

# Nihilism: A Lie In Service To The Existing

William Gillis

10th May 2016

Talking about nihilism, much less attempting to define and critique it, is an exhausting sort of task, akin to talking to a mischievous toddler who has learned some empty single-word responses that make an adult go in circles. And one risks serious strain from all the eyerolling necessary to get through any such discussion. Most of us recognize that to bother to debate or critique nihilism is to lose from the outset. In the same way that feeding the trolls is a game utterly disconnected from sincere comparison and collaboration on ideas. And yet total disengagement is unsustainable.

What are we to do when former friends or lovers start falling for such inane tripe and then are somehow shocked by our revulsion? One doesn't have to go far to find simmering disdain for nihilism in radical circles and yet it sees little expression to those calling themselves "nihilists" beyond snubbing or laughing at it with memes. We simply cluster apart from one another. Individually reasonable in our refusal to get drawn in, but ultimately impractical on the whole. Every once in a while with trolls someone has to suit up and shovel their shit. And so to is every once in a while it worth reiterating what garbage nihilism is.

In this I mean the core idea of nihilism and the way it's used in practice. I don't really want to waste time talking about the precise contours of the mild academic fad in continental circles, or the historical footnote of long dead 19th century Russian revolutionaries and some residual poetry, or the loose circle of former anarchists that all burned out together in the late 00s and tried to dress up despair as some kind of hip aesthetic. I mean I *will* talk about them, I've got essays lined up responding to their particulars. But it's all so utterly boring, such a drudge. And so much of the ostensible preoccupations of said groups are orthogonal to the real issue of nihilism. In letting them set the terms of the discourse the real substance of their core provocation is dodged and what is so pernicious about it is left to spread rot. So, before getting into those weeds, I think there's value in first going over — in a relatively evenhanded and non-polemic sort of way — what I and many others find so objectionable about nihilism. What's actually motivating this fury and distrust. Of course being frank and honest is not an effective way to play the game most nihilists are actually playing, and sadly this approach is a lot less entertaining than just talking mad shit, but I hope you'll read on nonetheless.

It must be noted from the outset that there's a kind of defensive contradiction in the very idea of nihilism that's immediately apparent when you try to clarify, "*what exactly does 'meaningless' mean?*" The escape hatch is obvious: a nihilist can just endlessly repeat the words "that doesn't

mean anything” to everything including their own statement. Talking to such a Bartleby is isomorphic to pressing a crosswalk button, so I’m going to start out by assuming a more engaging nihilism, one willing to speak in some approximation of rational terms. In such context I think the most substantive definition for “meaningless” is a situation where something is perfectly symmetric, pointing in all directions, all possible interpretations or models or values equally (including the incoherent ones) and thus conveying nothing. Utterly indistinct, in other words, without structure or affinity or direction or inclination. And thus without content. Formless. “Indifferent,” as an editor of Hostis succinctly phrased things, “to any particular way.”

With this prompt I’d personally phrase the most common form of nihilism as: *The notion that when examined at maximal vigilance or scope the topology of possible values/desires has no distinct universal attractors or flows.*

I recognize this uses language or concepts (eg “topology”) outside the life experience of some people, but I think it’s better for the precision. And note that one can replace “values” with “models” to get full blown epistemological nihilism rather than mere value nihilism. But honest-to-god full-fledged epistemological nihilism is where you just start throwing things at your interlocutor because all further discourse is impossible. Plus, you know, whatever they claim, no one actually believes in epistemological nihilism. At least not while still having a remotely functional neural net. So we’ll stick with value-nihilism for the moment and then come back to the epistemological stuff later.

The core problem with nihilism is that it always functions as a sleight of hand to protect an existing value set. Nihilism is uniquely good at this because *in practice* it resolves into nothing more than the assertion that thinking further about something is useless *because the ultimate endpoint of thinking about things is a state where all values are exactly equal in appeal*. The claim is that you reach an apex of perfect enlightenment and truly realize that “the stars and the sky are uncaring” — that valuing and pursuing happiness is no greater or less smiled upon by universe than valuing and pursuing sadness. Or rainbows, or rape, or honor, or genocide, or paperclips. One is doomed to reach — as Nietzsche so famously freaked out about science and rationality supposedly sending us towards — a vantage point, a crest above the fray, from which one can see that there is no conclusive value inextricably drawn to by one’s enlightenment. All ideals are hollow, all desires arbitrary. It’s a fear much older than Nietzsche, and hugely influential.

