

# *Reflections on Nihilism—From the Perspective of Heidegger's Ontology to Psychoanalysis*

Mei Yulong

*School of Marxism, Hunan University of Science and Technology, Xiangtan, China  
psychoanalyst\_mei@126.com*

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**Abstract:** Starting from Heidegger's evaluation of Nietzsche's nihilism, this article examines the origins of nihilism in the thoughts of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and analyses Heidegger's refutation of Nietzsche's extreme nihilism. He aims to overcome or transcend nihilism through this refutation. However, it also raises the question of Heidegger's notion of "existence", and by combining it with Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, reveals an ultimate form of positive nihilism.

## 1. Introduction

In "Holzwege", Heidegger quotes Nietzsche and asks, "What does nihilism mean?"<sup>[1]</sup> The answer is, "Self-degradation of the highest values." In Heidegger's view, this definition is not sufficient to exhaust the essence of nihilism because it does not answer the question of what value or highest value is. According to him, nihilism corresponds to "existence", which is exactly what Nietzsche disregarded. Heidegger's criticism is undoubtedly valid, but it is necessary to further examine why Nietzsche overlooked what is regarded as "existence" in Heidegger's sense.

## 2. The origin of Nihilism

As the mentor of Nietzsche's philosophy, the thoughts of Arthur Schopenhauer inevitably need to be included as the primary object of investigation. Schopenhauer continued Kant's division between the phenomenal realm and the thing-in-itself, further discussing the former. He believed that things considered as "real" ultimately belong to the world of phenomena and are illusions, and those concepts are merely contents provided by the intellect<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, undoubtedly, he considered the concepts involved in traditional idealism - existence, time, space, causality, substance, etc. - as unreal and indeterminable as "reality", and he emphasized that metaphysical tradition's emphasis on reason is even less capable of touching this "truth". On the contrary, he emphasized that perception and the mysterious identity of a certain subject itself can be used to understand the world. Ignoring the reliability of this identity, at the very least, Schopenhauer depreciated things that idealism considered valuable as mere appearances. So, what is the first thing that can be attained through the identity of perception? It is the will. If this will has a primary need or purpose, it is first to survive, a will to survive.

Here, it seems that Schopenhauer did not go further than Descartes' universal doubt of "I think,

therefore I am". On the contrary, Schopenhauer made a separation here and put aside the conclusion of "existence". At the same time, his theory led him to investigate other autonomous life forms. Influenced significantly by Darwin, the concept of the will to survive allowed him to observe the extensive cruelty of the natural world, with numerous lives wilting and perishing, yet the will to survive relentlessly endures. The various miseries of life also affected Schopenhauer, and he could not see anything more noble in life, not even the virtues claimed in ancient Greek metaphysics. Therefore, the "good" in that conception is merely an unexamined illusion, an attempt to conceal the "blind" essence. As a result, he claimed that the will is "blind" or "nihilistic" because, beyond the primary and sole will to survive, he cannot perceive anything more.

Linking it to Aristotle's ethics of "good as the goal" in ancient Greece, namely, that "good" exists as the highest value and is worth pursuing, all of these are completely destroyed in Schopenhauer's view. If life is blind, and besides existence itself, there is nothing worth pursuing. Then for those who already exist and temporarily do not have to worry about their lives, what can be the purpose beyond existence? Undoubtedly, this is the source of Nietzsche's "nihilism" to some extent.

If we were to make a metaphorical comparison here for Schopenhauer's view on life or the purpose of life, it would be the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus angered the gods and was condemned to roll a huge stone to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down each time, endlessly repeating the cycle. But if the gods assigned a purpose or meaning to this repetitive and meaningless labor, then Sisyphus' attitude towards performing this stone-rolling task would be completely different. He would have a delusion, thinking that the assigned meaning is his own will. This is like the salmon in the sea, which swims upstream every year to spawn in freshwater, only to return to the ocean again, but in the process, they are constantly being caught by humans, as if the gods have given them a certain will and impulse to cyclically engage in this meaningless reproduction. (But isn't this sigh towards rationalism criticized by Schopenhauer as a form of pessimism?)

