

# The Uncanny Guest at the Door: Nihilism as a Double-Edged Sword

Kevin George<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, K.E College, Mannanam, India

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\*Corresponding author: Kevin George

Assistant Professor, Department of English, K.E College, Mannanam

## Abstract

Nihilism is arguably the most misunderstood term in the history of philosophy. It is best understood as a risk inherent in the act of thinking itself, as noted by the 20th-century philosopher Hannah Arendt, rather than as a collection of "dangerous thoughts." Any notion, no matter how solid or widely accepted it initially appears to be, will eventually cause us to question its veracity if we give it enough thought. Additionally, we can start to question whether or not individuals who embrace the idea understand (or care) whether or not it is accurate. You can stop worrying about why there is so little agreement on so many topics and why other people seem to know so much about things that seem so uncertain to you. I believe that nihilism is beyond good and evil. But people in general have a predilection for negative nihilism. They ignore its positive counterpart out of ignorance. Nietzsche, for instance, had the latter in mind when he wrote those iconoclastic works. Baudrillard, in his most famous work on simulation and simulacra, also dedicates a whole chapter to nihilism. He also had the same in mind. The list is quite interminable. Some deconstructionists with American roots (Yale School of Critics) have also broached this topic to shed light on the modus operandi of deconstruction. I believe it was J. Hillis Miller who replaced the term with 'parasite' in his seminal essay *The Critic as Host*. He was defending 'Deconstruction' in the same vein as Philip Sidney did in the 16th century. The accusations levelled against poetry by Plato aeons ago seemed so rebarbative to him to have motivated him to write an 'An Apology for Poetry'. The apology here was not an apology. It was a tirade against Plato's Republic. Miller, on the other hand, was not only countering accusations but also explicating American deconstruction. The essay written way back in 1977 has so far received an astounding 935 citations. When I read the essay, I understood it made more sense and was less farfetched than its French counterpart.

**Keywords:** Nihilism, Nietzsche, Epistemological Nihilism, Transvaluation of Values, Deconstruction, Repressive Desublimation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of a choice between "active" and "passive" nihilism in his *The Will to Power*, which was published (posthumously) by his nefarious Nazi-loving sister. Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, arises when ideals held in high regard undervalue themselves. It seems Nietzsche's obsession with the transvaluation of all values and the birth of the Übermensch have their origins here. Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, is not something detrimental like Durkheim's anomie. Nihilism ushers in disillusionment, and this might have more to do with Albert Camus' notion of the absurd, which figures in his seminal essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. We come to terms with the fact that some ideals prove not to possess the strength that has been attached to them. 'Truth' proves not to be freeing, and 'Justice' is not always served. These values fail to live up to our expectations. So, is it such a bad thing?

This erosion of revered values. Nihilism, for Nietzsche, was a kind of iconoclasm, and we know the etymology of iconoclasm. It has its origins in Greek (eikonoklastēs) and, in very simple terms, means 'image destroyer'.

According to Nietzsche, individuals are left with two options when it comes to nihilism. One is to adopt an active nihilist mindset and jettison the values that have been imposed on us by others to establish our own values. The other is to adopt a passive nihilist approach and persist in upholding conventional values, even in the face of uncertainties over their actual worth. The destructive nihilist seeks out or creates anything worthy of belief, only to destroy it. According to Nietzsche, we are only strengthened by that which is capable of surviving destruction. Nietzsche and a coterie of Russian nihilists like Turgenev and Bakunin in the 19th century held this perspective. However, the passive

nihilist clings to the security of conventional beliefs because they are not willing to take the chance of self-destruction. Nietzsche argues that this kind of self-defence is a far riskier kind of self-destruction. Believing for the sake of believing can result in a superficial existence and a smug acceptance of anything others believe. This is because the passive nihilist will often view believing in something—even if it turns out to be nothing worth believing in—as preferable to taking the risk of not believing in anything at all or staring into the abyss, which is a metaphor for nihilism. The ‘abyss’ repeatedly figures in Nietzsche’s oeuvre.

Today, nihilism has become an increasingly popular way to describe a widespread attitude towards the current state of the world. Yet when the term is used in conversation, in newspaper editorials or social media rants, it is rarely ever defined, as if everyone knows very well what nihilism means and shares the same definition of the concept. But as we have seen, nihilism can be both active and passive. If we want a better understanding of contemporary nihilism, we should identify how it has evolved in epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics and how it has found expression in different ways of life, such as in self-denial, death-denial, and world-denial.

Whenever the term nihilism comes up in daily conversation or editorials in dailies, it is rarely explained. We normally take the word for granted. For a better understanding of nihilism and its myriad hues, we must trace its etymology in epistemology, metaphysics, and other arcane philosophical roots. Is it a way of life that has over the years jettisoned ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’? How did it end up being so pessimistic?