We all know that intellectual vigilance ends up changing one’s values. One learns upon reflection, for example, that two desires are mutually incompatible; that one must at least be recognized as more foundational than the other, but possibly the other must even be dropped entirely. Or we learn that a value we thought was clearly definable is in fact an arbitrary cluster of things, only held together temporarily, with no deep substance. That the ideology we assumed we were working from was instead filled with not just with tensions but full-blown contradictions that upon examination tear it irrevocably apart. Similarly, you desire pleasure and disdain pain but then, upon learning how to mentally step back and flip a neural switch that reverses the two, suddenly can find no objective meta-preference between them.

If ethics — the sector of philosophy concerned with exploring “oughts” — is the exploration of this topological network of desires about desires (and desires about desires about desires and so on), nihilism is the claim that when you get the furthest out in meta-desires, when you have mapped every dependency and interaction, every tension and flow, not only does nothing resolve inescapably as your most deeply rooted or inescapable meta-desire, but no deep structure is revealed at all. Rather you are left adrift, your inquiry bottoms out and you become capable of

choosing to adopt any value or desire, with no new sign to guide the way save the most base of happenstance, the most superficial of flickering impulses. Thus the popular concern with nihilism being a gateway to shallow hedonism.

Such fears of nihilism are widespread, ironically too often *because* the fearful accept the nihilist premise. Many people momentarily recognize that their present beliefs or values are unsustainable, critically unsupported and in constant danger of collapse should they be examined too closely. But unfortunately these same people violently shy away from actually shedding off such baggage, in no small part because they have no idea yet what might replace them, and respond by believing that *nothing* will. In any case, to search for better models of the world or more coherent value systems would mean letting their present ones crumble, and rather than cast themselves into a possibly fruitless quest, they'd prefer to wall up. To accept they're full of shit and just embrace it or erase knowledge of it. To make their bed where they stand, viewing their own contradiction-riddled perspective as as good of a lie as any other. Easier than radical inquiry is to leap on the suspicion that it'd be fruitless.

The occurrence of this kind of belief in nihilism in the general populace has historically driven a consequent open hostility to inquiry due to these nihilists' expectations that such can only lead to a more explicit, permanent, or less opportunistic nihilism. Which would, in turn, risk disrupting the incoherent values or identities they've secretly used their own nihilism to prop up. And because intellectual vigilance is the defining path or habit of geeks, philosophers, scientists, and other radicals, those communities have been frequently faced with charges of "nihilism" from such secret nihilists.

Naturally some among us feel an urge to turn into and embrace the accusation.

At best this sort of self-identified "active nihilism" ends up as the inane platitude "Question Everything" dressed up a little edgy. A mere call for more skepticism and critical detachment. And who on earth would disagree with that?

But it rarely stays there.

Because in practice an allegiance to "questioning everything" — when taken more seriously as a philosophy rather than a mere slogan or psychological corrective — means either secretly prioritizing *specific things* or it means holding no thoughts whatsoever. The distinction between skepticism and nihilism is one between carefully weighing possibilities and rejecting all such measurement or comparison all together.

When one has an infinite array of things to "question" to an infinite degree, whatever one prioritizes inherently smuggles in some background framework of assertions and values. Normal skeptical philosophies have no problem with this, they're happy to explicitly name what's being held in how much suspicion — to name degrees of trust and dependencies. To distinguish itself, to claim to truly "question *everything*" in a way that doesn't surrender by ever finding any semblance of *answers*, nihilism must discard any such structure. Or at least it must discard any *explicit* structure. In this guise "active nihilism" ends up being just a sleight of hand by which one distracts either oneself or one's ideological acolytes with a moving red ball of mindless "negation". So they spend all their time 'critiquing' (or just reactively denying) wherever the ball bounces in their chase of it — while in the process they ignore the rest of the universe of considerations beyond that singular point. In this way new norms, standards and assumptions are reinforced behind wherever the random focal point of attention happens to be. Dash as fast as you might, covering as much ground as you can, you will throughout all that time leave a much larger universe of things unexamined consciously. Every systematizing or framework or slowly-built map

you might choose to guide your critiques would be itself a new “god”. So you trade away being guided by structures you can see, analyze and have agency in reconfiguring to instead be guided by more gut and subrationally accepted structures.

