

# NIHILISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON SOCIETY TODAY

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## Abstract

Nihil means 'nothing' and 'ism' means 'ideology.' When these two words are joined, it means 'ideology of nothing' or 'believe in nothing'. Nihilism is a philosophy of moral and epistemological scepticism that became popular in 19th-century Russia during the early years of the reign of Tsar Alexander II. Currently, various forms of nihilism have been identified, like (i) Existential nihilism, (ii) Cosmic nihilism, (iii) Epistemological nihilism, (iv) Metaphysical nihilism, (v) Mereological nihilism, (vi) Moral nihilism, (vii) Passive and Active nihilism, (viii) Political nihilism, (ix) Medical nihilism, etc. A brief account of these categories has been provided in this paper to find out how these affect people, individually and collectively. It is valuable research for all those who would like to identify the nihilistic emotions and rectify them for a positive living.

*Keywords – Existence, Nihilism, Politics, Religion, Hate*

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## Nihilism: A historical perspective

Nihilism can be described as a belief that all traditional values have no foundation and that nothing can be known or communicated in this context. It is said that a true nihilist would believe in nothing. Nihilism negates existence in all formats and is often associated with pessimism and distrust.

It is reported that nihilism first appeared in the writings of Swiss Philosopher Jacob Hermann Obereit (1725 – 1798). German philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819) was a prominent figure who popularized 'nihilism in his writings. Russian author Ivan Turgenev (1818 – 1883) wrote a popular novel based on nihilism, titled 'Fathers and sons' in 1862. The popularity of this novel is reported to be the basis of Russian nihilist movement. Russian nihilistic movement (1860 – 1719) rejected the authority of the state, church, and family. It was aimed at rationalism and materialism as the source of enlightenment

and individual freedom. This movement gradually transformed into a culture of anarchy in Russian society.

Nihilism was discussed at length in the writings of German classical scholar, philosopher, and critic of culture, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), who predicted that growing nihilistic trends would be the cause of disintegration of traditional morality in Western society in the twenty first century.

## Modern nihilism

Modern nihilism is identified in many areas of human understanding, and it is centered around the denial of things and moral values. A brief account is provided below.

### (i) Existential nihilism

The followers of Existential nihilism believe that life has no meaning. Human being can create subjective meaning or purpose of this Cosmos in his mind which can differ from person to person. And as such, this world is fictitious, not real.

### (ii) Cosmic nihilism

The people who focus upon human sufferings in the world are inclined to believe that this Cosmos does not support humanity for a better living; rather it is hostile towards humanity.

### (iii) Epistemological nihilism

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge, under which the origin, nature and scope of knowledge is studied towards the rationality of a belief. Epistemological nihilism means distrust in the existence of knowledge. The followers of this concept consider that either knowledge does not exist or is unattainable by human beings. There is a difference between

epistemological nihilism and epistemological fallibilism. Epistemological nihilism deals with the concept that either knowledge does not exist or is unattainable by human beings towards the rationality of a belief, while epistemological fallibilism is a concept that no belief can provide guarantee about its truthfulness.

#### (iv) Metaphysical nihilism

The followers of Metaphysical nihilism believe that nothing exists in the Universe. They deny all existence, including their own existence. This concept is different from the concept of Metaphysical Solipsism in which people do not deny the existence of human beings. This is also different from existential nihilism in which it is believed that the Cosmos is a creation of human mind. All these concepts are forms of anti-realism.

#### (v) Mereological nihilism

Mere means 'part' and its suffix 'logy' means study or science. Together 'mereology' means the study of the parts and the whole of an object. Mereology is a mathematical logic, but it has been developed by logicians, linguists, engineers, and computer scientists, especially those working in artificial intelligence.

The mereological nihilists believe that objects with proper parts do not exist in the Cosmos, rather only basic building blocks exist, and nothing is part of anything. Objects with parts are a product of human misperception. They deny the fact that an object lacking proper parts can only be an atom and the mereological universe consists of all objects with their proper parts, like the tail is part of a lion or a cloud is part of weather system, etc.

#### (vi) Moral nihilism

The moral nihilists believe that no ethics or morality exists in the world therefore no action is morally preferable to the other. If any morality exists, it is made up by human mind and is artificial as all moral values have different outcomes in different circumstances. Thus, nothing is right or wrong. Moral nihilism is

different from 'moral relativism' which asserts that certain actions are wrong in relation to certain cultures or individuals.

#### (vii) Passive / Active nihilism

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), described passive nihilism as 'a will to nothing'. Passive nihilism is also known as philosophical pessimism.

