

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas

in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



**Nihilism and Western Thought**

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Western philosophical tradition has always paid its attention to the topic of nihilism by continuously asking anew about the essence of nihilism. Usually the answer to this question can be provided by presenting the history of nihilism.

When solving the problem of nihilism there were many attempts to reveal two “histories” of nihilism – the history of *nihilism* and the history of *Nothingness* - as separate and different ones. I suggest, that such approaches rather remind of theoretical kaleidoscope than gives the answer to the question “what is nihilism?” I am of the opinion, that the conceptual ground for exploring nihilism is non-alternative treatment of history of *nihilism* as well as history of *Nothingness*.

Discussions on nihilism usually bring to the foreground its “diagnostic” aspect. The term of nihilism becomes a label that describes various “maladies” and disabilities such as degradation of values, crisis of faith, loss of meaning, etc. Such “diagnostic” (“prognostic”) aspect of nihilism is important, even crucial. On the other hand, although the problem of nihilism remains on the “diagnostic” ground, it also has to be considered as a subject of (philosophical) theory. Therefore discussions on nihilism set off one essential feature of the “exploration” on nihilism: the “researcher” of nihilism – nihilist – appears in rather ambiguous situation. On the one part, he is a diagnostician, a forecaster, or even a prophet who proclaims nihilism, on the other part he is theoretician. Thinking of the great Western nihilists reveals this tension between the prophecy and the theory. Having in mind the whole variety of the researches made on nihilism, I’d like to point two ambiguously interconnected trends of exploration of nihilism. Such separation is related to the very treatment of the nature of nihilism itself. One tradition of such researches is inclined to treat nihilism rather as an event of spiritual life. In this case, nihilism may reveal itself with the whole abundance of its shapes – this complicated spiritual phenomenon has many forms of manifestation. Another tradition, although it not always rejects the treatment of nihilism as a spiritual phenomenon, is inclinable to approach nihilism rather as an “event” of speculative nature. Nihilism is being understood as event of spiritual life when the term serves to name the devaluation of the highest values, when the thesis “God is dead” is being announced, or it is declared that life has lost its meaning. However, when the “oblivion of Being”, the break of immediate relation between being and thinking, or the real alternative of Being and Nothingness are discussed, nihilism represents the “event” of speculative nature.

Selection of the starting point performed by the contemporary philosophy, which raises a question of nihilism anew, swings between the two theoretical perspectives, *i.e.* nihilism as spiritual event and nihilism as speculative “event”. Such selection is closely related to the question on “boundaries” of nihilism: whether we should limit ourselves to exploration of nihilism as purely historical phenomenon or should we “extend” the conception of nihilism by searching for the ground points to formulate the problem of nihilism in the ontological alternative between Being and Nothingness?

In my research<sup>1</sup> I try to question the meaning (“essence”) of nihilism and to glance at its history from the perspective of post-metaphysical philosophy. Such attempt is based not only on the ground of Heideggerian insight about ontological rootness of nihilism, which enables to erase the boundary between the two alternative “histories” – nihilism and Nothingness. For my research, position of a representative of the contemporary hermeneutical philosophy Gianni Vattimo is also crucial: here nihilism is treated as (hermeneutical) attempt of weak thinking. On the basis of these two insights the following questions are raised: what do separate historical forms of nihilism have in common and is there a single theoretical model of nihilism which could give sense to Western “conceptions” of nihilism? The approach to Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s, and Vattimo’s nihilism as well as the perception of certain affinity in their “conceptions” gives the conceptual ground and the problematical horizon for this research.

In the ambiguous perspective of approaches to nihilism – in the perspective of the history of nihilism as contrasted to and identified with the history of Nothingness – a fundamental question should be asked: what do separate forms of historical nihilism have

in common? Can we say that an intersection between two ‘histories’ reveals a certain structural homogeneity of nihilist consciousness?

