## Essays in Philosophy

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## **Book Review**

Genealogy of Nihilism, Conor Cunningham, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 315 pp., notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-415-27693-4 (hbk), ISBN 0-415-27694-2 (pbk). \$27.95, paper.

Genealogy of Nihilism is an overview of selected medieval and modern ideas that are purported to be "nihilistic." With a brief preface and no general introduction, the book consists of two parts, the first being a loose and fragmentary chronology of the multifunctional "nothing" with no distinction of its different types in the history of philosophy, while the second part contains a potpourri of mainly contemporary continental thought contrasted with the writer's peculiar theological perspective. Finally, the conclusion of this book hammers down what was expected all along, that the "excess" and "imbalances" of nihilism must be answered by the optimistic tradition of Christianity, that this answer must be given by "the faithful theologian" in the manner of "those in the Upper Room," and that love will overcome the dark fathomless abyss of nothingness.

This may sum it all up. But since Cunningham should not be crucified for his religious reaction against a disturbing movement that has brought an unprecedented exigency for reconstruction of philosophy and renovation in literary and artistic works in recent decades, his book deserves a critical review before receiving a general commentary.

The book consists of two parts. In Part I, chapters 1 and 2 attempt to explore the ideas of "nothing as some thing" in the works of Plotinus, Avicenna, Henry of Ghent, Scotus, and Ockham. It starts with the gruesome myth of Hesiod's *Theogony*, retelling castration and cannibalism (all summarized in one short paragraph). Cunningham correctly states that this is where Plotinus got the idea of Non-being. That is because, since the tale entails the progression of all (including Kronos the father, and his son, Zeus) from the One (the grandfather, Ouranos), and since the One is castrated by Kronos, the One is identical with Non-being. However, at this point, Cunningham takes a leap by insisting that the placelessness of Non-being is an opening for nothingness. This inference is not warranted. For in *Theogony* Non-being/the One is simply a precondition for Creation, and it is, as such, the antithesis of nothingness.

Subsequently, for showing the continuity (genealogy) of this questionable start, the writer moves on to the other thinkers and interprets them in a similar fashion to suit his blueprint. Here quoting some section titles of the first chapter might reveal his intentions: "To Need: Nothing;" "One: Audacity;" "Avicenna needs nothing;" "God: Without essence;" "Henry of Ghent: the possibility of nothing;" "Duns Scotus and William of Oakham: univocity of Non-Being;" "Possibly: Nothing;" "To Be: Nowhere," etc. Suffice it to say that the subtitle of the second chapter is no less revealing:

"Intuitive cognition—to cognise nothing." What does all this really mean? Does it mean that these remarkable theologians (including the "pagan" Plotinus) were true nihilists? In anticipating this kind of criticism, Cunningham has already stated at the outset that they are not. So the next obvious question is: What are they doing in this book? To him, although they were not nihilists, they all had some "nothing" in their thoughts. This answer, though, as clever as it may sound, is far from satisfactory in view of the vast difference between nihilism and mere nothing. It is to be noted that the writer is yet to define nihilism.

Chapter 3 is exclusively devoted to Spinoza. Similar to his handling of the aforementioned figures, here Cunningham narrowly scissors out what he needs, colors the cuttings as he likes, and then patches them together to suit his ready-made design. Like the previous case, the section titles may reveal his premeditation: "Substance: None;" "Attributes: None;" "Nothing: Much;" "I Am: Not;" "Desiring: Nothing;" "To Not Be: Saved." Would these words genuinely reflect what Spinoza meant? In *Ethics* (Cunningham's primary reference) Spinoza contends that God's infinite substance includes all substances. But Cunningham's interpretation of this book is quite amusing. For instance, to Spinoza's statement that "*Except God no substance can exist or be conceived*" (Pt.1, Prop. IX), Cunningham responds: "This use of the concept 'God' has therefore enabled Spinoza to rid the world of all substances (and eventually of all substance)" (p. 60). His respective endnote even borders on the scandalous: "Yet this God is set against a Nature with which it is equivalent. As a result the substance which this God has got rid of comes back to haunt both God and Nature. For it is, as I suggest, the *name* in Spinoza's philosophy for the absence of both" (p. 71). Was this famously monistic theologian a nihilist-atheist in disguise?

