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Ex aliquo nihil: Nietzsche on Science, Anarchy, and Democratic Nihilism

Babette Babich

Abstract. This essay explores the nihilistic coincidence of the ascetic ideal and Nietzsche's localization of science in the conceptual world of anarchic socialism as Nietzsche indicts the uncritical convictions of modern science by way of a critique of the *causa sui*, questioning both religion and the enlightenment as well as both free and unfree will and condemning the "poor philology" enshrined in the language of the "laws" of nature. Reviewing the history of philosophical nihilism in the context of Nietzsche's "tragic knowledge" along with political readings of nihilism, willing nothing rather than not willing at all, today's this-worldly and very planetary nihilism includes the virtual loci of technological desire (literally willing nothing) as well as the perpetual and consequently pointless threat of nuclear annihilation and the routine or ordinary annihilation of plant and animal life as of inorganic nature.

*The destinal nihil unfolds, triumphs with technology, and
in this triumph reveals itself.*

—Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting:
From Principles to Anarchy*

What Nietzsche calls political and philosophical or epistemological nihilism includes his critique of nineteenth century socialism and democracy as it also includes his critique of modern science. The last is perhaps most problematic just because most readings of Nietzsche and democracy, Nietzsche and politics in general, certainly most readings of Nietzsche and nihilism happily fail to raise the question of science. Yet—and here Nietzsche is as he is in most things a true or *critical* student of Kant—Nietzsche challenges that if one fails to raise the question of science, a question he claims he is one of the first to raise, one follows blindly in its wake.

Quite apart from certain exceptions, certainly not influential in themselves,¹ science today is not merely unchallenged but increasingly installed into the place of philosophy—a philosophy long beset with what Richard Rorty, echoing a point long made by the social scientists for their own part, calls “physics-envy.”² Rorty was apparently fond of the phrase and he repeats it in several essays in his concern with the political dynamics of the academy, in this case regarding the conclusive (and you know something is conclusive, that is to say, a done deal, when its existence is repeatedly and spontaneously denied) hegemony of analytic philosophy.³ If “physics-envy” also affects political science in the rage towards quantificational analysis, i.e., mathematics of whatever kind, wherever possible, in analytic philosophy, “physics,” or just plain science “envy” is the longing, as much as possible to be, or at the very least to be like, the sciences. This wishful-thinking is now so well-advanced that some philosophers fail to see (or more accurately said: aspire to fail to see) where a specific science (cognitive, brain, or linguistic or social, etc.) leaves off and their own “philosophical” reflections begin.⁴ Just a tad more radical than Rorty, Heidegger named this “the end of philosophy,” i.e., the dissolution of philosophy *in* science.

Thus philosophy and even theology can be, so contemporary accounts maintain, *reduced* to science and to the terms of science, or vice-versa.⁵ And in this way, the language of “intelligent design” betrays the same cultural pro-science disposition. Hence it is significant that religious fundamentalists do not challenge science or the teaching of scientific evolution but argue for equal time for the teaching not of the bible but of *scientific* creationism. Science and religion are

¹Critical readings of science are rare in the academic culture of philosophy but one can note, among others, authors like Adorno and like Heidegger, themselves rather at odds with one another.

²Rorty, “A Tale of Two Disciplines,” *Callaloo* 17–2 (1994): 575–85, at 576. The term has been in use for more than forty years, but see Philip Mirowski’s *Economics as Social Physics: Physics as Nature’s Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), particularly chap. 7, “The Ironies of Physics Envy.”

³See on this Rorty’s “Analytic and Conversational Philosophy” in *A House Divided*, ed. Carlos Prado (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), 17–31.

⁴See for an example Paul Churchland’s recent book, *Neurophilosophy At Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); but see also M. R. Bennett’s and P. M. S. Hacker’s more nuanced *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

⁵Thus we may recall Stephen Hawking’s concluding words in his *A Brief History of Time*, invoking what he called the “wonderful” prospect that seems to lie before a science poised to know “the mind of God.” Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 193. Cf. Anthony Flew, “Stephen Hawking and the Mind of God,” *Philosophical Essays*, ed. John Shosky (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 175–82. And see too Patrick A. Heelan, “The Role of Consciousness as Meaning Maker in Science, Culture, and Religion,” *Zygon* (2009): 467–86.

so compatible that one has designed a prize to commemorate this. This complex compatibility was one of Nietzsche's enduring insights.⁶

"Science," Heidegger argues "is the new religion."⁷ Indeed; and like religion, so Nietzsche reminds us in the third section of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, science brooks no critique. Thus any criticism of science tends to mark one, as Heidegger and Nietzsche have been marked, as anti-science.⁸

In place of the modern constellation that sets philosophy at best as a handmaiden of science, Nietzsche undertakes to raise the question of science as a philosophical question and proposes to illuminate that question using the resources of art as a self-conscious and innocent illusion. But, and this is the critical juncture, Nietzsche also emphasizes, both for methodological and logical reasons, that "the problem of science cannot be recognized in the context of science."⁹ Art can help here to the extent that, like science, art is a *defense* against truth, an antidote to the deadly insights of tragic knowledge.

For Nietzsche, science and art can be equated, and he differentiates them only in terms of reflective awareness or honesty.¹⁰ As distinguished from the illusions of both science and religion, art is "illusion" with a good "conscience." In addition, art lacks the prevailing hostility to life characterizing both religion and science "for all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error."¹¹ For Nietzsche "life *requires* illusions, i.e., untruths maintained as truths."¹²

As Nietzsche reminds us, "truth" is not always or inevitably an advantage for life and some truths, as he tells us in his essay on "Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense," are dangerous and hostile to life, and elsewhere he reminds us that some truths are bitter or hateful or repellent, etc.¹³ It is, he declares, "*not possible to live with the truth.*"¹⁴ Thus we have need of art, and that also means

⁶I point to the parallel between science and religion for Nietzsche in "Nietzsche's 'Gay Science,'" in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2006), 97–114. See too Rex Welson, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 32ff.; and Paul Valadier, "Science as the New Religion," in *Nietzsche, Epistemology, and Philosophy of Science: Nietzsche and the Sciences II*, ed. Babich (in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen) (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 241–52, among others.

⁷Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters*, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 20.

⁸See for a discussion, Babich, "'The Problem of Science' in Nietzsche and Heidegger," *Revista Portuguesa de la Filosofía* 63 (2007): 205–37.

⁹BT §ii.

¹⁰Babich, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Science: Reflecting Science on the Ground of Art and Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 200ff.

¹¹BT §v.

¹²KSA 7, 19 [43], 433.

¹³GM I: 1.

¹⁴KSA 13, 16 [40] §7, 500.

that we have need of science qua art, in order that we are not done to “ground” by the truth.¹⁵ It is in this sense that Nietzsche can regard science as a kind of “self-defense,” in Nietzsche’s words, “against the truth,”¹⁶ a perspective consistent with Nietzsche’s definition of science in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, as the “latest and greatest form”¹⁷ of the ascetic ideal.

Here I shall be exploring the nihilistic coincidence of this ascetic ideal and Nietzsche’s localization of science in the conceptual world of anarchic socialism with his reference to August Blanqui’s “*Ni dieu, ni maître*,”¹⁸ as Nietzsche indicts the uncritical convictions of modern science. Using a complex, multiply tuned argument, stylized in the extreme fashion that continues to elude most of his readers (but perhaps this keeps us on our toes), Nietzsche does this by way of a critique of the *causa sui*, questioning both religion *and* the enlightenment as well as both free *and* unfree will, instituting a philological challenge to the physicist’s lack of hermeneutics, condemning what now appears to be a case of “bad ‘philology’” as exemplified in the language of the “laws” of nature.

For Nietzsche, in what would have been an expression of theoretical under-determinism were he not undermining the theoretical basis of physics, a scientist might yet emerge who could argue “the ‘necessary’ and ‘calculable’ course” of nature yet “not because laws rule the world but because there is a total absence of laws.”