In order to answer these questions, instead of discussing different nihilist ‘diagnoses’ and diverse ‘conceptions’ of nihilism, we will try to search for a certain generality between the ‘diagnostic’ and ‘conceptual’ perspectives. It is in this context that we are going to ask: what does it mean to be a nihilist?

In this context I would like to remember an episode in a book on religion by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. We shall not mention the title of that book yet. Why? We shall answer this question by telling the aforementioned episode. So, Vattimo remembers how many years ago, one sweltering afternoon, he found himself in an ice-cream café at a stop on the motorway to Milan and suddenly realised that he had to phone professor Gustav Bontadini, one of the most remarkable representatives of the ‘neo-classical’ Catholic, Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy whose philosophical views he opposed; but he felt affection towards and admired him. The conversation in a telephone booth, according to Vattimo, was about the competition for the chair because both of them were members of the panel at the time. Thus, they were talking purely about issues related to the ‘academic kitchen’. However, Bontadini, with whom Vattimo had not communicated for quite a while, longed to discuss fundamental questions and, instead of inquiring about his health, he suddenly asked Vattimo: did he still believe in God? Vattimo says he does not know whether his answer to professor Bontadini was conditioned by the paradoxical situation in which the question was asked: ladies sitting around tables, eating ice-cream and drinking soft drinks indifferently, in the ice-cream café near the telephone. Yet Vattimo answered: *I believe, that I believe*. This is the title of the book<sup>2</sup> that gives an

account of this episode. According to Vattimo, this phrase has been stuck in his mind all the time after that sweltering afternoon on the motorway to Milan. And, moreover, Vattimo thinks that this phrase is the most precise and the best formula expressing his relationship with religion: his relationship with the Christian Catholic religion, in the tradition of which he was baptised and to which he directs his thoughts when he thinks about religion. What does Vattimo's answer *I believe that I believe*, instead of the simple *I believe* or *I do not believe*, mean?

Instead of trying to interpret the meaning of this statement in terms of Vattimo's philosophy, I would like to expand the context slightly and juxtapose this phrase, which Vattimo, besides, also calls the attitude of a 'half-believer', with a quotation from Dostoyevsky's *Demons*. Dostoyevsky says: "If Stavrogin believes, he does not believe that he believes, and if he does not believe, then he does not believe that he does not believe."<sup>3</sup>

I think these phrasings can be juxtaposed as representing certain conceptions of nihilism. On the one hand, *not to believe that you believe* or *not to believe that you do not believe*, and on the other hand, *to believe that you believe*. To tell the truth, such a juxtaposition both reveals and hides the nihilist character of these statements and simultaneously both proves and hides the differences between two conceptions of nihilism. Yet how could we compare them? Where does their nihilist, although ambiguous, meaning lie? If we answer that disbelief is nihilism, then Vattimo's position will not be nihilist, and in case of Dostoyevsky's Stavrogin, it will not be clear which part of the phrase is more important as it is not clear when Stavrogin *really* does not believe. But if not the belief itself as immediacy is more important in nihilism, but a relationship to belief, a relationship

mediated by reflection, then these positions as nihilist attitudes become unexpectedly closer to each other.

Here I'd like to do the remark: The centre of nihilism is the act of reflection. Already Kierkegaard saw a difference between *I believe* and *I have belief (I have Faith)*, i. e. it was he who separated an immediate belief from a reflection of belief. Thus, the essence of Stavrogin's nihilism lies in the questioning of any true relationship with reality (both based on belief and on disbelief). Dostoyevsky's Stavrogin trusts *neither* his belief *nor* disbelief. Such nihilism, of course, denies not (only) God, but the very possibility of any true (human) relationship. For a nihilist, the most suspicious is what starts to seem to be true. What is the least true, what presents itself, presents itself to be true. The inability to really *be* is nihilism.

