

A Treatment of Nihilism

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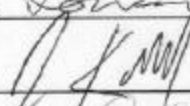
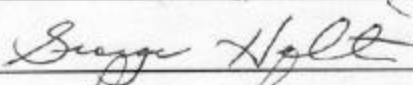
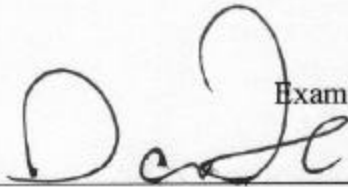
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## Abstract

### A Treatment of Nihilism

This paper concerns epistemological nihilism and is composed of five sections. The first section is introductory in nature. In it I define nihilism and distinguish epistemological nihilism from other types of nihilism. Also, I distinguish nihilism from relativism, skepticism, and anarchism. In the second section I examine the seeds of nihilism in modern thought, particularly Rene Descartes' skepticism about what exists and David Hume's skepticism concerning the use of the law of causality to determine truth. After examining Hume's view and Immanuel Kant's attempt to save the phenomena, I conclude that causation is in serious jeopardy and cannot be relied upon for the construction of truth. The third section is an elaboration of Friedrich Nietzsche's efforts to avoid nihilism through the will to power. The fourth section is an outline of Jean Baudrillard's arguments about simulacra and simulation and how these arguments recognize nihilism but consider it impossible because humans have moved beyond the point where nihilism is possible. In the last section I entertain the prospect that nihilism is not merely a modern problem, but existed in the ancient and medieval periods of thought. I will briefly examine the attempts of the ancient skeptics and medieval mystics to avoid epistemological nihilism, positing two solutions to the problem of an unintelligible world. I conclude by speculating about whether nihilism must negate itself in order to be a consistent theory.

## I: What Is Nihilism?

There are few topics that can begin a discussion about theories of knowledge like a simple mentioning of nihilism. To the theologian, it may be a curse; to the anarchist, it may be a truth. In fact, it is my contention that all theories can be expressed in reference to their stance concerning nihilism, and that most theories can be defined by a reference to nihilism, especially at the most basic level. Any person who adheres to a theory will say, “A nihilist believes in nothing. I believe in something. Therefore, I am not a nihilist.” The nihilist, of course, would answer that syllogism affirmatively, thus making a true statement about nothing, an interesting result. Indeed, nihilism defies the standards that allow other philosophical ideas to become codified and relegates them to the status of being useless but interesting. Over one hundred years after its first use, nihilism is still a vibrant part of philosophy (more so, say, than Locke’s powers or the categorical imperative), and according to many philosophers, it is now hitting its stride as a “prominent trend” in intellectual dialogues.<sup>i</sup> If it is the case that nihilism is being popularized and used as regularly as it seems—use of the term in movies and books seems to affirm this premise<sup>ii</sup>—then there ought to be a way in which the concept can be expressed and confronted other than by defining movements as “not nihilism” as in the modus tollens argument above. In other words, what is required for an inquiry into the nature of nihilism is a simple definition of what it is. The question that must be asked is a very simple one: What is nihilism?

The beginning of the answer is that few philosophical ideas evade description as well as nihilism does. Although the term has existed for over one hundred years and is used by philosophers in a manner that is generally understood by their audiences, the exact meaning of “nihilism” seems vague and changes from one writer to the next. Therefore, before this paper can properly begin, it is important to determine what the subject exactly is. To say that this paper is about nihilism does little to explain the issue at hand.

The problem with defining nihilism is that any definition seems to leave out a meaning or frequent use of the term. However, if I were to confront two differing definitions simultaneously, be the difference great or small, the result would inevitably be confusion. Therefore, after surveying the uses of the term “nihilism,” I will choose the definition that I find most appropriate to the remainder of the inquiry, and that definition will be what I mean when I write the word “nihilism.” Of course, it is important to survey several meanings of the term before the actual examination can begin. I will begin this survey etymologically, then move to an analysis of uses of the term.

Unfortunately, an etymological analysis of the word “nihilism” yields few fruits. The root of the word is “nihil,” Latin for nothing, and of course, an –ism is an –ism. We already knew that nihilism has something to do with nothing; an inquiry into uses of the term will be more practical than an etymological examination because there are no easily overlooked roots to “nihilism” that could provide information.

The first recorded use of the term nihilism is in the novel *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev in 1862, wherein a character uses the term “nihilist” to refer to his hero.<sup>iii</sup> It is in this work that we find the definition of the political nihilist, a person who advocates the destruction of existing political institutions.

It is here in this first use of the word “nihilism” that the problem of identifying what a nihilist is begins. The political nihilist is easily associated with anarchists and skeptics and is not either; although the definitions require a bit of hair-splitting in order to show the difference. The political nihilist advocates the destruction and the negation of government; the anarchist simply desires no government. Likewise, a skeptic can not believe in government but not desire its destruction. Still, the seeds of the confusion about what a nihilist is are plainly visible in this first use of the term, and with so many antigovernment groups making their headquarters in nineteenth century Russia, there is little wonder that the mixing of these three terms could take place.

This distinction between nihilism, skepticism, and anarchism is extremely important because nihilists are frequently stereotyped and categorized by the media as advocates of anarchism and skepticism, and often it is the case that a nihilist will not hold the views inherent in either of these ideologies. This kind of stereotyping is unfair and leads to difficulties and misunderstandings in dialogues between nihilists and people who accept the stereotype and treat the nihilist as a threat due to this misalignment of views. For instance, a nihilist who was debating politics with a liberal after the attack on the World Trade Center towers on September eleventh was

confronted with comments about how a nihilist must favor violence because the liberal confused nihilism and violent anarchism.<sup>iv</sup> Such confusion is frequent, obscures views, and misdirects dialogue. Further, for the nihilist to be forced to explain nihilism in every conversation is taxing and inefficient. In the least, it seems to be poor form for people generally to know what a communist is but not to know what a nihilist is if nihilism is a “prominent trend.” Therefore, a discussion of nihilism is necessary because not only is nihilism referred to in an unclear manner, it is also confused with other views, leading to further complications and inaccuracies.

Political nihilism is interesting for the purposes of this paper because it represents the first way in which “nihilism” is used. However, because it has little to do with knowledge, political nihilism is not essential to the stated focus. There are other types of nihilism that are of greater importance to the matter at hand.

A type of nihilism that will bear some relation to this discussion is cosmic nihilism. Cosmic nihilism comes in two forms. The first form claims that the world is meaningless due to its unintelligibility. The second form claims that the world is meaningless because it does not present “any place or support to the kinds of valuative and existential meanings to which human beings aspire.”<sup>v</sup> I think that neither of these forms is logically sound; they both make leaps of logic that must be supported by additional premises. In the first form, there is a leap from unintelligibility to meaninglessness. There is an unstated premise that something unintelligible must be without meaning, but such a contention is false. For instance, many people think that it is impossible to understand God, but that does not mean that

God is meaningless. Further, this first form allows for truth claims, which a nihilism of epistemology, to be about nothing, should not. For example, I can claim that the glass of water on the table has no meaning, but it is given as true that there is a glass of water on the table. In other words, the questions are not really about what is true at all, but what the truth means if it means anything at all. The second form claims that the world is meaningless and that it follows from this claim that individual judgments are meaningless, which is also not necessarily the case. An easy counterexample would be a comparison between two people from different groups. To a hedonist, sex could be a simple matter of pleasure, while to the Mormon sex involves a deep commitment to one's spouse. This difference indicates that values can have meaning regardless of whether or not there is inherent meaning in the world.

Still, there is value in cosmic nihilism for this inquiry. It shows that there are really three different types of nihilism. The first is political nihilism, a sort of anachronism that is unnecessary here. The second is the claim that the world is unintelligible; at least, humans cannot understand the world. This type of nihilism follows from the division established by Crosby in his treatment of cosmic nihilism, and it seems to make logical sense as a type of nihilism. The third nihilism claims that the world is meaningless, and it also follows from Crosby's work.

Thus, we can establish the principal line of thought for this paper. Either the paper follows the route of meaninglessness, or it follows the route of unintelligibility. The former is not really a truth claim and has little to do with knowledge. It can only

ask how meaninglessness manifests itself, not what is true. This nihilism of meaninglessness is more of a moral nihilism than it is a truth nihilism.

Still, it would seem that these last two forms should be able to be reconciled. After all, they are generally mentioned in the same breath in nihilistic literature. Meaning and intelligibility are the essential concepts that are negated by nihilism.

Indeed, there is a type of nihilism that attempts to bring together these two forms: existential nihilism. It holds that existence is “pointless and absurd,” and that human life is devoid of rational and constructive outlets.<sup>vi</sup> This nihilism is probably the most famous, having been brought to the forefront of thought in the existentialist movement by French intellectuals such as Sartre and Camus after the Second World War.<sup>vii</sup> Here we find the catchphrases of nihilism: the angst, the ennui, and the nausea, among others. More than any other type of nihilism, this one certainly sets a mood of hopelessness and helplessness.

Existential nihilism attempts to capture both the unintelligibility and the meaninglessness of other nihilisms and to combine them in order to give full expression to the absurdity of man. The reasoning is usually something like what follows. The world operates in an irrational fashion and has no inherent meaning. Therefore, it cannot supply humans with meaning, nor can humans create consistent meaning in the world because the world does not allow for consistency. The result is an isolated individual who lacks the capacity to reason a way out of the absurdity of life.<sup>viii</sup>

The argument hinges on accepting the first premise as a whole. That is, one must begin the argument by assuming a lack of both meaning and intelligibility; neither premise can be derived from the other. The existential nihilist, rather than attempting the impossible leap from comprehension to meaning, takes them both as given and provable through empirical analysis.

Although this approach toward nihilism is interesting, I think that these assumptions taken together are superfluous for this paper. Meaning may have a place later in the discussion, but it does not necessarily relate to truth. For now at least, my treatment of nihilism will relate only to truth.