How are we to read Nietzsche’s further reflections on science and nihilism in *The Genealogy of Morals*, naming science the latest and best instauration of the ascetic ideal (decried by Nietzsche as inherently nihilist) and declaring that one would rather will nothing than not will at all?

The considerable range of studies that have been made of the *Genealogy of Morals* are inclined to refuse or simply to skip over Nietzsche’s claims with respect to the nihilism of modern science. In this way, Charles Taylor in his recent book, *A Secular Age*, merely echoes most scholarship’s condemnation of Nietzsche’s equation of science and religion, suggesting that a resurgence of faith might counter

¹⁵Ibid., §6, 498.

¹⁶BT §i.

¹⁷GM III: 23.

¹⁸BGE §22. The phrase Nietzsche quotes in this context, “*ni dieu, ni maître*” was the title of a journal founded by the anarchist socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui in 1880. For a comprehensive overview of the anarchist tradition, see Bernard Thomas, *Ni dieu, ni maître, les anarchistes* (Paris: Sand & Tchou, 2008); as well as Daniel Guérin, *Ni Dieu ni Maître. Anthologie de l’anarchisme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002). Blanqui was also the author of a cosmological text on the eternal return and in particular regarding possible worlds, *L’éternité par les asters, hypothèse astronomique* (Paris: Librairie Germer Baillière, 1872), which Nietzsche may have read. On Nietzsche and Blanqui, see Tiziana Andina, “Eterno Ritorno: Nietzsche, Blanqui e la cosmologia del Big Bang,” *Rivista di Estetica* 41 (2001): 3–36.

nihilism.¹⁹ Furthermore, many scholars take Nietzsche's claim that one would rather will nothing than not will at all as a reflection on the will as such.²⁰

But what is it to will nothing? If an all-too postmodern answer can be found in the virtual spaces localizing technological desire,²¹ do we know what would it mean not to will at all?

I.

Nietzsche's Nihilism: Provocation and Equivocation. Is Nietzsche, in Karl Löwith's widely influential expression, the "prophet" of nihilism?²² Echoing the terms of a tradition of political scholarship on the nature (and names) of nihilism, Löwith goes on to reflect that "Nietzsche not only called 'European nihilism' by name for the first time but also helped it come into being."²³ It is the issue of this facilitation, aiding and abetting nihilism, that continues to set the terms of political debate on Nietzsche to this day.²⁴ Löwith, influenced as he was by Heidegger's style of philosophizing, does not make a single claim but argues that Nietzsche both sought to *engage* and to *overcome* nihilism, embodying both the radicalization/intensification of nihilism as well as the reversal of nihilism in the affirmative consummation of the eternal recurrence of the same.²⁵ A corollary to the view that holds Nietzsche's thinking responsible for contemporary nihilism presents nihilism as an already accomplished deed and thus as already *passé*. Thus Henri Lefebvre argues that if "Nietzsche's theories are to be taken seriously, we are already in the midst of nihilism, and already we can see the way out, the rebirth, the beyond."²⁶

¹⁹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁰See Tracy B. Strong's distinction, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Campaigne: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 16–17 and 250–1.

²¹I discuss this with reference to both Baudrillard and Lyotard in Babich, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra or Nietzsche and Hermeneutics in Gadamer, Lyotard, and Vattimo," *Consequences of Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 218–43.

²²Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977 [1935]), 35. See further Jacques Taminiaux, "The Presence of Nietzsche in *Sein und Zeit*," Taminiaux, *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 175–99.

²³Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, 7.

²⁴Several recent collections engage this theme. See, for example and from the point of view of political theory, Tracy B. Strong's introduction to his edited collection, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

²⁵See too Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, trans. David Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964 [1939]).

²⁶Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes September 1959–May 1961*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1995), 223.

As a thinker and opponent of nihilism, Nietzsche himself does not articulate the sophisticated kind of *deja-fait* rebirth Lefebvre emphasizes for his own part. In fact, still today we are hard pressed to understand let alone answer Zarathustra's reprise of the *Gay Science's* madman's warning accusation that we ourselves have killed God and cannot bear the consequences.²⁷ More than a history of the fortunes of belief or anthropomorphic theism, the nihilism Nietzsche engages is of an all-too-philosophical, all-too-epistemological kind, the sort that no matter where you turn is hard to shake. As if the sun itself had gone out, so our madman muses, "Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it gotten colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again?"²⁸

Historically, one of the oldest discussions to link Nietzsche and nihilism is also one of the most patent or obvious: the entry in Rudolf Eisler's conceptual dictionary of philosophy first published in 1901.²⁹ Few scholars cite Eisler on nihilism, but it has obviously played a role in the literature, as can be seen in Karl Jaspers in 1919,³⁰ but also in many others including Heidegger and Löwith.

Heidegger's lecture course on Nietzsche and nihilism begins historically, with the same Turgenev and Dostoevsky invoked by other authors.³¹ Thus Sartre cites Dostoevsky rather than Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, and rather than his recollection of the "invincible order of Assassins" and their signature motto: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted"³² to point to the inescapability of freedom that is

²⁷GS §125; Z *Prologue*.

²⁸GS §125.

²⁹Eisler, *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler, 1906 [1901]), 733. Eisler, an Austrian philosopher who wrote in 1902 one of the first monographs on Nietzsche's theory of knowledge, makes the distinction between epistemological and theoretical knowledge and dates the former back to the sophist and skeptic traditions of antiquity. Eisler discusses the relevance of Jacobi's invocation of the term nihilism as well as Paul Mongré's exposition of Nietzsche's cosmology or ontology of limitless chaos. The mathematician, Felix Hausdorff, used the pseudonym of Paul Mongré in his writings on Nietzsche.

³⁰Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Pieper, 1994). For a contextual reading including Jaspers, see Jin-Woo Lee, *Politische Philosophie des Nihilismus. Nietzsches Neubestimmung des Verhältnisses von Politik und Metaphysik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992).

³¹Wolfgang Müller-Lauter offers an overview of the context of Nietzsche's use of the term nihilism beyond Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* to Alexander Herzen and Peter Kropotkin, noting further Charles Andler's suggestion that Nietzsche's use of the term may have been inspired by Paul Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* inasmuch as Bourget himself engages the writings of the Russian anarchist tradition. See Müller-Lauter, "Nietzsche's Will to Nothingness," *Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of his Philosophy*, trans. David J. Parent (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1999 [1971]), 41–9. Löwith adds Karl Gutzkow to the mix but most critically, Löwith emphasizes the influence of Hermann Rauschnig's *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*, trans. E. W. Dicks (New York: Alliance Book Corp, 1939 [1938]).

³²GM III: 24.

key to existentialism: For Sartre, “Dostoevsky once wrote ‘if God did not exist, everything would be permitted’; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse.”³³

The specifically literary constellation of the origins of the term nihilism underscores the circumstances Nietzsche himself emphasizes in his own reflections on “European Nihilism,”³⁴ drawing a particular connection between the ideologies and histrionics of journalistic anarchism and the politically rational appeal of natural science.

Heidegger himself has been condemned for his own contributions to both epistemic and political nihilism. Yet Heidegger distinguishes his reading of the incipient danger of nihilism from Nietzsche’s own interpretive trajectory, as Heidegger links Nietzsche (where most interpretations *contrast* Nietzsche) with the tradition of Western metaphysics and thereby with nihilism.³⁵ It makes all the difference here that Heidegger thematizes nothingness in his own *Being and Time*, especially in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, well before he explicitly turns to Nietzsche.³⁶ As Heidegger reflects, “The root meaning of the Latin word *nihil*, which even the Romans pondered (*ne-hilum*), has not been clarified to the present day.”³⁷ Thus Reiner Schürmann has cause to invoke Heidegger’s characterization of the “nihilism” of the modern, technological worldview as obscuring Heidegger’s more foundational or preliminary question concerning what can appear to be the nihilism of thinking the no-thing of Being.

