

Heidegger's Interpretation on Nietzsche's Concept of Nihilism

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Abstract

Nietzsche views our 'modernity' as leading towards the kind of *crisis* – a loss of meaning and value: today we are currently witnessing the collapse of *prior* truths and values. Much has been discussed concerning the relevance of Nietzsche's concept of nihilism. As one of Heidegger and Nietzsche' readers, I want to reveal and investigate in this paper how Heidegger further enhanced Nietzsche's concept of nihilism, especially relative to 'revaluation' of value, *Being* and *historicity*. In addition, this paper also insists upon the notion that the apriority does not involve necessity since all *a priori* propositions need not be necessarily true. The paper has been separated into four sections in order to not only enrich the quintessence of nihilism that steer the primacy of research, but also urge the readers to view nihilism not as a complete negative downfall, but on the contrary, as the positive transition to new conditions of human existence according to both Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Introduction

"What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. 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...."

(Nietzsche, 1968, p. 3)

Ecce Homo, a book subtitled "How To Become What You Are," written by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in the late autumn of 1888, also contains the recapitulation of Nietzsche's final thoughts, critiques, and reckonings with transcendence: a testament to his will and self-overcoming relative to the rise

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of nihilism. And in the section named “Why I Write Such Good Books” in particular, he insists: “We who are new, nameless, hard to understand, we premature births of a yet unproven future, we require for a new end a new means, too, namely a new health” (Nietzsche, 2007, p.67).

Here he is speaking to our contemporary society: we need a *new means*. Present society seems to be suffering from the problems Nietzsche predicted. As Prof. Zygmunt Bauman too remarks: “the construction of sublime artefacts, objects of desire … styles of interaction, ways of acting, ways of constructing identity and so on becomes an oppressive drudgery masquerading as ever-extending choice. Matter fills up all space. Choice is bewildering illusion” (Bauman, 2007, p. 132). Hence, for that we must look for a new guiding-principle and also value in a society which is challenged by what Nietzsche described as nihilism (*nihilismus*). Today we are experiencing a deep crisis of meaning: lack of belief in anything, selfishness and consequent low self-esteem, absence of purpose and value (or *valuelessness*), growing anxiety and stress, low standard of morality, collapse of *prior* truth, gradual disappearance of sacred religious practice, obsession with wealth and material needs (in a ‘world without limits’), as well as the sense of boredom (or loneliness) accompanying a growing attitude of no other alternative, which characterizes much of contemporary society and is also a testament challenged by recent nihilism and our capitalism’s priorities being upside-down.

To recall briefly, after Friedrich H. Jacobi and the pantheism controversy or his “disclosure of Lessing’s Spinozism” (Beiser, 1987, pp. 44-45), which popularized the term ‘nihilism’ (*Nihilismus*) in the late eighteenth-century Germany: it *is* Nietzsche who recognized the seriousness of nihilism and the actual beginning of the problem of nihilism. Nietzsche’s *warning* can now be projected far beyond Europe to the rest of the world. His declaration in *The Gay Science*, of the ‘death of God,’ is also intended to “alert humanity” to this particular notion of the ‘twilight of the idols,’ which is declining in its binding force on us. What distinguishes Nietzsche from other nineteenth-century critics of religion, morality, or existentialism in general is that he does *not* search for a more effective “moral life”; instead, he attempts to *rescue* life from morality itself since traditional way of valuation is *no* longer appropriate for us as a ‘modern man.’ Here it is no exaggeration to say the aim of life for Nietzsche involves constant shedding of obsolete or inappropriate values which blind us to actual exercise or *acquisition* of power.

