a transvaluation of all values of the West post-enlightenment. Subsequently, Heideggerian phenomenology, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis and psychotherapy and several modernist art movements arose.

Curtly, after modernism was postmodernism, postmodernism was underway when the Second World War struck. Postmodernism was the forthright negation of the tenets of modernism, although they were enkindled by the modernists. Following the efforts of the modernists to restructure a better society, the advent of the Second World War meant that society could not (never) be fixed, for man is not a piano key, consequently nothing is true: all is permissible. Postmodernists maintained that all creations are human creations including God, ergo, everything is subject to change. The beginning of the Cold War coupled with threats of a possible nuclear war exacerbated the gloom that had befallen humanity, every iota of optimism was quenched. Alas the western society became nihilist. After the cold war however, there was a hope for humanity but

the damages of the two World Wars seemed irrecoverable, nihilism had already permeated western culture; as globalization became practicable, nihilism became a global culture.

### **Modernism**

One of the key derivatives from Nietzschean philosophy was phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of events or happenings just as they appear, the thing in itself – nothing preceding that event is relevant. Phenomenology is the search for objectivity in reality by analyzing subjective experiences. Phenomenologists opine that universal truths cannot exist; reality, truth and objectivity can only be arrived at subjectively. Phenomenologists conclude that truths are relative or conditional, thus truths are always dependent on the historical, social and cultural environments in which they materialized. This is to say, that phenomenology is the delay of judgement and a look at why things happen outside any prejudices, beyond good and evil. Phenomenology is the study of motives behind actions (the intentionality of actions) mental or physiological, intuitive or spontaneous, conscious or unconscious. The birth of phenomenology presaged the need to examine the human brain and neuro activities, after which modern psychology commenced.<sup>154</sup>

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1979) is one of the most feted phenomenologists of the age. Heidegger is renowned for his book *Being and Time*. As implicit in its title, the book discusses Being, (Dasein or being there) as a temporal existence in an unbounded space and time. In other words, Dasein means being there as a Being (an individual) to consciously witness one's own experience in time and space. Thus, the individual is at the center of her reality, the totality of one's experience, the manifestation of one's reality, experiencing from the first-

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<sup>154</sup> Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 62.

person point of view. Heidegger contends that Dasein is a worthy discourse because humans live within a self-defined perceptual world and that is what constitutes one's personality.<sup>155</sup>

Another theme in Heideggerian philosophy is the notion of "thrownness". Thrownness entails the fundamental arbitrariness, randomness and irrationality of existence because creatures (humans) are merely tossed into existence by their creators (nature) and are forced to endure the realities of existence by no fault of their own. No creature is/was part of the decision in their creation. This is to suggest that, in principle, no one is culpable for their actions or inactions because part of existence and even consciousness is genuine innocence and adaptation to existence. This implies that rightness, wrongness or truth are subjective experiences because humans are nothing more than naïve individuals distinctly trying to survive.<sup>156</sup> Blaise Pascal the popular seventeenth century French philosopher says it best, "when I consider the brief span of my life swallowed up in the eternity before and behind it - the small space that I feel or even see engulfed in the immensity of spaces which I know not and which no not me. I am afraid and I wondered to see myself here rather than there for there is no reason why I should be here rather than there or now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this place and time allotted to me?"<sup>157</sup>

Consequently, if humans are not in control of Being or Dasein, how can they get the best out of life? How can humans escape the mysteries of being and nothingness? Heidegger's design therefore revolves around the study of the structure of experiences or consciousness. He urges humans to look at the meaning of things just as they appear. He underlines that humans ought to be able to track and trace the process of being subjective as individuals and be answerable only to

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<sup>155</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1962), 37.

<sup>156</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 286.

<sup>157</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 86.

subjective individual experiences. Only then can the individual overcome thrownness, nothingness or societal dictates, that is when one can become authentic.<sup>158</sup> Authenticity is akin to Nietzsche's superman, i.e., being true to oneself. Heidegger expounds on the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, volition, bodily awareness, action and social activities: intentionality. He defines these experiences as "qualia" which denotes the quality of subjective experiences like pain, angst, ecstasy, love, beauty, anxiety etc. Heidegger concludes that life is existential, hence one ought to live authentically and with intention and with the understanding that the failure to shoulder existential burdens results in neurotic guilt and fear.<sup>159</sup> In other words, to be Nietzsche's superman, one needs to privilege one's own subjectivity and never look back.

