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Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Crisis of Piety

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Abstract

This essay aims to provide another perspective on how the problem of nihilism operates within Nietzsche's works by reading him against the thought of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, one of the first philosophers to introduce the classical modern sense of nihilism. Since Nietzsche makes no mention of Jacobi, this essay reads Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism as a silent reply to the founding problem of nihilism as Jacobi conceived it, namely the crisis of piety, and against the historical backdrop from which Nietzsche first truly encountered nihilism as a phenomenon, namely the 1881 assassination of Russian Tsar Alexander II. This essay will, additionally, briefly outline the various sources (historical, literary) Nietzsche had access to and contributed to his knowledge of nihilism.

Keywords: Nietzsche; Jacobi; Nihilism; God; Piety; Spinoza

The Pantheist Controversy

Frederick Beiser says it is no exaggeration to suggest that the pantheist controversy has had a lasting effect, albeit latently and without real recognition, on the development of nineteenth-century German thought. In this essay I want to provide some evidence of this claim by focusing my attention on how this controversy may have been among the central historical backdrops which helped shape, in particular, Nietzsche's understanding of, and response to, the emerging problem of nihilism.

The pantheist controversy has remained a good source for discussions of the historical, political, and philosophical role of nihilism since it is within the context of the controversy that the problem of nihilism, in its significant classical modern understanding, first emerges. Although one can trace a much deeper history of nihilism, both in terms of its terminological usage and/or its theoretical reliance on the role of nothingness, it was not until Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi that shaped our modern understanding of it. Jacobi used the term nihilism to designate what he thought as the crisis of belief in a personal God, which Jacobi accused Fichte, Kant, Spinozism, and Enlightenment philosophy for doing so. Any idea which consequently leads to a rejection of faith in a transcendent and personal God Jacobi accused as atheist, pantheist, and nihilist. The pantheist controversy emerges as a reaction against the growing popularity of Spinozism in eighteenth-century Germany, introduced by figures such as Pierre Bayle and Moses Mendelssohn. The controversy begins with an exchange in 1783 between Jacobi and Mendelssohn on the extent to which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing can be considered a Spinozist. Leaving aside the exegetical question of whether Lessing is a Spinozist, I will briefly outline why Spinozism (a metonymy for nihilism) proves a problem for Jacobi. The initial reception of Spinoza's

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work in seventeenth-century Germany was an entirely negative one. The *Ethica* was published in 1677, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in 1670. As Besier shows, it was almost *de rigueur* to prove one's orthodoxy by denouncing Spinoza as a heretic, and there was such an abundance of attacks against Spinoza that by 1710 a *Catalogus scriptorum Anti-Spinozanorum* was formed in Leipzig. The angst which beset orthodox pietists was Spinoza's supposed justification for atheism, which culminated in Spinoza's denial of providence, revelation, freedom of will, and a supernatural, transcendent, and personal God. Against the Lutherans, the rise of Spinozism was a 'reassertion of the political ideals of the Protestant Counter-Reformation' which meant, in short, inverting the privileged role of faith over reason and denying the divine truth of the biblical word. The philosophical and political radicalism that Spinoza's atheism or pantheism offered was that, through use of reason alone, access to knowledge of God was guaranteed to everyone without relying on the authority of priests and the Church.

Whilst the emergence of the problem of nihilism takes place within the pantheist controversy, it wasn't until Jacobi's letter to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, written in 1799, where the term nihilism is first used. However, in the letter Jacobi himself gives hint to the fact that his accusation of nihilism can be retrospectively applied to Spinozism insofar as Jacobi understands Fichte's philosophy to lead to the same consequence in the denial of a personal God. The controversy that surrounds Fichte is precisely the atheist controversy, which Jacobi sees as the other half of the pantheist controversy. Jacobi has a peculiar understanding of atheism such that it refers not to the common rejection of or indifference towards the existence of God but to the *failed theistic* attempt to secure God's existence. As with both Spinoza and Fichte, they do not proclaim to abolish God, but they nonetheless do as a consequence of their respective attempts to *cognise* Him. What Jacobi rejects is the enlightenment's privileging of rationality as the source for knowledge of reality or God, and he takes Spinozism to be the rationalistic system *par excellence*. In his *Brief über die Lehre von Spinoza* (1785), Jacobi had cast a doubt on the enlightenment's 'faith in reason'. This means that insofar as philosophy strives to *know*, it is a Spinozism which subsequently *negates existence*. As Jacobi says in the preface to his letter to Fichte, a 'God who could be *known* would be no God at all.' The problem with Fichte and Spinozism, according to Jacobi, is a problem with speculative philosophy *tout court*, since what it wants is to establish an *identity* between the claims 'I am' and 'There are things outside me' or between humanity and God and thereby abolishes the *difference* between them. Both Spinozism (materialism) and Fichte (idealism) collapsed into an 'egoism' which either asserts humanity *is* God or God *is* humanity, destroying the difference between human natural finitude and God's supernatural infinitude. It is for this reason that Jacobi refers to Fichte as an '*inverted Spinozism*.' For Jacobi's part, since God cannot be *cognized*, one must instead *believe* in Him, which is the only way of securing His existence. The philosophical strive towards knowledge results, for Jacobi, in transforming the world into *nothing*. The philosophical nihilist lives '*from nothing, to nothing, for nothing, into nothing.*'

