

Nihilism¹

Definition: The denial of the possibility of knowledge, philosophy, and value in anything.

Prominent Philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka

1. **Metaphysical nihilism**² -- Naturalism doesn't provide a basis for humans to act significantly

If matter is all there is, and there is uniformity in the universe which is a closed system, humans are part of that system and every action can be determined in advance. Thus volition is an illusion.

No action has any meaning, e.g. telling my wife that I love her, because I didn't choose to love her, it was determined that I would.

The illusion of free will itself and ones thoughts about it are part of that determining mechanism as well.

The general problem is the universe being closed, which means that each state is determined by one or more previous states of the system.

Chance, too, then, either describes our own ignorance by saying that we simply don't know the cause for an observed effect, or it's absurd: Something happened, nothing caused it, it's a chance event.

2. **Epistemological nihilism**³ -- True knowledge isn't possible because we cannot transcend the box we are in to determine whether we are truly in the box

If knowledge is a byproduct of our brain, which is simply a complex machine, then there is no way of knowing if that knowledge really corresponds to reality. Only humans concern themselves with meaning and true perception; matter itself doesn't care.

To test that what we know is really true we would have to use our brain, which is the very thing whose accuracy we are questioning.

In the words of C.S. Lewis: "If all that exists is Nature, the great mindless interlocking event, if our own deepest convictions are merely the by-products of an irrational process, then clearly there is not the slightest ground for supposing that our sense of

¹ The Universe Next Door - James W. Sire. 4th Edition, IVP 2004. pp 87ff

² TUND - pp. 91-97

³ TUND - pp. 97-102

fitness and our consequent faith in uniformity tell us anything about a reality external to ourselves. Our convictions are simply a fact *about us* -- like the colour of our hair. If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that Nature is uniform.”⁴

To use the example of the Matrix: We are in the Matrix, but to have any confidence that our knowledge of the Matrix is true, we need to be outside of it, or have someone from outside of it reveal truth to us. Naturalists deny that there is anything outside the Matrix, thus there is no way of knowing -- epistemological nihilism.

3. **Ethical nihilism**⁵ -- There is no basis for morality, no unchanging standard.

“Reason cannot establish values, and its belief that it can is the stupidest and most pernicious illusion.” Allan Bloom - *The Closing of the American Mind*⁶

There only *is*, and we cannot get *ought* from *is*. Ethics boils down to personal desires. More details on ethic and morality in a later paper.

Criticisms⁷

1. Nihilism is self defeating: “There is no meaning in the universe” assumes the statement itself has meaning
2. Nihilism is a parasite on meaning. Without meaning, nihilism cannot exist, so there must be meaning to begin with.
3. We *can* create meaning in our own actions (which is the key distinction to existentialism) even if it’s just for ourselves.

Existentialism⁸

Existentialism, both theistic and atheistic, aim to bridge the problems with dead orthodoxy and nihilism, respectively.

⁴ quoted in TUND p. 98

⁵ TUND - pp 102 - 105

⁶ quoted in TUND p. 102

⁷ TUND - pp 107 - 111

⁸ TUND - pp 112ff

Atheistic Existentialism⁹

Prominent Philosophers:
Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus

Atheistic Existentialism, according to Sartre, starts with Dostoevsky's statement that, "if God did not exist, everything would be permitted." Man is dumped into the world and forced to fend for himself. He has to work out his own values by making choices. Even not making a choice is in itself a choice. This way, he contributes to making himself the person he is becoming.¹⁰

1. **Subjective vs Objective:** Reason and logic don't intrude into the subjective, and values and feelings don't intrude into the objective. Where naturalism considered the objective the real and the subjective its shadow, existentialism emphasizes the disunity of the two.
2. **Existence precedes Essence:** We make ourselves. Salt is salt, tree is tree, but man is nothing until he makes himself. Sartre says: "At first he [man] is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made him what he will be."
3. From 2. follows that **we are totally free**. Determinism and indeterminism is on the objective side of things, free will lies on the subjective one.
4. The objective, **the there**, the world, **seems absurd** over against our desires, wills, and feelings
5. In the face of the absurdity of the object, **we rebel and create meaning**. Here existentialism goes beyond nihilism.
One of Dostoevsky's characters, the underground man, says: "The meaning of a man's life consists in proving to himself every minute that he is a man and not a piano key." Being considered part of the objective is worse than death, which is the end of the subjective and a constant thorn in the sides of existentialists. It is the ever intruding reality that mocks everything and finally brings everything to nothing.¹¹

Ethics: The good action is the conscientiously chosen action. Even deciding not to act is an action and therefore good.

⁹ TUND - pp 114ff

¹⁰ Philosophy & The Christian Faith - Colin Brown. IVP 1968. p. 183

¹¹ P&TCF - p 184

Criticisms:

- Leads to solipsism -- every man determines values himself and there is no objective standard.
- By detaching reason from self, it's impossible to live in accordance with reality. What follows is irrational absurdity.

Theistic Existentialism¹²

Prominent Philosophers:

Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann

Response to dead orthodoxy and very similar to theism, albeit with different emphases.

1. **Theistic Existentialism begins not with God, but with man.** Humans find themselves in an alien universe and must by faith figure out whether God exists.
2. **The personal is valuable**
 - b. Personalized faith vs dead orthodoxy

	Depersonalized	Personalized
Sin	Breaking a rule	Betraying a relationship
Repentance	Admitting guilt	Sorrowing over personal betrayal
Forgiveness	Canceling a penalty	Renewing fellowship
Faith	Believing a set of propositions	Committing oneself to a person
Christian life	Obeying rules	Pleasing the Lord, a Person

Christian theism, rightly understood, will have both depersonalized and personalized aspects to it. The dead orthodoxy that Kierkegaard tried to take on only had the depersonalized aspects, whereas theistic existentialism focuses -- probably too much -- on the personalized.

3. Knowledge is subjectivity.

This doesn't necessarily mean there is no objective knowledge, but that truth is

¹² TUND - pp 116ff

internalized and becomes part of the person. It is *that* which is sought, not objective truth itself.

4. **History as events is meaningless**, but as myth and sought to live out, it is to be embraced.

The biblical history is not accurate and needs to be personalized, e.g. the Fall. It never took place; instead, each human goes through rebellion against God and a personal fall. Miracles are discounted a priori by some theistic existentialists (Bultmann), but not others (Barth).

Criticisms:

Most criticism with theistic existentialism is not philosophical but theological and boils down to a flawed view of Scripture and its authority.