Nietzsche's foresight of these historical consequences also extends far into the future, for he predicts not only the arrival of nihilism, but also its strong impact in the next "two centuries" to come: "I describe what is coming" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 3). Nietzsche employed the term 'nihilism' to describe "the already" growing sense of emptiness (or nothingness) befalling people who had no 'faith' in the standard and value that regulated his or her daily life, but who could find no other (or better) alternatives to bring new values into his or her being. Similarly, the problem for humanity today is many people no longer believe in traditional concepts of 'virtue,' omnipotent God, and moral ideals that shaped the previous religious views of the world; moreover, they lack courage, guidance, or power to create values and meanings capable of underpinning a new vision suitable for themselves. Take our Thai culture for example, not only is it continuously losing a deep appreciation from the younger generation via mainstream 'western' culture, but also our standard of morality and religious (Buddhist) practices too are *all* facing crisis challenged by recent nihilism and its manifestations relative to *neoliberalism* as "postmodern desymbolization" of individuals and the effects it has upon the 'subject-form.' (e.g., be it Descartes' judging subject, Freudian subject, or Deleuze's *schiz* subject). Generally speaking, nihilism is now a subject on global scale. Hence, I believe it is not over exaggerated at all to say that Thailand and most other Asian countries, if not all, are affected in one-way or another – from sweet brown fizz drinks to popular software programs and Hollywood movies. However, keep in mind that not *all* aspects of the globalized consumer goods and popular culture are of superior quality, strictly speaking, and many of such products and cultural goods are promoted with subliminal marketing strategies some of which claim to even have "therapeutic effects" or involve seemingly spiritual or religious domain. But again a total rejection of popular culture and consumer products will not do. It is not advisable since in some ways we still depend on some of those products. But on the other hand, a careful selection is advisable because of economical, ecological and psychological reasons. In general if it comes to selecting such products the following idea of ascetics might be considered as a rough guideline:

By asceticism one generally means austerity. But I would like to understand ascetics under the triad of *selection*, *concentration* and *practice*, the concrete content of which has to be attuned, repeated and re-defined in

the practical conduct of life. Without going in-depth into the critics of asceticism and “moral *resentiment*”; here one needs to keep in mind only the central point of ascetics is practicing and exercising, for by so doing the work of art or life as a work of art can be brought to ‘relative completion.’ One should not at this point speak of a further division of labor, when reference is made to a concentration on a lesser number of objects, but rather to call upon the individual to make use of our selection competence in order to cope with not only such things as the *oversupply* in globalized popular culture and consumer goods, but also Nihilism and the process whereby the circulation of wealth erodes value in contemporary society. Now, relative to Nietzsche, thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Dany-Robert Dufour agree:

“It is no exaggeration to say that a feeling of deep crisis is affecting the soundest of minds ... making it more difficult for us to be together and to be ourselves ... The result is the sabotaging of what I have termed the ‘symbolic serfdom’ of man, and it paves the way for a certain contemporary nihilism.”
(Dufour, 2008, pp. 151-165; also Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, p. 8)

Heidegger: Nietzsche as an End and Transition

Martin Heidegger’s *Nietzsche* is considered one of the twentieth century’s most important and influential work among both Nietzschean scholars and philosophers. Here Heidegger writes:

“First, nihilism, as Nietzsche thinks it, is the history of the devaluation of the highest values hitherto, as the transition to the revaluation of all prior values, a revaluation that comes to pass in the discovery of a principle for a new valuation, a principle Nietzsche recognizes as the will to power.”

(Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, p. 52)

For Heidegger, Nietzsche is especially important because he is not only representing “a constitutive sense of the end of Western philosophy” (Heidegger, 1994, p. 116), but also a *new* and bold transition into a stage of overcoming nihilism and *surpassing* into something different, such as the future of ‘higher man’ (or *ubermensche*). In addition to that, he too describes “the twilight of the end of Western thinking ... which end means the running out and the running astray of the confusion of the various basic positions, valuations, concepts, and systems” (Heidegger, 1994, p. 116), which have been proposed, formed, or both, today and throughout past history.

