

**NIHILISM.** The term "nihilism" appears to have been coined in Russia sometime in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. It was not, however, widely used **until** after the appearance of I van Turgenev's highly successful novel *Fathers and Sons* in the early 1860s. The central character, Bazarov, a young man under the influence of the "most advanced ideas" of his time, bore proudly what most other people of the same period called the bitter name of nihilist. Unlike such real-life counterparts as Dmitri Pisarev, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, and Nikolai Chernyshevski, who also bore the label, Bazarov's interests were largely apolitical; however, he shared with these historical personalities disdain for tradition and authority, great faith in reason, commitment to a materialist philosophy like that of Ludwig Buchner, and an ardent desire to see radical changes in contemporary society.

An extreme statement by Pisarev of the nihilist position as it developed in the late 1850s and 1860s in Russia is frequently quoted: "Here is the ultimatum of our camp: what can be smashed should be smashed; what will stand the blow is good; what will fly into smithereens is rubbish; at any rate, hit out right and left-there will and can be no harm from it" (quoted in Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *Road to Revolution*, p. 120). Bazarov echoes this idea, though a bit feebly, when he accepts a description of nihilism as a matter of "just cursing."

Use of the term spread rapidly throughout Europe and the Americas. As it did, the term lost most of its anarchistic and revolutionary flavor, ceasing to evoke the image of a political program or even an intellectual movement. It did not, however, gain in precision or clarity. On the one hand, the term is widely used to denote the doctrine that moral norms or standards cannot be justified by rational argument. On the other hand, it is widely used to denote a mood of despair over the emptiness or triviality of human existence. This double meaning appears to derive from the fact that the term was often employed in the nineteenth century by the religiously oriented as a club against atheists, atheists being regarded as *ipso facto* nihilists in both senses. The atheist, it was held, would not feel bound by moral norms; consequently, he would tend to be callous or selfish, even criminal. At the same time he would lose the sense that life has meaning and therefore tend toward despair and suicide.

Atheism. There are many literary prototypes of the atheist- nihilist. The most famous are I van in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and Kirilov in Dostoyevsky's *The*

*Possessed*. It was into Ivan's mouth that Dostoyevsky put the words, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." And Dostoyevsky made it clear that it was Ivan's atheism which led him to acquiesce to his father's murder. Kirilov was made to argue that if God does not exist, the most meaningful reality in life is individual freedom and that the supreme expression of individual freedom is suicide.

Nietzsche was the first great philosopher-and still the only one-to make extensive use of the term "nihilism." He was also one of the first atheists to dispute the existence of a necessary link between atheism and nihilism. He recognized, however, that as a matter of historical fact, atheism was ushering in an age of nihilism. "One interpretation of existence has been overthrown," Nietzsche said, ..but since it was held to be *the* interpretation, it seems as though there were no meaning in existence at all, as though everything were in vain" (*Complete Works*, Edinburgh and London, 1901-1911, Vol. XIV, p. 480). Albert Camus later dealt with this historical fact at some length in *The Rebel* (1951).

The tendency to associate nihilism with atheism continues to the present. It is to be found, for instance, in a work by Helmut Thielicke entitled *Nihilism*, which first appeared in 1950. During the course of the twentieth century, however, the image of the nihilist has changed, with a corresponding change in the analysis of nihilism's causes and consequences. Professor Hermann Wein of the University of Gottingen writes, for instance, that the members of the younger generation today tend to think of the nihilist not as a cynical or despairing atheist but as a robotlike conformist. For them nihilism is caused not so much by atheism as by industrialization and social pressures, and its typical consequences are not selfishness or suicide but indifference, ironical detachment, or sheer bafflement. The literary prototypes are not the romantic heroes of Dostoyevsky but the more prosaic and impersonal heroes of Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* (first volumes published 1931-1933) or Kafka's *The Trial* (1925).

Moral skepticism. If by nihilism one means a disbelief in the possibility of justifying moral judgments in some rational way and if philosophers reflect the intellectual climate of the times in which they live, then our age is truly nihilistic. At no period in Western history, with the possible exception of the Hellenistic age, have so many philosophers regarded moral statements as somehow arbitrary. For many Continental philosophers, especially the atheistic existentialists, moral values are products of free

choice—that is, of uncaused, unmotivated, and nonrational decisions. The most notable statement of this view is in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) by Jean-Paul Sartre. In England and America, on the other hand, most philosophers tend to the view known as emotivism, according to which moral statements are ultimately and essentially products of pure social conditioning or brute feeling. The most noted, though not the most extreme, representatives of this position are A. J. Ayer and Charles Stevenson.

