Chapter IV

Nihilism Revisited

From the above it becomes apparent that Nietzsche uses nihilism in two senses:

(i) In the context of his philosophical method, nihilism states that we have no right to speak of Reality, Knowledge or truth, or that language, thought and rationality are not infallible tools in understanding either ourselves or the world. Indeed, that such understanding is impossible.

(ii) The second sense of nihilism emerges when Nietzsche discusses the will to nothingness. The ascetic ideals that arise out of it are seen as nihilistic because they, in "creating" a world of Reality, truth, or a moral world order or a beyond, are actually directed towards that which does not exist, are an illusion, and hence are evidence of a will to nothingness. One could find logical relations between them. For example: in order to assert (ii) Nietzsche must already have assumed (i).

Our concern here, however, is with the third sense in which Nietzsche uses nihilism. This sense incorporates (i) and (ii) to an extent and essentially conveys the sense of a vacuum — a sense of the loss of the grounds for values.

This vacuum occurs because on the one hand philosophical nihilism eliminates the possibility of postulating any metaphysical...
or objective grounds for values. Primarily, the Transvaluation attempts to reject the Platonic and Christian grounds of values. Science too is claimed to be incapable of providing a viable ground for values. And we have seen that Nietzsche is not concerned with either the universal, a priori or objective nature of values.

Thus there enters the phenomenon of nihilism — it is a sense or feeling of the lack of any values to give stability to modern men. For Nietzsche nihilism in this sense is not so much a philosophical problem as a psychological problem, and also a problem of the age.

The history of a necessity: For Nietzsche the forsaking of religious and metaphysical grounds for value is most forcefully expressed in a single assertion "God is Dead." This for him is not merely borne out by the Transvaluation, it forms the most basic fact of civilization. With this event the history of man takes on a dangerous path.

Nihilism is not simply the outcome of the critique nor is it to be seen merely as a decadent symptom of the age.

Nietzsche finds that its roots lie in a particular mode of interpretation. This interpretation takes its birth with Platonic and Christian metaphysics and develops with inexorable necessity till Nietzsche's own time.
The values which accompanied this interpretation now simply dissolve: "What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves". 1

Nietzsche likens himself to a "fate" — a "destiny" who is to be the historical agent of this devaluation. 2

Nihilism comes to light when the Platonic-Christian interpretation turns on "itself and negates itself".

For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequences; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals — because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these values really had. 3

The necessity, Nietzsche says, arises out of the very nature of morality. 4 The kind of morality Nietzsche has in mind is one that demands the virtue of truthfulness. This demand is closely related to what Nietzsche calls the development of the conscience. The virtue of truthfulness specifically, has developed to such a high degree that it finally turns upon all postulations of a moral-world order, a beyond, and finds them totally illusory.

But among the forces cultivated by morality was truthfulness this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective. 5

Indeed, the whole Transvaluation takes it critical pathes from the virtue of "truthfulness", and it is thus that Nietzsche is
able to assert that values "devalue themselves", that an "auto-
suppression of morals" takes place:

...the conviction of an absolute unsanityony of
existence when it comes to the highest values one
recognizes; plus the realization that we lack the
least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of
things that might be "divine" or morality incarnate,

This realization is the consequence of the cultivation
of "truthfulness" — thus itself a consequence of the
faith in morality.

A consequence of the devaluation: We have already seen how
the ascetic ideals arose essentially as an antidote to a theoretical
and practical nihilism, as well as gave a meaning, a purpose to
suffering. Therefore, the comprehensive event "God is Dead" not only
reintroduces theoretical nihilism (which enters as Nietzsche's philo-
sophical nihilism), but also a practical nihilism, the wish for
self-annihilation. Suffering becomes meaningless.

Morality had had the advantage of providing man an "absolute
value" in the face of an absurd insincerity of existence. In spite
of suffering it provides the world and man the "character of perfection
— including freedom."

It posited that man could have knowledge of absolute values
"and thus adequate knowledge precisely regarding what is most important
Finally:

it prevented man from despising himself as man, from taking sides against life; from despairing of knowledge; it was a means of preservation.

