

Chris Bremmers, Andrew Smith, Jean-Pierre Wils (eds.)  
Beyond Nihilism?

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Jean-Pierre Wils

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## *Foreword*

The papers collected in this volume were originally presented at a symposium, also entitled ‘Beyond Nihilism’, that took place at the Department of Practical Philosophy, Radboud University, Nijmegen on 10 and 11 December, 2015. The symposium was organized under the auspices of the Center for Contemporary European Philosophy by our colleague Dr Marcel Becker on the occasion of the retirement of Prof. Paul van Tongeren, who held the chair of Philosophical Ethics. This publication is intended to honor his work and the man himself in his role as a teacher, a colleague, a philosopher and a friend. The contributions gathered here were all written in response to a short position paper by Paul van Tongeren, which has been reproduced in a slightly revised form as the introduction to this volume. This text serves to open the discussion about what going beyond nihilism might mean. In a final, retrospective chapter prepared especially for this volume, Paul van Tongeren responds to and establishes relations between the various contributions that comprise the main body of this volume. This is an afterword, but by no means the final word for such discussions. The contributors approach the problem of nihilism from a variety of different perspectives and are representative of the philosophical fecundity and international scope of Paul van Tongeren’s research on Nietzsche. Given this diversity, the editors have taken the order in which the contributors are dealt with in the final response as the sequence in which the chapters should be presented.

The editors of this volume represent Prof. van Tongeren’s closest colleague in the Department of Practical Philosophy (Chris Bremmers), a PhD student of this department (Andrew Smith), and the successor to his chair (Jean-Pierre Wils). We are very grateful for the support provided by the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies for both the original symposium and

this publication. We very much appreciate the additional work required of the contributors to this volume, and especially Paul van Tongeren, in order to prepare it for publication, and we thank them for their patience with this process. We also wish to thank Hans-Georg Eilenberg for his careful copyediting, Miriam Fuselier for giving the text a publishable format, and Hans-Rainer Sepp and Traugott-Bautz-Verlag for agreeing to publish the volume in their 'libri nigri' series. It is our hope that it will prove fruitful for the international discussion about the meaning of nihilism in Nietzsche's thinking, and for those concerned with the impact and significance of this notion for 'Western culture' and its future.

The Editors,

Chris Bremmers

Andrew Smith

Jean-Pierre Wils



# Beyond Nihilism?

## Introduction

*Paul van Tongeren*  
*Radboud University Nijmegen*

In the title of this volume, “Beyond Nihilism?”, the question mark is probably the most important part. The question that I have proposed as a central focus for this book is: whether a step beyond nihilism would be possible at all, and if so, what it would be like? This question is, of course, strongly inspired by Nietzsche and his thoughts on nihilism. My own presumption regarding the title-question is that if Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the nihilism of our culture is correct, it will be extremely difficult to imagine the possibility of getting beyond it. Therefore, in this introduction I will briefly summarize (my interpretation of) what Nietzsche has written about nihilism.

For a correct understanding of what Nietzsche writes about nihilism, it is important not to identify nihilism with the so-called ‘death of God’, but to distinguish several kinds of nihilism, which are at the same time different stages in what Nietzsche describes as the history of the development of nihilism.<sup>1</sup> Nihilism as conceptualized by Nietzsche has at least three different stages and

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a very concise summary of some parts of my book on European Nihilism: *Het Europese Nihilisme. Friedrich Nietzsche over een dreiging die niemand schijnt te deren* (2012; repr. Nijmegen, 2017). An English translation will be published in 2018 as part of the “Nietzsche Now” book series by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

the concept ‘nihilism’ has accordingly a threefold meaning: it is (in an inverted chronological order) (3) the corrosion of (2) the protective structure that was built to hide (1) the absurdity of life and world. Nihilism-1 is sometimes also indicated as ‘Greek pessimism’, but seems to me to be the basis of Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism (cf. the famous Lenzer Heide Note: NL 1887 5[71] § 1, KSA 12.211). Nihilism-2 is Nietzsche’s way of referring to the history of European culture from Plato (and Christianity’s “Platonism for the people”) up to and including the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and nihilism-3 refers to what has been happening since then, i.e. what Nietzsche sometimes labels as “the death of God”, what he describes as the history of the centuries to come and with regard to which he makes all these well-known further distinctions (such as that between active and passive, complete and incomplete nihilism, etc.).

