

# TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE IDEA OF HUMANITY IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL NIHILISM

Adriano FABRIS

University of Pisa, Lungarno Pacinotti 43, 56126 Pisa, Italy

*adriano.fabris@unipi.it*

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## *Abstract*

The paper discusses two forms of contemporary nihilism. They are the replacement of meaning with explanation, and the replacement of purposeful theoretical explanation with purposeless praxis. Both forms are presented and discussed. In order to counter these two forms, adaptation to a nihilistic dimension must be avoided. To this end, the paper presents an interpretation of nihilism as “relational disorder,” and proposes the

idea and development of a “relational humanity” as an antidote to nihilism of our age.

*Keywords:* nihilism, relation, meaning, explanation, relational disorder.

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### **Preobrazbe ideje človeškosti v dobi tehnološkega nihilizma**

#### *Povzetek*

Prispevek pretresa dve obliki sodobnega nihilizma. Na eni strani gre za zamenjavo smisla z razlaganjem, na drugi strani za zamenjavo smiselne teoretske razlage z brezsmiselno prakso. V besedilu predstavim in obravnavam obe obliki. Če se jima želimo zoperstaviti, se moramo izogniti prilagajanju nihilistični razsežnosti. S tovrstnim namenom prispevek nihilizem razgrne kot »relacijsko motnjo« ter kot protistrup proti današnjemu nihilizmu predlaga idejo in razvoj »relacijske človeškosti«.

*Ključne besede:* nihilizem, odnos, smisel, razlaga, relacijska motnja.

## 1. Two forms of contemporary nihilism

We live in the age of technological nihilism. What do I mean to say by that? I mean that nowadays—at least in the West and in the prevalent mindset of the West—a way of thinking has been twice replaced with different ones, both relating back to technological progress. Both replacements may be defined as “nihilistic.” Actually, they are the very embodiment of the nihilism of our age.

The first one is *the replacement of meaning with explanation*. This is a process that feels ambiguous, and we need to explore it further. The second one is *the replacement of purposeful theoretical explanation with purposeless praxis*. The latter is an event that occurs most effectively and efficiently in the realm of technology. Let us have a brief look at these two points.

## 2. The replacement of meaning with explanation

There is a way of being in the world that had been developed first by myth, then by philosophy, and has then spread in the West with the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Regardless of the forms, in which such ways of being in the world used to be developed in the three cases (myth, philosophy, religions), the same strategy was invariably adopted. The human being was in the world, but at the same time, with its thoughts and its actions, it was part of a broader context. Such a context was the context of meaning (Weischedel 2013). Such meanings could be narrated. They were told, in different ways in each one of the cases I mentioned (myth, philosophy, religions). The narrative enabled one to understand the thoughts and actions of a human being from a broader perspective, that is, by giving them a specific place. Such a perspective provided a general framework, an overall horizon that allowed the human being to find and articulate the meaning of what it did. This mainly happened by showing the relationships, in which such behavior was involved. These relationships made it possible to identify responsibilities for some processes and placed them within the flow of a linear time: a time, that is, which had a past, a present, and a future.

Now, this approach is not so widespread in the common mindset anymore. It is not, at least in the West; it is not, at least for most people. Actually, this

meaningful perspective has been replaced with an explanatory perspective. Or, rather, the explanation looks like the true meaning nowadays.

Explaining means finding the causes why something is what it is. It is not responsibility in the broad sense of the word that is at stake here. Here, “cause” means “efficient cause”: something that is quantitatively measured in its efficiency and calculated in its actual effectiveness, depending on what it affects. This is a relationship that puts causes and effects on par. There is no need to refer to an ulterior reality. In what it is and in what it does, the human being completely belongs to the same, unique, and consistent level as the natural world. All one thinks, lives, and does can be explained with reference to such dimensions.

Every relationship that concerns us should therefore be considered—we might say—horizontally, that is, within one and the same horizon, on the same level. There is no need for an external point of reference, an ulterior look that may provide the narrative that concerns me. The narrative is replaced by knowledge. More to the point, it is replaced by a certain kind of knowledge.