To augment the phenomenologists, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of modern psychology, explained that both the conscious and the unconscious engender actions, humans are motivated by desire and repressed memories. Freud states that human actions are controlled by the id, ego and super ego. Rationality alone is not what inspires actions, as the enlightenment taught; humans cannot make themselves fully rational or change society as expounded by Dostoevsky's underground man. Freud argued that there is always an internal conflict between the conscious and the unconscious which makes life and existence implicitly difficult to deal with. Humans are driven by the pleasure principle (the human instinct to avoid pain and seek pleasure, whether physical, psychological or biological) but are forced to subdue themselves to the reality principle, which according to Freud, leads to repressed neurosis. This illustrates that the human's condition is nihilistic and existential because the unconscious or the known clouds human judgement. Thus, good and bad cannot even be decided forthrightly by people even if they want to. Humans cannot

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<sup>158</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 312.

<sup>159</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 329.

generate their own meaning because different parts of the physiology want different things. If humans make their own meaning to existence, which part of their physiology are they aiming to satisfy?<sup>160</sup>

Man is not a piano key, everything is permissible.

Carl Jung (1875-1961), an acolyte of Freud, took Nietzsche's commentary on the death of God seriously. Jung's concern was to address the dichotomy between science and religion. According to Jung, what motivates human action is beyond just the conscious and the unconscious but also includes the collective unconscious. Jung argued that the collective unconscious is akin to Darwin's theory of evolution. Just as the human body adapts through mutation to the environment in order to survive, the human mind also stores inherited survival archetypes (evolutionary knowledge) and applies them randomly depending on different conditions contingent on an individual's survival. This is why humans have instincts and understand certain phenomena even before they are explained. For instance, as kids can play games without knowing the rules of the game, humans survive existence without knowing with certainty what existence entails. The collective unconscious is exhibited through instincts and urges. It involves evolutionary biology, the history of society and how humans are brought up from childhood. As a concept, this coincides with existentialism: the individual does things instinctually, in ignorance and opposition to societal dictates.<sup>161</sup>

Jung maintains that what society calls good and bad are both important in the evolutionary process, because good and bad combine to make the existence process whole. Unlike Nietzsche, who believed humans ought to create their own values as the superman, Jung suggested that

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<sup>160</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014).

<sup>161</sup> Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self: With Symbols and The Interpretation of Dreams* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), 34.

humans should apply the principle of individuation or self-awareness - the ability to notice one's own motives behind one's action. Between conscious, unconscious, collective unconscious, and good and evil, humans must be aware of the source of motivations in their actions and choose what is good. Good and bad are part of the human nature but self-awareness is the way to strive for what is good.<sup>162</sup>

The modernist artistic movement was one of the earliest efforts to provide a remedy to the death of God. For the modernist, the death of God (decline of the highest value) meant the expression of boundless creativity and innovation in visual art, music and literature, everything was permissible. Modernism was a late nineteenth and twentieth century cultural movement that reflected a desire to transform art, religion and philosophy into anything that was defiant of western ideals of the time, to make everything new.<sup>163</sup> Europeans were simply bored from two thousand years of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman sameness (ascribing causality to divinity, spirituality, preordination and faith) and the rationalistic teachings of the enlightenment, anything unconventional (an expression of emotions, instinct and will) was welcomed with alacrity. The idea was that Europeans did not want to be heirs of history – and thus its victims as well – but rather the creators of history, from scratch. Modernism denoted expressionism, surrealism, futurism, eugenics, impressionism, self-consciousness, the will to power, relativism, pseudoscience, utopianism, nationalism, nudism, theosophy and psychoanalysis. Art, music, literature and architecture changed forever. Eccentricity became the new normal; nihilism, as the philosophical underpinning of modernism, was beginning to come to cultural life. Modernism was outrageous before the Great War; once the war occurred, it seemed more normal to the average

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<sup>162</sup> Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*, 38.

<sup>163</sup> Lawrence Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 136.

person. The cultural acceptance of modernism meant that nihilism transcended intellectual circles and became recognizable to the average westerner.