Nihilism is therefore not only, and not primarily, the corrosion or undermining of ‘meaning’ as it is summarized in the expression ‘the death of God’ (nihilism-3). On the contrary: ‘God’ is, according to Nietzsche, itself a nihilistic concept; the history of European philosophy, science, morality, politics, religion and art is itself deeply nihilistic (in the sense of nihilism-2). It is only because of the nihilistic structure of European culture that the death of God has become possible and is (and will continue to be) such a threatening event. It is only because ‘truth’ or the idea(l) of truth and the ‘will to truth’ have been the driving force of European culture that they could eventually undermine the whole construction centered around them; a construction that, on the one hand, has protected us against the view that there is no truth, but that, on the other hand, has done so by imagining a true world behind or beyond all apparent (contingent etc.) reality: a construction – in other (S. Beckett’s) words – that has left us ‘waiting for Godot’, even accepting that ‘Mr. Godot will not come today’, in order not to acknowledge that there is no Godot.<sup>2</sup>

That there is no Godot, no God, no absolute principle of truth, beauty or goodness, makes human existence extremely difficult. Human beings—at least since the time of Socrates, who by bringing ‘the tragic age of the Greek’ to an end left humans incapable of enduring chaos and absurdity without

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot,” in *Dramatische Dichtungen in drei Sprachen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), p. 408.

denying it—cannot live without the difference between true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, i.e.: they cannot live without that which is indicated by these words, that is, without ‘meaning’. The philosophical tradition recognized this insofar as it refers to the human being as an *animal rationale*.

Aristotle presented this in a very poignant way, by linking two defining characteristics of the human being to each other: because the human being is a *zooion logon echoon* (s)he is a *zoion politikon*. For *logos* deals with meaning (i.e.: with the difference between to sumferon and to blaberon, to *dikaion* and to *adikon*<sup>3</sup>), and because we cannot live (at least not as human beings, not in a humane way) without meaning, we cannot live as isolated, solitary individuals; i.e.: because we are *logikoi*, we are *politikoi*. We need each other; we need communication and community in order to get hold of this meaning by sharing our interpretations of it. When we are confronted with the groundlessness of our interpretations, when nihilism imposes itself on us, our existence as human beings is threatened and we become condemned to war and/or solitude.

Nihilism-2 is the nihilism inherent to the very construction that was supposed to protect us against nihilism-1. It consists, to put it very briefly, in the denial of the apparent world in the name of a true world. The contingency of this world is put in perspective by the eternity of the true world; the evil of this world, by the goodness of its creator and by our moral duty or ethical ideal; the imperfection of factual reality, by the perfection of the ideal. The ideality of the true world is, according to Nietzsche, a devaluation of the real world. The history of nihilistic European culture can therefore be summarized as the history of the construction of an ideal world, the history of ‘idealism’ in this sense.

Nietzsche famously completes this history of the construction of an ideal world with the history of its de(con)struction, and summarizes the whole process in the *Götzen-Dämmerung* as the history of an error, “Geschichte eines Irrthums”. (GD Fabel, KSA 6.80-81). For ultimately this ideal world succumbs to its own unreality: “All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming” (GM III 27, KSA 5.410). The search for truth un masks the idea of truth as an illusion, the moral virtue of honesty undermines the mendacious morality of which it is a part. Nietzsche’s

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 1253a15.

critique of metaphysics and of morality is not the cause of its perdition, it only brings the self-undermining force of the idealist construction to the fore.

The downfall of this protective structure causes the nihilistic catastrophe of our age:

An inexorable, fundamental, and deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either /Or: “Either abolish your reverences or – yourselves!” The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? – (FW 346, KSA 3.581)

Whoever abandons or abolishes his or her reverences, i.e.: his or her ideals, will as a result abolish him- or herself.

In his critique of nihilism-2 Nietzsche is constantly aware of the self-referentiality of this critique. This is most apparent in the critique of the will to truth or truthfulness, which is itself motivated precisely by what it criticizes (cf. JGB 1, KSA 5.15). But the same is the case in all domains of Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism. He is aware of the fact that in his critique of the traditional ideals he repeats the old idealism.<sup>4</sup>

This self-referentiality becomes – I think – extremely clear in the third essay of his *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, which is about ideals. It is not, as most interpreters claim, only about a particular type of ideal, the so-called ‘ascetic’ ideal, but rather about the asceticism of all ideals, and about the way these ideals continue to pervade everything we think and do and create, even Nietzsche’s own critique of these very ideals. In his critique of ideals he remains dependent upon an ideal, even if it is one for which he is still searching.

Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism repeats the criticized structures, but does not do so naively. It expressly demonstrates how this critique necessarily gets

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<sup>4</sup> I have elaborated several examples of this, e.g. with regard to Nietzsche’s thoughts on honesty/*Redlichkeit* (“Nietzsches Redlichkeit. Das siebte Hauptstück von Jenseits von Gut und Böse,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche. Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, ed. M. Born (Berlin, 2014), pp. 147-66) and his view on friendship (“Friendship and Nihilism,” in *Hermeneutics between Faith and Reason. Essays in Honor of Ben Vedder*, ed. Philip van Haute and Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Leuven, 2014), pp. 51-68).

