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# PATERNALISTIC CULTURES VERSUS NIHILISTIC CULTURES

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(Received 19 August 2012, revised 6 October 2012)

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## **Abstract**

Many philosophers from Nietzsche via Heidegger to contemporary communitarian thinkers like Sandel and MacIntyre criticized nihilism and identified it with many problematic attitudes and behaviours. My central goal of this essay was to explain why I regard nihilism as a wonderful achievement and one, which is worth defending. In this way, I stressed both that nihilism leads to a reduction of violence against individuals as well as to the possibility that individuals get placed in a position such that they can realize a radical multiplicity of concepts of the good life.

**Keywords:** nihilism, paternalism, culture, dynamic triangle

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## **1. Introduction**

Many philosophers from Nietzsche via Heidegger to contemporary communitarian thinkers like Sandel and MacIntyre criticized nihilism and identified it with many problematic attitudes and behaviours [1]. Consequently, they put forward values, norms or attitudes by means of which nihilism can be defeated and overcome. I do not regard their criticism as plausible. In contrast to their platitudes concerning nihilism, I regard nihilism as a wonderful achievement and one, which is worth defending [2]. In order to provide some reasons in favour of this attitude, I will progress as follows. In part one of this short essay, I will clarify the concepts of nihilism, paternalism and culture. In part two, I will put forward some reasons why I affirm nihilistic cultures, but not paternalistic ones. In the final part three, I will provide some hints concerning how to solve questions concerning values and norms within a nihilistic culture whereby I am concerned in particular with our contemporary posthumanist culture in which a high respect for the sciences and technologies represents the spirit of our times.

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## **2. Nihilism, paternalism and culture**

Concerning ‘nihilism’, I am referring both to alethic as well as ethical variants of nihilism [2, p. 242]. I take it that alethic nihilism stands for the following concept: Alethic nihilism implies the affirmation of perspectivism whereby perspectivism stands for the attitude that all perspectives are interpretations. However, the concept ‘interpretation’ does not imply that the judgment in question has to be a false one. An interpretation can represent a false judgment. However, perspectivism also implies that so far we have not yet gained the option of having a criterion by means of which we can distinguish a true from a false judgment. Hence, an interpretation is a statement which can be false, but it does not have to be false. Still, it is not yet possible for us to clarify whether a judgment is actually false or true. It is this basic attitude which alethic nihilism affirms.

Ethical nihilism, on the other hand, refers to the doubt concerning the possibility of non-formal accounts of the good, whereby the concept good refers to values, but not to norms. This position implies that it is possible to put forward a non-formal account of norms. I have argued in favor of the norms of freedom and equality. However, I do not uphold their universal validity. I merely regard them as wonderful achievements for which it is worth fighting. I am happy that many other citizens and scholars agree that negative freedom and equality are wonderful achievements. It is an implication of alethic nihilism that these norms are not universally valid and I agree. For a normative judgment to be universally valid means that its truth is independent of a human decision. However, it is this understanding which is being doubted by alethic nihilism. Whether a normative judgment gets accepted and applied depends primarily upon a decision made by human beings. Whether a norm is actually universally valid or not cannot currently be known.

Ethical nihilism goes beyond alethic nihilism which implies that it is implausible to claim the universal validity of values. Ethical nihilism not only upholds the former but claims further that any non-formal account of the good is bound to be implausible or even dangerous due to its potentially violent implications.

Paternalism implies the negation of nihilism. Any non-nihilistic culture is paternalistic. If it is regarded as not being the case that all perspectives are interpretations, then an alethic paternalism is given. (If it is assumed that there is a moral truth which cannot be ascertained, then I regard the corresponding culture still as a nihilistic one, because it is still the case that all political rules, laws and prescriptions need to be seen as interpretations due to the implausibility of having certain knowledge of their validity. Such a position could be upheld by thinkers who belong to the tradition of negative theology. I am very grateful to Michael Schramm and Michael Hauskeller for raising this issue.) Analogously, an ethical paternalism can be defined. Ethical paternalism affirms that it is possible to make an universally valid normative judgment. Hence, even

Nussbaum's strong but vague concept of the good affirms an ethical paternalism by arguing in favour of a universal concept of the good.

