A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF NIHILISM AND ANTIBLACK RACISM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a philosophical analysis of nihilism and antiblack racism. I argue that nihilism, the phenomenon espoused by Friedrich Nietzsche, is an implicit feature of antiblack racism. As a result of the implicit nihilism involved in antiblack racism, black existential life occupies a black nihilistic situation. In response to the black nihilistic situation, one can respond either weakly, as I argue is the case with Cornel West and Derrick Bell, or strongly, as I argue is the case with Frantz Fanon. I conclude that strong black nihilism is a healthy response to nihilism and antiblack racism because it is a trans-valuation of traditional forms of antiblack racist valuing, which exemplifies a commitment to the language and action of constructing non-decadent human worlds premised upon the existential freedom and responsibility of all human beings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

My work is dedicated to my ancestors, whose determination has made possible a rich

tradition of antiracist struggle against human oppression; it is also a salute to all who

have committed unwaveringly to the value of humanity, sacrificing, in some cases their

life or livelihood, so that humanity may pursue a more humane world.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This is a philosophical analysis of nihilism and antiblack racism. By that, I mean a study in the nihilistic dimensions of the lived existential situation of black being in antiblack racist contexts. Black nihilism designates both the conditions for and the product of a distinct form of nihilism situated within antiblack racism, one which involves grappling with a peculiar set of existential circumstances, circumstances which condition the modes of value productions faced by the inheritors of those circumstances, and which, I will argue, deeply affects (and effects) much of the nihilism involved in the "lived" oppression of antiblack racism. As such, antiblack racism fundamentally entails causes and effects of uniquely nihilistic circumstances around the production of values and meaning within antiblack racist societies.

Nihilism is a fundamental feature of antiblack racism. Nihilism is genealogically akin to the emergence of racism in modern Western civilization to the extent that both proceed from the cultivation of existential categories pertaining to modern European enlightenment forms of imperial reasoning and colonization.[1] Black nihilism highlights questions around the construction and maintenance of such values as a necessary feature of cultural and symbolic life in modern human communities. It also manifests forms of life and value constructions emanating from the perspective of subjugated, historically colonized viewpoints. I hope to show that thinking through the existential dimensions of

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[1] For a standard, detailed account of the genealogy of modern racism, see, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 47-67.

modern life via the lenses of nihilism and antiblack racism significantly contributes to the profundity of philosophical questions about value formation, and the theoretical necessity of certain forms of modality, and freedoms of possibility, in the cultivating of non-decadent, healthy, human societies and communities. The societal context of this study is the United States of America.[2]

Black nihilism is a theoretical perspective that can illuminate philosophical questions of nihilism as an existential category. Cornel West has written famously on the subject of nihilism in black American communities, and Derrick Bell has written famously on the permanence of racism in America and the pessimism of black American communities. By working through the strengths and weaknesses of these particular works on nihilism and pessimism in Africana thought, I hope to engage the question of Africana philosophy's treatment of nihilism and pessimism in light of largely accepted, and deeply influential, tropes in antiracist resistance. Bell's and West's work represent both the sobriety and candor of steel-eyed looks into the abyss of antiblack racism, pessimism and nihilism it engenders, and the spirit filled, imaginative transcendent responses it can evoke. What I hope to offer is an analysis that both challenges and supplements certain shortcomings in both Bell's and West's analyses of black pessimism and nihilism.

Bell's philosophy articulates the pessimism associated with experiencing the historical permanence of antiblack racism in America. The black pessimism of antiblack racism results from experiencing the immutability and sheer power of the antiblack constellations of a white-normative universe undergirding antiblack racism. Antiblack

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[2] From this point forward, as a convenience, I refer to the United States of America as simply "America." In similar kind, in agreement with George Codkin's *Existential America* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), my approach to existentialism will be premised upon its already situated history in the American context.

racism establishes a white universe from which black humanity is forced to emerge. Much like Arthur Schopenhauer's existential engagement with the metaphysical universe, black existence suffers through struggles of seeming futility and despair against a contradictory and self-justified transcendent force of will that makes itself known through a complete encapsulation, that is, through a white-normative representation of the human social, political, moral and aesthetic world. At least, as is well documented, in the American context, antiblack racism functions like the primordial will of the universe, above which something like human phenomenal being might perhaps construct certain realities to make this crude fact of existence bearable. Perhaps it is through representations, that is, illusions of equality and progressiveness, from Bell's perspective, or from Schopenhauer's perspective, aesthetic representations of art, music, and poetry, that antiblack racism seeks to hide the basic nature of itself.

The connections I am making require outlining the classic positions of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche on pessimism and nihilism. For instance, Bell's response to antiblack racism philosophically resembles Schopenhauer's response to existential pessimism. Bell, like Schopenhauer, responds to a profound sense of pessimism through attempts at melioration in the name of reconciliation. That is, Bell's response to what I call nihilism and antiblack racism involves finding ways to create circumstances in which black suffering can be ameliorated in light of the permanence of antiblack racism; Bell tries to achieve the highest level of black life possible given the immutability of a vastness of pessimistic conditions. Bell's attempt at aligning his theoretical response with the permanence of racism betrays a crucial forfeiture that is much like the kind of which Nietzsche openly accuses Schopenhauer in *The Twilight of*

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the Idols (1889).[3] Yet, Bell's thought, like Schopenhauer's, remains instructive and worthy of immense respect and consideration; his theoretical response to antiblack racism is intuitive and genuine. However, Bell's black pessimism also remains subject to criticism in a way similar to Nietzsche's final appraisal of Schopenhauer on the subject of pessimism.

Nietzsche's thought, through a discussion of Schopenhauer, is salient in terms of raising the question of whether or not an understanding of nihilism illuminates problems of social decay. Both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer considered nihilism, and predominantly pessimism in the case of Schopenhauer, to be an indispensable, if not natural, feature of the developmental process of human existence. Also, they understood aesthetic productions, music, poetry, and especially tragic poetry for Nietzsche, as among the greatest and highest human productions. These features of human existence comprised the esoteric elements of the aesthetic realm where values are introduced. For both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, nihilism and pessimism toward life can be tolerated, if not overcome through aesthetic apprehension. Thinking through problems of social decay, from this perspective, entails understanding the phenomena of human value productions experienced through pessimism and nihilism towards life.

Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism set the condition for Nietzsche's philosophical nihilism. The convergence of their thought on the metaphysical constellation of the immutable and constant universe conditioned a profound divergence of their thought on the ethical demands and esteem associable with the value of human

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[3] "Schopenhauer... a mendacious attempt of genius to marshal, in aid of a nihilistic total devaluation of life, the very counter-instances, the great self-affirmations of the 'will to live', the exuberant forms of life." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp.89-90.

existence. Schopenhauer's articulation of the fleeting nature of phenomenal existence in the grand scheme of the universal cosmos rendered its value necessarily negative; however, for Nietzsche, pessimism signaled the condition for a grand human achievement—the inversion of all values. Pessimism provided Nietzsche with the philosophical context necessary for his philosophy of the eternal recurrence, out of which came his philosophy of the will to power.

Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal recurrence maintains that the universe has been occurring and recurring both out of and into infinity; the universe has no beginning or ending state, only a finite amount of matter such that there may be an infinite number of arrangements of it, and eventually, a recurrence of particular arrangements of matter. However, Nietzsche describes the realization of the idea of eternal recurrence as a horrifying and paralyzing weight, and yet, he shifts the burden of that weight by avowing its embracement. For Nietzsche, the ultimate affirmation of life lies in the willing of its continuity in all of its particularity. He associates the ability to embrace the totality of life with the highest forms of greatness in the human species, calling it, "*amor fati,*" or the love of fate. Affirming life involves more than acceptance; on this picture, it calls for an embracement, a love of *all* life's particularity. For instance, in *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche wrote:

> My formula for human greatness is amor fati: that one wants to have nothing different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear the necessary, still less to conceal it--all idealism is mendaciousness before the necessary--but to love it.[4]

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[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 258.

However, Schopenhauer's existential philosophy must be further understood in order to understand the philosophical problems inherited by Nietzsche and their relation to black nihilism.

Schopenhauer's conception of the world situates human existence within a blind, contradictory, immutable, self-justified metaphysical universe, in which the reality beyond the phenomenal world of human representation consists purely of will. He rejected Immanuel Kant's claim that we cannot know the "thing-in-itself" beyond human representations. For Schopenhauer, however, the "thing-in-itself" is will, and each of us has certain access to it through intuition and reason. For Schopenhauer, reason is one of many instruments shaped by the will to accomplish its end, which is mainly to keep hidden from us that our existence is pointless. The primordial will of the universe is ultimately willed for no reason at all. Instead of reason functioning as the ground for moral law, as it does in the philosophy of Kant, and the idiom through which the pursuit of happiness and the notion of the good can be understood, as it does in Socratic and Platonic thought, reason for Schopenhauer functions as an illusion, a representation that fills human life with ambitions and desires, including the desire to continue living. He argues that all of our desires are the product of will, and since the will is primordially groundless, all of our ambitions in human life are also groundless.

Schopenhauer argues against the objectivity human beings tend to ascribe to the value of human life, and the value of its productions and endeavors. He argues that in our quest to achieve the means of our "objectively" given values, we rarely question whether the things we want are good. The result of authentic inquiries, according to Schopenhauer, reveals that the goodness of human endeavors and ambitions consists

entirely in an illusion, in the representation of the will, which conditions the emergence

of our desires. According to Schopenhauer, human beings are the authors of the concept

of objective value, not the translators of objectively given universal values. He argues

that if the will is a blind and irrational force willing the continuation of existence for

absolutely no reason at all, then nothing can have objective value and there is nothing in

the phenomenal realm of human desire that can be said to be valued for its own sake. One

can challenge the validity of this conditional claim by objecting to the consequent in light

of the antecedent. That is, it might be the case that despite the fact of the immutable,

primordial groundlessness of the universe, Schopenhauer's claim that one ought not to

invest any level of value in what ultimately makes no difference, nevertheless, relies on

an implicit advocacy for at least the value of intelligence. There is a fundamental paradox

in Schopenhauer regarding the possibility of willing a non-willing of human life, and this

would have been the first problem of Schopenhauer's philosophy inherited by Nietzsche.[5]

While Nietzsche can be said to have agreed with the source of Schopenhauer's

pessimism, he pronouncedly disagreed with its conclusion. For Nietzsche, value

structures that will a non-willing are precisely what he condemns as nihilistic.[6]

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[5] Here, I am thinking of Nietzsche's open rejection of Schopenhauer's claim that aesthetic productions make life bearable to the extent that during the moments of apprehension the will ceases to will. Nietzsche instead argues that the apprehension of art is actually the will redeeming itself through illusion. Nietzsche wrote, "When it comes to the philosophical consideration of art… I cannot follow [Schopenhauer]… in so far as the subject is an artist, he is already liberated from his individual will and has become a medium through which the only truly existent subject celebrates his redemption through illusion… the whole comedy of art is not at all performed for us… we are images and artistic productions for the true creator… it is only as an aesthetic phenomena that existence and the world are eternally justified." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 31-32.
[6] "[Schopenhauer] interpreted in turn art, heroism, genius, beauty, grand sympathy, knowledge, the will to truth, tragedy, as phenomena consequent upon the 'denial' of or the thirst to deny the 'will' — the greatest piece of false-coinage in history, Christianity alone excepted. Looked at more closely he is in this merely the heir of the Christian interpretation: but with this difference, that he knew how to take what Christianity had rejected, the great cultural facts of mankind, and approve of them from a Christian, that is to say

Nietzsche's existentialism is a way to redeem the value of phenomenal life from Schopenhauer's pessimism. However, through his acceptance of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, Nietzsche has inherited certain problems that must be overcome. For instance, the question of individuation and individuality remains in need of reconciliation. If individuation is to be regarded as an illusion of the phenomenal world, it is not clear how one ought to understand the individuality involved in the cessation of one's will. Nietzsche's program breaks with Schopenhauer's in that it reinvigorates the question of human individuality and distinction in terms of necessity. In Schopenhauer, one finds a distinct resentment toward life and a surrendering of human individuality to that resentment. Nietzsche takes as his starting point the search for the value of human life, of the necessity of phenomenal life, which ultimately leads him to raise the question of the value of individuality in terms of valuing in spite of Schopenhauer's pessimism.

Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche understands that the first human reaction to the pessimistic truth of the universe might incite horror or resentment. However, for Nietzsche, the absence of any objective basis for truth also conditions a uniquely human possibility. The process of the devaluation of values, removing the Apollonian veil of Socratic philosophy, which Nietzsche famously argues is taken over by Judaic and Christian ethical systems, reveals to the human being Schopenhauer's crude fact of existence: that there is only the suffering will. However, Nietzsche radically transforms his understanding of the will. Now, the phenomenal world, albeit representation, has claimed its space as an equal, if not elevated, site for the manifestation of the primordial universal will. The individuality of the human will is perhaps illusory against the

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nihilistic, point of view (- namely, as roads to 'redemption', as preliminary forms of 'redemption', as stimulants of the thirst for 'redemption'...)." Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp.79-80.

backdrop of the oneness of the universe, however, against the backdrop of the phenomenal world, that will is again endowed with a near endless agility. From this point onward, Nietzsche refuses to ascend from the unreality of the human experience, the phenomenal world, arguing that indeed it is the only real world.

Nietzsche's alternative to Schopenhauer involves a new kind of valuing, a revaluation of valuing that functions as a correlate of the devaluation of values, where one effectively raises the question of the value of values. Schopenhauer raises the question, but is unable to consider the value of valuing beyond the failure of objective considerations of values. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885), Nietzsche develops his thought on the devaluation of values, re-creating the very concept of value production according to a new conceptualizing of human possibility and excellence. However, much like Schopenhauer on human suffering, Nietzsche concedes that one can never be satisfied with any achieved level of excellence. To become a source of value, the creator of standards, one must always be on the way to overcoming and creating higher standards. Any claim to excellence that fails to recognize its own inevitable transience is not excellence, but decadence. Nietzsche's extraordinarily transient human being mirrors the nature of Schopenhauer's primordial will precisely because, for Nietzsche, the phenomenal being is an illusion, or representation, through which the primordial oneness realizes itself. Nietzsche has infused the unreality of that phenomenal human world with the reality of Schopenhauer's primordial universe. Nietzsche has found in man the very power of will that Schopenhauer could not. Nietzsche's understanding of the human condition contains the possibility of human achievement; instead of being a project of failure, each individual human life becomes an extraordinarily original and unique project

of affirmation. What remains is a healthy amount of uncertainty, fatalism, and immutability, enjoyed by the authentic possibilities of human becoming and achievement. However, if we are to affirm human life, overcoming pessimism in this way, we must not retreat in the face of the necessary, but must instead seek life in all its splendor and hideousness.

I will offer a comparative analysis of what is perhaps the nihilism and pessimism of an organic sort discussed in Nietzsche's thought, and heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, as well as an additional, unnatural, inorganic sense in which nihilistic circumstances are also faced by black people in America. I will argue that black people in America are forced to agonize over organic existential concerns through the peculiarity of a historically well-documented antiblack racist context. As raising problems of valuing in black life, it would seem that the nihilistic threat of antiblack racism could be overcome by constructing the right sort of value systems in relation to the given-ness of certain features of the developmental process of human existence. But, I argue, those who can embrace the given-ness of nihilistic circumstances, without themselves becoming nihilistic, can do more than tolerate, but actually overcome and invert the debilitating aspects of their existential condition. Thus, despite the soundness of Nietzsche's philosophy, critical dynamics of a trans-valuation of values are set to fail in the context of nihilism and antiblack racism.

The insufficiency of considering his philosophy by itself notwithstanding, Nietzsche's thought is an excellent starting point for examining the nature of nihilism and antiblack racism. Nietzsche's philosophy ultimately insists on shallow presumptions of European cultural elitism and the universality of cultural particularities germane to

modern European colonial race relations. Nietzsche's insistence on a white-normative dominant race is part and parcel of the genealogical emergence of modern antiblack racism, which constructs a hierarchy of existential categories whereby philosophical engagements with questions concerning the category of the human, from the perspective of black humanity, fail and lose countenance against allegedly "higher," universally valid, rationally sanctioned modes of existential being and theorizing. Black nihilism brings to the fore the unique phenomenological circumstance of having to live through this context, as a black within a white-normative, antiblack existential framework. That there is, as Franz Fanon observed, a "zone of non-being" from which some human beings are forced to manifest their humanity is the crucial circumstance of this condition, a condition that I plan to explain carefully and thoroughly.

Power and subordination, and the struggle of the subordinated against the powerful, is the leitmotif of anti-racist and anti-oppressive thought. In other words, the question of liberation is central to Africana thought in an antiblack racist society. In Nietzsche's thought, one finds the will to power as a vehicle of health, nobility, distinction, individuation, and ultimately, domination. I will show that one also finds enough theoretical weaponry in Nietzsche's thought to summon the will to power as a vehicle of change, transcendence, and ultimately, struggle against domination. The parallels between Schopenhauer's pessimism, Nietzsche's nihilism, antiblack racism, and the phenomenological and existential features of black pessimism and nihilism are striking. Antiblack racism in America functions as a totalizing experiential reality that has historically dominated, humiliated, brutalized, and terrorized billions of human beings on as many dehumanizing levels. Antiblack racism in America has contemporarily

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evolved into an extremely sophisticated, and suffocating form of oppression where avowals of colorblindness and race neutrality rule the day. This dissertation engages black nihilism and the lived reality of struggling against antiblack racism and politically institutionalized oppression as a sanctioned value system in all of its forms.[7]

The parameters of black nihilism are marked by their proximity to failure, by their semiotic linking of "black" with the failure of human life. The fact of this predicament militates strongly against the force of Nietzsche's (and by extension Schopenhauer's) conclusions concerning the possibility of overcoming the pessimistic and nihilistic dimensions of human life. For instance, if the production or the apprehension of aesthetic value, especially music and tragic poetry, achieve the best means of making the unbearable bearable, then both the esteem with which Nietzsche endows the human condition, and the asceticism which Schopenhauer avows it, themselves become unbearable and intolerable in the context of the lived experience of blacks in America. Also, if Nietzsche is correct that nihilism is unavoidable during periods of social decay, then contemporary American institutions of antiblack racism, including black nihilism, may signal a form of social decay that has paradoxically been historically interpreted by most Americans as cultural vitality. That is, it may be the case that the existential conditions that have historically made life bearable for whites in America are precisely the same existential conditions that have historically made life almost impossible for blacks in America.

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[7] I am referring to the historical momentum of traditionalist thought on the relations of darker human beings to lighter human beings in the American context. This dissertation takes its place in a rich history of scholarly academic critique since at least Alaine Locke's, W.E.B. Dubois's and Franz Boas' work in the first half of the twentieth century.

The backdrop of black productions of value in America, attempts to affirm the value of black humanity, is one in which those values become parasitic of white normative conceptions of humanity. The dehumanizing existential circumstances faced by black people in America are a consequence of particular cultural engagements with nihilistic circumstances on the part of modern European society, and by extension, contemporary American society. Antiblack values established through white normative conceptions of a self-abnegating, narrowly defined human existential condition, and the nihilism contained there, may be the occasion for antiblack racism and the types of nihilism contained there. I am suggesting that there is an important link between Nietzsche's (through Schopenhauer's) articulation of nihilism, the nihilistic circumstances of modern European society, and the nihilistic value structures faced, and often replicated, by those living as black (and white) in contemporary America.

Although I've chosen West and Bell as particular points of focus for my engagements with Africana thought on the subject of nihilism and the black experience, my project finds itself in the existential dimensions of the works of many serious thinkers of Africana philosophy. From Alaine Locke's theorizing of an axiological basis for alternative value production in the face of a decadent antiblack American culture, to W.E.B. Dubois' socio-philosophical engagements with the meaning of the human question, and the methodology of systematic inquiries concerning human populations under the self abnegating circumstances of white supremacy, to Charles W. Mills' thought on the necessity of non-ideal theory, and the prospects for cosmopolitanism in the face of expansive contractual relations premised upon the devaluation of black people, my project highlights a central philosophical component of Africana thought and

the black experience: the emergence of new, dangerous, but potentially beautiful existential categories and human realities. With that said, and since the issues I have already raised are susceptible to many forms of complication and contextualization, not only in terms of the oeuvre of works accompanying each of the authors mentioned thus far, and the thought of a plethora of related authors, I should say that my dissertation project is on the concept of nihilism and its relation to antiblack racism; I do not propose to write *on* Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bell, West, Fanon, etc. Rather, I want to explore black nihilism through drawing upon insights from the work of central figures bearing on the subject in the European and Africana philosophical canons.

Returning to Bell and West, Bell's thought may be structurally akin to Schopenhauer's pessimism, but it is also very different in that it seeks to employ a distinct kind of creativity, which exemplifies an important feature of Nietzsche's thought on nihilism not found in Schopenhauer. Bell's writings exemplify Nietzsche's point that certain forms of creativity can only be brought about under nihilistic circumstances. And, perhaps these achievements would be unrecognizable as such in the pale, decadent, twilight of a decaying society. Bell's legendary and unending civil rights activism and persistent upsetting of antiblack racist sedimentations may at the very least be an illustration of this type of creativity. Cornel West's engagement with black existentialism covers more philosophical ground than Bell's, but West's thought on black nihilism also fails to develop sufficiently its understanding of the existential dimensions of antiblack racism.

It is crucial to notice that West centers his philosophy of black nihilism not simply on the experience of being black in an antiblack racist context, but also on the experience

of being young and black in an antiblack racist context. West's noticing of the pertinence of the idea of youth, and its relationship to the idea of possibility in discussions about nihilism, is instructive. One cannot begin to think fully about nihilism, and especially about black nihilism, without simultaneously thinking about the very idea of possibility itself; and, the idea of possibility is connected with the idea of youth. West's thought on black nihilism, however, runs the risk of overestimating the utility of its ethic of love for the purposes of counteracting Black nihilism among black youth. West argues, e.g., that when people "conclude that 'the way of the world is closed to me'…[t]his conclusion yields two options—nihilism and hedonism… This nihilism leads to lives of drift, lives in which any pleasure, especially instant gratification, is the primary means of feeling alive."[8] Licentiousness, debauchery, and hedonism are West's primary tropes for describing the nihilism of black youth. As such, he concludes that providing love for the love-less through reconstructing black sites of community organization, primarily through the black Christian church, under the direction of "quality, race-transcending, prophetic" leadership can provide the grounds for dignity, moral righteousness, and self-love in nihilistic black youth. While West's engagement with the existential problem of nihilism in black America gets much work done, I will show that West's philosophy does not adequately address the value structures supporting black nihilistic life, while nonetheless agreeing with West in terms of the necessity of the category of youth in discussions of nihilism.

The socio-economical features of West's program also get much work done, but I argue that the existential features of his program are incomplete. For example, West is

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[8] West, Cornel, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 2001).

correct when he argues that the nihilism of black people involves an inability to express self-worth in terms of contemporary capitalistic value structures of success. Since market morality takes the end of life to be material accumulation, illicit activities often replace less opportune, legitimate, ways of capital accumulation. And, given the massive relevance of the contemporary technological phenomena of satellite television and internet pop-culture, the American underclass, and particularly its black youth, are increasingly inundated with the realities of the exclusive, upper class, elite, while simultaneously there exists a denial of the social inequalities that help to polarize the haves from the have-nots, and, in terms of America's well-documented antiblack racist history, the oppressors from the oppressed. I argue, similar Lewis Gordon in *Existentia Africana* (2000), that the logical result of nihilism and antiblack racism is an implosive existential angst, anguish in the Sartrean sense, on the part of the oppressed, ultimately leading toward an internalization of failures to achieve and negative forms of nihilism. Black nihilism often functions as a linkage of failure in black life with relative parity in terms of social access to mechanisms that increase one's potential for achievement. West's analysis correctly identifies the momentous increase in the intensity of degenerative nihilistic values perpetuated among contemporary black youth in America with the increase of involvement and exposure to an increasingly decadent, yet glamorized, American culture.

The cultures of pathological obsessions with capital, material accumulation, spontaneous violence, murder, excessive drug indulgence, promiscuous sex (and to this list one might add anti-intelligent vulgarity), that West describes when talking about black nihilism are clearly opposed to moral and intellectual sensibilities. However, one

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must be clear not to confuse the persistence of decadent or nihilistic values with an absence of values. For instance, Nietzsche's read on black nihilism might affirm the practice of much of the behavior found there. One might argue that the construction of values embracing the human existential realities of fleetingness and death can also be the occasion for some of the most magnificent forms of human expression, especially aesthetic expression of tragedy. However, this groundlessness can also serve as the occasion for decay.