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entangled in these idealist structures, and concludes that the recognition of this inevitability is a point beyond which one cannot get any further: “what meaning would our whole being possess if it were not this, that in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a problem?” (GM III 27, KSA 5.410).

This might possibly be called nihilism-4: Nietzsche’s own nihilism. And it is this nihilism of which there is for him – in my interpretation – no beyond. What Nietzsche adds to what he describes as the history of nihilistic thinking is not very hopeful: we remain caught in the longing for what we cannot believe in any more; or we cannot but criticize the ideals that we need in order to live:

This antagonism, not to value what we see through, and not being allowed to value what we would like to lie about to ourselves, results in a process of dissolution. (NL 1887 5[71] § 2, KSA 12.212)

The section from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* from which I have earlier quoted Nietzsche’s description of the nihilistic catastrophe ends with the following claim: “This is *our* question-mark” (FW 346, KSA 3.581). Although there are some texts (but only very few) in which Nietzsche speaks of “the overcoming of pessimism” or the “self-overcoming of nihilism”, I wonder whether this is more than a question, more than a ‘maybe’.

But this volume is not intended as a forum for a discussion about Nietzsche and his presuppositions alone; nor, indeed, shall it remain within the limits of my interpretation of his thinking. The question in the title can of course also be taken as an opportunity to question Nietzsche’s diagnosis, to conceive of other definitions of nihilism, or to present other ways to deal with that which is allegedly threatened by nihilism: the possibility of true thinking and meaningful life.

I was extremely happy to be offered – at the occasion of my retirement from Radboud University Nijmegen in December 2015 – a conference on the question ‘Beyond Nihilism?’ The position paper, in which I briefly introduced that question as the focus for the conference, is reproduced with minor changes in this introduction.

The organizers offered me another surprise by their plan to publish the papers of this conference. This publication offers me the possibility to add a short final chapter with some comments and reactions to the papers as they

were presented. It goes without saying that these comments are anything but an effort to close the discussion. On the contrary: one of the blessings of being a philosopher is that retirement from university does not mean taking leave from academic life and from what makes this life so wonderful: reading, writing and discussions with friends. To all those who enable(d) me to live that life, especially to the contributors to this volume, and most of all to the organizers of the conference and the editors of this book, I express my deepest gratitude.

# Is Nietzsche a Philosopher?

*Adriaan T. Peperzak*

*Loyola University, Chicago*

## *From Nothing to Nothing*

1. Conceived in the mother's womb and born into a strange, unfamiliar world – that was the beginning of an itinerary which ends in the womb of the earth, where all of us become the same.
2. *What* we become after birth is given to us by others, but it cannot be received unless the receiver is able and willing to appropriate it.
  - a. After birth I would die quickly if my mother, father and family did not *save* me, feed me, clean me, and so on.
  - b. I receive but cannot choose a particular language in order to communicate. Thus I enter our living together in small and bigger communities.
  - c. My entire humanization is due to education. Thanks to others, who are already at home in my surroundings, I become integrated.
  - d. All that I will become, my full destiny, is initially received as an undeserved gift, before it settles as part of my life.
3. All that we, as maturing individuals, through interaction and conversation make our own, was handed on to us as components of an already existing tradition in ethos, religion, culture, and philosophy. It was received and appropriated by me thanks to parents, family, teachers, friends, and many others, and transformed into characteristic elements of my own dispositions.

4. By being saved, addressed, fed, and spoken to, I am constituted as this singular person who is able to respond in my way to the goodness that is done to me. Responding is a way of *being open to* and *being for* others.
5. The ensemble of all persons compose the socio-economico-political, moral, religious, and aesthetic network of humanity as our common and historical life.
6. The relations that weave this network together, exist as a traditional framework for mutually dedicated service; but this plan is also resisted and undermined, without however bringing humanity to its end.
7. Within this universe, where all that happens or comes to being (and ideally to glory), the normal response of all to all is: Thank you for *your* way of making your existence a part of *our* destiny. You not only saved my life from death, but you also enabled me to be the one whom I have become.
8. The drive that drives us in all of this, despite destructive events, tends to realize peace and cooperation. Does it not testify to a basic and encompassing benevolence?
9. Despite all our simplifications of the human drama, the question of its benevolent and ever present origin seems quite justified. No single person or collective group of people can claim to be such an origin or to replace the Mystery of an all-giving and creative “source” that has been widely celebrated and adored in all human traditions. It took, however, a long time before gods and demons gave place to a widespread belief in the one and only God of benevolence and grace. Then, however, it also became a task of philosophy to fathom how immeasurable and infinite the differences are between (that) God and all other phenomena.
10. Within the great religious traditions, some philosophers have intensely meditated and discussed the question of how the one and only God could be approached – but not captured – from the perspective of the human universe and its blessings. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers focus their acumen on the question of how it is possible to distinguish Godself – not only from false imitations (the idols), but also from the universe as a whole or from other totalities, like the Cosmos, World, Life, Matter, Energy, History, Time, and so on, which of course are only as finite as their composing elements. In that search, those philosophers let themselves be oriented and directed by the drive or drivenness that animates and inspires their own living self from the outset. We are always