The visual art industry fully imbibed and incorporated all the tenets of modernist ideologies in their works. Dadaism was one of the first practical demonstrations of nihilistic or modernist principles in art. Dadaism was a twentieth century art movement that was established as a reaction to the First World War. People were aggrieved by the destructive outcomes of the Great War and the failure of European institutions to prevent such a catastrophe in Europe. Dadaism was thus a demonstration through art to express disquiet on how Europeans had abandoned their senses and destroyed themselves in the war. The movement was a denial of logic and reason, and the projection of nonsense and irrationality in art to explain how Europeans thought at the time or what Europe had turned into. Their intent was to produce anti-art, to destroy traditional art and supplant it with oddity or something new and show that, because the war had revealed all institutional structures in European life as a lie, then everything was now permissible, particularly if it was as nonsensical as the war.<sup>164</sup>

Dadaism signified creativity, spontaneity, humor, randomness, sarcasm, paradox, travesty, mockery, defiance, empty absurdity, and rebellion against the Great War and tradition. The artists had lost faith in everything established; they concluded that they could do as they wished for no one was qualified to attack them because nothing was right. They argued that humans are born tabula rasa, therefore it is society that shapes individuals. Consequently, if society fails the individual like in the event of the War, then the individual can only return to tabula rasa, nothingness or nonsense. Dadaism inspired several other similarly nihilistic art movements like surrealism as the cult of the primitive became the new ideal in Europe. Nihilistic principles began

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<sup>164</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 190.

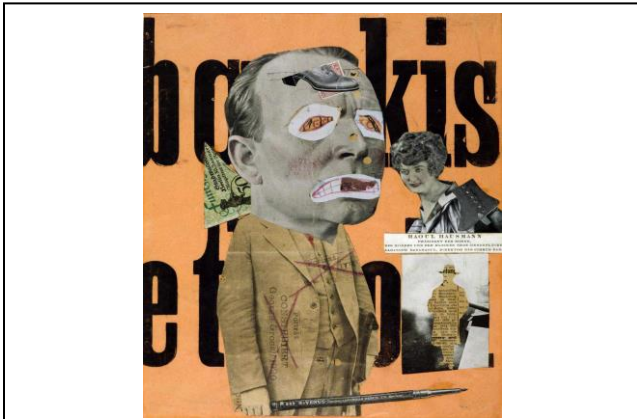


gaining roots in Western mass culture, as acceptance of the Dadaists' "senseless" art implied reception to all eventualities. Marcel Duchamp's remolding of the popular Mona Lisa painting with mustache and beard is one of the most popular works of dada art. The art depicted a deviation



from the normal and a conscious intent to offend people.

Raoul Hausmann, Francis Picabia, and Max Ernst were also some of the eminent dada artists of the age. They made art an intellectual creation and not a physical invention or a product of craftsmanship: nihilism actualized.



Raoul Hausmann, *The Art Critic* (1919-20)

Source :

<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/styles/original/private/media/0452/fotopoema.JPG>



Max Ernst, *Angel of Hearth and Home* (1937)

Source : <https://www.wikiart.org/en/max-ernst/the-angel-of-the-home-or-the-triumph-of-surrealism-1937>



Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913)

Source : <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/f/futurism>

The futurist movement was the essence of modernism. Futurism by definition was a total break from the past with emphasis on the future. With the rise of technology and science in the twentieth century, futurism was aimed at annihilating everything of the past and fixating on the future. Everything of the past was considered useless, hence new possibilities, creations and innovations were the way forward. The movement was a deliberate attempt to herald innovation, energy, modern weaponry, revolutionary

politics, dynamism, modernity, multiple focus, technology, and speed. “We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by new beauty: the beauty of speed... a roaring motor car... is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace... Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the impossible: Time and Space died yesterday.”<sup>165</sup> Futurism glorified industrialization and war because war for them was a way of cleansing the new society from the past, war was a necessary step into the future.

Futurists illustrated their ideology mostly in art but soon their doctrines pierced through politics as the spirited works of Filippo Marinetti (one of the founders of futurism) augmented the formation of Mussolini’s fascist party in Italy. In Russia, futurism was not just an artistic movement but was a scholarly and political movement. Futurists wrote poetry and added momentum to the Russian anarchist movements and any other organization that was interested in repudiating the Russian past. In art, some of the derivatives of futurism were divisionism, suprematism, constructivism, cubism and chronophotography. Divisionism signified painting to create a vibrant optical effect. Cubism is an exhibition of art from many angles of one image. Chronophotography and dynamism reflects representation in painting of how things appear when in motion. Repetition and transparency to show the flow of movements was a key characteristic of futurist art. The movement was to exhibit how people sensed the modern world around them.

Surrealism sprung out of futurist dogmas. Surrealism is a form of abstract art that reflects the expression of dreams and/or a combination of bizarre or incongruous components in art. Surrealists wanted to be associated with the psychological principles of Sigmund Freud because they argued that their art was the depiction or the illustration of the unconscious in art (though Freud decried that association). Surrealism is the elocution that everything is permissible in art.

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<sup>165</sup> Filippo Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*, (Milan: Governing Group of the Futurist Movement, 1912).

