Nolen Gertz explains how nihilism might conquer the world, and what it means for democracy

Nihilism is often defined as an ideological rejection of commonly-held traditions, customs, values, and ideals. In other words, nihilists are those who claim that there is no God, that knowledge is impossible, that morality is an illusion, and that life is meaningless. However, nihilism can also be thought of as a way of thinking and arguing, as a rhetorical strategy for winning debates, and even for winning elections. Given the current state of world affairs it is necessary to try to identify precisely how nihilism can function, not only as a rejection of logic, but as a logic of its own.

Nihilism vs. Logic

The aim of logic is to be able to judge arguments with regard to their structure rather than with regard to their appearance. Since we can be easily swayed by rhetoric that sounds pleasing to us, it can be difficult to determine whether we agree with an argument
because it is true or because we want it to be true. Logic therefore aims to help remove this difficulty by providing us with an objective methodology for judging arguments rationally. By focusing on the question of how conclusions are reached, we can be free from the bias that surrounds the question of whether we like the conclusions that are reached.

Nihilism arises however when we begin to doubt whether we can ever be free from bias, whether objectivity is possible, and whether rationality is as pure as philosophers like Kant would have us believe. If logic was invented because humans could not be trusted to judge the truth of arguments on their own, then, so argues the nihilist, why should we trust humans to be able to judge the truth of logic? Logic operates by reducing arguments to their essential structure in order to judge arguments like math problems. But if math problems often feel divorced from reality, then isn’t logic similarly a way to focus on abstractions in order to avoid the messiness of the real world?

These concerns about logic were famously dramatised on Star Trek through Spock and his fellow Vulcans. The Vulcans were supposed to be an alien species that was so devoted to logic that they turned it into a religion, a religion that required the ritualistic sacrifice, not of virgins, but of emotions. It was even revealed that the Vulcans came to worship logic precisely because of its ability to free them from their emotions, and so logic brought peace to a once war-torn world. Yet in replacing war with logic we are clearly supposed to see that the Vulcans also replaced life with logic. Transforming logic from a means-to-an-end into an end-in-itself entails that the peacefulness of the Vulcans is founded not on having resolved strife but on having become indifferent to it. Since to be emotional — either in the form of hate or of love — is to be illogical, the Vulcans replaced antagonism with apathy.

Similarly, in The Will to Power, Nietzsche argues that logic can be seen as normative, as based on a concern not with what reality is, but with what reality ought to be. Aristotle argued that the basis of logic is the principle of non-contradiction, or the idea that something cannot be simultaneously true and false. This principle is an axiom since it cannot be proven but only asserted,
as it is what must be presupposed by all logical statements. Nietzsche argues however that the principle itself presupposes that reality must conform to this principle, and that this “must” therefore operates like an imperative, demanding that reality be logical rather than chaotic.

If logic can be undermined through such radical skepticism, through doubting either what it can achieve or what its foundations are, then this can create a space for the nihilistic rejection of logic. In rejecting logic however it is important to realise that the nihilist does not stop using logic, or, to be more precise, does not stop using the word “logic”. Both what Plato described as sophistry and what Freud described as rationalisation can become for the nihilist what is described as logic. For the nihilist, the logical concern for determining the soundness of arguments is replaced by the simple determination that if an argument sounds good then it must be logical.

The nihilist does not reject logic by, for example, contesting the truth of the principle of non-contradiction, but rather by simply not caring about the principles of logic. Logic is a field of study that has existed for centuries, but for the nihilist it is only meaningful insofar as it can be useful, and for a nihilist it is only useful because its vocabulary sounds convincing to others. By emptying all meaning from logic, the nihilist reduces logic to a set of hollowed out words — “Invalid!” “Fallacious!” “Subjective!” — that can be thrown into arguments to try to bully others so they stop arguing or to frustrate people so they stop arguing. Either way, the nihilist wins, which is something that the nihilist does care about.

Nihilism as Logic

But it is vital to realise that, for the nihilist, winning does not mean winning an argument. Lots of people reduce logic to a mere tool to win arguments. Just think of anyone on a debate team. But for a nihilist, winning an argument is no different than losing an argument. For in rejecting logic as meaningless the nihilist also rejects arguing as meaningless. It is for this reason that the nihilist wants to win, not by ending an argument, but
by *ending arguing itself*, by making arguing as a practice into an undesirable and meaningless pursuit.