### 3. Nietzsche's extreme Nihilism

Nietzsche, on the one hand, engages in thinking based on this "nihilism", but it is evident that he rejects this pessimism and attempts to transcend or resolve the problems brought about by this "nihilism." Perhaps, through an inappropriate interpretation of his work "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", he seems to imply a certain criticism and rebellion against Schopenhauer through the dialogue between the dwarf and Zarathustra: "'You demon of heaviness!' 'Speak not of this lightly! Otherwise, I shall make you toil in the place of your squatting, cripple—I have carried you too high! Look at this moment!'"<sup>[3]</sup>

Compared to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics is deeper—there are no facts, only interpretations; a world that exists independently of our existence, logic, our psychological biases, and our hypothetical inductions does not exist as a thing-in-itself. He even interprets Plato's idealism in reverse—it is not about the existence of an ideal entity, but rather, these are products of human psychological characteristics and language. The so-called real world is just a replica of a general characteristic of the "phenomenal realm" in the Kantian sense. Therefore, in his view, philosophy becomes a "hermeneutics," and the question of these philosophical viewpoints is no longer about which one is more true, but rather, which one is more viable and has more "explanatory power." To some extent, he is closer to a pragmatist, as his theory starts from human beings themselves—human beings give value to all things for self-preservation—they create the meaning of all things, the meaning of humanity. Therefore, they call themselves "human," or in other words, "valuers." Hence, all theories only reduce to a certain choice, and the decisive value among them becomes the most important. It is not difficult to understand why Nietzsche designates the subject corresponding to nihilism as the "highest value."

However, this leads to an even more extreme form of nihilism, where all notions of a "real" otherworldly existence are destroyed, and it seems that no purpose or meaning can be relied upon.

#### 4. Heidegger's Negation

Returning to Heidegger's negation of Nietzsche, "Nihilism is a historical process in which the dominant 'supra-sensitive realm' loses its effectiveness, becoming void and empty, to the point where the existence itself loses its value and meaning." The key here lies in the definition of the "supra-sensitive realm" because it involves the origin of Western metaphysics, specifically the division between the real world and the supra-sensitive ideal world in Plato's philosophy. In Nietzsche's view, Plato's ideal world is a supra-sensitive realm of values, with the highest "idea of the good" ruling as the sovereign in the otherworldly domain. "The setting of the highest values also sets the possibility of devaluing these highest values; when these highest values reveal themselves to have unattainable characteristics, their devaluation has already begun. Life, therefore, appears unfit for these values, fundamentally incapable of realizing them. Because of this, the preparatory form of genuine nihilism is pessimism." Of course, as the creator of the otherworldly realm, one would not question the reality of the world they firmly believe in, just as a glassmaker creates a piece of glass and firmly believes that it can withstand tremendous force.

If we say Nietzsche has a prejudice, it is as Heidegger quoted, "The nihilist is such a person who, for the existing world as it is, determines that it should not exist; for the world as it should be, he determines that it does not exist," and Heidegger comments, "Here, Nietzsche uses a dual negation to absolutely negate everything: first negating the existing world, and then simultaneously negating the supra-sensitive world, namely the ideals, which are worth desiring from the perspective of the existing world." So, where does this prejudice come from? Is it not born out of despair caused by witnessing the glass shatter under tremendous force?

Clearly, in Nietzsche's view, Plato's division between this world and the otherworldly realm laid the foundation for the later Western Christian worldview. When all values are attributed to the highest value of God, the practical value of human life is emptied. The reason why a person attributes all their value to God is that they cannot fulfill these values in the real world. And the reason why they cannot fulfill their values is because they lack "the will to power." Therefore, they use a kind of "personification" to give an object the highest value and establish a God who possesses all these values to worship.

Naturally, humans themselves cannot deliberately act in this way. As revealed by the Austrian psychoanalyst Freud in "Totem and Taboo," this worship of gods and pantheistic ideas is more rooted in some psychological instinct of humans.<sup>[4]</sup> Obviously, Nietzsche rejects the concepts of causality and reason on one hand but unconsciously uses them on the other. It is difficult to argue that there is a necessary causal connection between "the will to power" and this "personification," even if we acknowledge that they are related. However, Nietzsche has a metaphysical purpose here, which is to emphasize the primordial power of the "will to power" and establish it as another "ultimate cause." In contrast, Heidegger believes, "What he (Nietzsche) sets is a gift from things, given autonomously by things themselves." This clearly weakens some causal connections.

Heidegger believes that in existence, there is an inevitable unfolding of a fate similar to destiny: "There must be a value placed within the entirety of existence for the inherent value of the individual to be safeguarded; there must be a beyond world for humans to endure this worldly existence." Indeed, from the standpoint of this structure itself, there must be a value beyond the structure to provide certainty for the structure itself. However, when viewed from a perspective outside of the structure, this structure itself appears purely accidental.

He further explains, "As metaphysics, they (values) from the beginning let the truth of existence

remain unthought. But as subjectivity metaphysics, they make the being of the existent objectivity of representation and pre-determination." Therefore, "Humans treat this transcendence either as the religious subjectivity of their own destiny or simply as a pretext for their self-centered subjective will, without affecting the essence of this metaphysical basic attitude of human nature." In other words, for existence to open itself, it must first mask itself in metaphysics and enter into a relationship between existent and existing. This forgetting, neglecting, and suspending of existence is actually the "self-restraint" of existence itself. In this sense, it is inevitable that when Aristotle begins to establish a scientific research "as the existence of existence," this metaphysical fate arises. Indeed, "the will to power" also accuses Nietzsche's "metaphysics of the will to power." For him, "Nihilism essentially relates to existence itself, or more precisely, existence itself relates to the essence of nihilism, because existence itself has already entered into history, a history in which existence is nothing."

