Nietzsche’s shadow: On the origin and development of the term nihilism

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Abstract
While the term ‘nihilism’ has become increasingly widespread throughout the past two centuries, not only in academic discourses but in popular culture more widely, there is a surprising lack of consensus regarding its specific meaning. This is perhaps owing to the myriad contexts in which the word has appeared since its inception, which range from specialized works of philosophy to an array of mass-cultural products. This article overviews the emergence and development of the term ‘nihilism’, in order to clarify some of the principal reasons for its prevalence and ambiguity. Having discussed the word’s origin, the article scrutinizes its significance in the early work of Friedrich Nietzsche, who was largely responsible for its popularization, and overviews some of its major appearances throughout the 20th century, in order to show that while Nietzsche stands as the iconic founder of discursivity on nihilism, posthumous uses of the word deviate sharply from his own determinations.

Keywords
modern philosophy, Nietzschean philosophy, nihilism, 20th century, western civilization

The term ‘nihilism’ is of a peculiar nature, to say the least. Since its emergence, in the second half of the 19th century, it has acquired considerable currency – but also notoriety – gradually becoming one of those words that appears to be widely understood (or at least familiar to most) but whose deployment seems to suggest quite the opposite. Although the term is prevalent in philosophical and other discourses of the 20th century, there seems to be little agreement as to its precise meaning. Even today, the word is ambiguous, for ‘nihilism’ is used to denote both a lack of ideology and ideology as such (or even a lack of ideology as ideology). Yet, despite this ambiguity its presence in the

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20th century is pervasive. In fact, this ambiguity is in no small part both the cause and the effect of its heterogeneous deployment in multiple and often conflicting contexts.

Among the countless apprehensions or fixations that haunted the 20th century, the question of nihilism was undoubtedly a fundamental one. Far from being a mere philosophical concern, the succession of sociopolitical conflicts that shook Europe during this period made its presence (or as Nietzsche would call it, the ‘specter of nihilism’) permeate the totality of the West (at the very core of which it had, arguably, always been present – see Heidegger 1979, 26), manifesting itself through all social discourses and strata: art, popular culture, politics, psychology, sociology and so on. The 20th century was a time of struggle, uncertainty and hopelessness. This climate was propitious for a crisis of values, and it is thus unsurprising that the question of nihilism should have become so pressing – even if this question remains a transhistorical one, since it concerns the way in which we perceive, comprehend and value reality.

This article overviews the emergence and development of the term nihilism in order to discuss the motives for its growing prevalence, to clarify its apparent ambiguity and to consider the reasons behind the surprising lack of consensus regarding its specific meaning. In an effort to work towards these three ends, the article will begin by discussing the term’s origin and early development, it will then scrutinize its significance in the early work of Friedrich Nietzsche – who was largely responsible (albeit posthumously) for its popularization – and will conclude by overviewing some of the ways in which it was used during the course of the 20th century. The underlying aim of this threefold analysis is to show that, while Nietzsche stands as the iconic founder of discursivity on nihilism, posthumous uses of the word deviate sharply from his own determinations, ostensibly evincing not only a general lack of (or at best limited) understanding of the concept, but also, and paradoxically, that Nietzsche’s reputation as the ‘philosopher of nihilism’ misunderstands what he himself meant by the term.

Pre-Nietzschean nihilism

The exact origin of the word ‘nihilism’ is unclear. Scholars have tended to disagree when identifying the thinker responsible for its coinage and in many cases coincide in not providing any concrete evidence to back up their claims. Friedrich Jacobi (presumably the best known user of the term in the 18th century) is often erroneously referred to as the father of the word. Many also mistakenly credit Ivan Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) as the first place where it appeared, while others, such as Lawrence J Hatab (following Robert G Olson’s lead), identify it as a 19th-century Russian expression. However, and although Jacobi should indeed be acknowledged as the first to put the term to philosophical use and to popularize it in the academic field, neither he, nor any of the other sources mentioned above, was responsible for its creation. Among the various writers that may in fact be credited as the most probable authors of the word, several scholars have signalled the Swiss philosopher and physician Jacob Herman Obereit, who in his *The Recurring Vitality of Desperate Metaphysics* (1787) used the term to condemn Kant’s epistemology for its subjectivist implications. Others, such as Otto Pöggeler, have pointed to the German Lutheran theologian Daniel Jenisch, who also used it in relation to
idealism (in 1796);2 and still others, such as Karen L Carr, accredit the poet and linguist Friedrich Schlegel as the creator of the word (in 1797).3