There may be an additional, inorganic, sense in which black people face nihilistic circumstances, i.e., black nihilism, as an organic feature of American life itself. However, nihilism and decadence are not only results, but are also the conditions of antiblack racism. Black pessimism and nihilism are not just symptomatic effects of poverty as a result of historically antiblack racist oppression and disenfranchisement in a capitalist society. The scope of black nihilism is broader than the popular images of ghetto loveless-ness that take up much of the popular discussion of nihilism and black youth.[9]

In antiblack racism, the primordial universe, out of which Nietzsche and Schopenhauer understood the backdrop of human existence, is replaced by an antiblack racist, white normative, neocolonial rendering of Western reality that is purported to be grounded on all that is objectively pure, good and universal. The assertion and insistence of sincerity at all costs regarding the goodness of the American (Western) system provides the occasion for grievous existential turmoil and angst, especially as the black child struggles to understand the inevitable bewildering feelings of failure and rejection associated with attempts to live the American ethos in good faith. Perhaps the lived

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[9] Cornel West, *Race Matters,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). Originally published, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

experience of antiblack racism by the black youth, born with hope and possibility, having yet traversed the threshold of maturity, with its sterile demands for reconciliation with tragedy and impossibility, best illustrates the most insidious dimension of antiblack racism: the destruction of hope and the crippling of the idea of possibility shrouded in a garb of liberal equality of access and implosive forms of meritocracy. Perhaps black nihilism is the result of the devaluation of the goodness of American values, conditioning the potential for the occasion for values of death, material accumulation, hedonistic pleasure, and the litany of other ills associable with a decaying society. Perhaps the sources of black nihilism, its devaluation of all values and subsequent upsurge of nihilistic values, can be traced to the exuberant decadence of a white normative conceptualization of the very category of the human itself—"whiteness," as symbolically isomorphic with human par excellence.

Black nihilism illustrates, in the words of Enrique Dussel, "the underside" of Western modernity, and may function as the face of Western decay. The valorization of death and abhorring of life found in black nihilism is directly symptomatic of a decadent and nihilistic value structuring of American and Western life. That is, Black nihilism is marked by a tradition of failure in Western and American values to sustain one against the harsh, crude realities comprising the fact of the lived reality of blackness in America. While there are extraordinary responses to these circumstances, the fact remains that extraordinariness cannot be made a standard for access to the ordinary.

What would be ordinary is to not have to theorize about the purpose and meaningfulness of one's life within a context where the meaning of one's life is necessarily linked with failure and impossibility, while others face hope and possibility—the extraordinarily ordinary problem of the black experience in America.

CHAPTER 2

CORNEL WEST AND NIHILISM IN BLACK AMERICA

It became popular among certain scholars at the close of the twentieth century to write about nihilism among New World Africans living in the United States of America, whom I shall refer to as simply "black people" living in "America." Cornel West produced a popular analysis of nihilism in black America. West described that form of nihilism in the opening chapter of *Race Matters* (1993).[10] West wrote:

> Nihilism … understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there is no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most importantly) lovelessness…. The major enemy of black survival in America is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning… The monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America… A numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world… a coldhearted, mean spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others… angst resembling a kind of collective clinical depression in significant pockets of black America … like Alcoholism or drug addiction, nihilism is a disease of the soul.[11]

In *Race Matters*, West argued that black nihilism partly resulted from failures of American socio-political institutions to address sufficiently the needs of black Americans. However, he also argued that the debilitating effects of black nihilism were precipitated in America by the existential dimensions of antiblack racist assaults on black humanity. Previous writings by West contextualize his analysis of black nihilism in *Race Matters*. In *Prophesy Deliverance* (1982), he argued that antiblack racism is an inevitable

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[10] Cornel West, *Race Matters*, pp. 17-31. Originally published, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).
[11] West, *Race Matters*, pp. 22-29.

feature of American socio-political life.[12] Antiblack racism in America is philosophically predicated on modern European enlightenment constructions of human reality, out of which American socio-political life was created. West wrote:

> It is important to note that the idea of white supremacy not only was accepted by … Montesquieu and Voltaire of the French Enlightenment, Hume and Jefferson of the Scotch and American Enlightenment, and Kant of the German Enlightenment … [They] not merely held racist views; they also uncritically—during the age of criticism—believed that that the authority for these views rested in the domain of naturalists, anthropologists, physiognomists, and phrenologists.[13]

West's analysis correctly implores that a study of nihilism in black America involves an examining of the theoretical connections between modern Western philosophy and antiblack racism in America.

In *Prophesy*, West offered a critique of modern European philosophy and antiblack racism through a discussion of Marxist and black Christian theological criticisms of American capitalism. In the process, he identified fundamental dimensions of black American life as an existential confrontation with the absurdity of antiblack racism and oppression. Antiblack racism is absurd because it demands that some human beings use their human capacities to paradoxically deny the existence of their human capacities; that is, antiblack racism demands that one absurdly deny what is fundamental to one's human existence, i.e., human willing. In effect, antiblack racism absurdly demands that one exist as a human being whose humanity is rendered non-existent, or invisible. West wrote:

> [These are] the basic components of black invisibility and namelessness: black people as a problem people rather than people with problems; black

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[12] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* Ch. 2, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism."
[13] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* p. 61.

people as abstractions and objects rather than individuals and persons; black and white worlds divided by a thick wall (or a veil) that requires role-playing and mask-wearing rather than genuine human interaction; black rage, anger and fury concealed in order to assuage white fear and anxiety; and black people rootless and homeless on a perennial journey to discover who they are in a society content to see blacks remain the permanent underdog.[14]

In addition, he highlighted the confrontation as a "pervasive sense of play, laughter and ingenious humor," combining "engaged gaiety, subversive joy and revolutionary patience, which works for and looks to the kingdom to come."[15]

Black nihilism, from West's perspective, is a destructive response to the absurdity of black life in antiblack racism. Black nihilism, for West, is an existential despair over life's lack of value. West stated that black nihilism was a "loss of hope and absence of meaning."[16] He primarily treated nihilism as an existential threat to black survival fostered by the internal dynamics of Western philosophical and cultural life. He argued that black nihilism could be overcome through a combination of Marxist and black Christian thought-praxis.[17] For instance, he argued that the amelioration of black existential suffering involved black American Christian notions of true selfhood in addition to Marxist critiques of Western capitalism and grass roots political activism in response.[18] In *Race Matters*, West treated nihilism more explicitly as a response to antiblack racism. There he argued nihilism was an especially unwise and unproductive response to antiblack racism. In his earlier writing, West was centrally concerned with addressing the black American existential situation; in his later writing, a pronounced

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[14] Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," in *The Cornel West* Reader, pp. 103-104.
[15] Cornel West, "Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity," in *The Cornel West Reader*, p. 439.
[16] West, *Race Matters,* p. 23.
[17] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* Ch. 4, "Prophetic Afro-American Christian Thought and Progressive Marxism."
[18] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* pp. 140-146.

political sensibility attenuates his previous existential emphases. West claimed that he could "see in retrospect that in 1984 my struggle with the tragicomic character of black life and the human predicament was central to my work."[19] In *Race Matters*, West emphasized an explicitly political notion of democratic agency in addition to black American Christian love and true selfhood for overcoming black nihilism. West argued that "nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care … A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion."[20]

West's black Christian politics of conversion, as a means for ameliorating black nihilism, raises several problems. For instance, Molefi Asante argued that articulating black nihilism as a loss of Christian values in conjunction with Marxist analyses of economic oppression misrepresents black American life. Asante wrote:

> I have challenged the African American Marxists, who have claimed to be radical democrats … to understand that the structural problems they identify in the American system are not primary causes of the economic dislocation of African people. While it is true that the American system … is structurally organized by the energy it gathers to dislocate and disorient African people, it is dependent on the cooperation of systematic racism. In other words, the system exists because of the racism, and not the other way round … Furthermore, what appears to Cornel West and others as evidence of nihilism in the African American community is simply the failure of the American economic system to deliver its goods equitably, not some imperfection in African people.[21]

Asante argued that traditional Western value structures enable African existential dislocation by creating a metaphysical and theological imposition on the black self situated in a racially Manichean structure of dark and light exemplifying good and evil.[22] Also, West's Black American Christian prescription doesn't explain Malcolm X's using

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[19] West, *Reader*, p. 436.
[20] West, *Race Matters,* p. 29.
[21] Molefi Asante, *The Afrocentric Ideal*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p.5.
[22] Asante, p. 138-143.

Islam as a means of salvation from the black existential nihilistic condition. Additionally, Rastafarian religious cultures also combat the black existential situation in ways that formulate Western versions of Christianity as nihilistic.[23] However, I will focus on West's analysis of nihilism in black America. This chapter will explain the central tenets of West's understanding of the existential dimensions of antiblack racism, black nihilism, and his idea of the role of the black American Christian church as a response. I will then discuss some well-noted critics of West's position on black nihilism. Finally, I will introduce a fuller way of approaching the subjects of nihilism and antiblack racism.

The Black American Christian Tradition

Black struggles in America began with chattel slavery. Most black people in this period (the 16th century to the early 19th century) were introduced into American society as enslaved chattel. Early American attitudes toward black inferiority were the correlates of modern European cultural dispositions of white supremacy, despite other struggles to adopt the genteel philosophical dispositions of modern European civilization to the "wilderness" of colonial America. West provided detailed accounts of intellectual struggles faced by early American thinkers.[24] Modern European philosophical and cultural attitudes toward black people have traditionally denied their inherent humanity. That is, modern European cultural attitudes on blackness proceeded entirely as if human intellect, cognition, and consciousness did not exist in black bodies. For black humanity

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[23] See, Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), Chapter 6, "Rastafari: Babylon, Dread History, and the Politics of Jah."
[24] For instance, Alexis De Tocqueville argued that Americans were destroying European aristocratic sensibilities requisite for cultural vitality with an insistence on democracy and equality; and George Santayana argued that the genteel transcendentalism of European thought clashed with the Calvinism of the early American beliefs. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* Chapter 1, "American Africans in Conflict: Alienation in an Insecure Culture."

in America, historically existing from a space of non-existence means facing a primordial demand against healthy relations and understandings of oneself as a human being. Since most black people from this period came into America as chattel slaves stripped of all indigenous cultural realities and excluded from literacy and socio-political life, they were forced to depend on modern European discourses to articulate black American cultural reality. One historically religious response of black American life under antiblack racism produced masses of black people openly confessing their devotion to the Christian faith. Historically, according to West, the greatest spiritual and socio-political tradition of black American resistance and struggle against antiblack racism has been the black American Christian tradition.

Black people in America were forced to live the American institution of chattel slavery as if it were a permanent feature of reality. Antiblack racism and white supremacy were not experienced as historically contingent and socio-political phenomena, but rather as earthly reflections of universally ordered values for human life. For instance, in the drafting of the original American constitution, there was no need to explicitly state whiteness as an existential or philosophical condition of application for the moralist and humanist language contained therein. The idea of whiteness historically functioned in America as a sublimating parenthetical attribute preceding the category of human being. In light of antiblack racism and chattel slavery's denial of black personhood, black American Christian emphasis on salvation for the individual black soul was a powerful existential defense. Black American Christian values and beliefs created an existential buffer between the absurdities of lived black reality and a religiously and metaphysically conceived notion of the true value of black humanity.

Thus, a Christian theodicy assuring the triumph of universal goodness and God's will over the earthly evils of antiblack racism was particularly appealing for black Americans.

According to West, "[Most] black [American] people became Christians for intellectual existential, and political reasons;" he channeled Friedrich Nietzsche in writing that Christianity is "a religion especially fitted to the oppressed."[25] He argued that this was especially so because "Christianity also is first and foremost a theodicy, a triumphant account of good over evil."[26] The historical appeal of black Christianity for black people in America was its rejection of the value of nothingness and meaninglessness conferred onto black life through antiblack chattel slavery, and its promise of existential liberation from that absurdity. Black American Christianity literally allowed black Americans to emerge into existence as persons, beings with meaning beyond antiblack racist denials of black humanity. It reinforced black life as supremely valuable, favored, and blessed according to the "highest" standard of metaphysical truth, i.e. God's will. However, in *Prophesy*, West also criticized black American Christianity for its traditional inability to "talk specifically about the way in which the existing system of production and the social structure relate to black oppression and exploitation."[27] He responded by combining Marxist analyses with black American Christian critiques of American racism and socio-economic oppression; the result was West's conception of "Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity," which I will simply call, "black American Christianity," or "black Christianity."[28]

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[25] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* p. 35.
[26] Ibid.
[27] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* p. 109-111
[28] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* Ch. 5, "Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity."

According to West, the historical focus of black American Christianity is "on praxis against suffering, not reflection upon it."[29] The primary goal of black American Christian programs has been to provide existential sustenance and positive meaning for black American life. Christian conversion presented an opportunity for black Americans to forge existential identity and personhood against the demands of antiblack racism. But, questions could be raised concerning the scope of West's conception of Christianity. For example, West primarily used a Baptist and/or Protestant model for his conception of black American Christianity. These forms of Christianity enabled black people to seek out their own conversion, whereas Catholicism, for example, does not require individual consent for conversion. Babies, in Catholicism, could be "converted" or baptized Catholic without the subjective act of personal conversion on their part. Clearly then, West was not speaking of Catholicism, Greek or Russian Orthodoxy, Coptic Christianity, or Abyssinian Christianity when referring to the existential and political appeal of Black American Christianity for black Americans. The sense of "self" involved in Protestant forms of Baptist and Methodist Christian conversion, for West, however, were particularly enticing for black Americans. The black American Christian tradition is primarily a Baptist and Methodist religious polity and organizational form where the first sites of political and social self-organizations of black Americans were formed.[30] As a historical effect, black American Christian values have traditionally served as the religious and metaphysical context for black social and political struggle against antiblack racism. West wrote:

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[29] West, *Reader*, p. 438.
[30] West, *Prophesy Deliverance*! p. 35.

