

***Friedrich Nietzsche and European
Nihilism—Paul van Tongeren***

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In *Friedrich Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, Paul van Tongeren does not simply interpret Nietzsche's thought; rather, he offers his reader an applied history of philosophy, utilizing Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism to diagnose an issue that calls for continued contemporary concern. Including "European nihilism" in the title, then, serves not only to pinpoint a particular way that Nietzsche frames nihilism, but as a reminder that what Nietzsche characterizes as European nihilism remains an ongoing problem, a phenomenon with which the everyday individual and scholars of Nietzsche have yet to contend in meaningful ways.

The work begins with van Tongeren's interesting (though somewhat familiar) account of the development of nihilism from Christian metaphysics through Schopenhauer. After this, van Tongeren focuses on the ideological underpinnings of nihilism, emphasizing especially 1) the "revolutionary phase of the term" (18) nihilism, understood as a liberating and thus positive concept embraced by young Russian Hegelians and anarchists in the mid- and late-19th century and 2) nihilism as a typical "illness" (19) of decadence and impotence (experienced as an individual navigates the chaotic multiplicity of modern Europe) diagnosed in the work of literary figures and psychiatrists from 19th-century France. Van Tongeren identifies these latter two permutations of "nihilism" as especially critical given that Nietzsche's own sense of the concept and its significance was filtered through these two lenses.

In the second and third chapters, van Tongeren looks to Nietzsche's own writings – both his published and unpublished work – to track Nietzsche's use of the term and concept "nihilism". As throughout much of the text, van Tongeren here attends to ways in which Nietzsche's work serves not only as analysis and critique of nihilism, but as the fulfillment of nihilism, insofar as Nietzsche's drive to truthfulness and knowledge (spurred on by his prioritization of honesty) betrays his own nihilistic moral commitments: as van Tongeren notes, "the

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nihilistic value of truth works itself through into his critique of these nihilistic ideals” (30).

The second chapter traces the evolution of the problem of nihilism in Nietzsche from Schopenhauerian pessimism (resulting from one’s inability to know an inherently illogical world); through nihilism as “intensified pessimism” involving either 1) a belief in the meaninglessness of existence or 2) beliefs meant to protect against this belief; through decadence as a fundamentally physiological issue, an illness resulting from the chaotic plurality of cosmopolitan Europe. After these investigations, van Tongeren shifts perspectives, looking to see if there is any unified “theory” of nihilism one might find in Nietzsche’s thought. Unsurprisingly, he finds that there is no such theory, but that Nietzsche’s unpublished analysis of European nihilism from what van Tongeren calls the Lenzer Heide text (the more complete text from which Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* notes about European nihilism come) offers the most “definitive version” of Nietzsche’s take on the problem of nihilism (50). This is a problem that is, by van Tongeren’s lights, “typically European” (51) insofar as it occurs in a context in which a plurality of histories, cultures, viewpoints, and priorities are brought together into a cosmopolitan mish-mash in which individuals must live. For the average European, living in such a plurality results in a fundamental skepticism about any one viewpoint, culture, or history. Such skepticism “make[s] all differences relative” and the skeptic becomes “increasingly ugly, sick, and weak, and because of it regard himself with evermore self-contempt” (52) – that is, the skeptic created by the conditions of European life in the 19th century becomes a nihilist. Given that the mish-mash of European culture results generally from relative improvements in comfort and security, however, such nihilism is, for the most part, either repressed or forgotten: “while our suffering may have been greatly mitigated, meaningless itself... has not” (54). Even so, nihilism is ultimately a problem with which all must contend, and the nihilistic realization – that of “life’s meaninglessness (that there is no order, no truth, no purpose” (54) – is one which even the comfortable skeptic, in less comfortable moments, must face. Nihilism for Nietzsche, then, is fundamentally inseparable from the “European” context – or at least what that context signifies for Nietzsche.

In this chapter, van Tongeren importantly identifies what he argues is the source of all Nietzschean nihilism: the will to truth, or drive to truthfulness, which is nihilistic insofar as it seeks a stable, orderly “true” world where there is none – thus functioning to negate the irrational, chaotic world in which life is actually lived. Indeed, as is so critical for van Tongeren’s analysis, even as the nihilist problematizes truth, he is still “partly guided by [a] truth imperative” involving beliefs in the possibility of truth and the desirability of its pursuit (57).

Furthermore – and more practically – when we recognize “truth” as mere “projection motivated by our needs rather than a mirroring of reality” (65), this undermines moral, political, scientific, and religious pursuits, leaving us with a sense that the pursuits and “best efforts” of humankind have actually been wasted (66).