It might seem like a contradiction to argue that a nihilist would care about ending arguing as a practice, or that a nihilist would care about anything whatsoever. Nihilism is after all typically associated with the “Who cares?” way of life. But nihilism is not apathy. Nihilism is about *not caring* in the sense of *not wanting to care about reality*. Because arguing requires that we (1) be concerned with reality in order to judge the truthfulness of arguments, and (2) open ourselves up to criticism, the nihilist seeks to evade arguing as part of the larger nihilistic concern to evade reality in order to evade anything that can cause the nihilist pain. And to evade arguing, the nihilist must make arguing as undesirable for others as it is for the nihilist.

The nihilistic destruction of logic is achieved by attacking traditional logic with a new logic, the logic of nihilism. To understand the logic of nihilism, let’s look at the following argument — an argument that one is likely to come across quite regularly nowadays on Twitter or Facebook — as an example:

All dangerous people should be kept out of our country.

Immigrants are dangerous people.

Therefore, immigrants should be kept out of our country.

This argument seems logical insofar as its conclusion follows from its premises \((1 + 2 = 3)\). For this reason it is tempting to debate the logic of this argument by focusing on the question of whether the premises are in fact true. This is typically done by offering counter-examples and counter-evidence, such as by listing the names of famous immigrants who were not dangerous people. Or by giving statistics about the crime rates of immigrants compared to the rest of the population.

So what’s wrong with engaging in this kind of logical debate? First, there is the danger that comes with accepting the framing of this argument. By focusing on premise (2), premise (1) gets
ignored. This creates the impression that premise (1) has at least been tacitly accepted as true. Such an impression can help to make the logic behind this argument seem reasonable to others and thus help to gain support for continuing to push this kind of argument.

Second, there is the danger that comes with accepting the language of this argument. By debating premise (2) with regards to the question of whether it is factually accurate, the idea of treating “immigrants” as an acceptable way of lumping multiple groups of people into one abstract category is given further credence. Similarly, the listing of famous immigrants can make them seem, on the one hand, like exceptions, and on the other hand, like immigrants matter only if they are famous rather than because they are human beings. Furthermore, the use of crime statistics as counter-evidence can help to further strengthen the association in people’s minds of immigration with crime.

Third, there is the danger that comes with accepting that the person who put forth this argument is actually interested in a good faith debate. By debating the person who made this argument, the person is made to be seen by others as someone worthy of debate and therefore worthy of attention. And it is quite likely that attention was what was truly sought after in putting forth this argument in the first place. Consequently, whether the person who made this argument is able to win the debate over this argument is not what really matters here so much as the ability to trick people into wasting their time and attention on bad faith arguments.

There is growing awareness of these and other dangers involved in trying to engage in logical debate in an ever-worsening climate of bad faith arguments. Because of this, people are increasingly warning others to not engage, to not debate, to not “feed the trolls”. And here lies the true danger, and the true logic of nihilism. For the logic of nihilism is not to be found in the creation of bad faith arguments, but rather in the exploitation of bad faith arguments.
Thanks to the rise of social media and the spread of paranoia about trolls, about bot farms, about propaganda campaigns, it has become more and more difficult to know when to debate, what to debate, or who to debate. Since anyone offering an argument could be seeking followers rather than facts, or seeking to confuse rather than to clarify, it has become impossible to know the difference between good faith and bad faith arguments. In this way it is not only social media that has come to be seen as toxic, but debate itself has come to be seen as toxic.

Consequently, what is felt to be safe is to not offer counter-evidence, to not test the truth of statements, to not engage in debate. Even fact-checking has come to be seen as something that can be weaponised. If someone makes a seemingly outrageous claim, it seems safest to just ignore it and move on, or to take a screenshot and make a joke out of it for one’s friends and followers. In other words, what is felt to be safe is to avoid the temptation to argue. Because it is one’s knowledge of logic that is often the source of that temptation — just think of how tempting it is to tell someone they’re using “begs the question” wrong — knowledge of logic comes to feel increasingly undesirable. And this is how the logic of nihilism, the logic of evading rather than engaging in the practice of arguing, can replace traditional logic.

How Nihilism Conquered the World

Simone de Beauvoir warned in her *Ethics of Ambiguity* that nihilism can spread like a disease. This metaphor can create the impression that nihilism is something painful and debilitating. Yet precisely the opposite is true and this is what makes it so easy for nihilism to spread. For what must be appreciated is how painless, how comforting nihilism is.

