

Nolen GERTZ, *Nihilism* (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series). Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 2019, 13,7 × 21,3 cm, 224 p., 21,90 \$USA, ISBN 978-0-26253-717-9

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Unlike those of other *biographies romancées* of ancient figures such as Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* or Robert Graves' *I, Claudius*, the fictionalized elements in *Moi, Aristote* are very limited. Maloney clearly wanted his book to emerge as faithfully as possible from the authentic works of Aristotle. Accordingly, Maloney does not speculate about Aristotle's views concerning the goings on around him. Indeed, Maloney's Aristotle remains remarkably neutral in the face of the political events which rocked the Greek world of his day. The philosopher's inner thoughts and feelings concerning his powerful friends – Philip and Alexander – remain rather distant and largely unexplored in *Moi, Aristote*. Indeed, the Aristotle of *Moi, Aristote* does not enter into any real conflict. His move away from Plato is not a break. His relationship with Alexander is not vexed. This Aristotle is always characterized by that most important of virtues which he so insightfully analyzed, namely, friendship. Maloney does not attempt to recreate a complex inner life of his protagonist. Rather, the *moi* here is closer to that of a diarist who records events and activities but does not commit existential considerations to the page.

Maloney's fictionalized biography illustrates the idea that for the ancient Greeks philosophy was a way of life. The repeated appearances of the Cynic Diogenes in *Moi, Aristote* underline this theme. But Maloney's Aristotle is, above all, a researcher with an unrelenting interest in discovering the whole of the world around him. How else can we explain his Aristotle's detailed observations concerning dreams, language, fish and insects? But unlike some researchers who may be driven by any range of passionate ambitions, Maloney's Aristotle is a paragon of virtue and moderation. His research aims not at recognition or power, but at *theoria* or 'contemplation.'

This is a very enjoyable read. Moreover, because it is so historically accurate, it is also a useful work. Philosophy students will find in it a wonderful overview of Aristotle's works, his friends and his world. The reader does hear in *Moi, Aristote*, the philosopher speaking for himself and recognizes the voice of the author of *ta ethika*, *ta physika*, etc. Maloney deserves praise for his careful, comprehensive, both ambitious and modest work, that provides a new yet faithful perspective on Aristotle.

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Nolen Gertz's *Nihilism* is intended, according to its back cover, to offer an "examination of the meaning of meaninglessness: why it matters that nothing matters." As a part of the *Essential Knowledge* series, Gertz's book is intended to offer a concise and accessible introduction to the topic, and on the whole it succeeds. The book is focused and highly readable, clearly written for those new to the topic and in need of a clear idea of what the concept means. On the other hand, the brief length and broad scope

of the topic can make the book somewhat overwhelming; the bewildering amount of material, thinkers, and their ideas, and readers' lack of familiarity with these could make it all somewhat confusing. My familiarity with such figures as Socrates, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, for example, made the chapter of the book covering them quite easy to follow (if I had been reading about these people for the first time, it might have been more difficult to process and recall the provided information). The sheer breadth and depth of human thought certainly becomes apparent over the course of the chapters, as so many people have made so many insightful contributions to conversation (which continues right up until the present day).

Throughout the book, Gertz presents nihilism as a tendency from which nearly all of us suffer: a denial of reality and truth. He would portray nihilism as both positive and negative (depending on how this denial is used): is some vital truth being denied in order to avoid it, or may we deny what we see in order to test its reality? The chapter in which Gertz describes the questions and responses of philosophers throughout history demonstrates the different aspects/ways nihilism has manifested itself in human thought.

A brief overview of the chapters comprising the book will now be presented, along with the different conceptions of nihilism discussed by the thinkers covered in the book. This will both show the various meanings "nihilism" has held over the centuries, and a comprehensive, clear understanding of what "nihilism" means can be put forward as a result of this comparison.

Chapter 1 ("Why Does it Matter that Nothing Matters?") begins with an assessment of nihilism in the contemporary world, observing how commonplace and "mainstream" it has become (citing the comedy of Jerry Seinfeld and the success of such films as *The Big Lebowski* (1998) as examples, showing the presence of nihilistic worldviews in popular culture). Gertz also discusses how nihilism has been so successful at establishing itself as the mainstream, default perspective of our age by considering how media, rather than academia or politics, have paved the way for the attitudes so prevalent in our time.

Chapter 2 ("What is the History of Nihilism?") traces the evolution of nihilism from Socrates to Plato (with Socrates' efforts to demoralize the confidence of the people of Athens in their ideas, and Plato's story of the cave, and the doubts it inspires regarding reality and truth). The chapter then leads to Descartes (whom Gertz identifies as an unwilling nihilist, doubting while seeking certainty), and then David Hume (who, in contrast with Descartes, accepts the impossibility of certain knowledge, responding to the challenge of nihilism by playing backgammon with his friends). The idea at the heart of all these examples is doubt in the face of uncertainty: the nihilism of each of these philosophers comes from rejecting the certainty of the world and of appearances, in order to find something more real/true behind it (with the exception of Hume, who realizes that there is none to be found). Gertz's very interesting discussion of Nietzsche presents yet another view of nihilism, one which denies life itself by suppressing the very aspects of life that make it worth living. We see such attitudes of self-denial in Christianity and Buddhism (indeed, the Buddhist concept of *nirodha*, the cessation of perception and feeling, is particularly nihilistic, according to the view presented by Nietzsche, seeking to deny desire in order to extinguish existence and suffering, which are both understood to be synonymous).

