

# Nihilism, from Existentialism to Postmodernism

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**Background:** This talk is an overview of my PhD research, shortly to be published as *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, 2009), and available soon from Amazon.com.

**The issue:** Nihilism is popularly associated with both existentialism and postmodernism, but in different ways: existentialism is often understood as a critical response to nihilism, while postmodernism is often understood as a symptom of nihilism.

**My argument:** Postmodern philosophers are in fact deeply concerned with the problem of nihilism, and offer a useful response. To an extent, existentialist and postmodernist philosophers offer complimentary responses to nihilism.

## **What is Nihilism?**

According to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900):

- '[T]he radical repudiation of value, meaning and desirability.'
- (Famously): 'God is dead.'

## **What is Postmodernism?**

- A brief definition: 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard)

*Characteristics of Postmodern Philosophy:*

1. The critique of reason
2. The critique of the subject
3. Anti-humanism
4. The end of history

*Who are the postmodern philosophers?*

- Jean-François Lyotard (1924 - 1998)
- Jean Baudrillard (1929 - 2007)
- Gianni Vattimo (1936 - )

## **How do Existentialists understand Nihilism?**

- Friedrich Nietzsche: values

*Diagnosis:* the devaluation of the highest values

*Response:* the active completion of nihilism; revaluation of all values

- Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980): intentionality

*Diagnosis:* the "desire to be God" (being-in-itself-for-itself)

*Response:* radical conversion – embracing freedom and creating values

- Martin Heidegger (1889-1976): being

*Diagnosis:* metaphysics – the oblivion of being

*Response:* "being-historical-thinking" preparatory to a turn in being

- Heidegger's critique of Nietzsche and Sartre (values, subjectivism, humanism)

## ***From Existentialism to Postmodernism***

We have thrown off that old existential garb...Who cares about freedom, bad faith and authenticity today?

- Jean Baudrillard

Precedents to the "postmodern turn" in nihilism:

- Nietzsche and Heidegger
- Karl Marx (1818-1883)
- Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)
- The French Sociological tradition e.g. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917); Marcel Mauss (1872-1950)
- Structuralism and semiotics e.g. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

A major point of transition: *The linguistic turn*

### ***How do Postmodernists understand Nihilism?***

- Lyotard: libidinal investment

*Diagnosis:* structuralism, capitalism

*Response:* maximise libidinal intensities within structures

- Baudrillard: exchange

*Diagnosis:* exchange in capitalism and semiotics

*Response:* symbolic exchange

- Vattimo: hermeneutic ontology

*Diagnosis:* metaphysics

*Response:* positive nihilism

### ***Analysis: Nihilism Now***

#### **1. The transcendental conditions for existential meaning**

*Existentialism:* the individual, the subject, consciousness

*Postmodernism:* language, sign systems, social forces, the unconscious, being

#### **2. Reductive nihilism and abyssal nihilism**

*Reductive nihilism:* A reduction, often involving rationalisation and abstraction, from which nihilism follows because what gets left out of the reduction is precisely what makes life existentially meaningful.

*Abyssal nihilism:* The negation of meaning which takes place when the field of existence becomes too wide and indeterminate, when there are no criteria of evaluation or guidelines for choosing between different possibilities.

#### **3. The complementary roles of existentialism and postmodernism**

- The postmodernists respond to reductive nihilism, but not abyssal nihilism
- The existentialist concern with abyssal nihilism still yields useful strategies for dealing with it

A dual strategy to confront nihilism:

1. Existential meaning as a *political* issue
2. Existential meaning as a *personal* issue