Not arguing is of course a much more relaxing way to spend one’s time than is arguing, just as avoiding reality is a much less stressful way to live than is confronting reality. This simple fact can help explain why the idea that arguing may not only be counter-productive, but may even be dangerous, can be enough to convince people to reject logic and to embrace nihilism. In this
way nihilism comes to seem less like defeatism and more like common sense. Or to put it another way, nihilistic defeatism becomes increasingly normalised as common sense. Just think of how often nowadays people express seemingly innocuous tips like “Don’t bother arguing, it’s pointless!” or “Don’t worry so much, it’s unhealthy!”

The danger here, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, is that democracy only survives so long as people argue with each other, and withers away when people start to prefer personal interests to political duties. This is why Arendt was so concerned about the rise of bureaucracy as indicative of how “politics” had come to be seen as something to avoid, as something to let elected representatives worry about so that the rest of the population could instead focus on trying to lead happy, healthy lives.

For this reason Arendt warned against what she called “desert psychology”: the attempt to avoid suffering rather than confront it by viewing suffering only from the perspective of the personal as something that can be cured psychologically, rather than seeing it as structural and as something that can only be dealt with politically. Arendt described this psychologising attitude as creating a “desert” because of how the individualism it invites distances people from each other, replacing the public life of democracy with the private lifelessness of a desert.

Nihilism can therefore not only replace traditional logic with a logic of its own, but can also replace traditional politics with a politics of its own. Rather than a democracy of civic engagement and public debates, nihilism invites us to embrace a democracy of bureaucratic engagement and expert debates. Just as the logic of nihilism helps to convince us that arguing is bad for us, a risk not worth taking, it also helps to convince us that arguing should be left to others, to those who can take such risks because they know better.

In this way the logic of nihilism creates a reductive binary through which to view democracy: either a political argument is worthy of being debated and so should be left to experts to debate, or a political argument is not worthy of being debated
and so can be ignored. Regardless of what happens to be the case with any particular argument, this deflated democracy can allow citizens to remain unconcerned and feel safe staying out of it, which is precisely what nihilism aims to achieve. The only thing that citizens in such a democracy need concern themselves with politically then is voting for the experts who will debate so we don’t have to. The problem of course is that the question of who to vote for is also a political argument, and so the logic of nihilism requires that this argument too should either be left to experts (i.e., pundits and polling) or simply ignored (i.e. not participating and not paying attention).

It should perhaps come as no surprise therefore that such a hollowed-out democracy would lead, on the one hand, to the rise of fascism, and on the other hand, to the rise of AI. In a world where politics is seen as too complicated and too dangerous for the average citizen to participate in, the sudden arrival of someone (or something) that can make politics much simpler and much safer is very appealing. Fascism makes politics much simpler by turning the world into a binary opposition of nationalistic heroes and globalistic traitors and by offering to make elections obsolete by turning democracy into a dictatorship. AI makes politics much safer by turning the world into a binary opposition of objective machines and biased humans and by offering to make elections obsolete by turning democracy into a technocracy.

The danger of the dictatorships of the past has made a future with technocracy seem all the more appealing. But if it is the same nihilistic impulse that is leading us to desire to be ruled by either fascists or by algorithms, then there might not be as big a difference between these alternatives as we might think. Whether it is a tyrant or a technology that saves us, all that matters from the perspective of nihilism is that we are saved. The question we need to be asking therefore is not who can save us, or what can save us, but rather, what is it that we think we need saving from? Because the answer seems to be that we need to be saved from ourselves, to be saved from our nihilistic impulses.

Conclusion
Because of his opposition to what he described as the “herd mentality”, Nietzsche thought the way to overcome nihilism was by becoming self-reliant rather than depending on others to tell us what to do and what to think. Though Arendt credited Nietzsche with the discovery of nihilism she criticised his diagnosis of it, as she argued that his sought-after individualism could never combat nihilism but only contribute to it. Arendt and de Beauvoir both argued instead that we should think of nihilism as political rather than personal and that the answer to nihilism must consequently be sought in the public square rather than in the private sphere. If we are to stop nihilism from taking over the world then we must work together to find ways to reinvigorate the political way of life.

But accomplishing this goal requires that we first find a way to reinvigorate public debate and the practice of arguing. According to Arendt, politics exists only when we argue with each other as a way to combine our limited experiences into a shared understanding of the world. In other words, we can take a lesson from nihilism and realise that winning and losing arguments doesn’t really matter. Rather what should matter to us is that we view arguing not as combative but as constructive. Arendt warned that nihilism is an ever-present danger inherent to thinking, which, unlike Socratic dialogue, is aimed not at seeking truth, but at seeking the end of thinking. So, as shocking as this may sound coming from a philosophy professor, we can save the world from nihilism if we can keep alive the desire to think and argue together about it.

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