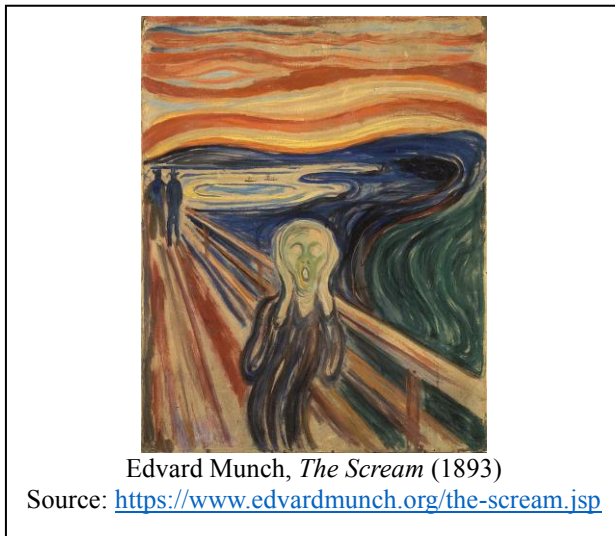


Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931)  
Source : [https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018?sov\\_referrer=art\\_term&art\\_term\\_slug=surrealism](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018?sov_referrer=art_term&art_term_slug=surrealism)

Soviet constructivism too appeared on the scene. It echoed modern industrial culture and urbanization, abstraction and three-dimensional creation. The artist was an engineer (creator) as they used instruments like compasses and rulers in their art. Building and science were highlighted over artistic expressions. As the movements gained momentum, Soviet constructivists used art as a propaganda tool to preach socialism and revolutionary ideas. Soviet constructivists had influences in architecture, graphic design, fashion, film and dance. Suprematism was another form of abstract art focused on “the supremacy of pure artistic feeling” rather than on visual depiction of objects, akin to cubism.

Expressionism was similarly another pioneering art crusade of the age that was influenced by the existentialists and Carl Jung. Expressionists believed in the spontaneity and freedom in painting, allowing the painting to take form from the process as the revelation of an artist’s conception. Some of their paintings were not even named, the expressionists were not interested in their subject or the meaning of their works. They were purely interested in creating unique

subjective inventions that were impossible to emulate even by its own creator after the painting: everything was permissible. One of the well-known expressionist paintings is *The Scream* (1893).



The modernist art movements were a direct onslaught against tradition and were creating new identities that hitherto were atypical. They were implying that everything is permissible in the spirit of the nihilistic zeitgeist of the time. Other notable cultural figures who were inspired by the modernist doctrines of the age therefore integrated novel

ideas into their craft including Igor Stravinsky in his ballet *The Rite of Spring* (1913), Arthur Schoenberg's twelve-tone musical scale, the Imagist poetry of TS Eliot and Ezra Pound, Man Ray in photography, Luis Bunuel's surrealism in cinema, and Henry Moore and Constantin Brancusi in sculpture. The focus was now inventing, producing, or reproducing rarity or abstraction. These cultural producers wanted to make reproductions of ideas, pictures, thoughts, and concepts – to make concrete what was not concrete. The artists were breaking down conventions in cultural expression inferring that “nothing is true” and then inventing new boundaries for their own productions (“everything is possible”). The average intellectual westerner between 1890 and 1940 was familiar with these or other cultural figures and recognized the breakdown of traditional western cultural values in their work. Nihilism was now revealed, revered and unvarnished; after the Second World War it would become the essence of western culture itself.

## Post Modernism

Postmodernism is the annulment of reason and/or the certainty of knowledge with an emphasis on skepticism, subjectivity, relativity and the sensory data of individual experiences - the subjective analysis of every phenomenon. Modernism had standards of artistic worth as evident in the list of qualities of beauty in Marinetti's manifesto, or the emphasis on dreams as source material in surrealism, or geometrical patterns in suprematism. Postmodernists rejected even those qualities as universal – literally, “beauty”, if that is even what one is striving for, was in the eye of the beholder. In short, postmodernism is the deconstruction of the principles of modernism, a double negation of Western values. Postmodernists doubt universal explanations and instead concentrate on the relative truths of individuals of different circumstances. Postmodernists conclude that there is no objectivity, so they judge even reality itself to be a mental construct. Postmodernism rests on “the assumption that there is no common denominator in ‘nature’ or ‘truth’ ... that guarantees the possibility of neutral objective thought.”<sup>166</sup> Postmodernism presages the criticism of everything: nothing is true, everything is permissible, and there will be no future stasis to become institutionalized. Postmodernism is nihilism in action.

