Journal of

Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology

───

On Friedrich Nietzsche, Nihilism and the 21st Century

Patrick Van Calster, Bournemouth University (UK)
pvancalster@bournemouth.ac.uk

It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.
Georges Bataille (2010 (1931): 17)

Abstract

Nietzsche's thought and work, it could be argued, is quite paradoxical and contradictory in places. But it has generated a number of ideas and concepts that, as the great philosopher himself suggested, may have emerged well ahead of their time. In this contribution the focus is on the notion of 'nihilism', and its uses for anyone who wishes to make sense of what some might wish to call the calamitous 21st century. In Nietzsche's work, 'nihilism' appears in many contexts and guises. Here we explore four shapes of nihilism (continuous recycling of the old; decadence; slave morality; and active nihilism) and apply those to developments and phenomena that became quite ubiquitous in this calamitous age of ours.

Keywords

Friedrich Nietzsche – Plato – nihilism – incels – cancel culture – slave morality

Introduction

In this contribution, I would like to argue that Nietzsche's thoughts and ideas on nihilism may hold a clarifying key to the understanding of some of the 21st century's dynamics. There are,

however, some difficulties to overcome. First, Nietzsche never offered a systematic analysis of nihilism. Elisabeth Kuhn (1992), who penned down what is considered the most comprehensive study on Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism (cited in Van Tongeren, 2017: 83), argued that Nietzsche's ideas on nihilism should be viewed as an exploration of the many meanings and understandings the notion may hold or evoke. Indeed, Nietzsche seemed to have played with the concept for many years, shifting its meaning each time he (re)addressed the matter, leading him to repeatedly call the concept "ambiguous" (Van Tongeren, 2018: 66). Consequently, to fully comprehend Nietzsche's understanding of the different evocations of nihilism, we will have to look for it across his work and puzzle our way through his writings.

Secondly, apart from some lengthy parts in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)*,* and perhaps *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), Nietzsche didn't publish much on nihilism during his lifetime. Therefore, for an inclusive analysis, we will have to turn to the Unpublished Fragments, more specifically the *Lenzer Heide Notes on European Nihilism*. Thirdly, Nietzsche considered his work ahead of its time, thus setting some high standards for the reader. "The reader," Nietzsche writes in the preface to *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (2016: 145), "(…) must have three qualities: He must read calmly, without haste; he mustn't always let himself and his "culture" intrude into his reading; and finally, he must not expect a concrete result, some tables and charts at the end." Nietzsche's aphoristic writing style may speak volumes here. Aphorisms don't deliver clear-cut ideas or understandings. Quite on the contrary, aphorisms, it could be argued, are open-ended and invite the reader to find their own interpretation that may shift over time when revisiting a specific line or page. Fourthly, as any Nietzsche reader already may know, contradictions and paradoxes are at the heart of Nietzsche's thought and ideas, which makes it a challenge to put different and often contradicting pieces together in a coherent text. As Charles Bernheimer (2002: 7) said it: "Contradictions are (…) characteristic of Nietzsche's reflections on any of his key concepts, and readers of his books are used to the multiple twists and turns that characterize his dynamic thought." Finally, due to his approach to philosophy and the acquirement of knowledge in general, Nietzsche's work may have more to say about the current times than it ever did before. In *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche (1989: 13) elaborates on the type of philosophy he wants to practise: "Gradually, it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir (…)." In other words, Nietzsche's philosophy, if there even is one, is about himself, or more accurately perhaps, about what it is to be human. It may therefore not surprise us that Nietzsche saw himself as an "Arzt der Kultur"[1], or physician of culture (Nietzsche, 1979:67-76). The 'Arzt der Kultur' metaphor is strikingly accurate in describing the way Nietzsche examines his subject. Like an 'Arzt', Nietzsche wants to 'diagnose' culture by submitting it to a series of examinations. As Van Tongeren (2000: 5) puts it, Nietzsche is inquiring the culture's "psychological and physical condition, its strength and weakness, its suffering and flourishing". Indeed, like a doctor, Nietzsche observes and listens to culture's manifestations and appearances which are then taken as symptoms for the underlying mechanics that are causing these same symptoms.

Since Nietzsche is both a culture producing and culture consuming being, he does that by taking his own pain and suffering, indeed his own humanity as subject of research. In *Twilight of the Idols,* originally published in 1889, Nietzsche takes the idea of *Artz der Kultur* even further and presents himself as the philosopher with the hammer. The hammer here isn't so much the sledgehammer you might think it represents, designed to demolish. Quite on the contrary, the hammer here needs to be taken as the tuning fork, or the reflexologist's hammer, used by the doctor to slightly touch the idols Nietzsche wants to scrutinise (such as values, beliefs, truths). It could even be argued that most, if not all, of Nietzsche's ideas or analyses, such as the Übermensch, the Will to Power, the Eternal Recurrence and the many ideas and evocations he developed and addressed over time on nihilism must be seen as tools, indeed as little tuning

---

[1] The reference to medical terminology here couldn't be more apt since Nietzsche started his academic career as a scholar in classical philology, studying and admiring the pre-Socratic thinkers, many of whom worked as medical doctors, and introduced medical terminology into their philosophies (Van Tongeren, 2000: 3).

forks if you will, used to test the existing and perhaps rusted intellectual mind frames or social paradigms, instead of treating them as a coherent philosophy that explains the world.