It is thus plain that speaking of nihilism we have to do with an inherently equivocal term. As Heidegger began his own academic career as a scholastic logician, he is thus careful to remind us that thinking the logical meaning of the nothing, “nihilism is an illusion.” But for Heidegger, the tacitly thetic dynamic of the logicizing perspective is itself part of the problem:

³³Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007 [1946]), 28–9.

³⁴The published text of the second volume of Heidegger’s *Nietzsche* expands Heidegger’s reference to Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* by quoting Otto Pöggeler’s citation from Jacobi’s *Brief an Fichte*. In English, see Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982), 3.

³⁵For a reading sensitive to Heidegger’s distinctions, see Michel Haar, *Par-delà le nihilisme. Nouveaux essais sur Nietzsche* (Paris: PUF, 1998); but also Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

³⁶“Why are there essents, rather than nothing?” Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959 [1953/1935]), 1. Heidegger’s invocation of the nothing is relevant for Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* as indeed for Camus as well as Bataille, but also Blanchot and Klossowski.

³⁷Heidegger, *Nietzsche, IV*, 19.

The question arises whether the innermost essence of nihilism and the power of its dominion do not consist precisely in considering the nothing merely as a nullity, considering nihilism as an apotheosis of the merely vacuous, as a negation that can be set to rights at once by an energetic affirmation.³⁸

The logical alternative is a patent one: “the nothing either ‘is’ something thoroughly null or it must be a being. But because the nothing obviously can never be a being, the only other alternative is that it is the purely null.”³⁹

Heidegger was attacked for taking the question of the nothing as seriously he did,⁴⁰ and it is by way of a defense that we may read his reflection that “Perhaps the essence of nihilism consists in *not* taking the question of the nothing seriously.”⁴¹ Genuine or authentic nihilism [*eigentliche Nihilismus*] is at work for Heidegger in the very ontic preoccupations of modernity, as an absorption with things in the oblivion of Being, treating “Being as a nothing (*nihil*).”⁴² To the extent that Heidegger contends that “*Metaphysics as metaphysics is nihilism proper*,”⁴³ he also argues that “the metaphysics of Plato is no less nihilistic than that of Nietzsche.”⁴⁴

From Löwith and Lefebvre to Heidegger and Schürmann, the range of readings that can be given of Nietzsche and nihilism seems limitless and nearly all of these include political overtones on the extremes of both the left and the right. In this way, Richard Wolin’s *The Seduction of Unreason* cannot but seem to overlap with Abir Taha’s *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism*.⁴⁵ In the spirit of Georg Lukács’ politically violent indictment already patent in his title *From*

³⁸Ibid., 21–2.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Heidegger’s “nothing” provoked the logical ire of no one less than Rudolf Carnap, and the subsequent debate continues to be central to the stylistically adumbrated (but still politically substantive) analytic-continental divide. I thus discuss this latter context in Babich, “On the Analytic-Continental Divide in Philosophy: Nietzsche’s Lying Truth, Heidegger’s Speaking Language, and Philosophy,” *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy*, ed. C. G. Prado (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2003), 63–103. See also James Luchte, “Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Carnap: Radical Phenomenology, Logical Positivism and the Roots of the Continental/Analytic Divide,” *Philosophy Today* 51–3 (2007): 241–60.

⁴¹Heidegger, *Nietzsche, IV*, 21

⁴²Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 217.

⁴³Ibid., 205.

⁴⁴Ibid. See for a discussion, William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1963), 363ff.

⁴⁵See Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Abir Taha’s *Nietzsche, Prophet of Nazism: The Cult of the Superman—Unveiling the Nazi Secret Doctrine* (Bloomington, Ind.: AuthorHouse, 2005).

Nietzsche to Hitler,⁴⁶ and like Hermann Rauschning's more generally political warning in 1938 against the nihilism inherent in National Socialism,⁴⁷ readings of this kind track a *causal* connection between Nietzsche's thought and political nihilism. Even as critical an author as Jürgen Habermas highlights this same causal danger in an epistemological context as he underscores our now supposedly secure "immunity" to Nietzsche's all-too "contagious"⁴⁸ brand of nihilism.

Other authors writing on Nietzsche and nihilism mix theological and political accounts, as some have read theological nihilism back into the beginning of the Judeo-Christian tradition with Augustine.⁴⁹ In addition to other studies, Gianni Vattimo's more contemporary reading of nihilism and postmodernity⁵⁰ is significant to the same extent that the *postmodern* (the word and the idea) galvanizes (and irritates) readers of a recent generation rather in the way that the terminology and conception of *nihilism* affected earlier generations. It would take us in another direction than the current reading follows, but it is also relevant

⁴⁶See Georg Lukács, *Von Nietzsche bis Hitler oder Der Irrationalismus in der deutschen Politik* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1966); and Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason: Irrationalism from Schelling to Nietzsche*, trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981). See, for an insightful analysis, Endre Kiss, "Lukács versus Nietzsche, or The Most Significant Stalinist Trial Against Philosophy," *East Europe Reads Nietzsche*, ed. Alice Freifeld, Peter Bergmann, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 207–18.

⁴⁷Rauschning, who took his doctorate with Heidegger as Löwith did, warns of the inherently nihilistic dangers of National Socialism in Paris with his *Die Revolution des Nihilismus. Kulisse und Wirklichkeit im Dritten Reich* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1938). See too Rauschning, *Masken und Metamorphosen des Nihilismus: der Nihilismus des XX. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt and Main: Humboldt, 1960). For his part, Habermas repeats Lukács' influence, as I argue in Babich, "Habermas, Nietzsche, and the Future of Critique: Irrationality, The Will to Power, and War," *Nietzsche, Habermas, and Critical Theory*, ed. Babich (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004), 13–46.

⁴⁸See Habermas, "On Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge: Postscript from Nietzsche's Erkenntnistheoretische Schriften," *Nietzsche, Habermas, and Critical Theory*, ed. Babich (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004), 47–67, at 47. Scholars who write on Habermas and Nietzsche duly repeat Habermas's emphasis upon this same issue of contagion.

⁴⁹Many philosophical themes have been traced, in one way or another, to Augustine. And nihilism is no exception. Or if not Augustine, then at least Peter Lombard, as it turns out to be hard in the case of Augustine to read between mentions of nothing and nihilism. See note 29 above as well as, for further discussion, Seizo Sekine, *Transcendence and Symbols in the Old Testament: A Genealogy of the Hermeneutical Experiences* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999). Sekine does this in associative concord with Asian thought.

⁵⁰Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. John R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). The language of the postmodern continues to irritate some readers even as it fades from popular use. See for a discussion, Babich, "Nietzsche and the Condition of Post-Modern Thought: Post-Nietzschean Post-Modernism," *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, ed. Clayton Koelb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 249–66.

to note discussions of Nietzsche and Buddhism⁵¹ in addition to treatments of Nietzsche and literary nothingness.⁵²

To cite Nietzsche's most famous non-book *The Will to Power*: "What is the meaning of nihilism? That the highest values devalue themselves."⁵³ Where the waters become troubled, both philosophically and politically, is with the still ongoing implications of Löwith's contention that Nietzsche's philosophical influence brought political nihilism "into existence."⁵⁴ Along with the political nihilism associated with Nietzsche are the high stakes associated with talk of the death of God: two world wars, that is to say Nazism in particular and fascism in general. And beyond the fulminations of the arguments for or against Nietzsche as putative "Godfather" of fascism, the same conviction continues.

In the sections to follow, I explore philosophical nihilism in the context of "tragic knowledge,"⁵⁵ along with political readings of nihilism in order to raise the all too patently practical question of what we might call, to give it a name, "*planetary nihilism*"—including the ongoing and hence affectively nugatory threat of nuclear annihilation, but also the literal and everyday annihilation of plant and animal life, indeed of organic and inorganic nature by bits and pieces: not everything, not all at once, just some things, until there is nothing left to destroy.

II.