This specification having been made, there is another type of nihilism that needs to be addressed: epistemological nihilism. Crosby asserts that epistemological nihilism can be divided into two forms. The first form claims that truth is relative to individuals or groups. The second holds that there is a problem of “semantical intelligibility” between conceptual schemes.<sup>ix</sup> There are discreet differences between these two forms, and I will approach them separately.

I think that the first form of epistemological nihilism is not nihilism at all, but is simply a form of relativism instead. This issue raises another of the confusions that surround nihilism, and it needs clarification. Relativism is not nihilism.<sup>x</sup> These two theories are distinct from each other just as nihilism and anarchism are distinct from each other, and the reasons are obvious. In Crosby’s first form of epistemological nihilism, there is a truth. It does not matter if that truth is relative to a culture or to one person; there is still a truth within a given context. Just because a truth is relative

to a particular group does not mean that it is nothing. Nihilism can never be relativism.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, the first type of epistemological nihilism that Crosby discerns is not nihilism at all.

The second form of epistemological nihilism, the one that holds that there is a breakdown when relating something between two conceptual frameworks, is also not appropriately considered a form of nihilism. When comparing ideas, it is perhaps true that it is impossible to be completely sure of what the idea that another person expresses actually is.<sup>xii</sup> However, the exact nature of the idea is not the problem; rather, the problem lies in the processes of communication and interpretation. That which is being communicated can still be true regardless of varying interpretations. In fact, all interpretations could be true depending on the philosophical stance of the perceiver.

The point of this discussion is that the two forms of epistemological nihilism mentioned above are not really nihilism at all, and as such, they serve only to confuse the issue. Because the confusion surrounding what nihilism is has been one of the foci of this section of this paper, I have presented them; but they must be disregarded for the remainder of the discussion. They have their own points of interest, but they do not concern nihilism in any capacity other than as red herrings. The crux of this discussion is that nihilism is a distinct philosophical idea that is not anarchism, skepticism, or relativism.

The confusion has been cleared somewhat, but there is still a question that must be asked. What is nihilism? I have labored at length to describe what it is not

and to distinguish nihilism from other systems of thought, but I have given no sure answer to the question. In the remaining pages of this section, I will attempt to create a clear, concise answer to that question.

Nihilism is a philosophy of negation that manifests itself in three forms. The first form is political nihilism, which negates government. The second form is nihilism of meaning, which negates meaning.<sup>xiii</sup> This form is primarily concerned with ethics and morality. The third form is nihilism of intelligibility,<sup>xiv</sup> which negates intelligibility. This form of nihilism is primarily concerned with interpreting reality, and it is the subject of this paper.

I do not suppose that I can treat reality properly in a paper as brief as this one. Instead, I will entertain three aspects of reality: metaphysics, physics, and social interactions.<sup>xv</sup> If these three parts of reality cannot be justified when targeted by nihilistic arguments, then nihilistic arguments will negate them. In other words, the failure of any of these disciplines is a proof of the power of nihilism. I introduce here the term “nihilize” to refer to the destruction of an idea via an appeal to nihilism. For instance, if it were proven that Platonic forms do not and cannot exist, then that idea would be nihilized. Nihilization is similar to an appeal to Ockham’s razor, but it does not require the simplest route. Any path that destroys an idea serves to nihilize the idea, even if it is the long way around. I use this term because it makes for an easy distinction from similar words like “annihilate.” “Nihilize” can be used philosophically without an appeal to other words that may cause confusion due to their use in common speech.

Can metaphysics, physics, and social interactions be nihilized? This question will come to be paramount to the discussion. Nihilism is an active force, if you will, that obliterates a theory. It is the theory that must prove itself correct; otherwise, it is nihilized and removed from consideration.

In order to engage in a nihilistic discourse with metaphysics, physics, and social relations it is necessary to understand how nihilism can be an active force working to undermine existing theories. There are three steps to this process. The first is to understand the development of nihilism. This step is best accomplished through an inquiry into from where nihilism comes. I speculate that the seeds of nihilism can be discovered in modernist thought, and it is there that I will begin the next section of this paper. By tracing the growth of what will become nihilism, I intend to show that there is a long history of nihilization, and that nihilistic approaches to theories became prominent in the modern period of philosophy, although the name “nihilism” had not yet come into currency.

The second step is to relate the development of nihilism to its relationship to other theories of knowledge. This step will occupy the third section of this paper, and will rely mostly on Nietzsche’s assessment of nihilism. I think that the majority of Nietzsche’s later work is an attempt to avoid and defeat nihilism, which he saw as the greatest threat to civilization.<sup>xvi</sup> Thus, nihilism must be considered in relation to Nietzsche’s own theories.

The third and final step is to examine the role that nihilism plays in contemporary philosophy. This step involves both a look at responses to nihilism,

and an evaluation of the viability of nihilism as a worthwhile process. Further, whether or not nihilism is even possible must be taken under consideration. If nihilism is not possible, then nihilism itself must be nihilized.<sup>xvii</sup>

Finally, if nihilism is possible and worthwhile, then its application needs to be examined. It is possible that every theory can be nihilized. If it were the case that nihilism can be used pervasively and effectively, then it would seem that philosophy has reached the end of history, a time wherein no change can occur. In the last section of this paper, I will attempt to understand what it would mean for metaphysics, physics, and the social realm to be negated. In other words, there is room in which to encounter the second form of nihilism, the nihilism of meaning. It could be possible that nihilism cannot exist at the end of history because it would have to negate itself. Without self-negation, there would still be something, namely, nihilism.

However, such speculations are worthless until the groundwork has been established. Therefore, the discussion of the beginning and development of nihilism, the first step, is the next step in this paper. In order to approach this step, it is best to begin with the modern era of thought, the time during which philosophers began to examine their views through negation.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources & Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5. Also, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. It contains a section entitled “Nihilism, American Style.”

<sup>ii</sup> For instance, the film *The Big Lebowski* contains characters that profess to be nihilists, *Fight Club* is about a nihilistic protagonist with a Sartrean sense of nausea, and there are a host of other films that come out each year that reference nihilism, differing widely in quality. As far as books are concerned, almost anything by Albert Camus will suffice for a reader who is interested in the use of nihilistic ideas in literary ventures.

<sup>iii</sup> Crosby, 10. Additionally, I rely on Crosby’s categorization of different types of nihilism for the remainder of section of this paper.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew Pickett, interview by author, 19 December 2001, Townsend, TN.

<sup>v</sup> Crosby, 26. The word “meaningless” means that there is no inherent meaning in the world.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>vii</sup> Of course, the French intellectuals are borrowing heavily from Nietzsche and Kafka, among others.

<sup>viii</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 3-4.

<sup>ix</sup> Crosby, 18.

<sup>x</sup> Often, people who write polemics against nihilism, skepticism, and relativism do not even bother to divide the three and tackle the problems that they raise separately. See Margarita R. Levin, “Upholding Truth: Objectivity versus Solidarity,” in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, ed. Louis P. Pojman New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999.

<sup>xi</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that Nietzsche, one of the first of the philosophers that are placed in the relativist camp, was not a nihilist; in fact, he hated nihilism. His perspectivism is not nihilism because the will to power posits truth, though that truth is relative to the will to power. For instance, the second note in *The Will to Power* claims that in nihilism “[t]he aim is lacking.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 9.

<sup>xii</sup> W. V. Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” in *Metaphysics: An Anthology*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 48.

<sup>xiii</sup> It should be noted that I use the word “meaning” in the sense of intent, not in the sense of intelligibility.

<sup>xiv</sup> Although it may be a grave error on my part, I do not intend “nihilism of intelligibility” to be a catchall phrase that I will use repeatedly as a reference point. When I write “epistemological

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nihilism,” or “nihilism of comprehension,” or any other phrase about nihilism that relates to the definition above, it is that definition that I mean. The other terms should be considered to be synonyms.

<sup>xv</sup> I recognize that reality could be divided into different parts. However, for ease of discussion these three sections will suffice, and they correspond to the subjects that are dealt with by the three major philosophers that I use in this paper.

<sup>xvi</sup> Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>xvii</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 160-61.

## II: The Seeds of Nothing

Modern philosophy covers roughly two hundred years of thought, a period of time that is impossible to cover in a paper as brief as this one is. However, in order to get a taste for how nihilism developed, it is necessary to take a brief look at three of the thinkers of this period: Rene Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant.<sup>i</sup> All three of these figures encountered nihilism through their philosophical speculations, and all three understand the power of negation. It is their interest in negation that is of interest in this paper, and it will be my primary focus. None of these men is a nihilist, but they certainly recognize the uncertainty with which they are dealing. It is these three men more than any others of their time who will encounter the ideas that will result in nihilism.

Descartes' work represents the beginning of modern philosophy. There are several agendas behind his philosophical thought, but the one that figures most prominently in this discussion is Descartes' desire to show that reason is a useful tool with which to discover truths about the world. Because Descartes lived in a time when the established Church and the beginnings of modern science were coming into conflict—for example, the trial of Galileo—it seems sensible for Descartes to want to bring his religion and his ideas into concert. In order to do so, he develops a method meant to show that reason can prove the existence of God. It is with this method that the first seeds of nihilism are sown.

Descartes felt that the only way through which his agenda could be met was by uncovering the faulty foundations of philosophical thought and shoring them up by laying a new foundation. The new foundation that he creates is not of great import here. Rather, it is his method for destroying the old foundation that is intriguing. This method is simple doubt, and its results are devastating.