The black church was a communal response to an existential and political situation in which no ultimate reasons suffice to make any kind of sense or give any type of meaning to the personal circumstances and collective condition of Afro-Americans.[31]

In *Prophesy*, West examined the relationship between the metaphysical and the socio-political in black struggles against antiblack racism. He described an antagonistic relationship between Marxism and Christianity.[32] Christianity opposes Marxist secularism, and Marxism opposes the Christian dialectic between metaphysical and human reality; yet, each strain of thought could supplement the other, West argued. Christianity locates the source of ultimate reality, including the power to effect political transformation, within a transcendent metaphysical ordering of God's will. It establishes a notion of universal truth outside of human history. God, and/or Christ functions as "The Truth," which is a conception that cannot be intellectually demonstrated, only existentially appropriated in one's phenomenal life, according to West.[33] Marxism appeals to socio-historical bases in understanding human reality in terms of a complex relationship between labor and the production of capital. West admitted that black American Christianity lacked the intellectual integrity of Marxist analyses, but countered by emphasizing the existential or "spiritual" work black Christianity got done for black Americans. According to West, his conception of black American Christianity enabled two elements necessary for black struggles against antiblack racism. First, it establishes a metaphysical constellation of prophetic black American Christian values in order to ward against the nihilism accompanying racism's denial of black humanity. Second, it establishes socio-economic theories of political praxes aimed at transforming black

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[31] West, Reader, p. 427.
[32] West, *Prophesy Deliverance*! pp. 95-101.
[33] West, *Prophesy Deliverance*! pp. 96-97.

American material and economic realities. West argued in Prophesy that black American Christianity seeks to emulate "as close as is humanely possible the precious values of individuality and democracy," with prophetic faith in earthly struggles until, or "as soon as God's will be done."[34] The black Christian tradition, from West's perspective, is an optimistic response of metaphysical faith intended to fortify socio-political struggles responding to the absurdities of black life in antiblack racism.

Black American Christianity and Nihilism

West's philosophy expresses black American Christianity's consideration of nihilism as an unhealthy, or sick, response to antiblack racism. For example, West's diagnosis and prognosis of nihilism in black America drew on Søren Kierkegaard's Christian existential philosophy, wherein Kierkegaard also considered nihilism a form of sickness driven by despair. Kierkegaard wrote:

> The formula for that state in which there is no despair at all: in relating itself to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power which established it.[35]

Kierkegaard argued that ameliorating the despair of the human existential condition involved a return to Christian values. The primary difference between West's and Kierkegaard's philosophy was that, for Kierkegaard, nihilism and despair were necessary dimensions of human life and authentic Christian faith; whereas, for West, despair meant one was closed off from Christian faith. In *Sickness Unto Death* (1849), which Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, he argued that since God's

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[34] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* p. 146.
[35] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, (London: Penguin Books, 2004) p. 165. Originally published by Kierkegaard in Copenhagen in 1849.

consciousness precedes the consciousness of humankind, human consciousness is only authentic, or "itself to itself," in relation to a metaphysical idea of divine consciousness, or God.[36] Grounding one's existential identity in God is the ultimate form of being and the only way of alleviating human despair. Kierkegaard wrote:

> Where then does despair come from? From the relation in which the synthesis relates to itself, from the fact that god, who made man this relation, as it were lets go of it; that is, from the relation's relating to itself.[37]

In *Sickness*, Kierkegaard argued that existential "sickness" resulted from a failure to resolve one's existential despair.[38] Despair is a form of doubt concerning the justification, value, and meaning of human existence in the absence of Christian metaphysical narratives. Kierkegaard called this situation despair precisely because human value and meaning, for him, could only be justified through God's existence. In the absence of God's presence, human life is left to despair over its lack of meaning. Hence, despair for Kierkegaard is any existential understanding of self outside of Christian frameworks. Kierkegaard defined despair as an alienation from the grounds of one's existence, or "a sickness of the spirit, of the self."[39] However, despair had a redemptive quality for Kierkegaard; it was man's advantage over beasts. Kierkegaard wrote:

> [The] possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be aware of this sickness [as a sickness, one might add] is the Christian's advantage over natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness.[40]

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[36] Kierkegaard, p. 109.
[37] Kierkegaard, p. 46.
[38] Kierkegaard, pp. 47-51.
[39] Kierkegaard, p. 43.
[40] Kierkegaard, p. 45.

Despair, according to Kierkegaard, is a necessary, ironic existential condition for authentic Christian personhood. Kierkegaard understood nihilism to be an intensified form of despair. Nihilism, for Kierkegaard, is the affirmative decision to remain in despair by denying God's existence, which he considered "sin."[41] Nihilism is sickness unto death because one chooses to remain in despair. Nihilism is also sin, on this picture, because it involves devaluing God's existence. For Kierkegaard, only by establishing one's self in relation to God's eternal being can human existential despair be alleviated, and sin avoided. Human life, for both West and Kierkegaard, overcomes the sin of nihilism by grounding existential being in its original source—God. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard argued that Christian faith requires an absolute resignation of human will and understanding in deference to the infinite will of God.[42] However, he also added that it was through the trials of despair that the true Christian was molded.

West's response to black nihilism was almost identical to Kierkegaard's response to nihilism; both agreed that that despair and nihilism resulted from losing sight of the true source of one's existential value. For Kierkegaard and West, existential despair resulted from being cut off from the source of reality itself. Nihilism, on this view, is a form of existential despair over lack of meaning and value in life that functions as a simultaneous estrangement from God and self. Antiblack racism in particular, for West, conditions black despair and nihilism. Thus, West suggested an appropriation of Kierkegaard's response to existential despair and nihilism.

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[41] Kierkegaard, pp. 109-120.
[42] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Kierkegaard regarded nihilism as a self-imposed sickness, a sin, precisely because it involved an awareness of God's existence and either a refusal or inability to properly "relate." The inability to relate to the truth of God's existence is called "wanting in despair to be oneself"; the refusal is called "in despair not wanting to be one self," for Kierkegaard.[43] Since "self" is defined here as an a priori "relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself," or in a less confusing way, a relation between God's metaphysical reality and human phenomenal experiences of itself, the human self is not a concrete entity that envisions God, but an identity relationship between consciousness and God's existence.[44] Nihilism, for both West and Kierkegaard, is an especially nefarious and unhealthy response to despair because it amounts to atheism. Kierkegaard's conception of despair and nihilism is what West ultimately identified as black nihilism, although the latter is specific to black humanity and the former is an organic possibility for all human beings.

Despair for Kierkegaard was a closing off from the true sources of meaning in the world. The Kierkegaardian thread of West's analysis of black nihilism involves viewing black nihilistic people as in need of a "true" sense of self that can only be achieved through absorption in the black American Christian church tradition. West's most illuminating piece concerning black despair and nihilism is reflected in his essay, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization."[45] There, he explicitly traced the existential "consequences of the construct 'race' during the age of Europe (1492-1945)."[46] West depicted "the cultural depths of black everyday life," which he argued, suffers from an

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[43] Kierkegaard, p. 109.
[44] Kierkegaard, p. 43.
[45] West, *Reader*, pp. 87-118.
[46] West, *Reader*, p. 88.

"unrelenting assault on black humanity," and which produces the "fundamental condition of black culture—that of black invisibility and namelessness."[47] The task of "alleviating black social misery," in light of existential invisibility and namelessness, requires engaging the cultural depths of black everyday life, according to West.[48] West's criticism of W.E.B. Du Bois for failing to "immerse himself in black everyday life," helps explain what West thinks is necessary for engaging and alleviating the oppressive dimensions of black American life.

West argued that Du Bois' famous "talented tenth" argument failed to grasp the everyday lived reality of blackness and the absurdities it faced. He claimed Du Bois' understanding of the lived reality of everyday black life was informed by "an Enlightenment worldview that promoted Victorian strategies in order to realize an American optimism."[49] His central criticism of Du Bois was of the latter's optimism regarding the role of rationality and education in alleviating the ills of racism. According to West, Du Bois didn't feel the lived reality of black invisibility "in his bones deeply enough, nor was he intellectually open enough to position himself alongside the sorrowful, suffering, yet striving ordinary black folk."[50] According to West, Du Bois underestimated the existential role of spirituality in combating antiblack racism. For instance, Du Bois wrote that he intended to "to scatter civilization among a people whose ignorance was not simply of letters, but of life itself."[51] The basic role of the young Du Bois' talented tenth program was to civilize and refine ignorant black Americans by selecting the best among them to serve as conduits for the rest toward "knowledge of

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[47] West, *Reader*, pp. 88-101
[48] West, *Reader*, p. 89.
[49] West, *Reader*, p. 89.
[50] West, *Reader*, p. 90.
[51] West, *Reader*, p. 90.

life." For him, according to West, "the ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation."[52] West called this Du Bois' "Enlightenment naiveté." [53] According to West, Du Bois' responses to the problems of black life were attempts to draw existential sustenance from rationalistic tropes of European modernity and Victorian culture, which West considered an attempt to keep "the deep despair that lurks around the corner… at arm's length."[54] West called Du Bois' program an attempt to "boost his flagging spirit" through European rationalism, but criticized the attempt for mistaking modern Victorian, Enlightenment sensibilities for an effective way of spiritually countering the basic tenets of black invisibility in American life.[55]

West's terminology of a flagging spirit in need of a boost illuminates his stance. According to West, black Americans are alienated from existentially sustaining values that are not adequately replaced by rationalism. Thus, West criticized Du Bois for failing to meet the challenges of the cultural depths of black everyday life by failing to provide an existentially potent program for black spiritual strivings. To fully make this point, it is necessary to introduce another essay by West entitled, "Nietzsche's Pre-figuration of Postmodern American Philosophy."[56] There, West cited Nietzsche's position that nihilism would be the debilitating result of Western philosophical praxes unless the rationalistic ideals of modern Enlightenment philosophy were sufficiently replaced.

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[52] West, *Reader*, p. 91.
[53] West, *Reader*, p. 91.
[54] West, *Reader*, p. 93.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Cornel West, "Nietzsche's Pre-figuration of Postmodern American Philosophy" in *The Cornel West Reader*.

Nietzsche forewarned that Modern Enlightenment philosophy, transcendental

idealism in particular, fallaciously portended to regulate an unpredictable world of human

becoming, which he called "European nihilism."[57] European nihilism, according to

Nietzsche, is a way of understanding modern philosophy's assuredness of its idealist

methodologies in producing universal truth, certainty, and order in human life and value.

Modern Enlightenment philosophy entailed ontological presuppositions about an external

world of metaphysical value independent of human will. Cartesian epistemology and

Kantian transcendentalism, helped develop the modern philosophical position of

rationalistic idealism. West's critique of Du Bois could be read as a criticism of Du Bois'

failure to meet Nietzsche's postmodern challenge of constructing alternative ways of

ordering the world not reliant on Enlightenment fallacies. In other words, West's

criticism was that Du Bois put too much faith in modern Western philosophical ideals.

West's criticism of Du Bois drew on Nietzsche's explicit criticisms of modern

Western philosophical ideals as nihilistic. Nietzsche expressed a pronounced abhorrence

for value-free, objectively grounded interpretations of truth and reality. For instance,

Nietzsche wrote:

> The "real world"—an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer—an idea grown useless, superfluous, consequently a refuted idea: let us abolish it…. We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps?[58]

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche further wrote:

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[57] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*, Translated, Anthony Ludovici, Ed. Dr. Oscar Levy (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), Volume I, "First Book: European Nihilism;" originally published in 1901.
[58] West, *Reader*, p. 195. See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*.