Heidegger's Interpretation of Nihilism: Comparisons and Observations

Nietzsche was very important to the development of Heidegger's philosophy, especially during the mid 1930s. During this period Heidegger gave a lecture on Nietzsche and focused a large part on the question of Nihilism. From my position, Heidegger's interpretation is very much in line with Nietzsche. He always placed a good deal of emphasis on the physical world, human experience, and the senses just as would Nietzsche when reflecting upon the concept of nihilism. He also furthered the interpretation on nihilism in the sense of striving to emphasize on the nothingness or *valuelessness* itself that *surrounds* one's own existence, and which *renders* everything ‘meaningless’; that values and meanings can be described by means of oneself. And relative to the process of devaluation of the “uppermost values” (or *highest*) thus far (A 62), Heidegger insists: if these *highest* or “uppermost values” are to be devalued, then, logically speaking every being for which **all** values “were grounded” too would become *valueless* (or non-value) relative to this process. (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. III, p. 204).

In *Being and Time* (1927), among Heidegger's major writings, he continued to give an account of his own analysis of human existence. Here he regarded the analysis as “the pathway” to understanding of *Being*, and which also “often served” as foundation relative to his thought and interpretation on nihilism. With reference to nihilism, now he *too* writes of “human encountering” of the world and of our mood in which we experience it as placing or judging a value and meaning on the world.

Next we then find ourselves *occupying* or as such ‘existing’ in this world, specifically in the sense of *inhibiting* our own perspectives on life and using whatever we (can) find (or that “surrounds us”): the “*thrown possibility*

through and through. *Dasein* is the possibility of Being-free for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being ... and this is also our *facticity* ... as factual *Dasein*, any *Dasein* has already diverted its potentiality-for-Being into a possibility of understanding" (Heidegger, 1992, pp. 216-218). Essentially speaking, while *Dasein* means "Being-in-the-world," hence, to be conceived of as "the Being-possible" or "the potentiality-for-Being;" in the same manner *Being-there* is, therefore, also "Being-in" and inclusive of all our perspectives of the world whether or not nihilistic ones (Heidegger, 1992, pp. 221-226).

Consequently, this is important because "beings as a whole remain, and the need to establish a truth concerning beings simply grows more pronounced" (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. III, p. 204). This way, again the positing of a new value, meaning, or both, is thus needed and announced. In comparison, this is also similar to what Nietzsche had in mind relative to his concept of nihilism as it is not being seen as a complete or negative downfall; on the contrary, as something positive to begin our *new* life with (in terms of re-valuing values). And like Nietzsche, Heidegger also insists that it is about time (presumably beginning with Nietzsche as a forerunner of the 'advent of nihilism') to start thinking anew and looking for alternatives. After all, a *new* era has begun, which, according to him, has taken us away from the "usual path" man has taken for over two thousand years of *Christendom*. Relative to Nietzsche, here he remarks:

"The devaluation of the highest values hitherto first of all makes the world seem valueless. These values are indeed devalued, but beings as a whole remain, and the need to establish a truth concerning beings simply grows more pronounced. The indispensability of new values becomes obvious. The positing of new values is announced ... even though the presence of a new world of values has been detected and – albeit unwillingly – already acknowledged. This intermediate state, in which the historical peoples of the earth must decide on their destruction or on a new beginning...."

(Heidegger, 1991, Vol. III, p. 204)

On the whole, while Nietzsche is better known for his emphasis and critique on the ‘*historical* movement’ of mankind or a ‘justification of history’; for instance, relative to our desire and will, of self-overcoming (*selbstüberwindung*), the conscious and the unconscious forces (whether or not from the ‘herd instinct’ that relates or traverses the social field: “To give men back the courage to their natural drives—” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 76; also NB: 15 [63]); in other words, “the history of a *becoming-reactive*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. xviii). Here in particular, Heidegger now takes this further than Nietzsche in the sense that “Nihilism is history ... Nihilism determines the historicity of this history” (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, p. 53) and as such the pattern of thought or “*ressentiment*” (GM ‘I’ 10; also ‘III’ 13) in which man has inscribed into his own culture – the ‘European’ culture (and together with the “misguided representation” or the manipulation of the churchly order as according to him). From these types of underlying thoughts behind the essence of *historicity*, realization that “God is dead” or the ‘death of God,’ as well as upon finding *new* strength for humanity to live life as “it *is*.” These are all, essentially speaking, not only contributive, but I suggest, an essential interpretation of Heidegger’s concept of nihilism and how it affects our lives and belief systems. Moreover, I also believe it then integrates into other significant concepts such as that of ‘overman’ (*ubermensch*) or ‘the will to power,’ which is again the *crown* of Nietzsche’s key conception and philosophy of power: “Life itself is not a means to something; it is merely a growth-form of power” (Fraser, 2002, p. 73; also Nietzsche, 2003, p. 274).

