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Nihilism and Indifference

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1. *Nihilism and fear*

If, in philosophy, there is a general definition of the word “nihilism”, it is the one that says that generally speaking “nihilism” is the condition in which *being “is” nothing*. Apart from how difficult it can be to express such condition in an apophantic language, that is, to actually define it, what we can say in this respect, in moral and not simply logical terms, is that such definition emphasises a defining attitude of human beings. There’s more: it expresses an idea that can arouse a distinctive mood in a human being.

What does the definition of nihilism as a condition in which being blends into nothingness reveal? It reveals disorientation, a very distinctive type of *fear*: the fear that all that is can be annihilated and that, therefore, it is basically nothing in itself, it has no substance or value. This is the fear that has spread throughout the history of thought, since the time of Parmenides.

The fear that being is nothing is, in other words, a fundamental feeling of philosophy, a feeling that runs underneath it, a feeling that drives its actions. In this respect, philosophy is actually seen as an antidote to the indifference of being and nothingness. In other words, philosophy is built not only on a love for knowledge but – I insist – on the fear that nothingness and being are one and the same¹.

¹ It is not, then, the dread (*Angst*) Heidegger speaks of, because in this case such dread is the one that nothingness inspires in man. This is conditional on a specific idea of “nothingness” which I will speak of in this essay. The fear I speak of is instead the one that is generally aroused by potential confusion, the indifference of being and nothingness. It is this fear that philosophy is tasked with finding a remedy to.

2. *Parmenides and the birth of nihilism*

Parmenides is the first philosopher who feels such fear, who focuses it, who reflects on its causes, who comes up with an antidote to it. It is precisely not to fear the prospect of nihilism any more that Parmenides establishes, or tries to establish once and for all, a difference, a separation between being and nothingness. He establishes it as something insurmountable, he looks for the right language to defend such distinction – by stating that «whatever is is; and what is not cannot be»² – and lastly he shows the way, the way of knowledge that enables those who follow it to be spared the possibility that everything may eventually vanish. The difference that Parmenides establishes between being and nothingness is then developed in his thinking as specific terms of an opposition. Therefore, the world, seen through this lens, the world meant as an opposition between being and nothingness, is a world split in two.

All this involves, as we know, a number of problems and paradoxes. But here I am not going to talk about this. What I want to highlight here is the fact that, despite the dramatic solution offered by Parmenides, the clear separation between being and nothingness, the fear of the two blending into one, is not dispelled at all. Once surfaced and focussed, it keeps showing up, again and again.

This happens for two reasons. On one hand, because such fear has been aroused, and now it is around and it is upsetting. On the other hand, because the solution contrived by Parmenides soon turns out to be inadequate, not so much in logical terms but in existential terms. That's why the inheritance that Parmenides left to the history of thinking is such fear, not the antidote to it.

3. *Plato and the inclusion of non-being into being*

In other words, after Parmenides philosophy develops as a grapple with nihilism, not only because the solution proposed by him to prevent being blending into nothingness results in paradoxes and theoretically unacceptable consequences. Neither is this about finding a proper way to connect the sensible world with the path of truth, for instance by expounding the different meanings of “non-being”, as Plato did in *The Sophist*. Actually, fear, the fear of indifference, is not dispelled along this road either. One would notice

² Parmenides, *On Nature*, fr. 6.

quite soon that the issue of nothingness is even more complex and upsetting than Greek philosophy held it to be. That's why, in the later history of thinking, the issue of being and nothingness, and their mutual relationships, kept reappearing.

Nihilism, as I said, is a confusion of being and nothingness. But in fact being and nothingness are not on a par. On the contrary, if you think about it, it stems from the fact that being can be not only *confused with*, but *absorbed* by nothingness, which is even worse. If this can happen, then nothingness has more power than being. So, any attempt at keeping it at bay by opposing it to being, as Parmenides and all those who, even now, want to «go back»³ to Parmenides try to do, would not be enough.

Such attempts are doomed to fail because, I insist, one notices that being and nothingness are not on a par and cannot be simply be opposed to each other. Nothingness is ambiguous: it is opposed to being while also being the background, the abyss, from which being floats up, stands out on, can go back to. From this point of view, being is constantly threatened by nothingness.