The only way to avoid implicit structure creation is to somehow avoid letting any thoughts, models, and desires gel. Not to chase off in circles attempting to “critique everything in ‘equal measure’”, but to sabotage the formation of any remotely solid ideas in one’s skull. Whether one poetically visualizes this as empty still waters, or as a formless chaos, the effect is the same: incapacity to act. A mind truly without models or desires — without a proactive interest in building such structures — is a mind perhaps maximally “free” internally, but incapable of engaging with the wider universe.

In both directions — either by removing all reflection and explicit structure from one’s mind to instead become a billiard ball driven by simple immediate animal desires or, alternately, by turning up the chaos to infinity to obviate the formation of thoughts — the end result is totally unpalatable, unless one’s emerging core value is a rejection of cognition itself.

This is why nihilism has such a reputation as being anti-intellectualism for intellectuals. The purest expression of ‘active nihilism’ is the rejection of thinking itself, and any lesser nihilism is merely an infantile shield for certain values. After all, if intellectual reflection is supposedly totally inconclusive, finding no emergent signal to break the symmetry between all possible desires, then you might as well settle on the desires you came in with and fend off any tendency to think or evolve further.

Of course there’s another noteworthy exit from such an assumed state of universal symmetry: to just pick something at random. But the full space of possible desires much less possible models of reality is big. Infinitely big. For very large sorts of infinity. A *truly random* choice would be an insanely alien one. We’re not just talking about a subject wanting to tile its future lightcone with paperclips, but a mind with values and/or models of reality so far from our ken we cannot even speak of them. Remember that anything less than truly random would itself bundle in unexamined or undemolished structures.

I don’t know of many people who’ve stared into the nihilist abyss and come back as unknowable lovecraftian rifts in the fabric of reality seeking to maximize writhing extra-dimensional demon paperclips, so either we don’t really have to worry about this... or it’s the case that inquiry inevitably leading to state of perfect symmetry — meta’d beyond all possible values — is a hypothetical speculation that no one has actually conclusively reached. An influential fear or belief rather than an actual reality.

A common speculative fantasy with sometimes intense aesthetic and emotional affect, but no actual substantiation beyond the reassurance of self-delusion.

I would like to posit a profoundly unoriginal alternate hypothesis: The vigilance necessary to reveal and strip away the false pretenses of our arbitrary inherited values is itself an emergent value.

While strawmen can be constructed around terms like “rationality” and “science”, there remains a direction of coherent inquiry nonetheless that does not invalidate itself. I’ve termed this “radicalism” in light of what anarchists and other political radicals have traditionally found valuable in that word — the pursuit of roots. But this is a starkly philosophically realist position: it assumes that there are roots to be gotten at. Or, perhaps less audaciously, it merely finds nothing to hold onto outside that assumption and so proceeds with it.

While I've more frequently invoked value-nihilism than epistemological-nihilism up until now, you can see that the two are of course deeply connected and in an ultimate sense inseparable.

If however radicalism is correct and there are any roots to be grabbed at — most fundamental dynamics to be found — in our *models* of reality, then this automatically breaks any supposed symmetry of potential values & desires. When one searches to infinity, pressing asymptotically closer to said roots, it is the search itself that remains, that becomes one's most inescapable emergent value.

This is part of the reason folks attempting to invoke value-nihilism to as a quick shield to defend the lazy, ridiculous, or unconscionable, are so often driven to embrace epistemological-nihilism. A rapacious CEO who waves away all reflection on ethical issues to uncritically satisfy his base hungers suddenly starts spouting harsh dismissals of any objective reality. What seems an absurd and weak non-sequitur is in fact deeply necessary to keep his house of cards from falling. We see this dynamic all over the place. The “you can't tell me not to date-rape” gutterpunk who wraps himself in the trappings of the “occult” and carries a passionate grudge against “science”. The preening social capitalist who loves to manipulate through emotion and fervently believes that there are — or should be — limits to reason and consideration.

