

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

Check out nihilism online:
<http://www.nodogs.org/nihilism.html>
<http://www.geocities.com/liudegast/nihilism.html>

I. Introduction

A. Definition

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

B. Nihilism in modern art:

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

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

C. Nihilism is the natural child of naturalism in that nihilism is naturalism carried to its logical conclusions.

II. The Essential Tenets of Nihilism

A. Metaphysics (being): everything is determined; everything is chance.

1. Determinism: Since in naturalism, all things (including human beings) operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system, there is no basis on which a person can act significantly or freely. Freedom is perceived but not real, a determinacy not

recognized. Human beings are a toy of impersonal cosmic forces. Things may be determined by at least two forces:

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

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

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

B. Epistemology (knowledge): the mind and reason, the product of matter, cannot be trusted; ergo, epistemological nihilism.

1. Naturalism holds that mind and reason arise from the functioning of matter, that is, the interaction of physical and chemical properties we do not fully understand. But is there any reason to believe that such functioning matter has any capacity or concern to lead a conscious human being to truth, accurate perceptions or logical conclusions? Why should what the material brain is conscious of be related to whatever is there? The mind cannot be trusted and the result is epistemological nihilism.
2. "The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the conviction of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?" —Charles Darwin. [If Darwin's theory is true, then how can one be sure?]
3. "If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs

are true. . . and hence, I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms." —C. S. Lewis.

C. Ethics: There are no moral laws; all values are relative.

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

D. Metaphysical, epistemological and ethical nihilism equals the loss of all meaning. If the valueless cosmos is to have meaning, we must manufacture it for ourselves. But, are our values valuable?

III. Five Reasons Why Nihilism is Unlivable

- A. From meaninglessness, nothing at all follows, or rather anything follows; any course of action is open. "It matters not whether one gets drunk or is a leader of nations." —Jean Paul Sartre.
- B. Every time nihilists think and trust their thinking, they affirm that thinking is of value and can lead to knowledge; but this is contradictory since the very essence of nihilism is that "there is no meaning in the universe" (which itself is a self-defeating statement for if it is true, then it is false).
- C. Though one can live out a limited sort of practical nihilism, eventually a limit is reached; for in order to deny God, one must have a God to deny, something against which to do battle. What does a nihilist do since there is no God?
- D. Nihilistic art is a contradiction in terms. Much modern art has nihilism as its ideological core. But to the extent that these art works display the implications or meaning of nihilism, they are not nihilistic; to the extent they are nihilistic, they are not artworks since art implies meaning and structure.
- E. Nihilism leads to severe psychological problems. People cannot live with it consistently (i.e., an agonizing atheism) since it denies what

every fiber of their being cries out for—meaning, value, significance, dignity, worth.

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

IV. Conclusion:

Question: How to transcend Nihilism?

Answer: Existentialism.