

A Way Out of Techno-limbo

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Nihilism is in the air. Yet, it is hard to say to what profit—beyond that for marketers and manufacturers of electronic devices. Advertisements paradoxically take on a bravura of appealing to targeted-consumers' nihilism in the guise of bold autonomy dependent on one's incorporating their brand names into one's life. Social analysts themselves, reporting on such phenomena, seem to shy from too much criticism of the trend lest they appear out of touch. We seem to have ended up in a sociopolitical condition in which everyone senses some kind of social and ecological disaster looms but the free market of ideas should not disturb itself too much about it.

Gertz's new volume offers a frank, serious, while occasionally humorous philosophical exposition of this nihilism in the air. In fact, it offers a kind of narration, an excursion through the limbo of technological nihilism guided by Nietzsche, somewhat as Virgil guided Dante through a Florentine purgatory. Gertz's guide leads us through six levels of technological nihilism: techno hypnosis (TV, YouTube), self-tracking, the sharing economy and its petty pleasures, social media, orgies of feeling/clicking, and net-searching oneself "to death."

Each of these levels merits a brief description, to see where Nietzsche/Gertz is leading us. Nietzsche's notion of self-hypnosis arises when people have come to so lack feeling for life that they prompt themselves into a kind of daytime somnambulism, as if urging themselves always to be asleep. Many commentators have configured television (which would include its online forms, such as YouTube, a cynical play on "boob tube") as a soporific, an alternative to turn to because nothing can satiate. Perhaps television, too, does not satisfy, but it keeps streaming, keeping the reel taut, so that one need not note the lack of deep response.

Self-tracking is to health somewhat as television is to conscious life: If one focuses steadily on data about one's health, one may sacrifice attention to health itself. Nietzsche speaks of such a brand of obliterating feeling as reversion to "mechanical activity." To add another picture to the prose here, this mechanical activity is much like that of a caged large feline, who paces all day in what ethologists deem "stereotypic behavior." For caged humans, health becomes mechanistically derived data that are more significant than what is internally registered.

While much is written now about television and self-tracking, less commonly analyzed is the sharing economy and what Gertz, after Nietzsche, deems its "petty pleasures." The notion of a sharing economy sounds so beneficent, to a hysterical point of compassion, the book's examination therein may comprise its strongest and more original sections. Humans have an almost moral compulsion to share, so technologies promoting it are veritably blessed. Where Nietzsche was speaking here of the pettiness of do-gooding for the sake of feeling good about oneself, Gertz looks from the expansive online "giving" movement to the online pleasure-giving economy. Sites such as Uber and Airbnb are often touted as marking a new age of tightly interlocked consumerism, such that you do not merely indulge in your own property, but many people can experience the same sort of thrills from a given, shared product. Consumerism is made ethical, efficient, "ecological"—in fact *good* for the globe. Using an Uber car is much like giving to Oxfam, as we are all a worldwide community of mutual sharers, and not so secret. Yet, the site Tinder offers a strong example of how such "sharing" sites actually lend themselves to a type of hierarchical judgment of client-users by owner-users, as research that Gertz provides indicates. Most Tinder-users seem to use the site not to meet people but to reject people and make oneself appear ever superior—a problem that, overall, Nietzsche finds in pity and its petty pleasure.

Social media has also received much critical attention, especially under Turkle's influence. Per Nietzsche, the same depression from the disconnect of one's life from feeling receives attempted appeasement from the formation of the herd, "the community . . . as a means of shaking off their dull displeasure" (137). The social media are famously decried for their attention-grabbing, much like video games, leaving the rest of life behind for the sake of the infinitely unending stare into the dazzling screen. Gertz likens "herdbook" to a religion: "To be a user of Facebook is to be an evangelist for Facebook, to be guided by, to be a missionary for, its gospel" (148) But the site is out to undermine not only our privacy, but also our autonomy. All in all, while humans may gain some good from a herd—"community, strength, security" (151)—these come at a cost: individuality, auton-

omy, inner strength, all these losses are unacceptable in Nietzschean aspirations, if such compromise is taken too far out of balance, as in contemporary nihilism.

“Orgies of feeling” give way, in the cyber world, to “orgies of clicking” (162). Nietzsche warned how, thanks to the “acetic priests” and their stringencies’ leading to the caging of emotions, we are subject to wild, pointless rages, for which we can then be forgiven, setting the grounds for the next orgy. Current cyber tools only inflame such orgies, perhaps to even a greater degree than without the ease of clicking. Users can—and notoriously do—vent massive amounts of hate, anger, and death threats through message boards, chat rooms, and commentaries. Much of these being anonymous or under pen names, users can hide themselves and scramble ever more forcefully to spill their venom in the process of attempted assuaging of their depression, emptiness, lack of feeling in their lives. Even more dangerously, these platforms can be used to assassinate people, utterly ruin their careers, via flash mobs, which can annihilate someone globally in seconds.