Chapter 4 is about Kant. The section titles are: "To Say: Nothing;" "To Do: Nothing;" "To See: Nothing," and "To Be: Nothing." Here we go again! Except here Cunningham's plan is far more ambitious than in the previous case for it compresses all of the three *Critiques* in this same chapter. With regards to the words "Nothing" above, it must be indicated that Kant's greatest achievement in the first *Critique* is his criticism of metaphysics by placing the objective reality beyond the human reach. Yet it is widely recognized that, for Kant, the phenomenal world is not nothing, but it is the representation of the noumenal world. Cunningham shows no interest in exploiting this Kantian dogma about the existence of an unknowable "thing-in-itself." This neglect makes his book blindfolded to the post-Kantian questioning of the very existence of objectivity, knowledge and truth, that which in part led to the rise of metaphysical nihilism, in Nietzsche, and its profound influence on existentialism and poststructuralism. Yet instead of exploiting this Kantian essential in this chapter, Cunningham goes off speaking about "analytic and synthetic judgments," the "a priori synthetic judgment," and other irrelevancies. With regard to the other *Critiques*, he also insists on questionable issues and dwells in vicinities that are clearly irrelevant to nihilism and nothingness.

Chapter 5 deals with Hegel's encounter with nothingness. After starting off with some theological topics, especially God, it discusses nothingness, and in this connection it misses Hegel's view of "Being." Here the writer wants to show that, just like Spinoza's "God," Hegel's "Being" is surrounded by nothing and contains nothing (p. 114). To clarify this misrepresentation, here is a summary of Hegel's perspective: Insofar as Being has been understood as the abstraction of all things (the *cupola*), it is completely empty and therefore has no identity or is identical with nothing. In this case, he rejects it as a false notion. On the other hand, in order for a thing "to be" (properly speaking), it must remain constant and invariable. Yet there is nothing in this world that stays the

same. This matter of fact gives Hegel the opportunity of introducing the antithesis, Nothingness, whose perpetual impact on the changeless Being brings about the synthesis of Becoming. Therefore, Being is and is not nothing. It is nothing (or false), as a *cupola*; and yet it is not nothing in its transitory state (which is not quite itself and yet it is itself as long as it is not totally absent). For Hegel, Nothingness brings to life the "rigid processless Being," and by so doing it is the mother of Time and agent of change in the Universe. Hegel acknowledges that the earliest expression of this insight is to be found in Heraclitus, thus the Heraclitean enunciation that "All is flowing" (*Werke: Wissenschaft der Logik* I, Erstes Buch: "Die Lehre vom Sein," C. "Werden"). From this "elementary notion" Hegel attempts to move on to a "richer and more intense" realm of the Spirit (ibid.).

In Chapter 6 the writer ventures to meet Heidegger. At issue are the familiar Sein, Dasein (sometimes in the accentuated form, Da-sein), Geworfenheit, Zuhandenheit, Sorge, das Nicht, and other Heideggerian terms in existential phenomenology. The main problem here is not about what is said but what is not said. In fact, this problem takes us back to the opening chapters and forces the question of why, instead of those medieval thinkers, the more relevant Hellenistic cosmologists have not been included in this book. This question becomes all the more pressing when one realizes that in the present case Heidegger is battling, albeit an uphill one, two of his towering predecessors: Hegel and Nietzsche. While Nietzsche is conspicuously absent in this book, Heidegger's case against Hegel is completely neglected. The latter is reminiscent of the twenty-five hundred year old contest between Heraclitus and Parmenides. In this drama, Heidegger's own conservative Dasein cannot be forgetful. It cleverly appeals to the Parmenidean Being so as to halt both the Hegelian dialectic of becoming and Nietzschean spread of nihilism. Had Cunningham been apprehensive of this family feud, his book could have shown a more convincing "genealogy." While many things are missing here and there, he brings the chapter to a close by comparing Celan with Heidegger, thus reconciling a Jew with the National Socialist. Good try! Notwithstanding, Heidegger never denounced his old creed, and to make the matter more complicated, he did date Hanna Arendt.