4. *God as savior of being from nothingness*

Such an unbalanced relationship between nothingness and being is the one expressed within the philosophical tradition, mainly the Judeo-Christian one. Here, God is the Supreme Being, the one who can rule the relationship between being and nothingness. By creating, God draws being from nothingness but in such a way that he gives it substance and still makes it win over nothingness, which is eventually defeated: “vanquished”, as it were. So, the one that can redress the relationship between being and nothingness, as opposed to the Greek approach, and that, above all, avoids the negative consequences that the disproportionate relationship between nothingness and being implies, is the doctrine of creation. But, once again, despite God's making being prevail over nothingness, the focus on the idea that being is drawn out of nothingness just by an act of creation has upsetting and, again, fearful consequences. As easily as a creature is saved from nothingness by God's act of creation and called to be, it can fall back into the same abyss.

Of course, we know that *Gn 1* does not mention any “*creatio ex nihilo*”⁴.

³ E. Severino, *Ritornare a Parmenide* (1964), in Id., *Essenza del Nichilismo*, Adelphi, Milano 1982.

⁴ As f.e. G. Scholem demonstrates: *Schöpfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes*,

We are perfectly aware that God's act toward the world is naming things, thus distinguishing them (just by his calling them to be) from primordial chaos and, as it were, pulling them out of it. Quite soon, though, after the gradual Hellenization of Christianity, the scriptural *tohu wa-bohu* (*Gn* 1, 2) is understood to be the nothingness of beings: the nothingness of their determinations and therefore their total non-being, again in the sense of indifference. What nothingness expresses is the primordial confusion, what "was" – even without being it – before the Creation.

In other words, when the biblical model entwines and interacts with the Greek tradition, two things happen. On one side, nothingness is explicitly preordained, unlike being, and is left therefore on the background: it is what being comes from, as well as what it can go back to. On the other side, the concept of "nothingness" is resemanticised: it is no longer something opposed to being, it is no longer a mere and contradictory non-being, it turns into something positive, something that has its own substance and its own specific attractiveness. Now, it means confusion, meaninglessness, things lacking any reference, and at the same time the threat that such meaninglessness may prevail. Fear, therefore, reappears, in a different guise.

The act of creation is the only one that can dispel such threat. That's why it cannot be simply regarded – viewed from a merely Greek perspective and with a merely theoretical approach, as Emanuele Severino does – as something contradictory: insofar as it considers nothingness and being in the same way, and that's the only way it can draw being out of nothingness. It is, instead, that gesture of salvation and liberation that only God can make. This is the only way to dispel a fear of nothingness that seems to be even increasing. The only difference is that now the antidote is not philosophy, it is religion.

5. *Science and nothingness*

However, what happens if such reference to God, the reference to that God who creates everything out of nothing with his act of creation and prevents everything falling back into the abyss of nothingness through the power of his being, is missing? As we know, the eclipse of God gradually occurred in the modern age. It is not only the God of faith that disappears, it is also that "God of the philosophers" that seemed to be able to replace him, at some point. In

such a scenario, the last chance is responding to the fear of nihilism with an extensive analysis of what “being” means. There is still the option of a “return to being”. Actually, if we know what “being” means, we can firmly cling on to it, to its concreteness, to its positivity: both theoretical and practical.

So, on one hand, being takes the shape of reality, of what one can address through the *sensate esperienze* (Galileo), the sensible experiences, that human beings have of it; on the other side, that of the dimension in which human activity can be performed, changing and tweaking it. The developments of modern science and technological practice are but attempts at giving value and substance back to being, as such, and taking it out of nothingness. Here, nothingness is considered an appearance, an illusion too: what cannot be justified and tested by the concrete inter-subjective experience that human beings can have of it.

6. *Subject as creator in place of God*

Yet, even this solution offered by science and technological practice – a solution that still looks extremely attractive even in this day and age – fails to prevent nihilism. This is because it slips into a specific paradox. It entrusts the power to control nothingness, to restrain it – to use a paradoxical phrase: to annihilate nothingness itself – to those who do not have, and cannot have, such power.

As I said, since the modern age, the one who has had the power to wrench being out of nothingness has no longer been God, it has been human being. We are at the centre, now. Actually, it is us who give ourselves such power.

Descartes made such move, much earlier than Nietzsche did. He did it by placing himself on a purely theoretical level, the level of thinking, while Nietzsche extended it to the dimension of will. In other words, Descartes, especially in his *Meditations*, takes the human subject as the man who can *acknowledge* that God is the origin of everything and, as such, he is the origin of reality as well. But the idea that the human subject not only acknowledges but *creates* the conditions for knowing everything soon prevailed in the following debates. In other words, the subject is that privileged being that can create being as well as create (or obliterate) nothingness.