Passive nihilists believe that life, in the words of a German philosopher Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) is 'an unprofitable episode'. Passive nihilists go through existential confusion and disorientation and start considering life as meaningless. It is a form of resignation from life. Passive nihilists often suffer severe depression.

The active nihilists also go through existential confusion and disorientation, but they do not become inactive. They consider that every individual has freedom to decide about the purpose of his life. Thus, they disregard all human values that were imposed on them by the society, authority, or morality. They consciously destroy all their earlier beliefs and consider themselves as independent free spirits able to create meaning of life for themselves. And in the process, they focus on actions that profits them and often ignore the impact on others.

#### (viii) Political nihilism

A political nihilist considers political institutions as the cause of all troubles in the world and seeks to destroy them all. He does not believe in any principle, value and social institution that uphold political institutions. However, he does not provide an alternative to the existing political set up in the world. Political nihilism is often termed as anarchism.

#### (ix) Medical nihilism

Medical nihilists believe that the effectiveness of medical intervention in curing certain diseases is often without merit and mostly dubious. Many people in the world still consider that taking jabs for the Covid-19 virus is a fake medical exercise and pharmaceutical companies are making a fast buck by exploiting the miseries of people. Jacob

Stegenga, Professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge, UK wrote a popular book in 2018 on Medical Nihilism arguing that modern medical therapies are less effective than they are portrayed by medical fraternity.

## Effects of nihilism

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900), in his writings, didn't portray nihilism as a philosophical concept. Rather he considered it as a pathological disease. It is reported that Nietzsche himself went through the cycle of nihilism but was successful in leaving it behind him. He suggested that the people suffering from any nihilistic tendency should strive to rid themselves of it. He regarded nihilistic emotions as a common phenomenon, a transitional time, in people's lives, which they should use to their advantage. He emphasized that the nihilistic view that life is meaningless is a mistake, a mistake of erroneous generalization. It is like the reasoning of a heartbroken individual claiming that love does not exist in the world.

Like Nietzsche, many philosophers have written on the problem of nihilism and how to overcome it.

The effect of nihilism on the culture and values of our modern-day society has been widespread. The post-modern person can be described as confused, indifferent, and bewildered, directing psychological energy into self-indulgent deep resentment that often explodes into violence. As a result, there is fear, anxiety, anger, economic uncertainty, and mood of gloom in many societies around the globe. These emotions are often exploited by opportunistic people / politicians. What they do by their campaigns is, they turn the passive nihilism among the people into active nihilism by infusing religious / nationalistic phobias into their minds to an extent that people would be willing to destroy everything that comes their way. They lure people to join their ranks / movements which are portrayed as 'designed to benefit people'. Often these movements are based on hatred, division in society and for the benefit of a few over the vast majority.

Certain politicians, rulers have exploited these tendencies in their societies to their advantage in the past and created mass movements to establish their hold on power. Russian / Chinese current regimes, Hitler's Nazism, Mussolini's Fascism are glaring examples in this context. The creation of Islamophobia in some countries of the world is an example in this context. The Hindutva movement in India is also a glaring example in this regard. They create fear among the people and convince them that they are in danger of extinction from certain groups. They incite their followers for violence against these groups and ensure impunity for them and in the process destroy all institutions of justice, law enforcement and accountability. Human values of tolerance, people's co-existence, and peoples' welfare are replaced by hatred, lawlessness, and terror. The people who follow them do not realize that they are taken for a ride and their minds are being polluted from hatred, away from the human values of tolerance, love, affection, progress, and welfare of society. History is a witness that all such campaigns ultimately lead to anarchy, bloodshed of unprecedented proportions where no one can lead a safe and peaceful life.

## Conclusion

Nihilism can be described as one of the greatest crises of human societies around the world. There is a need for self-reflection, individually and collectively, to safeguard ourselves from the destruction as has been explained above. Extreme scepticism in any issue is unwarranted. We cannot generalize things and brand them as non-existent or illogical. We should not allow selfish politicians to lead us to hate each other. The good and evil in a society, on different occasions and circumstances, are indefinable and are often the result of social and emotive pressures. Currently everyone seems to accept meaninglessness in every moral and ethical value. In such a scenario, moral arrogance of a few irresponsible persons will determine which perspective has precedence over the other for their society as they will interpret the religious and moral laws to suit their self-interests. This will result in forceful imposition of 'will of a few' on the

masses that may lead our societies into disintegration and chaos.

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## About the author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.