Yet, despite its unclear origin there is general consensus regarding the term’s first use within the realm of philosophy (by Jacobi). Although scholars such as Stephen Wagner Cho have identified some ‘relatively obscure occurrences’ of the word prior to Jacobi ‘in Latin and French sources’ (of which he gives no exact details) (1995, 205), there is little disagreement as to the role that the 18th-century German philosopher played in the term’s early genealogy. As Shane Weller points out, even Heidegger and Adorno, who consistently stand in stark political and philosophical opposition to one another, agree on this matter, affirming that the first significant philosophical use of the term is to be found in Jacobi’s famous letter addressed to Fichte, where he deems the latter’s idealism to be ‘nihilism’ (Nihilismus) (see 2008, 15). So it is that the word enters the domain of philosophy as a critical characterization of German idealism, with Jacobi’s ‘Circular Letter’, written in 1799. This initial use was soon to be mirrored by several contemporaries. It is reiterated, for instance, in Max Stirner’s The Ego and Its Own (1844), where, however, rather than being conceived of as a threat, it is celebrated as a ‘liberation’ (Critchley 2009, 5); a contrasting use that already illustrates its paradoxical or ambiguous nature.

The early usage of the term ‘nihilism’ in relation to idealism, in both its philosophical and its poetic form, was preponderant throughout the first half of the 19th century. However, the meaning of the concept shifted in the second half of the century, entering popular consciousness as a result of its appropriation by a Russian political movement, from where Adorno claims that Nietzsche adopted it: ‘presumably from newspaper accounts of terrorist acts’ (1973, 379). Russian nihilism emerged during the first half of the 19th century, more as a set of attitudes than as a concrete political program, movement or system; yet it gradually attracted a significant following and ‘passed from the realm of ideas into actuality’ in the years from 1858 to 1863 (Gillespie 1995, 139). This political activism gave currency to the word throughout Europe at the time but it also triggered an inflation of its meaning, since it soon became used to refer to almost any kind of allegedly radical political ideology or extreme form of anti-establishment dogma such as anarchism, but also (and more alarmingly) socialism. This kind of use of the word was to become paradigmatic throughout the 20th century, coming to signify almost all ideologies, philosophies or political views that were perceived as threatening, or simply opposed to the personal preferences of the individual using the term. Historian Charles Downer Hazen testifies to this gradual popularization and ambiguation, noting that the word became ‘a term of opprobrium […] applied by the conservatives to all shades and kinds of reformers’, signalling, moreover, that it was commonly used ‘most inaccurately’ (1910, 667). As an example, he transcribes a demeaning characterization by the British statesman Lord Randolph Churchill of a group of Irish leaders, whom he defined as ‘political brigands and nihilists’ (1910, 509).

Thus, nihilism’s original relation to German Idealism fluctuates during the early history of the term, becoming principally related to the aforementioned Russian political movement as well as used, in the early 19th century, ‘as a condemnation of atheism’ (Cho 1995, 205). However, it is with Nietzsche that the concept is given detailed consideration for the first time and identified, not only as an impending threat or as the
The gravest problem of modernity but as the inevitable condition of the Western world. Indeed, as Heidegger was pointing out by 1958, Nietzsche had become a major figure in the 20th century: the thinker ‘in whose light and shadow all of us today, with our “for him” or “against him” are thinking and writing’ (1958, 107). Nietzsche’s role within the history of the development of the concept is crucial, not only because he propagated the term even further within the domains of literature and philosophy, but because with him the concept of nihilism underwent a drastic redetermination resulting from his reassessment of the question of ‘value’ in philosophy. Nietzsche’s replacement of truth and morality by ‘life’ and ‘vitality’ as determinants of value, resulted in a reversal of the concept’s significance, now directed against the abstract world of ideas (of being), rather than against the physical world (of becoming). So, even if Nietzsche did not invent the concept, nor was able to contain it within certain clear and enduring ideological boundaries, he played a decisive role in construing its ‘determinative definition’ (Gillespie 1995, vii). Consequently, although it is evident that the philosophical discussion of nihilism cannot be limited to Nietzsche’s understanding or analysis of the concept, it is also evident that he stands as the primary founder of ‘nihilistic discursivity’, as well as the foremost iconic embodiment of this intricate question in the 20th century. Even Michael Allen Gillespie, who believes that Nietzsche ‘misunderstood nihilism’ (1995, vii), acknowledges that he was the central figure to define the term and that his work is largely responsible for the concept’s ubiquity in the 20th century.