In this paper I wish to make use of Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism as tuning forks in an attempt to understand the current times. A recent survey of more than 18.000 adults in 27 countries showed that many believe that the current times are confusing and ambiguous, indeed that our society is broken[2]. Although some blame the Internet, social media or fake news (Reisach, 2021), the problem, I wish to argue, might be of a slightly more philosophical nature. Instead of looking for insight or clarification in the realm of turbo-capitalism, the worldwide access to technology or political populism, I want to argue that these cultural manifestations are merely symptoms of an underlying dynamic caused and simultaneously fed by nihilistic sentiments, which have been ingrained into Western culture since Platonism. Like Nietzsche, I want to argue that Western culture was destined to arrive exactly at where it is today. For that purpose, I will address a brief overview of the evolution of Nietzsche's thoughts on nihilism, each time linking it to some of (Western) culture's current manifestations.

On Dionysos, Platonism, Christianity and Pessimism

In the foreword to a new edition of *Die Geburt der Tragödie,* published originally in 1872, Nietzsche re-examines his relationship with Schopenhauer. More specifically he explores Schopenhauer's ideas on pessimism and his attempt to overcome it, which he then plays against the affirmation or acceptance of pessimism by the pre-Socratic thinkers (see also van Tongeren, 2000: 78-81). There are indeed different ways to deal and cope with the absence of meaning and truth and the experience of pain and suffering, Nietzsche argues. On the one hand, he argues, there is the weak way, indeed the Schopenhauerian way of overcoming pessimism by seeking comfort in a fictional bliss, be it religion, philosophy, consumerism, mindfulness, or asceticism. On the other hand, there is the strong pre-Socratic way of accepting the world as it is, i.e. a world of chaos, deprived of meaning.

In Ancient Greek tragedies, Nietzsche (1999: 51) argues, all heroes were represented by the same character, Dionysos: "all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus etc., are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysos". Dionysos, as Philippe Borgeaud (2011: 161-162) has argued, was "an earth-shaker". Indeed, throughout history, Dionysos has been associated with disorder, creativity, enjoyment, drunkenness, and play, in short with Life. However, at the same time, Dionysos suffered greatly from the awareness that death is unescapable and that everything alive has to die. However, like the gods, the ancient Greeks amused themselves through art and theatrical plays (mostly tragedies) in which this lack of meaning was (re-)enacted and human suffering and pain were explored and laughed at.

This changed with Euripides who reformed theatre significantly by introducing exposition into the narrative (Hadas, 2006). From then on, the characters' sufferings weren't merely (re-)enacted and laughed at, but they were expanded on through the delivery of exposition, and the characters' experiences depicted were shaped by explanations. The story then served rather as an illustration of the author's ideas and philosophies in which suffering was justified by attributing meaning to it (Hadas, 2005; Van Tongeren, 2017). In other words, by providing meaning to human suffering, Euripides introduced logics, judgment, and reason into the craft of storytelling thus eliminating the pure experience of Life's discomforts which were at the heart of the Ancient Greek Tragedies.

Nietzsche was very disappointed in the changes introduced by Euripides and the philosophy that came after the pre-Socratic thinkers in general. He thought it lacked bravery and considered it cowardly (Safranski, 2020: 125-146). Indeed, Plato's philosophy broke with the pre-Socratic thinkers significantly as it introduced the *Theory of Form* into philosophy (Dancy, 2004). Whereas the pre-Socratic thinkers stressed the importance of art and aesthetics to manage or cope with the lack of truth and meaning, Plato took a different path and claimed that the world we experience only *seems* chaotic and deprived from meaning due to a lack of knowledge and understanding. With his *Theory of Form*, Plato wanted to attribute Meaning and Truth to the lives

---

[2] A majority of people across the world agree that society is 'broken' — survey | Euronews (obtained on 27 March 2022).

of individuals and society in general. In other words, Plato argued that behind the world we live in, which is a world of appearances, there is another world that is more real and, more true. With it, Plato paved the road to much of the Western worldview we know today (Herman, 2014). Both monotheistic religion and science, to name just two examples, are steeped in the Platonic idea of improvement and progress, indeed in the idea of providing meaning and truth to our lives. Religion for example pledges to provide in a better and Eternal Life without suffering if we live a virtuous life in this world. Science promises a better, more comfortable and sustainable world that can be accomplished through observation, study and research. In other words, both monotheistic religion and science want us to denounce and devaluate the immediate experienced world around us in favour of a truer, ideal world that exists, or could exist, in the future[3]. In short, Plato constructed his *Theory of Form* to shield us from the pre-Socratic chaos and meaninglessness by providing us with the *Idea* (or construct) of Truth and Meaning.