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena—"there are only facts"—I would say: No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself," perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.[59]

For Nietzsche, neutral interpretations of the "facts" of reality are inherently fallacious. "There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is—our opinions."[60] Furthermore, there is "no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted; every interpretation is a symptom of growth or decline."[61] For Nietzsche, truth in human life is a matter of positing and achieving certain goals within the particular structures of one's value systems. For example, he further wrote:

The ascertaining of "truth" and "untruth," the ascertaining of facts in general, is fundamentally different from creative positing, from forming, shaping, overcoming, willing, such as is the essence of philosophy. To introduce meaning—this task still remains to be done…. Thus it is with sounds, but also with the fate of peoples: they are capable of the most different interpretation and not merely conceptual translation.[62]

West's criticism of Du Bois might be read as West calling him nihilistic in Nietzsche's sense. According to West, because Du Bois did not fully immerse himself in the everyday absurdities of black American life, he failed to notice the ineptitude of rationalistic discourses to combat antiblack racism. West claimed his "fundamental problem with Dubois [sic] is his inadequate grasp of the tragicomic sense of life—a refusal candidly to confront the sheer absurdity of the human condition."[63] For instance, West claimed that Du Bois "never fully grasped the deeply pessimistic view of American democracy behind the Garvey movement."[64] West reflected the pessimism of the Garvey

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[59] Ibid. See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.
[60] Ibid.
[61] West, *Reader*, p. 196. See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.
[62] Ibid.
[63] West, *Reader*, p. 89.
[64] West, *Reader*, p. 97.

movement through a quote from Josephine Baker, "The very idea of America makes me shake and tremble and gives me nightmares."[65] Baker's disposition marks a sharp contrast from the young Du Bois, who maintained hope and optimism in America through the rationalism of his approach. In Black Nationalist thought, contrary to Du Bois, there is a firm conviction that America will continue willing antiblack racism. For this reason, West argued, Black Nationalism better explicated the "tragic prerequisite of America itself."[66] According to West, Du Bois' infamous opposition to Garvey's Black Nationalism was motivated by fear. West wrote:

> Dubois[sic] feared that if [Black Nationalists] were right, he would be left in a state of paralyzing despair that results not only when all credible options for black freedom are closed, but also when the very framework needed to understand and cope with that despair is shattered.[67]

For the young Du Bois, the best framework for coping with and understanding black reality was a rational and scientific Enlightenment approach to race.[68] As West put it, Du Bois thought, "The cure for [black suffering] was knowledge." [69] West countered that the answer for black coping in America is not rationality or scientificity, but Christianity. The upshot of Black Nationalism, for West, was its emphasis on struggle against antiblack racism on "existential levels of what to do about 'what is' or when 'what ought to be done' seems undoable."[70] Black Nationalism got it right concerning the "dark night" of the black American soul, "that gray twilight between 'nothing to be done'

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[65] West, *Reader*, p. 97.
[66] West, *Reader*, p. 98.
[67] West, *Reader*, p. 98.
[68] The mature Du Bois renounced his earlier optimism in America. See, W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968).
[69] West, *Reader*, p. 91.
[70] West, *Reader*, p. 98.

and 'I can't go on like this.'"[71] He argued that Black Nationalism's "cultural efforts to express the truth of modern tragic existence and build on the ruins of modern absurd experiences at the core of American culture" more fully explicate the process of overcoming the "tragedies and absurdities" of black life. Essentially, West argued that Du Bois missed important elements of the existential dimensions of "black strivings," which caused his overestimation of rationalism as an effective response[72]

West's criticism of Du Bois is ultimately that he produces a nihilistic appeal to rationality in response to antiblack racism, that Du Bois did not feel deeply enough what black striving entailed. For West, the everyday dimensions of black cultural life were things about which Du Bois was decidedly too rationalistic. "Black strivings are the creative and complex products of the terrifying encounter with the absurd in America— and the absurd as America."[73] The aim of black strivings is to construct platforms of meaning for black life in the face of the absurdities of black life. "The specificity of black culture," argued West, lies in black people's "attempts to sustain their mental sanity and spiritual health."[74] Hence, for West, black striving is primarily about spiritual, or existential sustenance, and not rationalism. These "strivings," argued West, "occur within the whirlwind of white supremacy… the vicious attacks of black beauty, black intelligence, black moral character, black capability, and back possibility."[75] Black strivings are made in a world denying every fundamental facet of humanity and consciousness to black people. Thus, antiblack racism "attempted to exclude black people

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[71] Ibid.
[72] West, *Reader*, pp. 101-115.
[73] West, *Reader*, p. 101.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

from the human family… [producing] the fundamental condition of black culture—that of black invisibility and namelessness."[76]

West understood black nihilism as a form of madness, sickness, mental instability, and spiritual disease produced in effect of black invisibility and namelessness conferred by antiblack racist assaults on black humanity. This is the reason why West appeals to spiritualistic, existential sources for sustaining black life. He claimed, "The basic predicament exists on at least four levels—existential, social, political, and economical."[77] Here, the existential is the most relevant because, as West says, "it has to do with what it means to be a person and live a life under the horrifying realities of racist assaults."[78]

According to West, black humanity in America faces "the sheer absurdity of being a black human being whose black body is viewed as an abomination," that is, a negation of all that is normatively human. According to West, "On the crucial existential level relating to black invisibility and namelessness, the first difficult challenge… is to ward off madness and discredit suicide."[79] For West, warding off black madness and suicide involves "confronting candidly the ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises of black people while fending off insanity and self-annihilation."[80] He claims this is the fundamental existential utility of black Christianity. The task is to construct healthy ways of being black in America without succumbing to nihilism and despair. For West, "black striving resides primarily in movement and motion, resilience

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[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] West, *Reader*, p. 102.
[80] Ibid.

and resistance against the paralysis of madness and the stillness of death."[81] On this view,

the black American Christian tradition embodies a "life-preserving content of black

style," providing spiritual and existential sustenance for black American life.[82] Black

American Christianity, for West, exemplifies a "shift from a mournful brooding to a

joyful praising," a courageous effort to "look life's abyss in the face and keep 'keepin'

on.'"[83]

In sum, West views black nihilism and despair as spiritual and existential

sicknesses where "black self-hatred and hatred of others" serves to parallel "all human

beings, who must gain some sense of themselves and the world."[84] "White supremacy,"

however, "makes this human struggle for mature black selfhood even more difficult."[85] In

particular, black nihilism "feeds on a black futureless-ness and black hopeless-ness."[86]

The causes and dangers of black nihilism, for West, involve despair over life's meaning

and value associated with black existential invisibility and namelessness resultant from

antiblack racist denials of black humanity.

Black Americans live the contradictions of American lauding of humanity and

freedom while sustaining structures of degradation and stratification. Black people in

America live their humanity with a profound awareness of the absurdity and hypocrisy of

antiblack racism's denial of their presence and perspective. Antiblack racist denials of

black humanity sometimes inform black understandings of the worthlessness of black

life, in particular, and human life in general. According to West, the black American

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[81] West, *Reader*, p. 103.
[82] West, *Reader*, p. 102.
[83] West, *Reader*, p. 103.
[84] West, *Reader*, p. 109.
[85] Ibid.
[86] West, *Reader*, p. 112.

Christian church tradition is the best hope for "warding off" black existential despair and

nihilism. Providing existential sustenance for black Americans struggling against

antiblack racism while attempting not to succumb to despair and nihilism is the

traditional role of black American Christianity. West's analysis argues the black

American church tradition "generates a sense of movement, motion, and momentum that

keeps despair at bay."[87] Traditional black American Christian beliefs and values

therefore, according to West, have gained their place in Black American struggles by

historically providing the existential sustenance needed for creating "ritual art and

communal bonds out of black invisibility and namelessness."[88]

Criticisms of West's Critique of Black Nihilism

Some well-known critics of West's analyses of black nihilism have argued that he adds

fodder for neo-conservative perspectives on black poverty and despair (Floyd Hayes III);

that he fails to provide real or practical solutions for his "politics of conversion" (Stephen

Steinberg); and that he lacks a fuller discussion of the existentialist and philosophical

approaches to nihilism that he suggests in his critique (Lewis Gordon). With the

exception of Hayes and Gordon, most commentators of West's position on nihilism do

not challenge the philosophical rigor of his understanding of black nihilism but instead

argue about the political efficacy and utility of the implications of his analysis. For

instance, discussing West's "political nihilism" in *Democracy Matters* (2004), David

Gabbard uncritically accepted West's general understanding of nihilism as a purely

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[87] West, *Reader*, p. 113.
[88] Ibid.

negative and destructive phenomenon.[89] Although Gabbard identified "philosophical

nihilism" as underlying West's discussion of political nihilism, Gabbard nonetheless

uncritically deployed West's generalized conception of nihilism as something

fundamentally destructive. Gabbard claimed that, "Nihilists, after all, deny all

meaning."[90] Gabbard used West's discussion of political nihilism to argue against

political frameworks rooted in "unprincipled" schemas of valuing.[91] Like West, he

collapsed the meaning of nihilism into the production of arbitrarily formed values. That

is, Gabbard treated nihilism as simply being the project of producing unprincipled values,

which he argued was dangerous political policy.

In an essay entitled "Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some

Questions of Life and Death," Nick De Genova referenced Richard Wright's literature in

exploring nihilism as "modern American racism's most significant contribution to black

culture."[92] De Genova objected to West's conception of nihilism, arguing that it painted

a pathological picture of black nihilists, whose "disease of the soul is a greater threat to

their well being and survival than any objective structures of exploitation and

oppression."[93] De Genova referred specifically to West's claim that "the major enemy of

black survival in America… is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic

threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning."[94] De Genova argued that West

treated nihilism too much as a self-imposed disease, and not enough as a disease situated

by experiences of antiblack racism in America. He further argued that West placed too

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[89] Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
[90] David Gabbard, "Meaning Matters: Education and the Nihilism of the Neocons," *The Journal of Thought* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 39.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Nick De Genova, "Gangster Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death," *Social Text* 43 (Autumn 1995): 91. De Genova is quoting Paul Gilroy's description of Richard Wright.
[93] Ibid. p. 92.
[94] Ibid.

much of the burden for alleviating black nihilism on black people. However, perhaps De Genova's criticism of West could be attenuated in light of West's larger body of work making the explicit connection between the absurdities of black experiences and fundamental philosophical and socio-political ideals of antiblack racism in American life.[95] Yet, De Genova was correct, in light of West's Kierkegaardian commitments, that there is a problem with situating of nihilism-in-itself as an existential condition that must be overcome. A more dynamic discussion invoking the question of passive versus active nihilism is required to disambiguate West's articulation of black nihilism.

In "Black Dada Nihilismus: Phyllis Wheatley, Malcolm X, and the Traumatic Politics of Conversion," Kimberle Benston suggested a more dynamic interpretation of black nihilism.[96] According to Benston, the "function of violence and negativity" associated with nihilism is necessary for revolutionary black American projects of liberation. She argued that the subtext of West's chapter on black nihilism in Race Matters ironically admits of a positive articulation of the role of violence and trauma, and perhaps nihilism, in black struggles against antiblack racism. Benston suggested the revolutionary potential of experiences of "negativity and violence" in black nihilistic populations is a negative antecedent with potentially positive consequences.

Floyd Hayes, III, like De Genova, used Richard Wright's work to elaborate black nihilism. For instance, Hayes argued that Wright's character, Damon Cross, in the Outsider (date) represents the quintessence of black nihilism. Hayes wrote that "Wright's Outsider provides a context in which we can consider the effects of social and historical

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[95] See, West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*
[96] Kimberle Benston, "Black Dada Nihilismus: Phyllis Wheatley, Malcolm X, and the Traumatic Politics of Conversion," *The Journal of Power and Ethics* 2, no. 3 (2001): 149-185.

factors on this self constitutive process as it operates for black people."[97] He further

wrote, "Wright hints at a conceptualization of the multiple, fragmented black self in the

postmodern age of nihilism—modern Western culture in ruins."[98] Hayes argued that

Damon represented the existential nihilist because he "found no absolute standard by

which to appraise his actions," which included four murders and impregnating a minor.[99]

With a conviction that "life means nothing in particular," Damon undertook a quest for

self-identity.[100] Although Damon had to struggle against the absurdities of antiblack

racism and its stereotypes, there remained a possibility of using "these situations to his

advantage."[101] "Familiar with the literature of the irrational—Nietzsche, Heidegger,

Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard—Damon holds the view that all men are free to create

their own meaning. Consequently, Damon is his own God."[102] Furthermore, Damon's

nihilistic perspective puts him in a position to see the "double lies" of the "Communist

Party nihilists'" will to power.[103] In other words, according to Hayes, the black nihilist is

lead through the absurdity of antiblack racism to a doubled vision of human meaning,

wherein the pessimistic truth of each person being radically responsible for producing

meaning conflicts with the idealist language of certain political and religious programs of

response. For instance, Hayes cited Damon's rejection of the communist party. Damon

said:

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[97] Floyd Hayes, III, "The Concept of Double Vision in Richard Wright's The Outsider," in *Existence in Black*, ed. Lewis Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 174.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid. p. 175.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid. p. 177.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid. p. 179.

I'm propaganda-proof. Communism has two truths, two faces…. You use idealistic words as your smoke screen, but behind that screen you rule … It's a question of power.[104]

In other words, black nihilism not only rejects the philosophical idealism of antiblack racism but also all forms of idealism as a response.