**Nietzsche’s nihilism**

In the writings of Nietzsche, the term ‘nihilism’ does not appear until 1880, by which time he had already published a number of works, including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1873), *Untimely Meditations* (1873–1876), *Human, All Too Human* (1878) and *Mixed Opinion and Maxims* (1879). Although initially the word only appears sporadically in his notes, and in these early appearances is not given significant attention, it gradually becomes one of his central concerns, starting, as Weller points out, with the famous sentence found in a notebook dated autumn 1885–autumn 1886: ‘Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes to us this uncanniest of all guests?’ (Nietzsche 1968, 7). The first published book in which he deploys the term explicitly is *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); however, at this point, Nietzsche also reworks some of his earlier texts to incorporate it, including the preface for the revised edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* and appendix of songs and fifth book of ‘aphorisms’ in *The Gay Science* (1882). In the preface of his revision of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he makes nihilism the central force behind the necessity of advocating an aesthetic interpretation and valuation of life and therefore of considering the Apollo–Dionysian opposition. In *The Gay Science*, he incorporates a passage (§345 ‘Our question mark’), which not only gives an overview of the history of nihilism (Christianity, Buddhism and pessimism) but elucidates the concept with the purpose of averting the inevitable dilemma that it entails: ‘“Either abolish your venerations or – yourselves!” The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism?’ (Nietzsche 1974, 204). Thus, in the works written after the 1885–1886 notebook that Nietzsche either saw published during his lifetime or intended for publication, the term appears
frequently, with the most extensive analyses of the concept being found in the third section of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) where he focuses mostly on the relationship between nihilism, art and science – and where he also declares his intention to write a ‘History of “European Nihilism”’ (see §27). The concept is also discussed, although to a lesser extent, in *The Anti-Christ* (1895), principally in relation to Christianity and Buddhism (see sections 6, 7, 9, 11, 20).

Nevertheless, the ideas which constitute the basis for his thought on nihilism are clearly already present in his texts written prior to 1885. In his posthumously published essay, completed in 1873, ‘On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense’, for instance, Nietzsche articulates an epistemological distrust which might at first sight seem to be a form of epistemological nihilism, but which in fact unveils the problematics of science and positivism – as nihilistic devaluations of life. In his *Untimely Meditations* too, the preoccupation with nihilism is evident in his repudiation of David Strauss’s progressivist ‘new faith’, and in the revaluation of life (as opposed to knowledge) in the second ‘Meditation’ (1874). Even in his adoption of the ‘aphoristic’ style, initially in a work which may be perceived as ostensibly ‘hedonistic’, *Human All Too Human* (1878), the influence of the concept is palpable since this choice of form constitutes in itself a statement against systematization and hence a denunciation of logic, reason and structure – nihilistic values for Nietzsche, given their inherent positing of a superior metaphysical dimension in regard to physical existence. All these instances may be regarded as evidence of the development of a preoccupation which was to be later synthesized under the proclamation of ‘the death of God’, in section 108, ‘New Battles’, of Book 1 in the first published version of *The Gay Science* (1882):

> After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. – And we – we must still defeat his shadow as well! (Nietzsche 1974, 109)

This proclamation marks his first announcement of the perpetual threat that nihilism entails, the analysis of which would constitute Nietzsche’s primary concern throughout his subsequent work.

So, even if the first published use of the term ‘nihilism’ is to be found in *Beyond Good and Evil*, its advent had already been implicitly proclaimed in *The Gay Science* – even prior to its 1887 revision – and its repercussions (the birth of the Overman, and especially the necessity of eternal recurrence) discussed extensively in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). Yet, while the importance of the problem of nihilism is already evident from Nietzsche’s first published text, the in-depth analysis of the concept does not occur until his announcement of the ‘death of God’, which triggers a gradual and ever more extensive consideration of its implications in his ensuing works. In these, his thought on nihilism follows a threefold development. Nietzsche begins by establishing Socratism and Platonism as forms of nihilism. He then equates these philosophies with Christianity (as well as with Buddhism). He defines Christianity as ‘nihilistic in the most profound sense’, since ‘it negates all aesthetic values – the only values recognized in *The Birth of Tragedy*’; stresses that nihilism is ‘rooted’ in ‘one particular interpretation, the Christian-
moral one’ through its positing of a superior reality that undermines life; and argues that Christianity is itself ‘the cause of nihilism’, given that it inevitably entails the eventual devaluation of those same values that it posits (Nietzsche 1968, 271, 7, 13–14). Finally, Nietzsche declares that nihilism is intrinsic to Western thought, at the same time a condition of the past, present and future: beginning with Platonism, developing into Christianity and reaching out into the pessimism of the 19th century but also announcing its advent everywhere ‘in a hundred signs’ (1968, 3); an advent that will mark the era of ‘the next two centuries’ (1968, 3).