Since then, Platonism has been adopted extensively and it nested into the very heart of Western culture. In the Christ narrative, for example, humanity's suffering is given meaning by linking it to Christ's suffering. Through the transposition of suffering from humanity to Christ, followed by Christ's resurrection, death has been conquered. With it, Dionysian life was brushed away by linking Life's torments to a divine or higher meaning. In short, whilst the Ancient Greeks celebrated Life by laughing at human suffering and pain, Platonism, with Christianity in tow, moved away from the experience of Life by devaluating the immediate, experienced world in favour of a more true and meaningful life 'behind' it. It took, however, a long time before any negative consequences could come to fruition and noticed. Indeed, for more than 2000 years, humanity was able to successfully shield itself from suffering and despair through the emergence and further development of science, monotheistic religion, and the arts. However, by accepting the Platonic Idea of Truth behind the immediate experienced world of appearances, Nietzsche argues, the seeds of nihilism were planted into Western culture (see also Van Tongeren, 2018: 87).

On the Collapse of Platonism and the Re-Emergence of the Experience of Despair and Suffering

In the *Lenzer Heide Notes on European Nihilism*, Nietzsche (2020: 11) argues that nihilism does not emerge from scarcity and poverty. Instead it tends to rear its head in times of prosperity, wealth, and comfort. Indeed, technology had helped to prevent and conquer natural disasters. Science had been able to secure control over nature and had installed a political and economic system that managed to maintain and even increase wealth and progress. Medicine had explored the biological body and developed remedies to heal the sick and prolong life. As a consequence, Nietzsche (2020) argues, the philosophical and monotheistic religious systems put in place to shield humanity from pain, despair and suffering were less needed and over time people felt they were obsolete. In other words, due to the many successes in the sciences which led to social safety and economic prosperity, Europe (and any other continent that had been exposed to its influence) had less need for moral, philosophical, or religious constructs to shield itself from suffering and desperation (Nietzsche 2020). Having looked into the benefits brought by Christianity[4], Nietzsche (2020: 10) then concludes, that moralities were "the great antidote to (...) practical and theoretical nihilism".

In Book Three of *The Gay Science* (originally published in 1882), Nietzsche addresses the development described above in more detail. There we can find the parable of *The Madman* (Nietzsche, 1974: 181-182). It tells the story of a madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours and runs to the marketplace, crying "I seek God! I seek God!". The people in the marketplace

---

[3] See Van Calster (2010) for an argument on how the scientific debate generates political and ideological statements, rather than scientific ones due to the particular systems-theoretical reason, logic and methods used which are founded on Platonism. There I have undertaken excursions into the epistemology of Immanuel Kant, Norbert Elias's long-term research, and Stuart Kauffman's pioneering research on complexity theory.

[4] In the first paragraph of the *Lenzer Notes*, Nietzsche addresses the benefits brought by Christianity. These are: (i) man has been given an absolute value. We are not here by coincidence, nor are we transient, (ii) evil has meaning and its existence does not deny the existence of god, (iii) adequate knowledge and understanding of the world is possible (van Tongeren, 2017: 102; Nietzsche, 2020: 10)

who don't believe in God start laughing and mocking the man. The madman however jumps into their midst and shouts that god is dead and that they have killed him. The men don't care.

There are many ways to interpret the parable. One way is to see it as a criticism of Platonic philosophy. From the imagery used, it can be argued that Nietzsche is not merely addressing the god of monotheistic religion but is also referring to Platonism. Sentences such as "who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?" and "what were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?" are referencing the imagery Plato used in the Allegory of the Cave which provided the foundations for his *Theory of Form* (for a general analysis see Blok, 2017: 21-23). In other words, with the announcement of the death of God, Nietzsche is saying that Platonism is dead. Or to put it differently, the metaphysical foundations, indeed the Platonic Ideas or constructs of Truth and Meaning which were used to build Western civilisation and its resulting worldview have now been discarded and, overall, abandoned. However, humanity doesn't seem to care. Or perhaps more accurately, it isn't aware of it.

The parable also, it could be argued, invites the reader to reflect on the upsurge and effects of atheism in society. For a long time, it was thought that rationalism and an increase in knowledge would lead to a progression in morality or moral judgement (Vattimo,1998). It could be argued that Nietzsche here puts an end to this and makes the argument that an existence beyond religion infused with rationality and supported by science does not necessarily lead to a higher moral awareness or a more understanding type of man (see also Van Tongeren, 2000: 271). Any feeling of superiority, Nietzsche seems to be arguing here, is completely unfounded. After all, as soon as the news about the death of God reached the men in the marketplace, they start laughing and mocking the man who, as the parable title indicates, is called a madman. Without doubt, such men consider themselves superior to the religious man.

Whichever route to interpretation is taken, it is clear that the parable wants to inform on the coming abandonment of the metaphysical systems which initially brought prosperity, but also, once fully deserted, may assist in the re-emergence of the *experience* of suffering and despair. However, as Nietzsche argues, the announcement of these developments doesn't seem to prompt any worries in the people in the marketplace.