"The existential-nihilist perspective," according to Hayes, situates the black nihilist "within the historical transition between modernity and postmodernity," that is, between idealist and non-idealist renderings of human meaning and value.[105] The nihilist suspects all forms of idealism as concealed wills for power behind a "smokescreen" of idealist language; which is one form of what Nietzsche called, nihilism. In, "Cornel West and Afro-Nihilism," Hayes argued that West failed to consider the dynamism of the concept of nihilism, introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche, in his analysis of nihilism in black America.[106] Hayes challenged West's description of the black nihilist, arguing that black nihilism could also be understood as a critique of the foundations of Western life. The nihilist is, in the words of Albert Camus, "not one who believes in nothing, but one who does not believe in what exists."[107] Hayes correctly pointed out that "the nihilist rejects as absurd the values and laws articulated by the dominant culture, which itself devalues its own values and breaks its own laws."[108] The nihilist expresses profound doubt about traditional cultural formulations of human life and value. "The nihilist is a

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[104] Ibid. p. 180. See, Also, Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953).

[105] Ibid. p. 182

[106] See, Floyd W. Hayes, III, "Cornel West and Afro-Nihilism: A Reconsideration," in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, pp. 245-260.

[107] West, *Reader*, p. 249. See, also, Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: vintage books, 1984), p. 69.

[108] Ibid.

rebel," writes Hayes, filled with resentment that can lead to rebellion against the absurdity of certain values.[109]

Ressentiment, in Nietzsche's sense, is a profound philosophical repulsion from an existing state of affairs that may involve inverting or augmenting existing values. Hayes, however, did not use "ressentiment" in Nietzsche's sense of the term, but appealed to the more colloquial term, "resentment." In the case of black resentment, the repulsive state of affairs is antiblack racism. Ressentiment, however, entails an implicit acknowledgement of powerlessness, weakness, or impotence in directly changing one's condition. In the case of black American resentment, traditional Western values are rejected precisely because they appear idealistically situated as a permanent feature, because presumed unchangeable, of universal reality. Hayes used Max Scheler's definition of resentment in explaining black struggles as a reactive, long-lasting desire for redress of prior attack or injury. Scheler wrote:

> Revenge tends to be transformed into resentment the more it is directed against long standing situations which are felt to be 'injurious' beyond one's control—in other words, the more injury is experienced as a destiny.[110]

Hayes added:

> The long standing and ever-present impulse of resentment can give way to rebellion. At times, the feelings of hatred, anger, and revenge are unleashed against the oppressor, transforming individuals experiencing resentment into persons who decide to embody a sense of freedom by resisting the injustice of a racist culture.[111]

Hayes maintained that "Afro nihilism" is not "an appeal to transcendental or ideal resentment; rather, it is ordinary or general… Resentment is not a necessary or universal

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[109] Ibid.
[110] West, *Reader*, p. 250; See, especially, footnote 17.
[111] West, *Reader*, p. 255.

response to racist oppression. Resentment is not essential to black identity."[112] He suggested that ordinary resentment, not ressentiment, could produce revolutionary activity; however, he did not further investigate the connection between "ideal resentment" and antiblack racism.

Another philosopher, Charles Ephraim, argued that the idealist nature of antiblack racist values was "symptomatic of a uniquely European disease, namely, ressentiment."[113] For Ephraim, ressentiment described, firstly, a European repulsion to the human existential condition of there being no objective standards by which to affirm the value of white life. In, *The Pathology of Eurocentrism* (2003), Ephraim offered an analysis of Euro-centrism that articulated its antiblack racist dimensions as dependent upon pathological existential needs for self-aggrandizement on the part of Europeans.[114] For example, Ephraim wrote:

> This obsessive need for self-aggrandizement has given rise to a host of problems constituting the so-called "pathology of black life conditions." The "peculiar institution" of slavery, the disempowerment of indigenous peoples by imperialism and colonialism, as well as the infamous Jim Crow laws, and the prevailing system, of anti-black discrimination, have all been consequences of the white obsession with self-aggrandizement. Among the manifold ways of its expression… resentment entails elements of xenophobia and misanthropy.… The white passion for self-aggrandizement, which necessitated the myth of black inferiority, has been the greatest obstacle to black liberation.[115]

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[112] West, *Reader*, p. 251.
[113] Charles Wm. Ephraim, *The Pathology of Eurocentrism: The Burden and Responsibilities of Being Black* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 36.
[114] Ephraim, *Pathology*, Ch. 1, "Prologue: Metaphysics and the Problem of Being Black."
[115] Ephraim, *Pathology*, p. 3.

He argued that antiblack racism was motivated by a European philosophical and existential quest for revenge against the absurdity of human existence.[116] I will elaborate this perspective in the next chapter.

Finally, Lewis Gordon in, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (1997), provides a further illumination of black nihilism and antiblack racism.[117] Introducing Frantz Fanon's thought as crucial to the discussion of black nihilism, Gordon raised challenging questions concerning the meaning of humanity in an antiblack racist world. According to Gordon, black American struggles against antiblack racism seeks to force American institutions to face the "theodicean problem of legitimacy… How can it legitimate its conquest without depending on conquest itself as its source of its legitimation?"[118] Antiblack racist societies can only appear to be legitimate by discounting, erasing, and/or making invisible, black perspectives. Therefore, Gordon argued, as did Fanon, black perspectives function as "anomalies, the sites of contradictions" against the antiblack racist world, which attempts to demonstrate itself as "pure … good, in the midst of its contradictions" by making black perspectives supposedly extraneous.[119]

Gordon argued that black people in an antiblack racist world are charged with the paradoxical task of struggling against injustices that function as justice, which involves responsive struggles for justice that appear in an antiblack racist society as injustice. The tragedy, so to speak, involves the social demonization of black struggles challenging the injustice of antiblack racist systems. The term, "justice," is being used here in a classic Aristotelian sense, whereby it is a seeking of virtue and balance in relation to one's self

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[116] Ephraim, *Pathology*, Ch. 2, "Ressentiment: The Pathology of Eurocentrism."
[117] Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), pp. 165-177.
[118] Ibid. p. 166.
[119] Ibid.

and others. Aristotle understood justice as the virtuous application of virtues to others.[120]

For this reason, Aristotle thought the highest science was political science because it is

concerned with justice in relation to the polis. Yet, in an antiblack racist society that

paradoxically maintains foundational claims of human liberty and justice while

historically treating white supremacy and antiblack racism as universally predestined

states of affairs, the antagonist fighting against antiblack racism is set to face the despair

of one who is perceived to be politically unjust, and socially pathological. The result for

black people struggling against antiblack racism is a condemnation of guilt attenuated by

a deep intuition of one's innocence. In other words, the black fighter against antiblack

racism in America is charged as guilty in relation to antiblack racist values, but feels

deeply the sentiment of Damon: "In my heart… I'm… I felt… I'm innocent… That's

what made the horror."[121]

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche saw positive utility in the existential situations of

human despair and nihilism. While Kierkegaard and West advocated for a prodigal return

to Christian faith, Nietzsche regarded suspected Christianity to be a manifestation of

values born of decadence, the inevitable outcome of which, he argued, was nihilism.

From a Nietzschean perspective, the black American Christian value system upheld by

West as a response to American institutions of racism could be read as nihilistic. For

instance, Gordon wrote:

> Even if the equality sought by West were achieved, the irony is that, if
> Nietzsche is right, the problem of nihilism will be intensified.… A black
> person who desires to be equal to whites is, in the end, … pathetic. The

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[120] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd Edition, Translated, Terence Irwin, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 67-79.
[121] Hayes, *Existence*, p. 175.

damage achieved by racism is such that even equality may not be enough.[122]

Gordon's critique raises the problem of assessing the norms, the measuring systems, and the standards of human valuing in an antiblack racist system. The rest of this study will explore this Nietzschean understanding and challenge of nihilism in relation to a Fanonian understanding of antiblack racism as posed by Gordon's challenge. It will be demonstrated that "The fact that decay pervades American society leaves no room for an optimism that is not paradoxically a nihilism."[123] In other words, struggles for the health and vitality of black life in a decadent antiblack world carry with them the necessarily tragic circumstance of fighting against values that are presumed universally and objectively conceived. Thus, what would appear in congruence with antiblack racist values as normal and healthy, in the antiblack racist world, may be pathological and sick; and, what would appear as contemptible, destructive, sinful, and nihilistic could be, as Gordon suggests, an "active nihilism… a response to racism/passive nihilism."[124]

The next chapter will construct a Nietzschean evaluation of antiblack racism as a form of weak nihilism. The subsequent chapter will construct a Fanonian conception of black nihilism as a strong and healthy response to antiblack racism. Then, finally, this dissertation will conclude with remarks on the philosophical relationship between nihilism, antiblack racism, and the category of black youth.

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[122] Gordon, *Critical Reader*, p. 44.
[123] Gordon, *Critical Reader*, p. 45.
[124] Ibid. p. 44.

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CHAPTER 3

EUROPEAN NIHILISM

Cornel West explained nihilism in black America as a result of the invisibility and namelessness conferred onto black life by American social and political institutions. In particular, he identified the "nihilistic threat" accompanying racist oppression of black life in America.[125] He argued that antiblack racism was linked to fundamental principles of modern Enlightenment philosophies shaping American socio-political life.[126] West wrote:

> The very structure of modern [Western] discourse at its inception produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy.[127]

He did not, however, explore the healthy dimensions of nihilism as a response to antiblack racism. I argue that antiblack racism is itself a nihilistic value structure belying the European nihilism of modern Enlightenment philosophy, to which a stronger form of nihilism may be a healthy response. I will thus first identify European nihilism as a contextualizing source of black nihilism.

Antiblack racism is a consequence of European nihilism, which is a modern European response to the meaninglessness of human life in general. Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche articulated European pessimism and nihilism as more than a weak response to meaninglessness in human life, which is what West argued in the case

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[125] Cornel West, *Race Matters*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2001) Second edition, p. 19.
[126] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!* (Louisville: West Minster John Knox Press, 1982), pp 47-65.
[127] Ibid. p. 47.

of black nihilism.[128] They more broadly conceive nihilism as a transitional stage between dying and new values.

Modern European philosophy accompanied European conquest and colonialism in the fifteenth century. A consequence of this philosophy was the notion that the scope of the philosophical category of the human being extended only to those who would today count as racially "white." A survey of modern European philosophical anthropology belies a white normative understanding of the category of human being, by which I mean whiteness is the standard by which and from which others are measured. As such, antiblack racism evidences a form of weak nihilism, which I shall call "white nihilism," that is an existential dependence upon the ideal of white-normativity, or "whiteness," in order to justify the value of human life. The goal of this chapter is to show how European (white) nihilism conditions denials of the meaningfulness of black life, i.e., antiblack racism, and is therefore the context of meaning to which black nihilism either healthily or unhealthily, strongly or weakly, responds.

Rationalism and Transcendental Idealism: A Brief Sketch of Descartes & Kant

Traditional Western philosophy begins with the premise that human existence involves the capacity to order the world rationally.[129] Ancient Mediterranean philosophies grew into medieval Christian theologies and Islamic thought that eventuated in modern European philosophical and scientific ideals. Modern European philosophy was a struggle between religious belief and rational knowledge. According to Bertrand Russell:

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[128] West, *Race Matters*, pp. 17-31.
[129] Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), pp. 3-24.

The first serious irruption of science was the publication of the Copernican theory in 1543; but this theory did not become influential until it was taken up and improved by Kepler and Galileo in the seventeenth century. Then began the long fight between science and dogma…[130]

René Descartes positioned philosophy in the modern fight between science and theology. Descartes introduced a philosophical framework for the thinking human "ego," the site of preeminent cognitive representations that make human knowledge of the external world possible.[131] He wrote:

I am conscious that I possess a certain faculty of judging [or discerning truth from error], which doubtless I received from god … [And] since it is impossible that he should will to deceive me, it is likewise certain that he has not given me a faculty that will ever lead me to error, provided I use it right.[132]

He further wrote:

When I lately considered whether aught really existed in the world, and found that because I considered this question, it very manifestly followed that I myself existed, I could not but judge that what I so clearly conceived was true, not that I was forced to this judgment by any external cause, but simply because great clearness of the understanding was succeeded by strong inclination in the will … I not only know that I exist, in so far as I am a thinking being, but there is likewise presented to my mind a certain corporeal nature …[133]

Descartes argued that scientific knowledge required legitimization through a priori understanding because human knowledge needed to meet conditions of epistemic certainty premised on one as a thinking and willing being. In other words, scientific truth, according to Descartes, needs philosophical legitimization because human knowledge requires certainty beyond rational doubt. He wrote:

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[130] Ibid. p. 492.
[131] Walter Kaufmann, *Philosophic Classics: Bacon to Kant,* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961) Ch. 2, "Rene Descartes: MEDITATIONS (complete), Thomas Hobbes' OBJECTIONS and Descartes REPLIES (complete)," pp. 26-91.
[132] Ibid. p. 54.
[133] Ibid. p. 57.