A brief explication of Descartes' method is worth noting at this point. He begins with a claim he finds intuitive, namely, that "common sense or reason, is naturally equal in all men."<sup>ii</sup> With this simple claim Descartes has established that reason will be his guide, not past efforts in philosophy. His reason tells him that in his quest for truth he should "reject as being absolutely false everything in which [he] could suppose the slightest reason for doubt."<sup>iii</sup> In other words, Descartes is utilizing skepticism in order to gain knowledge about reality. It is curious that Descartes, thinking that common sense is equal in everyone, would reject the work of thinkers of the past. It would seem that, common sense being equal, those earlier philosophers would have done the same thing that Descartes is doing and arrived at the same conclusions that Descartes does. At any rate, through his skepticism Descartes finds that he can doubt everything except himself; thus his famous *cogito ergo sum*. Whether or not Descartes is correct in his reasoning about this point or any other, he has done something extremely important; he has nihilized the past foundations of philosophy. Again, this action seems to be a paradox given Descartes' belief about common sense. Still, with the presumption of common sense and his method, Descartes manages to destroy everything that has come before him. In short, there is

only one thing that is intelligible to Descartes: himself. The rest has been sheared away, at least until he restores it later in a mitigated form.

Clearly, Descartes must have understood nihilism theoretically, though he did not take it seriously and never gets beyond himself. However, he has produced the portal to future events. He has constructed a method that allows him to remove the firmament of philosophy and replace it as reason dictates. It is an idea<sup>iv</sup> that is utilized time and again as philosophers of the modern era begin at the beginning with the empiricists looking to the world and the rationalists looking to reason.

Put simply, Descartes introduces nihilism to philosophy although he does not know it. He thinks that his thought has saved metaphysics by constructing a new foundation for it, but this presumption is not the case. There are other issues in modern philosophy, issues that are difficult to ground and bear more of a relation to metaphysics than Descartes *cogito* does. Further, there are greater skeptics than Descartes. At a certain point, Descartes assumes that causation is the case, and causation is that upon which metaphysics is based. Not all philosophers are willing to grant this assumption.

If anyone could provide an outlook on the issue at hand, David Hume is the most likely candidate. It is a given that the average run of people believe that causation is a real process that happens all the time. It takes a true skeptic to challenge such a strongly entrenched concept, and Hume does an admirable job of presenting an argument that damns causation if his premises are accepted.

Hume begins his work by presenting a few concepts that he expects the reader to accept. First, there are impressions, which are simply sense perceptions. Second, there are ideas, which are based on reflection about impressions and are “less forcible and lively” than impressions.<sup>v</sup> Impressions are just raw sense data that enter the *tabula rasa* of the brain; ideas are thoughts about impressions and can be associated in several ways, one of which is through causal links.

The next terms that Hume defines are relations of ideas and matters of fact. Relations of ideas are intuitively true concepts according to Hume. What he means is that relations of ideas are, by definition, true. Matters of fact are claims about the world that are based in reason. Because a matter of fact is grounded in experience and not all experiences are reflections of reality, Hume stresses that it is always possible that the contradiction of a matter of fact could occur.<sup>vi</sup>

According to Hume, matters of fact are always based in relations of cause and effect. It is now the work of the skeptic to examine the truth of causal links. Because matters of fact are created by reason, and reason is not based on impressions, Hume finds that the hold of causation on truth is a tenuous one. Experience does not posit a cause and an effect; rather, it presents two events, nothing more.<sup>vii</sup> Causation is a product of the mind and is not necessarily a part of the world. The mind witnesses two events and then it conjoins them; after repeated experiences of the same two events with one always preceding the other, the mind posits a necessary connection based on a “belief in uniformity” that the customary conjunction has engendered.<sup>viii</sup> The inference that the mind makes “is not intuitive; neither is it demonstrable.”<sup>ix</sup> In

short, causation is not necessarily true, and the upshot is that the mind's ability to reason seems fairly likely to go off course and create connections where they do not necessarily exist.

With these few propositions, Hume created arguments that have far-reaching implications. Not only does he negate the possibility of an objective science because there can be no certainty of causal links, but he destroys metaphysics as well because he has shown that intuition is faulty. In order to save metaphysics, it must be demonstrated that reason can provide knowledge about the world. This task is easier said than done. If Hume's empiricist reasoning is correct, then there is no way around this issue of causation. All ideas are formed from impressions. Impressions can be true or false, and there is no way by which one can prove that a given impression is true or false. Therefore, both relations of ideas and matters of fact are not testable with any degree of certainty, and the ontological status of what is in the world is up for grabs.<sup>x</sup> It could be that there is no proof of anything as the nihilist would claim, or that there are real things as the realist would claim.

Thus, there are two conclusions that can be drawn from Hume. First, principal impressions cannot be verified. Second, the causal relations among impressions cannot be verified. Therefore, before any ontological claims are made, it must be determined whether or not Hume is correct. If he is, then any type of certainty other than that which concerns relations of ideas is impossible. If he is overlooking something, however, then claims about reality might still be possible.

The issue of the validity of Hume's argument is what Immanuel Kant attempts to discover.

Kant's effort to save knowledge begins with what I stated above; he must find something that Hume overlooked. He, not Hume, is the philosopher who carries the burden of proof. As Kelley L. Ross puts it, "if we produce an idea that we contend is not derived from an original impression..., then it is Hume's business to produce that impression or admit that his theory, his empiricism, is false."<sup>xi</sup> This places the burden of proof back on Hume. He must, if an *a priori* idea is discovered, either prove that the idea is not available *a priori*, or give up his theory that there are no *a priori* impressions. Of course Hume was dead by the time that Kant published his work, so we will take it to be the job of the follower of Hume's empiricism to produce the impression, not Hume himself. First, however, we must determine whether Kant can produce such an idea or not.

Kant wants to create a foundation for metaphysics by restoring objectivity to cause and effect relationships. In order to accomplish this task, he notes that objective necessity is required. By objective necessity, Kant means something that is necessarily true regardless of experience.<sup>xii</sup> A claim of this sort would be true *a priori*, or prior to experience, rather than *a posteriori*, or after experience, because experience has no effect on what is true prior to it. He also distinguishes analytic and synthetic propositions. In an analytic proposition the predicate is contained in the subject. For example, to say that all bodies are extended is simply to state a truism

for a body is, by definition, extended. A synthetic proposition is a claim about reality that says something new. In order for a statement to escape Hume's claims about knowledge, it must be a synthetic *a priori* statement; that is, a statement that says something new about the world and is derived from reason without recourse to experience.

Is such a statement possible? According to Kant, it must be the case that we can have knowledge independent of experience. He claims that mathematics is composed of synthetic *a priori* propositions because it provides new information without an appeal to experience. For example, Kant would claim that  $2 + 2$  is 4 can be known without experience. The Humean skeptic would claim that mathematics is a relation of ideas brought forth through impressions, but to Kant it is an important example. He thinks that he is moving in the right direction.

So far, Kant has produced what is arguably a set of synthetic *a priori* propositions. Next, he intends to prove that causation is such a proposition. First, he claims that the conditions under which we make causal links are analytic and *a priori*. He argues that space and time are conditions in the mind of the perceiver that he imposes on the world in order to apprehend it. Though we might not be able to know what the world is really like (the *noumena*, the thing in itself), we can have knowledge of *phenomena*, the way that things appear to be. And, because all loci of perception experience the world according to space and time, we can be sure, *a priori*, that what we perceive are, in fact, phenomena as they are produced by the active work of our minds.<sup>xiii</sup>

Beyond space and time, Kant posits categories of the understanding that explicitly state how we come to gain knowledge. These categories are present *a priori* in the mind, and causation is built into the structure of an experience according to the categories. Thus, it is due to the categories that the mind can posit cause and effect relationships. Further, the categories allow synthetic *a priori* knowledge because experience must be synthesized by the categories before it can be knowledge.<sup>xiv</sup> Therefore, cause and effect relationships are a product of the mind, but they are universally true according to human perceptions of phenomena.<sup>xv</sup> They are universally true because they are categorically true and the categories are universal; thus, Kant thinks that he has established a solid basis from which to derive metaphysics.

It should be noted that Kant accepted much of Hume's work, which led him to pose the categories in the first place. What Kant does is a reevaluation of Hume's understanding of how experience becomes knowledge, and he is placing the burden of proof back on the Humean empiricist. Is this shift appropriate, and is there another way in which metaphysics can be saved? In this section I will first examine whether there can be another path to metaphysics that Hume overlooks. Second, I will consider Kant's response to Hume, questioning whether it even saves metaphysics, then whether it is correct. Finally, I will attempt to explicate the repercussions of this discussion for metaphysics.

Is there another way to formulate metaphysics, one that Kant neglected to find and Hume failed to secure against? I think that there might be a problem with the entire concept of empiricism as it was used in the eighteenth century, and Kant hints at the possibly false presupposition of which empiricism makes use through his perception of the mind, but he does not state it explicitly.<sup>xvi</sup> The arguments that empiricists give are based on the notion that the mind is a *tabula rasa*. Kant is attempting to prove that the mind has abilities prior to experience. I think that Kant may be right in this aspect of his philosophy, and I will present an empirical argument in his favor. Humans tend to look alike as a species and the internal structures of organs etc. are extremely similar from one individual to another. One could infer hastily that brains would work in the same way in different individuals because other organs do. However, it is not wise to make such an assertion just yet because it is obvious that the products of minds are extremely different, and there is precedent for the blank slate theory of mind. Besides, it is foolish to infer that one mind will work the same as the next on the basis of all livers functioning in the same way. Still, there are certain abilities that seem hard-wired in the mind; for instance, grammatical structures as Noam Chomsky claims. Further, all minds, as Kant claims, do tend to work in similar ways, using reason and intuition. It would seem that there is an innate ability to perform certain functions that we can discover through experience and postulate as existing prior to experience. However, the Humean could pose the argument that because I am working through impressions I cannot be sure that I am correct. That is a valid criticism, and I cannot find a simple way around it.