Nihilism is often seen as the denial that knowledge is possible, the stance that our most cherished ideals have no bedrock. Epistemological nihilism maintains that knowledge requires something more than the knower and a known. This in a way reminds us of Kant’s *The Critique of Pure Reason*, wherein he maintains that our perception of the world is restricted by our subjective experience. But epistemological nihilism takes this notion to the extreme by maintaining that knowledge of the world, or anything for that matter, is an endeavour bound to end up in futility. Epistemological nihilism also holds that there is no norm, no basis, no justification for knowledge claims, and nothing that supports our conviction that any given claim is accurate. When considering objectivity from the standpoint of epistemological nihilism, all arguments are deceptive. To conceal the reality that there are no facts, we fabricate the appearance of knowing. As Kuhn argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), for instance, we can create incredibly complex and effective models of reality that we can use to uncover a plethora of new “facts,” but we can never demonstrate that these correspond to reality itself because they might just flow from our specific model of reality.

When scientists present conclusions based on the research of earlier scientists, it is possible to interpret these statements as appeals to authority. This gives rise to an additional issue, which is the endless regression issue. Any assertion of knowledge based on a basis will necessarily give rise to enquiries concerning the foundation, and the foundation of that, and so on, and so on, and so on.

Strong parallels could be drawn between epistemological nihilism and scepticism here. The sceptic looks askance at the foundations upon which knowledge claims are taken to rest. Going back to Nietzsche’s distinction between active and passive Nihilism would be helpful in this situation. The passive nihilist is not like the radical sceptic, but the active nihilist would be. The passive nihilist understands that sceptics may object to what is known. Nevertheless, the passive nihilist does not question knowledge; rather, he maintains his belief in it; as such, knowledge exists, but only because of confidence in the passive nihilist. Nihilism is not a mere rejection of knowledge. A person who is completely indifferent to these doubts is also a nihilist. One need not necessarily reject the foundations of knowledge to be one.

Passive nihilism, contrary to what many think is not a radical incredulity (to quote Francois Lyotard) toward metanarratives or any possibility of knowledge, but rather something mundane. It’s a part of our daily lives. Take events from our quotidian lives, for instance. We are all dependent on Google Maps. Most of us won’t even go for a second opinion when the map tells us to slide right, turn left, or take a U-turn to reach the destination quickly. We don’t question anything anymore. In Kerala, where I come from, two highly educated physicians drove their car into a river for reasons unbeknownst to me. I call this passive nihilism.

Nihilism is at the door of many philosophical schools. Epistemology is just one of them. In moral philosophy, nihilism is seen as an utter disregard for morality. It even maintains that morality doesn’t exist. Moral Nihilism can be regarded as a corollary of epistemological Nihilism. Since epistemological nihilism maintains that objective truths are a myth, one must conclude that morality doesn’t exist either. There is no right and wrong if you are not in a position to segregate both. To put it another way, morality is not so much about what is right as it is about what is thought to be right, regardless of how that view relates to a particular historical moment, culture, or individual. In the past, people have made statements about what is right by equating them with concepts like God, happiness, or reason. These tenets are regarded as essential to ensuring that morality applies to everyone, everywhere, at all times since they are thought to be universally applicable. The Death of God sounds like a death knell for morality since morality has its origins in God. This is perhaps why Nietzsche’s Superman becomes an agent for the much-

anticipated transvaluation of all values. Nietzsche's Superman, unlike Benjamin's Angel of History, is in a position to change everything.

Moral scepticism results from basing morality on happiness or God, according to the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant. People can be ethically motivated to act morally by their belief in God, but only if it is their ultimate goal to go to paradise rather than hell. This is Kant's second categorical imperative. People shouldn't be seen as a means to an end. They must be ends in themselves. People can be morally motivated to behave by pursuing happiness, but we cannot predict what will make them happy in the future. Kant therefore argued in favour of a morality founded on reason in response. In his view, morality only needs a universal foundation, in which case we should base our decisions on the universalisability argument. Reason allows us to ascertain whether an intended action may logically be universalised by defining our goals for every action and transforming those goals into a law that all rational creatures must abide by. It is therefore up to logic, not God or desire, to determine whether a certain intended action is right (universal) or wrong (not universal).

"There are several problems with trying to base morality on reason. One such problem, as pointed out by Jacques Lacan in 'Kant with Sade' (1989), is that using universalisability as the criterion of right and wrong can let clever people (such as the Marquis de Sade) justify some seemingly horrific actions if they can manage to show that those actions can actually pass Kant's logic test. Another problem, as pointed out by John Stuart Mill in *Utilitarianism* (1861), is that humans are rational, but rationality is not all that we have, and so following Kantian morality forces us to live like uncaring robots rather than like people."