Wealth, progress, technology, and medicine may have taken away the *experience* of suffering, they did not take away desperation and suffering *itself*. In other words, the initial successes delivered by Platonism through science, philosophy and monotheistic religion, had softened the experience of suffering and desperation, but without completely eliminating them. In addition, Nietzsche argues, these very same Platonic systems had become part of Western culture and were consequently internalised into European minds and daily lives through habit and education. As a result, the way humanity experienced Life had been transformed accordingly: the systems and ideas delivered and further explored by Platonism successfully found their way into the daily lives of the Europeans, which, once fully adopted and assimilated, made it feel natural to undervalue the human experience in the here-and-now. As a consequence, Western culture evolved into a civilisation obsessed with on the one hand abstinence and, on the other, and consequentially so, the near total commodification of Life. There are ample examples to give.

George Loewenstein's research on social behaviour (1987) for example has shown that people like to denounce and delay immediate needs and desires because they believe that postponing them to a later date will lead to an increase in enjoyment. Kumar and Gilovich (2016: 169) have argued that "(c)losing our eyes and envisioning endless possibilities for how things might turn out is itself a pleasurable experience, sometimes more rewarding than the here-and-now of the actual experience itself." Indeed, delaying experiences -or at least, withdrawing from immediate experience- has become a constant in the way people live their lives in Western society.

However, Joseph Davis (2003), on the other hand, argues that the way we understand ourselves is mediated by the consumption of goods and images. "In this sense," he argues, "self-definition depends on the appropriation of the traits of commodities" (Davis, 2003: 41). In other words, our identities are, at least in part, defined through consumer goods. He refers to social psychologist Louis Zurcher who argued that self-actualization has become a "product marketed by awareness-training organizations that are subsidiaries of dog food and tobacco companies. Are you only a 'three' on our self-actualization scale? Too bad! We can make you a 'ten' during one of our weekend seminars (...) for only a few thousand dollars" (in Davis, 2003: 45). Echoing Platonism

here, people have started to see themselves as commodities that need to be improved and constantly modernized. Personal branding, which can be described as "a strategy of cultivating a name and image of ourselves that we then manipulate for economic gain" (Davis, 2003: 41,) has played a major role in this and has become a key factor in the way we currently live our lives. Psychoanalyst Helen Davey (2010) for example argues that human beings have thus been dehumanised. Her work as a psychotherapist convinced her that human emotion has been made into a commodity "bought and sold the same as if it were a physical object".

In a thoroughly commodified culture where everything is bought and sold, and where consumption and economic exchange are the only life strategies available, or perceived to be available, just as they are gradually becoming the only ways to experience life iself, it should perhaps come as no surprise that more and more people are withdrawing from the actual world of real, palpable experiences. Kate Julian's research (2018), for example, shows us that today, younger generations have very little sex. She starts her paper by summing up all the opportunities available for having "easy accessible sex in the 21st century": Grindr, Tinder, low HIV cases, society's open mind about casual sex, sexting, polyamory... the list is lengthy. However, she argues, despite all of this, young people rather stay at home, and are isolating themselves from the world. Social media platforms such as Reddit are filled with messages from people who say they don't like to leave the house. These developments have been confirmed by other scientific research. In 1985, a study found that the average person had three people with whom they had close contact, by 2004 already that number had fallen to zero (in Twenge, 2014: 200). Brandon Hidaka (2012) has conducted research on the rising levels of depression in contemporary society and came to the conclusion that a decline in social capital and loneliness are generating high levels of depression.

In addition, Jean Twenge's research on *Generation Me* (2014) came to the conclusion that younger generations feel more anxious, depressed, and suicidal than previous ones. They also are heavily medicated (Twenge, 2014: 191). On suicide, she writes: "Almost every high school and college student knows someone who committed suicide or tried. In past generations, suicide and depression were considered afflictions of middle age, as it was unusual for a young person to be depressed, but for Generation Me, these problems are a rite of passage through adolescence and young adulthood" (Twenge, 2014: 191). Her findings are troubling, she argues, as our lives have been free of traumatic events and the younger generations are benefiting from advances in health care and safety. More children than ever live better lives, she writes, the educational level has gone up and the number of teen pregnancies has gone down, there is less physical labour and never before has there been more freedom of choice. "In many ways," Twenge (2014: 198) argues, "there's no better time to be alive than right now." At the end of her research, Jean Twenge comes to the conclusion that the increase in depression and anxiety may be caused by disillusionment, unfulfilled expectations and an overall feeling of being let-down (Twenge, 2014: 226-234). The point made here may already be clear: the systems brought and further developed by the Platonic *Ideas* (or constructs) of Truth, Progress and Wealth, indeed he same systems that in previous eras instilled a sense of Meaning into our lives, have led to unfulfilled life expectations and *ennui* (Eastwood et al, 2012), and have reinstalled the experience of despair and suffering which can be seen in the current rise of severe mental health issues. And so, at the point when it has become clear that the Platonic systems of meaning have all but crumbled apart, many have now also disengaged from life, from immediate experience, from the world as such indeed. The only dynamic, it seems, that keeps life in the socius going, is one of sterile exchange and commodification. And the Ancient Greeks' solution to life's tragedies –bold acceptance, indifference and laughter- are nowhere in sight.