The belief in God and a moral world order was an "extreme position" to adopt in our evaluations. With the "death" of God man now drifts towards the opposite extreme: "Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind." 10 And:

belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim — and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary effect once the belief in God and an essential moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at that point.... 11

Nietzsche pinpoints three "values" which, having been devalued, lead man towards a psychological crisis: (1) "Meaning" or "goal": The ascetic ideals and morality provided a goal to the process, any goal would constitute a meaning:

that something is to be achieved through the process — and now one realizes that becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing... 12

* Nietzsche here probably means to convey the sense of "amoral".
(ii) "Totality" or "Systematization": The belief that there is a unity in being. But now man finds that there is no universal:

Some sort of unity, some form of "monism," this faith suffices to give men a deep feeling of standing in the context of, and dependent on, some whole that is infinitely superior to him, and he sees himself as a mode of the deity. By positing a universal, man gave himself value, but now he has lost faith in his own value. 13

(iii) Finally, once man finds out that the "true world" which was used to pass sentence on this world was fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any meta-physical world and forbids itself any belief in a true world. 14

Thus Nietzsche asks, once the categories of aim, unity, and being are withdrawn, and morality is shown to be illusory, what results? There is a psychological consequence of the world becoming valueless.

we are lost for a while. Abruptly we plunge into the opposite valuations, with all the energy that such an extreme overvaluation of man has generated in men. 15

"God is Dead." Rather than make men feel free and give him a sense of individual responsibility, this creates dangerous situations. Philosophical nihilism is itself debilitating.
to esteem what we knew, and not to be allowed any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves — results in a process of dissolution. 16

In spite of man's "new" knowledge, the refutation of metaphysics, man yet longs for a meaning, a system, and Nietzsche remarks that our disappointment is with ourselves "only because we cannot subdue that absurd impulse that is called idealism." 17 Man "despairs of shedding" his "inveterate mendaciousness". Truth is still our greatest need.

That all this could lead to a state of self-contempt and self-disgust is what prompts Nietzsche to regard the problem of nihilism as primarily a psychological, even pathological problem. Perhaps Nietzsche himself felt this, for in spite of his faith in the tragic affirmation of existence, egoism and necessity there is nonetheless the disgust at this essentially liberating event.

everything egoistic has come to disgust us (even though we realize the impossibility of the unegoistic); what is necessary has come to disgust us (even though we realize the impossibility of any liberum arbitrium or "intelligible freedom"), for we are weary because we have lost the main stimulus. In vain so far. 18

The problem, as Nietzsche sees it, is one in which man once again embarks on a suicidal course — a practical nihilism.
"God is Dead" but we have not thereby _suo facto_ given ourselves a meaning, a goal, a task for this world. The world of appearance, the phenomenal world, is valueless, this is a nauseating discovery, and it creates conditions of self-annihilation.

_Either man?_ Nietzsche says that religion, Christianity specifically, had provided a "centre" to man. Since Copernicus, however, man begins to lose hold over the "centre" and begins to drift in a directionless manner:

Since Copernicus man seems to have fallen on a steep plane — he rolls faster and faster away from the centre — _Whither?_ into nothingness? into the thrilling sensation of his own nothingness?

He sees prevalent in his own times, the predominance of decadent values, reflected in all spheres of everyday life, art and academics. As such, _nihilism_ is the "normal condition" of the age.

All demands for equity in society, be it of Christianity, democracy or socialism, are essentially alive with new moralities and go contrary to nature. The purely destructive anarchists are, like the above, criticized for having arisen from resentment. Nietzsche's last words for the age, as we said, is one of "great disgusted".

Nietzsche believed that he stood at the critical juncture in this situation not only because an "autosuppression of morals" takes place but also because he saw himself as prophetic of that which
was to draw its full impact in the twentieth century. Nihilism not only has a history, it also has a future.*

This history can be related even now, for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs; this destiny announces itself everywhere.*** For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as towards a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect, 20

Thus it can be seen that nihilism, "the uncanniest of all guests", 21 is rooted originally in an interpretation. It becomes perceptible from Copernicus onwards, becomes the "normal condition" by Nietzsche's times, and is moving towards a catastrophic future. The problem, for Nietzsche, is not one that is given to philosophical solution. Here "contemplation" of the valuelessness of the world is not sufficient. What is demanded of the situation is an active participation in the process of general dissolution. Such a participation Nietzsche calls "active nihilism". He himself is an active participant insofar as the devaluation and the Transvaluation are to be a part of the destructive-creative process.

Briefly, and somewhat at random, we may try to further understand this problem by comparing this picture that Nietzsche paints with some contemporary philosophical developments.
To begin with, one may refer to Eric Heller's basic insight into contemporary literature and thought:

I have stressed what appears to be one of the distinctive symptoms of modern literature and thought, the consciousness of life's increasing depreciation. 22

Heller is more explicit with reference to the existentialists. Here the increasing "deprecation" of life becomes a vivid and personal experience of "nothingness". Being essentially a personal experience, it can hardly be given to easy identification and rationalization. It is more of an experience than a strictly philosophical position of ontology:

What...the existentialists have in common is the experience of the utter exposure and defenselessness of the frontiers of human existence against the neighbouring void, the area which was once established as the divine home of souls and is now the impregnable fortress of the nihil, defying for every new and heroic attempt of man to assert himself in that region... 23

Heller sees the divine replaced by the "nihil". Man, however, is unable to establish any foothold in the region of the nihil.

