

NIHILISM, NATURE, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE COSMOS

David Storey

ABSTRACT: Though nihilism is a major theme in late modern philosophy from Hegel onward, it is only relatively recently that it has been treated as the subject of monographs and anthologies. Commentators have offered a number of accounts of the origins and nature of nihilism. Some see it as a purely historical and predominantly modern phenomenon, a consequence of the social, economic, ecological, political, and/or religious upheavals of modernity. Others think it stems from human nature itself, and should be seen as a perennial problem. Still others think that nihilism has ontological significance and issues from the nature of being itself. In this essay, I survey the most important of these narratives of nihilism to show how commonly the advent and spread of nihilism is linked with changing conceptions of (humanity's relation to) nature. At root, nihilism is a problem about humanity's relation to nature, about a crisis in human freedom and willing after the collapse of the cosmos, the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature in which humans have a proper place. Two themes recur in the literature: first, the collapse of what is commonly called the "great chain of being" or the cosmos generally; and second, the increased importance placed on human will and subjectivity and, correlatively, the significance of human history as opposed to nature.

KEYWORDS: Nihilism; Nature; Cosmos

We typically regard nihilism as a problem about human life. While Nietzsche and Heidegger are undoubtedly the thinkers most closely associated with nihilism, it has an important history (predominantly in Europe) before them and has led an interesting life (especially in American culture) after them. Nietzsche's proclamation, "God is dead!", has been taken as the historical and philosophical fountainhead of European nihilism. As with any idea, however, the history of nihilism is more complex, and over the last half-century a handful of scholars have set out to trace its elusive arc.¹ Though nihilism is a major theme in late modern philosophy from Hegel

¹ Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995. Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Study*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1969. Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1988. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, New York,

onward, it is only relatively recently that it has been treated as the subject of monographs and anthologies. Commentators have offered a number of accounts of the origins and nature of nihilism. Some see it as a purely historical and predominantly modern phenomenon, a consequence of the social, economic, ecological, political, and/or religious upheavals of modernity. Others think it stems from human nature itself, and should be seen as a perennial problem. Still others think that nihilism has ontological significance and issues from the nature of being itself. In this essay, I survey the most important of these narratives of nihilism to show how commonly the advent and spread of nihilism is linked, as it is by Nietzsche and Heidegger, with changing conceptions of (humanity's relation to) nature. At root, nihilism is a problem about humanity's relation to nature, about a crisis in human freedom and willing after the collapse of the cosmos, the erosion of a hierarchically ordered nature in which humans have a proper place. Two themes recur in the literature: first, the collapse of what is commonly called the "great chain of being"² or the cosmos generally; and second, the increased importance placed on human will and subjectivity and, correlatively, the significance of human history as opposed to nature.

ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF NIHILISM

Nihilism originated as a distinct philosophical concept in the 18th century. As Michael Gillespie reports, "the concept of nihilism first came into general usage as a description of the danger [German] idealism posed for the intellectual, spiritual, and political health of humanity. The first to use the term in print was apparently F. L. Goetzius in his *De nonismo et nihilism in theologia* (1733)."³ Tracts portraying Kantian critical philosophy as a form of nihilism appeared near the end of the century, but it would fall to F.H. Jacobi to give the first explicit formulation of the concept. Convinced that idealism posed an existential threat to traditional Christian belief, Jacobi attacked both Kant and Fichte, the former in his essay, "Idealism and Nihilism," and the latter in a letter to Fichte in 1799. He branded Fichte's philosophy as nihilism by drawing a stark contrast between a steadfast faith in a God beyond human subjectivity and an insatiable reason that, as Otto Poeggeler puts it, "perceives

Harper and Row, 1966. Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995. Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes, Albany, SUNY Press, 1990. David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*, New York, Routledge, 1988.

² See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, New York, Harvard University Press, 1936.

³ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 65.

only itself” and “dissolves everything that is given into the nothingness of subjectivity.”⁴ Jacobi believed that idealism entailed a lopsided focus on human subjectivity that not only shut out the divine, but severed itself from any external reality whatsoever, including nature. If things-in-themselves cannot be cognized, and actuality itself is but a category of the understanding, then it seems to follow that things-in-themselves do not actually exist. Idealism shifts, to use Gilson’s formulation, from the “exterior to the interior,” but does not make the move from the “interior to the superior”; in fact, it does not “move” at all, since the exterior—nature—is regarded as a realm of mere appearances. For Jacobi, it is only through a decisive act of will, a recognition of the stark either/or before us and a resolute commitment to God, that humans can find their proper place. As Jacobi challenges Fichte: “God is and is outside of me, a living essence that subsists for itself, or I am God. There is no third possibility.”⁵

Three things stand out in this passage. First, Jacobi is simultaneously charging Fichte with pantheism and atheism, positions he regards as basically identical. Before mounting his assault on idealism, Jacobi had argued that Spinoza’s pantheism was actually atheism. Jacobi seems to have regarded Fichte’s idealism as a doomed attempt to marry the focus on freedom in Descartes and Kant to Spinoza’s holistic and divinized view of nature. So nihilism is portrayed as emerging, roughly speaking, out of attempts to integrate modern conceptions of freedom and nature. Second, Jacobi’s denial of a “third way” is, as we will see, a common complaint among critics of nihilism, or of philosophies alleged to be nihilistic. Those who cannot accept the basic dualities and either/or’s of existence, so the thinking goes, attempt to sublimate them in elaborate monistic philosophies that bend logic and language beyond their breaking points in order to chart a third way--to, in Kierkegaard’s turn of biblical phrase, join what God has separated. The attempt to include everything ends up embracing nothing. Third, it is more than a little ironic that Jacobi’s fideistic focus on the will, intended as an antidote to nihilism, would later be pointed to as a symptom of nihilism by Nietzsche because the will is directed toward a false object (God) and by Heidegger because the triumph of the will in modern thought is the fruition of the ancient seed of metaphysics, the drive to frame being as presence.