Nietzsche and Philosophical Nihilism: Tragic Knowledge. Starting with the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche underscores the dangers of the Kantian distinction between the apparent and the real, the phenomenal and noumenal world. For Nietzsche, it is as philosophers of what he will later call

⁵¹In addition to others who have written on this theme, see Robert G. Morrison, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); as well as Benjamin A. Elman, "Nietzsche and Buddhism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44.4 (1983): 671–86; and Freny Mistry's earlier *Nietzsche and Buddhism: Prolegomenon to a Future Study* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981).

⁵²Such readings are various, including Blanchot, Camus, Klossowski, and of course Bataille in addition to Alphonso Lingis and, from a different perspective, Gillian Rose. See further the contributions to *Evil Spirits: Nihilism and the Fate of Modernity*, ed. Gary Banham and Charlie Blake (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

⁵³KSA 12, 9 [35], 350. Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht*, §2. Note the section title "Nihilismus" and the first section "Nihilismus als Konsequenz der bisherigen Wert-Interpretation des Daseins." For a discussion of the relevance of this particular emphasis on "value," see Babich, "Heidegger's Relation to Nietzsche's Thinking: On Connivance, Nihilism, and Value," *New Nietzsche Studies* 3.1/2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 23–52.

⁵⁴Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, "Foreword to the Second Edition," 7.

⁵⁵BT §15; GS §370.

the “dangerous perhaps” that Kant and other critical thinkers “sense that under the reality in which we live and exist, there lies hidden a second and completely different reality, and that this surface reality is therefore an appearance.”⁵⁶ The rub comes in knowing this “second” reality, an impossibility on Kant’s critical terms, adduced as such solely to bridge the gap or Humean connection between cause and effect, otherwise known as the gap between empirical and logical necessity. Thus in “Schopenhauer as Educator,” Nietzsche speaks of “the gigantic horror which overcomes the human being who has lost his footing amidst the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world as the principle of reason in any of its forms threatens to collapse.”⁵⁷

For Nietzsche, the rectifying justification [*Rechtfertigung*] of art lies in its power to redeem or harmonize this dangerously dissonant insight, providing an ultimately “metaphysical comfort,”⁵⁸ as Nietzsche characterizes the comfort of art in terms of both critical as well as romantic idealism.⁵⁹ This is Nietzsche’s argument for the genesis of the tragic work of art as a *necessary* response to the sight of the chaotic heart of Being, that is, the ancient Greek’s insight into “what is” as a glance “into the terrible annihilation of supposed world history together with the cruelty of nature.”⁶⁰ It is in this critical spirit that Nietzsche affirms “*We have art in order that we are not undone by the truth.*”⁶¹

Two meanings of nihilism are at play in Nietzsche’s writings from the outset: the nothing of the yawning abyss at the bottom of things as sheer appearance and the nauseating effects of the insight into this abyss leading either to the tragic lethargy of absurdity or the deadly consequences of the “buddhistic” abnegation of the will. Nietzsche’s reading of the “birth” of tragedy is thus founded upon the nihilistic consequences of Kantian epistemology. Hence Nietzsche explains that “the real truth of nature and the lie of culture that poses as if [*als ob*] it were the only reality is similar to that between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself and the whole world of phenomena [*Erscheinungswelt*].”⁶²

In 1792, Jacob Hermann Obereit invokes the term “nihilism” that we above spoke of as Nietzsche’s intellectually unhooking, “gigantic horror,” in order to give a name to the fatal logical, emotional, and above all spiritual consequence of setting the noumenal (that is, for us, an *x*; i.e., for us: *nothing*) in the place

⁵⁶BT §1.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸BT §8.

⁵⁹This is what Nietzsche means by an “artist’s aesthetics.” For further references to the literature on this theme and for discussion, see Babich, “Nietzsche’s ‘Artists’ Metaphysics’ and Fink’s Ontological ‘World-Play,’” *International Studies in Philosophy* 37–3 (2005): 163–80.

⁶⁰BT §7.

⁶¹KSA 13, 16 [40], 498.

⁶²BT §8.

of God.⁶³ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi makes this point more plainly and still more importantly for history just because he makes it in a letter to Fichte.⁶⁴ Philosophical nihilism is the epistemological legacy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as it was regarded after Jacobi and as can be seen, and as Michael Gillespie emphasizes, in Jean Paul,⁶⁵ the aphorist so important for Nietzsche, no less than for Schopenhauer. It is in this same epistemological spirit that Nietzsche frames his initial reflection on the "science of aesthetics"⁶⁶ in *The Birth of Tragedy* in terms of "tragic knowledge."⁶⁷

To this extent, Nietzsche's later claim in his "Attempt at a Self-Critique" that his early efforts in *The Birth of Tragedy* were concerned with nothing other than "the question of science" is more than a mere figure of speech as many of Nietzsche's readers, especially the more analytically-minded among them, have supposed. Beyond science, and as Schiller had similarly sought to do with respect to the aesthetic as such, Nietzsche points to the transfiguring role of art inasmuch as art alone, and precisely *as* illusion, works to harmonize the nihilistic paralysis of "tragic knowledge." The question Nietzsche is later at pains to specify as the "problem of science"⁶⁸ in *The Birth of Tragedy* articulates the "tragic insight" that follows from the darkness of the recognition of seeing "how logic turns upon itself at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail."⁶⁹ It is in the spirit of this

⁶³Oberleit, "Widerruf für Kant: Ein psychologischer Kreislauf." *Gnothi seauton oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde als ein Lesebuch für Gelehrte und Ungelehrte* IX-2 (1792): 109-26. See Jacob Hermann Oberleit's critique of the consequences of Kantian idealism, *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist der verzweifelten Metaphysik. Ein krit. Drama zu neuer Grund* (Berlin, 1787). For a thorough overview, see Dieter Arendt's book *Nihilismus. Die Anfänge von Jacobi bis Nietzsche* (Cologne: Jakob Hegner, 1970) in addition to the more commonly cited essay by Otto Pöggeler, "Hegel und der Anfänge der Nihilismus-Diskussion," *Man and World* 33 (1970): 163-99. See further, Stephen Wagner Cho, "Before Nietzsche: Nihilism as a Critique of German Idealism," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 18.1 (1995): 205-32. On the issue of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the influence of German idealism on the conceptual role of nihilism, see too Löwith's 1939 exposition of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 301-2.

⁶⁴See Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1994), esp. 519. See for a discussion, Frank Ankersmit, "Jacobi: Realist, Romanticist, and Beacon for Our Time," *Common Knowledge* 14.2 (2008): 221-43. See more broadly, Roland Duhamel, *Die Decke auf dem Kopf: Versuch einer Deutung des Nihilismus* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006) who notes that the first usage of the term can be traced to F. L. Goetzius in 1733 (58).

⁶⁵Thus Michael Gillespie begins with Jean Paul in "Fichte and the Dark Night of the Noumenal I," the third chapter of his *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶⁶*BT* §1.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, §15.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, ii.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, §15.

tragic insight that Nietzsche also explains the Apolline illusion of Greek tragedy as “radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night.”⁷⁰

Nietzsche devotes his life to drawing out the *epistemological* and moral consequences of this very specifically *philosophical* nihilism. And beginning with the philistinism of the humanistic theologian, David Strauss, and reflecting further on the cultural uses and harm of “history” for life, Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* continues in “Schopenhauer as Educator” to invoke Heinrich von Kleist as the poetic exemplar of a cultivated human being confronted with the philosophical insight leading to the nihilism Jacobi outlined in his own letter to Fichte, comparing this encounter as being brought to the brink of “nothing . . . but nothingness.”⁷¹ This nihilistic prospect led Jacobi and others to urge the path of a calculatedly mortal “leap of faith” (*salto mortale*),⁷² leading Schopenhauer to “despair of truth.”⁷³