Michel Foucault (1924-1984) is a capstone name in postmodernist, deconstructionist and nihilistic philosophy. He is known for maintaining that the only incentive to read and review history is to dig out ideas, concepts and paradigms which can help humans to live a better life in their own times. On this account, his books are reflective and evolutionary accounts of certain concepts of power over a long period of time. Among these works are *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, *A History of Sexuality*, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, *The Birth of Clinics: An Archaeology of Medical*

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<sup>166</sup> Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing*, 70.

*Perceptions* and a few other. His contents highlight a break away from the optimistic smugness of the modernists, ergo he proposes a conception of unbridled freedom. Markedly influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault ruthlessly critiques history and assumes that all grand knowledge is objectionable. He encourages humans and society to select from history only that which will be beneficial to them.<sup>167</sup>

Foucault's primary motive is to remove any form of restriction on human freedom, especially power and the ways in which it is exercised, both overtly and subtly. He argues that humanism is everything that limits the yen for power. Therefore, individual and society should only aim at freedom, an anarchic utopian society. In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* he contends that the enlightenment placed restrictions on or stigmatized mad people who previously were accepted as part of society. He thus sparked anti-psychiatric, de-stigmatization movements, a refusal to be governed. Foucault further argues that since modernity (the enlightenment) destroyed all meta narrative, then modernity itself cannot be trusted because it is also open to destruction by its own precedent. Consequently, nothing is true including modernism, hence in the period after modernity, everything is possible. He reasons that all meta narratives are socially constructed and change over different periods of time to suit different circumstances; therefore, in principle everything (meta narrative) is subject to change which follows that nothing is true; all is permissible.<sup>168</sup>

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* Foucault explores reasons why all punishments must be abolished because moral judgements are inherently illegitimate. He recommends a life beyond good and evil. In *A History of Sexuality*, he aims at legitimizing all

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<sup>167</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books 1972), 134.

<sup>168</sup> Michel Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

forms of sexuality. In the end, Foucault advocated for the freedom of the mad, criminals and all forms of sexuality, all must be permissible.<sup>169</sup> Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jurgen Habermas were also other influential cultural figures of the age whose teachings had nihilistic undertones.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Michel Foucault are arguably the most notable postmodernist philosophers of the twentieth century. Derrida is keenly associated with deconstructionism. For Derrida, deconstructionism was about dismantling extreme consecration to any idea or learning, so as to grasp aspects of veracity that might lie concealed in the opposite. He meant that institutionalized truths force us to abandon other truths that may be worthy of attention. Derrida insinuated that humans should learn to live with intellectually conflicting viewpoints for everything is part of a process; everything should be permitted as part of the whole. He stressed that society is overly logocentric, but confusion and puzzles are part of the human condition - reason alone cannot solve everything. He alluded that equality and inequality are both important, therefore humans should get curious about the other side of any debate. "All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings."<sup>170</sup>

In music, John Cage (1912-1992) did the unusual with his avant-garde experimental music, aroused by the spirit of the time. John Cage described music as "a purposeless play... an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvement in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living."<sup>171</sup> His best-known work

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<sup>169</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>170</sup> Marvin Perry, et. al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, vol II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 43.

<sup>171</sup> John Cage, "John\_Cage-Experimental Music.pdf", robertspahr.com  
<[https://www.robertspahr.com/teaching/cpro/john\\_cage-Experimental-Music.pdf](https://www.robertspahr.com/teaching/cpro/john_cage-Experimental-Music.pdf)> (accessed June 18, 2024).



was/is 4'33" a four minute - thirty-three second silent performance.<sup>172</sup> The content of the creativity is intended to be the sound of the environment, the equivalent of the music of the production itself. Instead of paying to listen to a performance, the audience pays to listen to silence or the sound in the environment, a complete irony and a deviation from the normal – but which also highlights the music of everyday life. Cage implied that four minutes thirty-three seconds of silence is good music, nothing is/was true; all was/is permissible.