388 Knowing means piecing relationships, specific relationships, together: relationships between interlinked parties, relationships, in which the parties involved are put on par and become the object of a theory that, because of such standardization and oversimplification, can deal with this and other, similar processes procedurally, according to mathematical models (Khalifa 2017).

Thus, the reference to an ulterior perspective, to something—we might say—“vertical,” vanishes. Everything is brought back to the here and now. Time itself, instead of stretching out across the past, the present, and the future, shrinks into the instant. The meaning, the narrative that might concern what I am doing, my place within an ulterior dimension: all this disappears. It disappears, because every ulterior dimension fades away, there is no global view, from which I could look at what I do and what I am anymore. There is no external point of reference at all. If I create it, for my convenience, I can destroy it, too.

So, the nihilism of meaning prevails. But a paradox happens, too. Actually, nowadays it is precisely such an overall explanation—the belief that we can explain everything, and nothing else is needed—that makes sense of our being in the world.

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It is the myth of science and its way forward. It is the meaning provided by the proclamation of meaninglessness. It is an ambiguous statement of nihilism. On the one hand, it proclaims that nothing makes sense; on the other hand, the idea prevails that such background can actually provide meaning, direction, certainties for our being in the world (Fabris 2020).

### **3. A senseless action**

The second instance of contemporary nihilism concerns not only the area of knowledge and orientation, but above all the area of action. It is clear that between the two dimensions—knowledge and action—there is a tight connection: the connection that has bound theory and praxis, and knowledge and technique, together for some time now. However, things have changed. We no longer have to do with the practical approach of technique, but with the action of technology.

Between technique and technology, there is a key conceptual difference, regardless of the fact that historically the latter stemmed from the former, through specific processes of complexification. The difference lies in the fact that the field of technique covers processes and tools that cannot take place without human intervention. The field of technology concerns, instead, procedures and devices that can act with higher and higher degrees of independence, even without human intervention.

In the first case, if we look at the matter from an ethical perspective, the human being retains some control over those processes and those tools and is fully responsible for using them; in the second case, as opposed to the action of technological devices, at some point such control vanishes. This broadens the concept of “responsibility.” Now, it is associated with the transformation of the concept of “independent action” and the ability to initiate such action as much as the possibility to continue it in unexpected ways. All this can be attributed to software and machines, too.

In the technological context we live in, a number of consequences happen as a result of the transformations I mentioned. Theory is increasingly subsumed under, and subjected to, practice. Knowledge can be developed and increased only by acting; just think of the way we operate our devices through plug-and-

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play methods. Then, discoveries and the advancement of knowledge take place through experiments, performed by increasingly sophisticated technological devices, which do not really test theoretical assumptions, but rather raise new problems, which only additional experiments can deal with. In other words, theory is a connection, a link between different practices, and is functional to them. Its purpose is no longer to steer or guide some kind of action: not least because, as we have seen before, it can no longer do that.

Then, how can such action, which is growing ever more independent and self-referential, be guided? Its direction is based on action itself. It is performed, it is accomplished precisely in such an action. It is one with action, it wanes into action.

In short, action becomes self-regulatory. More to the point, the only rule that it must abide by is the rule of its self-affirmation. A specific moral principle is inherent and practiced in that, too: the principle of utility, in the sense of individual utility. The only difference is that here utility is not someone's utility, it is the utility of the mechanism, the structure, the process. Utility and function are one and the same, for them.

390

Here is the second dimension, in which contemporary nihilism can be found. It is not just the meaning of action that vanishes. Meaning boils down to the mere manifestation of action itself, which therefore makes sense in itself. In other words, there is no ulterior dimension, in this case a cognitive dimension, to refer to: what happens is self-explanatory.

But there is a consequence to all this. A fact does not have to liquefy into action and an object does not have to be taken in its dynamism now. As we know, that had been the operation Heidegger carried out.<sup>1</sup> Now, instead, it is action itself that is fixed into fact. Therefore, nihilism is no longer a fate or the fulfilment of a fate.<sup>2</sup> It is just a reality that hides behind the senseless action of bureaucracy, of procedures, of increasingly fast and compelling responses. It is the triumph of an increasingly frenzied dynamism that hangs and weighs over us: for no reason at all.