It is not only nihilism’s temporality that is paradoxical. The task of its announcement and overcoming also calls for the same contradictory necessity of ‘look[ing] back when relating what will come; as the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself’ (Nietzsche 1968, 3). In other words, as Weller puts it:

 nihilism is that which belongs to the past in the sense not just that it commenced with Plato, or that it follows upon ‘pessimism’ in the period 1830-50 [...] but also that it has already been surpassed in the one who announces its coming and who takes it as his task to write its history before its arrival. (2008, 15)

Moreover, in the same way that the development of the concept of nihilism can be separated into three distinct phases within Nietzsche’s thinking, his definition is also comprised of three basic elements. As Deleuze points out, for Nietzsche nihilism is at one and the same time ‘the value of nil taken on by life’, ‘the fiction of higher values which give it this value’ and ‘the will to nothingness which is expressed in these higher values’ (1983, 147).

If Nietzsche begins by tracing the origins of nihilism back to certain fundamental aspects within Socrates’ philosophy, it is because it establishes reason as an ‘instrument’ or mechanism with which life can be judged from an external point of view, creating a problematic dichotomy – ‘the problem “of the real and the apparent world”’ (Nietzsche 1989, 16) – that is discussed in his first published mention of the term ‘nihilism’.6 For Nietzsche, then, Socrates’ philosophy is a ‘symptom of decadence’; he represents ‘a moment of the profoundest perversity in the history of values’, a decadence emphasized through his final ‘rejection of life’ (discussed by Nietzsche in section 340 of The Gay Science). On the other hand, Platonism is also condemned on account of its elaborating Socrates’ philosophy by arguing that, given its (alleged) inherent objectivity, reason logically posits an overarching, metaphysical, transcendent ‘true’ world, with regard to which the real, physical world is no more than a ‘perverted copy’ (Diken 2009, 17).

In other words, Nietzsche describes Platonism as the belief that ‘the more subtilized, attenuated, transient a thing or a man is, the more valuable he becomes; the less real, the more valuable’ (1968, 308). This, Nietzsche states, is the inexorable effect of Platonism:

 Plato measured the degree of reality by the degree of value and said: The more ‘Idea’, the more being. He reversed the concept ‘reality’ and said: ‘What you take for real is an error, and the nearer we approach the “Idea”, the nearer we approach “truth.” ’ (1968, 308)
So, by subjugating the existing world to ‘a supra-sensory realm beyond earthly life’, Plato not only demeans life, earthly experience, its values and truth but also makes it impossible ‘to create new values that are in accordance with this world’ (Diken 2009, 17). Consequently, Nietzsche argues that, by positing these views, Socrates and (especially) Plato give rise to nihilism since they annihilate life in order to emphasize a superior world, the superior realm of the world of ideas or eternal and perfect forms; an annihilating process which would subsequently be ‘popularized and turned into a mass movement by monotheistic religions’ (Diken 2009, 17). This Socratic and Platonic (and Christian) ‘devaluation of life’ is at the same time an affirmation of three central values: ‘the concept of “aim” [Zweck], the concept of “unity” [Einheit], and the concept of “truth” [Wahrheit]’ (Nietzsche 1968, 13). It is also a moral interpretation of life as opposed to an aesthetic one – in absolute contrast with Nietzsche’s view as expressed in The Birth of Tragedy, where he states that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence and the world justified eternally’ (1967, 24). However, this (Socratic/Platonic/Christian) affirmation is also one that ‘turns back upon itself, and judges itself as a falsification’, devaluing those central values that it posits, owing to both internal reasons – ‘the internal logic of moral interpretation’ (Weller 2008, 16) – and external or historical ones such as the decline of faith in religion and the rise of pessimism; a process which is tersely articulated in the notorious claim ‘God is dead’. The consequence of this realization is what Nietzsche describes in a passage dated Spring-Fall 1887 as ‘The most extreme form of nihilism’, the awareness that ‘every belief, every considering-something-true, is necessarily false because there simply is no true world’ (1968, 14).