Despair, as a word for philosophical nihilism, is usually associated with depression, spiritual or otherwise. As Nietzsche sees it, the “danger” of philosophical nihilism is the inevitable companion of “every thinker whose starting point is Kantian philosophy, provided that in his sufferings and his desires he is a strong and complete human being and not merely a clattering machine that cogitates and calculates.”⁷⁴ The philosophical problem of nihilism, as Nietzsche cites Kleist’s account of this nihilistic insight, is that “We cannot decide whether what we call truth is really truth, or whether it only appears to be such. If the latter is the case, then the truth we collect here is *nothing* upon our death, and all our efforts to procure a possession that will follow us to the grave are in vain.”⁷⁵

How is one to bear the nihilistic insight of tragic knowledge? Nietzsche does not argue against the furthest and most difficult consequences of this nihilism and he refuses to forget that however one ambitions to take the “leap” of faith, the vault itself is inevitably fatal just because the issue is inherently a matter of life *and* death, with the consequence that for Nietzsche the religious remedy as a leap, like its antecedent in Pascal’s wager, remains as fundamentally nihilistic (or anti-life as Nietzsche emphasizes) as the problem it is meant to solve.⁷⁶ It

⁷⁰Ibid., §9. This dark reflection is tied to Nietzsche’s articulation of the healing balm of the tragic artwork, which he continues to explore on the model of the uncanny and strange Greek hero of ultimate reflexivity as Goethe mentions Lyncaeus, who had the disturbing ability to turn his own eyes inward. Cf. *BT* §15 and §24.

⁷¹Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings*, 519.

⁷²Ankersmit discusses Jacobi’s “*salto mortale* from reason into belief and feeling” in Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings*, 242.

⁷³*SE* §3.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid. (emphasis added). From Kleist’s letter to Wilhelmine von Zenge, 22 March 1801.

⁷⁶Ankersmit notes Jacobi faced the same criticism from his contemporaries. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings*, 242.

will take a noble and rare philosophic sensitivity, as Nietzsche argues, in order to grasp the implications of tragic critical knowledge, requiring all the resources of culture *and* of cultivation—that Nietzsche and Löwith (and Burckhardt) named “education”—in order to be able to endure this insight.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had argued on behalf of Schiller’s remedy of aesthetic cultivation. In his *Untimely Meditations* he muses that Schopenhauer might serve as educator not for everyone (for Nietzsche the only democracy to be found highlights difference rather than equality) but much rather and only for those “few” with an affinity for rarified thought coupled with a poetic—and “knightly”—sensibility. Thus Nietzsche calls us to attend to the *personal* life-circumstances that make all the difference for the aesthetic sensibilities of Schopenhauer who had counseled a kind of *ataraxia* or resignation, as this spirit of resignation is different in Pyrrho⁷⁷ (and hence the critical importance for Nietzsche of noting the difference between *personalities*).

If the mischief is in trying for such a renunciation of the will, there is an even greater danger in its universalization. One can aim for the peace and the calm of detachment and serenity (positive nihilism) and wind up in the swirls and misery of pessimistic *ressentiment* (negative nihilism). Thus Nietzsche sought affirmation which is always, as yes-saying, not only the oldest word for consummation but also a word for love, Nietzsche’s *amor fati*.

Such an *experimental philosophy* as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of a fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it halts at a negation, a No, a will to the No. Rather, it wants to get through to the reverse—to a *Dionysian Yes-Saying* to the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection—it wants the eternal cycle: the same things, the same logic and illogic of entanglements. The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian relationship to existence—my formula for this is *amor fati*.⁷⁸

III.

Planetary Nihilism or Nihilism and Science. If nihilism means that the highest values devalue themselves, if nihilism corresponds to the negative pronouncement “God is dead,” Nietzsche also argues that an objective and soberly demystified and scientific perspective is part of the same nihilism. Hence science,

⁷⁷See Löwith, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* for a discussion of Nietzsche and Pyrrho in connection with nihilism. Although John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor As a Response to Nihilism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) titles his book with the image of Pyrrhonic laughter, he omits any reference to Löwith in this context.

⁷⁸KSA 13, 16 [42], 492 [WM §1041]; cf. GS §276; EH, *Why I am so clever* §10.

understood as the contemporary manifestation of the ascetic ideal, corresponds to planetary nihilism. Heidegger emphasizes the nihilism of modern technology as Schürmann reminds us in terms of the more current context of globalization. As Schürmann analyzes this point, “contemporary man, ‘dislodged from his essence, compensates his homelessness by the organized global conquest of the earth.’ As decidedly one-dimensional, such conquest is the most revelatory manifestation of the technological *phuein*.”⁷⁹

Yet if the meaning of nihilism cannot but catch us in a fundamental equivocation, the meaning of the ascetic ideal is no less equivocal and political commentators can remind us that Nietzsche is all for the ascetic ideal as a means of self-creation. Indeed, it is only by dint of the ascetic ideal that the human animal ever *became* interesting in the first place.⁸⁰ And it is by means of the ascetic ideal that artists and creators become what artists they are.

Nietzsche concludes his *On the Genealogy of Morals* with the still ill-understood contention that the ascetic ideal is not *opposed by* but and much rather *extended into* the technical and natural scientific modern ideal. This scientific reference should be heard not merely in connection with what we noted above as the anxious heart of philosophical nihilism,⁸¹ but more plainly or literally. Modern science does not give us the power to create *ex nihilo* however this consummately or divinely nihilistic ideal may inspire our longing. What science does do is to provide us the power to generate nothingness just a bit, just where there had once been something (anything/everything). It is thus with reference to the technological twilight of modern science that Nietzsche’s madman’s question acquires and maintains its uncanny relevance: “How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?”⁸²

This is the explosive light play of the fire cracker which had been one of the first uses for what became the gunpowder used in muskets and cannons, and subsequently in rocket launches and, metaphorically rather than materially, thence to all the modern devices for “shock and awe,” all the way up to nuclear weapons. For over half a century, an almost infinite interval by modern standards of impatience, we have been perfecting this awful power. As a result, the very idea of the bomb now underwhelms us where it once preoccupied thinkers and scientists from Jaspers and Jonas not to mention Heidegger and Arendt to both Heisenberg and Einstein;

⁷⁹Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 191. Schürmann cites Heidegger’s *Question Concerning Technology* in his text.

⁸⁰*GM I: 6*. What Nietzsche gives with one hand, he can seem to remove with another as he also qualifies this new interest as profound and “evil” (*GM I: 6*). See further Banham and Blake, eds., *Evil Spirits*.

⁸¹“Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center into X” (*KSA 12, 2 [127], 125 [WP §1]; GM II:25*).

⁸²*GS §125*.

and one can argue that nihilism today corresponds to the political itch or inching toward atomic war, as George Lakoff has drawn our attention to even the language we use as it articulates our desire to keep nuclear “options” “on the table.”⁸³

Part of the equivocal meaning of nihilism is that more than reflecting a negative animus vis-à-vis the world—that would be one meaning of nihilism as a psychological desire to negate or wish away the world (in this sense, simply closing one’s eyes is a kind of nihilism)—the scientific and technological practitioners of today’s ascetic ideal are well beyond merely affective “world denial.” Thus the Husserl of the *Crisis* points all too literally to the incipient threat of destruction.⁸⁴ For Lefebvre, with “its wars and revolutions, defeats and victories, confrontation and turbulence, the modern world corresponds precisely to Nietzsche’s tragic vision. . . . This is a new negativity, a tragic negativity which manifests itself as incessant violence.”⁸⁵ Thus we might take Deleuze and Guattari at their word and thus we might draw the spatial perspective of a Lefebvre to its fullest consequences (a spatiality that should be crossed with Schürmann’s *economic* account of Heideggerian space/time),⁸⁶ just to practice one of Nietzsche’s favorite expressions in the service of an effectively *phenomenological* perspectivalism.⁸⁷

It is salutary in this connection that what was shocking for the Heidegger of the *Beiträge* or indeed for Arendt in *The Human Condition*, becomes merely *banal* for Jean Baudrillard (not to begin to speak here of Slavoj Žižek). The capacity for world destruction does not stop at the earth. Old news, we say. But can we learn from the reminiscences of a Sputnik enthusiast of the cold war or the convictions of the more recent fascism that continues even after the current election and its new hopes?