With this story of the origin of the concept of nihilism in place, let us take a look at some of the most sustained attempts to determine the nature of nihilism.

⁴ Quoted by Parkes, *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, xvi.

⁵ Quoted by Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 66.

A SURVEY OF THEORIES ON THE NATURE OF NIHILISM

Nishitani Keiji. Despite nihilism's presence at the birth of German idealism (and prominence after its death), it was not to be made a subject of study in its own right until the 1930s and '40s, by Karl Löwith and the unlikely figure of Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani was a member of Japan's Kyoto School, a vanguard of Japanese intellectuals, many of whom travelled to Germany to study with leading European thinkers and endeavored to integrate modern Western philosophy, particularly Nietzsche, Heidegger and the German Idealists, with Buddhist thought.⁶ Graham Parkes suggests that since, e.g., the Buddhist tradition never took substance or presence as foundational philosophical categories, it is no accident that one of the first relatively unified statements on nihilism was made by a non-Western philosopher: "Nishitani's perspective has allowed him to see as more unified than Western commentators the stream of nihilism which springs from the decline of Hegelian philosophy through Feuerbach, Stirner, and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Heidegger."⁷ In other words, from a Buddhist perspective rooted in the belief that all things are empty, finite, and lacking in "own-being," the Western notions of being as standing presence or stable substance are obviously a poor foundation to build on.

The hallmarks of Nishitani's approach to nihilism in this text are a rigorous analysis of Nietzsche's treatment of nihilism, a spirited defense of Nietzsche's solution, the application of Buddhist conceptual tools to the problem, and a critique of atheistic positions such as those of Stirner, Marx, and Sartre. He argues that Heidegger's significance in the history of nihilism lies in his insistence on its connection to ontology: "Heidegger gives us nothing less than an ontology within which nihilism becomes a philosophy. By disclosing nothing at the ground of all beings and summoning it forth, nihilism becomes the basis of a new metaphysics."⁸ One of the most important contributions of Nishitani's account is his insistence that the deepest significance of nihilism is ontological, not merely psychological or cultural, and that its

⁶ Nishitani's approach to nihilism is severely conditioned—and, some would argue, strengthened—by his Buddhist background. The notion of nothingness or emptiness has been a foundational concept of Buddhist thought since Nagarjuna, and does not carry the negative connotation usually imputed to it by the Western tradition. Some have argued that Buddhism is uniquely positioned for overcoming Western nihilism precisely because it is not built on the conceptual foundations that many modern thinkers now regard as unstable. See, for instance, James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

⁷ Parkes, *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, xx.

⁸ Parkes, *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, 157. It bears mentioning that Nishitani's interpretation is based primarily on Heidegger's *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?", and addresses neither Heidegger's later history of being nor his critique of Nietzsche.

rise in modern Western philosophy is a symptom of a failure to adequately grapple with the concept of the nothing.

Karl Löwith. If Nishitani's approach to nihilism has the virtue of distance, Karl Löwith's has the advantage of proximity.⁹ A student of Heidegger and an eye-witness to the real-world ravages of political nihilism in the rise of Nazism, Löwith provides a detailed account of the prominent role nihilism played in post-Hegelian European thought and culture, and he offers a rich account of the intellectual and cultural trends that culminated in Heidegger's philosophy. On Löwith's telling,

Ever since the middle of the [19th] century, the construction of the history of Europe has not proceeded according to a schema of progress, but instead according to that of decline. This change began not at the end of the century but rather at its beginning, with Fichte's lectures, which he saw as an age of 'perfected iniquity.' From there, there proceeds through European literature and philosophy an uninterrupted chain of critiques...which decisively condition not simply the academic but the actual intellectual history between Hegel and Nietzsche. The state of Being in decline along with one's own time is also the ground and soil for Heidegger's 'destruction,' for his will to dismantle and rebuild, back to the foundations of a tradition which has become untenable.¹⁰

Fichte's indictment of the present age would be the prototype for a long list of scathing critiques of modern society, from Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* to Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*. Once Hegel had, as Löwith puts it, "made the negation of what exists" the principle of genuine philosophy, the task of philosophy would widely become identified with *Zeitdiagnose*, and the role of the philosopher was to become, as Nietzsche put it, the physician of culture. Löwith shows how this spirit is embodied by thinkers as disparate as Marx and Kierkegaard:

Marx's worldly critique of the bourgeois-capitalist world corresponds to Kierkegaard's critique of the bourgeois-Christian world, which is as foreign to Christianity in its origins as the bourgeois or civil state is to a polis. That Marx places the outward existential relations of the masses before a decision and Kierkegaard the inward existential relation of the individual to himself, that Marx philosophizes without God and Kierkegaard before God—these apparent

⁹ Despite his Japanese and Buddhist perspective, Nishitani's approach to nihilism appears to have been heavily influenced by Löwith's three studies on nihilism in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the period between Hegel and Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Given that Löwith lived in Japan for five years, his intellectual proximity with Nishitani is unsurprising.