The moment any constancy or structure is admitted to be found in the world the game of value-nihilism becomes unsalvageable. If radicalism — intellectual vigilance — is remotely coherent and efficacious, then it becomes emergent from caring. One has desires and so one puts in intellectual consideration to satiate them. New discoveries propagate updates to one's motivating desires, and one grows to recognize more just how critical having a better map of the world's structure is. One's endless ontological update crises gradually dissolve any extended rigid sense of self. A runaway compounding process happens and all other values fall away to radicalism itself. What different discursive traditions term vigilance, epistemic rationality, consciousness, and even freedom. The storm of recursion and meta-cognition that gives us ‘agency’.

Now one can get into a huge conversation about the occasional optimality of irrational/non-thinking strategies or habits within certain local contexts, and one can also claim that there are other emergent desires/values. I do not want to belabor the point too far by arguing specific structures. The takeaway is more important than any particulars: we have good reason to believe there is some structure to the space of possible values. After all, it would be a strange and unusual random network that was perfectly symmetrical, with no unique attractors or flows. Why should reality be so perfectly ordered as to be *precisely* meaningless?

There is no proof that the asymptotic endpoint of inquiry implies a perfect symmetry between values. There is no proven nihilist abyss, merely a phantasmal myth of one. Similarly what does it matter where our prompts for inquiry originate, or what precise historical cruft came attendant? One could posit infinite other starting points — the structural dynamics generating convergences in our meta-desires are broader than a precise historical path. To reject this is the same as to rejecting all induction. Again: value nihilism is inherently dependent upon epistemological nihilism.

How would anyone sincerely arrive at the ‘conclusion’ of nihilism? How has this even been a thing? Anti-intellectualism is certainly widespread but it's not like there are loads of people who take it to the point of openly ideologically worshiping the abolition of consciousness. Such absurdities clearly only emerge defensively.

A lot has been said about the inseparability of nihilism from the context of Christianity, inheriting its frameworks and philosophical assumptions even while it attempts to rebel — for example

totally failing to even conceive of any notion of “ethics” or ought or “meaning” that doesn’t look like divine command. And since obviously, no, we’re not going to find any giant flaming letters on the side of a cliff telling us ‘*I order you to do such and such, your purpose should be this*’, those who have never imagined anything beyond must surely feel some vertigo upon realizing this. Intellectually malnourished, those raised within such blinders naturally tend to respond by seeking some new shallow but immediately graspable certainty to fill the place God once occupied: *all values are arbitrary!* This too is simple and straightforward and helps salve the panic of uncertainty, assuages the pressure to do the hard work of investigation and exploration.

In the case of those working from the most moribund traditions of philosophy the whole affair often inherits a strange and false notion of “what meaning is” and how it arises. It’s an almost classical western mistake — a tendency to think in terms of a first-order understanding of linguistic claims rather than in terms of patterns of relations. The need for some kind of starting point, some ur-axiom, directly stateable in language, that is perfectly true, and universally self-evident in a totally unassailable way. Sure you’re not going to find that, at least at first-order — all language is a contingent network — but you can nevertheless find emergent patterns or meta-flows within that network. Is this “truth”? Centuries of philosophers going on tangential quibbles have shown the term to provide an unedifying frame. Indeed the use of such a word, “truth”, seems prone to the discretizing tendencies of human language in a particularly severe all-or-nothing way.

But of course that’s the whole game. Nihilism lives on the over-simplifying of depressed minds in retreat. There’s a deep reason the philosophical concept of “nihilism” has become in much common parlance a mere stand-in for “despair”. Just because the model you were working from turns out to be wrong doesn’t mean there is no better model to be found. Yet depression has an interesting effect on how we perform induction or pattern-recognition. It shrinks the scope of our attention and working memory and demolishes the dynamic complexity of our picture of the world, so we’re reduced to comparing between only very simple models, often at a level of abstraction where simplicity in explanation is unreasonable. Whittled down to these few remaining explanations some particularly simple and dire ones seem incontestable. “I’m a loser,” “nothing can be done,” that kind of thing. Superficial abstractions papering over rich underlying dynamics into a short narrative. Every single piece of data in our lives, every experience can be funneled through this lens, and it often does better than any of the other superficial alternative explanations we, in our despair, have the mental capacity to conjure, and so we trace over it, ingraining it again and again.