Anyhow, towards the end of Heidegger’s work on nihilism, he still maintains that the idea of nihilism itself is a kind of situation (often more like “a movement”), which occurs well beyond a “depreciative state” or our general perception. It is not merely the *weariness* of the world and the human will, or even of humanity as previously explored by Nietzsche. According to Heidegger: “*nihilism* points to a historical movement that extends far behind us and reaches forward far beyond us” (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, p. 57). Here, to simplify Heidegger’s view in relation to Nietzsche; in sum we argue: the main difference that distinguishes Heidegger’s interpretation from that of Nietzsche could be understood in the “essential disclosing” of nihilism is (or as) the “*default of Being*.” And so in an attempt to “stay away” – not only does it *engages*, but also *promises* to itself in its “own unconcealment” (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, pp. 238-239) in different forms and levels of ‘intensity.’ (cf. “schizophrenic realities” in *Anti-Oedipus*).

For Heidegger, his interpretation frequently revolves around this stance relative to nihilism. After all, as those who are familiar with him would consent to this that his importance lies in the persistent vision and concept of the *history of Being* (or ‘beings’) and philosophy. Now consider the following excerpt, which from my position not only integrates, but also crystallizes Heidegger’s view on nihilism in relation to his concept and explanation via *Being*, the *history of Being*, or ‘beings’ thus far, which are taken to epitomize as he would now assert – “phenomena of nihilism” or “nihilistic phenomena”:

“...Granted that the unconditioned appearance of the will to power in the whole of beings is not nothing, is the essence of nihilism in the history of Being, an essence that reigns concealed in this appearance, merely a product of thought or even something utterly fantastic? ...taking these appearances as what alone is actual, and throwing to the winds what occurs essentially in the actual, as though it were nothing at all? ... The essence of nihilism in the history of Being is not something produced in thought, nor does it hover rootlessly above actual nihilism. Rather ... ‘the real’ ... comes to be only on the basis of the essential history of Being itself ... through a complete ordering of all beings.”

(Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, pp. 232-234)

In short, as we have seen earlier that Heidegger is more concerned with the central theme of the *history of Being* or ‘beings.’ Conversely, Nietzsche’s overcoming, on the other hand, if thought in terms of the essence of nihilism itself, is simply the ‘fulfillment’ of nihilism and in *it*, the better (or *fuller*) essence of nihilism is announced “more clearly” than in any other ‘fundamental position’ of the metaphysics, which is but *concealing* the sharper view of the world. Now, what is important here is this: this is also where the will to power eventually departs with the *history of Being* relative to nihilism altogether.

While Nietzsche apprehends the course of ‘Western philosophy’ as a kind of reflecting or the thinking in value: “revaluating values” (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 151). Or, in other words, “...a reckoning with values, as value positing ... In a covert yet utterly comprehensible way, the history of metaphysics appears in the light of valuative thought in most of Nietzsche’s writings and notes”

(Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, p. 69). Again unlike Heidegger, Nietzsche valuations have more emphasis or ‘groundwork’ and *their necessity* in the will to power as well as the creativity, passion, and desire in human. Therefore, another main difference could also lie in his underlying thought that the will to power must have also been “a definitive” for the initial “positing of” the *‘highest values hitherto’*; that is, for the actual beginning of the metaphysics as seen in his critiques of “Subjectivity in Nietzsche’s Interpretation of History” (Heidegger, 1991, Vol. IV, pp. 69-75). Furthermore, relative to such aspect, thinkers like Alexandre Kojève,¹ an influential twentieth-century Russian Hegelian-Marxist philosopher, also remarks in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* that:

“The very being of man, the self-conscious being, therefore, implies and presupposes Desire ... In contrast to the knowledge that keeps man in a passive quietude, Desire dis-quiets him and moves him to action. Born of Desire, action tends to satisfy it, and can do so only by the *negation*, the destruction, or at least the transformation, of the desired object: to satisfy hunger, for example, the food must be destroyed or, in any case, transformed. Thus, all action is *negating*.”

