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Active vs. Passive Nihilism

anonymous

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A great many philosophers have dedicated considerable amounts of their waking moments wrestling with the problem of nihilism; or more specifically, the problem of overcoming nihilism. Nevertheless, nihilism itself remains a mystery — least of all its consequences for mankind. To be sure, an adequate definition of nihilism is wanting. In the most general sense, nihilism refers to the absence of any objective, universal or intrinsic value. From this, it necessarily follows that our metaphysical beliefs, our moral/ethical values, and even our own existence, are completely and utterly lacking any inherent meaning.

As a direct consequence of nihilism, man is forced to see reality for what it is: a random, irrational, and chaotic existence in which our role is infinitesimal. Nihilism, in this capacity, serves to break down all the illusions, myths, and all other social, cultural constructions that have hitherto given us a false sense of security and hope.

In its active form, nihilism is likened to a hammer — used not only to chisel away all artificial meaning, but to smash them. Active nihilism paves the way for the creation of new values, the overcoming of the self by taking a new relation to oneself as an autonomous creator. In effect, this is the transformation of living

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as the “one-self,” into “my-self.” Thus, the end result of nihilism in its active form is nothing short of paving the way for the grounds to becoming my own self.

Passive nihilism, on the other hand, is epitomized by resignation; the prognosis that life is an “unprofitable episode,” (in Schopenhauer’s words). Nietzsche equated passive nihilism with Schopenhauer’s repudiation of life via the denial of the Will as a great threat. Nihilism in its passive form, while adopting the same prognosis of existence as active nihilism, thus nevertheless takes the opposite stance of active nihilism as to how we should respond to the problem of a meaningless, value-less, and chaotic existence.