Chapter 7 is on Derrida, the only figure in the book who has philosophized on the margin of nihilism. Yet here, too, annoying problems abound. For example, right at the start, the subtitle: "Spinozistic Plotinianism" is a reminder of the writer's habit of insisting on the non-existing relations that are deemed suitable only for his "genealogy." He in fact says: "It is possible to argue that Derrida is a Plotinian disciple of Spinoza..." (p. 158). Consequently, what is "possible" becomes a solid base of this chapter. It is interesting to know what Derrida himself would say about this alleged "Spinozadic" and "Plotinian" genes of his. Surely, in spite of Derrida's rare mentioning of Plotinus and Spinoza in his extensive writing, the thinker who affected him deeply was Nietzsche (e.g., Jacques Derrida, Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles). Similar to Nietzsche's view that as an arbitrary abstraction language is illusory, Derrida shows that there is nothing inside and outside of the text. But Cunningham takes this "outside of the text" to mean, that for Derrida there is nothing out there in the world. This is obviously not what Derrida means, and Cunningham, as though having suddenly become aware of this blunder but still unwilling to rectify or revise it, takes it to an endnote and gives the impression of trying to hide it right there. Therefore, he first quotes Derrida who himself has stated clearly that "It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference.... I never cease to be surprised by the critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite..." (Note 3, p.163). But Cunningham is still unconvinced! His contention

comes basically to this: that Derrida, in defending his own philosophy, does not know what he is talking about! He then refers the reader to "an excellent critique of Derrida," whose author happens to be another advocate of "radical orthodoxy" (ibid.). This is very amusing, especially when it is realized that for the rest of this chapter the writer's struggle to score against the prominent poststructuralist remains entangled in a web of out-of-context commentaries and wrong choices of words.

The shorter Part II is titled: "The Difference of Theology" (author's italic). Its first chapter begins as though the writer is finally going to define "nihilism." While this does not happen, he does make a valid point about the emptiness of the subject matter of science. For instance, "Biology must reduce that which it describes to nothing, that is, nothing outside its descriptive abilities (DNA, etc.).... The Word [DNA] has not become flesh, rather flesh has become 'words'.... When biology studies life (bios), it does so on the axiomatic assumption that life does not exist" (p. 177). Of course, these lines do conform with the general criticism of nihilism, since theoretical science, as perceived in this way, is indeed nihilistic. Alas, the writer fails to go further and elaborate on the following points. First, in spite of the abstract emptiness of its subject matter, science is always optimistic. This is partly because of its presumption about some kind of realism, objectivity, or universal truth, which has proven to be a favorite target for the skeptics and nihilists. So, in this crucial sense, the very idea of science is not nihilistic but anti-nihilistic. Second, the inherent emptiness, arbitrariness and falsity of the subject matter of science (as indicated above by Cunningham) are in fact offset by science's application, technology. For Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Rorty, this is how the unreal becomes actual, and the ideality and arbitrariness of mathematics, logic, language, and scientific theory turn into practical tools for, say, enhancement of power (economic, political, military, even for the teacher in a classroom), improvement in health (for humans, animals, plants), increasing convenience (transportation, telecommunication), and so on. Of course, along with its usefulness, technology can also lead to unexpected and new spectra of nihilism in different areas of social and cultural life. Yet none of these crucial issues has been addressed either in this chapter or elsewhere in the book.