It is impossible to state here with reasonable detail and accuracy the positions so summarily described in the last paragraph, much less to discuss their logical merits. For an understanding of nihilism, however, it is important to note how these positions relate to the ideas of those to whom nihilism of this kind is anathema. As already indicated, the most vociferous antinihilists were originally theologians, like Dostoyevsky, who feared that disbelief in God would lead to selfishness and crime. If, they argued, there is no divine lawgiver, each man will tend to become a law unto himself. If God does not exist to choose for the individual, the individual will assume the former prerogative of God and choose for himself. For these antinihilists the principal enemy today would be Sartre. The later antinihilists, however, tend to save their fire for the emotivists, whom they accuse of sanctioning moral indifference and mindless conformity. If all moral codes are essentially matters of feeling and social pressure, then no one would be better or worse than another. The wise man, like the Sophists of Plato's day, would simply adjust as best he could to the code of the society in which he happened to be living.

John Dewey's fervid insistence upon critical individual intelligence as the prime agent of social and moral reconstruction places him squarely in the second group of antinihilists.

Whether belief in atheistic existentialism or emotivism does in fact have the kinds of consequences suggested above is not at issue here. The point is simply that antinihilists of the older variety do not regard conventional morality, especially in its other-regarding aspects, as adequately justified unless it has a cosmic or divine sanction, whereas more contemporary antinihilists do not regard any moral code as adequately justified unless there is some standard or touchstone more universal than pure feeling or social pressure to which it may be shown to conform. The pertinent question here is whether the antinihilists have a good case for these views.

It would appear that the demand for justification of conventional moral rules by

appeal to a divine or cosmic power cannot be logically admitted without abandoning widespread and deeply felt notions about the nature of moral justification. If the higher power which presumably legitimizes our moral code is by definition good and just, an appeal to that power would involve us in a vicious circle. How would we know that that power was good and just unless there were some purely human ideas about the good and the just to which we felt entitled independently of that power's sanction? If, on the other hand, the presumed higher power is not by definition good or just, if, for instance, it were defined merely as a creator and sustainer of life, by what right could we appeal to it to legitimize our moral views? Might or power, even the power to create and sustain life, is not to be confused with right or legitimacy.

The demand that moral codes be justified by more universal standards than pure feeling or social dictate is, on the contrary, much more consonant with widespread, intuitive notions about the nature of moral justification. If social pressure is taken as the touchstone of morality, we once again court a confusion between might and right; if feeling is taken as the touchstone, we must apparently abandon not only the notion of a universal morality, feelings being notoriously fluctuating and individual, but also the notion that one of the functions of morality is to refine, direct, and control individual feelings. It may, of course, be the case that there is no universal morality and that whatever power morality possesses must derive from individual feeling and social conditioning alone. It would be surprising, however, if even the emotivists did not experience a certain chagrin that the truth in ethical theory should be so contrary to human hopes.

Meaninglessness of life. Passing to the second meaning of the term "nihilism," we find that the pertinent questions are less logical or technically philosophical than psychological or sociological. There are two questions here, corresponding to the two forms of antinihilism. Is it true that a loss of faith in God or cosmic purposes produces a sense of despair over the emptiness and triviality of life, consequently stimulating selfishness and callousness? Is it true that industrialization and conformist social pressures have trivialized life in a similar way, causing us to adopt an attitude of ironic detachment? A negative answer to these questions would appear to fly in the face of most contemporary social criticism and analysis as well as the testimony of most contemporary literature.

It is doubtful, however, whether a simple yes would be a proper response to the first question. When it is assumed that man needs a sense of divine or cosmic purpose in order to lead a rich and morally wholesome life, one is generalizing far beyond the evidence. The most that the evidence can be made to support is that relatively large numbers of men in certain societies at certain times have felt this need. No one who has read, for instance, Tolstoy's account of his religious crisis in middle age could doubt the depth of his despair or the reality of his need for a vital relationship to an eternal being. One can reasonably doubt, however, whether that need and despair spring from universal and firmly rooted human aspirations. Some psychologists regard Tolstoy's conversion crisis as a symptom of involuntional melancholia, and there are many who believe it to be a consequence of Tolstoy's social position as a member of Russia's decaying aristocracy.

Bertrand Russell went through a similar crisis earlier in life. He not only survived that crisis without reverting to faith in God or cosmic purpose; he also survived it, as his essay "A Free Man's Worship" (1902) attests, by deliberately espousing a world outlook which emphasizes the finitude and cosmic isolation of mankind. And no one who is familiar with the facts of his life would dare to suggest that the later Russell was less morally earnest than the young believer or less wholeheartedly and happily engaged in the process of living.

Those who attribute the nihilistic malaise of our time to industrialization and conformity are less vulnerable to the charge of overgeneralization. This is not because they limit their analysis to a given historical epoch, for they, too, are making an implicit generalization about universal human needs. Their point is that all men need, if they are to be whole and healthy, the sense that they can by a unique and personal effort contribute to the social process and that society will appreciate and reward this individual effort. This generalization is less vulnerable than the first simply because there is more evidence for it. Novels and biographies, ethnographic reports and individual clinical histories, not to mention common-sense attitudes of most men in all societies at all historical periods, tend to support it. And the issue raised by nihilism in this sense of the term is one of the great unresolved political and social problems of the twentieth century. Whether philosophers in their professional capacity are competent to contribute to its solution is a question we shall not attempt to answer here.