For Nietzsche, replacing one ideal with another, just as replacing Christian thought with rationality, is not feasible. He believes that only through "the revaluation of all values," reversing and overturning the past metaphysical thoughts and metaphysics, and replacing the declining "slave morality" with the "master morality" of the will to power, can nihilism be overcome. Nietzsche destroys the static values and reconstructs a dynamic, human-made value, an absolute value in the Nietzschean sense of the "eternal recurrence of the same" within the "moments" of eternal return. In the eternal recurrence, everything repeats, everything is destroyed, and everything starts anew, but only the same act of creation itself is eternal. If we use the analogy of Sisyphus again, in Nietzsche's view, the purpose itself is meaningless, and humanity should strive for and cherish this "eternal whole," those countless "moments" - that is, "Amor Fati(a love of fate)."

However, Heidegger criticizes this will to power: "Only when power remains as the enhancement of power and is commanded by the 'increase of power,' can power be enduring power. Even if the enhancement of power is interrupted, and only stagnates at a certain level of power, it is already the beginning of the decline of power." In this regard, it is necessary to criticize Heidegger's critique as somewhat unfair. He is undoubtedly referring to the fact that there must be a will to ensure the strength of power after the power. This can be seen as an extremely clever trick, transforming "power" into a "force" that seeks to become "strong." But in fact, for Nietzsche, "strength" is merely a characteristic of "force" itself - having "force" is a premise that requires no guarantee, as it is inherent in force. Of course, Nietzsche admitted in his later years that "force" is limited, but its transformation is immeasurable, although it is still limited, its effect is limitless. "Force" itself is always positive.

Certainly, Heidegger's intention is to highlight the rootlessness of Nietzsche's will in the critique of this metaphysics, that Nietzsche understands existence only as "value," where "existence becomes value while ignoring existence itself, so Nietzsche's way of replacing nihilism to some extent fails. Although Nietzsche's metaphysics can be defended from Nietzsche's own perspective, there is no doubt that Heidegger's inquiry into existence itself holds power, but in fact, it also replaces one metaphysics with another. If we use Nietzsche's perspective, Heidegger attempts to bring back the perspective of the existent to existence itself. It is worth contemplating whether this approach is possible.

## 5. Conclusions

So, let's go back to Descartes' "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"). Returning to oneself is to establish the existence of the existent, so is the relationship between existence and thinking a necessary relationship? Indeed, common sense tells us that existence is the carrier of everything, perhaps from the perspective of occurrence, existence is indeed a prerequisite for consciousness. But from the perspective of cognition, and since humans can only base themselves on their own viewpoint, humans become aware of "existence" through consciousness. And this "existence" is not yet

metaphysical existence, but an "existence" in cognition, or as a representation of "existence." Just as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan mentioned in "The Mirror Stage," the subject recognizes oneself through the mirror to achieve this determination of existence, but always remains identified as a phantom in that mirror. The paradoxical modification of Descartes' statement, "I think where I do not exist, therefore I exist where I do not think," to some extent affirms the existence that Heidegger mentioned, which is obscured and suspended in entering the relationship of existence. However, this is not a presupposition of a certain metaphysical existence like Heidegger, but an acknowledgment of a primordial loss that is inevitable and irreversible.

Returning to Nietzsche's nihilism, the true problem with the concept lies not in what Heidegger believed, the neglect of existence, but in the self-devaluation. It is not spontaneous, even if it is to some extent inevitable, it is a derivative of human cognition that arises from the discovery of one's own limitations and finitude (as contemporary philosopher Judith Butler reveals human passivity and vulnerability), and it is an inevitable derivative. On the contrary, this nihilism precisely signifies the elevation of human cognition, a rise of rationality, just as Kant acknowledges the unattainable "thing-in-itself" of reason. So, the value that this extreme nihilism brings to humanity is to compel humans to determine and create value for themselves. In other words, this extreme nihilism is almost insurmountable and does not need to be overcome, just as Lacan believes that human "alienation" is fate and cannot return to that state of "innocence" - to regain a state of being given "the highest value". Therefore, all humans can only be "Amor Fati" and continue to move forward along this path of "alienation." But the power of this attempt to return is never in vain, as the very effort itself leads to the constant understanding and exploration of the potentiality and value of the self and others' existence.

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