At any rate, that argument has little to do with causation or metaphysics, the objects of inquiry for this paper. Hume is not right all of the time, but he still may be on the right track regarding his claims on these subjects. I admit that I cannot think of a route to metaphysics that is based in sense perception. The question now is if Kant's argument saves metaphysics as he claims that it does.

If Kant is right, then metaphysics is still possible, albeit in a form that is mitigated by the categories of the understanding and the process of perception. We can never know a thing in itself, but we can know about phenomena, the appearances that the mind creates from *noumena*. Additionally, Kant claims that reason is not bounded by experience. Therefore, it is possible to apply reason to phenomena in order to learn about what the noumenal world might be like. Specifically, we can use analogies to categorize and move beyond the phenomenal world because phenomena suggest *noumena*.<sup>xvii</sup> Kant posits three modes of metaphysical knowledge that exist in the *noumenal* realm: "an immaterial being, a world of understanding, and a supreme being."<sup>xviii</sup> Kant uses his reason thereafter to justify and describe these three modes.

Thus, Kant has been able to establish a basis for metaphysics and posits three metaphysical ideas himself that he thinks are true. However, does Kant's argument really counter Hume? I am not quite convinced that Kant has actually performed the task that he undertook. There is a "chicken or the egg" problem with Kant's argument that makes it seem as though it could rest on experience, not reason. How can we be sure that we are not misguided in placing space and time in the mind?

Could it not be the case that we are experiencing the world under space and time because the world impresses us with these ideas? Because we reason after we have experienced the world and not before, there is no way of determining the answer to this question, I think, despite Kant's arguments to the contrary.

Even if I accept it as a given that the world as it is perceived by the mind is similar for all minds, all that is indicated is that all knowledge of the world takes the form of human constructs. If this is the case, then this knowledge reflects minds, not the world, and Kant knows this fact, thus dividing the world into the phenomenal realm (world as we perceive it) and the *noumenal* realm (the world as it is). If we can only know the phenomenal, then why should we be able to speculate on the *noumenal*, and why should we posit a *noumenal* at all? Kant thinks that the *noumenal* world is required in order for phenomena to be produced. I think that the proof is lacking, despite Kant's arguments to the contrary. There is no sure way of proceeding from phenomenal to *noumenal*; thus, there can be no talk about *noumena* that is certain. In short, the *noumenal* realm must be nihilized.

The problem with reason is that it can only be used *a posteriori* of experience, not *a priori* as Kant claims that it can. I think that Kant's effort to save the phenomena is impressive, but it falls short of reinstating certainty. Plus, even if Kant's reasoning is correct and there are synthetic *a priori* propositions, I do not think that they can tell us anything about the *noumenal* world and the correspondence theory of truth is still flawed. Further, Kant's theory of mind does not necessarily provide objective truth because, although minds may all perceive in the same way,

there can still be disagreement over what it is that is being perceived. Finally, causation is no longer certain once the categories are shown to be speculation that rests on *a posteriori* reasoning. They are matters of fact, not relations of ideas.

In short, causation still lacks philosophical justification. Hume, with his unique brand of academic skepticism, thinks that we can take some comfort in the seeming regularity of most events, but I disagree. If there is no justification for causation, and the logical contradiction of all matters of fact is possible, then there can be no probability in making decisions and no justification for any action other than custom or habit. The best philosophical option could be a Pyrrhonian skepticism that suspends judgment over perceptions. Although it may not be a practical or enviable position, it might be the soundest method for avoiding error. Then again, to suspend judgment is to take a position, and the taking of any position is arbitrary because there is no justification other than that it seems like the best way of doing things. In the end, there can be no certainty after Hume's arguments, not even certainty of uncertainty. Metaphysics, while possible, is but speculation without knowledge, and without causation there can be no metaphysics. I can think of no way in which to rescue metaphysics from uncertainty, and I am not sure that it can be done. What Kant tried to accomplish seems like the most plausible avenue, but it falls short of certainty. In a post-Humean world, there is little option other than to try to undo what he has done or to search for a way out from within his scheme. I have attempted the former with limited success, and, as far as I am concerned, Kant attempted the latter and met with little success in his effort. It does seem that

causation could be the case, but it could also be the case that there are unicorn ranches in Texas. Experience is a poor guide to knowledge as Hume and Kant suspected, but there is no other route to take, whether the mind is a *tabula rasa* or not.

All of the above having been said, must metaphysics be nihilized? There are two ways to evaluate metaphysics. The first is to consider its truth-value; the second is to consider its usefulness. According to the arguments above, the status of metaphysics is questionable. There is no conclusive proof for it; therefore, metaphysics must be nihilized. As far as use-value, I am not really sure. Metaphysics may or may not be true, but it could still be useful, like a noble lie of some sort that may not even be a lie. However, if one can no longer believe in metaphysics, then it no longer has any use other than as an antiquated philosophical idea that amuses the reader, like Stoic physics. It is difficult to accept an idea that has had its truth-value nihilized. Therefore, I propose that metaphysics be entirely abolished.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> There are other philosophers of this time period who could be included in this discussion such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. I have not included them for the sake of brevity and the fairly minor role that they play in the rise of nihilistic thought.

<sup>ii</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 27.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>iv</sup> By idea I mean the destruction of an old foundation of philosophy in order to create a new one.

<sup>v</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *From Plato to Nietzsche*, ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 749.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 753.

<sup>vii</sup> It is certainly true that in some cases the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and I do not wish to express the contrary. However, concerning cause and effect, there is no whole, only parts for Hume.

<sup>viii</sup> G. J. Matthey, "Hume Lecture." (1998), 2. <http://hume.ucdavis.edu/phil023/humelec.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> Hume, *op. cit.*, 759.

<sup>x</sup> Though relations of ideas can be true because they are only about the ideas themselves and not about reality, the way in which they relate to reality could be false.

<sup>xi</sup> Kelley L. Ross "Hume Shifts the Burden of Proof," (2001), 1. <http://www.friesian.com/hume.htm>

<sup>xii</sup> Immanuel Kant *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, in *From Plato to Nietzsche*, ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 826.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 855-856.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 851-2.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 848.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 852.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 883.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 880.

### III: Growth and the Bloom as Experienced by Nietzsche

In the last section I proposed that metaphysics is in serious trouble and lacks sufficient grounding due to the problems that are inherent in causation. The question now, instead of ‘What is there?’ is “What is left?” In order to answer this question, it is necessary to move beyond modern philosophy and into the nineteenth century. The problem with the nineteenth century is that, due to the influence of Kant, most philosophers did not really care about Hume’s contentions; thus, the effects of his theories are not apparent in most cases, the exception being the rise of Anglo-American philosophy and pragmatism.<sup>1</sup> On the continent of Europe, however, there was a general movement in the direction that Kant indicated with his “victory” over Hume. It is not until Friedrich Nietzsche that nihilism again comes to the forefront of thought, and it is with his treatment of the subject that I will primarily be concerned for this section of this paper.

Still, there is another point to make about the moderns that allows a segue into the real power of nihilism. There is a simple analogy that can be drawn between nihilism and gardening. With Descartes, we can see the seeds of nihilism being planted. Hume furthers the issue with his skepticism, and the first buds on the plant begin to grow. The garden is then discarded, let us say, for about one hundred years, and history has passed as it did during those years, with the French Revolution, Napoleon, Imperialism, and, most importantly, the steady rise of science and its parallel, technology. Next, Nietzsche comes along and, having done some gardening in philology and social theory, finds this plant, untouched for one hundred years, that

instead of withering, has grown due to the events that have occurred, taking in civil unrest and radicalism as if it were water. This plant took root and thrived without anyone knowing, or at least, without anyone noticing, and now it is ready to reproduce, to spread its spores and replicate. What is Nietzsche to do?

What Nietzsche does is study this plant and attempt to destroy it by ripping out the roots and burning it. Next, he attempts to grow a new plant in its place based on what he calls “the will to power” and the “revaluation of all values,” which he thinks are leftover from the original plant. I have stated before that Nietzsche is not a nihilist and I hold to that claim. Rather, he is a scientist of sorts who has discovered a new phenomenon that no one else has noticed. He studies it, rejects it, and attempts to create a new theory that will not be subject to defeat by this idea that he has discovered. His hope is that, by learning the strengths and weaknesses of the nihilism plant, he can effectively uncover a species that will be immune to nihilism and overcome it.

It is because he studied nihilism so thoroughly that Nietzsche is believed to be a nihilist; instead, he was more like Kant. Kant discovered Hume’s work and rejected it while taking note of what he thought were its strong points. Nietzsche does the same thing with nihilism. He discovers it, rejects it, and tries to develop a theory that will account for it while steering away from its conclusions. Therein lies the root of the perpetual confusion that surrounds Nietzsche: he was so close to the source of his philosophy that he became fused with it in the eyes of many critics.

My treatment of Nietzsche will have three phases. The first phase is his discovery of nihilism. The second is his rejection of it. The third is his attempt to find a suitable option (obviously, this option rejects previous options). In conclusion, I will discuss whether or not his option is successful and what we can learn from Nietzsche.

I mentioned that the flower of nihilism was already in full bloom when Nietzsche discovered it. A description of this bloom is appropriate so that we can understand exactly what it was that Nietzsche saw. First, there is the presence of permeating skepticism due to Hume's influence on the cultivation of the species. Nihilism is not skepticism; however, skepticism can lead to nihilism, and in the case at hand skepticism was essential to the development of nihilism. Second, there is another aspect of Hume's work that cannot be ignored. In his *Enquiry*, Hume notes that all reasoning falls prey to an infinite regress. Induction requires a basis in deduction, which in turn requires a basis in induction and so forth, leading to an infinite regress.<sup>ii</sup> Now, philosophers hate infinite regresses because they are unsolvable, another "chicken and the egg" problem. Further, in the case of a regress there is no foundation *per se* and it is impossible to build anything without a foundation.<sup>iii</sup> Philosophers have a lot of trouble with this sort of problem: for instance, Descartes' journey to himself in order to begin his philosophical thought. Third, because modern skepticism was so pervasive and effective, because Hume undermined so much work with his devastating critique of philosophy, there was no

lack of fertilizer for this young budding seed of nihilism. Given time, ideas die, become dormant, or grow. Nihilism (though not yet known to be planted or even named) had not been stillborn, which is the only way that it could have died in this scenario because its basis had been conceived and the process of its gestation had begun through the work of modern philosophers. There was no immediate undermining that would have aborted nihilism and, because it went unnoticed, nihilism could not have been killed. Therefore, nihilism did not die. It did not go dormant because, though not cared for, the processes that would contribute to it were in place. These processes allowed nihilism to grow and flourish.