[As] often as I so restrain my will within the limits of my knowledge, that it forms no judgment except regarding objects which are clearly and distinctively represented to it by the understanding, I can never be deceived; because every clear and distinct conception is doubtless something, and as such cannot owe its origin to nothing, but must of necessity have God for its author—God, I say, who, as supremely perfect, cannot, without a contradiction, be the cause of any error; and consequently it is necessary to conclude that every such conception [or judgment] is true … I will assuredly reach truth if I only fix my attention sufficiently on all the thing I conceive perfectly, and separate these from others which I conceive more confusedly and obscurely.[134]

Descartes introduced modern philosophical questions concerning the epistemic conditions for human knowledge. Whereas St. Augustine, for example, emphasized religious faith as the primary vehicle for human knowledge against metaphysical skepticism, Descartes championed the certainty of reason as the source of human knowledge. In *Against the Academics*, St. Augustine argued that metaphysical skepticism requires faith in divine revelation to be overcome.[135] For Descartes, however, skepticism is not overcome by faith but rather by rational proofs. In effect, Descartes sought to rationalize medieval conceptions of religious faith.[136] His epistemic philosophy attributed a rational nature to the metaphysical universe of traditional Christian theology. He wrote:

God established these laws in nature just as a sovereign establishes laws in his kingdom… He would also be able to change them just as a king changes his laws… But I understand these truths as eternal and unvarying in the same way that I judge…[137]

Also, in *The Replies*, Descartes wrote:

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not

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[134] Ibid. pp. 59-60.
[135] Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 26.
[136] Ibid. p. 42.
[137] Ibid. 30-32.

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depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but all order, every law, and every reason for anything being true or good.[138]

Descartes' philosophy was not merely a theological proof of God's existence, although it affirmed Christianity; it created a metaphysical realm of limitless perfection devoid of the self-conscious perspective and will traditionally attributed to God; and it created a realm of perfectly human knowledge impervious to divine intervention. That is, Descartes effectively removed God from human affairs. In *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (1995), Michael Gillespie summarized Descartes' conception of human knowledge in relation to God's existence. Gillespie wrote:

> The human will, which is in essence the same as the will of God, thus discovers that it is limited, that it is not God. The discovery of such a limitation, however, is simultaneously the recognition of the necessity of the unlimited, that is, man, only is as the negation of the unlimited, that is, as the negation of God. … Deception requires self consciousness, which is the basis for distinguishing oneself from others. God, however, is not self-conscious. God thus is no deceiver. If God is no deceiver, then the truths of mathematics cannot be doubted and the only thing that stands in the way of man's perfection is man himself. Through science, man can expand the sphere of his knowledge and his power until it is identical with that of his will, that is, until he becomes master and possessor of nature. … Descartes thus demonstrates that God cannot be the God he was traditionally understood to be, since as infinitely infinite and therefore nonself-conscious he cannot have intentions or will in a traditional sense.[139]

The modern Western philosophical moment began with Cartesian affirmations of the potency of reason in definitively determining objective features of metaphysical and human reality. Nearly a century and a half later, in the heyday of modernity, Immanuel Kant expanded the Cartesian model by articulating the transcendental conditions for

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[138] Ibid. 31.
[139] Ibid. pp. 60-81.

human knowledge through the structuring categories of reason.[140] Kant argued that

human knowledge required not only a Cartesian capacity for rational doubt, but also a

synthetic a priori understanding of universal truths. For instance, Kant wrote:

> I call all knowledge transcendental which is occupied not so much with objects, as with our a priori concepts of objects. A system of such concepts might be called Transcendental Philosophy. … It is not meant to extend our knowledge, but only to rectify it, and to become the test of the value of all a priori knowledge … according to which hereafter a complete system of philosophy of pure reason, whether it serve for an expansion or merely for a limitation of it, may be carried out, both analytically and synthetically.[141]

Kant distinguished among varying modes of conscious experience in human

knowledge formation, which included representation, sensibility, and intuition. He wrote:

> [The] faculty of receiving representations [vorstellungen] according to the manner in which we are affected by objects, is called sensibility [sinnlichkeit]. Objects therefore are given to us through our sensibility. Sensibility alone supplies us with intuitions [Anschauugen]. These intuitions become thought through the understanding [Verstand], and hence arise conceptions[Begriffe]. All thought therefore must, directly or indirectly, go back to intuitions [Anschauugen], i.e., to our sensibility, because in no other way can objects be given to us. The effect produced by an object upon the faculty of representation [vorstellungsfahigkeit], so far as we are affected by it, is called sensation [empfindung]. An intuition [Anshauung] of an object, by means of a sensation, is called empirical. The undefined object of such an empirical intuition is called phenomenon [Erscheinung]. In a phenomenon I call that which corresponds to the sensation its matter; but that which causes the manifold matter of the phenomenon to be perceived as arranged in a certain order, I call its form. … The matter only of all phenomenon is given us a posteriori; but their form must be ready for them in the mind [Germuth] a priori, and must therefore be capable of being considered as separate from all sensations.[142]

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[140] Kaufmann, Ch. 10, "Immanuel Kant: *selections from* CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON; *selections from* PROLEGOMENA; *selections from* FOUNDATION FOR THE METAPHYSIC OF MORALS," pp. 415-569.
[141] Ibid. p. 430.
[142] Ibid. p. 432.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), exposited the transcendental conditions of rational understanding, while investigating certain antinomies arising between the imperatives of reason and the freedom of human will. Kant investigated reason's potency to ethically effect human willing in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). He framed the modern epistemic question of human knowledge in terms of a tension between human experience of phenomena and things beyond or behind phenomena, which he referred to as noumena.[143] Kant argued that there is an impassible barrier between phenomenal experience and noumenal reality.[144] He wrote:

> Appearances, so far as they are thought as objects under the unity of categories, are called phenomena. But if I admit things which are objects of the understanding only, and nevertheless can be given as objects of intuition, though not of sensuous intuition (as coram intuiti intellectuali), such things would be called noumena (intellegibilia) … For if the senses only represent to us something as it appears, that something must by itself also be a thing, and an object of a non-sensuous intuition, i.e., of the understanding. That is, there must be a kind of knowledge in which there is no sensibility, and which alone possess absolute objective reality, representing objects as they are, while through the empirical use of our understanding we know things only as they appear. … In fact, quite a new field would seem to be open, a world, as it were, realized in thought, which would be a more, and not a less, worthy object for the pure understanding.[145]

Kant resolved the tension between noumena and phenomena by presuming the rational order of metaphysical reality, and then dividing the universe into practical and pure parts. According to Kant, human life uses practical reason to understand the universal principles of pure reason, which results in synthetic a priori judgments, or human, non-tautological, non-empirical knowledge about reality. He wrote:

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[143] Ibid. pp. 469-482.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid. p. 475.

One might feel inclined to think that the concept Phenomena … suggested by itself the objective reality of the Noumena, and justified a division of objects into phenomena and noumena, and consequently of the world into a sensible and intelligible world (mundus sensibilis et intelligiblis); and this in such a way that the distinction between the two should not refer to the logical form only of a more or less clear knowledge of one and the same object, but to a difference in their original presentation to our knowledge, which makes them to differ in themselves from each other in kind.[146]

Kant also wrote:

Where do we get the concept of God as the highest good from? Solely from the idea of moral perfection that reason lays out for us a priori and which it ties, unbreakably, to the concept of a free will.[147]

Human understanding uses practical reason to ascertain universal principles, such as "the highest good." Kant wrote:

Only a rational being has will—which is the ability to act according to the thought of laws, i.e. to act on principle. To derive action from laws you need reason, so that's what will is—practical reason. When reason is irresistible in its influence on the will, the actions that a rational being recognizes as objectively necessary are also subjectively necessary; i.e. the will is the ability to choose only what reason recognizes, independently of preferences, as practically necessary, i.e. as good.[148]

Kant famously wrestled with the epistemic tension between human phenomenal experience and metaphysical reality. In the process, he admitted that phenomenal understandings of metaphysical reality are necessarily limited. Regarding the inherent limitations of the phenomenal perspective, Kant wrote:

[It's] an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth… surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous

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[146] Ibid. p. 475.
[147] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 15.
[148] Ibid. p. 18.

seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion.[149]

Kant recognized epistemological limits in human knowledge of the metaphysical universe. He conceded that the rationality of human intellect necessarily veiled phenomenal experiences of metaphysical reality, potentially obscuring human knowledge of noumena. Yet, Kant resolved the tension between phenomena and noumena by conjuring distinctly rational realms of human reality. Both Kantian and Cartesian philosophy fundamentally shaped the modern European philosophical discourse. Both philosophers affirmed the human capacity to potentially know universal truths, although Kant acknowledged important limitations to human knowledge.

Kant and Descartes represent the heart of modern European Enlightenment philosophy, which is an optimistic hypothesizing of the potential of human intellect to know universal truth. However, Kant's revelation of the distinction between phenomena and noumena, between the antinomies of freedoms and limitations of phenomenal will, created room for a criticism that ultimately sparked Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism.

Fichte's Criticism of Kantian Idealism: A Preliminary Philosophy of Nihilism

Johann Fichte's criticism of Kantian idealism, and that way of resolving the tension between phenomena and noumena, was an early catalyst for Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism and Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism. Fichte agreed with Kant that phenomenal knowledge could not, properly speaking, know noumena. But, he rejected the claim that phenomenal projections needed to "know" noumena in order to be meaningful. He argued that freedom in imagination, not noumena, was the ground for

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[149] Kaufmann, p. 469.

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justifying phenomenal meaning. That is, in order to resolve the tension between phenomena and noumena, Fichte proposed abolishing the role of noumena in the formation of human knowledge. Contrary to Kant, he imagined noumena to be part of a universe of indefinable flux, an eternal chaotic movement resisting the rational order of phenomenal perspective.

Fichte distinguished between the objective world of human experience and the metaphysical universe by labeling phenomenal perspectives an "I" that orders the noumenal "not-I'" of the empirical and metaphysical world. According to Fichte, the "I" finds its limits by attempting to order logically the "absolute-I." In this way, Fichte imagined the limitation of human life similarly to the way Descartes envisioned it. The phenomenal perspective of the not-I necessarily finds its limits through the absolute-I's annihilation of the meaning of the I's projections. Michael Gillespie explained Fichte's philosophy of the not-I. Gillespie wrote:

> The existence of the not-I poses an unavoidable problem for the I. The not-I is the opposite of the I and annihilates it. Where the not-I is the I is not. Yet, the not-I is posited by the I and thus presupposes it.[150]

Fichte's conception of the metaphysical universe, or absolute-I, or by extension, not-I, mirrored Aristotle's conception of *energia*, which is a pure activity existing for its own sake.[151] According to Fichte, similar to Kant, human life uses phenomenal capacities of the empirical-I to engage universal reality; but, unlike Kant, he claimed human life finds itself overwhelmed and exhausted, rejected in the process.

Existential exhaustion is the result of tension between phenomena and noumena, or I and not-I, according to Fichte. He argued that human life experiences itself as

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[150] Gillespie, p. 81.
[151] Ibid. pp. 87-88.

paradoxically strong and weak, exhausting itself through its own mechanisms when it attempts to represent the absolute-I. It reaches its limitations when engaging the universal, and in repulsion projects repulsiveness onto the not-I. "The returning motion of the I from its repulse by the infinite … and the feeling that it engenders is attributed to the object, to the not-I."[152] In other words, phenomenal life experiences exhaustion through the pursuit of metaphysical meaning. It experiences exhaustion through a longing for universality that it can never attain. Regarding Fichte's idea of longing, Gillespie wrote:

> Longing arises out of a dissatisfaction with the limits of the I, that is, out of its feelings of incapacity. This feeling arises however, because in longing the I is already in some sense beyond its limitations and thus feels the contradiction between what it is as an absolute activity and what it is as an empirical being.[153]

Gillespie also wrote:

> From the perspective of the absolute-I, the not-I is only an internal disruption of the I itself. The empirical-I, however, experiences this disruption as a feeling. The primordial-I, as Fichte understands it, is both everything and nothing. As pure, unconditioned activity, it is totally without internal distinctions and encompasses everything whatsoever. … this pure activity is disrupted by an alien element that appears within the I. … this other undermines the self-identity of the I by establishing a boundary between what it is and what it is not. The I experiences this boundary as a feeling that curbs its activity. As a result of this feeling, the I does not want to extend itself any further in the direction closed off by the boundary. It thereby ceases to be absolute and becomes merely an empirical-I. … The limitation of the I is also the source of self-consciousness. The primordial I is a pure activity, a point that wants to become an infinite plane … it is pure will. This outreaching however is checked at a particular point by the not-I. the will meets a resistance which it cannot overcome. … the I comes to recognize itself as an I in consequence of its encounter with the not-I or object. The inner experience of the empirical I undergoing this experience is a feeling of incapacity that sets a limit for the I. … the I strives for the infinite but the infinite cannot be attained. At some point short of the infinite, the I reaches the limits of its strength, and can go no further. At this point it is repulsed from the

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[152] Ibid. p. 89.
[153] Ibid. p. 91.

infinite. … [This] is the source of the feeling of incapacity in the I, the feeling that the will is limited, that it is not God.[154]

To avoid this form of existential exhaustion, the tension between noumena and phenomena "must be cut rather than loosened, by an absolute decree of reason, which the philosopher does not pronounce, but merely proclaims: since there is no way of reconciling the not-I and the I, let there be no not-I at all," according to Fichte.[155] In other words, he suggests human life dispense with reliance on universal groundings for phenomenal meaning. According to Fichte, metaphysical legitimizations of phenomenal perspectives are impossible. Philosophy ought to focus on how human phenomenal life experiences the not-I, not on bridging a presumed gap in meaning.[156] For instance, Gillespie explains:

> Fichte attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction by properly distinguishing … The not-I is real and restricts the empirical-I … Both the empirical-I and the not-I, that is, both individual human subjects and the objective world, in Fichte's view, are expressions of the free activity of the absolute-I, of the infinite will that is essential to both God and man.[157]

In other words, human beings make sense of reality by viewing it through a phenomenal lens, which entails certain epistemic limits.