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1 E.g., by interpreting being as a manifestation.

2 According to Heidegger's view again; see Heidegger 1960.

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#### 4. The role of philosophy

So, these are the ways, in which nihilism appears in its current configuration. Or, at least, these are some of its distinctive traits in this day and age. What is the role of philosophy in this scenario? At least, it is to open possibilities. Such possibilities are related to the ability to retrieve a meaningful structure, an ulterior perspective, instead of waning into the hardened dynamics of explanation and its technical and technological effectiveness.

The way this can be done is prompted—such is the thesis I want to put forward—by a rethinking of our humanity based on the relationships we are involved in. As a matter of fact, in principle it is the relationship that makes itself: that makes itself with us, in us, among us. In a nutshell, we must change our mindset. Let us see how that can be done.

#### 5. Some specific traits of the contemporary common mindset

Today, humans, in the context of the nihilism of scientific explanations and self-referential technological praxis, feel driven to adopt specific behaviors. A common mindset underlies such behaviors: a sort of “spirit of the world” that—even if we do not accept it, even if we fight it—we all end up sharing. Here, I can only mention a few aspects of such a mindset. There are three features to it.

a) There is, first and foremost, an understanding of modernity as hypermodernity, in the sense of the privilege of the undivided, self-centered, self-engrossed individual (Mordacci 2017).

b) Next to this, however, there is the celebration of the fragility of such an individual, the ostentation of such fragility in the different forms accepted today, his dependence, in this widely emotional ostentation, on other people’s opinions, and above all the self-centered individual’s readiness, just because of his fragility, to submit himself to some aspiration that is admittedly more powerful than he is. Such aspiration can be, for example, the one expressed by the technological device or the political sphere personified by a leader. In any case, the condition, by which we are led into subservience, is always the same: that such apparently powerful aspiration promises some form—even a trivial one, even a cheap one—of happiness to the individual.

c) In order to do this, that is, to find happiness, the individual is more than willing to lose his own individuality. The way he does it is paradoxical: first, he claims he is different from everyone else; in other words, he actually takes his individuality to the extreme (his own tastes, his own specificity, even his own allergies or food intolerances). But such a claim is in fact what everyone does. So, paradoxically, this celebration of individual differences results in indifference, in everyone conforming to everyone else. We are all the same, just because we are all different. Not in the sense of respecting our own specificity, but as a way to an unavoidable standardization. In other words, and to put it better, in our common diversity we are all the same: just the same.

## **6. Two ways to adapting to a nihilistic dimension**

Here are some specific traits of the contemporary common mindset. They hark back to the forms of nihilism I mentioned at the beginning. Let me remind you: the real or apparent replacement of meaning with explanation; the primacy of an action that is an end in itself, that replaces thought and only aims at sustaining itself.

In what sense can these traits of today's mankind be related to nihilism in its current version? They can be, mostly, in two ways. The first one is by adjusting to such a situation: an adjustment that often takes the form of subservience. The second one consists in claiming a scope of action for the individual only, a sort of possibility of action, despite such subservience to a higher power.

Actually, on the one hand, as we have seen, the human being claims its own centrality: that is, the fact that its relationships with the other are mainly built on and defined by the individual's relationship with himself. It does not matter whether such an individual identifies himself with, and shows his, fragility. What matters is that in any case he or she must always be the center of attention: especially their own attention.

However, today, all this is moving in ambiguous directions. On one side, as we have seen, this self-centered and fragile individual claims a scope of action for himself: his own diversity and the right to assert it. On the other side, though, such a claim can only be appeased in a limited dimension, that is, in some confined spaces: the space of work, hobbies, the close relationships he

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or she constantly lives in. From the global perspective, instead, what matters is the individual's conforming to a superior power, to which, more or less deliberately, more or less happily—he submits (La Boétie 2016).

