Reviewing Nolen Gertz's *Nihilism and Technology*

Frank Scalambrino, Duquesne University

———————————————

There are three (3) parts to this review, each of which brings a philosophical, and/or structural, issue regarding Dr. Gertz's book into critical focus.

> 1) His characterization of "nihilism."
>   a) This is specifically about Nietzsche.
> 2) His (lack of) characterization of the anti- and post-humanist positions in philosophy of technology.
>   a) Importantly, this should also change what he says about Marx.
> 3) In light of the above two changes, going forward, he should (re)consider the way he frames his "human-nihilism relations"

1) Consider that: If his characterization of nihilism in Nietzsche as "Who cares?" were correct, then Nietzsche would not have been able to say that Christianity is nihilistic (cf. *The Anti-Christ* §§6-7; cf. *The Will to Power* §247). The following organizes a range of ways he could correct this, from the most to least pervasive.

1a) He could completely drop the term "nihilism." Ultimately, I think the term that fits best with his project, as it stands, is "decadence." (More on this below.) In §43 of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche explained that "Nihilism is not a cause, but only the *rationale* of decadence."

1b) He could keep the term "nihilism" on the cover, but re-work the text to reflect technology as decadence, and then frame decadence as indicating a kind of nihilism (to justify keeping nihilism on the cover).

1c) He could keep everything as is; however, as will be clear below, his conception of nihilism and human-nihilism relations leaves him open to two counter-arguments which – as I see it – are devastating to his project. The first suggests that from the point of view of Nietzsche's actual definition of "nihilism," his theory itself is nihilistic. The second suggests that (from a post-human point of view) the ethical suggestions he makes (based on his revelation of human-nihilism relations) are "empty threats" in that the "de-humanization" of which he warns refers to a non-entity.

Lastly, I strongly suggest anyone interested in "nihilism" in Nietzsche consult both Heidegger (1987) and Deleuze (2006).

1. Gertz's Characterization of "Nihilism"

Nietzsche's writings are notoriously difficult to interpret. Of course, this is not the place to provide a "How to Read Nietzsche." However, Dr. Gertz's approach to reading Nietzsche is peculiar enough to warrant the following remarks about the difficulties involved. When approaching Nietzsche you should ask three questions: (1) Do you believe Nietzsche's writings are wholly coherent, partially coherent, or not coherent at all? (2) Do you believe Nietzsche's writings are wholly consistent, partially consistent, or not consistent at all? (3) Does Nietzsche's being consistent make a "system" out of his philosophy?

The first question is important because you may believe that Nietzsche was a "madman." And, the fallacy of *ad hominem* aside, you may believe his "madness" somehow invalidates what he said – either partially or totally. Further, it is clear that Nietzsche does not endorse a philosophy which considers rationality the most important aspect of being human. Thus, it may be possible to consider Nietzsche's writings as purposeful or inspired incoherence.

For example, this latter point of view may find support in Nietzsche's letters, and is exemplified by Blanchot's comment: "The fundamental characteristic of Nietzsche's truth is that it can only be misunderstood, can only be the object of an endless misunderstanding." (1995: 299).

The second question is important because across Nietzsche's writings he seemingly contradicts himself or changes his philosophical position. There are two main issues, then, regarding consistency. On the one hand, "distinct periods" of philosophy have been associated with various groupings of Nietzsche's writings, and establishing these periods – along with affirming position changes – can be supported by Nietzsche's own words (so long as one considers those statements coherent).

Thus, according to the standard division, we have the "Early Writings" from 1872-1876, the "Middle Writings" from 1878-1882, the "Later Writings" from 1883-1887, and the "Final Writings" of 1888. By examining Dr. Gertz's Bibliography it is clear that he privileges the "Later" and "Unpublished" of Nietzsche's writings. On the other hand, as William H. Schaberg convincingly argued in his *The Nietzsche Canon: A Publication History and Bibliography*, despite all of the "inconsistencies," from beginning to end, Nietzsche's writings represent the development of what he called the "Dionysian Worldview." Importantly, Dr. Gertz neither addresses these exegetical issues nor does he even mention Dionysus.

The third question is important because throughout the last century of Nietzsche scholarship there have been various trends regarding the above, first two, questions, and often the "consistency" and "anti-system" issues have been conflated. Thus, scholars in the past have argued that Nietzsche must be inconsistent – if not incoherent – because he is purposefully an "anti-systematic thinker."

