

WEEK 5 | NIHILISM

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.¹

INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 19th century naturalism had replaced theism as the dominant worldview in the sciences and in intellectual circles, and its influence was beginning to infiltrate society at large. The scientific advancements of the new astronomy had removed the need for God as Sustainer, and Darwin's theory of natural selection as an explanation for the diversity of life on earth had removed the need for God as Creator. God was dead; in His place rose Man, with reason and science his keys to unlocking the mysteries and creative potential of the natural world. The promise of scientific and technological advancement seemed limitless and filled the cultural atmosphere with a sense of optimism as the 20th century dawned. In the midst of this optimistic mood, however, some philosophers were taking naturalism to its logical conclusions and arriving at a very different place than optimism. Nihilism was born, and it would increase in influence as the 20th century, with all its horrors wrought by technological advancement, wore on.

Nihilism is not so much a new worldview as much as it is the naturalistic worldview fully developed—the worldview any honest materialist should have. Friedrich Nietzsche—a contemporary of Charles Darwin—is attributed with first articulating its implications, but as the quote from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* makes clear, nihilism was present where God was absent long before Nietzsche arrived on the scene. This lesson will begin with a definition of nihilism and brief sketch of its conception in history. Then, rather than analyze nihilism with the four worldview categories we have used thus far, we will look at four implications of naturalism that lead to the conclusions of nihilism.

DEFINITION

“Nihilism” is derived from the Latin *nihil*, meaning “nothing, that which does not exist.”² It is associated with the absolute denial and the total negation of everything—knowledge, ethics,

¹ Spoken by King Macbeth shortly after learning of his wife's death in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Macbeth is lamenting the brevity and emptiness of life; his was a truly nihilistic perspective. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1606), act 5, scene 5, lines 16-20.

² Alan Pratt, “Nihilism,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>.

beauty, even reality.³ Nihilism is marked by an extreme skepticism and pessimism that condemns existence. Essentially, nihilism is not so much a worldview as it is a denial of all worldviews. It asserts that all values, knowledge, communication, and meaning are baseless. Francis Schaeffer describes it as a state of despair that man has descended into as the implications of his rejection of God have become clear.⁴

HISTORY

As early as the 4th century BC, the Greek philosophers known as the Skeptics denied the possibility of certainty and thus denounced traditional truths as “unjustifiable opinions.”⁵ Demosthenes observed that “Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true,”⁶ identifying knowledge as subjective and relational rather than objective and absolute. Already, the seeds of nihilistic skepticism were present.

Though it had always been present, nihilistic philosophy was first labeled as such and popularized in Ivan Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) where it was used to describe the credo of total negation espoused by the character Bazarov.⁷ Nihilism formed the part of the philosophical basis for a loosely organized revolutionary movement in Russia in the latter half of the 19th century, encapsulated in the notorious entreaty, “Let us put our trust in the eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unsearchable and eternally creative source of all life—the passion for destruction is also a creative passion!”⁸ This anarchist movement rejected all state, church, and familial authority on the basis of a radical materialism. Even earlier, in 1844 Max Stirner expressed nihilistic tendencies in his denial of absolutes and abstract concepts of any kind.⁹

Despite these early tremors, the true shock of nihilism was felt in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche followed the implications of naturalism to their logical end: there is no objective order or structure in the world except what we give it. Any appearance of order, any apparent absolutes that might support convictions of any kind, is a façade that, when penetrated, proves to be nothing more than illusion. “Every belief, every considering-something-

³ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 84.

⁴ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 24.

⁵ Pratt, “Nihilism.”

⁶ Demosthenes, Third *Olynthiac*, section 19. Julius Caesar would echo his words when he said, “Men in general are quick to believe that which they wish to be true.”

⁷ Pratt, “Nihilism.”

⁸ Mikhael Bakunin, *Reaction in Germany* (1842).

⁹ See Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority* (Dover Publications, 2005).

true, is necessarily false,” he writes, “because there is simply no true world.”¹⁰ He goes on to say that true strength will be determined by the extent to which “we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely apparent character, the necessity of lies.”¹¹ Because there are no universal absolutes—whether of truth, morality, beauty, value, etc.—“The highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why’ finds no answer.”¹² Nietzsche rightly recognized that, by removing God as the infinite point of reference for all values and norms, those norms and values are rendered utterly devoid of meaning.