Punk rock was as well inspired by the rebellious spirit of the time for it rejected the corporate nature of mainstream rock music. Punk rock artists characteristically created concise, fast-paced tunes with hard-edged melodies with austere instrumentation. Their lyrics usually had avant-garde and anti-authoritarian themes. Punk rock artist often produced themselves and had independent labels. Their aim was to create a nontraditional and nonconformist kind of music that was a complete aberration from standard music.<sup>173</sup>

The Situationist International also resurfaced as an artistic, political and youthful revolt movement that was a negation of art. One of their aims was to express apathy towards urban life – a “situation” was an artistic or cultural event that inspired a reaction in the audience, waking them up to the boredom of everyday life. The 1968 Paris revolution was inspired by Situationist slogans and likewise inspired youthful demand for anomalous change.<sup>174</sup> The underpinning dogma for the revolution was “all power to the imagination.” The revolution was anarchist in style brought forth by French students though later joined by workers. It was a violent attack on Charles De Gaulle’s regime of French patriarchal leadership. Later it morphed into street fights between the protestors, mostly students and state authorities (security services). In the end, the students

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<sup>172</sup> Gann Kyle, *No Such Thing As Silence: John Cage's 4'33* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>173</sup> Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (New York: PM Press, 2015), 20.

<sup>174</sup> Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

succeeded in reforming the educational system and it signaled greater respect for diversity and freedom in France. Spontaneity was becoming a better virtue than rationality. Conservative values became obsolete and liberal values were embraced and protest for change spread throughout Europe. Opposing sides of the revolution argued that the aftermath has caused the erosion of traditional family values. It was a period when the powers and the police meant nothing, as the will of the people prevailed.

The Second World War ended with a peace negotiation to divide Berlin into two, one half for the Eastern Bloc and its allies led by the Soviet Union and the other for the Western Bloc and its allies spearheaded by the U.S, the Cold War ensued. The Cold War was a geopolitical ideological battle between Capitalism and liberal democracy on one side (US and their allies referred to as the Western Bloc) and Communism on the other (Soviet Union and their allies called the Eastern Bloc). It manifested in the fighting of a few proxy wars and the Soviet Union and the US idea of expanding their ideolog of how a state ought to be governed. By the end of the series of events, the U.S and its respective allies and capitalism and liberal democracy emerged as victors as the Cold War ended in 1989-1991. The Soviet Union collapsed and about fifteen countries became Republics. Communist ideologies where relegated to the background as models of governance. The US became the paragon for how nations ought to be governed.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Francis Fukuyama also had his take on the evolution of history and the solution to the problem of nihilism in one of the most celebrated literary crafts of the twentieth/twenty-first century, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama is a renowned twentieth/twenty-first century philosopher, political scientist, political economist, and an erudite international relations expert. According to Fukuyama, the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy after the Cold War was a eureka moment for humanity because it meant that

history had reached its summit – it beckoned the end of polarization, a solution to the problem of nihilism. He believed the coming twenty-first century would be a halcyon epoch, hence the ensuing generations were going to be the last men in history. The end of history analogy implied that humanity had finally settled on the greatest good/value in capitalism and liberal democracy for it cannot be faulted, therefore humanity (the last men) is going to apply it till eternity. Capitalism and liberal democracy for him was the best solution to the nihilistic predisposition the two World Wars and the Cold War had caused in the previous century, thus the consummate substitute for God in the secular society that ensued. “What is emerging victorious, ...is the liberal idea. That is to say, for a very large part of the world, there is now no ideology with pretensions to universality that is in a position to challenge liberal democracy, and no universal principle of legitimacy other than the sovereignty of the people.”<sup>175</sup>

The twentieth century western world was warlike because throughout the century, the world was divided into political factions. By the beginning of the century there were constant rivalries between nationalities in the era of European nationalism which segued into the First World War. Soon fascist military states, communist countries and western democracies competed amongst themselves, and the Second World War resulted from these conflicts. After the Second World War, the Cold War emerged between liberal democratic states and communist countries. The Cold War peaked as rivalries intensified between the US as the preeminent western democracy and the Soviet Union as the key communist state. The world was threatened with a possible nuclear conflict that could end humanity and history altogether. The end of the Cold War in 1992 was thus a cause for celebration – the twentieth century’s last remaining conflict had ended peacefully. Fukuyama assumed that all states on the earth at the time strove to become democracies, and since

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<sup>175</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last man* (Harlow: Penguin Books, 2012), 45.

two democracies had never gone to war with each other, it stood to reason that war was coming to a rapid end as a tool of diplomacy in the 1990s. The end of war meant the end of the standard engine of change throughout history – therefore, history itself, as mankind knows it, was coming to an end as well. “The end of history would mean the end of wars and bloody revolutions. Agreeing on ends, men would have no large causes for which to fight.”<sup>176</sup>