However, as Schaberg's work, among others, makes clear: To have a consistent theme does not necessitate that one's work is "systematic." For example, it is not the case that all philosophers are "systematic" philosophers merely because they *consistently* write about philosophy. That the "Dionysian Worldview" is ultimately Nietzsche's consistent theme is not negated by any inconsistencies regarding how to best characterize that worldview.

Thus, I would be interested to know the process through which Dr. Gertz decided on the title of this book. On the one hand, it is clear that he considers this a book that combines Nietzsche and philosophy of technology. On the other hand, Dr. Gertz's allegiance to (the unfortunately titled) "postphenomenology" and the way he takes up Nietzsche's ideas make the title of his book problematic. For instance, the title of the first section of Chapter 2 is: "What is Nihilism?"

What About the Meaning of Nihilism?

Dr. Gertz notes that because the meaning of "nihilism" in the writings of Nietzsche is controversial, he will not even attempt to define nihilism in terms of Nietzsche's writings (p. 13). He then, without referencing any philosopher at all, defines "nihilism" stating: "in everyday usage it is taken to mean something roughly equivalent to the expression 'Who cares?'" (p. 13). Lastly, in the next section he uses Jean-Paul Sartre to characterize nihilism as "bad faith." All this is problematic.

First, is this book about "nihilism" or "bad faith"? It seems to be about the latter, which (more on this to come) leads one to wonder whether the title and the supposed (at times forced) use of Nietzsche were not a (nihilistic?) marketing-ploy. Second, though Dr. Gertz doesn't think it necessary to articulate and defend the meaning of "nihilism" in Nietzsche, just a casual glance at the same section of the "Unpublished Writings" (*The Will to Power*) that Gertz invokes can be used to argue against his characterization of "nihilism" as "Who cares?"

For example, Nietzsche is far more hardcore than "Who cares?" as evidenced by: "Nihilism does not only contemplate the 'in vain!' nor is it merely the belief that *everything deserves to perish*: one helps to destroy… [emphasis added]" (1968b: 18). "Nihilism" pertains to moral value. It is in this context that Nietzsche is a so-called "immoralist."

Nietzsche came to see the will as, pun intended, beyond good and evil. *It is moralizing that leads to nihilism.* Consider the following from Nietzsche:

> "Schopenhauer interpreted high intellectuality as liberation from the will; he did not *want* to see the freedom from moral prejudice which is part of the emancipation of the great spirit… Fundamental instinctive principle of all philosophers and historians and psychologists: everything of value in man, art, history, science, religion, *technology* [emphasis added], must be proved to be of *moral value*, *morally* conditioned, in aim, means and outcome… 'Does man become *better* through it?'" (1968b: pp. 205-6).

The will is free, beyond all moral values, and so the desire to domesticate it is nihilistic – if for no reason other than in domesticating it one has lowered the sovereignty of the will into conformity with some set of rules designed for the preservation of the herd (or academic-cartel). Incidentally, I invoked this Nietzschean point in my chapter: "What Control? Life at the limits of power expression" in our book *Social Epistemology and Technology*. Moreover, none of us "philosophers of the future" have yet expressed this point in a way that surpasses the excellence and eloquence of Baudrillard (cf. *The Perfect Crime* and *The Agony of Power*).

In other words, what is in play are power differentials. Thus, oddly, as soon as Dr. Gertz begins moralizing by denouncing technology as "nihilistic," he reveals himself – not technology – to be nihilistic. For all these reasons, and more, it is not clear why Dr. Gertz insists on the term "nihilism" or precisely how he sees this as Nietzsche's position.

To be sure, the most recent data from the CDC indicate that chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis are presently *at an all-time high*; do you think this has nothing to do with the technological mediation of our social relations? Yet, the problem of bringing in Nietzsche's conception of "nihilism" is that Nietzsche might not see this as a problem at all. On the one hand, we have all heard the story that Nietzsche knew he had syphilis; yet, he supposedly refused to seek treatment, and subsequently died from it.

On the other hand, at times it seems as though the Nietzschean term Dr. Gertz could have used would have been "decadence." Thus, *the problem with technology is that it is motivated by decadence and breeds decadence.* Ultimately, the problem is that – despite the nowadays obligatory affirmation of the "non-binary" nature of whatever we happen to be talking about – Dr. Gertz frames his conception in terms of the bifurcation: technophile v. technophobe. Yet, Nietzsche is, of course, a transcendental philosopher, so there are three (not 2) positions. The third position is *Amor Fati.*

> The 'predominance of suffering over pleasure' or the opposite (*hedonism*): these two doctrines are already signposts to nihilism… that is how a kind of man speaks who no longer dares to posit a will, a purpose, a meaning: for any healthier kind of man the value of life is certainly not measured by the standard of these trifles [pleasure and pain]. And suffering might predominate, and in spite of that a powerful will might exist, a Yes to life, a need for this predominance. (Nietzsche, 1968b: p. 23).