The processes to which I am chiefly referring are the rise of science and the fall of the enlightenment. The rise of science is important because it led to secular, bourgeois culture, one of the principal elements of the rise of nihilism.<sup>iv</sup> Further, science had the effect of crystallizing a method of inquiry that allows for uncertainty and misunderstanding.<sup>v</sup> There is a simple way of understanding science in terms of nihilism: science breeds nihilism. This result is because the more pervasive science becomes, the more uncertainty there is. In other words, for every allegation of truth that science makes, there is a possible contradiction that had not been realized before. Every new claim to knowledge includes a new possibility of negation. For Nietzsche, the most important truth allegation that science made, both as a possible explanation and a damning piece of evidence, was evolution. Randomness is nature made possible the nihilism that Nietzsche found. Thus, as Hume was a catalyst for Kant, so Darwin was a catalyst for Nietzsche.<sup>vi</sup>

The fall of the enlightenment offered further nourishment for the growth of nihilism. The inability of science to discover the clockwork, deistic realm that was imagined by intellectuals of the eighteenth century combined with the disillusionment caused by the French Revolution advanced the paradigm shift from the primacy of reason to that of emotion. With romanticism, we can see the stress of human thought moving away from reason to the more passionate aspects of humanity. Reason alone had proven to be a failure; thus, Nietzsche's emphasis on elements of the psyche that are not under the jurisdiction of reason.<sup>vii</sup> This failure of reason also aids nihilism because nihilism tends to reject the rational. Thus, paradoxically, the fall of reason is a proof of nihilism, although reason was also a cause of nihilism.

It is under these conditions that Nietzsche found nihilism, its fruits ripe on the branch. The question of how he came to discover nihilism is not that interesting in light of the discussion above. He simply caught wind of it in the ideas of his time and followed them to their conclusion at the trunk of the nihilism tree. It is what he discovered there that is of more interest.

Nietzsche spent a lot of time studying nihilism and learning to understand it and what it could mean. Luckily, he was a rather scholarly man and he has given us a few descriptions in his books and posthumously published notes. I will confine myself to discussing the parts of his work that deal only with nihilism of intelligibility as much as I can; he does not make the careful distinctions that I have made earlier. His chief interest is in what nihilism means to "values," but he does not specify the

values to which he is referring. Usually, he seems to think that all other nihilisms follow from moral nihilism.

Unfortunately, most of the notes that were collected in *The Will to Power* are extremely vague. They are the kind of notes that one might expect from a man who is encountering a new species for the first time, a species that bears a resemblance to others that he has seen (such as skepticism), but is obviously unique. In note twelve, however, there are some conclusions that are worth mentioning. Nietzsche begins by describing what we would now call existential angst and ennui. He is describing, as one would expect from a psychologist, the psychological state that nihilism produces, and I think that it is safe to say that Nietzsche himself had had a first person experience of these dreadful effects, the feeling of “insecurity,” the realization that one’s work has been “in vain,” the feeling of an inability to correct the troubles of the soul. Clearly, if I am right and Nietzsche is feeling such effects from his encounter with nihilism, then it seems fairly reasonable to assume that this infection *per se* would be manifest in his search for a cure as well, just as dead viruses are used in a flu vaccine. This analogy proves apt for Nietzsche’s treatment of this subject.

Nietzsche goes on in fragment twelve to postulate three forms of nihilism as a psychological state. These psychological states are, in fact, reflections on the world as someone who has been infected by nihilism perceives it. The first state claims that there is no inherent meaning in the world and no inherent teleology. As Nietzsche puts it, “becoming has no goal.”<sup>viii</sup> This reflection is the direct outcome of evolution, which claims that there is no inherent goal in the development of life. According to

Nietzsche, this claim translates nicely into becoming in terms of human progress and history. Though the logic behind the argument may not be adequate, the conclusion is sound if one is to take an extended glance at the course of human history.

The second form of nihilism is the recognition that “underneath becoming there is no grand unity.”<sup>ix</sup> What Nietzsche is attacking here is Kant’s concept of *noumena*.<sup>x</sup> However, this claim applies to Locke’s substratum and many other philosophical speculations that lack a firm grounding, and it follows from Hume’s arguments against causation. Hume, as I have claimed above, shows that belief in an underlying unity of experience is impossible without the incorporation of causation. As far as Nietzsche goes, his feelings on causality are wedded to his feelings about teleology, and in this claim I follow Walter Kaufmann’s treatment of the subject in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Kaufmann points out three notes in *The Will to Power* that make great headway in this discussion.<sup>xi</sup> The first is note 627, wherein Nietzsche argues that causality is posited because of “the inconceivability of an event divorced from an intent.”<sup>xii</sup> This note affirms my claim concerning Nietzsche’s belief in the problem of wedding causality and teleology. The second useful note is 550, in which Nietzsche writes “Hume was right; habit... makes us expect that a certain often-observed occurrence will follow another: nothing more!”<sup>xiii</sup> Finally, in note 551, he even claims that “[t]here is no such thing as a sense of causality as Kant thinks.”<sup>xiv</sup> In other words, Nietzsche aligned himself to some extent with Hume’s account of causation and understood that it means that there is no underlying unity of things.

The third form of nihilism that Nietzsche proposes is a result of the first two. Without meaning or unity, the world falls apart. Nietzsche puts it eloquently (as he usually does) by writing that this third form of nihilism “includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world.”<sup>xv</sup> The Italics on the word “true” are Nietzsche’s, and they are extremely important. They point to a passage in a published work of his that explicates the process of nihilism nicely.

In *Twilight of the Idols* there is a strange little passage entitled “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable.” To explain this passage would require another paper of this size, so I will only explain those items that are appropriate for this discussion. Nietzsche begins by postulating the “true world” and aligning it with Plato, thus claiming that this true world is representative of idealism and metaphysics in general. He takes this true world through a brief history of philosophy from Plato to himself, and the idea becomes less and less “real,” so to speak, becoming first “unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable” (Kantian, he notes at this point), then “unknown” and hence lacking the ability to obligate people. Finally, the “true world” has become useless. His answer? “The ‘true’ world—an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating—an idea which has become useless and superfluous—consequently, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!” In other words, Nietzsche is calling for the nihilization of idealism in any form, just as I have nihilized metaphysics. However, there is still a world left, is there not? Nietzsche refers to the physical world as the “apparent” world. However, according to him, with the “true” world we also must abolish the “apparent” one.<sup>xvi</sup>

How can the nihilization of the “true” world vanquish the “apparent” one as well? First of all, a bit of clarification is necessary. By “apparent” I interpret Nietzsche to mean the physical world as we commonly understand it. To make things simpler, I will substitute “metaphysical” for “true” and “physical” for “apparent.” The conclusion here is perhaps obvious, but it needs to be stated. Nietzsche recognized that without causation, a metaphysical concept, the physical world is simply an illusion. The mind posits relationships that do not exist, making the physical world untenable and not as we perceive it. The result is that there can be no understanding of a physical world. If the physical world is unknowable and unattainable, then it suffers from the same fate as the metaphysical world and must be abolished. The physical world must be nihilized.

Nietzsche has often been seen as a prophet of sorts, but so far what he has accomplished is simply a reinterpretation of the past. He is more important thus far as a historian who has looked at the past and understood that the project of modernity has resulted in nihilism. Because nihilism has developed through the course of history, it can be considered a historical process. Nietzsche rejects nihilism, not as a process, but as the final stage of human development. The next task, then, is to put a positive spin on nihilism. Nihilism has shown that human thought has been incorrect so far. Through the process of nihilization, nihilism clears the air, so to speak, liberating humans from the trappings of the past.<sup>xvii</sup>

Thus, Nietzsche's rejection of nihilism is due to his desire to posit something else, not to prove nihilism itself incorrect. However, what is there that can be posited when all of human thought has already been proven incorrect? It is this question that Nietzsche strives to answer.

There are several ideas that make up the foundation of what Nietzsche thinks can survive the arguments of nihilism. When nihilism has done its work of abolishing the metaphysical and physical worlds, there is still something left: power. Hence, power becomes what all values must be based upon, and in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, this seems to be what Nietzsche is saying.<sup>xviii</sup> If Nietzsche is correct and power is not nihilized, then power is the only thing that can come after a nihilist revolution, unless there is something else that has been left over and not obliterated.

Power is a function of the will, and the will to power allows for the "revaluation of all values." This step makes sense because if all values have been nihilized, then they must be revaluated, or new values must be created in order to have values. Nietzsche thinks that values must exist due to the presence of power. What the revaluation really does is develop a new means by which beings can be defined. This new value *is* the will to power, what Heidegger calls "accruing of power by power for its own overpowering."<sup>xix</sup> Heidegger means that power is the most fundamental of traits, in that values cannot be posited without power. Therefore, power creates, subsumes, and gains energy from other powers.