¹⁰ Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 192.

oppositions have as a common presupposition the decay of existence along with God and the world.¹¹

Both thinkers, he continues, “conceived ‘what is’ as a world determined by commodities and money, and as an existence defined throughout by irony and boredom.”¹² Marx’s assertion of a purely “human” world and Kierkegaard’s espousal of a “worldless Christianity” both share in common the severance of the human from the natural. For Marx, nature is merely the positum there to be negated and appropriated by human labor. For Kierkegaard, as Walter Kaufmann quips, nature is irrelevant to human life: “He sweeps away the whole conception of a cosmos as a mere distraction... Here is man, and ‘one thing is needful’: a decision.”¹³ Hans Jonas, another of Heidegger’s students, detected a similar problem with Heidegger’s own account of human existence: namely, that it did not place humans within any kind of *scala natura* that is the locus of value. Löwith’s larger point, though, is that the disintegration of the Hegelian vision resulted in a grab bag of incompatible viewpoints usually consisting of a scathing critique of the present, a longing for a lost age, and/or a radical program for individual or social renewal.

C.S. Lewis. Another vital voice in the discourse on nihilism—and who also saw firsthand the fallout from political nihilism in the world wars of the 20th century—is C.S. Lewis. Though Lewis does not explicitly mention the specter of nihilism in his classic *The Abolition of Man*, he clearly laments its corrosive effects on Western civilization and insists it arose largely due to a disruption in humanity’s relationship to nature. The abolition of human nature, he hypothesizes, is the unintended consequence of the attempt to bend nature to human purposes and is the endgame of scientific naturalism. Moreover, this attempt to defeat nature and scrub it free of undesirables results, paradoxically, in nature’s total victory. The more of reality we concede to the objective, value-free domain of “mere nature,” the less free we become; or more precisely, the more freedom becomes a curse, because its polestars for navigating the field of possibilities—an objective morality rooted in nature or the “*Tao*,” Lewis’ catchall phrase for premodern notions of nature as a cosmos to which humans must conform—have been snuffed out. The human is left with nothing but his drives and instincts to decide how to act; he is left, in other words, with nothing but nature to guide him. But since this is not a cosmic nature with a logos, an ordered

¹¹ Ibid., 202. As we will see, this is a recurrent theme in genealogies of nihilism, namely, that thinkers occupying wildly different positions, such as Marx and Kierkegaard or Russell and Sartre, are both victims of nihilism. The reason usually given for this is that nihilism is an prejudice deeply embedded in the foundations of modernity.

¹² Ibid., 202.

¹³ Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York, Penguin, 1956, p. 16.

hierarchy of matter, body, soul, and spirit, but a nature bereft of reason or moral value, and since reason has been downgraded to a tool and morality whittled down to a matter of preference, it is a matter of the blind leading the blind; a matter, in short, of nihilism. What happens, then, is that whatever someone happens to prefer is called natural. Somehow, the attempt to make everything “natural” ends up denaturing the very notion of nature.

Stanley Rosen and Allan Bloom. Two writers who made similar observations about nihilism were both students of the political philosopher Leo Strauss: Stanley Rosen and Allan Bloom. Both trace the phenomenon to a gradual shift in the reigning conceptions of reason, morality, and nature throughout the modern period. Like Lewis, Rosen describes nihilism as partly the collapse in the belief in objective moral truths, which is abetted by the widespread adoption of a non-normative, instrumental view of reason. Once the will is decoupled from the intellect and no longer choosing from among the ends the intellect presents to it, and once the logos is removed from nature, then there are no longer any objective moral truths that the intellect can apprehend and present to the will as worthy candidates for action. Everything falls to the will, and since the will cannot furnish reasons for acting one way or another—and since reason itself has been relieved of command to do so—then everything is permitted. Rosen defines nihilism in this Nietzschean sense, and asserts that “For those who are not gods, recourse to a [value] creation *ex nihilo*...reduces reason to nonsense by equating the sense or significance of speech with silence.”¹⁴

While nihilism is often regarded primarily as a moral position, e.g., value relativism, Rosen contends that the moral implications are in fact derivative and stem from a “contemporary crisis in reason” rooted in the problem of historicism. Rosen defines historicism as “the view that rational speech about the good is possible only with respect to the meaning of history” and “the inability to distinguish being and time.”¹⁵ Historicism was ironically the unintended consequence of an attempted expansion of reason: “the influence of mathematical physics led to the secularization of metaphysics by transforming it into the philosophy of history, whereupon the influence of history, together with the autonomous tendencies of the mathematizing ego, led to the historicizing of mathematical physics.”¹⁶ In other words, while the premodern task of philosophy, generally speaking, was (partly) to discern the unchanging logos within nature, in the modern period it is expanded to tracing the logos within history—but this leads, somehow, to the paradoxical view that all

¹⁴ Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Study*, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

rational speech is reducible to historical, i.e., contingent, conditions. The strange thing is that such a nihilism can equally accommodate the view that “everything is natural”—since there is no reason or necessity governing human affairs and action, they are merely an arbitrary matter of chance, will, or instinct—and “nothing is natural”—since there are no trans-historical or trans-cultural metaphysical or moral truths and everything, including theses about nature, is a product of history.