In terms of philosophy of technology, if it is our *fate* to exist in a world torn asunder by technological mediation, well, then, love it (in this wise, even the "Death of God" can be celebrated). And, here would be the place to mention "postmodern irony," which Dr. Gertz does not consider. In sum, Dr. Gertz's use of the term "nihilism" is, to say the least, problematic.

Technology's Disconnect From Nietzsche Himself

Nietzsche infamously never used a typewriter. It was invented during his lifetime, and, as the story goes, he supposedly tried to use the technology but couldn't get the hang of it, so he went back to writing by hand. This story points to an insight that it seems Dr. Gertz's book doesn't consider. For Nietzsche human existence is the point of departure, not technology.

So, the very idea that technological mediation will lead to a better existence (even if "better" only means "more efficient," as it could in the case of the typewriter), should, according to Nietzsche's actual logic of "nihilism," see the desire to use a typewriter as either a symptom of decadence or an expression of strength; however, these options do not manifest in the logic of Gertz's Nietzsche analysis.

Rather, Dr. Gertz moralizes the use of technology: "Working out which of these perspectives is correct is thus vital for ensuring that technologies are providing us leisure as a form of liberation rather than providing us leisure as a form of dehumanization." (p. 4). Does the "Who cares?" logic of Gertz's "nihilism" necessarily lead to an interpretation of Nietzsche as a kind of "Luddite"?

Before moving on to the next part of this review, a few last remarks about how Dr. Gertz uses Nietzsche's writings are called for. There are nine (9) chapters in *Nihilism and Technology*. Dr. Gertz primarily uses the first two chapters to speak to the terminology he will use throughout the book. He uses the third chapter to align himself with the academic-cartel, and the remaining chapters are supposed to illustrate his explication of what he calls Nietzsche's five "human-nihilism relations." All of these so-called "human-nihilism relations" revolve around discussions which take place only in the "Third Essay" of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* – except one foray into *The Gay Science*.

Two points should be made here. First, Dr. Gertz calls these "nihilism relations," but they are really just examples of "Slave Mentality." This should come as no surprise to those familiar with Nietzsche because of where in his writings Dr. Gertz is focused. Moreover, there is not enough space here to fully explain why, but it is problematic to simply replace the term "Slave Mentality" with "nihilism relation."

Second, among these "nihilism relations" there are two glaring misappropriations of Nietzsche's writings regarding "pity" and "divinity." That is, when Dr. Gertz equates "pity sex" (i.e. having "sexual intercourse," of one kind or another, with someone ostensibly because you "pity" them) with Nietzsche's famous discussion of pity in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it both overlooks Nietzsche's comments regarding "Master" pity and trivializes the notion of "pity" in Nietzsche.

For, as already noted above, if in your day to day practice of life you remain oriented to the belief that you need an excuse for whatever you do, then you are moralizing. (Remember when we used to think that Nietzsche was "dangerous"?) If you are moralizing, then you're a nihilist. You're a nihilist because you believe there is a world that is better than the one that exists. You believe in a world that is nothing. "Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*." (Nietzsche, 1968b: p. 13).

Lastly, Dr. Gertz notes: "Google stands as proof that humans do not need gods, that humans are capable of fulfilling the role once reserved for the gods." (p. 199). However, in making that statement he neither accurately speaks of the gods, in general, nor of Nietzsche's understanding of – for example – Dionysus.

2) The Anti- and Post-Humanist Positions in Philosophy of Technology

In a footnote Dr. Gertz thanks an "anonymous reviewer" for telling him to clarify his position regarding humanism, transhumanism, and posthumanism; however, despite what sounds like his acknowledgement, he does not provide such a clarification. The idea is supposed to be that transhumanism is a kind of humanism, and anti- and post-humanism are philosophies which deny that "human" refers to a "natural category." It is for this reason that many scholars talk of "two Marxisms." That is to say, there is the earlier Marxism which takes "human" as a natural category and aims at liberation, and there is the later Marxism which takes "human" to be category constructed by Capital.