On a more philosophical level, it could be argued that Platonism, obsessed and driven by the desire to know and understand, has now finally arrived at the point where the construct of Truth on which it was based has now been exposed as a lie. It is here, Nietzsche argued, already in the 19th century, at this point, where the Platonic lie has been exposed, that nihilism starts rearing its head. Nietzsche phrases it somewhat like this: the will to understand, indeed the will to truth ingrained by Platonism into Western culture, has finally been exposed as deceptive (see also Van Tongeren, 2017: 96-105). Humanity's desire to know and understand has uncovered a paradox, i.e. the truth that there is no truth. In other words, 'truth' is a construction of a 'truth' that

doesn't exist (Van Tongeren, 2017: 96-105). Or to put it somewhat differently, 'Truth' (or Absolute Meaning) has been exposed as a provisionally useful fable which now has started to undermine itself. Due to the exposure of its own constructions as false, the will to truth (or absolute meaning) has exposed itself as false. It is the will to truth, Nietzsche argues, that has robbed us of any genuine protection against despair and suffering.

This paper might have ended end here if only humanity could stop its desire to truth or ultimate meaning. After all, as Nietzsche argued, the realisation of the illusion of truth does not necessarily take away the desire to truth. In other words, unless humanity finds a way to halt its desire to truth, and perhaps once again, just like the pre-Socratic thinkers did, accept life as meaningless and chaotic (to phrase that differently: if only humanity would be willing to move away from monotheism to polytheism), there is no escape from suffering. Let us therefore look into the different forms nihilism can take.

Nihilism or Four Different Types of Reaction to the Collapse of Platonism

There are several reactions possible to the exposure of the lie of Platonism. It is here where Nietzsche delves into the different meanings or shapes nihilism can take. There is no specific chronology to be noticed in these types of reactions, nor does one automatically lead to the other. Instead, they all can materialise simultaneously. As I hope to demonstrate, all types can be found in 21st century culture.

1. A Continuous Restauration of the Old

Once humanity became aware of the paradox described and the cul-de-sac it found itself in when it came to finding Truth, it included 'doubt' and 'scepsis' into its systems of morality, the arts and even the sciences. Since then, society's focus has been on pluralism (Grillo, 1998). Indeed, values such as respect and tolerance have since been highly valued and become part of the Western worldview. As a result, the Western worldview became less dogmatic and more open-minded.

Since the adoption of pluralism and relativism, humanity has constantly and systematically been trying to restore Platonism. Take for example Christianity. See how it has moved position, from a literal interpretation of the Gospels to an allegorical one, thus adapting conveniently to the changing times. Nietzsche considered philosophies with their focus on epistemological criticism, moralities with their focus on efficacy, historical-critical theologies which have distanced themselves from mythology, and art that is out to numb, as derivatives of Platonism (in van Tongeren, 2018: 107). If Nietzsche would have lived in the current times, Paul van Tongeren (2018: 107) argues, he would have added: human rights activism, environmental movements, the uncompromising belief in the value and significance of scientific research, or any social movement interested in finding authenticity and emancipation. The same can be said about humanism, of which John Gray (2002: xi) has said that "humanists like to think they have a rational view of the world; but their core belief in progress is a superstition, further from the truth about the human animal than any of the world's religions."

John Gray may be on to something. If we follow Nietzsche's interpretation of nihilism here, then it may not surprise us that humanity is continuously reinventing the same value system, giving it a different name each time, thus deceiving itself that it has come up with something entirely new, whilst in reality each next system of beliefs is merely a copy of the one it has just abandoned or discarded. Humanity doesn't seem to be able to shake off Platonism; and that may be why the cycle of disillusionment, suffering and despair continues.

2. Decadence

Due to having become aware of the death of the Grand Narratives, a state of decadence has settled in Western culture. Decadence, according to Nietzsche, can be defined as the impossibility of bringing unity in plurality (in Van Tongeren, 2017: 137). J-K Huysmans's *A Rebours* [Against the Grain] for example, which is considered as the pinnacle of decadent literature, tells the story of Des Esseintes, the last "of an impoverished stock" (Huysmans, 2003: 3) who has retreated from society and now lives a life in isolation. The novel is without narrative. Each chapter is an exploration of the things Des Esseintes has escaped into, such as a detailed description of the

books he likes, the paintings he has hanging on the walls and the smells of the parfums he has collected. *A Rebours* is also referenced in another major piece of decadent literature, i.e. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where it corrupts the lifestyle and worldview of the main character.

How then can decadence be characterised, Nietzsche asks. Nietzsche answers (2008: 37): "By the fact that in it life no longer animates the whole. Words become predominant and leap right out of the sentence to which they belong, the sentences themselves trespass beyond their bounds, and obscure the sense of the whole page, and the page in its turn gains in vigour at the cost of the whole, -the whole is no longer a whole. But this is the formula for every decadent style: there is always anarchy among the atoms, disaggregation of the will, -in moral terms: "freedom of the individual"—extended into a political theory, "*equal* rights for all." Life, equal vitality, all the vibration and exuberance of life, driven back into the smallest structure, and the remainder left almost lifeless."

In 21st century, we can see glimpses of decadence emerging from a culture that is clearly exhausted. Indeed, it seems as if culture today is lacking fresh and novel ideas. The cinema theatres for example are overwhelmed with remakes of films that once proved to be successful. Ross Douthat, in his *The Decadent Society* (2020), argues that 21st century society is stuck in a static, stale system that thrives on old ideas that keep producing the same arguments.