It is perhaps the most famous passage of Nietzsche’s writings that best captures the despair of realizing how meaningless life becomes without something Transcendent. The Parable of the Madman, known primarily for that infamous statement “God is dead” is worth quoting at length:

The madman.—Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed;

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Book 1 (1883-1888).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, notes from 1887.

and whoever is born after us -- for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars -- and yet they have done it themselves.

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"¹³

In this passage, as Carl Trueman puts it, Nietzsche "calls the bluff of the Enlightenment and challenges those who have sloughed off the shackles of traditional Christianity to have the courage to take full measure of what they have done."¹⁴ In essence, through the madman Nietzsche challenges Enlightenment philosophers to draw the awful yet necessary moral and metaphysical conclusions that follow when God is regarded as unnecessary to explain reality as it is. Thus, in the parable the madman is not addressing Christians and challenging their belief in God; rather, he is confronting the atheist, "those who did not believe in God," and asking if they realize the gravity of what they have done. Initially the madman is met with laughter and mockery, but soon he has the attention of his audience.

Atheistic society, the madman contends, has killed God. "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Yet doing this, he cries, is like unchaining this earth from its sun. Why? Because to dispense with God "is to destroy the very foundations on which the whole world of metaphysics and morality has been constructed and depends."¹⁵ To remove God meant removing the very foundation upon which morality and our perception of reality had been built. Though religion had been dispensed with, its influence on the systems of life and thought—the way people think and behave—continued. What the enlightenment had failed to do, Nietzsche alleged, was to recognize that these systems no longer had justification because their foundation had been removed. There was no longer any justification for morality, ethics, or knowledge.

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¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. By Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82

¹⁴ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” Without God, there is no transcendent order and meaning on which a worldview can be built as a basis for truth or morality. Without God, the impetus falls to man to determine them; Man must take on the terrifying burden of creator. Every man becomes the maker of his own ethic, his own knowledge, his own morality. Everything is relative. Truth and morality become matters of personal taste. “There has never been a greater deed,” he says. Indeed, by removing God from their worldview, the atheist had removed truth, meaning, value, and morality as well. It was this reality—and its implications—that Nietzsche challenged the thinkers of his age to confront and that we will evaluate in the following sections.

LOSS OF FREEDOM

Two basic presuppositions of naturalism are that 1) matter is eternal and all there is and 2) the universe is a closed system that operates with a uniformity of cause and effect. While not immediately obvious, these premises have a profound effect on human nature. As we saw previously, naturalism holds that human beings are essentially complex machines, and personality is just a function of chemical and physical processes. If this is true, however, then one must admit that free will is an illusion. In a closed system, change can only come from within, so that the present state of affairs governs the future state of affairs. Because cause and effect are uniform, there is only one possible outcome for the future state, and it is entirely dictated by the present state. History, then, in a closed system is simply a string of causal events whose outcomes were determined by their prior conditions. As Sire writes, “In a closed universe the possibility that some things need not be, that others are possible, is not possible. For the only way change can come is by a force moving to make that change, and the only way that force can come is if it is moved by another force, ad infinitum. There is no break in this chain, from eternity past to eternity future, forever and ever, amen.”¹⁶

If humanity is a part of this system, then our choices are determined by something outside of our will: the prior conditions of both our internal and external environments. Every choice we make is not self-determined but determined by a prior chemical and physical state that will have a theoretically predictable outcome—a cause and an effect. If this is true, the ability of a human beings to act in a significant way is lost. Nietzsche recognized this, writing:

If one were omniscient, one would be able to calculate each individual action in advance, each step in the progress of knowledge, each error, each act of malice. To be sure, the acting man is caught in his illusion of volition; if the wheel of the world were to stand still for a moment and an omniscient calculating mind were there to take advantage of this interruption, he would be able to tell into the farthest future of each being and describe every rut that wheel will roll upon. The acting man’s delusion about himself, his assumption that free will exists, is also part of the calculating mechanism.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 89.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878),

While many naturalists have sought to maintain free will and the genuine significance of human action and choice, it is difficult to avoid the above conclusion. Freedom can at best be a *determinacy unrecognized*, an illusion due to limited knowledge. Only if the initial premises of naturalism are dropped can free will be maintained. In this worldview, human beings are machines without any ability to affect their destiny or act in a significant way. Of this the nihilist despairs.

LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE

In the naturalistic worldview, man is only matter, the result of impersonal forces. Perception and knowledge are illusory, the product of chemical and physical processes occurring in the brain. Thought is a product of matter. If this is true, then no person has any way of knowing whether or not what they perceive is truth or illusion. If this world was not created to be truly perceived and understood, and if we were not created with the capacity to truly perceive and understand the world around us, on what basis would we believe this to be possible? If humanity is the product of impersonal matter plus time plus chance, what produces confidence that matter has any concern to lead a conscious being to a true and logical perception of reality? Darwin himself once wrote, “The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”¹⁸

The epistemological problems for naturalism go even deeper than this. J. B. S. Haldane took Darwin’s admission one step further: “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.”¹⁹ In this statement he conceded that, according to his own presuppositions, not only does he have no basis for believing his perception of reality, but he has no basis to even believe his own presuppositions! Despite science’s claims of objectivity and verifiability, science apart from a Biblical worldview has no way of establishing its own credibility and verifying its own claims; ironically, they must be accepted by faith.

In addition to presupposing the rationality of the human mind and our ability to accurately perceive reality, naturalism also assumes that laws of logic are universal and operative. This, too, is a foundationless assumption. Why? Any argument for the truthfulness of logic must rest on the very laws of logic it seeks to prove. This requires another argument for their validity, which in turn rests on their validity. Without an infinite and objective standard of truth, this process descends into a never-ending cycle of vicious circular reasoning. Perhaps one could argue that they are self-evident, but this too is an argument that cannot be trusted and must be proven. To

¹⁸ From a letter to W. Graham (July 3, 1881), quoted in *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters* (1892; reprint, New York: Dover, 1958).

¹⁹ As quoted by C.S. Lewis in *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), 18.

prove it, another argument is needed which, in turn, must be proven. In this case the argument for laws of logic becomes an infinite regress with no hope of resolution.

When naturalism is taken to its logical end, all knowledge is reduced to nothing, an illusion of the mind which is itself an illusion (maybe, but who knows?). “We thus end in an ironic paradox. Naturalism, born in the Age of Enlightenment, was launched on a firm acceptance of the human ability to know. Now naturalists find that they can place no confidence in their knowledge.”²⁰

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
“It is futile,” I said,
“You can never—”
“You lie,” he cried,
And ran on.²¹

Taken to its logical conclusion, the naturalist chasing knowledge is like the man chasing the horizon. This is epistemological nihilism, and it leads only to despair. Granted, one would be hard pressed to find someone who holds this position consistently. Robert Farrar Capon humorously describes how to spot the hypocrisy of nihilism: “The skeptic is never for real. There he stands, cocktail in hand, left arm draped languorously on one end of the mantelpiece, telling you he can’t be sure of anything, not even his own existence. I’ll give you my secret method of demolishing universal skepticism in four words. Whisper to him: ‘Your fly is open.’ If he thinks knowledge is so all-fired impossible, why does he always look?”²²

LOSS OF VIRTUE

Most naturalists would identify as moral people. The problem, as we have seen, is not that the naturalist would deny morality but that they have no basis for it. As Allan Bloom writes, “Reason cannot establish values, and its belief that it can is the stupidest and most pernicious illusion.”²³ In other words, *is* cannot produce *ought*. Without an infinite point of reference for what is good and evil, right and wrong, morality is relativized.

That this is logically true is not lost on most modern thinkers, yet no one wants to live in a society devoid of moral values altogether, one in which every person can do whatever they want

²⁰ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 96.

²¹ Stephen Crane, *The Black Riders and Other Lines*, anthologized.

²² Robert Farrar Capon, *Hunting the Divine Fox* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 17-18.

²³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 194

without penalty.²⁴ The prevailing question in this situation becomes: where then can moral values be grounded? Cultural anthropologists will argue that morality is relative to ones' culture, that society itself determines what is valuable and what is good. This too, however, runs into difficulties, for it is only another way of saying that *is* produces *ought*. Whatever value society desires to actualize—thus deeming it 'good'—is a mere fact of the specific value. There remains no basis to say that this value *ought* to be; it only *is*. For example, say a society defines morality as that which promotes human flourishing. The question must be asked, on what basis is human flourishing itself regarded as good? There remains a chasm between *is* and *ought*.