The rest of Chapter 8 and the much shorter Chapter 9 reflect the writer's worries about the consequences of nihilism. This is where his "radical orthodoxy" could potentially offend even some mainstream Christians. First of all, he claims that "Nihilism is not a choice but all choices" (p. 170). But why should this be the case? If somebody sees in life no true end other than death or after some serious reflections candidly pronounces that the universe has no ultimate purpose, how can this person be considered beyond doubt to have a choice in believing in such things? But since no such questions have been raised by the writer, no answer is obviously expected by him either. So he continues: "In being a choice (the etymology of heresy stems from the word for choice, hairesis), then it will be a reality. In being 'a' reality it will be but a reactive discourse which is better referred to as 'sin'" (p. 171). In this way, we are led to the inference that "nihilism" is a "heresy" and "sin." He then goes on attacking logical possibilities, analyticity and "aprioricity" for being the re-enactment of "the logic of the fall: to have a-part of the world apart from God" (p. 172). "And Hell is the black night of this dissolution; the very loss of the immanent under the reign of quantity" (p. 173). After issuing these frightening warnings, he refers to Aquinas' conception of divine causality and analogy, which he subsequently applies to the "literal" and "metaphorical" interpretations of Holy Thursday and Good Friday. In this way he frees himself from the historical order of events, and reverses and mingles the temporal sequence of the dates that led to crucifixion,

and even suggests Mary's presence in the Upper Room. Nonetheless, regardless of all these eccentricities, it is still unclear whether this approach is meant to defeat the "dark" and "sinful" nihilism, and if so, why this would be the only way mentionable as antidote. Since the rest of this chapter provides no answer to these crucial questions, the only space left for clarification is the next and final chapter.

Chapter 10 is an overcrowded stage for both a famous and an obscure cast of characters. In the order of appearance they are: Sartre, Lacan, Deleuze, Badiou, Žižek, S. Beckett, Jacobi, Heidegger, Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Kant, Spinoza, Derrida, T. S. Elliot, Shelley, Guattari, Adorno, M. Hallett, M. C. Taylor, M. Blanchot, A. Uhlmann, Ricoeur, Bergson, L. Kolakowski, G. Cantor, St. Paul, Lenin, J.-L. Marion, Shakespeare, R. Doyle, C. McGinn, A. Artaud, R. Penrose, Kafka, J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, P. Claudel, Scotus, Nietzsche, Aquinas, Dostoyevsky, Levinas, J. Mullarkey, S. Mallarmé, Plato, Jastrow's duck-rabbit, Schelling, J.-J. Lecercle, Plotinus, Descartes, and many more. In the midst of this crowd the writer, as though having a sudden glimpse of worry about tending this herd, says: "[I]t is now harder to discern who is who as they travel on. This is not to mix these thinkers up.... There are indeed real differences between such thinkers, but," he insists, "this difference [between theologian and nihilist] requires perpetual discernment" (p. 248). Yet the problem of handling these characters soon takes its toll on him as he angrily calls philosophy and (still undefined) nihilism "ontological shit," "absolute shit," etc. (p.257). Then he looks back and says: "[H]ere we are still with Plotinus and Avicenna. There is also a blatant Gnosticism in the embittered nihilist who sees horror and shit as the kernel of reality..." (ibid.). These fragrant words are sure signs of frustration. And as if these utterances have not been scholarly enough, at the end of this bizarre scene the writer ventures to offer an interpretation of the allegory of the cave. Hence, the prisoner "who has returned to the cave with 'knowledge' is the prisoner we find at the beginning of the Platonic simile. In other words, the enlightened philosopher who returns is the shackled prisoner who never left" (p. 261). Why is this? Because, for Cunningham, philosophers are like those prisoners in that they are at home in the darkness of their cave where they prefer to live their mistaken lives.

The two-page Conclusion of this heavy book starts with a quotation by Jean Borella. It reads: "Faith is the truth of knowledge." This may indeed show us the reason for Cunningham's depriving philosophers of sunlight. For, in this way, "faith," which is by definition blindfolded, is now the (objective) "truth" and the source of (disinterested) "knowledge." Notwithstanding, after reading more and more of this book, one is no longer surprised to see such virtuous insights. The book is devoted to *theos*—it revolves around Him, and even the "philosophical" discussions are filled with unsightly words such as "theophany," "theo-ontology," "ontotheology," "meontology," "meontotheology," and the like. Of course, this manner of approach leads to the final victory of faith over philosophy. In the end the devotee returns to his favorite Upper Room to remember the coming of the kingdom of God, and in so doing he asks the faithful theologians to join him for eternal salvation by defeating the evil that is nihilism. In defense of Cunningham one might say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with having strong religious convictions. But it was Nietzsche who once said that "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies." Observing other people has shown this to be true, particularly when their convictions are energized by superstition and fanaticism.