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propelled by this deepest desire, which Socrates and Diotima called *erōs*. Many – perhaps all – other thinkers have developed similar descriptions of human journeying as driven beyond all finite desires and needs with their satisfactions. The best guides of such explorations insist on the startling abyss that separates the finitude of our universe and the “infinity” of that which Plato indicated through the words “beyond the ess-encing of being” (*epekeina tēs ousias*). Sadly enough, that abyss is overlooked too often. Hegel’s summation of philosophy in his *Encyclopedia*, for example, has abolished it by using the word “infinite” to characterize the systematic totality of all that can be understood conceptually.

### *Infinity*

Today we do not often meet philosophers who concentrate on the radical difference between God’s infinity, on the one hand, and the finiteness of all other existences, on the other. It is however a sign of decadence in *erudition*, when even famous authors present the totality of the universe – or its greatness and abundant goodness – as an argument against God’s own infinitely good-and-beautiful, but also absolutely separate, and therefore also absolutely original and intimate, existence.

In modern and postmodern philosophy, we often see a tendency to oppose God to all other realities or as rivaling with humanity or the finite universe as a whole, for being recognized as the most important and primary object of a philosopher’s attention. Some authors even suggest that too much honor given to God must be paid by diminishing the degree to which we simultaneously may and must pay our respect to humanity. Some acquaintance with the logic of the finite suffices, however, for recognizing that the *Infinite* cannot be treated as *part* of a balance in quantity, worth, height, value, or importance. Did not Plato’s Socrates already instruct us that the originary source and creative light of what he called “the Good” (*to agathon*), as beyond (*epekeina*), transcends the being of all that is (*ousia*)? And can’t we read the entire philosophical tradition of the West as an ongoing retrieval of the hints that are compressed in such an enigmatic formula? That not only Plato, Plotinus and Proclus, but also Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and so many other thinkers every time again found new inspiration for radicalizing the Platonic tradition, established a great tradition, which has not died. It still testifies to

our being inspired along new versions of the erotic impetus. But how do we, Plato- *and* Christ-inspired philosophers, relate to those who swear by unsurpassable borders between faith and conceptual distinction?

*Plato or Nietzsche?*

My reader might wonder what the preceding exordium has to do with Nietzsche's nihilism. The framework I sketched, resembles more the world of Saint Augustine or Jean-Louis Chrétien than the dramatic scene of Friedrich, Dionysos, Zarathustra, and other heroes or friends of Nietzsche's life and work. But how can I discuss their thoughts if I cannot (1) speak from a perspective of my own? I must, of course, also (2) possess a sufficiently guaranteed insight into Nietzsche's quite different world and individuality; and (3) discover some kind of bridge along which I can reach out to him in order to share – at least in a bracketed or tentative way – his very special orientation and style of thought. If Nietzsche's convictions were philosophical in any sense of our traditional philosophy, we could perhaps bracket the adventure of his extraordinary personality; but everyone knows how inextricably his life and his thought are intertwined. In which sense, if any, is Nietzsche then a philosopher in the academic sense of our work, or even in the sense of Descartes or Spinoza? Is he not instead a more or less successful prophet, god, or daemon, or perhaps the imaginary incarnation of a supra-human genius? Where exactly do we draw the line to distinguish Nietzsche's properly philosophical contributions from his other – moral, social, erotic, poetic, rhetorical, poetic, musical, dramatic, and otherwise fascinating – performances?

If, in philosophy, we cannot accept a sharp and clear distinction between the two domains of living and thinking, the understanding of a serious philosopher presupposes a certain kind and measure of *sympathy* between that philosopher's and our own engagement in the double task of living and thinking; and this might be one of the reasons why, every time while studying Nietzsche's writings, I struggle hard, but without quite succeeding, to adopt an attitude of sympathy – or even empathy – toward this most engaged author one might encounter in "philosophy."