This can be taken a step further. If society is deemed the arbiter of morality, one must ask on what basis the existence of societies is deemed good, or better than the absence of societies. Once again, in closed universe there is no satisfying answer to these questions. As Sire notes, "Cultural relativism, it turns out, is not forever relative. It rests on a primary value affirmed by cultural relativists themselves: that culture should be preserved."²⁵ This doesn't even begin to address how differing values held by different cultures should be arbitrated; to that question the naturalist again has no answer. Here we see clearly the inconsistencies inherent in the naturalistic worldview. Thus,

Naturalism places us human beings in an ethically relative box. For us to know what values within that box are true values, we need a measure imposed on us from outside the box; we need a moral plumb line by which we can evaluate the conflicting moral values we observe in ourselves and others. But there is nothing outside the box; there is no moral plumb line, no ultimate, nonchanging standard of value. Ergo: ethical nihilism.²⁶

The nihilist sees this situation clearly. Nietzsche writes, "One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves beyond good and evil—and that they have the illusion of moral judgment beneath them. This demand follows from an insight formulated by me: that there are no moral facts whatever. Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment, that it believes in realities which do not exist."²⁷

Nietzsche was an anti-realist when it came to values—he believed they simply do not exist. He recognizes elsewhere that, if there are no true moral facts, then guilt itself is an illusion. How can one be guilty if there is no such thing as right and wrong? It is here that the despair of nihilism sets in, for everyone has feelings of guilt. How, then, can guilt be atoned for if there was no moral law that was actually broken? There is no atonement in such a system. In fact, according to

²⁴ One thinks of the situation in Israel described in the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

²⁵ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 98.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The 'Improvers' of Mankind."

the naturalistic worldview, the only thing one can be guilty of is feeling guilty, and for this very personal problem there is no solution. There is only nihilistic despair.

LOSS OF MEANING

If we blend the conclusions of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical nihilism together we find ourselves left with a complete loss of meaning and, with it, total despair. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. captures this reality well in a parody of the creation narrative of Genesis 1:

In the beginning God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness.

And God said, "Let us make creatures out of mud, so mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God. And he went away.²⁸

You can see the naturalist's dilemma. We are personal, conscious beings produced by an impersonal universe, "God" in this satire. When we ask the big question, our creator cannot answer, for it is only impersonal matter, plus time plus chance. This "creator" can imbue no meaning to life. Naturalism leads to nihilism—infinite despair.

CONCLUSION

One thing we recognize throughout this discussion is that no one actually lives this way. Most naturalists do not follow the logic of their worldview to nihilism, and those who do still do not live according to it because, ultimately, nihilism is unlivable. Why? First, the moment a person chooses to affirm nihilism they undermine it. If there is no meaning, than any course of action in a given situation is a viable option because none is better than the other. However, when we choose a particular course of action we are affirming the value of that course of action over the others. "We are creating value by choice"²⁹ and not living by nihilism. To choose to be a nihilist is to choose not to be a nihilist—an absurd state to exist in.

Further, the statement that there is no meaning in the universe is self-contradictory, for that would have to mean that the statement itself is meaningless; if it has any meaning then it is false.

²⁸ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Dell, 1970), 177.

²⁹ Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 103.

Yet to construct the sentence and make the statement affirms that there are such things as knowledge, truth, and meaning. This hints at another internal tension in nihilism: it is a parasitic worldview. That is, for it to deny God it needs a God to deny. For it to deny meaning, there must exist a generally understood definition and experience of meaning to deny. And so on for truth, values, etc. Nihilism can't exist on its own; it needs something to fight against. When there is nothing left to fight, there remains no possibility to think or speak or contemplate from a nihilistic worldview.

For someone to practice nihilism would necessary lead to severe psychological issues, for who could actually live as though there was no meaning or purpose in life? It goes directly against the human experience in this universe. Nietzsche himself ended his life in an asylum, unable to cope with the implications of his own worldview. In the end, no matter how voraciously one might rail against God and His existence, this remains His world and the only way to live in it in a meaningful and consistent way is to acknowledge His existence, whether explicitly or implicitly. Both the naturalist and the nihilist are practicing theists. Their issue is not intellectual but moral. It's not an issue of being unconvinced, it's an issue of rebellion against their Creator. These rebels, attempting to escape the necessary implications of their belief, would seek to transcend this despair and create meaning of their own. Existentialism would be birthed.³⁰

³⁰ There is a group of philosophers who argue for an "optimistic nihilism" as a way to find purpose in a meaningless universe, but—as far as I can tell—its argument is virtually identical to that of classic existentialism, and so it will be discussed under that heading.