Generally speaking, it is safe to say that Genealogy of Nihilism is neither a genealogy nor an

exploration of nihilism. Interestingly, the writer does admit in the opening sentence of the Preface that "This book does not seek to present a complete historical genealogy of nihilism...." This admission, it would seem, implies that either the manuscript does not live up to its title, or the title is wrongly chosen for the manuscript. At any rate, the following commentary is intended to show the grave shortcomings of this book by way of sketching an alternative "genealogy" in conjunction with the much needed meaning of nihilism.

The main problem with this book, as suggested thus far, is its selection of historical figures. Given its title and ambitious range, the book should have begun with the pessimistic Ionians such as Theognis and Sophocles, and sympathized with their concerns about the uncertainties of life, the certainty of death, the darkness of the future, and so on. Subsequently, Cunningham could have discussed Gorgias of Leontini's famous remark that "Nothing exists!" In addition, it would have been appropriate to look at the (third-century BC) leaders of the Academy whose rejection of Plato's metaphysical system was based on the Socratic statement that "All I know is that I know nothing."

Further, the chapter on Spinoza was unnecessary for a book on nihilism. Instead, Descartes' *Meditation I* would have been infinitely more relevant. And to add some spice, one could compare the psychological nihilism of this *Meditation* with the Buddhist doctrine of no-mind. Furthermore, Descartes' contemporary critics, especially Gassendi and Mersenne, would have been exciting additions, especially with regards to their arguments against the *cogito*. Meanwhile, the complete absence of Berkeley and Hume was quite a surprise. A discussion of the latter would have been appropriate particularly in connection with his shrinkage of the self (or the world) to a mere bundle of perceptions. The huge gap between the irrelevant Spinoza and not-so-relevant Kant in this book is inexcusable. Moreover, while Schopenhauer is conspicuously absent, Hegel is misrepresented as a nihilist and given a full chapter.

These problems lead us to the central question of what nihilism means. And to answer this, one must realize that the true history of nihilism starts no earlier than the first half of the nineteenth century in Russian literature. This realization simply means that one need not go as far back as the Greeks or include any of the above modern philosophers. In fact, the word "nihilism" was coined sometime during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855), but it was not until the appearance of Ivan Turgenev's bestseller, *Fathers and Sons*, in the 1860's that this term became popular. In seriously questioning the rigid values of his father, Bazarov, the proud hero of this novel, calls himself a nihilist. Soon afterwards, the nihilists of different persuasions made appearances in the works of Dobrolyubov, Pisarev, Chernyshevski, Dostoyevski, et al. It was through these novels that the rejection of value-standards became the tenet of nihilism. But what kind of values? It was first the rejection of parental values, which immediately led to challenging the underlying values of moral and political order, and this rapidly brought the authority of the Orthodox Church under attack. With an air of intellectual honesty, the nihilist saw no ultimate worth in social, cultural, political, moral and religious values, and questioned the meaning of life itself. To the young middle-class Russians these ideas were "cool."

As such, *Genealogy of Nihilism* has failed to register the birthplace, development and significations of nihilism and by so doing, it has taken it almost entirely as atheism. This is how the author pays titanically for his obsessive religious thinking. Tragically, this failure is only the tip of the iceberg. With the exception of six isolated and passing comments, the book ignores Nietzsche, inarguably

the pivotal figure of philosophical nihilism. Nietzsche, like his Russian contemporaries, perceived nihilism in terms of the rejection or absence of values, but he expanded its domain by defining it as the devaluation of all values. In this all-inclusive sense, the term "value" denotes not only the social, cultural, political, moral and religious kinds, but also the metaphysical, epistemological, linguistic, logical, mathematical, and aesthetic. As a philosopher, he also looked at the history of ideas and recognized pessimism and skepticism as earlier yet undeveloped expressions of nihilism. Furthermore, in contrast to Cunningham's parenthetic comment that Nietzsche's nihilism is "joyous" (p. 175, apparently a mistaken allusion to his *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), Nietzsche did not want to be a nihilist and in fact viewed this movement as a sign of resignation, passivity, decadence and degeneration, and tried to overcome it by not going back but by breaking through and going beyond it: "This—is now my way,—where is yours?," so I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For the way—does not exist!" (*Zarathustra* 3.11). This "perspectival" answer later inspired the existentialists (especially Jaspers, Heidegger, Camus) and poststructuralists (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattarri) to overcome nihilism in their own ways. This being the case, none of these philosophers is a nihilist, but all of them had to reckon with it at the start.