Rosen insists that the notion of “creativity” played an important part in this process. According to this view, a person’s moral life consists not in obeying the dictates of a conscience common to all or by acting in accordance with his rationally knowable nature, but by being faithful to the oracle of his inner genius, the natural creativity welling up from below. Once creativity, not reason, is enshrined as the center of gravity in human nature, the next logical step is to adopt the view that all speech about being—all philosophy, science, and mathematics—is poetry. Rosen thinks that the influence of historicism on the view of reason and metaphysics, and the effect of the notion of creativity on the view of morality and human nature, are the main causes of the advent of nihilism: “the fundamental problem in a study of nihilism is to dissect the language of historicist ontology with the associated doctrine of human creativity.”¹⁷ Heidegger and Nietzsche are the most important thinkers in this drama; Heidegger because of his attempt to think being in terms of time, and Nietzsche because of his reduction of all human faculties to a creative will to power. Though their diagnoses of nihilism are unparalleled, Rosen thinks their solutions are flawed because both are victims of the modern “rationalistic view of reason”:

By detaching ‘reasonable’ from ‘good,’ the friends of reason made it impossible to assert the goodness of reason.... If reason is conceived exclusively on the model of mathematics, and if mathematics is itself understood in terms of Newtonian rather than Pythagorean science, then the impossibility of asserting the goodness of reason is the extreme instance of the manifest evil of reason. Reason (we are told) objectifies, reifies, alienates; it debases or destroys the genuinely human.... Man has become alienated from his own authentic or creative existence by the erroneous projection of the supersensible world of Platonic ideas...and so of an autonomous technology, which, as the authentic contemporary historical manifestation of ‘rationalism,’ will destroy us or enslave us to machines.¹⁸

As such, since the good was not to be found by the light of reason, it had to be found somewhere else; but since the very notion of good becomes unintelligible when severed from reason, it was nowhere to be *found*, and thus had to be *created*. But since

¹⁷ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁸ Ibid., xv.

the goodness of this creativity consists in its spontaneity and novelty, it must supply its own criterion and guarantee its own legitimacy.

Allan Bloom devotes the middle act of his *The Closing of the American Mind* to what he calls “Nihilism, American Style.” Despite its popular acclaim, the book contains a sophisticated account of nihilism. Though the tenor of his treatment is similar to Rosen’s and though both thinkers emphasize the connection between nihilism and the modern view of nature, Bloom’s account is unique on at least two fronts. First, he illustrates how nihilism has been democratized, normalized, and neutered in American culture; this watered down, latter day version of nihilism represents, for Bloom, the victory of Nietzsche’s “last man.” Second, where for Rosen the main root of nihilism is the conception of reason that arose out of the scientific revolution, for Bloom it is the major shifts in modern political philosophy. I will briefly illustrate these two fronts.

In Bloom’s genealogy of nihilism, what was once the province of the German high culture of the 19th and early 20th century—the intellectual skyline so exquisitely sketched by Löwith—has been transfused into American popular culture and slang. The post-World War Two generation came to employ a menagerie of terms—“values,” “lifestyle,” “creativity,” “the self,” and “culture,” to name a few—to replace traditional social and religious norms, but divested them of their original meanings, or at least their implications. “Weber,” Bloom observes, “saw that all we care for was threatened by Nietzsche’s insight [that God is dead].... We require values, which in turn require a peculiar human creativity that is drying up and in any event has no cosmic support.”¹⁹ But instead of introducing a mood of despair and a sense of the tragic, nihilism was parlayed into an ethos of self-help, the psychology of self-esteem, a therapeutic culture, and a glib relativism. As Bloom writes, “There is a whole arsenal of terms for talking about nothing—caring, self-fulfillment, expanding consciousness.... Nothing determinate, nothing that has a referent.... American nihilism is a mood, a mood of moodiness, a vague disquiet. It is nihilism without the abyss (CAM 154). What irks Bloom is that Americans embraced the language of value and creativity with such ease, without gleaning their darker implications and ignorant of the turbulent intellectual, cultural, and political history that produced them. Reminiscent of Heidegger’s discussion of idle talk, Bloom notes how the nostrums of nihilism calcify into democratic dogma: “these words are not reasons, nor were they intended to be reasons. All to the contrary, they were meant to show that our deep human need to know what we are doing and to be good cannot be satisfied. By some miracle these very terms became our justification: nihilism as moralism” (CAM 238-

¹⁹ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 150. Hereafter cited as CAM.

9). This form of nihilism is the most insidious because the most unconscious, what Nietzsche called “passive nihilism.” It is the most unconscious because its victims are unaware of their condition and incapable of contemplating alternatives.

As we saw with Löwith, the prevailing outlook in European nihilism is one of pessimism and historical decline; but on American soil, seasoned with the spirits of egalitarianism and perpetual progress, nihilism winds up with a “happy ending” and wears a happy face. Bloom thinks this improbable syncretism is more than a fascinating social and cultural phenomenon and has deep philosophical import because it perfectly embodies Nietzsche’s vision of the “last man,” the contented being who lives only for the present and is incapable of self-contempt or reverence for anything greater: “Nihilism in its most palpable sense means that the bourgeois has won, that the future, all foreseeable futures, belong to him, that all heights above him and all depths beneath him are illusory and that life is not worth living on these terms. It is the announcement that all alternatives or correctives...have failed” (CAM 157). Bloom shares with Rosen the view that “Western rationalism has resulted in a rejection of reason,” and thinks that we live, in John Ralston Saul’s term, in an “unconscious civilization”: “We are like ignorant shepherds living on a site where great civilizations once flourished. The shepherds play with the fragments that pop up to the surface, having no notion of the beautiful structures of which they were once a part” (CAM 239).