The third concept, which is important in this context, is the concept 'culture'. Here, I am drawing upon a very wide concept of culture, which can be seen as the opposite of the concept 'nature'. Consequently, culture refers to a locally and temporarily limited realm, which is being determined by a specific attitude concerning ontology and ethics. Hence, in paternalistic cultures human beings share a similar understanding of what the world actually is. There needs to be made the further distinction between a strong and a weak version of paternalistic cultures. The Holy Roman Empire certainly represents a strong version of a paternalistic culture, whereas, West Germany during the nineteen fifties and sixties can be identified with a weaker version of a paternalistic culture. In the first case, a strong and detailed account of the good is regarded as valid for all citizens. In the latter case, a certain plurality is accepted, but there are vague conceptions of the good life which are supposed to be valid for all people.

In what respect can it be said that Germany at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century differs significantly from West Germany during the nineteen fifties and sixties? Here, the relevance of commentaries of the foundational law needs to be pointed out. There are some prominent commentaries, which are particularly important for understanding how the various articles of the law ought to be read. During the nineteen fifties and sixties, a commentary edited by Maunz and Dürig was particularly influential, and Dürig himself was responsible for the commentary on Article 1 of the foundational law, the one which deals with the central and foundational relevance of human dignity. Herein, he put forward that human dignity refers to a quality which is actually ontologically present in all human beings and it is this understanding of human beings which is supposed to be valid for all times at all places [3]. In 2003, Herdegen was given the chance to update the commentary to Article 1 of the foundational law for the commentary, which was originally edited by Maunz and Dürig. In contrast to Dürig, Herdegen stressed that human dignity does not stand for an eternal quality, which is actually ontologically present in all human beings, but that the concept solely depends upon an agreement among human beings like all other laws, too [4]. Thereby, Germany moved from a weak paternalistic culture towards a nihilistic one, and I affirm the movement in this direction.

### **3. Reasons for preferring nihilistic cultures to paternalistic ones**

Our culture is a nihilistic one, because many of the above mentioned nihilistic qualities are being widely shared. However, from my perspective our culture still needs to progress further towards nihilism, because it has not yet sufficiently embraced ethical nihilism.

In any case, I wish to point out that our enlightened culture has come about as a result of many movements, deeds, and acts which have taken place during the Enlightenment. During the Middle Ages, human beings had to believe

what their political and religious leaders wanted them to believe. This applies both to their understanding of the world as well as of the values and norms they ought to subscribe to, ought to act in accordance with and ought to believe in. Thereby, the political and religious leaders were violent and cruel towards their citizens, because these were forced to hold on to and act in accordance with a world view, which in most cases did not correspond to the physiological and instinctual demands of the various individuals. Human beings of all social levels realized that harm was done to them in this manner and that such a social structure was merely in the interest of the religious and aristocratic leaders. Consequently, many individuals and groups took a lot of great and dangerous efforts in order to free themselves from this paternalistic oppression, so that it becomes possible for them to realize their own individual understanding of the good life, to live in accord with their own physiological demands and to form and stick to their own understanding of what the world is like [2, p. 239]. This struggle can be seen on a philosophical as well as on a political, scientific, religious, or artistic level. The French Revolution represents a part of this struggle in the same way as Feuerbach's, Schopenhauer's or Nietzsche's philosophies are a part of this development. The increasing relevance of the Natural sciences and technologies and the devaluation of a dualistic metaphysical conceptualization of the world reveal another aspect of this movement. In the 'Critique of Cynical Reason', Sloterdijk describes appropriately various developments, which have taken place during the Enlightenment which enabled the move away from paternalistic social structures [5]. In this way, the norm of negative freedom has gradually become more and more important, because it provides individuals with the possibility to realize their own concept of the good life and to live in accord with it. It was this goal, which the various Enlightenment figures have tried to promote, and I am very glad that they were successful in moving towards nihilism in this way.