Nietzsche identifies two possible responses to nihilism: active and passive (see 1968, 17). He deems active nihilism to be the only true answer, since passive nihilism remains in essence a moral valuation and therefore inherently nihilistic, given that ‘morality is a way of turning one’s back on the will to existence’ (Nietzsche 1968, 7). Passive nihilism considers ‘existence as punishment’, which is precisely what Nietzsche condemns in Socrates’ philosophy (1968, 11). Thus, Arthur Danto is right to argue that although Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism can be traced back to the pessimism or ‘Nihilism of Emptiness’ of the ‘Buddhist or Hindu teaching’, through this Oriental pessimism he is able to construct an affirmative attitude toward life, a ‘new way to say “Yes”’ (1965, 28–29). The overcoming of nihilism by the active nihilist is not only paradoxical in that it is a negation which is in itself the greatest form of affirmation: that of life as such; but also in that, to overcome nihilism, one has to counter it constantly, in a continuous effort to overcome the values, norms and structures imposed by culture and tradition; to re-evaluate existence relentlessly in order to avoid the grasp of nihilism. For this to be achieved, one must stand at the same time before, within and beyond, but also, inside, on-the-limit and outside of nihilism. This highly paradoxical time and place, Nietzsche claims, is that of art: ‘It is in art that the question of the limit – and, above all, the limit between negation and affirmation – becomes critical’ (Weller 2008, 21).

Accordingly, Nietzsche’s way of overcoming nihilism is not in itself an ideology, but a re-evaluative or deconstructive call to arms. It is the proclamation that, since all aspects of life, as well as all the ideological systems that attempt to explain them (science, philosophy, art and religion), are merely the products of ‘the will to power’ – ‘an impulse
and a drive to impose upon an essentially chaotic reality a form and structure, to shape it into a world congenial to human understanding while habitable by human intelligence’ (Danto 1965, 12) – one must revaluate existence continuously in order to destabilize those values that have been assumed as true – and therefore engage in a constant process of creation and becoming. Given Nietzsche’s assertion that ‘the measure of the desire for knowledge depends upon the measure to which the will to power grows in a species: a species grasps a certain amount of reality in order to become master of it, in order to press it into service’ (1968, 267), the values that all ideological systems sustain will necessarily devaluate themselves. The only possible response to nihilism is thus ‘a Dionysian yes [Ja-sagen] to the world as it is, without exceptions, exemptions or deductions’ (Nietzsche in Danto 1965, 15). For this reason, nihilism can only reach its culmination in the notion of the ‘eternal recurrence of the same’ (ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen), since the existence of a universe which repeats itself ad infinitum is, in Nietzsche’s view, the only real alternative to a teleological understanding of the world and the idea of progress; or in Nietzsche’s own words: “the eternal recurrence.” That is the most extreme form of nihilism: (the “meaningless”) eternally! (1968, 36).

One can therefore summarize Nietzsche’s thought on nihilism as a twofold process: nihilism as the negation of life through its subordination to a ‘higher realm’ and nihilism as the consequence of the ‘death of God’; in other words, as the realization of the fictitiousness of this higher realm. Thus, Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism leads him to the idea of the eternal recurrence of the same. Furthermore, the relationship between nihilism and the eternal return manifests itself as a logical and intrinsic necessity, a fundamental characteristic of both. Besides, Nietzsche’s sole proposed response to nihilism (active nihilism) cannot take place without the idea of eternal recurrence, since without a perpetual affirmation in the face of the eternal recurrence of the same, escape from existence remains a (devaluative) option, so that its absence precludes the true fulfilment of nihilism. The idea of eternal recurrence is necessary if nihilism is to achieve its most extreme form – and if it is to be overcome.