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I do not think that there is anything else left over after complete nihilization, including Nietzsche's power. As soon as power becomes the focus of Nietzsche's philosophy, it becomes a metaphysical concept and is susceptible to Hume's critique of causation. If power exists without causation, then it is worthless. Thus, power itself must be nihilized. There can be nothing left over after complete nihilization. In effect, nihilism is a philosophy of negation, and it requires things to be nihilized in order to be useful itself. After nihilism has done its work, it negates itself by force of having nothing left to negate. However, there will be more on this subject later in this paper. For now what is of primary importance is that Nietzsche recognized the bloom of nihilism and actually helped to propagate the species, applying it to the physical world as well as to the metaphysical world. He thought that power was overlooked by nihilism, but he was wrong: there is nothing left behind. Still, there are aspects of contemporary society that relate to the discussion of nihilism, and it is to those features that I will turn in the next section through the work of Jean Baudrillard.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Indeed, the beginnings of the pragmatic movement can be seen as a response to Hume, especially Peirce's first formulation of pragmatism as a group of experts who come to agreement on truth. Because skepticism obscures what science can do, such a consensus is necessary, and lives on in practice today. See Charles Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 105-16.

<sup>ii</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, 758-9.

<sup>iii</sup> There are many epistemologists who would argue against the claim that a foundation is necessary, but I will consider myself primarily concerned with truth correspondence theorists and leave coherentists and pragmatists alone because the discussion would become too unwieldy for this paper and lead to an unnecessary digression.

<sup>iv</sup> I will have more to say about bourgeois culture in the fourth section of this paper.

<sup>v</sup> Crosby, *Specter*, 186.

<sup>vi</sup> Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 66.

<sup>vii</sup> Hume also notes that reason is not the supreme power in human life in his claim that reason is the "slave to the passions." See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 415.

<sup>viii</sup> Nietzsche, *Will*, 13.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> In fact, Nietzsche specifically calls out the thing in itself in note three wherein he argues that there is no right to posit such a thing. See *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>xi</sup> Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, 230-2.

<sup>xii</sup> Nietzsche, *op. cit.*, 335. This note is specifically directed against Spinoza.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 295. Indeed, Nietzsche often treats Hume as the only "English psychologist" that he can stand.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>xvi</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1954), 485-6.

<sup>xvii</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume Four*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982), 5.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), 31-3. The entire first essay is pertinent to this note, but these pages suffice for a simple explanation.

<sup>xix</sup> Heidegger, *op. cit.*, 6-7.

#### IV: Propagation of the Species: Baudrillard

Although nihilism negates the metaphysical and physical worlds, things do still seem to exist. I make this claim because, although truth has been negated, there is still perceivable stuff, at least as far as I can tell. In order for nihilism to fully succeed, it must become social, creating a world of negation and a culture of negation as well; that is, a culture that negates itself. In order to understand this seemingly contradictory alignment of ideas, it is necessary to refer to the works of Jean Baudrillard, the foremost theorizer of nihilism in contemporary philosophy.

Baudrillard's philosophy is difficult to grasp because in many ways he is speaking a language that is different from those that have preceded him. He works mainly through analogy and metaphor in order to describe the social realm, rather than providing definitions and logical proofs. Thus, his writing is somewhat cryptic and obscure. The difficulty in comprehending Baudrillard's works and his vague arguments (when there are arguments at all) lead many philosophers to think of Baudrillard's writings as "bad philosophy," but I think that they fail to recognize that his manner of conducting philosophy is simply different, and in fact, may be better. Baudrillard does not fall into the trappings of reason or logic chopping; rather, his fault is that he sees the forest and usually does not bother to examine the trees. It is the job of the philosopher who examines Baudrillard's work to critically deconstruct his deconstruction. He is already off on a new topic before he can be caught up in the mania of analyzing the composition of the forest he has introduced to his audience.

However, the topic to which Baudrillard returns time and again is nihilism. Whatever he is writing about at any given time, nihilism is in the back of his mind: it is his end and his beginning. To better understand Baudrillard's ideas concerning nihilism and the social, it will be helpful to return to the metaphor that I have been developing throughout this paper.

When the metaphor was last mentioned, we had Nietzsche encouraging the growth of nihilism in an effort to get rid of the undesirable residue of former visions of philosophy. Nihilism was cultivated and spread from the metaphysical world to the physical one because Nietzsche made use of it in such a manner, perhaps viewing nihilism as a panacea for the philosophical ills of his time. With Baudrillard, we encounter the effects of the movement of nihilism and its culmination in the realm of the social where nihilism is spread via the ecstasy of the object.

However, to speak of the ecstasy of the object is to begin in the middle of the process. First, it is important to outline some of the terms that Baudrillard uses in order to understand exactly what it is that he is talking about (if there ever is an "exactly" with him). After this outline, I will investigate the forms of nihilism that Baudrillard notes and compare them with Nietzsche's forms. After that analysis, I will explicate what Baudrillard thinks a nihilist must be like.

Much of Baudrillard's philosophy has evolved out of the dialectic between subject and object. For him, at least at this stage of history, the object has defeated the subject and controls it. This event has occurred on the level of social interactions,

a strange occurrence considering that we, in our role as subjects, find it difficult for objects to be social. However, due to the proliferation of objects in Western society that control the whims of subjects, it is not difficult to understand how the subject is being controlled: the social realm has been overcome by spectacle. In fact, “objects and events in contemporary society are continually surpassing themselves, growing and expanding in power.”<sup>i</sup> The ecstasy of the object is the increase of power and number of the object.

Another important concept for Baudrillard is hyperreality. Hyperreality is the term that Baudrillard uses to characterize the world as it is; that is, the world as controlled by objects. The influences of technology and the explosion of communications have created a world where spectacle has become real in place of life as it is lived by the subject. Thus, reality itself has become outdated and is no longer a useful term for describing life. Rather, it is the realm of hyperreality in which social interactions take place.<sup>ii</sup>

The realm of hyperreality is elucidated by two concepts: simulacra and simulation. A simulacrum is a copy of an original that does not exist. The paradigmatic example of the height of simulacra is Disney World.<sup>iii</sup> Disney World is a setting in which the real world has become a play. The employees are “cast members,” it contains sets such as Frontier Land and Tomorrow Land, and the foliage is shaped into objects to exacting degrees.

Simulation is process of mimicking something real.<sup>iv</sup> Disney World is also a good example of simulation, especially EPCOT Center, wherein the world is

simulated in the form of an edutainment theme park. In fact, during the summer actual inhabitants of the countries that compose the world showcase are hired and brought to America in order to make the simulation of their native lands more realistic. The effect is that the simulation becomes hyperreal in that the object, the spectacle, in this case the country that is being simulated, controls the movement of the social, in this case the people who are attending the theme park, who are, in effect, willing participants in the hyperreal; they have given over control to the object due to their participation in its world.<sup>v</sup> Further, the simulacra go beyond the realm of the real in that they create a new social environment through control of the subject. This going beyond the real is the reason why Baudrillard has adopted the term “hyperreality,” and the act of the simulacra moving beyond the real is what he calls “the precession of simulacra.”<sup>vi</sup>

These points of explication made, we can return to my analogy. Due to the ecstasy of the object and the subject’s having been entranced by the object, I will show that nihilism has grown, propagated, and spread throughout the realm of social interactions. In fact, it has overtaken the social and controls it, the idea having overtaken its creators. Baudrillard has much to say on this subject, and to delay the presentation of his ideas in order to make them more clear is a waste of paper at this point. These definitions should hopefully serve as a suitable introduction to the language that Baudrillard uses and his general philosophical interests.

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Baudrillard's treatment of nihilism has two factors that allow for an easy comparison with Nietzsche's treatment of nihilism. Indeed, in many ways Baudrillard can be read as a successor to Nietzsche. I think that the most obvious way to read Baudrillard in this manner can be approached through my analogy that compares nihilism to the life cycle of a successful plant species. Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard can be seen as a scientist who is examining a new species of plant. However, the plant is in a different stage of its life span from where it was for Nietzsche, so Baudrillard's treatment, while similar to Nietzsche's, will be different enough to shed new light on the subject.

The first factor that Baudrillard's treatment shares with Nietzsche's is that both philosophers view nihilism in terms of a historical process. However, because of the different time periods of the two philosophers, their understandings of the historical process are different. Nietzsche's process is the history of modern philosophy. Baudrillard's process is the history of the social in the postmodern world. In this aspect again, it is easy to view Baudrillard as Nietzsche's successor because Baudrillard picks up the path of nihilism at approximately the same time that Nietzsche died. Notice, too, that there is a shift in emphasis from the philosophical to the social. Finally, there is a shift from the modern to the postmodern. Thus, although both philosophers are interested in nihilism as a historical process, their experiences of nihilism are indicative of different contexts.

The fact that these philosophers are discussing different contexts *from* different contexts would lead one to think that their ideas about nihilism would vary

greatly, but they do not. Once again, they are dealing with the same species of nihilism here, just in different forms. While the factor of historical process is an interesting confluence of ideas, the real point of interest here is not the first factor, but the second. The second factor that indicates a similarity between Nietzsche and Baudrillard's treatments of nihilism is that both treatments share roughly the same shape. Baudrillard offers three forms of nihilism that are similar to Nietzsche's, though revised and in a different order.<sup>vii</sup> This new order represents adjustments that are necessary in order to recognize the movement of nihilism from the metaphysical and the physical to the social.

Before moving to the forms of nihilism in the social, however, it is necessary to posit a relationship between the ecstasy of the object and nihilism. This relationship can be developed fairly quickly due to the groundwork that I have created by defining Baudrillard's terms. The triumph of the object results in the transposition of hyperreality over reality. That is to say, reality as it was for the subject is adapted to fit the needs of the object; thus, the transformation of reality into hyperreality. Hyperreality resembles reality because it is transposed on top of reality. However, through the process of simulation and the precession of simulacra, hyperreality is more than simply reality with a new look; it is, rather, an entirely new set of conditions that the subject cannot know because they belong to the object. Hence, there is a lack of intelligibility for the subject because the object has nihilized intelligibility in the realm of the subject. In fact, there is no longer a realm of the

subject; rather, the subject now lives in the realm of the object. Thus, nihilism has entered the social, and through the triumph of the object the subject has lost its world.