However, is it possible to be a nihilist if you say 'I believe that I believe'? Obviously, Vattimo's focus on the reflection of the act of belief is more radical than Dostoyevsky's act of the tragically nihilist thinking. However, not so much the character of reflection, its 'intensiveness', is important here as its very presence – the mediatory aspect, the mediation of the act of belief. Then even a statement *I believe that I believe* is already a loss of chastity, a loss of the immediacy of belief. Thus the phrasing *I believe that I believe* concentrates not only the loss of the immediacy of belief, but also a (reflective) mental note of that loss. Making a mental note of the acquired distance towards belief means for Vattimo also questioning the contents of belief, its urgency. "If I say I believe that I believe, then in what I believe I believe, in what from the Christian doctrine which has been passed onto us I believe?"<sup>4</sup> Access to (religious) 'experience' is a 'situation of belief' recorded by the act of reflection.

Therefore, what is essential to the nihilist act (motion)?

To see the act of defining two different phenomena of nihilism, the Russian nihilism of Stavrogin (Dostoyevsky) and the postmodern nihilism of Vattimo, expressed in different phrasings, as *the same – nihilist* act has been made possible by the ‘recognition’ of the ‘location’ of the act. The act of annihilation fundamental to nihilism reveals itself as taking in the act of reflection, and nihilism appears as a phenomenon of consciousness (thinking).

Such a disclosure of the ‘nature’ of nihilism guides also Sartre’s thinking. It is in his philosophy that consciousness becomes a mirror of its own act of annihilation. Let us see what Sartre can say about ‘the same’ nihilism. The perspective of Sartre’s philosophy that reality reveals itself as an opaque surface, as meaning-less from the point of view of consciousness, makes him a contemporary Stavrogin who *neither* can understand reality *nor* can he refuse that desire. Yet Sartre not only defines the absurd situation of human (consciousness) in the face of the meaning-less-ness of reality, but also focuses on the account of belief as a phenomenon of consciousness. If we looked for an *expressis verbis* to describe belief we would have to refer to the phrase that takes in the radical nature of reflection, “Thus to believe is not to believe any longer”<sup>5</sup>. It would seem to be ‘implausible’, ‘meaningless’, contradictory, if we forgot that the perspective of ‘considering’ belief is the act of reflecting it, an attempt to ‘look carefully’ at reflection itself when it encounters the plane of ‘belief’ – ‘experience’, ‘immediacy’, seemingly alien to itself. This is precisely what Sartre demonstrates – that he cannot find belief in the form of such ‘alien-ness’, ‘outwardness’, with regard to consciousness – the form of immediacy. Thus belief for him is ‘belief’ or what is contained in self-deception. Another

phrase emphasises rather the reflective side of our relationship with belief and ‘corresponds’ more precisely with the phrasings of Stavrogin (Dostoyevsky) and Vattimo: “To believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe”<sup>6</sup>.

Yet is there a possibility of a different approach to belief? I believe that my friend Pierre is attached to me, says Sartre. I do believe this *honestly*. I believe *that*. What does this mean? In the Sartrian mirror of consciousness this ‘belief’ is reflected in the following sequence of acts of consciousness: I yield to the impulses of trust; I decide to believe this; I behave in such a way as if I was sure of it. “What I have defined as trust is what Hegel would call immediacy”,<sup>7</sup> Sartre says. This is a blind belief. Following Hegel, Sartre points to a very essential moment in terms of belief: when belief becomes *belief for the sake of itself*. Following Sartre, we could term this differently, as the ‘self-consciousness’ of belief. However Sartre, together with Hegel, shows precisely that what we have just termed the ‘self-consciousness’ of belief is contradictory; it destroys itself (belief): a mediated belief; a belief becoming a belief for its own sake passes into the state of disbelief. Thus, to discover one’s own belief means to deny it. Therefore, for Sartre, “belief is a being with regard to which a question arises in its own being and can be realised only through self-destruction; it can be discovered only as a negation of itself. This is a being for which to be means to appear, and to appear means to deny itself.”<sup>8</sup> It is obvious that the nature of the ‘paradox of the reflection of belief’ as recorded by Sartre is nihilist. However, when trying to discover the indiscrete character of the forms of nihilism and the points of intersection among their ‘conceptions’, more important is



the fact that nihilism appears as a phenomenon of thinking (consciousness). Yet does this make us think that nihilism is a 'pure event' of thinking?