**Nietzsche’s shadow**

Nietzsche died almost unknown, mad and silent, having achieved little impact or recognition during his lifetime and a scarce following in the years subsequent to his death. However, as the 20th century progressed and the succession of sociopolitical crises proved the optimism of the turn of the century to be wholly misguided, an evergrowing interest in his work, and particularly in the concept of nihilism, begins to surface throughout the European continent. Owing in great measure to a misunderstanding of Nietzsche’s thought resulting from Alfred Baeumler’s national-socialistic politicization and appropriation of his work – in *Nietzsche the Philosopher and Politician* (1931) – and Heidegger’s countering lectures delivered between 1936 and 1940, the discussion of nihilism also starts to take hold of the academic world of philosophy (where it had been almost completely ignored until that point). However, the concept’s ingress into the realm of philosophical discourse veered in especially non-Nietzschean directions, both due to the success of Baeumler’s work and, despite Heidegger’s efforts to safeguard Nietzsche’s writings from it, also as a result of his own association to the Nazi Party.
Moreover, the term increasingly ceased to be a merely intermittent political or philosophical concern, entering not only the broader realm of critical discourses dedicated to the discussion of modernity (where it would occupy a central position throughout the century) but popular culture more widely. To be sure, beginning with the Russian realist novels of the second half of the 19th century, most notably Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, nihilism appears repeatedly in reference to the subject matter of myriad literary works, paintings, musical compositions and even broader artistic movements (encompassing all of these media) such as Dadaism. And yet, this explosion in usage also worked against Nietzsche’s efforts, since most of these popular cultural instances where the term appears not only fail to claim any Nietzschean lineage but evince a clear ignorance of his work: in some cases being used to describe precisely that which Nietzsche considered to be a response to nihilism (such as the vitalism of certain artistic trends). Thus, throughout the 20th century, the word is used to describe the characters or storylines of films and television series, pop-music styles (such as Punk or Death Metal) and a wide range of counter-culture movements: from popular artistic trends like Warhol’s Pop Art to political activism organizations such as the Red Army Faction (the *Baader Meinhof Gang*), which operated in Germany between 1970 and 1998. What is more, the term also begins to surface frequently in the speeches of countless public figures of the time, from politicians to pop-culture icons; yet often in reference to conflicting ideologies, or in vague ways that demonstrate a dubious understanding of the concept, and mostly in direct contradiction to Nietzsche’s determinations.

Consequently, the word’s pervasive appearance in such a range of disparate contexts did not cause it to fix its meaning but rather to experience an extreme inflation that blurred its specific significance and triggered a radical ambiguation of the signifier. With its entering the domain of popular culture, the term nihilism became (once again) a fashionable affront, used to define and, above all, to disqualify all sorts of ideologies. As a result, throughout course of the 20th century, we find it deployed in relation to concepts as divergent as ‘atheism, Christianity, Judaism, rationality, metaphysics, ontology, transcendental idealism, logocentrism, deconstruction, technology, democracy, Nazism, fascism, socialism, bolshevism, humanism, and anti-humanism’ (Weller 2008, 9–10). Nevertheless, in spite of this extreme disparity of contexts and clear lack of consensus regarding the word’s usage and meaning, towards the latter part of the century, and as if in complete ignorance of Nietzsche’s discussions, the term became being progressively linked to ‘moral, religious, and political anarchism, usually grounded in loss of belief in God’ (Carr 1992, 15); that is, to an elusive ideology of the *nihil* or nothingness. Ironically, this would award Nietzsche with his notorious fame as the ‘philosopher of nihilism’, rather than the philosopher working against nihilism, a belief that became commonplace in popular culture, but more alarmingly, in some circles of academic philosophy which even today still hold a Socratic or Platonic faith in truth as the primordial value.

Hence, even if recent scholarship recognizes that the word nihilism has a particularly complex meaning, as well as a number of disparate associations, that, as Slocombe observes, cannot be grasped or ‘inferred directly from its etymology’, since the term gains its significance historically by means of its reference to particular stances that arise in antagonism to certain predominant ideologies, acquiring its meaning through the
negation of a concrete idea or value rather than constituting in itself ‘an ideology of the nihil’ [….] as such’ (2013, 2);\textsuperscript{12} the tendency to use it precisely in this manner has gradually outweighed those uses and analyses that ensue from careful deliberations regarding the concept’s significance – such as Nietzsche’s. Thus, while most contemporary scholars avoid thinking of nihilism as a specific philosophical trend, point of view or doctrine advocated by a particular individual or collective, they have also moved away from the Nietzschean approach to describe it as the self-devaluation of the highest values, or the Heideggerian view (paraphrasing Nietzsche) that nihilism is ‘the fundamental movement of the history of the West’, a condition that appears intermittently and repeatedly throughout its history of ideas, or (put simply) ‘thought in its essence’ (1979, 62). Nevertheless, the danger there is both the (over-simplistic) suggestion that ‘nihilism’ could essentially be described as an extreme form of scepticism, and, more alarmingly, the problematic underlying implication that the specific values that are being negated are not themselves nihilistic.