In this same vein the often attendant nihilist “critiques” of hope are always trivial affairs, tilting at strawmen.

What would it matter if the probability of good things was very low? How would that necessarily change anything about our values, goals, or motivations? Hope and despair are mere psychological affects, frames of mind or emotion we can always choose to adopt either of in any situation. Nothing is ever known with literal 100% certainty and thus there’s always coursing veins of possibilities that can be ferreted out. Sometimes it’s strategic to start out thinking about ways we could win, other times it’s strategic to start out thinking about ways we could lose. These are just differing search algorithms. Anyone with a little self-knowledge and freedom to reflect can choose to switch between them as need be. Both, of course, can have their failure modes — overconfident limited scope or listless unimaginativeness — but so what. You can ham-fist any strategy.

In the laziest most generic sense, “nihilism”, often just signifies a kind of PTSD from malformed experiments with hope. But in particular, a ridiculous kind of hope that’s not a forward-searching of possibility but just a false-certainty: motivating yourself by delusions of assured victory.

Consider just how *weird* it is that anyone would ever need to be assured of victory to pursue certain things. Such a need betrays that the ends sought are not being valued in-and-of-themselves. If a revolution is the only way to achieve freedom and you value freedom then you will obviously pursue it no matter how marginal your chance of success. But if what you really value isn’t freedom but something else or some other bundle of things that might be satiated some other way — if freedom for you is only another means to those ends rather than an end in itself — then the unlikelihood of revolutionary victory is relevant. (This is no doubt why the would-be-commissars of Marxism ranted so much about the inevitability of their victory. Without such certainty they would have resorted to seeking quite different paths to the power and privilege they really desired.)

Having overreached by convincing themselves that victory was assured there’s an impulse to course-correct in the opposite direction. This avoids any deep probing questions of one’s values, their dependencies, primacy and weightings. Following the same example as before, if freedom is taken to be outright impossible — rather than merely unlikely to be achieved — then it would be incoherent to continue to value it. With such a move one is saved from a true accounting of one’s motivations.

That this is lazy as fuck is the whole game.

Such ‘nihilism’ leads one to assign literally zero likelihood to events rather than a small percentage because it’s really just an enunciation of depression. A kind of ideological framework of over-simplification to wrap comfortingly around collapsing mental health.

It has been widely said in various ways that “there’s no point in debating nihilism, all you can do is provide therapy” and this folk ‘nihilism’ that defines itself in contrast with ‘hope’ seems to lend that credence. Not a philosophical argument or position so much as a psychological one. A state of feels. We might then view such ‘nihilism’ in something like sociological terms alone, as an affective state that causes people to cluster together until tribal effects take over, promoting various incantations that reinforce this shared bonding experience. There’s a kind of relief in this evaluation: That the incantations of this ‘nihilism’ don’t work as rigorous or radical philosophy might simply be to read them in the wrong context.

Yet this is probably a bit too optimistic.

Sure, there’s undoubtedly some sense in which many casually professed ‘nihilists’ are just faddish fashionistas of depression for whom the philosophical arguments they spout are only so much flak. But similar is often true for many philosophies. It would be a mistake to assume that because prominent numbers do not take a philosophy they represent seriously *therefor no one does*. Or that the ideology itself has no bite in practice.

Nihilism, as we’ve seen, is in every incarnation a philosophy of anti-intellectualism. From the preemptive dismissal of any inquiry further into our models or values, to quixotic requests that we hold no structure in our minds, to fetishized depression. Nihilism can operate specific to some locale or flavor of thought, but what’s common across all these permutations is a penchant for over-simplification — a search for excuses to fend off intellectual vigilance and the pains that sometimes accompany. Nihilism is a staunch faith in there being no reason to think further. The various arguments for *why* are not support so much as window draping.

And of all ideologies ‘nihilism’ is one of the most widespread. It has seen incredible success and widespread mention. And no wonder, it’s a stripped down and more directly exposed version of what was at the heart of so many other religions and ideologies. Thinking further, thinking systemically, rigorously, deeply — thinking radically — is a waste of time.

One need not look long for what ends such a tendency serves. The negation of radical inquiry has always been reaction.