We have already been able to ascertain that even in everyday consciousness there is an image of a nihilist as a 'negationist' established – a negationist of order, values and authority. This seems to tell an important theoretical truth that for a nihilist consciousness, the very act of negation, its character, is constitutionally important. To state a certain act as defining the 'logic' of nihilism – negation – is important, but not enough. Already Nietzsche's position would create a confusion here: if nihilism can say 'no', it is only because it has said 'yes'. A point of reference from which we recognise a nihilist (and nihilism) could be the image of a nihilist that formed at the time of French revolution: a nihilist used to be considered as somebody who was *neither* for *nor* against revolution. Thus, the 'logic' of nihilism is not the usual one, but – what has been demonstrated by Stavrogin's figure in Dostoyevsky – the 'logic' of a radical negation of (reality): *neither-nor*. Such an 'escape' of reality from consciousness based on the nihilist 'logic' has been confirmed also by the Sartrean 'paradox of the reflection of belief': it is *neither* possible to understand the world (reality) *nor* it is possible to reject such a desire. The same 'logic', only in a more 'gentle' form, presents itself also in Vattimo's reflection on belief: both belief and disbelief are equally (im)possible because everything I encounter in my 'belief' is no longer reality, but only the 'contents' of belief given a theological and philosophical meaning which I have to reflect on. Yet does this 'experience' of 'logic' common to Stavrogin (Dostoyevsky), Vattimo and Sartre allow us to think that, on the one hand, we can restrict the search for the meaning ('essence') of nihilism to its plane of logic, and, on the other hand, does that paradoxical logical

structure of *neither-nor* ( $A = \neg A$ ) found in different forms of nihilism presuppose the identity of a nihilist consciousness *par excellence*?

According to Nietzsche and Heidegger, nihilism is the Western “logic” itself. But what is the meaning of this “logic” of nihilism, *i. e.* of the “logic” which expresses the same “question” of nihilism? In what sense nihilism is understood as such “logic”?

The latter definition of nihilism enforces in a certain sense a re-evaluation of ‘logical dimension’ as such.

The very term of ‘Western logic’ refers to a certain necessity and normativity, *i.e.* the inner rules of thinking which Western thought is obliged to obey, the principles of valid inference and correct reasoning which are impossible to avoid. On the other hand, is it really worth speaking about the one and only Western thought when one could only foresee its development till the nihilistic explosion? The answer is: yes, it is, at least in a certain sense. And we could grasp this sense namely because of the very fact of nihilistic destiny of *logos*. Nihilism itself is the destiny of philosophy, since it provides the means of survival for philosophy.

Nihilism is the phenomenon of consciousness and this is why its problem involves a certain level of logic. However this type of ‘logic’, originating from the very depth of the relationship between thought and reality, is fatally controversial. It refers to a certain ‘deficit’ of reality, its, so to say, unachievable-through-thinking nature.

In terms of philosophical thinking, nihilism is the outcome spreading the fundamental immanentism from the ontological to logical level. The philosophical *logos* itself includes this kind of action and variability. Thus nihilism is a shadow, *i.e.* an another side of

Western rationalism: the self-disclosing *neither-nor* structure which expresses the ontological „drama“ of Western logos.

What is more, the analysis of the problem of nihilism enables to identify an entire transfiguration of Western philosophical tradition as nihilism itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Šerpytytė, *Nihilizmas ir Vakarų filosofija* (Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Gianni. Vattimo, *Credere di credere* (Milano: Garzanti, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Фёдор Достоевский, *Бесы* (Москва: Правда, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Vattimo, *Credere di credere*, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'êtr e et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*