Of course, Nietzsche did not cause nihilism, but his understanding of it as the culmination of modernity transcended traditional philosophical discourse, thus inciting interest in historians, sociologists, and art critics, among others. An example of this influence is found in Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West (2 vol., 1918, 1922), which troubled readers, and whose central concerns are still relevant to our world. Are there parallels between the seemingly withering modern Western values and the social conditions that led to the fall and collapse of the Roman Empire? More recently, Allan Bloom's best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, exemplifies the conservative objections to the present trend of value-standards in education, particularly at the university level. Is there not a great difference between the appearance of present students and their nineteenth-century counterparts? Are they as studious? As disciplined? Is not their vocabulary getting poorer? What about their moral values? The center is gone and everything is now relative. No? Do they have any political value? Yes, says Bloom: "The Nietzscheanization of the Left or Vice Versa." Even in the Physics Department there are now relativity and quantum jump. And out on the Western street there are no more bow ties, waistcoats, spats, or top hats; instead, one sees blue jeans, cut-offs, tank tops, sneakers, and backward baseball caps. Meanwhile, the orderly symphonies of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven are replaced by the casual jazz, rock and rap. Even war is no longer romantic. There is emptiness in the traffic-jam, and shapelessness about the international style skyscrapers.

In view of these brief reminders, the historicity toward meaninglessness, emptiness, or nothingness is far more extensive than what is narrowly and inaccurately presented in Cunningham's broadly titled book. Yet this does not sum up the entire problem. Far from it. Indeed, to sustain the unsustainable, the writer tries to tie in his loose and ill-chosen "genealogy" with the idea (repeated over and over again in every chapter) that "Nihilism is the logic of nothing as something, which claims that nothing is." This claim is absurd for three major reasons. First, the phrase "nothing is" leads to a circular argument and is known to elementary logic students as "the liar paradox" (or "the barber paradox" in Russell's and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*). Second, "nothing as something" is false; "nothing" (or "no-thing") can equate only to "nothing" (or "no-thing"). Even in astrophysics the black hole may be seen as something, but it is not the same "thing" as the material world of galaxies it is swallowing. To employ a Heideggerian expression and use the English noun

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"naught" as verb, one can say only that "nothing naughts." Third, and foremost, nihilism has no logic. For it considers logic as a species of the Reason (*Vernunft*) that has been overthrown along with the loss of faith in the Universal Truth, Objective Reality, Absolute Beauty, Idea of the Good, God or any other universal principle of unification that had previously provided security and hope for humankind. Nietzsche, for one, believed that to compensate for this historic loss, one must resort to one's native Dionysian impulses and passionately create new values.

In view of the considerations discussed above, it is evident that in the study of nihilism Nietzsche is indispensable, and ignoring him makes this study grossly defective. In fact, the two nouns of *Genealogy of Nihilism* were introduced to philosophy by Nietzsche. One wishes that the subtitle of the book, "Philosophies of nothing and the difference of theology," had been printed on the book's cover. In this way, the unsuspecting shopper on-line or through mail-order catalog or in a hurry at the bookstore would not be hoodwinked by the book title (believing that it is about the Russians, Nietzsche, the existentialist literature, French poststructuralists), and later discover its content and get disappointed without even bothering to return it for a refund. "Do not judge a book by its cover," says the old Chinese proverb. But people do not read a book before deciding whether to buy it. The real problem here is that what the book cover suggests and what is inside are completely different. And what is inside is not educational even for a young seminarian, given the things that are and are not in this book.

It was initially surprising that the prestigious Routledge had published this book. However, one must consider that it is part of the publisher's Radical Orthodoxy Series, whose editors are published in the same Series and are also referred to and praised in this book.

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