⁸³For a reflection on the indirect language associated with the politics of (and policies concerning) nuclear war, see George Lakoff, for a Rockridge Institute post, variously re-posted on the web: “The Words None Dare Say: Nuclear War,” <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/research/lakoff/the-words-none-dare-say-nuclear-war.html>. Accessed 16 January 2009.

⁸⁴Gianni Vattimo notes Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences* in this context. See Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 130–1.

⁸⁵Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 23.

⁸⁶Schürmann discusses space in a Heideggerian context understood in an economic sense (“The *nomos* or injunction always and everywhere determines the *oikos*, the abode of man.” Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 235) as a kind of dwelling: “the entry into what is *eigen*—not what is ‘proper’ or one’s own (property, appropriation, possession), but is *oikeion* (from *oikos*, the ‘house’, hence ‘eco-nomy’), pertaining to one’s dwelling. The entry into the event is the homecoming from metaphysical errancy, which, for us children of technology, remains thinkable and doable only as the struggle against the injustice, the hubris, of enforced residence under principal surveillance—whatever form it may take” (ibid., 281).

⁸⁷Not perspectivism as I distinguish this in my discussion of “Nietzsche’s Perspectivalism” in Babich, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Science*, 46ff.

Retrospectively, we know, J. Robert Oppenheimer reports the words “I am become death” as he heard them in his mind upon the detonation of the first atomic bomb. Heideggerian, Jasperian, Arendtian worlds away from our modern, technological, scientific world, what occupied Krishna and Arjuna was the human-referred aspect of an all-too-human sized war, and it is that same scale that should still engage the whole of our concern today. Oppenheimer articulates the nihilism of modernity, the twentieth-century concern with the absolute and totalizing mobilization of power and of doom on the grand scale.⁸⁸ This is the cosmic scale of Nietzsche’s world-child, building up and casting down worlds in play. But that is myth and today’s war-games are not about play on the level of the cosmos, but all-too human rapacity that is beyond our wildest powers of imagining but already in play, already developed, business as usual, that is power and the pursuit of profit on this earth, here and now.

It is unclear that there can be anything like redemption or salvation from this all-too-human cupidity and rapacity that we insist upon everywhere we go, wherever we are. Hence Nietzsche, who noted that living and murdering are identical, is able to define humankind as a “planetary infection,” as Deleuze emphasizes this phrase, hence the “humanism” Heidegger is at pains to underline as foundationally, ineliminably nihilistic.

For my part here, just to keep my cards on the table, I am more interested in the way we human beings express our insidious growing role as a “‘skin disease’ of the earth”⁸⁹ in pesticides, poisons, clear-cutting, the building of ordinary roads to ordinary ends, building ordinary homes for the sake of ordinary business, developing natural resources, “exploring” traditional and alternate sources of energy. That is, I am concerned with *development* per se and beyond the oxymoronic phantasm of “sustainability.”⁹⁰ The devastation of the population of

⁸⁸See Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); and for a discussion of Kahn from a present day context, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). See too for a discussion, Karl Löwith’s “European Nihilism: Reflections on the Intellectual and Historical Background of the European War,” in Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173–284; as well as Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁸⁹Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Thomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 64. Deleuze quotes Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II *Of Great Events*.

⁹⁰See the final chapter of Babich, *Words in Blood, Like Flowers: Philosophy and Poetry, Music and Eros* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); and see for a more public (and applied) policy reading including a useful discussion of the north-south politics of the newly globalized world, Aidan Davison, *Technology and the Contested Meaning of Sustainability* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

raptors, hawks, and eagles, by the slicing arms of the windmills we build in our search for some other, which is to say *additional*, way to power the things we have made corresponds for me to the darkest of the world-darkening meanings of nihilism. From our cars to the entirety of our electric grid: driving our devices for fitting ourselves with an integrated world of our own making (this is the hype in Baudrillard's "hyper-reality") and thereby girding ourselves, guarding, saving ourselves *from* the incursions of what we call an "outside" world into "our" world, ranging from (ontically) nihilistic "devices" (or doomsday machines) to computers to the highways and city lights that themselves devastate animals from elk, squirrels, and foxes to birds, insects, amphibians, all the animals one ever/never learned about, and the slow death of plant life, ah, and especially the trees, from the streetcars and the trains as well as all the other kinds of energy we desire to warm us in the dark of the coming night. Thus we take no thought for the prairie dogs and wolves and Canada Geese we kill and for convenience's sake—that, once again, is what we name wildlife "control"—we call for the wholesale slaughter of untold beings, individual beings. Yet another meaning, if anyone is still counting, of nihilism.

The *worlds* annihilated, the *worlds* destroyed are not intended to be our own "world." Although and peripherally we can, at best, work ourselves up to a worry about the accidental incidental consequences of our intentions. For the point here, however, is germane to the question of nihilism that untold worlds *not our own* have already been destroyed. Hence our more or less thoughtless sense of impotence and inevitability in the face of modern technology. This sense of impotence reflects the contemporary face of nihilism much more than the idea of the death of God or the loss of the old social order threatened by socialism—the last always a danger posed more by an idea, an ideal less realized but hinted at by its always incomplete practice. For as Nietzsche reminded us, modern science not only "proves" that everything and everyone is equal before the law,⁹¹ but modern science also makes it plain, and this was key for both Heidegger's and Löwith's notion of European nihilism, that everything, that *anything* is possible.

IV.

The Politics of Reading Nietzsche's Nihilism. Nietzsche's patently, presumably anti-democratic sentiments have not hindered scholars from developing the theme of Nietzsche and a perfectly popular or else more "agonistic" democracy.⁹²

⁹¹BGE §22.

⁹²Lawrence Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995); see also as his "Prospects For A Democratic Agon: Why We Can Still Be Nietzscheans," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 24 (2002): 132–47. See too William E.

But the association of democracy and natural science, although exactly characteristic of Nietzsche's thought, characterizes few readings of Nietzsche and even fewer reading of Nietzsche and nihilism.

Indeed Nietzsche's anti-god bit of fuming on behalf of enlightened modern science (taking enlightened modern science as uncritically as possible), is often supposed to be constitutive of nihilism as such: "the acknowledgment that traditional values are hollow."⁹³ But acknowledgment is as acknowledgment does, and the challenge for theorists who read Nietzsche *and the political* is the challenge of linking a reading of the political in Nietzsche's writing to the political, to politics *per se*.⁹⁴ For most people in the modern era, one tends to be able to have one's hollow values—this is the point of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche's claim that "the highest values devalue themselves"—while nonetheless counting on them as well. As a result, a specifically nihilistic recognition of this point "proceeds subtly"—i.e., slowly, and thus we read that "Nietzsche tries to help [nihilism] along by announcing the death of god."⁹⁵ For his part, Nietzsche traces the death of god back to the ancient gods, not only great Pan, as Heidegger quotes Nietzsche as saying, but also to more recondite eastern divinities associated with Buddhism⁹⁶ as well as, of course, the Norse gods destined for death and decomposition after a final battle that has drawn the greater part of literary (and musical) attention. Rather more mainstream, in the Christian teaching of the death of God in the person of Jesus Christ, everyone knows the all-too-human death of God, which the Church, at least, officially commemorates two days out of every year and indeed with every celebration of the mass. All this and more is at the heart of Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of god."⁹⁷ It is critical to

Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and for an overview, Christa Davis Acampora, "Demos Agonistes Redux: Reflections on the Streit of Political Agonism," *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (2003): 373–89.

⁹³Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 45. See also Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), but also his "The Politics of Nietzsche's Philosophy: Nihilism, Culture and Power," *Political Studies* 33(1985): 418–38; as well as Tracy Strong, "Language and Nihilism: Nietzsche's Critique of Epistemology," *Theory and Society* 3 (1976): 239–63 (also in *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975 (1987; 2000)]), 55ff., and, by way of a kind of negative political theory, again, Gillespie's *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*.