Such move was perfected by Kant, first in his *Beweisgrund* (1763), then in his first *Kritik* (1781 and 1787). Such idea is then taken to the extreme by Fichte, in his first *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). And it instantly caused a stir, at a philosophical-literary level, with Jean Paul (in his *Rede des todten Christus*,

1796⁵) and, at a more philosophical-religious level, with Jacobi (for instance, in his *Brief an Fichte*: 1799 and 1816). Now, though, the situation that has been created, and the human fear of the meaninglessness of everything that Jean Paul enacts, have a name of their own: they are called “nihilism”, and it’s the first time they are expressly called like that.

7. *Nihilism in the knowledge (Jacobi)*

Why such a response? Because, as shown by Jean Paul and especially by Jacobi, the subject – both the empirical and the transcendental one – cannot vouch for the certification of being. They are simply unable to. And this is not just because they are structurally unable, because they are basically finite, but above all because, if such assumption were true, nihilism would eventually prevail.

Both Jean Paul and Jacobi work out the same reflections, using almost the same words: if the self, if the subject, is the maker of everything and therefore even of itself, it can also annihilate everything and therefore even itself. If, in other words, the subject is the originator of being, it is also the originator of nothingness. Being and nothingness hang upon its will. And there’s more. It is precisely in this that being and nothingness are equal: they are indifferent.

It is a veritable nightmare, which for instance Jean Paul stages in the scary tones of a horror novel. And it is precisely to avoid such nightmare, just to keep the eyes open, that Hegel built his system. He did it by showing that negativity could be “tamed”. As a “determinate negation”, negativity could – platonically – be made functional to the development and self-affirmation of being: to its necessary triumph over nothingness. It’s a pity that, though on the background of the system, the «empty abyss» of nothingness (as it is called in the «Introduction» to *Phänomenologie des Geistes*) still sounds so attractive.

8. *Nihilism in the will (Nietzsche)*

All in all, the alternation between being and nothingness, and the choice between such two dimensions, hang upon man’s will. Or, at least, upon the will of some men. Of few decision-makers. Of the chosen few. This is not

⁵ From his novel *Siebenkäs*.

strange at all, if we consider for instance our age, in which some heads of State can wage a nuclear war and wipe out a big chunk of the world.

Nietzsche is the philosopher who actually focussed on the conditions in which such situation could occur. Nietzsche is the one who justified the power to decide, quite paradoxically, just because such decision could be taken. In this way, he too tried to find a way to dispel the recurring fear of nihilism. According to Nietzsche, a subject's abilities, its power, must be taken to the extreme. A subject must be responsible not only for its ability to create the world, to be the origin of being, but also and above all for its willingness to do it.

The problem, then, is about advocating free will. The problem is wanting will. Only the *Übermensch* can do it. He is the only one who can get out of the nightmare of nihilism, by willing to will his own will.

It is however an ambiguous move. It is a move that, just because it is ambiguous, cannot solve the problem, it cannot assuage the fear. Not only is absolute will not a remedy to nihilism, it is also what further – and paradoxically – produces it. As we know, according to Nietzsche, Western culture is the history of nihilism, insofar as will has not been rightly exercised: it has been exercised by the weak, not by the chosen few. But the outcome of the latter's choices and actions might be annihilation itself. In other words, it is unable to protect being. That's why fear is aroused again. A fear that not even the *Übermensch* can suppress.

9. *Nihilism in Heidegger*

So, this is about the power that the human being must be able to exercise if he wants to escape nihilism, and that he cannot fully exercise, otherwise being would be arbitrarily turned into nothingness. And there's more. Not even being aware of such power is an adequate solution to the fear that indifference between being and nothingness can arouse. The human being has limited powers. At most, he can control his own powerlessness. He can choose it, he can want it.

This is what Heidegger tries to think, from *Sein und Zeit* to at least his Lectures on *Nietzsche*, from the second half of the 1930s to the early 1940s. In a nutshell, his plan is not only to chronicle the history of being as the history of nihilism – insofar as, as we know very well, metaphysical thinking forgot the difference between being and essence: the ontological difference – but above all to prove, as opposed to Nietzsche, that the way out of nihilism,

the response to fear, lies in relinquishing the superpower of the human being.