The purest nihilists are rapacious stock market bros and casual genocidaires. Rapists and abusers. Every inane garden variety sociopath is a nihilist by nature. And perhaps we might also count the suicides and a spattering of those hardened misanthropes who are filled with a need to snuff out all the noise, color, and complexity of a world filled with thought and agency.

Nihilism suffuses us. It smothers our world, propping up decaying structures and values left and right.

It is not an acid or an abyss, capable of devouring anything. Rather, nihilism is the strongest glue there is — an embrace of contradiction, a self-distraction, a refusal to systematically reflect — a glue capable of holding together absurdities through preemptive strikes against cognition itself. This glue has historically held fast entire empires and churches. Its purest and most flagrant expression being the Fascists who were happy to hug contradictions when they were useful in pursuing droll and bestial desires. For the nihilist or fascist any allowed intellectualism is always a defensive move. An ‘ethical’ appeal today, its negation tomorrow, whatever serves their shallow ends. Theory is only tolerated insofar as it serves one’s aims, it is never allowed to surprise and challenge. Sincere inquiry is entirely alien.

Into this nihilist world have loudly arrived a few johnny-come-latelys, today a handful of academics and punks who’ve been coddled by liberalism and academia, and who thus somehow experience the notion of nihilism as a novelty rather than — as for the rest of us — the all-too-ever-present and noxious ideology behind the cruel grins of all the abusers we’ve ever faced. These jokers arrive too late in their lives to be any good at nihilism, having been long outpaced by the millions of sociopaths native to it, and all they can really use it for is to fend off any pesky intersections with their conscience or serious intellectual engagement in potentially impactful directions. Instead they choose to spiral out in performative displays. One can interrogate the full context and content of their pronouncements, the most popular currents, the people behind them, and what values or orientations need such cloaking as to warrant a defensive move as puerile as nihilism. In the specific case of the anarchist milieu in recent years the obvious answer is a confluence of burnout and conscienceless social capitalism, but here we find it hard not to trend a tad more biting, other authors have already covered this territory, and I’d prefer to leave my far more vicious thoughts on them to separate essays addressing specific currents.

What’s important and independent of such local permutations, is the character of nihilism. What they channel so glibly is not neutral, it has intrinsic affiliations and aims.

Whether unconscious or conscious, nihilism serves as a defensive chaff thrown up by folks who value certain things and don’t want to risk either exposing those values or having them change. Explicit and vocal nihilism is a kind of doubling down: Gleefully embracing contradiction enables both hiding what is really meant from scrutiny and erecting barriers to legibility as a way of reinforcing social hierarchies of access. At the same time that nihilism uses the arbitrary complexity of incoherence to distract it also excuses a shrinking of one’s attention, a collapsing of one’s desires and models of the world, from the more complex to the more immediate. Until one merely reacts, as might a kicked rock, rather than reflecting and choosing.



Nihilism is death. The erosion of agency and choice. A rot that replaces the living, searching, feeling of the mind with disconnect and fossilization. It severs one's lines of engagement, helps support walls to fend off the outside world. In this sense it perhaps perfectly achieves the perverse notion of negative freedom, or *freedom-from*. It provides a perfect sort of pickling where-one-stands. Preserving some distorted semblance of life, albeit still and trapped, at least until the bottle finally breaks and one's suspended corpse is released to rot. This may constitute some sort of 'defense', but only that.

Nihilism is incapable of real destruction just as it refuses to engage in creation. In the end it serves only to preserve what exists. Its retreat from structure to indifference blurs the world into a formless single grey, blinding us entirely from possibility. To change things, to act, to have choice, is inherently to reflect, to press against the world, take in its texture and structure, and to build upon that. To be free — in a positive sense of *freedom-to* — is first and foremost to be able to explore and trace the network of what is possible. Freedom requires engaging with possibility, nihilism denies it. In nihilism's ideological rejection of radical inquiry — its blind faith that further thought will ultimately reveal nothing but endless formless grey — it ultimately seeks to suppress all living motion in our minds and thus in the world.

It is thus without polemic but with solemnity that we must conclude:

Nihilism is, in the final accounting, fascism. Both its necessary seed and its most purified expression.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis  
Nihilism: A Lie In Service To The Existing  
10th May 2016

<http://humaniterations.net/2016/05/10/nihilism-a-lie-in-service-to-the-existing/>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**