(Kojève, 1980, p. 92)

Recommendations for Further Research

By and large we could say Nietzsche neither contested nor contended for what he would call *nullity*. On the contrary, its essence lies in a positive nature or ‘affirmation’ of nihilism as the ‘nature of *liberation*’ resulting from it. Nihilism to Nietzsche, I believe, as much a ‘devaluation’ of all *prior* values as a ‘devaluation’ that “turns to” a rejection or reversal of all values as such. Consequently, with reference to Heidegger’s referring to Nietzsche, he still “cannot escape” from the metaphysics (i.e., of the will to power) upon which his nihilism is also interdependent. At this point, it is only boiled down to following manifestations on the ‘nature of *liberation*’ which I think is often repetitive of Heidegger, but then again constantly appeals to us in different contexts as also appeared in Nietzsche’s critiques in various instances throughout *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. It is now up to both Heidegger-Nietzsche interpreters to put their constructive syntheses to further and more creative use in other related research. For instance, further research could

be conducted on Bataille's interpretation on nihilism, as well as Deleuze's interpretation on nihilism: a concept of active and reactive forces (cf. Nietzsche's 'noble' morality, reactive life, or of reaction and "*ressentiment*") would also be valuable in the fields of nihilism as both of them too play an important role in critiquing the interrelations between capitalism and nihilism relative to schizophrenia.

Here, to recap, I think we could also propose the following summary. What does this essentially say about the strategies of interpretive orientation in our so-called global age? How does one shift through the competing mythologies and interpretations which ask for trust? The 'role' of interpretation would not be one of deconstruction, consensus, or even a dialectical synthesis towards some "originary significance." But it would instead involve framing the contradictions and tensions within a cultural tradition faced with globalization and allowing those *tensions* themselves to speak, for instance, to allow the traditional myths and hermeneutic circling to speak in new ways to allow new (or old) solutions to the problems of our current situations of interpretations; in other words, to allow the tensions between competing stories and interpretations, to create new stories and interpretations. Finally, I conclude this paper with an excerpt from Heidegger's *Nietzsche* which captures, succinctly (if implicitly), much of what I have explored and discussed thus far relative to our topic of research:

"Nihilism then proclaims the following: *Nothing* of the prior valuations shall have validity any longer; all beings must be differently posited as a *whole*; that is, they must as a whole be posited on other conditions. As soon as the world seems to be valueless, due to the devaluation of the highest values hitherto, something extreme comes to the fore, which in turn can be superseded only by some other extreme (WM, 55). The revaluation must be absolute and must transpose all beings into an original unity. The original, anticipatory, unifying unity constitutes the essence of totality. In this unity ... the dawn of the Western world ... the appearance of the world as temporarily valueless, the need to replace prior values with new ones, the new positing as a revaluation, and preliminary stages of this revaluation – all these

describe the proper lawfulness of those value-estimations in which an interpretation of the world is to be rooted."

(Heidegger, 1991, Vol. III, p. 205)

Endnotes

¹Kojeve is known for his ideas and interests on both ends of the political and economic idealism; namely, Marxism and capitalism (or “socialist-capitalist synthesis,” which is often based on the type of Marxist-economic analysis) relative to the “end of history,” for instance, as in the case of French Revolution in relation to human struggle for recognition, share, or the “final drive” towards liberal ‘capitalist movement’ (even to the extent of ‘total’ capitalism, where everything, including our very being, will be dragged into the orbit of the commodity – let alone responsibility or the breaking down of ‘subject-form’). See “On the New Servitude of the Liberated in the Age of Total Capitalism” by Dany-Robert Dufour (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) for his further analyses and elaborations on such issues relative to our “foolish optimism” at deterritorialization brought about by the commodity or neoliberalism as “postmodern desymbolization”; in other words, a new form of ‘domination.’

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