Bloom is convinced that most of this stems from the revolution in modern political thought brought about by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Whereas the ancients, generally speaking, relegated the best regime to the realm of speech and thought, doubtful about its possible instantiation in history, the moderns aimed to put the best regime into practice. One of the most important instruments for doing so was positing a “state of nature,” a primal condition from which humanity extricates itself in order to achieve an optimal way of communal life. A stark contrast has to be created between the natural and social orders in order for the rationality, legitimacy, and desirability of the political order to stick. Nature has to be branded as indifferent if not hostile to human flourishing in order for the project to make sense, and human nature must be redrawn as a- or pre-political. As Bloom puts it, “Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all found that one way or another nature led men to war, and that civil society’s purpose was not to cooperate with a natural tendency in man toward perfection but to make peace where nature’s imperfection causes war” (CAM 163). Moreover, nature’s obstacles have to be conceived as surmountable through applied science: “if, instead of fighting one another, we band together and make war on our stepmother [nature], who keeps her riches from us, we can at the same time provide

for ourselves and end our strife. The conquest of nature, which is made possible by the insight of science and by the power it produces, is the key to the political” (CAM 165). But nature has to be conquered in two senses. Before it can be literally conquered via applied science, it must be theoretically transformed from a great chain of being, a cosmos, into an ontologically homogenous plane of extended matter in motion. Just as nature is reduced to its lowest common denominator, politics comes to be based not on virtue or the good, but on the most basic human drives: the fear of death, the desire for comfort, and the goal of self-preservation. This lowering of the human center of gravity—what Strauss called the “low but solid ground”²⁰ on which the moderns built—is what eventually leads to Nietzsche’s last man .

However, this foundation is highly unstable and its implications are deeply ambiguous. Rousseau was the first to tap the fissure that would grow into the abyss addressed by Nietzsche, and this gap has to do with the new concept of nature. As Bloom writes, “For Hobbes and Locke nature is near and unattractive, and man’s movement into society was easy and unambiguously good. For Rousseau nature is distant and attractive, and the move was hard and divided man” (CAM 169). Rousseau, Bloom writes, realizes just how difficult it is to sever the ontological bond between nature and human nature, and that the attempt to do so creates great confusion: “Now there are two competing views about man’s relation to nature, both founded on the modern distinction between nature and society. Nature is the raw material of man’s freedom from harsh necessity, or else man is the polluter of nature. Nature in both cases means dead nature, or nature without man and untouched by man...” (CAM 173). One view sees nature as the problem, while the other sees humanity as the problem; but both views, and all three thinkers, share the prejudice that nature is “dead,” i.e., bereft of soul or subjectivity and flatly opposed to the human order of history, politics, and society.

Bloom gives an excellent summary of the difference between the ancient and modern views of nature:

[In the modern view,] all higher purposiveness in nature, which might have been consulted by men’s reason and used to limit human passion, had disappeared. Nature tells us nothing about man specifically and provides no imperatives for his conduct.... Man somehow remains a part of nature, but in a different and much more problematic way than in, say, Aristotle’s philosophy, where soul is at the center and what is highest in man is akin to what is highest in nature, or where soul is nature. Man is really only a part and not the microcosm. Nature has no rank order or hierarchy of being, nor does the self (CAM 176).

²⁰ Quoted in CAM, 167.

This is the consequence of the collapse of the cosmos, the same disproportion between humanity and nature that Rosen points to. There are no “natural limits” to the passions, because only the passions are natural, and all claims of reason are taken to be in some way derived from or motivated by them. Humans have longings that formerly would have been correlated with dimensions of the cosmos, but since the higher levels of the great chain have been shorn off, leaving only the “low but solid ground,” Rousseau, determined to reprise the pursuit of wholeness that was formerly headed by reason, had nowhere to go but “back” before society and “down” into the pre-rational nether reaches of human nature. Rousseau was seeking the norms that he would try to incorporate in his political vision, primarily equality. Since reason—which Rousseau, much like Heidegger, interprets as calculation—is responsible for disrupting the equality of the state of nature, it cannot be the source of the ideal order; instead, the sources for bringing about a harmony between humans and nature are freedom and sympathy. In showing that the so-called “natural” bases of human life according to Hobbes and Locke were actually stones laid down by society, Rousseau attempted to drill down to the real state of nature, but ended up opening Pandora’s box: “Having cut off the higher aspirations of man, those connected with the soul, Hobbes and Locke hoped to find a floor beneath him, which Rousseau removed.... And there, down below, Rousseau discovered all the complexity that, in the days before Machiavelli, was up on high.... It is here that the abyss opened up” (CAM 176-7). This is the fountainhead of what would become Nietzschean nihilism and eventuate in value-relativism.