It is from this latter idea that the "care for the self" is criticized as something to be sold to "the worker" and to eventually transform the worker's work into the work of consumption – this secures perpetual demand, as "the worker" is transformed into the "consumer." Moreover, this is absolutely of central importance in the philosophy of technology. For, from a point of view that is truly post-human, Dr. Gertz's moralizing-warning that technology may lead to "a form of dehumanization." (p. 4) is an empty threat.

On the one hand, this fidelity to "human" as a natural category comes from Don Ihde's "postphenomenology." For Gertz's idea of "human-nihilism relations" was developed from Idhe's "*human*-technology relations." (p. 45). Gertz notes, "Ihde turns Heidegger's analysis of hammering into an exemplar of how to carry out analyses of human-technology relations, analyses which lead Ihde to expand the field of human-technology relations beyond Heidegger's examples" (p. 49).

However, there are two significant problems here, both of which point back, again, to the lack of clarification regarding post-humanism. First, Heidegger speaks of Dasein and of Being, not of "human." Similarly, Nietzsche could say, "The will to overcome an affect is ultimately only the will of another affect, or of several other affects." (Nietzsche, 1989a: §117), or "There is no 'being' behind doing … the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything." (Nietzsche, 1989b: p. 45).

Second, the section of *Being & Time* from which "postphenomenology" develops its relations of "co-constitution" is "The Worldhood of the World," not "Being-in-the-World." In other words, Dasein is *not* an aspect of "ready-to-hand" hammering, the ready-to-hand is an aspect of Dasein. Thus, "human" may be seen as a "worldly" "present-at-hand" projection of an "in order to." Again, this is also why Gertz doesn't characterize Marxism (p. 5) as "two Marxisms," namely he does not consider the anti- or post-humanist readings of Marx.

Hence, the importance of clarifying the incommensurability between humanism and post-humanism: Gertz's characterization of technology as nihilistic due to its de-humanizing may turn out to be itself nihilistic in terms of its moralizing (noted in Part I, above) and in terms of its taking the fictional-rational category "human" as more primordial than the (according to Nietzsche) non-discursive sovereign will.

3) His "human-nihilism relations"

Students of the philosophy of technology will find the Chapter 3 discussion of Ihde's work helpful; going forward, we should inquire regarding Ihde's four categories – in the context of post-humanism and cybernetics – if they are exhaustive. Moreover, how might each of these categories look from a point of view which takes the fundamental alteration of (human) be-ing by technology to be desirable?

This is a difficult question to navigate because it shifts the context for understanding Gertz's philic/phobic dichotomy away from "care for the self" and toward a context of "evolutionary selection." Might *public self-awareness*, in such a context, influence the evolutionary selection?

So long as one is explicitly taking a stand for humanism, then one could argue that the matrix of human-technology relations are symptoms of decadence. Interestingly, such a stance may make *Nihilism and Technology*, first and foremost, an ethics book and not a philosophy of technology book. Yet, especially, though perhaps not exclusively, presenting only the humanistic point of view leaves one open to the counter-argument that the "intellectual" and "philosophical" relations to "technology" that allow for such an analysis into these various discursive identities betrays a kind of decadence. It would not be much of a stretch to come to the conclusion that Nietzsche would consider "academics" decadent.

Further, it would also be helpful for philosophy of technology students to consider – from a humanistic point of view – the use of technology to extend human life in light of "human-decadence relations." Of course, whether or not these relations, in general, lead to nihilism is a separate question. However, the people who profit from the decadence on which these technologies stand will rhetorically-bulwark the implementation of their technological procedures in terms of "saving lives." Here, Nietzsche was again prophetic, as he explicitly considered a philosophy of "survive at all costs" to be a sign of degeneracy and decay.

Contact details: franklscalambrino@gmail.com

References

Blanchot, Maurice. (1995). *The Work of Fire*. C. Mandell (Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. (2006). *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. H. Tomlinson (Trans.). New York: Columbia University.

Heidegger, Martin. (1987). D.F. Krell (Ed.). *Nietzsche, Vol. IV: Nihilism*. F.A. Capuzzi (Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1989a). *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. W. Kaufmann (Trans.). New York: Vintage.

_____. (1989b). *On the Genealogy of Morals / Ecce Homo*. W. Kaufmann (Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

_____. (1968a). *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*. R.J. Hollingdale (Trans.). Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

_____. (1968b). *The Will to Power*. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

Schaberg, William H. (1995). *The Nietzsche Canon: A Publication History and Bibliography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.