The Nihilism Controversy

The most common source for the term nihilism in the nineteenth-century comes from Russia. The Russian term *nigilizm* appears in 1829 largely within an aesthetic context, but quickly gained a much more political import first in novels narrating the struggle between liberals and conservatives and second in the repeated assassination attempts of Tsar



Alexander II in 1866, 1867, and 1881 (which I will turn to shortly). It is from these events that nihilism takes on a worldwide terrorist signification. There are plenty of sources Nietzsche could have encountered the term, among them: Karl Immermann's *The Epigones* (1836), Karl Gutzkow's 'The Nihilists' (1853), Gottfried Keller's *Green Henry* (1855), Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1871). We know Nietzsche was at least familiar with most of these authors but not necessarily with all their works. However, it is Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevsky that deserve special consideration because it is through them that Nietzsche begins to engage the question of nihilism. Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* is often held responsible for popularizing the term nihilism with its association with political radicalism, which Nietzsche read around 1873 in a French translation with a preface by Prosper Mérimée who discusses nihilism. Nietzsche would read Dostoevsky over a decade later in 1886-87 which further prompted Nietzsche's thinking on nihilism. Nietzsche discovered Dostoevsky the same way he had discovered Schopenhauer in his youth, as a mere accident in a bookshop. In a letter to friend Peter Gast, Nietzsche writes that Dostoevsky has given him 'much pleasure and astonishment: a psychologist whom 'I agree with.'" Nietzsche had read a collection of short stories by Dostoevsky in French translation (preferring the lyrical superiority of French over German) and some of his novels, such as *Demons* which acts as a sequel to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, in which he is highly critical of the young generation of the 1840's and how their ideas turned into dangerous nihilist ideas of revolutionary socialism. Nietzsche's engagement with nihilism was not primarily derived from Russian writers, however, since between his reading of Turgenev and Dostoevsky Nietzsche discovers his first analysis of nihilism in the work of French literary critic Paul Bourget. In 1883 Bourget published *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, a collection of psychological 'portraits' on French authors such as Renan, Taine, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Baudelaire in which he analyses their works as representatives of the decadence of modernity, which Nietzsche read and made copious notes of between 1883-85. It is in Bourget's essays on Flaubert and Baudelaire, in particular, that Bourget made use of nihilism and decadence as diagnostic categories, which Nietzsche adopts. For example, Bourget finds in Baudelaire the perfect nihilist, one made up of pessimism and solitude, who Bourget describes as having a 'voracious appetite' for Nothingness. 'One finds in Baudelaire the Hindu Nirvana, rediscovered at the root of modern neuroses.' Bourget gives himself the task of providing a history of this 'will to nothingness', a term Nietzsche later borrows. For Bourget, nihilism and decadence have six qualities: 1) inability to overcome piety, 2) the disintegration of wholeness, 3) joy in negation and destruction, 4) will to nothingness, 5) lack of future, and 6) idealism, that is it seeks the other-worldly, they are seducers of the Beyond and renounce earthly sensuality. In short, Baudelaire is a case of modern neurosis *par excellence*. For Nietzsche's part, this role will be played by Wagner, for which modernity 'speaks its most *intimate* language through.'