Donald Crosby. While Rosen and Bloom give a heavily historical account of the rise of nihilism, Donald Crosby offers perhaps the most systematic and analytical account in *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*, detailing its different types, reconstructing the myriad arguments in its favor, and exposing its philosophical and theological sources. Like both of them, though, he effectively shows how nihilism is a pervasive power in modern thought that underwrites seemingly contrary philosophical positions, such as voluntarism and determinism, and plagues thinkers as different as Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell. But he follows Nietzsche and Heidegger in holding that Greek metaphysics and especially Christianity prepare the way for nihilism, and maintains that other traditions, such as process thought, might provide us with resources for confronting it. Moreover, Crosby follows Lewis in calling for a new conception of nature, insisting, with philosopher of science Ivor Leclerc, that to combat nihilism, “what is urgently needed...is a restoration of the philosophy of nature to its former position in the intellectual life of our culture, a

position it had prior to the scientific revolution and continued to have up to the triumph of Newtonian physics in the 18th century.”²¹

A) *Types of Nihilism*. Crosby describes five types of nihilism: political, moral, epistemological, cosmic, and existential. Crosby is more concerned with the last two types. He cites Schopenhauer and Russell as unlikely bedfellows representing these views. For Schopenhauer, he says, “All striving is rooted in deficiency and need, and thus in pain. Each organized form of nature, including human beings, everywhere encounters resistance to its strivings and must struggle to wrest from its surroundings whatever satisfaction it can achieve” (SA 28). For Russell,

the cosmos is alien and inhuman and the values we cherish have no realization in it. We must learn to accept that the natural world is oblivious to all distinctions between good and evil and that it is nothing but an arena of blind forces or powers...that combined by sheer chance in the remote past to effect conditions conducive to the emergence of life (SA 27).

Whereas Schopenhauer holds that the cosmos has no intelligible structure whatsoever, Russell’s view is less extreme, in that he holds that mathematics and natural science can provide us with an accurate picture of nature, but one that will not include human values. Russell’s universe is rationally knowable but finally meaningless. Cosmic nihilism is then something of an oxymoron, since it means that there is no such thing as a “cosmos” in the sense of an intelligible and moral order in nature that humans can discover and conform to.

From here, it is a short step to existential nihilism. This view has been advanced most pointedly by writers such as Sartre and Camus. Honesty demands that we face the absurdity of our existence and accept our eventual demise; religion and metaphysics are dismissed as happy hedges against death. The mature person accepts all of this and slogs through, manufacturing meaning through projects chosen for no reason. He cannot provide a reason for living, for the particular life he chooses, or for choosing not to live.

Now Löwith, as noted above, saw the rise of existentialism and nihilism as consequences of the collapse of a view of nature as cosmos or creation. Crosby notes the major shift from the medieval to the modern view of nature: “The medieval method made the needs, purposes, and concerns of human beings the key to its interpretation of the universe; the scientific method tended to exclude human beings altogether from its concept of nature, thereby leaving the problem to philosophy of how to find a place for humans in, or in relation to, the natural order” (SA 202). Moreover, whereas the modern method conceived nature as a uniform plane of

²¹ Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, 191. Hereafter abbreviated as SA.

being, the medieval method “took for granted...the twin notions that the universe was a domain of quality and value, and that it was a hierarchically ordered, pluralistic domains, consisting of fundamentally different levels or grades of being” (SA 203). Moderns of different stripes all accept the former prejudice. The positivist and the existentialist may have quite different views, but they share the presupposition of cosmic nihilism. My point here is that existential nihilism—the type that garners the most attention, both literary and philosophical—is derivative of cosmic nihilism. Here I think Crosby is wrong in claiming that existential nihilism is the primary philosophical type of nihilism. Cosmic nihilism (a view about the status of nature) is more fundamental than existential nihilism (a view about the status of human beings).

B) Sources of Nihilism. Crosby traces many religious and philosophical sources of nihilism through the Western tradition, but here I just want to focus on two of the more general ones, since they bear directly on our conceptions of nature: anthropocentrism and value externalism. Anthropocentrism, he explains, involves the subordination of nature to human beings and stems from the Judeo-Christian assumption that nature must revolve around us: “we humans are either at the pinnacle of a nature regarded as subservient to our needs and concerns, or we are nowhere. Everything in the universe must focus mainly on us and the problems and prospects of our personal existence, or else the universe is meaningless and our lives are drained of purpose” (SA 128). Once these unrealistic expectations are disappointed and we fall back to earth, the alternatives—dualism and materialism—seem unsatisfying. It is as though we had resided so long on a mountaintop that the lowlands came to seem inhospitable. But Crosby points out that our pique at realizing we are not the center of the universe is conditioned by our clinging to anthropocentric views. Hence while Crosby laments the loss in the transition from the medieval to the modern view of nature that I mentioned above, he approves of, e.g., Nietzsche’s critique of the Christian view: “Nietzsche is correct when he claims that the anthropomorphic assumption is a fundamental cause of nihilism. ‘We have measured the value of the world,’ he says, ‘according to the categories that refer to a purely fictitious world.... What we find here is still the hyperbolic naivete of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things’” (SA 129). The premodern cosmos is thus criticized as (at least in part) an unwarranted projection of human interests, qualities, and desires. Whitehead shows how this is echoed in the modern period: “The individual subject of experience has been substituted for the total drama of reality. Luther asked, ‘How am I justified?’; modern philosophers have

asked, ‘How do I have knowledge?’ The emphasis lies upon the subject of experience.”²²

This brings us to the second source of nihilism, what Crosby calls the “externality of value.” This notion, he says, “requires that we deny that nature has, or can have, any intrinsic significance; it supposes that the only value or importance it may have is that which is externally bestowed” (SA 131). Originally this assumption took root in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the idea that the goodness of nature and natural beings lay in the fact that they were created by God. Later, however, once the cosmos is collapsed and God disappears, humans replace him as the value-bestowers in chief.