Paternalistic cultures give universally valid answers concerning values, norms and what the world consists of. However, each human being is unique, has very specific individual passions, instincts and demands, which cannot be described by means of universally valid judgments, and wishes to realize her own understanding of what a good life consists of. Universally valid judgments do not take this radical plurality of human existences into consideration. Paternalistic cultures are based upon such judgments. Hence, such cultures are bound to be in conflict with the individual's wishes, drives and demands. By affirming the validity of their own conceptualization of the world, which is also supposed to represent the legal basis of their own culture, harm, violence and cruelty is being done to the radical multiplicity of human existences. In order to reduce the pain, which necessarily is associated with the claim of a universal validity, it seems to me as advisable to try to free oneself of those claims and to attempt to realize the dissolution of encrusted structures. Even if the dissolution of an encrusted structure will lead to another encrusted structure, then the nihilistic impulse teaches us to permanently move beyond structures, which lack

the dynamic fluidity of life so that the glittering diversity of our radically pluralistic goals can be realized.

#### **4. A methodology for arguments within our nihilistic culture: three pillars as dynamic triangle**

I regard our contemporary posthumanistic culture as one version of a nihilistic culture, because it both affirms perspectivism as well as a type of this-worldliness. I personally prefer to talk about our metahumanistic culture instead of referring to it as a posthumanist one. Metahumanism tries to bridge the duality between the Anglo-American transhumanism and the continental posthumanism. In contrast to posthumanism, which affirms a materialist understanding of the world, metahumanism refers to a this-worldly, immanent relationalism, which stresses the dissolution of the subject-object dualism as well as the duality between technology and nature. What is important here is to reply to the question of how it is possible to argue in favor of certain norms and values within a nihilistic framework? My own suggestion is based upon the following three pillars for argumentation.

1. Acknowledgment of wide spread or dominant opinions: Hereby, I both refer to sociological research as well as to narratives which I am putting forward to underline and stress that the issue in question is one which is being shared by many if not most people.
2. Acknowledgment of scientific and technological findings: Hereby, I recognize the state that our age is a scientific and technological one. To many of us scientific and technological research leads to solidly based insights. I am not claiming that we are getting to know the truth as correspondence to the world in this way. However, if we wish to base our judgments on something, then this type of research is usually a reliable method for finding solutions that work. By referring to the latest insights in these fields, I am taking this spirit of our times into consideration.
3. The initial two insights only ought to be recognized, if they do not undermine the wonderful achievement of negative freedom: I regard negative freedom and derived from it also equality as the two central norms which are worth fighting for, because I think that violence against the individual gets minimized, if these norms get acknowledged, and because my physiology regards these two norms as valuable ones, too. I am trying to stress the relevance and importance of these two norms by putting forward the aforementioned genealogy. Luckily, I am sharing the acknowledgment of the relevance of these two norms with many citizens of enlightened countries, and I am glad to be able to point out that there are also citizens in non-enlightened countries who affirm these norms [2, p. 243]. Non-enlightened countries have a strong metaphysical foundation of their political culture, whereas this is not the case or is merely the case in a weaker form within enlightened countries.

By having these three pillars, a dynamic triangle is given on the basis of which I can develop further insights by means of a hermeneutic-dialectic consideration of the various issues in question. It is this methodology, which provides me with a basis of being able to affirm negative freedom and a this-worldly, immanent relationality without having to move beyond nihilism.

## 5. Conclusion

My central goal of this essay was to explain why I regard nihilism as a wonderful achievement and one, which is worth defending. In this way, I stressed both that nihilism leads to a reduction of violence against individuals as well as to the possibility that individuals get placed in a position such that they can realize a radical multiplicity of concepts of the good life. In the end, I also put forward a methodology such that it becomes clear that nihilism does not have to lead to a indifference concerning various understandings of the world, but that it is actually possible to find a method of arguing without having to move beyond nihilism.

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