⁹⁴By which is usually meant theory if only because real-world or practical *applications* of Nietzsche to, just for instance: election fraud or the planned demolition of the world trade center or the politics of Sierra Leone or Iraq-Afghanistan-Pakistan or a town meeting in Switzerland are rare. It is common for political theorists to chide one another's readings of Nietzsche in this spirit, without themselves offering examples of the more "ontic" sort mentioned above.

⁹⁵Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, *ibid*.

⁹⁶GS §108.

⁹⁷There are many references here and to follow any of them will take the reader in a direction not always to be aligned with other readings. See Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence*

this notice that we do not hearken much to the report of this death in modern times and hence this once-upon a time “highest” of values can, according to Nietzsche, be said to have been “devalued.”

Explaining his own an-archic political account, Reiner Schürmann writes that

Nietzsche’s program of transvaluation subverts all representations of a first, be it man, God, a principle for reasoning or acting, or an ideal such as scientific truth. Nietzsche is assuredly entitled to the various epithets of Anti-Christ, Anti-Socrates, Immoralist (or rather Amoralist). Strictly speaking, however, these are titles of incipient closure. They express, not some doctrine on the subject of Christ, Socrates, or morality but the foundering of any epochal principle at the end of modernity. They are titles for the transmutation of the origin understood as *primum captum* into the origin as unseizable aggregation and disgregation of forces.⁹⁸

Where for Schürmann, Nietzsche is a postmodern thinker, dissolving or pluralizing into a name for almost anything—as Nietzsche once said of himself “I am all the names in history”—and serving Heidegger as another name for technology,⁹⁹ other scholars argue that Nietzsche is thoroughly modern while he is less than modern for a great range of others readers, including those who convict him of a very obvious nostalgia for antiquity.¹⁰⁰

Unmodern or postmodern, Nietzsche explores the cultic tradition of tragic transfiguration in his first book together with (and this is what makes it hard to read that first book) the overcoming of that tragic condition by way of reason and science, with reference to a creative force he there names the “insatiable.” This “insatiable,” which corresponds to what Nietzsche calls an

and *Dionysian Faith* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); as well as Eugen Biser, “*Gott ist tot*: Nietzsches Destruktion des christlichen Bewußtseins (Munich: Kösel, 1962); and Paul Valadier’s several books on Nietzsche, such as his *Nietzsche et la critique du christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1974), among others.

⁹⁸Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 54–5.

⁹⁹For Schürmann, Heidegger sets Nietzsche up, in every sense of the word, as a “spokesman for technology” (*Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 188), effectively “substituting” a “Nietzschean discourse for the technological economy” (*ibid.*, 184). Thus it can be useful to remember that at least in the Nietzsche lectures, “it is necessary to read ‘technology’ wherever Heidegger says Nietzsche” (*ibid.*, 363). Manifestly, then, as Schürmann tells us, Heidegger deploys an “interpretive violence in reading Nietzsche” (201).

¹⁰⁰“Nietzsche did not understand as Marx did, for example, the degree to which the extension of markets distinguishes social organization in liberal societies from the Christian past. Or, to give another example, he did not understand as Weber did the significance of the qualitative leap from traditional to bureaucratic organization with respect to the problem of responsible individuality” (Warren, “The Politics of Nietzsche,” 438).

“artist’s metaphysics”¹⁰¹ as differentiated from a metaphysics of either religious or mechanistic kinds, he later names the will to power.¹⁰² For Nietzsche here, this insatiable phenomenon always finds *myriad* ways “to detain its creatures in life and compel them to live on.”¹⁰³ This manifold creative power includes a number of illusions but in every case as Nietzsche emphasizes, these illusions are meant to function on the cognitive level as a fetter—from Kant to Schiller and Schopenhauer: “One is chained by the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence; another is snared by art’s seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; still another by the metaphysical comfort that beneath the whirl of phenomena, eternal life flows on indestructibly.”¹⁰⁴

The creative nihilism of the artist turns this seductive captivation to its advantage in the service of life and thus one can argue that for the human animal, nihilism may be another way to hang on to life. Knowledge and action exclude one another.

V.

Universal Law, the Democratic Ethos, and Annihilation. Reflecting as he did on the history of scholarship in general and science in particular, Nietzsche argues that a scientific system stands or falls with the merits of its advocate and its times just because what we take to be the “scientific” arrangement in question is not its scientific rigor (or lack thereof) but an explicitly interpretive reflection of the temper of the times, inclusive of the personalities of its proponents (researchers, theorists, scholars, scientists). I have argued that Nietzsche’s philosophic insight took this historical reflection on the basis of his own science of classical philology to science in general, especially chemistry as he favored this metaphor but also including logic and physics, as well as the biological sciences including physiology (which Nietzsche incorrectly imagined would be developed to a highly particularized/individualized as opposed to standardized, one body-function, one-genome fits-all kind of science) and medicine as well.

Beyond personal tastes and affections, Nietzsche sets the nineteenth century ideal of science and scientificity in the same conceptual world as the political and economical ethos of socialism in its own historically anarchic context, challenging the physicist’s lack of hermeneutics or what he here explicitly names:

¹⁰¹See for a discussion and further references, Babich, “Nietzsche’s ‘Artists’ Metaphysics’ and Fink’s Ontological ‘World-Play.’”

¹⁰²See further, Babich, “Ontologie,” *Nietzsche-Lexikon*, ed. Christian Niemeyer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 257–60.

¹⁰³*BT* §18.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

“bad ‘philology’” exemplified by an *uncouth* insistence upon the “laws” of nature and the smiling equivocation that takes natural law as analogous to specifically European law and thus as inherently universal and still more as equalizing. For Nietzsche this inclination always and inevitably—and this is the heart of what we may call Nietzsche’s hermeneutically sensitive phenomenology of science—was not merely casually equivocal but dangerously ‘illogical’ in a scientific context just because, as he argues, “nothing is really equal.”¹⁰⁵

For Nietzsche, the desire for “freedom of the will” contradicts the entirety of physical and metaphysical causality at once: this is “the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society”¹⁰⁶ from any role in one’s ultimate individuality. Every man his own Jesus now becomes; every man is the center not merely of his own world but of the cosmos.¹⁰⁷ Although it is easy to take Nietzsche as arguing on behalf of natural causality (one’s evolutionary endowment, physiology, upbringing), it is this very naturalistic argument Nietzsche refuses.

Ensclosed in a routinely misread passage that also happens to be the *locus classicus* of Nietzsche’s most patent—let me emphasize this—**because** self-identified self-contradictory assertion (expressly conceding that the claim that truth as interpretation is itself no more than an interpretation), Nietzsche claims that modern science articulates the conceptual world of anarchic socialism seeking “to meet the democratic instincts of the modern soul!”¹⁰⁸ Thereby Nietzsche is able to tease out the workings of an insidiously anti-aristocratic “mental reservation” within science in the process: “Everywhere equality before the law—nature is in this matter no different from us and no better off than we.”¹⁰⁹

If Nietzsche sets off what we can now see to be his hermeneutics of science by thus challenging the very idea of the *causa sui* in the sections leading up to this section in *Beyond Good and Evil*, questioning as we noted at the start both religion *and* the enlightenment together with the traditional conception of free (or, and indeed, *unfree*) will,¹¹⁰ here he challenges the weaknesses of the physical scientist’s formation (or scholarship) on the scientist’s own terms as a lack of interpretative facility and “bad ‘philology.’”¹¹¹ This incompetence is exemplified by the equivocal language of the “laws” of nature.

Nietzsche argues for the thought-possibility of an anarchic horizon not in his own political nineteenth century sense, but in a sense closer to Schürmann’s

¹⁰⁵GS §111.

¹⁰⁶BGE §21.

¹⁰⁷AC §43.

¹⁰⁸BGE §22.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid., §21; but also §§16, 19.