In conclusion, Crosby thinks that though nihilism has considerable problems as a philosophy—especially its embrace of “false dichotomies” such as “faith in God or existential despair, a human centered world or a meaningless world” --it is a necessary halfway house between untenable modern and premodern philosophies and something new (SA 364). In addition to having a useful debunking function and a laudable emphasis on human freedom, it drives home the “perspectival nature of all knowledge, value, and meaning” (SA 366). When viewed against the backdrop of the Western tradition, perspectivism—such as that of Nietzsche—comes off as a great calamity and a crass relativism. But Crosby submits that this reaction is not necessary: “To be finite and time-bound is no disaster but simply the character of our life in the world. The philosophy of nihilism can help us to acknowledge and accept our finite state by forcing us to give up the age-old dream of attaining a God’s-eye view of things” (SA 366). Though Crosby appears to cast Nietzsche as a nihilist, I think this was precisely Nietzsche’s conviction: that nihilism is a painful but necessary and even salutary stage through which humans come to terms with the interpretive aspect of their view of nature, abandon otherworldly visions, and realize that nature is an ever-evolving complex of perspectives, none of which command a total view of reality. Nihilism opens us up to a “constructivist” view of nature; the difficult part, as Crosby notes, is not lapsing into a radical idealism, where nature is dissolved into a positum of the human subject, precisely Jacobi’s critique of Fichte. But here we just need to note that Crosby, one of the most astute contemporary scholars of nihilism, draws the connection between nihilism and nature.

Michael Gillespie. Michael Gillespie offers perhaps the most revisionist account of nihilism, arguing that its roots can be traced from late medieval nominalism to Descartes’ epistemological revolution, Fichte’s absolute idealism, and the “dark side” of Romanticism. The principle source of the concept, he contends, is the rise of the capricious, voluntaristic, omnipotent God unleashed by nominalism. Long before

²² Quoted in SA, 240.

Nietzsche pronounced the death of God, the seed of nihilism was sown by the birth of the God of nominalism. It was not the weakness of the human will that led to nihilism, but its apotheosis. According to Gillespie,

Nietzsche's definition of nihilism is actually a reversal of the concept as it was originally understood, and...his solution to nihilism is in fact only a deeper entanglement in the problem of nihilism. Contrary to Nietzsche's account, nihilism is not the result of the death of God but the consequence of the birth or rebirth of a different kind of God, an omnipotent God of will who calls into question all of reason and nature and thus overturns all eternal standards of truth and justice, and good and evil. This idea of God came to predominance in the fourteenth century and shattered the medieval synthesis of philosophy and theology.... This new way was in turn the foundation for modernity as the realm of human self-assertion. *Nihilism thus has its roots in the very foundations of modernity....*²³

Not only is Nietzsche's diagnosis of the cause of nihilism—the death of God—wrongheaded, but his cure fails because he is unconscious of the prejudices guiding his valorization of the will to power. Nietzsche's spirituality of the Dionysian over-god-man, try as it might to escape the gravity of Christianity, remains squarely within the ambit of one of its mutations in the transition from the medieval to the modern period. "The Dionysian will to power," Gillespie writes, "is in fact a further development of the absolute will that first appeared in the nominalist notion of God and became a world-historical force with Fichte's notion of the absolute I.... Nietzsche's Dionysus...is thus not an alternative to the Christian God but his final and in a sense greatest modern mask" (NBN xxi). Gillespie's account is, by his own admission, not entirely original in that it is a modification of Heidegger's view that Nietzsche was merely the crest of the wave of the will that motored modern philosophy from Descartes onward, but his novel claim is that that power was unleashed by the rupture of the medieval cosmos at the hands of the nominalists. Here, I want to look more closely at a few of the planks in Gillespie's account in order to highlight the centrality of two themes we have seen again and again throughout this essay: the collapse of the premodern cosmos and the increased focus on subjectivity and the will.

Gillespie contrasts nominalism with the thoroughgoing realism of medieval scholasticism. Though the latter certainly embraced divine omnipotence, this was usually seen as somehow limited by the perfect order of creation which reflected the perfect order of the divine mind. The divine will and the divine intellect are seen as

²³ Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xii-xiii. Hereafter abbreviated NBN.

integrated. The notion of a completely arbitrary and all-powerful divine will would be seen not as a true representation of God's freedom but as a reflection of fallen, human freedom. Moreover, for realism the divine will is not entirely inscrutable, since it produces an order that can be understood by observing nature, an intelligible cosmos reflecting it. As Gillespie recounts,

The metaphysics of traditional scholasticism is ontologically realist in positing the extramental existence of universals such as species and genera as forms of divine reason known either by divine illumination...or through an investigation of nature, God's rational creation. Within such an ontology, nature and logic reflect one another.... On this basis, it is possible to grasp the fundamental truth about human beings and their earthly duties and obligations (NBN 12).

The "loose end" of this realism that the nominalists would exploit, however, is divine omnipotence. "While no one denied God's *potentia absoluta* (absolute power)," Gillespie writes, "scholastics generally thought that he had bound himself to a *potentia ordinata* (ordered power) through his own decision. The possibility that God was not bound in this way but was perfectly free and omnipotent was a terrifying possibility that nearly all medieval thinkers were unwilling to accept" (NBN 14). It is the widespread acceptance of this possibility, Gillespie contends, that formed the foundations of modernity and spurred the rise of nihilism.