We are finite. Not even technique cannot make us rule the world. That's why the human being can only understand, through philosophers, that there is a history, a history of the ages of being, which shows the rationale of meaning, and the power through which events come into being. We can only submit to such rationale, to such history: just because we are finite. In this submission, in this *Gelassenheit*, lies salvation. That's why «Only a God can save us».

10. *Nihilism as indifference, and its antidote*

Can we settle for this solution? And, most importantly, is it really a solution that assuages all our fears? To avoid such fear, do we only have to get used to this «uncanny guest», nihilism, in all its forms? Can nihilism, the indifference of being and nothingness, the abyss that attracts everything, thus turn into a «family friend» (*Hausfreund*)?

Let's sum up our review. Let's recall more accurately the forms of nihilism we have met. There is that form that equates nothingness to that contradictory, unthinkable space that is left out of the entirety of being, as it happens in Parmenides. There is the idea of nothingness taking priority over being, since God the Maker as in the Judeo-Christian tradition has the power of taking being out of nothingness and keeping it as being, preventing it from being annihilated. There is the distinctive concept of the modern philosophy that sees nothing as what is opposed to a being that is available to a subject, that is created by a subject and depends on its will: even if, after all, such claim is itself a sign of nihilism. There is the attempt to tame nothingness into submission to the human will, which could choose between nothingness and being just the same: which, indeed, turns into the real being, as it happens in Nietzsche according to Heidegger. There is the supreme gesture of ruling the nihilism that pervades all things and history by chronicling such things and their history according to the rationale of each event: an event that does not depend on the subject but that the philosopher – or maybe just Heidegger – can think of, nevertheless.

All these forms that nihilism can take have two features in common. On one hand, as we have seen, they are driven by the intention to set the phenomenon in a philosophical context so as to keep it under control. This is how philosophy can help avoid the fear that is aroused by nihilism. On the other hand, all the forms I have briefly summarised refer to an experience and a theorisation of nothingness – precisely as “nihilism” – from the perspective

of indifference. And this solution is ambiguous too: on one side, it inures us to the primacy of nothingness – being indifferent to it and regarding it as a «fate» –, and, on the other side, it always lets fear rise again, sooner or later.

Such ambiguity of attitude means an ambiguity of concept. Nothingness, in the sense of indifference, is somehow nothingness as opposed to being, the undetermined and the undistinguished as opposed to the determined and the definite. And likewise, it is somewhat a nothingness that absorbs being and nothingness into itself: it is confusion, it is chaos that always remains on the background of being. The consequences of both meanings are disruptive anyway. Nothingness expands and begets more indifference, meaninglessness, depression. And it is just such expansion of nothingness that increases fear.

What can one do in such a circumstance? A real, effective antidote to indifference should be tested. It is an antidote that philosophical enquiries can, again, provide. It is the possibility to distinguish and combine union and distinction together, at the same time, in a non-indifferent manner. It is the experience and the practice of relationships.

The theory and the practice of relationships can actually offer a way out. They can do it by showing that the nihilism of the modern age is caused by humans' distinctive *will of* putting their own *will*, and, even more than that, their own thoughts at the centre of everything: more than capable of arbitrarily creating (or destroying) being. But, as we have seen, the outcomes that such concept leads to are disruptive. They can also do it by suggesting that the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as reimaged by philosophical theology, cannot be taken as something absolute: it would be an origin of meaning that would be posed meaninglessly and that therefore could not save us from nihilistic meaninglessness. And, lastly, they can do it by going beyond the mere juxtaposition of being and nothingness, as imposed by Greek philosophy.

The theory and the practice of relationships actually show that human beings are always relational beings and that relationships come before them, they are not preordained. They also point out that such relationships are always underway, they are performative, and in this way they create ever-new relationships while legitimising their meaning. Finally, they make us understand that relationships are not just an opposition, but are practiced in a very wide range of shades that involve differences and connections.

Here, I cannot expound such concept any further. To conclude, I can only repeat that thinking in terms of relationships, which is theoretical and ethical at the same time, is the antidote to nihilism. However, it will always have to be put to the test. If the fear disappears, it means the test has been passed.

Abstract

What is the general meaning of the word “nihilism”? Is it possible to define different patterns during the history of this philosophical phenomenon? This paper try to reconstruct the history of “nihilism”, from Ancient Greece to Contemporary Thought, starting from the idea that nihilism has essentially to do with the human attitude of indifference. The antidote to this attitude, therefore, can be found in a true motivation. Ethics could help us to define and activate it.

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