Having established the permeation of the social with nihilism, Baudrillard's three forms of nihilism can be discussed. The first form concerns the enlightenment and romanticism. Baudrillard calls this type the aesthetic form of nihilism.<sup>viii</sup> I have discussed the enlightenment earlier in this paper. Romanticism, however, is also a necessary component of aesthetic nihilism, and I have not spent much effort on this subject. As I remarked earlier, there was a movement away from reason and toward the less rational elements of the mind during the romantic period. One characteristic of thought that has been consistently considered irrational is aesthetics because it has always proven difficult to determine any objective set of criteria by which to judge the beauty of something. Aesthetic nihilism, then, is a result of concentrating on appearances. Indeed, Baudrillard states that the enlightenment and romanticism "correspond to the destruction of appearances."<sup>ix</sup> What he means is that the enlightenment, which emphasized science in order to explain appearances, and romanticism, which indulged in artistic movements that resulted in the destruction of the old aristocratic/bourgeois representation of objects,<sup>x</sup> served to remove the intelligibility of the appearance because they treated appearances in a new manner. Thus, conventional appearance was nihilized.

Interestingly, Nietzsche's will to power is often represented as aesthetic nihilism. Because his will to power is based on intense experience such as that which is caused by art, art can be seen as a value that supercedes other values: hence,

aesthetic nihilism.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, Nietzsche's work can be seen as a culmination of the first of Baudrillard's forms of nihilism.

Further, Baudrillard's first form of nihilism roughly corresponds to Nietzsche's second form of nihilism. Nietzsche's second form posited that there is no "grand unity" or organization of systems. Another way of putting this idea is to claim that appearances are not organized. Just as the destruction of causality leads to the undermining of unity, so the destruction of causality undermines the unity of appearance. In other words, this form of nihilism sets up the nihilization of the physical world that is Nietzsche's third form of nihilism.

Finally, Baudrillard uses dandyism as a representation of nihilism of appearance, and I find the example apt. The dandy's appearance is out of place given his position in society, thus destroying the common association between social status and dress. His aesthetic is different from his environment, thus pointing out that appearances lack unity.

Baudrillard's second form of nihilism is the metaphysical one. It is "the destruction of the order of meaning." Baudrillard also calls this movement terrorism, and he claims that it is represented by the Surrealist and Dada movements, as well as by political nihilism.<sup>xii</sup>

Baudrillard does not mean the word "meaning" here in a moral sense. Rather, his intended use of "meaning" is in terms of the loss of, first, value in the sense of intelligibility, which leads to, second, the impossibility of something having value to a subject. It is important to note this dual use of the word "meaning" here because it

can lead to immense confusion. There is a tremendous difference between something being comprehensible and something not possessing a meaning in the eyes of a subject.

This second form of nihilism reflects the nihilization of the metaphysical because it removes the possibility of a goal. Considering this analysis, the “destruction of the order of meaning” corresponds to Nietzsche’s first form of nihilism, wherein “becoming has no goal.”

Baudrillard’s alteration to the positions of Nietzsche’s forms of nihilism reflects the fact that, in terms of the history of the social realm, events have occurred in this manner. Specifically, in terms of social movements, the destruction of the physical took place before the destruction of the metaphysical. It follows from Baudrillard’s interpretation that Surrealism, Dada, and political nihilism are manifestations of this second form. First of all, these movements took place after romanticism. Second, all of these movements explicate the end of metaphysics. Surrealism examines this fact by attempting a new style of art that does not involve older ideas of representation. Without the old metaphysics, the old art does not make sense. Dada, of course, is a blatant cry that there is no meaning in the world. And political nihilism is terrorism, an act that displays the fact that there is no metaphysics. If there were, the political nihilist would not need to inspire terror because he would be couched in an intelligible order. Instead, he argues that “becoming has no goal.”

These first two forms of nihilism are interesting in themselves, but according to Baudrillard they “no longer concern us.” The third form of nihilism that Baudrillard posits, however, is extremely important. It is the nihilism that destroys the social. Baudrillard calls it the “nihilism of transparency,” a name that is both vague and apt.<sup>xiii</sup>

When Baudrillard writes about transparency, he is concerned with the fixation of the subject on the object. In order to properly make sense of transparency, it is necessary to describe Baudrillard’s principal background theory in more detail. One of the staples of Baudrillard’s social theory is that it inverts one of the main premises of Marxism. Instead of the primary focus being the relations of production, Baudrillard claims that the matter of most importance is the consumption of products. The product, of course, is the object, which allows Baudrillard to make claims about the ecstasy of the object. The object has become so powerful, so permeating that it controls the subject in all facets of the subject’s existence. The subject is “fascinated” with the object and no longer has any power. All that the subject does is add power to the object due to its fixation on the object. Because the object controls the subject, the subject is transparent because it has no power. When one looks at the subject, one sees through it to the object, like looking at a puppet and seeing the hand of the person who controls it.<sup>xiv</sup>

Further, with the subjugation of the subject by the object to the point of the subject being transparent, the subject has been nihilized. The subject, in effect, no longer exists, and if it does, it has no power. Moreover, with the end of the subject,

the social ends. There is no social for the object, or if there is, it is a social that is beyond the understanding of the subject.

To summarize this section, a comparison between Nietzsche's forms of nihilism and Baudrillard's is appropriate. There are several features that relate their three forms. The first is simply formal: Nietzsche uses his first two forms in order to derive the third form, as does Baudrillard. The rest of the relations are a bit more complicated. Nietzsche's first form indicates that there is no inherent goal in becoming. His second form was that there is no grand unity of appearances. From these two forms he derived the third, namely, the nihilization of physics. Baudrillard somewhat collapses the first two forms in order to arrive at metaphysical nihilism in his second form. Baudrillard's first form is the nihilization of the physical, which is Nietzsche's third form. However, Baudrillard's aesthetic form of nihilism is similar to Nietzsche's reaction to nihilism, and it corresponds to Nietzsche's second form as I mentioned earlier. Additionally, Baudrillard's first form of nihilism relies on the destruction of causality just as Nietzsche's first form does. Also, Baudrillard's second form of nihilism relates to Nietzsche's first in that both dissolve meaning. Thus, although the comparison bears some one-to-one correspondence, the relationships between Nietzsche's three forms and Baudrillard's three forms is intricate and impressive.

Baudrillard has more to say about nihilism, unlike Nietzsche, who was content to move on to what is beyond nihilism. Baudrillard wants to explicate a method of

travelling beyond nihilism as well. However, before attempting to insert an escape clause, Baudrillard describes nihilism in the social realm in more detail. Particularly, he describes the necessary characteristics of a nihilist. The first characteristic of a nihilist is to be “obsessed by the mode of disappearance, and no longer by the mode of production.”<sup>xv</sup> This statement reaffirms Baudrillard’s belief that consumption is the primary focus of the social, with consumption leading to the triumph of the object and serving as an obsession with disappearance. The second characteristic of the nihilist is that she consciously works to better the position of the object. The final position of the object is what Baudrillard calls the “hegemony of the system,” meaning that the object’s influence has congealed and that all social interactions revolve around the object.<sup>xvi</sup>

However, Baudrillard argues that nihilism is now impossible. Because the object has already nihilized the subject, there is nothing that the subject can do. The subject can no longer be a nihilist, in other words, because the subject has already been nihilized. The world is now the hyperreality of the object, and it is unintelligible and without meaning.<sup>xvii</sup>

This condition leads to an interesting question. If the object has won and the subject has lost, does that mean that we have reached the end of history? Baudrillard does not think so. In fact, he argues against the possibility of an end of history. In the next section, I will analyze what the end of history is and why Baudrillard thinks that we have not reached it. I will conclude with a critique of Baudrillard’s view and then offer some possible alternatives to nihilism.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas Kellner, "Introduction: Jean Baudrillard and the Fin-de-Millennium," in *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1994), 15.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Disneyworld Company," trans. Francois Debrix. <http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/disneyworld.html> Originally published March 4, 1996 in *Liberation*.

<sup>iv</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 1.

<sup>v</sup> Perhaps the most interesting attraction of EPCOT is Spaceship Earth, the enormous golf ball-like monolith. Inside of it, the history of communication is chronicled, including an exhibit of a possible future (the object moving beyond the real). Outside, it is a testament to the triumph of the object, an awkward appearance that indicates man's construction of that which surpasses him. Further, as Spaceship Earth represents the "real" earth, there is an obvious analogy that can be drawn between it and the ecstasy of the object over the globe.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> The fact that the three forms are the same indicates a close connection between culture and thought, a topic that is very important, but often overlooked. Unfortunately, I cannot treat that idea here because of lack of space.

<sup>viii</sup> Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, 159-60.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>x</sup> There is a direct correlation between the representation of objects in the arts and the dominance of the aristocracy. When the bourgeois class overcame the aristocracy, they retained the obsession with objects, but the depiction of possessions failed to amuse artists, who were ready to move on to more intellectual fare. Another interesting corollary is that when the aristocracy was overthrown, their palaces became art museums, and the art in the museums was the old art of the aristocracy, continuing the obsession with possessions, the still life. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in *Signs*, ed. John Wild, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 59-64.

<sup>xi</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1954.

<sup>xii</sup> Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, 159-60.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>xiv</sup> There is a sense of irony in seeing the hand of the puppet master. Likewise, there is irony in seeing through the subject while the subject cannot recognize its state.

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., 163-4.

## V: Portal to the End of History

The end of history seems like a contradiction in terms. History, so long as linear time exists, cannot end. However, there are ways of looking at history other than as events passing through time. History is log of change, be it progressive or otherwise. If there is no longer change, then history no longer exists because there is nothing to report. It is this view of history that allows history to end.