Sartre too takes the "death" of God as very fundamental to his thought. 24 This has important implications for values. Firstly, with the "death" of God, the idea of human essence disappears: "there
is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Sartre emphasises the absolute, unconditional freedom of man. Freedom and choice lie at the core of Sartre's moral being. Secondly, because no grounds remain for a priori moral values, each man is "allowed" to create and define his own values. Sartre asserts that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing absolutely nothing justified me in adopting this or that scale of values.

The "death of God" therefore leaves the individual in great anguish and anxiety. In the "reflective apprehension of the self" the individual experiences the anxiety of facing both freedom and nothingness; "anxiety is precisely the consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being."

We are not here interested in Sartre's ontology of Nothingness. What is of interest is that Sartre's moral philosophy is pessimistic to the point of being, in this writer's opinion, depressing. Each individual is seen as trying to retrieve his freedom from the other as well as trying to possess, enslave, the other. The picture is
one of endless conflict. Where Christianity had sanctified law and norms, the "death" of God leaves the individual lost in conditions that are almost pathological. Sartre's analysis of "Being-for-others" takes him through such psychological conditions as alienation, shame, fear, sadism and masochism all of which, he thinks, deeply mark human relationships. Attempts at bridging the gap between individuals, e.g. in love, sexuality and language are ultimately self-frustrating. Therefore, for Sartre "Hell is other people". 2)

Though the later Sartre's ethical thought comes close to introducing universal, almost Kantian, conditions, what is marked in his ethical thought as a whole is the shadow cast by the "nausea" which results from confronting an absurd universe. This absurdity of the universe is the same point at which Nietzsche finds himself with the "death" of God.

Heidegger too ontologises Nothingness or Not-being. It is disclosed in "anxiety" as the totality of beings in its negation. Non-being. However, he treats the problem of nihilism at very many levels. For our context, what is noteworthy is his picture of contemporary history.

For Heidegger the really great event of human history took place with the ancient Greeks. As contrasted with Nietzsche's picture
of the pre-Socratics as men of sublime instincts, Heidegger's picture shows them as being "great" because they stood in "harmonia" with the Logos. The "pathos" that moves "philosophy" then is the "astonishment" which the Greeks felt when they saw that "in the appearance of Being, being appears". While they alone stood in "accordance" with Being, the rest of the history of "thought" has been essentially a forgetfulness of this great event, and this is mutatis mutandis reflected in the history of metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche. Rather than being a "progress" or linear development, history has been a repose, a flattening out. Nihilism is nothing more than this "fundamental movement of the historical destiny of the occident". In the modern context, Heidegger sees Nietzsche as the "last great metaphysician" of the West. He examines the problem of nihilism in the context of its historical origins and development. He sees the problem of nihilism as having entered a crucial stage with Nietzsche's treatment of the problem.

He takes up specifically the devaluation of old values and the birth of new ones:

the birth of art for art's sake, the birth of a notion of a culture, the flowering of research, the debasing of man to a unit within the complexes of the Maschinenachtkultur, the death of God -- are only consequences... of a long tradition.
Not only, as Nietzsche, does Heidegger think that nihilism has become the "normal state" of man 36 but he also sees nihilism reflected in, firstly, man's attempt to restore "what has been", rather than entering into a discussion about the essence of nihilism. Secondly, in man's failure to grasp the "worthiness of questioning the metaphysical position of man". And thirdly, where metaphysics is sought to be abandoned for logistics, sociology and psychology.

The will to know which breaks forth here, and its more tractable total organisation, points to an increase of the will to power, which is of a different kind from that which Nietzsche designated as active nihilism. 37

Like Ernst Junger, 38 Heidegger uses Nietzsche's will to power in a significant way to examine present day history, but in a sense goes "beyond" Nietzsche to see the impact of nihilism in the twentieth century. Heidegger notes how Junger tried consciously participating in "active nihilism". For the latter, Being is revealed in "the light and shadow of the metaphysics of the will to power which Nietzsche expounded in the form of a doctrine of values". 39 Both discuss the problem of nihilism as one which is all pervasive, planetary, "all-conquering". For Heidegger, specifically, the essence of the problem is marked by the "spirit of vengeance" with which modern man "persecutes" all beings.

pursues them, does violence to them, reduce them more and more to his own control, decomposes them by his analysis, disposes of them at will. 40
Heidegger's pessimism about the modern age goes to the extent of predicting the "long night which will follow the evening fading in the West". For him the death of God and nihilism becoming the "normal state of man" can only be followed by a world catastrophe "as the very nature of man is utterly transformed." 42