Finally, the sixth level of Gertz’s techno-limbo evokes Nietzsche’s infamous death of God. Of course, no one has shot God fatally, but creeping nihilism has depleted God of meaning. In our more recent rendition of nihilism, search engines and their technical offshoots such as satellite maps and office assistants have promised to have the strength wholly to displace and replace whatever function God had before. The very notions of “good” and “evil” get redefined in this context. Parallel to how the American pragmatists construe true as what works, “evil” in the world of Search-Engine+ is what doesn’t work, what obstructs results. Nietzsche’s complaint here, though (considering his flagellation of Christianity’s moralism) would be that what this techno-limbo fashions, pretending to be a non-moral outlook, “is in reality a moral worldview of self-perpetuation” (201). Gertz construes such technologies as “God 2.0,” such that the companies perpetuating them

all share ‘the belief that its principles should apply to everyone.’ This logic, though, is not new, and it is shared not only by tech companies but by ascetic priests. (201)

The ascetic priests are, of course, those in whom (the empty-vessel) humans have, over millennia, put their trust and faith “to cure us of our suffering, of our nihilism” (201). The cyber-tech world is doing nothing new for the species, if not accelerating the process of forgoing a full life for a nihilistic one.

Considering how these technologies permeate industrial society, it is hard to evade such deleterious effects. The book is not overtly calling on readers to abandon these technologies’ usage as the way to circumvent them. Rather, we

need heightened awareness of what we are, especially in terms of questioning how we fit these technologies into our daily living, how they fit us into themselves, and how the process reflects values that in turn may warrant critical examination. Gertz's distinction between passive and active nihilism is central here. Passive nihilism is simply accepting technologies as they arise in the market, passively assuming a general progress behind the technological progress. Such nihilism thereby tacitly calls for questioning every value that would call such progress into doubt. Gertz proposes that certain advantages can accrue to such passive nihilism if the doubting of values extends so far as to question the value that would give technological progress ascendancy. Then the road forks, with one way leading, if one so chooses, to active nihilism and questioning the very notion that technological progress means human progress. Then we could be en route not only to question and replace the central valuing of technological progress (as if it had exclusive rights to what human progress consists in), but also an ongoing examination and reassessment of values ad infinitum.¹ Gertz encapsulates:

A critical, Nietzschean perspective can . . . help us to recognize how we evaluate technologies nihilistically, such as when we take for granted what it means to be human, and when we take for granted that we need not question the relationship between human and technological progress. (211–12)

Certainly, this book may irritate some Nietzsche scholars. It is not doing what good (Nietzschean) scholarship presumably should do. It is not, for example, suggesting a particular interpretation of a Nietzsche text and arguing for it. However, such charges against the book's methodology would entirely misfire. This book is no more Nietzschean scholarship than the *Divine Comedy* is Virgilian scholarship—or, indeed, than *Republic* is Socratic scholarship (Socrates, at this point in Plato's career, likely being a constructed persona). In Gertz's case, as mentioned, Nietzsche serves as a guide, to provide orientation and structure to what could otherwise be a morass of our current technological deluge and how it affects both individual and social lives. No doubt, Gertz must, nonetheless, assume an interpretation of Nietzsche. But that fact does not undermine Gertz's method. Even a constructed Nietzsche could serve the role here as well as Nietzsche speaking from the dead. What matters is the content of the particular "Nietzsche" chosen and how it enables this work to make its critique. As Gertz writes:

A critical, Nietzsche perspective on technologies can help us to recognize how we use technologies nihilistically, such as when we use technologies to

try to make people happier in particular circumstances rather than questioning why people are not happy in those circumstances. (211)

Still, a reader can only wonder: Why use Nietzsche, given the sort of reputational baggage he carries, for a precautionary normative evaluation and enjoinder? Can one so readily tease apart the Nietzsche that would hardly bother with the “weak” (whoever they are) and their fates and who exhorts individuals who happen to listen to triumph over the weak, from the Nietzsche that seems to find hope for the entire species (Zarathustra: “I love man. . . . What can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*”)? His *Genealogy of Morals*, despite its popularity and influence, falls short as an empirical theory of the origins of Christian-type morality and strongly needs updating (if thereby endangering it to falsification) with current archaeology and anthropology (Nietzsche 1967). Moreover, many readers or potential readers of this book may not uphold Nietzsche as a reliable source of normative edification and yet could benefit by much of the book’s analysis. That is, the book risks narrowing its readership to Nietzscheans. Could the same message have been promulgated without deference to the chosen guide?

One other, small objection could be made to the notion of passive and active nihilism. It is not convincing that passive nihilism can be so easily extended into a profound doubter of all values, including those that set all technologies on a pedestal. The very passivity, given its self-hypnosis and herd mentality, would seem rather to muffle questioning of its foundational values to the point of silence. Thus, passive nihilism hardly seems the source and forerunner of activism (or active nihilism). In fact, there seems to be a danger here to the book’s program of exhorting readers to active questioning: It appears that we could too readily continue breezing along with the technological flow, with the assurance that passive nihilism and its antipathy to all values that would doubt it will always keep puffing alongside and, before it’s too late, save us from our over-technologized selves. There is, then, in this book’s exhortation, no clear way to jump from the quicksand of passive nihilism to the firm ground of the active (beyond a fortuitous tree-branch dangling down for one’s grasp!). Passivity begets passivity.

Despite these drawbacks, the book offers remarkable insight, some of the analysis even deserving the name wisdom. Its often felicitous phrasing, amusing anecdotes about “our” technological overfeeding (the scare quotes indicating that not all humans so indulge), and deep concern for what humanity is currently doing with itself all work to make this a volume appropriate for the widest range of readers, lay and professional.

Notes

1. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison, “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical” (Jefferson 1787).
2. Excerpted from Nietzsche 1968, 123, 127; emphasis in original.

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