Nietzsche's true encounter with nihilism came in 1881 with the assassination of Russian Tsar Alexander II, which I'll turn to now. As Marshall Bernan says, the 1860's was a watershed moment in Russian history. The decisive event being Alexander II's edict of 19th February 1861, the emancipation of the serfs. Alexander II brought a Great Reform to a disheveled society after its experience of the Crimean War, effectively leading to a liberalization of culture. This meant, among other things, opening up universities to all

those who could pass the qualifying exams. However, it was quickly observed that the serfs were free only in name. Peasants had remained shackled to their lords, received even less land than before, and received a whole new set of obligations to the village's communes. By the late 1860's and 70's, the reform was gradually revoked. All this had the effect of producing a new generation and style of intellectuals—the *raznochintsy*, those who did not belong to nobility—who seized on the opportunity to make radical changes to the government. Tugenev's Bazarov is one such portrait of the 'new man' of the 1860's who inspired a generation of self-described nihilists. Nihilism became a worldwide phenomenon when, on 13th March 1881, Alexander II was assassinated in Saint Petersburg by revolutionary socialist and nihilist group Narodnaya Volya ('People's Will'). Another group of revolutionaries had tried twice before in December 1879 (by using dynamite to destroy a train) and February 1880 (by bombing a dining room which failed due to the Tsar not being there). There were four assassins who executed the bombing of 1881. Ignacy Hrniewiecki was the martyr who got killed as he was wounded by the same bomb used against the Tsar. The rest were publicly executed by hanging. Alexander II died later that day as he was carried away to his study in the Winter Palace. As Adorno remarks, Nietzsche's adoption of the term nihilism presumably came from newspaper accounts of these terroristic acts. We find the earliest mention of *Russischen Nihilisten* in two 1880 fragments. In one note Nietzsche says '*Die Nihilisten hatten Schopenhauer also Philosophen*' (eKGWB/NF-1880,4[103]) and in the other he praises nihilists for their immorality. Nietzsche remarks that revolutionary history is always on the side of 'evil' insofar as those who wish to overcome the existing order are subsequently moralized as 'bad people', in this case the 'nihilist' denotes those immoral deviants who disrupt the order of things. But for this very reason they are to be considered as free thinkers or spirits who, for Nietzsche, are to be on the side of criminality (eKGWB/NF-1880,4[108]). In a letter sent to Peter Gast on the day of the assassination, Nietzsche signs off: 'Dear Friend, why can I not hear your music! I need all kinds of good health — it has gone a little too deep into my heart, this "heart-breaking nihilism"!' (eKGWB/ BVN-1881,88).

As previously mentioned, Nietzsche won't reflect on this moment until he discovers Dostoevsky in 1887, the same year Nietzsche publishes his fifth chapter in *The Gay Science* and *The Genealogy of Morality* where he first writes about nihilism in published form. In Book V of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche begins with a series of related aphorisms on faith, morality, and nihilism. The central problem which animates these aphorisms is that of piety. Aphorism 344, titled "In what way we, too, are still pious", challenges the secular enlightenment assumption that its practice of science is driven by an innocent search for truth by showing that 'science, too, rests on a faith' and that there is 'simply no 'presuppositionless' science,' that is no science or domain of knowledge that does not depend, as Nietzsche will go on to show, on the unconditional faith in morality. The conviction that truth is necessary—'this unconditional will to truth'—does not, as one might assume, 'owe its origin to the calculus of utility' but, in the final analysis, to 'not deceive, not even myself.' If science aims for the truth, then it affirms the prerogative not to deceive. But why not deceive, why not allow oneself to be deceived, asks Nietzsche. 'Granted we want truth,' Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but 'why not rather untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?' (BGE §1). Here Nietzsche, as elsewhere, is drawing on the fact that we ascribe a value to the question of the necessity of truth. And truth's value lies precisely in its ability to preserve the species who searches for it. But even this is wrong,



Nietzsche continues, since one cannot know in advance whether certainty or ignorance, trust or deception, truth or lies has greater advantage in the self-preservation of the species. The ‘will to truth’ stands on moral grounds. Behind the question ‘why science?’ lies the question ‘why morality?’. Nietzsche’s critique here is less directed towards morality *per se* than to the unchecked moral presuppositions of rational scientific enquiry. The issue involves the fact that science’s search for truth is not so innocent of ulterior motives. Nietzsche concludes in claiming that the faith which science presupposes ends up affirming another world than that of life, nature, and history; ‘and insofar as they affirm this ‘other world’, must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our* world?’