Like Huysmans' Des Esseintes, 21st century (wo)man has retreated from society, into the World Wide Web where useless data and numbing entertainment can be found. At the same time, 21st century (wo)man arguably has lost connection with nature and authenticity –or immediate experience- and is seeking comfort in mindfulness and meditation. As Alicia Eler (2017) argues, the majority of people only seem to be able to enjoy their holidays once they have returned home, when looking at the numerous selfies they took. Young people tend to record the pop concerts they attend and enjoy them at home sitting on the couch. People find something like happiness in the 'likes' on Facebook from people they don't know (Alba et al, 2008). Living, so it seems, has become devoid of real, actual, immediate engagement. In Nietzsche's words (see above): there's precious little 'life' in all this, very little 'exuberance of life', very little 'vibration'. There's mostly sterile, 'lifeless' abstract value and exchange, consumed in splendid isolation. In his words: "life no longer animates the whole".

3. Passive Nihilism

A third reaction to the paradox described has to do with morality. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1989 (1886)), Nietzsche constructs a typology of moralities which he then reduces to two types: a slave or herd morality, and a master or noble morality (Nietzsche, 1989: 204-208). By reducing it to two types, Nietzsche is able t illuminate the differences between the two more clearly (van Tongeren, 2000: 195). Both types of morality can be described in terms of difference and the position they take on the topic of struggle (van Tongeren, 2000: 195). Slave or herd morality is focused on deterring difference and struggle, whilst master morality cultivates both. When addressing master morality, Nietzsche writes (2001: 154): "when dominating people determine the concept of "good," it is the elevated, proud states of soul that are perceived as distinctive and as determining rank order. The noble person separates himself off from creatures in which the opposite of such elevated, proud states is expressed: he despises them."

In other words, masters consider themselves good and righteous in themselves. The master or noble is the one who creates morality and does not need approval (Nietzsche, 2001:155). The master links morality to people, not actions. That is why the master despises "creatures of a lower rank" (Nietzsche, 2001: 154). They are perceived as contemptable; indeed, they are seen as worthless nobodies. It is the master who represents true morality. The master glorifies himself and only has duties towards their own kind (Nietzsche, 2001: 154). As Nietzsche (2001: 155) puts it: "(...) when it comes to creatures of a lower rank, to everything alien, people are allowed to act as they see fit or "from the heart," and in any event, 'beyond good and evil'".

Slave or herd morality, on the other hand, as Nietzsche (2001:155) argues, is in essence a morality of utility. It resembles a certain kind of middle-class mentality that is focused on efficacy and pragmatism. Whereas the master makes a distinction between 'good' and 'inferiority', the herd mentality is focused on the distinction between 'good' and 'evil'. Evil here is seen as perilous and

must at all costs be fought since it endangers usefulness, effectiveness, and the production and maintenance of what the slave calls a just world.

In the *Lenzer Heide Notes*, Nietzsche argues that the key purpose of any morality has always been the protection of the weak (or herd) from the strong (or masters). Indeed, people who feel powerless have always been inclined to turn to morality in order to mitigate their powerlessness and feelings of inferiority (van Tongeren, 2017: 140). It could be argued, then, that moralities generally thrive on hatred and contempt for the strong (Nietzsche, 2020). The hatred felt by the herd is aimed at the unwillingness of the master to act in morally apt ways. In order to force the master to act morally, the herd sees it as its drive and moral duty to reform the master. This missionary attitude makes the herd believe that a more just society can materialise. In other words, herd morality has an urge to control and is out to discipline (Nietzsche, 2001: 78).

It is this herd morality that has taken over the world, Nietzsche argues. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (1989: 115) writes: "Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality -in other words, as we understand it, merely one type of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other types, above all higher moralities, are, or ought to be, possible. But this morality resists such a "possibility," such an "ought" with all its power: it says stubbornly and inexorably, "I am morality itself, and nothing besides is morality." Indeed, with the help of a religion which indulged and flattered the most sublime herd-animal desires, we have reached the point where we find even in political and social institutions an ever more visible expression of this morality: the democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement."

The mentality to reform runs through 21st century cancel culture. Cancel culture follows a fixed pattern: someone acts or says something which is considered offensive by a social group, in response the group mobilise and organise a public backlash, using social media, with the purpose to end that person's career or revoke their social influence. Alan Dershowitz (2020: 16-17; 20) compares cancel culture with McCarthyism and Stalinism; it is a culture, he argues, that demands greater accountability from public figures. The only difference, he continues, is that "McCarthyism and Stalinism employed the power of government, whereas cancel culture employs the power of public opinion, social media, threats of economic boycotts, and other constitutionally protected forms of private action (…) which makes cancel culture more dangerous as the cancellers are often invisible, anonymous and not accountable." At the end of his research, Dershowitz (2020: 65) comes to the conclusion that cancel culture is a direct attack on due process in law and argues that cancel culture has the intention to rewrite history and reality in general (Dershowitz, 2020: 88-96).