Nietzsche seeks to rebel against these repressive, life-denying (and life-destroying) philosophies and attitudes, in order to live authentically and honestly, even if it requires a great change of our world and culture.

The next two chapters (Chapter 3, "What is (Not) Nihilism?" and Chapter 4, "What is Nihilism?") both seek to define nihilism, and might have better served as the first and second chapters of the book. Because the book's actual discussion about the meaning of nihilism comes after the thoughts of the earlier-mentioned thinkers have been presented, we are unable to compare or contrast their ideas with Gertz's understanding of what nihilism means. Among the different ideas or attitudes rejected as not being truly "nihilistic," Gertz discusses pessimism (dwelling in despair; nihilism would seek to avoid it), cynicism (which embraces the lack of truth, rather than avoiding it, as nihilism does), and apathy (a quality which nihilists, in seeking to deny the truth of the world and themselves, most certainly lack). The difference between each of these attitudes becomes clearer when we identify nihilism with particularly nihilistic beliefs and attitudes (as Nietzsche describes them): the lack of feeling and nihilistic suppression of Christianity and Buddhism both encourage, for example. The concluding discussion of these chapters is on a view of nihilism that, like the one from chapter 2, seeks to avoid inauthentic ideas of the truth and the world, and like Nietzsche, seeks a positive approach to life in the world, that does not deny the reality of who we are as human beings. Yet nihilism could also mean to deny the significance of some aspect of life (or some activity; to say "I was doing nothing" is to say that "I was doing nothing of importance," which is according to Gertz a kind of nihilistic, though totally ordinary, statement (and activity). The definition of nihilism we can take away from this chapter is one of doubt with regard to certainty, for this is the problem which each of the thinkers discussed contends with, each in his own unique way.

This theme (the escape from reality and/or the avoidance of significant actions) carries forward into the last chapter of the book, "What is the Future of Nihilism?," which discusses the present-day nihilism brought to us by science and technology. Following from what Nietzsche said in the preceding chapter regarding our self-denial and rejection of the world, technology has since provided us with a new means of escaping life (while he does not mention either virtual reality or films like *The Matrix* (1999), these would work as extreme examples of the role technology could play in humankind's nihilistic effort to escape the truth of our existence). Instead, Gertz offers more practical examples (the ways technology determines our interactions with our environment: the locations of outlets, which determine where we go and where we sit, whether we will engage with or hide from the world, and whether we serve our devices, rather than having them serve us). He also discusses Martin Heidegger, who saw the role of technology in creating an inauthentic human life, effectively removing us from our environment (behind walls of glass and air conditioning), and demystifying the world, transforming it into a collection of objects/tools practical only for human consumption (the sun as merely a giant battery, capable of supplying us – and our devices – with the electricity we need to enjoy life removed from the world and distract us from ourselves).

To sum up this review, I would note two real issues that I found problematic, while reading this book. First, no real effort is made to respond to the nihilistic

attitudes/beliefs/behaviors which Nietzsche and Heidegger observe in human life, or the illustrations/examples provided by Gertz demonstrating each. Could there be value to some measure of self-denial, especially if it helps us to become kinder, better people, and if it improves the lives of those around us? (*Taṇhā*, the idea that suffering and desire are synonymous, lies at the very heart of Buddhist philosophy and has always struck me as a profound and sobering truth; if accepted, it would surely improve one's life and attitude toward the world and conduct with other people).

The examples of technology (and whether it serves us, or the other way around) also seemed superficially presented (for example, where is the line between building a fire to stay warm, reading by lamplight, or escaping from the world?). As a person with autism, who sometimes struggles with the overstimulating "busy-ness" of the world, I find that technology provides a useful means of focus when the world overwhelms; its usefulness in situations such as this might also merit discussion. However, the fact that this book is only intended to serve as an introduction to the topic of nihilism excuses the need for rebuttals or counterarguments (interesting though they may prove to be). Therefore, the book can be said to offer several opportunities for in-depth follow-up discussion, instead. (It is also worth noting that a year earlier, Gertz wrote a book specifically on *Nihilism and Technology* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018); no doubt these very questions are raised and discussed in further detail there).

Finally, it must be noted that this book lacks a real conclusion or recap of the ideas it presents; after discussing concepts of nihilism from several thinkers and their differing attitudes toward it, the book fails to bring them all together at the end, to compare them, contrast them, and determine what they share in common, for a clearer idea of what nihilism is (a denial of truth? of life?) and a summary of the book as a whole. That said, I can still positively say that the Gertz succeeds at explaining, succinctly and clearly, what nihilism is, what it is not, and what characterizes it. He also explains very well how nihilism has been identified by philosophers in the past, and where we can find it present in our world and lives today. And given the series to which this book belongs (providing, as advertised, "essential knowledge" about the topic), the author succeeded in what he set out to do, presenting the essential basics of the concept he was tasked to discuss.

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