Liberal democracy for Fukuyama was thus the best replacement of God since God’s death. Capitalism and liberal democracy were the outcome from the summation of the history hitherto. For Fukuyama, liberal democracy protects individual rights and freedom and upholds the principles of checks and balances on power. It protects the properties of individuals and abides by the utilitarian principles of majority rule. There is a state of law and the rule of law. There is a free market economy. Fukuyama was positing the triumph of enlightenment rationality when the western culture had abandoned the enlightenment a century earlier. For him, nothing could counter liberal democracy as a solution to societal issues, as an attack on democracy was best answered with a further advance of democracy – the answer to individuals who complained about the social or economic or political order was to include them in that order. Society could not get any better than that. Marx suggested that the end of history was pointing towards a communist utopia, but the collapse of the Berlin Wall exposed the failure of communism as a political system. Liberal democracy and a market economy were now the end of history, the end of ideological battles. Capitalism prevailed because history judged that any other ideology was wrong. Fukuyama inferred that the victory of liberal democracy and capitalism in the Cold War was the end of nihilism too because the whole world assented to democracy. There would be no more values to be overthrown in a liberal democratic world because everyone’s individual values would be

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<sup>176</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last man*, 311.

validated. Liberal democracy in principle guarantees the permission of all things; even nihilism has a place in it.<sup>177</sup>

The existentialists suggested that humans should create their own meaning for existence; Fukuyama reasoned that liberal democracy was the best political means humans could provide for protecting that existence. Fukuyama suggested that polarization of any form could be solved by expanding freedom to the minority group. Globalization had commenced because society now spoke one language in liberal democracy – a person in Vietnam could someday live the same political, social, economic and cultural life as a person in the U.S. Globalization had materialized. Wars would be minimal. If liberal democracy is unassailable then that is the last stage in history and the people who live through this halcyon period will be the last men. The last man has no pride or anger or aspiration. He has peace, security and prosperity.

Notwithstanding the above, Fukuyama acknowledged the possibility of nihilism because of the last man. He asserts that humans like the struggle for survival and existence. If society does not give humans something to struggle for which is just, they will struggle for unjust things, and this is the challenge for society. If humans do not get respect and recognition, they get angry. Globalization and the last man in principle is to produce equality and idleness but human nature is opposed to equality – the death of communism was proof. Consequently, although a democratic society is a perfect society, humanity should be guided against the possibility of nihilism. “There are many people in contemporary democratic societies, particularly among the young, who are not content to merely congratulate themselves on their broadmindedness, but who would like to “live within a horizon.” That is, they want to choose a belief and commitment to “values” deeper than mere liberalism itself, such as those offered by traditional religions... But they are faced with an

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<sup>177</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last man*, 51.

almost insuperable problem... But the very variety of choice is bewildering, and those who decide on one path or another do so with an awareness of the myriad other paths not taken.”<sup>178</sup>

Fukuyama vehemently declared that no other alternative could challenge the perfect idea of liberal democracy. He emphatically underscored that the Chinese system of governance – then under challenge in the years after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 – would not survive because it was nationalistic as it had ethnic sentiments and was not universal in outlook and that populism is not a democracy. *The End of History and the Last Man* was a celebration of the collapse of Marxist ideologies as the only threat against liberal democracy. In the end Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God transcended generations and played an active role in modern politics as Fukuyama deciphered the perfect replacement for God after his death in the twenty first century world. Fukuyama reflected on how the concept of nihilism continuously haunts intellectual and academic discourses in the twentieth/twenty-first century world.

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<sup>178</sup> Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last man*, 307.

## Conclusion

The concept of nihilism in regular discourses predictably has negative connotations. Yet the notion has also engendered creative ideas through the search for authenticity and certainty. Philosophers' fear of nihilism has inspired the innovation of different ideologies to supplant emaciated established traditions. Nietzsche went as far as stating that Christianity was nihilistic in origin because monotheistic Christianity replaced traditional polytheistic pagan beliefs of the classical era. The advent of the enlightenment meant that the universal belief in Christianity in Europe was under threat. By the turn of the twentieth century, Nietzsche killed God in the intellectual circles because God was no longer the focus of scholarly discourses. The death of God was interpreted by Dostoevsky as meaning that everything was permissible, and it only led to anarchy and rightly so, it led to an anarchy pursued by terrorists and agitators in his own tsarist Russia.

In the twentieth century, it was generally accepted that God was dead as a motivator of human endeavor. Religious people who thought otherwise became a minority as the twentieth century went on and as western society was increasingly becoming secular. Renowned academics devoted their attention to devise ideologies to fill the void left by religion. Every field of study was now influenced by Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God. Freud led what became modern psychology with his concept of psychoanalysis. Carl Jung augmented Freud's theories with his idea of the collective unconscious. Heidegger led the school of phenomenologists. Existentialism soon became a pervasive ideology in the West because the two World Wars changed people's views on life. Pseudoscience and parapsychology also emerged as an academic discipline because people wanted to have access with the death. It was the era of the eugenics movements.