Nietzsche thereafter turns his attention to nihilism for similar reasons. In aphorism 346 “Our question mark” Nietzsche once again poses the problem as a problem of piety which ends with a Kierkegaardian decision: “the terrible Either/Or: ‘Either abolish your venerations or — *yourselves!*’ The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be — nihilism? That is *our* question mark.’ The task with which Nietzsche sets humanity is the aim to overcome the either/or between faith or death, which so characterizes the predicament of the revolutionary nihilist. Nietzsche is here a careful thinker who does not uncritically adopt the position of the nihilist who, as Turgenev’s Arkady says, does not accept any authority or principle on faith alone, since Nietzsche criticizes nihilists for doing what they profess not to do because even they, too, remain pious. For Nietzsche, the nihilist merely ‘turns his unbelief into another faith, a goal, a martyrdom!’ (GS §346). Or as Dostoevsky put it in *Demons*: ‘He who dares to kill himself is God.’ In the following aphorism we find such a reference to a ‘Petersburg-style nihilism’ which means ‘*faith in unbelief* to the point of martyrdom’ (GS §347) which indicates once again the *need* for faith. Nietzsche clearly had in mind here the assassination of Alexander II. Bourget himself observes in his essay on Baudelaire that a ‘universal nausea’ manifests itself in nihilism, pessimism, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the Paris Commune, the misanthropy of naturalist novelists, and the ‘murderous rage of St. Petersburg conspirators’ and goes on to claim that ‘they need a set of beliefs, not a vision. For the initial belief in God they substitute a belief in liberty, or revolution, or socialism, or science’. It is for this reason Bourget deems Baudelaire an idolator—with its etymological significance (*Latria*—*idololatry, idolatry*)—because he retains ‘the passionate surge by which man transfers to some creatures [. . .] the exalted ardour that he has turned away from God.’ A typical Baudelairean theme of raising prostitutes to the dignity of divinity. The nihilist is an idolator or ascetic who does not escape the ‘will for veneration’ since it is the nature of humanity to operate according to the fulfilment of needs which, for Nietzsche, express themselves in the construction of false ideals that make the suffering of existence endurable and meaningful (precisely, endurable *because* meaningful). Humanity just is a venerating animal. Nietzsche will later clarify the problem of ascetic ideals in his *Genealogy of Morality*: ‘Precisely this is what the ascetic ideal means: that something *was lacking*, that an enormous *void* surrounded man—he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of meaning’ (G III §28). Nietzsche thus characterises both the Christian and the nihilist, for both do not know how to give meaning to their suffering caused by the non-fulfilment of their needs. Ascetic ideals are symptoms which palliate suffering by giving it meaning. As Nietzsche goes on to say, the ‘meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far stretched out over

humanity—and the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning!’ A nihilist is one who destroys the normative bonds which make meaning possible and without thereby being able to affirm. As a result, they suffer from a lack of meaning. Instead, the nihilist posits meaning—‘an end, a goal, a martyrdom’—to the meaninglessness itself. Thus they palliate their suffering with a false consolation, a world without meaning or affirmation. They embody a rejection of life in the form of a will to nothingness. Their martyrdom is proof of Nietzsche’s claim that ‘man would rather will *nothingness* than not will . . .’ (Ibid.).

In the scattering of notes collected under the posthumously published non-book *The Will to Power* we find Nietzsche experimenting with his diagnostic category of nihilism which he used to explain: Christianity, Buddhism, Socrates, Jesus, Hegel, nationalism, socialism, anarchism, romanticism, positivism, dialectics, pessimism, optimism, Pyrrhonian skepticism, Wagner and, most importantly, himself. Nietzsche makes the curious claim that he is able to understand nihilism, decadence, modernity better than anybody because he is a nihilist, a decadent, a modern *par excellence*. Nietzsche calls himself the ‘first perfect nihilist of Europe who [. . .] has now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself’ (WP §2). He is therefore able to create a distance between himself and his time, to reflect in a culture ‘that no longer reflects’ precisely because he has embodied the nihilism of modernity within himself. He is likewise the master of the practice of decadence because it is which he has had the most experience with (EH “Why I Am So Wise” §2). Nietzsche assumes the role of somebody capable not only of reflecting on the truth of decadence but towards ‘healthier concepts’ precisely because he was decadent, weak. This is where we can begin to interpret what he subsequently says: ‘Setting aside the fact that I am a decadent, I am also its antithesis.’ Nietzsche says he is as much a child of his age as Wagner, that is, he is decadent, and is therefore careful not to consider himself outside the problem of nihilism but instead affirms the necessity of its existence and its self-overcoming. Nietzsche therefore considers himself to embody the very contradictions of modernity.