Such studies demonstrate that nihilism is not only culture-specific but also generic, in that it relies on specific ideologies to unfold. The meaning of the term shifts in these analyses according, not to the particular historical moment in which it is used or the specific thinker who attempts to examine it but to the concrete aspect of life which it opposes or negates. And yet, this recent tendency to discern between several types of nihilism, and thus to define the concept as the negation of a concrete idea, belief or ideological assumption, has not been able to clarify the meaning of the term. On the contrary, it has obscured the implications of the term’s origin, historical development and its significance, veiling that what the word precisely alludes to overall is to a problem of valuation (and not of negation). While it is not hard to see that the ambiguity of the term arises out of the disparity of the contexts in which it has been deployed since its emergence, what most contemporary uses of the word seem to ignore is that this ambiguity is the result of it being used as a demeaning appellation that seeks to degrade a specific Weltanschauung or value, in favour of a prevalent ideology. Consequently, if the term today is generally described as the belief that ‘life has no meaning’ or as a lack of faith in a transcendental reality or value system, be it theological or otherwise, far from being accurate definitions of the word such uses are moral valuations of these world-views that simply perpetuate its function as an ambiguous disqualifier.

So, all things considered, Nietzsche’s meticulous deliberations on the concept of nihilism seem to have backfired against him. His deductions and warnings regarding the impending (yet ever-present) threat of nihilism now lay hidden beneath the shadow of his paradoxical fame, as the nihilistic philosopher par excellence. In all probability, his popularization of the term, added to the importance and power of the ideologies he was critiquing (Christianity, Nationalism, Positivism, etc.), as well as to the word’s pervasiveness and the heterogeneity of the contexts in which it has been used since his demise, have resulted not only in a radical ambiguation of the signifier’s referentiality but in a generalized tendency to use the term in direct contradiction to the way in which Nietzsche himself understood it. As in the time of the word’s inception, the term nihilism now has become reduced either to an ambiguous affront, a nebulous ideology of nothingness (whatever that may be), or to a vague form of radical scepticism, a problem of negation (rather than one of valuation) – both of which conflict diametrically with the
German philosopher’s own deliberations. Thus, as Nietzsche wrote of Buddha’s shadow, misunderstood and praised by unwitting followers for centuries,\textsuperscript{13} his own transfigured penumbra also remains undefeated, involuntarily yet relentlessly elongating Buddha’s one.

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\textbf{Notes}

1. René Wellek, for instance, states: ‘Nihilism is not of course the creed of bomb-throwing revolutionary groups in Tsarist Russia nor the positivism or the naive belief in science professed by Turgenev’s nihilist, Bazarov, in \textit{Fathers and Sons}, but is rather derived from Nietzsche’s concept, which in turn comes from the anti-Kantian polemics of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who used and possibly coined the term in 1799 in an open letter to Fichte in which he calls idealism “nihilism”’ (1990, 77).

2. See \textit{Der Nihilismus als Phänomen der Geistesgeschichte in der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion unseres Jahrhunderts, Wege der Forschung}, vol. 360.

3. See Carr (1992, 13).

4. While Nietzsche’s most extensive discussions of the concept of nihilism are to be found in the works written after 1885 and, above all, in the \textit{Nachlass}, his ideas were also developed progressively within his early published works: beginning with \textit{The Birth of Tragedy} (where the first step towards this end is already made, as a critique of the moral interpretation of life), gradually leading to \textit{The Gay Science}, where all his fundamental concepts are already present (perspectivism, the death of God, eternal recurrence), and culminating in \textit{Zarathustra}, one of his most iconic works, a sort of recapitulation of his philosophical `system' which contains his most extensive discussion of the notion of eternal recurrence. Although Nietzsche’s earliest proclamation of the ‘death of God’ appears in \textit{The Gay Science}, it is in \textit{Zarathustra} that his consideration of the problem of nihilism is first developed fully and, perhaps, described most effectively. Moreover, in \textit{Zarathustra}, Nietzsche does not expound his thoughts dogmatically or systematically (an approach that he himself repudiated) but through parables that require interpretation, making his style an essential part of its meaning, and thus constituting the most adequate format for the elucidation of such ideas. What is more, the fact that the work presents its central notions and themes poetically also highlights the importance that literature (and art in general) had for Nietzsche.

5. Some writers (including Karl Jaspers) have expressed their reluctance to define Nietzsche’s style as aphoristic, even if Nietzsche himself described the format of his passages as aphorisms in §129 of \textit{Mixed Opinions and Maxims} (1879) (see Westerdale 2013, 14–15.)