In line with Nietzsche's analysis, it could be argued that cancel culture thrives on an outraged herd, fuming at the alleged immoral actions of influential people, out to demolish those people's power or influence. The type of conduct displayed by the "invisible, anonymous and not accountable" (Dershowitz, 2020: 20) herd is fuelled by hatred and contempt. They see themselves as having a missionary duty in delivering a more just society by removing 'evil' from society. Their feelings of powerlessness and inferiority are what drives them to mobilise social media. In the process the herd exercises the power and influence they accuse the public figures of. However, Nietzsche argues, the exercise of power often sets a process of self-reflection in motion.

4. Active Nihilism
Eventually, the herd comes to realise that it exercises the same destroying powers and influence that it has accused the masters of using (van Tongeren, 2017: 142). Indeed, like master morality, slave morality is about power, submission and destruction. As soon as the slave becomes aware, the hatred and contempt that were once aimed at the masters, are now directed inwards, giving rise to self-hatred and self-contempt. It is here, Nietzsche argues, that passive nihilism transforms into active nihilism.

The herd may be reluctant or perhaps unable to articulate it, but the overall sentiment the slave feels after the unmasking of his/her morality, is one of self-loathing (Nietzsche, 2020). However, instead of then adapting to a rather moderate viewpoint, the hatred grows even more viciously. As Nietzsche (2020: 11) argues, extreme positions are seldom replaced by more moderate ones; more often than not, they instead evolve into even more stringent extremes. The exposure of slave morality as brutal and malicious does not make morality as such disappear.

Instead, it takes a different form. It nurtures, Nietzsche argues in the *Lenzer Heide* Notes (2020: 11), fanatism. As soon as slave morality has been exposed and undermined by its own premisses, the slave who once believed in slave morality, starts seeing life and the world in general as meaningless (Nietzsche, 2020: 11). Like Platonism, Nietzsche further argues, morality is reluctant to accept more than one single Truth. As a consequence, as soon as that single Truth has been exposed as what Nietzsche calls a mere interpretation by the Will to Power, the slave experiences purposelessness (van Tongeren, 2017: 143). Life, for the slave, has then lost all meaning. The result is likely to be: immorality. In other words, the rage and hatred once aimed at the master are now turning into an all destroying rage towards "the world". This may result in self-destruction, anarchy or radical movements. Here, Nietzsche seems to argue, nihilism takes the form of destructive power.

Recently, for example, we have seen the emergence of the incel phenomenon. Incels, as Laura Bates (2021: 23), a feminist activist, defines it, is "almost cultish in its development of a vehemently misogynistic ideology, this hydra-like subculture has spawned a detailed, often delusional and violently anti-feminist worldview". The red pill imagery taken from *The Matrix* movie is often evoked to denote the moment of realisation that 'society' or 'the world' has been promoting lies. Like the fictional character Neo, an incel is convinced that the world around him is a world of appearances and that there are powers at work that prevent him from finding the truth. That truth, as incels see it, is that "the world" is privileging women over men. According to Bates (2021: 25), "(i)ncels refer to this man-hating world as a 'gynocracy', a clever system designed to keep men (the true victims of oppression) in their subordinate place, without them even noticing." She continues: "Almost all incels take as their starting point the idea of a feminist conspiracy and a deeply rigged sexual marketplace that is hostile to men" (Bates, 2021: 37). Although some research has suggested that the incel worldview is often linked to class differences and poverty, Bates who has spent hours in chatrooms pretending to be an incel in order to have conversations with them, argues that the socio-economic background of members is too diverse to confirm any one of those theories. "What they do seem to have in common" she continues, "is a craving to belong. And this need is met in spades by a community that excels at conveying a tribal sense of cohesion" (Bates, 2021: 27).

Elliot Rodger may be the most famous incel so far and answers to Nietzsche's analysis. On 23 May 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger entered a sorority house, near the campus of University of California and started to shoot female students, killing two and injuring many. It was part of a longer lasting killing spree that was well planned. Rodger then turned the gun on himself and left a 107,000-word manifesto, titled 'My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger', which he emailed to family members and friends. Before embarking upon the killing spree, Rodger uploaded a video onto YouTube which he named 'Elliot Rodger's Retribution'. In this video, and in line with Nietzsche's analysis, Rodger comes across as a man disillusioned and feeling rejected by society's (i.e. herd's) moral code, and now wanting to destroy that which has rejected him. When slave or herd morality has been exposed by not delivering what it has promised, the slave has lost all hope and faith in the morality s/he shortly before still admired and was happy to submit to (Nietzsche, 2020: 13). Having lost all their confidence, the slave sees no other way than to destroy all authority and affiliates that are associated with that morality.