The compound influence of Ockham and others was to normalize what had been a minority view in the medieval period: negative theology, the general notion that the ontological difference between God and humans (and God and nature) is so great that we cannot achieve any positive or analogical knowledge of his nature. The decoupling of human reason and God and the prioritization of divine omnipotence laid the groundwork not only for a new theology focused on revelation and faith alone (instead of natural theology and the complementarity of faith and reason), but a new understanding of nature. As Gillespie notes, "The effect of the notion of divine omnipotence on cosmology was...revolutionary. With the rejection of realism and the assertion of radical individuality, beings could no longer be conceived as members of species or genera with a certain nature or potentiality.... The rejection of formal causes was also the rejection of final causes" (NBN 21). Denied access to God, reason would now be focused squarely on knowing nature in a more precise, certain, and complete way, and in the process, as we saw Rosen describe above, reason itself would undergo a decisive change. Since reason can no longer discover *teloi* in nature—including the human *telos*—it loses its normative status, and its sole task is instrumental, and the ends to which it is put are prescribed not by reason itself, but by the will. Gillespie notes that this is the root of Descartes' project of doubt: "The will as doubt seeks its own negation in science in order to reconstitute itself in a higher and

more powerful form for the conquest of the world. Science and understanding in other words become mere tools of the will” (NBN 43). Doubt is undertaken as a security measure needed to protect against a dangerous and unpredictable nature created and unregulated by a capricious God. God and nature can no longer be looked to for practical guidance. Humanity must seek its proper ends within itself. But since its reason can no longer recognize itself as an instance of a natural kind that fits within an ordered cosmos (in the sense of both intelligible and purposive), its reason cannot do the job, and all that is left is the will. In Gillespie’s view, all of this signals a drastic shift from a model of God as “craftsman” to a vision of God as “artist”:

The nominalist emphasis upon divine omnipotence overturned [the] conception of natural causality and established divine will and efficient causality as preeminent. God was thus no longer seen as the craftsman who models the world on a rational plan, but as an omnipotent poet whose mystically creative freedom foams forth an endless variety of absolutely individual beings.... This ‘cosmos’ is devoid of form and purpose, and the material objects that seem to exist are in fact mere illusions (NBN 53).

As I mentioned near the start, the first philosophical usage of the term nihilism occurred when F.H. Jacobi alleged that Fichte’s absolute idealism was nihilistic. As Gillespie writes,

In [Fichte’s] interpretation of Kant...it became his goal to break the enslaving chains of the thing-in-itself and develop a system in which freedom was absolute.... Such a system in Fichte’s view could be established only by a metaphysical demonstration of the exclusive causality of freedom, and this in turn could be achieved only by a deduction of the world as a whole from freedom (NBN 76).

Freedom must be conceived not as a mere postulate that must be assumed because of a nature thoroughly determined by efficient causality (i.e., nature according to Kant *via* Newton), but as the principle of this nature in the first place. Fichte exacerbated the fault line between freedom and necessity broached by nominalism and wedged wider by Descartes: “Nihilism...grows out of the infinite will that Fichte discovers in the thought of Descartes and Kant. Fichte, however, radicalizes this notion of will...transforming the notion of the I into a world creating will” (NBN 66). This world-creating will is not, however, the will of the individual ego, but the source of all manifestation that alienates itself in nature: “Reality is merely a by-product of this creative will that seeks only itself.... The I of the I am is not a thing or a category but the primordial activity which brings forth all things and categories” (NBN 79). Nature is not an independent order: it is a spontaneous, free creation of the will, a negation

of the absolute I. For Fichte, the moral struggle of humanity is the story of the I becoming reconciled to itself. Nature is nothing but the obstacle in the finite self's path toward recollecting its original infinitude; or, put differently, nature is nothing other than an instrument for the perfection of humanity.

CONCLUSION

In presenting these accounts, I have highlighted their tendency to see the origins and nature of nihilism as tightly bound up with the concept of nature. This was done to bring to light the gamut of influences informing Nietzsche's and Heidegger's engagements with the problem of nihilism. The sources are several: Greek metaphysics, Christian theology, late medieval nominalism, modern science, politics and culture, the advent of the philosophy of history, and German Idealism. The diagnoses are different: some see nihilism as a historically contingent phenomenon; some think it is rooted in human nature; and some think it issues from the nature of being itself. What they all have in common, though, is the notion that nihilism has something to do with a disruption in the relationship between humanity and nature, and many of them hold that overcoming or at least attenuating it involves developing a new conception of nature. There must be an alternative, in other words, to the positivism and scientific naturalism that rule the day because such a universe has no place for meaning and value; it offers no ground or justification for human values, and mocks human intuitions about the value of nature. Moreover, a common thread in the accounts is that nihilism involves the emergence of the view that the human will is the source of all meaning and value, and that the latter are in no way discovered but are purely created.

In closing, my hope is that this narrative of the origins, development, and nature of nihilism might serve as a conceptual and historical backdrop for the contemporary project in environmental philosophy to "re-enchant the world" by recovering the meaning, value, and purpose that modern conceptions of nature by and large drained from the world. The search for a new cosmology or an alternative, non-reductive nihilism springs from a recognition of the nihilistic consequences of scientific naturalism.

Fordham University
Collins Hall, Philosophy Dept.
441 East Fordham Road
Bronx, NY 10458
dstorey@fordham.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Crosby, Donald A. *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988.
- Gillespie, Michael. *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Phenomenon of Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Kaufmann, Walter, ed. *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Penguin, 1956.
- Keiji, Nishitani. *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.
- Levin, David Michael. *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Harper Collins, 1944.
- Lovejoy, Arthur. *The Great Chain of Being*. New York: Harvard University Press, 1936.
- Lowith, Karl. *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Rosen, Stanley. *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.