So, then, there are *two* forms, in which the individual adapts to the nihilistic dimension, with the confusion of meaning and explanation and with the primacy of praxis over reflection it currently entails. The *first form* is the one that gives space to the individual, even if it is an ever-smaller and ever-confrontational space, that is, claiming and asserting his rights. The *second form* is that, in which subservience inevitably takes place in return for a few little happy moments, small real gratifications, whose full accomplishment, though promised, never happens. In either case, the individual feels happy because, at least on the surface, he is kept at the center: at the center, though, of a situation that he cannot either understand or control; at the center of nothing.

## 7. Relational humanity

How can one get out of this predicament? And then: can we really get out of it? It should be said, above all, that we can at least confront it. We can try to understand and deal with the nihilistic context, in which we live. It is essential. It is worth it. Such a situation namely entails unhappiness. It is the unhappiness that comes from disorientation and indifference, that is, a lack of interest in others (Godart 2023).

The underlying question that contemporary nihilism allows us to highlight is actually, as I said, the one that concerns our relationships. Better said: it is the one that concerns the way we conceive of, and experience, our relationships. Contemporary nihilism is the offspring—as it were—of a veritable *relational disorder*.

What do I mean by this phrase? I mean the fact that the two manifestations of contemporary nihilism I pointed out—I insist: the confusion of meaning and explanation, and the primacy of praxis over reflection—, which require the individual to adapt and subjugate himself, are the outcome of a misunderstanding and a diminishment of the way we conceive of, and experience, our relationships. The confusion of meaning and explanation makes one conform his relationships only to the “horizontal” bonds of cause

and effect, thus removing the possibility that there may be other kinds of connections, the ones I called “vertical,” the connections with what can provide guidance in life and let an explicit narrative develop, within which the individual’s life can find meaning. The spreading of a senseless and self-relational praxis in technological contexts is the example of yet another diminishment occurring in our relational approach: whereby the relationship with the self does not only prevail over the relationship with the other, but subjugates and eventually wipes it out. Here is how contemporary nihilism takes the form of a relational disorder.

All this—as Jacobi had rightly intuited and as Jean Paul had staged (Jean Paul 2012)—is the ultimate consequence of a unilateral way of understanding modernity. The modern revolution, as we know, is the one that has put the individual at the center—and rightly, legitimately so. But if it is understood in a unilateral, extreme way, it subjugates the relationship with the other to the relationship with the self. The relationship with the other ends up being built and arbitrarily established by the relationship with the self.

394 This is the emancipatory project that Kant, for instance in *Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), advocates. Only that the unwanted result of such an emancipatory project is precisely that the subject who should be emancipated by this approach is in fact subjugated to the other. As proven by the historical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and as shown even better by today’s technological advancements, in the end, self-affirmation does not concern the individual at all, it concerns the people, the masses, the global economic structure, the apparatus, in which a given system takes shape and sustains itself. To all this, the individual submits himself. In a nutshell: *subservience is the heterogony of ends in the modern emancipatory project.*

But this happened, because, in its development, such a project misunderstood the experience and the concept of relationship. It ended up understanding them in a restrictive way, mainly from the perspective of self-relationship. But a relationship is first and foremost a relationship with the other. The relationship is the first principle, that is, a relationship, which is not established by the individual, but the one, in which the individual is in fact always involved. It is also that bond, in which different individuals are not subsumed under the same dimension, but remain different. Indeed, it is

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just because of such a bond that they have the opportunity to explore their differences, their identities, and therefore the very bond that unites them.

I am going to finish. A relationship is first and foremost a relationship with the other. A relationship is something that comes first, that involves the individual, rather than depending on him. A relationship is a bond between different elements that does not remove their differences. Here are the three distinctive features of a relationship, which are first misunderstood and then eliminated in the contemporary context.

Retrieving them means saving and properly reviving the very emancipatory process of modernity. Retrieving them means tapping again into the real meaning of our humanity. Retrieving them means getting out of that nihilism, which can now be increasingly qualified as a relational disorder.

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