For Nietzsche, although truth has been shown to be an error, the desire for truth continues – making this nihilistic discovery largely a source of continued suffering, rather than liberation (61). His distinction between passive and active nihilism does hint, however, at the possibility that some might experience such a discovery as liberating. Van Tongeren uses this possibility as a jumping-off point for discussing various kinds of nihilism. Supplementing his reading of the Lenzer Heide text with Nietzsche’s later writings, especially the fifth book of *The Gay Science* and the 1886 prefaces, van Tongeren offers an elaborate sketch opposing strong, life-affirming nihilism (“healthy” nihilism as involving either the perpetuation of the world in all its meaninglessness or the destruction of traditional sources of meaning from a position of strength) to weak, life-denying nihilism (“sickly” nihilism as involving either the formulation of explanations to provide declining life with meaning/to preserve weak life or the destruction of traditional sources of meaning from a position of weakness). Indeed, some of van Tongeren’s parsing and distinction-drawing can come to feel tedious; the categories he distinguishes results in a version of nihilism so limited and local as to perhaps obscure, rather than reveal, the broader patterns in Nietzschean nihilism he hopes to illuminate. And though this is likely a feature of van Tongeren’s mode of inquiry, it also reveals just how varied and disparate Nietzsche’s characterizations of nihilism can be, definitively demonstrating that there is indeed nothing close to a single, unified “theory” of Nietzschean nihilism. What the reader does get by chapter’s end, however, is an elucidating and thorough account not only of a variety of types of nihilism, but also a plausible account of the progressive “phases” of nihilism identified in Nietzsche’s work – with the welcome caveat that “there need not be a continual and unambiguous progression” (99). Though van Tongeren notes that the phases of European nihilism are progressive stages, it still is possible for individuals to regress into a prior stage. Thus, Nietzschean nihilism – while inseparable from a history of ideas and frameworks of understanding – is a fundamentally personal phenomenon, experienced by the individual: it is the experience of recognizing – and facing up to – both the meaninglessness of the world and the failure of meaning-giving structures to eradicate this absurdity (100). According to van Tongeren, Nietzsche himself has this deeply personal experience with nihilism and, significantly,

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recognizes himself as incapable of escaping that which he “for the first time diagnosed” (100).

Along with this experience, according to van Tongeren, comes the realization that one cannot escape the nihilism in which one is embedded – in mourning the dearth of ideals and hoping for a life-affirming world beyond them, Nietzsche believes that “same old”, nihilistic, longing for something beyond this world.

The following chapters from van Tongeren on Nietzsche’s reception allow him to survey some of the most important interpretations of the problem of Nietzschean nihilism: focusing first on Heidegger’s familiar critique, following this with Vattimo’s Nietzschean critique of Heidegger’s continued metaphysical commitments, and a brief section on both Müller-Lauter’s interpretation and the contemporary works in Anglophone philosophy that continue to treat the issue. While those interested in a review of 20th century (and more recent) interpretations of Nietzsche are likely to find this chapter a welcome refresher, van Tongeren seems to include it by way of marking a transition from Nietzsche’s thought and works to the significance of nihilism to our contemporary situation. By the end of this chapter, he hopes his reader will ask him- or herself: Is it possible to overcome the kind of nihilism Nietzsche diagnoses? Why should we, today, care about Nietzsche’s analysis?

The last chapter – by far the most original – gestures towards answers to these questions. Here, van Tongeren looks to works of modern and contemporary literature (including *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Gaming Instinct* (2010) which exemplify the nihilistic view in order to demonstrate nihilism’s ramifications – and to see if we, the readers, feel truly able to stomach such a view and its consequences. In this way, literature may serve as a “laboratory,” a space to test the truth strength of our nihilistic commitments. By orienting his reader in such a space, van Tongeren intends to show the reader residual ideals: not only moral ideals evidenced by the “moral horror” one likely experiences in response to selections from the *Gaming Instinct*, but also the ideal of truth. Indeed, even the exemplary nihilists on whom van Tongeren focuses remain caught up in the paradox of European nihilism, disavowing any and all ideals while striving for honesty and truth.

Nietzsche confronts this paradox by making himself the site of experimentation, by re-reading his own works and writing prefaces that allow him to attempt the incorporation of those hard truths he identifies, thus charting his own “progress” along the way. In his existential experimentation, Nietzsche makes himself a “battlefield” on which the will to truth fights its own “presuppositions”: life and the illusions that allow for its advancement and thriving (149). As he writes about European nihilism, then, Nietzsche does not

only introduce a problem; he becomes the problem he poses. It is this, van Tongeren notes, that makes Nietzsche's critique of nihilism genuinely radical. Though answers van Tongeren's reader might have anticipated getting in this chapter -- answers to why readers should still worry about European nihilism and whether or not it can be overcome -- are not necessarily forthcoming, certain answers do make themselves apparent. To the former, van Tongeren notes that while Nietzsche's philosophy is "about" him insofar as he is the site of experimentation, insofar as all facing up to the problem of European nihilism become sites of the incorporation of truth and the conflicts that emerge between the furtherance of life and the will to truth, it is also about all of us -- and continues to be. Van Tongeren's answer to the latter is a bit more agnostic or undecided, but for good reason: the problem of nihilism is something we all face, yet it is also something that we can only come to know -- and learn to overcome -- "in the singularity of an experimental life" (153). To ask whether it can be overcome is to ask whether it can be overcome in *me, the individual reader contending with nihilism*. Finding out whether nihilism can be overcome, then, requires each one of us to undergo existential experimentation as Nietzsche does, and find out for ourselves whether nihilism can be overcome in each individual case.

Van Tongeren packs quite a lot into this relatively thin monograph, resulting in a dense text best suited for slow, focused reading. Given the incredibly wide scope of the work— his account begins with a "pre-history" of nihilism founded in Christianity, moves through the Anglophone reception of Nietzsche in works as recent as Reginster's *The Affirmation of Life* (2006), and locates manifestations of nihilism not only in philosophy and political history but also, appropriately, in literature -- it is a happy surprise to discover the project itself still treats its topics with precision and in sufficient detail. This ability to distill such a vast amount of information into clear, pithy sentences is a true virtue of the work, and surely results from van Tongeren's lifelong engagement with Nietzsche's thought.