Finally, it may be of some interest to point out that Anglo-Saxon Ethics too has somewhat suffered from a sense of being lost, at least as far as moral philosophy is concerned. The rigorous demands of Kant and Moore for the autonomy of the ethical object i.e. the Good has left many philosophers nonplussed by the difficulty of looking for universal criteria by which to settle disputes arising out of ethical intuitions. Thus MacIntyre, for example, argues that the demand of universalisability is itself not peculiar to the nature of ethical thinking but arises out of a tradition of liberalism. 43 Strawson states that the demand for universalisability is merely a formal demand and one need not really go through it. He shows in fact how easy it is to make any moral norm universal through a "formal manoeuvre". He sees the absolute diversity in "the region of the ethical", including "incompatible and possibly practically conflicting ideals", as "itself the essential element in one of one's pictures of man". 44
Such tendencies towards relativism, or even subjectivism, of course, need not be pessimistic. Neither are their authors concerned with exposing, developing, or participating in any form of nihilism. Yet we may ask whether such positions do not, in effect, deny the possibility of ethics itself. For ethics, by its very meaning, does demand universality. And if, by implication, one were to deny the possibility of ethics, would it not be a matter of concern about the very situation in which man finds himself?

In another context, Anscombe made such a strong statement as:

it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that it should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. 45

She in fact questions the very legitimacy of using the term "moral" as applied to obligation, duty, rights, wrong, or to an "ought". These she says "ought to be jettisoned if psychologically possible", since they belong to the "law conception of ethics" peculiar to Judeo-Christian thought. 45

In spite of such sophistication within the intuitionist, prescriptivist, and descriptivist "schools" of ethical philosophy, there remains the feeling of not really having achieved very much in understanding either moral philosophy or the nature of value. Thus Mary Warnock finds in recent literature "an increasing triviality of the
I believe, that the successive orthodoxies of moral philosophy in English in the present century have been, notwithstanding the often admirable acumen of their authors, remarkably barren.

He concludes his book on contemporary moral philosophy with the remark that much of recent moral theory has been misguided in its aims and unrewarding in its results "... there is almost everything to be done."

In conclusion we may say that in the contemporary scene much controversy prevails over the question of values. Sartre's individual is left in a vacuum as to the content and actual practice of being moral. He, like MacIntyre and Strawson, argues against the principle that ethics must necessarily be a universal science. This has the disadvantage that ethics is made largely relative, if not entirely a subjective and arbitrary, study. Philosophers like Anscombe, Mary Warnock and G.J. Warnock seem disillusioned by the strict formalism of Kant and Moore, but are skeptical whether adequate alternatives have been found.

Nietzsche and Heidegger see this not only as a philosophical problem as the above philosophers seem to do, but as a problem which is a consequence of almost the entire history of western civilization. Their perspectives, however, are markedly different. Whereas for
Nietzsche's nihilism originates in the Platonic-Christian interpretations, in the creation of "Being", for Heidegger it originates in the reifications in the history of metaphysics, in the forgetfulness of "Being".

Whatever their understanding of the history of nihilism, both are acutely aware that the present age is bent upon its own dissolution, and also that this could be followed by a new "man", or a new age. Perhaps, both would agree that the present confusion in ethical and moral thought is but reflective of the very impasse that man has reached vis-à-vis values.

One thinks it is not the possibility of working out universal formal systems of ethics that is the basic issue. In this writer's opinion, it is its very desirability that is being questioned. One no longer feels the need for universal principles because one is too hopelessly aware of the absolute diversity of moral opinion that prevails in the world.

The modern age has thrown many cultures together. But it is rather paradoxical that in this global intermingling of cultures universalistic ethics finds itself lost. It is possible to assume that the loss is felt in its content, not in its normative formal structures.

Pessimism about the modern world could also be extended to include the extent to which the diversity of morals have themselves gone.
The absolute liberality to which western man opened his mind, without the constraint of religious and social taboos, has led to a permissive in all walks of life: personal relationships, economic relationships and politics.

Further, industrial and technological structures and finance have created a "machine" over which individuals themselves have little control. International power politics and the arms race leave little doubt as to the dangerous extent to which man has reached the point of self-annihilation. Can one deny that the many movements of the sixties and seventies, especially in the West, have been most painfully aware of these problems? What is important is not what paths they travelled; that is noteworthy is that they felt the need to find new alternatives.

Such problems could well be discussed under the generic concept of nihilism—seen as the feeling, the sensing, of a vacuum and lack of meaningfulness in one's life and one's task.

Nietzsche is one philosopher who stands as almost the earliest witness to this problem of nihilism. The "death" of God is a global, cultural event, and Nietzsche asks whether must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of this event. His call goes to the individual to "heal" himself. Rather than look for alternatives in
religion, philosophy, history, or society, the key to one's task lies within each of us. Though Nietzsche all along gives the impression of being egoist and individualist to an extreme, there is also, as we shall see, a sense of humanism in his thought.