Nietzsche’s solution involves the affirmation of the self-overcoming of nihilism which comes from his teaching of the ‘highest formula of affirmation that can possibly be attained’, the eternal recurrence of the same (EH “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” §1). In his late notes Nietzsche refers to his ‘central teaching’ as the most extreme form of nihilism (WP §55). The logical consequence of the nihilistic negation and devaluation of life—the belief in the immorality of nature, in aimlessness and meaninglessness—necessarily leads to the necessity of affirming life. ‘Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness.’ The nothing, eternally! Just as Nietzsche posits the eternal recurrence as the conclusion of nihilism, he also remarks that it is to be taken as the *antithesis* to pantheism. Eternal recurrence and pantheism are not merely opposed but, like that between eternal recurrence and nihilism, lead to the same conclusion. The pantheistic belief for “‘everything perfect, divine, eternal” also *compels* a faith in the “eternal recurrence””. Nietzsche continues and asks whether a pantheism ‘beyond good and evil’ is possible, and believes it to be so in Spinoza who ‘reached such an affirmative position insofar as every moment has a logical necessity.’ In a related note Nietzsche says:

Hegel’s way of thinking is not far different from *Goethe’s*: one need only to listen to Goethe about *Spinoza*. Will to deify the universe and life in order to find *repose*



and *happiness* in contemplation and in getting to the bottom of things; Hegel seeks reason everywhere—before reason one may submit and acquiesce. In Goethe a kind of almost *joyous* and *trusting fatalism* that does not revolt, that does not flag, that seeks to form a totality out of himself, in the faith that only in the totality everything redeems itself and appears good and justified.’ (Ibid.)

Nietzsche extends this note to an aphorism on Goethe published in *Twilight of the Idols* which ends in the same tone:

A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed — *he no longer denies*. . . . But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptised it with the name *Dionysos*.— ‘(TI §49).

Thus, Nietzsche affirms a parallel between Hegel, Goethe, Spinoza and himself, each of whom affirm a ‘joyful fatalism’, and that between nihilism, pantheism, and Dionysianism. It is not for nothing that Nietzsche, ironically, considers nihilism to be a ‘*divine way of thinking*.’ In yet another note (WP §1050) we find Nietzsche associating his concept of the Dionysian with pantheism, both of which share an ‘ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction.’ What Nietzsche calls nihilism is a midday, a period of transition, an *intermezzo* between the end and the beginning where the old system of values destroys itself with the onset of a reevaluation of all values.

Although Nietzsche makes no reference to Jacobi nor explicitly to the pantheism controversy, one can speculate that not only was he aware of these debates but that he had them in mind when constructing his notes on what has become known as his outline on ‘European Nihilism.’ It would not be surprising since Nietzsche aimed to provide an extensive history of nihilism, and within the first page we find references to Hegel’s pantheism and a ‘critique of Spinozism.’ Thus the founding problem of nihilism, for Nietzsche as much as for Jacobi, concerns precisely the crisis of faith in God. However, whereas for Jacobi nihilism refers to a lack of belief, for Nietzsche nihilism refers to the inability to overcome faith. Whereas for Jacobi nihilism is the decline of Christianity, for Nietzsche nihilism refers to the historical decline of Christianity itself (WP §2). Christianity is nihilism because it results in self-abnegation. That is, Christianity overcomes itself, it ends at the hands of its own morality and its *will to truth*. Christianity rebounds from “God is truth” to the fanatical “All is false” (Ibid.). This is what Nietzsche means when he says: ‘What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*.’ What Nietzsche calls ‘radical nihilism’ is the affirmation of the self-overcoming of morality, which means not only the liberation from self-alienating ideals (i.e., values) but a transformation of humanity’s relation to valuation, to becoming masters of value-creation. Jacobi and Nietzsche agree on this point, namely skepticism inaugurates the end of Christianity. Skepticism is the consequence of all rational enquiry which, for Jacobi, afflicts enlightenment philosophy as such. The philosophical attempt to avoid skepticism, as

Jacobi views it, is likewise the attempt to avoid nihilism. But since philosophy cannot avoid nihilism without ‘faith in reason’, any philosophy which privileges reason over faith falls into nihilism. There is thus an unavoidable element of piety. For Nietzsche, nihilism constitutes the crisis of piety in which aims, ends, goals, ideals, or ‘why?’ can no longer be affirmed since ideals, or the ‘highest values’, through their own logic devalue or overcome themselves. It is precisely this logic of self-overcoming which Nietzsche affirms. Nihilism requires a ‘great health’ which not only can say yes to life but can affirm that which makes affirming the world possible, a double affirmation. Nietzsche, like Spinoza and Hegel, converted the accidents of history into necessity. As Zarathustra says: “To redeem those who are the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into ‘thus I willed it!’ — only that would I call redemption!” (Z 2 “On Redemption”). Affirmation does not mean the affirmation of the status quo nor the affirmation of what has been but the affirmation of precisely the *will that affirms itself. To affirm a life—this life—* in which saying yes is possible. For Nietzsche, piety negates this world because it presupposes the unfulfilled need for another beyond-world. Nietzsche’s nihilism can thus be viewed as an inverted Jacobism.

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