Hegel developed the idea of the end of history. His philosophy of history was based on dialectical thinking, which he used as a process for resolving differences. A thesis is presented. It has an antithesis, its opposite. The two are combined in a synthesis, and this synthesis becomes a new thesis, thus allowing the dialectic to begin again. When a contradicting antithesis can no longer be posited, then history has ended.<sup>i</sup>

For Hegel, the end of history would occur when the principles of liberty and equality were implemented.<sup>ii</sup> Hegel's concept has been a popular and influential one, and at the end of the second millennium C. E. it seems that in the most developed countries of the world Hegel may have been right. Democracy and capitalism have flourished and beaten all of the competition thus far. These countries, it appears, may be nearing the end of history politically and economically.

I agree that the West has nearly met this possibility, but in a different aspect than those that interested Hegel. In the most developed areas of the most developed countries, it is not liberty that has succeeded (though it has), but nihilism. The end of history is not the universal rights of man, but the right of man to make use of these

rights. In making use of these rights, humans are finding out that there is nothing left but nihilism.

In this section of this paper I will argue that the end of history is nihilism and that nihilism has beaten its competition just as democracy and free market enterprise have beaten their rivals. Then, I will discuss Baudrillard's belief that history cannot end and criticize it. Finally, I will engage in speculation concerning what it means for the end of history to be nihilism.

I have already argued that nihilism has flourished and spread, destroying metaphysics, physics, and the social. If Baudrillard is correct and the object has won the dialectic, then there are two possibilities: either the subject tips the balances back to its favor, or the object continues to dominate the subject forever. I find the former option dim, while the latter, from the perspective of contemporary society, seems extremely likely.

However, because these options are available for discussion I will posit arguments against them, beginning with the possibility that the subject can regain prominence in the dialectic. In order for the subject to regain the upper hand, it must find a manner through which it can subjugate the object. How could this activity take place? There are two possibilities. First, the object could be destroyed, perhaps via terrorism or elimination by God, or something like that. Terrorism seems more possible now than it did a few months ago, so I will treat it seriously. If terrorism were to succeed in destroying the object, it really does not matter. People will be

fascinated by the absence of the object. Then, they will make a new object. We have a ready example with the destruction of the world trade center towers. For days we watched CNN show us footage of the absence of the towers. Now, we are still captivated by the fact that these objects could be rendered nonexistent. Soon, we will build a memorial to the nonexistent object. With such a startling example available of what happens when a powerful object is destroyed, I find it difficult to believe that terrorism could liberate the subject.

The possibility of disappearance due to interference by supernatural powers is intriguing, but would suffer from the same fate as terrorism, unless God (or Satan, if you prefer) also erased the existence of the object from the mind of the subject. Having no memory of the object, the subject could prevail. Of course, the subject would also have to lose the ability to create objects as well. I find this possibility fairly unlikely, and if it does happen it will not be due to the influence of the subject (except maybe indirectly through prayer), so the subject, while having surpassed the object, is not actually surpassing the object.

Thus the alternative option that the object will continue to dominate the subject seems to be the most likely possibility. The subject has no hope of beating the object, and the subject will remain fixated because it has the opportunity for ever-changing new spectacles. In this respect, the subject is actually beating itself.

Baudrillard does not think that the subject is doomed to being controlled by the object forever. Instead, he offers an option for defeating the object: indifference.

By ignoring the object, the subject will have an existence that is free of the object, thus beating the object and regaining control of the dialectic.<sup>iii</sup>

I suppose that this possibility will always exist, but I think that its implementation is highly unlikely. It is fairly infrequent that one meets a family that has not and never intends to go to Disney World or somewhere similar (economic factors aside). Western culture is obsessed with the object, and a change in the status quo seems unlikely. Baudrillard's argument is possible, but highly unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Still, Baudrillard thinks that history cannot end. He presents several reasons as to why history cannot end, but I think that his own ideas damn the effort. First, he claims that history is cyclical and turns back on itself. Therefore, there is no future and no end in cyclical history, just a series of points on a circle. Because a circle has no end, there can be no end of history.<sup>iv</sup>

This idea is interesting and has some possible support in physics with the concept of the universe collapsing and expanding again, but the process of the universe functioning in a cyclical fashion takes so much time that an end of history as perceived by humans is indeed possible. Time is linear and history, because it is based on time, is also linear. Because time is perceived linearly cosmic cycles on a scale that is incomprehensible by human standards are useless for a human definition of the end of history. Additionally, the old saying about history repeating itself only indicates that humans can create connections between past events. In fact, a literal repetition is practically impossible given the differences between different people.

Further, if the dialectic is over, then time cannot be circular because the dialectic would have to continue, and it will not.

Baudrillard presents a more worthwhile argument than that straw man, however. He proposes that, because total knowledge is impossible, the end cannot be reached. In this argument he is relying on nihilism in order to show that nihilism cannot be the end of history. He claims that complete knowledge would result in a “catastrophe” because it would allow a “total definition” of human beings. At the point that a total definition is reached and all signs of unintelligibility are erased, there can be no more meaning. Meaning requires mystery in order to fascinate the subject. If everything is explained, then there is no reason to care. Fortunately, according to Baudrillard, nihilism renders complete intelligibility impossible, allowing the subject to posit meaning. The social can never fully be realized due to nihilism, and history is rendered interminable.<sup>v</sup>

This argument is provocative, but it sets up a conclusion that is not necessarily valid. Baudrillard may be correct in claiming that a total definition would mean the absence of meaning, but a total definition is not required for the end of history. All that is required is a lack of change or a negligible amount of change. If nihilism has served to obscure a total definition, then there still can be no change. The absence of knowledge is also a possible end of history. In fact, it is the end for which I am arguing. Therefore, although Baudrillard may have a plausible argument, his conclusion is not the only possible one.

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Having addressed the arguments of nihilism's most ardent defender and critic, I find that nihilism has won and the end of history is at hand. In this final section I wish to explore what the world will be like in the end of history and compare it to the world as it was before.

The end of history, of course, looks no different from the way the world looks now. Objects dominate it and, though the individual objects may change, the overall structure of hyperreality remains the same as it is now. I think that the major difference will be in the degree to which the subject is dominated. The object will increase in power as spectacles grow more extravagant. I call this the roller coaster effect. In order for a theme park to continue to attract customers, the operator adds new rides. The signature ride for a theme park is the roller coaster. As technology expands, the roller coaster becomes larger and more intricate. Gone is the turn of the century up and down coaster.<sup>vi</sup> In its place is a roller coaster with loops, water, a blast-off beginning, 3D options, etc. All objects are becoming more advanced in order to captivate the subject, just as the roller coaster is. This is the roller coaster effect.

Human life will be much the same, only with a greater interest in the object. The greater this interest, the less intelligible life will become. I make this claim because it follows from nihilism. As nihilism grows and the ecstasy of the object intensifies,<sup>vii</sup> the subject will be less and less able to ascribe intelligibility to a world that does not belong to it. Eventually, the subject should either be completely alienated from the world or become an object. Indeed, it seems that people are

becoming objects with the increases of science allowing control over the genetic makeup of the subject.

There are few options as to how the subject can react in a nihilistic world. These options should serve to conclude this paper. If the subject lacks the possibility of acquiring meaning or intelligibility, how can the subject exist? The first option I propose is from Pseudo-Dionysius, a medieval mystic. His system has the goal of a union with God, who is “beyond all being and knowledge.”<sup>viii</sup> Because hyperreality is beyond all being and knowledge for the subject, I find the comparison appropriate. Pseudo-Dionysius argues that in order to understand God one must assert all attributes, then deny them. This process is called the *via negativa*.<sup>ix</sup> Because God is everything, the *via negativa* is the only way to understand His nature. I think that this system could be applied to hyperreality as well. If nihilism is correct, then truth is unknowable. Therefore, both everything and its negation could be true. It follows that in order to understand hyperreality the subject could attempt to believe everything. Unfortunately for this approach, it cannot be determined that hyperreality is everything with any degree of certainty.

Another possibility is the system developed by Pyrrho the ancient skeptic. Pyrrho claimed that the world was unknowable. For every argument there is an equally good counter argument. Because it is impossible to determine which argument is correct, Pyrrho recommends *epoche*, the suspension of judgment. By suspending judgment one can reach *ataraxia*, or inner tranquillity.<sup>x</sup>

Pyrrho's claim that the nature of the world is unknowable leads me to believe that his world was not unlike our own; that is, his world was beset with uncertainty and threatened by nihilism, which is why he was searching for *ataraxia*. Pyrrho's philosophy is nihilistic, especially the ten modes that he devised for negating arguments.<sup>xi</sup> Thus, before modern philosophy nihilistic arguments were practiced.

Earlier I claimed that nihilism was a condition created by modern philosophy. That claim was not true. Nihilism has been a force in thought at least since the ancient Greeks. It has always been a part of philosophy, and it always will be. Modern philosophy simply brought nihilism to the forefront.

A last word on nihilism. In order for nihilism to work, it must negate itself. Baudrillard is almost right when he claims that it is impossible to be a nihilist. Nihilism is, in the end, impossible because nihilism turns back on itself. When everything has been negated, nihilism is impossible and negates itself. Thus, although characterized by nihilism, society cannot be full of nihilists at the end of history because there is no nihilism.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1992), 60.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. Hegel himself declared the end of history in 1806 while Napoleon was conquering Europe and spreading the ideals of the French Revolution.

<sup>iii</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 163-4.

<sup>iv</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 10-11.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

<sup>vi</sup> The old roller coaster serves the purpose of being a spectacle of history, like an old battlefield.

<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, there is a direct link between the power of the object and the growth of nihilism. The more control the object has, the more thoroughly the subject is nihilized.

<sup>viii</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 135.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>x</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Pyrrho*, in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, trans. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 289.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-91.

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