6. See section 10, part 1 of \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}.

7. The discussion is taken up by figures as significant as Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Gianni Vattimo or Alain Badiou.
8. As Weller notes, the term ‘nihilism’ surfaces continuously in the works of ‘many of the most influential figures in philosophical, political, and aesthetic modernism’, including, but evidently not limited to, Paul Bourget, Ernst Jünger, Franz Kafka, Adolf Hitler, Walter Benjamin, Albert Camus, EM Cioran and Maurice Blanchot (2011, 9).

9. To list but two examples, the TV show Sledge Hammer! (1986), features a police officer who defines himself as a nihilist, and the Cohen brothers’ cult film The Big Lebowski (1998), where three of the characters appear unnamed in the screenplay as Nihilist, Nihilist 2 and Nihilist 3. In one of the scenes in this film, the protagonist captures satirically the ambiguous nature and relevance of the concept as a fundamental preoccupation of his age by likening nihilism to what was undoubtedly the other major concern of the 20th century, the rise of fascism and Nazism, claiming: ‘Nihilists! Fuck me. I mean, say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it’s an ethos’ (Cohen and Cohen 1999).

10. See Rollin (2012, 80).

11. We find, for instance: Albert Camus’ vague reference to the ‘nihilism of the era’ in his acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize banquet on 10 December 1957; Robert G. Olson’s remark that ‘if philosophers reflect the intellectual climate of the times in which they live, then our age is truly nihilistic’ (cited in Crosby 1988, 12); Alain Badiou’s use of the term in reference to ‘Liberal capitalism’ as ‘the vehicle of savage, destructive nihilism’ (2007, 203); Gottfried Benn’s view that nihilism was ‘the inevitable frame of mind of all those Europeans of the present age who have the courage to think’ (Hamburger 1954, 52); Clyde Leonard Manschreck’s assertion that although nihilism had been present in Western culture for many centuries, ‘no century has been so permeated by nihilism as has our own’, stressing that it had ‘become pervasive, finding expression not only in a flood of literature but in virtually every phase of our existence’ (1976, 85); American musician Bruce Springsteen’s remark: ‘I think you can get to a point where nihilism, if that’s the right word, is overwhelming, and the basic laws that society has set up – either religious or social laws – become meaningless’ (cited in Marsh 2004, 255); Pope John Paul II’s assertion (in his 1998 Encyclical Fides et Ratio) that nihilism, ‘which appears today as the common framework of many philosophies’, is a denial of ‘the humanity and of the very identity of the human being’, a ‘neglect of being’ which ‘inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity’; President Barack Obama’s description of the ideology that drove the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 as ‘stark nihilism’; and, countering the general tendency, Jean Baudrillard’s claim in Simulacra and Simulation (1981) that the observation, acceptance and assumption of ‘the immense process of the destruction of appearances (and of the seduction of appearances) in the service of meaning (representation, history, criticism, etc.)’ not only makes him a nihilist but constitutes ‘a fundamental fact of the nineteenth [and twentieth] century’ (1994, 164).

12. This mode of analysis has been the tendency of several recent studies, of which Carr’s The Banalization of Nihilism (1992), despite its clear religious focus and tone, is perhaps one of the most effective. Carr differentiates between five types of nihilism: epistemological (‘the denial of the possibility of knowledge’), alethiological (‘the denial of the reality of truth’), metaphysical or ontological (‘the denial of an (independently existing) [metaphysical] world’), ethical or moral (‘the denial of the reality of moral or ethical values’), and existential or axiological nihilism (the denial that life has any intrinsic meaning) (1992, 17–18). To these distinctions, Slocombe adds three further categories: theological nihilism (‘the denial of God
and of any other transcendent being (and often any transcendent form of being) [...] not an absence of belief but a belief in Absence’), political nihilism (‘the philosophical rejection of any valid means of government’), and semantic nihilism (the belief that ‘communication is an illusion, and that language does not function’, different from epistemological nihilism in that ‘it comes into play before questions of consensual knowledge or truth because such a consensus must be communicated’) (2013, 7). Slocombe also remarks that political and theological nihilism are ‘portmanteau’ categories, since they are not directly related to nothingness but simply comprise ‘any philosophical formulation that rejects either politics or divinity’ (2013, 7).

13. See section 108, Book 3 of The Gay Science.

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