¹¹¹Ibid., §22.

an-archy, a scientific scenario reflecting “the ‘necessary’ and ‘calculable’ course” of nature, “not because laws rule the world but because there is a total absence of laws.”¹¹² In the wake of this insight, reflecting the mature Nietzsche’s expression of philosophical nihilism, “much remains” as Schürmann has it, “for us to think, but little for us to know.”¹¹³ That is, as Schürmann glosses Nietzsche here: “To ‘know’ is to create the fictions that we hold objective and true.”¹¹⁴

As Gillian Rose has argued, it is the idea of law as such (and our “preoccupation” with law) that unites the self-destructive impulses of the ascetic ideal.¹¹⁵ To say that one would rather will nothing is thus not at all to say that one would rather not will *at all*. And here we recall Schürmann’s clarification of contemporary nihilism, according to which, and Carnap was already well-advanced to this insight, Heidegger’s reflections on ‘no-thing’ are particularly meaningless, worth nothing, as we say. In this respect, Schürmann can conclude, the contemporary era is essentially “nihilistic” just to the degree that “it proclaims aloud that only entities and goods are worth anything, that their ‘difference’ from being or the Good is worth nothing. Here *nihil* stands for the soberness of the technological economy according to which there is nothing to look for behind the visible and the invisible.”¹¹⁶

Willing nothing, as current world events arguably have made all too plain, is about willing things and goods and our own all-too-humanist purposes and ends and all at any price. In this way, such a humanist nihilism is both consummately democratic and perfectly rational. It is not irrelevant here that this same nihilistic will is crumbling as we speak, a catastrophe on the economic order of real or market values that we can neither identify or acknowledge much less explain, which is only to say that it is a catastrophe we cannot halt and cannot change. Thus we slaughter whales (and everything else we call meat), we “collectively” club seals to death, and our tax dollars continue to pay for the aerial chasing down of wolves, to shoot them at the end of the sport (for both our Park Rangers and for bounty- and other hunters), after running them to exhaustion. Nor do we oppose any of this, nor do we act, instead we sign a pretend internet campaign to appeal for the value of change and watch television specials, although many of us no longer even bother to do that.

If we find ourselves unable to move to any real or effective change in what we, collectively as human beings, do, that is to say: if we find ourselves unable to

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 49.

¹¹⁴Ibid. See further, Babich, “The Science of Words or Philology: Music in *The Birth of Tragedy* and The Alchemy of Love in *The Gay Science*,” *Revista di estetica n.s.* 28, XLV, ed. Tiziana Andina (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2005), 47–78, esp. 52ff.

¹¹⁵See Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

¹¹⁶Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 191.

halt the decimation of the planet, the rape of the seas, the systematic exclusion of wildlife—and how “wild”? from what perspective?—from every secret corner of the earth, “developed” for our purposes, we are indeed consummately resolved, *committed*, Nietzsche argued, to willing nothingness. And the nothingness we intend has nothing to do with our own nihilation, our own annihilation. As I noted to begin with, we do not will the destruction of our *own* lives, only the lives of other beings, not ourselves: our enemies we need not call by name, as the ultimate supplement, the infinitely replaceable, the substitutable.¹¹⁷

We will instead and for no passion other than utility, the annihilation, the destruction of beings who are nothing to us, we concede or legislate, tolerate the destruction of every kind of animal or plant but also and ultimately the very earth itself, which we plunder for materials we name “raw” and thereby claim, as so many “natural resources,”—who made them ours?—to be mined for profit and energy, spilling, as we do, poison onto the surface of the earth to bleed into rivers and ground water, when we do not drill into the sea, leaking the oil that is also a nihilism as oil kills everything it touches, and of course, this is what oil does, it touches everywhere we drill.

Contemporary nihilism, so some argue, has limits just because we draw the line at ourselves, or more precisely said, at beings of our own kind. But here too what John Gray, in an indictment striking both for its passion and the relative mildness of its claims, called our intrinsically humane “rapacity” is unmistakable.¹¹⁸ This is greed more than thoughtlessness, and this greed obliterates life in its wake: our manner of fishing not by the fist-full but football-field-full drag nets, from boats that churn the depths of the seas into packaged frozen meals, spewing blood behind them as they go for months in deep water, or the mechanical coldness and heartlessness of factory farming, mechanically inseminating, mechanically feeding and watering, and then slaughtering animals as mechanically¹¹⁹ as possible.

In all Nietzsche tells us, we are engaged in nothing less, and that is to say at no lesser scale, than wiping away the horizon itself. The Nietzsche who calls to us to be true to the earth utters this at once anti-humanist and anti-nihilist imperative

¹¹⁷This may be part of the reason we like to read Carl Schmitt.

¹¹⁸See John Gray, *Straw Dogs* (London: Granta, 2002).

¹¹⁹I note here Siegfried Giedion's point (Jacques Ellul also comments on this same technical point) that the actual killing of animals remains a handcraft, in the sense that it is done by hand despite the consummate mechanization of the technologized slaughterhouse. Giedion also emphasizes the cold neutrality that follows upon the practice of killing, which adds indeed to the horror of the animal holocaust that has grown exponentially indeed since his analysis. See Giedion, *Mechanization takes Command* (New York: Norton, 1948). For a sociological reading of the “anthropocentric fiction that the cries of dying animals are the responses of unfeeling automata” see Mike Smith, “The Ethical Space of the Abattoir: On the (In)human(e) Slaughter of Other Animals.” *Human Ecology Review* 9.2 (2002): 49–58, at 49.

just because it is needful. Our nihilism is directed against the earth itself: the space of being for those other “folk” who also and along with human beings have inhabited the earth until now, those whom, as the historian Lynn White reminds us, a once-upon-a-time subversive mendicant friar called brother and sister,¹²⁰ so naming fishes, birds, all manner of crawling animals, including the insects we cannot imagine considering, lizards and frogs, sharks and whales, elephants and sea turtles. We kill all of these, the very least to the greatest of our brethren.

We should find the thought of exploring extra-terrestrial *Lebensraum* (this is the point of “bombing the moon,” of exploring Mars) a sobering one, as if, after we have done here, we might just move on, colonize space. What will be left of the planet? Who will be left—and who are we that we think this way?

We are hell-bent on willing nothingness (annihilation) at our own hands, and if Nietzsche is right, what Heidegger called for with respect to the modern technological means of life is impossible, at least failing the dispensation beyond ourselves that the later Heidegger argued that we would need. As Heidegger noted, reading Nietzsche, there is no remedy for or against the *horror vaccui* of the human will that might simply be met with the counsel of releasement, that might merely or modestly recommend that some of us, you or I, might just and simply stop or let be.

It is in this sense that one might think of the alternative between nihilism and an an-archic politics as Schürmann speaks of it: “If the principles are to yield, and entry into the event is to occur, unprincipled praxis will either claim everyone that lives in the economy of transition or it will be nothing at all.”¹²¹

I am inclined to close by repeating Nietzsche’s word that we would rather will the nothing, *das Nichts*, than not will at all. Thoughtless and unprincipled, far from Schürmann’s ‘nothing at all,’ we will not leave off willing until there is nothing left to will.¹²²

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¹²⁰Lynn Townsend White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203.7, at 1206–7.

¹²¹Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 243.

¹²²When I presented this paper at Catholic University in February 2008, Monsignor Robert Sokolowski asked me if the remedy to all of this might be a kingship—the term used was “monarchy.” Upon reflection, I suppose that Sokolowski intended his question contra Nietzsche’s notion of anarchy, as Nietzsche writes that “—When the anarchist, as the mouthpiece of social strata in decline, waxes indignant and demands ‘rights’, ‘justice’, ‘equal rights’, then he is just feeling his lack of culture” (*TI, Expeditions of an Untimely Man*, §34). Less in opposition to rights or justice, Nietzsche asks *what* in us moves us to call for justice. Thus the call for “rights” is different from the revolution that demands them. “Even a complaint, making a complaint, can give life some spice and make it endurable: there is a small dose of revenge in every complaint” (*ibid.*).