The postmodernist stretched further the meaning of nihilism. The death of God coincided with Darwinism and Einstein's relativism; everything was permissible.

Nihilism began to gain roots in popular culture, though the masses called it different names. Music, art, literature, science, philosophy and academia guzzled nihilistic ideas and called it freedom, anarchist movement, futurism, relativism etc. Sexuality and gender became undefined. Climate apocalypse is becoming a popular trend. Social media means children are now trained on the internet. Nations are beginning to abandon constitutionalism. The United Nations was biased from its inception so in the international scene all things are permissible. Legal institutions are now the only highest value institutions, although they make decisions after debates. Secularism is the new perfect. The enlightenment killed God and made reason the master of the universe. Today reason is not the master of the universe, everything is tolerable. Advocacy for anything is now heroic. There is a possibility that it may lead to decay but positively, there is also massive advocacy for the right and freedom of each individual. Nihilism has come to stay, nihilism simmers under the culture of the twenty-first century world. It may be necessary to reevaluate societal values to create a new value but who even decides what is right? Like Fukuyama's end of history theory, only time can show where we are headed.

The tenets of the enlightenment laid the foundations that ushered the doctrine of nihilism into a worthwhile study. Prior the enlightenment however the philosophy of Machiavelli illuminated an inquest into the study human nature and how leaders can govern their subjects using any means possible to attain the common good. The theme of human nature became central in enlightenment discourses as it was also explored by Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Schopenhauer, and subsequently Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, the existentialist and the modern psychologists. In the end, it was concluded that man is not a piano key and cannot be expected to be predictable, for man is



controlled not just by his consciousness but also his unconsciousness and collective unconscious. Machiavelli's political ideas likewise engendered modern democratic philosophy. In the age of Machiavelli, Martin Luther similarly markedly decentralized Christianity to its atomized form during the Reformation. Luther was not nihilistic in every understanding of the word yet implicit in the Reformation and its corollaries was the credo that everything is permissible when the highest value is shaken.

Descartes methods of doubts inspired the core foundations of nihilistic, existential and postmodernist philosophy. Hobbes and Locke's state of nature also stirred up further studies on human and suggested an alternative creation narrative different from the biblical creation story. Hume's agnostic, deist and atheistic teaching pointed to the death of God. Kant proposed how and why humans should be moral outside previously held religious reasons of heaven and hell. Schopenhauer highlighted that existence in merely full of suffering and ends in nothingness after inferring that God was dead. Kierkegaard a Christian philosopher of the age penitently opined that it is scientifically impossible to prove the existence of God, but Christians (individually) must take a leap of faith and simply belief in the existence of God thus abide by Gods principles. Kierkegaard like Schopenhauer also admits to the difficulty in existence.

Nietzsche summed up all the reflections of these enlightenment ideals vis a vis his background in philology, his personal experiences, the spirit of the time and his understanding of history and concluded that God was dead. Comparably, Dostoevsky also studied events in Russia and concluded that the death of God presaged that all things are permissible. Nihilism as a philosophical proposition was defined. Both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky settled that nihilism only led to decay and dissolution of the individual and society. Nietzsche projected that the problem of nihilism can only be resolved when one became a superman; a person who invented his own values

devoid of any external motivation. It follows that if all humans became supermen, then all things will become permissible for each individual will create their own values, leading to an eternal return to the same. Meanwhile Dostoevsky suggested that a return to Christianity was the solution to the problem of nihilism. He reckoned that there is an implicit wisdom in traditional value systems no matter their foibles.

Shortly, it was the era of the World Wars where society was in a state of nature as no rule applied except trying to survive the moment. Nihilistic ideas resonated with the era. Academics and society took the death of God seriously and were trying to find another meaning to existence as a way of replacing God. Existentialism, phenomenology, modernism, postmodernism and post-structural ideologies blossomed. Modern psychology in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and clinical psychology also emerged. The underlying conclusion was that nothing is true, society was a social construct, humans are motivated not just by rationality, but by instincts, the unconscious and the collective unconscious, everything is relative, there is no objective truth, life is meaningless, all human efforts ends in nothingness, individuals should create their own meanings and live by it independent of any external motivation - even that is not also possible, man is not a piano key, the end justifies the means, take a leap of faith, doubt everything in order to know, abide by Kant's categorical imperative, globalization is the way forward, the twenty-first century onwards generation are the last men. Nothing and everything were true; everything and nothing became permissible. Nihilism had come to stay.

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