Conclusion

In this contribution an attempt was made to explore forms of nihilism, starting from Plato's *Theory of Form* and expanding on the way it has affected Western culture. Plato produced his *Theory of Form* to shield humanity from meaninglessness and despair. The *Theory of Form* developed successfully into the sciences, monotheism, and the arts. However, following Nietzsche, it can be argued that having brought wealth and progress, and consequently making the metaphysical systems it was based on obsolete, Platonism carried the seeds of its own destruction. Indeed, because of the Platonic desire to Truth, and Ultimate Meaning, Platonism exposed *itself* as a lie, leaving humanity once again in a state of despair and suffering. Unable to shake off the powerful lie instilled by Platonism, Western culture has developed different reactions, said Nietzsche, to cope with the exposure of the lie. All types can be found in 21st century Western society. Thus we have been seeing the continuous reinvention of the same Platonic value system, tricking ourselves

into believing we have finally found a value system that will end despair and suffering. We have also seen 21st Century culture plunging into a state of decadence, i.e. a state whereby people seem to have lost the capacity to engage with life and life experiences. A third reaction has to do with morality. In Western society, Nietzsche argued, slave or herd morality has become the dominant morality, and can be characterised as a utility morality fuelled by hatred towards anyone who does not embrace the rule(s) of those who believe themselves the oppressed. Cancel culture comes to mind here. Finally, active nihilism –which usually takes the form of a destructive power, such as radial movements, or acts of anarchism- was explored and illustrated by reflections on the incel phenomenon.

References:

Alba, J. and J. Stay (2008) *I am on Facebook. Now what???* Happy About, California

Bataille, G. (2010 (1931)) *The Solar Anus*, Canongate Books, Edinburgh, London, New York, Melbourne

Bates, L. (2021) *Men Who Hate Women*, Simon & Schuster, London

Bernheimer, Ch. (2002) *Decadent Subjects. The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London

Blok, V. (2017) *Ernst Junger's Philosophy of Technology. Heidegger and the Poetics of the Antropocene,* Routledge, New York and London

Dancy, R. (2004) *Plato's Introduction of Forms*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Davey, H. (2010), 'Faking Positive Emotions for our Job: At what Cost?' *HuffPost Life* (retrieved on 19 April 2022)

Davis, J. (2003) The Commodification of the Self, *The Hedgehog Review,* Summer 3, p. 41-49

Dershowitz, A. (2020) *Cancel Culture. The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process*, Hot Books, New York

Douthat, R. (2021) *The Decadent Society. How we Became the Victims of Our Own Success*, Avid Reader Press, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi

Eastwood, J., A. Frischen, M. Fenske, and D. Smilek (2012) 'The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7, 5, p. 482-495

Eler, A. (2017) *The Selfie Generation. How our self-images are changing,* Skyhorse Publishing Books, New York

Gray, J. (2002) *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, Granta Books, London

Grillo, R.D. (1998) *Pluralism and the Politics of Difference: State, Culture, and Ethnicity in Comparative Perspective*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Hadas, M. (2006) *Ten Plays by Euripides*, Bantam Classic (2006)

Herman, A. (2014) *Cave and the Light. Plato versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization,* Random House, New York

Hidaka, B (2012) 'Depression as a disease of modernity: explanations for increasing prevalence', *Journal of Affected Disorders*, 140, 3, p. 205-214

Huysmans, J-K (2003 (1884)) *Against Nature* (A Rebours), Penguin Classics, London

Julian, K. (2018) Why are Young People having so Little Sex, *The Atlantic* (retrieved on 20 April 2022).

Kuhn, E. (1992) *Philosophie des Europaeischen Nihilismus*, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, New York

Kumar, A. & Th. Gilovich (2016) 'To Do or To Have, Now or Later?' *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 26, 2, p. 169-178

Loewenstein, G. (1987). 'Anticipation and the valuation of delayed consumption'. *The Economic Journal*, 97(387), p. 666-684

Nietzsche Fr. (1974) *The Gay Science*, Vintage Books, New York, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Delhi

Nietzsche, Fr. (1989) *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Vintage Books, New York

Nietzsche, Fr. (1999) *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York

Nietzsche, Fr. (2006) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Delhi

Nietzsche, Fr. (2008) *The Case of Wagner. Nietzsche Contra Wagner. And Selected Aphorisms*, The Project Gutenberg Ebook

Nietzsche, Fr. (2016) *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, New York Review Books, New York

Nietzsche, Fr. (2020) *Lenzer Heide Notes on European Nihilism*, Kuhn von Verden Verlag

Reisach, U. (2021) 'The Responsibility of Social Media in Times of Societal and Political Manipulation', *European Journal of Operational Research*, 291, p. 906-917

Safranski, R. (2020) *Nietzsche,* Olympus, Amsterdam

Tongeren, P. van (2000) *Reinterpreting Modern Culture*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette Indiana

Tongeren, P. van (2017) *Het Europese Nihilisme, Friedrich Nietzsche over de dreiging die niemand schijnt te deren,* Vantilt, Nijmegen

Tongeren, P. van (2018) *Nietzsche*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam

Twenge, J.M. (2014) *Generation Me,* Atria, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, New Delhi

Van Calster, P. (2010) 'Studying Society, Safety, and Security. Notes on Observer Involvement', in: Lippens, R. & P. Van Calster (eds.) *New Directions for Criminology. Notes from Outside the Field,* Antwerpen/Apeldoorn/Portland: Maklu, 2010, p. 17-38.

Vattimo, G. (1998) *De Transparante Samenleving*, Boom Uitgeverij, Amsterdam