Reason, according to Nietzsche, is not something absolute and universal but rather something that has evolved over time. Reason, contrary to what Kant had maintained, is not much different from other 'transcendental signifiers' (or signified). Although 'transcendental signified' has a relatively modern origin, I use it intentionally here. It was Jacques Derrida who coined or rather proposed the term. But indubitably, he was influenced by Kant's notion of the transcendental. God, for instance, is a 'transcendental signifier'. Reason, Nietzsche maintains, is a poor replacement for God or happiness. Reason's own foundation is unstable.

There is a crucial difference between the reactions of the active and passive nihilists to this kind of moral scepticism. The ability to question the validity of any potential moral basis might cause an active nihilist to either reject or redefine morality. First, moral standards can be used to evaluate activities, but the active nihilist makes the moral standards. However, since it is hard to tell when we are thinking for ourselves and when

we are thinking according to our upbringing, what appears to be innovative may actually be derivative.

Human actions are seen as not different from animal actions when they are judged on a practical basis. In the abeyance of morality, anything goes. I am reminded of Nietzsche's slave and master morality here. The eagle swooping down on the lamb is not evil, at least in the eyes of active nihilists. For the lamb (Sklavenmoral), the eagle is a creature that puts its life in peril. The active nihilist is a pragmatist. We can call an action criminal but not immoral. Nietzsche was right when he said that some things are beyond good and evil. Take love or war, for instance. Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte (two megalomaniacs) wouldn't have conquered anything or risen to the top had they been agents of slave morality. The things Emperor Shah Jahan has done in the name of love can never be forgiven. Winston Churchill was a war hero for the English. The Germans might have a different opinion. Arthur Balfour, a former Prime Minister of the UK, is an orientalist for the Palestinians, a modern messiah for the people of Israel.

The passive nihilist is not an iconoclast who rejects traditional morality. Instead, he rejects the idea that the legitimacy of morality really matters. Morality is obeyed by the passive nihilist for the only purpose of obedience, not morality itself. In the eyes of the passive nihilist, it is better to live according to what other people consider to be good and evil or right and wrong than to have no moral guidelines at all. A passive nihilist would prefer to live by a defective moral compass than take the chance of being totally lost in life. Moral standards serve as a compass. Nietzsche had nothing but contempt for passive nihilism.

The passive nihilist gets a sense of community, and moral standards help to foster it. The active Nihilist rejects community along with morality. The passive nihilists can't bear the chance of feeling all by themselves. The passive nihilist thus endorses community while rejecting moral validity. According to the passive nihilist, the general perception of a moral proposition is more important than its veracity. The active nihilist is a lone wolf. The passive nihilist, on the other hand, reminds one of a gregarious wildebeest. He is the epitome of the abhorred 'herd mentality'. The passive nihilist looks at morality as a means to an end. He gets a sense of purpose and direction by being part of a community, and that's all that matters to him. In other words, a passive nihilist is a crowd-pleaser who buys Apple products to blend in with his affluent friends. He is a conspicuous consumer more concerned about the brand value than the utilitarian value. An active nihilist who is an iconoclast might even buy a Motorola or any upcoming brand and is never lured by popular or exorbitant products.

Political nihilism is a natural corollary of moral nihilism. It comes into being in the abeyance of morality and is understood as the complete rejection of authority. Bartleby from Melville's eponymous short story is a perfect example of a political nihilist. We don't see him acquiescing to authority's demands and, consequently, losing his livelihood and even his life. Political nihilism is revolutionary in one sense, and one is reminded of the Arab Spring, which had its origins in Tunisia and spread across much of the Arab world in the early 2010s.

Contrary to our perception, passive nihilism is the most dangerous form of nihilism. A passive nihilist, in his quest to find a community (or acceptance), treats knowledge and morality as means to his ends. In one sense, this is a pure violation of the Second Categorical Imperative of Kant as well. Kant was a moralist after all.

Nietzsche's attack on Christianity for promoting selflessness and abnegation was an outcome of his anxiety for the world. He wanted to deracinate passive nihilism and promote his version of nihilism. It was altruistic in some ways, if not completely. Nietzsche had always been at the receiving end of attacks from moralists for promoting nihilism. People familiar with his 'will to power' wouldn't doubt his intentions. What Nietzsche saw was an epidemic, an incorrigible affliction

that had the potential to bring the world to its knees. The uncanny guest at the door was not really a guest after all. Passive nationalism can be promoted by those in power to serve their ulterior motives. Passive nihilism in turn promotes repressive desublimation. We must not only recognise the nihilism (passive) within us but also recognise the sources of the same around us. It's not really that hard to find.

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