"The mutual necessity and mutual contradiction of the I and not-I is the essence of the problem that manifests itself in Kant's antinomies," according to Fichte.[158] The repulsive situation of realizing human finitude through an engagement with the universal induces exhaustion. In exhaustion, human phenomenal life encounters the proposition of ultimate meaninglessness as a philosophical paradox that is emotionally rejected.

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[154] Ibid. pp. 88-89.
[155] Ibid. pp. 85.
[156] Ibid. pp. 79.
[157] Ibid. p. 83.
[158] Ibid. p. 81.

Exhaustion is human existence being driven beyond itself. On Fichte's view, exhaustion is inevitable in human life. As finite beings enabled with transcendent capacities, but unable to complete innate universal drives, humans necessarily experience existential exhaustion through an inherent sense of longing for universal meaning that cannot be phenomenally achieved.

The only recourse for Fichte's existential exhaustion is imagination.[159] According to Fichte, imagination is the uniquely human phenomenal capacity to conjure radical forms of meaning. And, since phenomenal projections are not produced by the not-I, according to Fichte, human imagination need not refer beyond itself in order to ground the legitimacy of its meaning.[160] In response to the exhausting feeling of metaphysical incapacity, human life can imagine uniquely creative forms of meaning whose legitimacy is grounded in the phenomenal. Gillespie described Fichte's conception of imagination. He wrote:

> [T]he new image engenders a new boundary and a new feeling of limitation… As a result it is driven forward from one image to the next along a dialectical path by the repeated negation of successive realities. At each moment of liberation, 'harmony exists and a feeling of inclination ensues, which in this case is a feeling of contentment, of repletion, of utter completeness,' but this harmony 'lasts only a moment… since the longing necessarily recurs.'[161]

Phenomenal imagination presents human life with a new relationship to its possibilities and limitations; with imagination, one experiences phenomenal projection as a source of liberation. However, given the necessary incompleteness of phenomenal life, imagination provides only transient moments of existential contentment.

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[159] Ibid. pp. 91-92.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.

Human existence is an "endless task of pursuing an ideal that can never be attained," though one remains motivated by staggered recurrences of contentment, according to Fichte.[162] Resisting existential exhaustion requires imagination strong enough to reject the weaknesses of phenomenal life. Humanity displays weakness in attempting to fix the meaning of the phenomenal world according to the absolute, or the not-I. But, Fichte encouraged, human life can find strength in imagining newer horizons of phenomenal modality. Fichte's philosophy challenged Kantian idealism by arguing that dependence on noumena to ground phenomenal meaning is a recipe for existential exhaustion. Beyond rational idealism, Fichte claimed, human life is an emotional longing for universality that ends in exhaustion and frustration when not buffered by imagination. For instance, of Fichte's perspective on Kantian idealism, Gillespie wrote:

> [Kant] partitions reason in a way that allows space for both science and morality, for both the finite-I and the objective world on one hand and the infinite-I and subjective freedom on the other. Fichte, however, believes that he has discovered that Kant's island of truth is itself only an illusion, that there are no fixed and immutable forms, and that everything is merely the projection of the imagination upon the banks of fog where one image gives way to another. This confusion, of course, is exactly what Kant predicted would engulf those who left the shelter of his island.[163]

While Descartes' conception of human being allowed for a theometaphysics, because the cognition of the mathematical unity of the universe was presumed compatible with the deity's thought, Fichte usurped Christian metaphysics by replacing it with an incomprehensible universal flux. Fichte's philosophy did not depend on the role of noumena to legitimize human value. He considered the Christian metaphysical narrative superfluous.

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[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid. p. 85.

The metaphysical dimensions of Fichte's philosophy influenced Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's philosophies concerning the human condition. In fact, it was Fichte's emphasis on the infinite chaos and meaninglessness of the universe that inspired Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi to calling him a nihilist. The term, "nihilism," was coined in his 1799 criticism of philosophical idealism.[164] Jacobi's critique was broad, also covering Spinoza and Kant, but it was his specific criticism of Fichte that produced the colloquial understanding of the term, "nihilism." In an open letter, Jacobi wrote: "Truly, my dear Fichte, it should not grieve me, if you, or whoever it might be, want to call chimerism what I oppose to idealism, which I reproach as nihilism."[165] Jacobi argued that philosophical idealism was a nihilism that reduced the world to nothingness. For example, since rational idealism entails a questioning of the bases of universal truth, following St. Augustine, Jacobi argued that rational idealism is heretical of the fact that God's will is universal Truth. Jacobi wrote:

> Man has this choice and this alone: nothing or God. Choosing nothing he makes himself God; that means he makes God an apparition, for it is impossible, if there is no God, for man and all that is around him to be more than an apparition… God is and is outside of me, a living essence that subsists for itself, or I am God. There is no third possibility.[166]

The main concern for Jacobi was that if there are no universal truths, humanity is bereft of objective standards to measure itself. He understood Fichte's philosophy as advancing a moral and religious subjectivity threatening God's omnipotence. Fichte understood his philosophy to be a liberation of human freedom beyond existential

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[164] The first appearance of the term "nihilism" was actually F. L. Goetzieus' *De Nonisismo et nihilismo in theologia,* which appeared in 1733. This text is relatively unknown and seems to have had little or no influence on the term's later emergence.
[165] Gillespie, p. 65.
[166] Ibid. p. 66.

exhaustion. Human freedom, for Fichte, meant going beyond the established boundaries of phenomenal life, which in modern Europe also included going beyond traditional Christian values. This is why, as Jacobi observed, Fichte's nihilism could easily embrace crime, immorality, and atheism. Jean Paul, a student of Jacobi's, wrote:

> In an age where God has set like the sun, soon afterwards the world too passes into darkness. He who scorns the universe respects nothing more than himself and at night fears only his own creations.[167]

For Paul and Jacobi, philosophical idealism, both in Kant's and Fichte's versions, was blasphemous against God's existence.

The human phenomenal world, according to Fichte, is a world of unreality and imagination premised upon emotional longings stemming from an exhaustive human existential condition. Constructing imaginative possibilities for human phenomenal life constitutes human existential freedom. In other words, Fichte's philosophy responded to the crisis of Christianity invoked by Descartes' epistemology by countering rationality with imagination. The chaotic flux and immutability of the metaphysical universe, the necessarily exhausting nature of the human condition, and the possibility of existential freedom through turning against rationality crucially prefigured both Schopenhauer's pessimism and Nietzsche's nihilism. Fichte's philosophical rejection of objectivism in favor of subjectivism created theoretical space for late-modern European philosophers who would further deny the potential of human rationality to know universal truths.

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[167] Gillespie, p. 106.

European Nihilism: Schopenhauer's Pessimism

Nihilism is a philosophy that fundamentally rejects identity relations between

phenomenal meaning and metaphysical reality. Fichte could be considered a nihilist

because he rejected metaphysical interpretations of phenomenal projections. Fichte's

philosophy opposed a priori interpretations of human values, and rejected transcendental

idealism as a form of existential longing borne out of human exhaustion. He argued that

imagination and freedom were the bases of phenomenal meaning. Rationality, on his

view, is a limitation of human freedom whose counterbalance is imagination.

Arthur Schopenhauer's pessimism began with Fichte's disposition against

metaphysical certainty in human knowledge. He argued that all forms of phenomenal

experience were "representations" born of human consciousness. He wrote:

> The world is my representation: this is a truth valid with reference to every
> living and knowing being, although man alone can bring it into reflective,
> abstract consciousness. If he really does so, philosophical discernment has
> dawned on him. It then becomes clear and certain to him that he does not
> know a sun and earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels the
> earth … If any truth can be expressed a priori, it is this …[168]

Schopenhauer considered scientific knowledge an empirical representation worth

believing in. Although the world is ultimately a representation within human

consciousness, a particular class of representations is grounded according to the

"principle of sufficient reason." Schopenhauer considered the structuring categories of

human reason espoused by Kant, i.e., time, space, and causality, for example, to be the

unique forms of human representations allowing for the rational capacity to make

judgments in accordance with the "principle of sufficient reason." Schopenhauer wrote:

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[168] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, *vol. I*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), p. 5.

[T]ime, space, and causality … While each of these forms, which we have recognized as so many particular modes of the principle of sufficient reason, is valid only for a particular class of representations, the division of object and subject, on the other hand, is the common form of all those classes; it is that form under which alone any representation, of whatever kind it be, abstract or intuitive, pure or empirical, is generally possible and conceivable … everything that exists for knowledge, and hence the whole of this world, is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver, in a word, representation.[169]

Thus, for Schopenhauer, transcendental idealism described the forms of human phenomenal projections. However, transcendental idealism's claim to metaphysical knowledge, as in Kantian morality, is a rationalistic illusion of human life. Schopenhauer wrote:

"[S]pace, time, and causality belong not to the thing-in-itself, but only to the phenomenon… they are only the forms of our knowledge, not qualities of the thing-in-itself."[170]

Human phenomenal consciousness projects rational form onto noumena. While animals and brutes share in something resembling human sentience, i.e., thought in terms of space and causality, according to Schopenhauer, it is the temporal dimension of rational forms that create the human possibility of enjoying and suffering representations. Human self-consciousness includes the fundamentally structuring category of time. "Our self consciousness has not space as its form, but only time; therefore our thinking does not, like our perceiving, take place in three dimensions, but merely in one."[171] Human beings are able to organize their phenomenal representations and project them forwards or backwards, recalling a past or planning a future. The powers of human consciousness

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[169] Ibid.
[170] Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 88.
[171] Ibid.

to reflect, recall, and conjure representations entail human desire and will, which, according to Schopenhauer, necessarily end in suffering and boredom. Although the logical structure of time is axiomatic to human rationality and phenomenal life, it forms the basis of human life as suffering. Existential suffering is a unique reality of rational "man" over animals and "brutes." For instance, in the essay, "On The Sufferings of the World," Schopenhauer wrote:

> [E]very state of welfare, every feeling of satisfaction, is negative in character; that is to say, it consists in freedom from pain, which is the positive element of existence. It follows, therefore, that the happiness of any given life is to be measured, not by its joys and pleasures, but by the extent to which it has been free from suffering … If this is the true standpoint, the lower animals appear to enjoy a happier destiny than man. … the chief source of all this passion is that thought for what is absent and future … In his powers of reflection, memory and foresight, man possesses, as it were, a machine for condensing and storing up his pleasures and his sorrows. But the brute has nothing of the kind … [Besides] the sources of pleasure which he has in common with the brute, man has the pleasures of the mind as well … the most innocent trifling or the merest talk up to the highest intellectual achievements; but there is the accompanying boredom to be set against them on the side of suffering.[172]

The suffering of man is due to his existential situation of having rationality in consciousness, or will in a world that destroys its value. Suffering is induced through the struggle to will meaning within a universe that inherently rejects it. Schopenhauer argued that if phenomenal projections were to have meaning at all, they would have to "point to something… that is not a representation but the thing-in-itself."[173] But, the thing-in-itself is a universe of active flux transcending the time-ordered logic of phenomenal representations. Thus, human phenomenal will suffers a permanent predisposition toward ordering something that cannot be ordered. The crucial question for Schopenhauer is: can

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[172] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism,* trans. By T. Bailey Saunders, (New York: Cosimo, inc. 2007) pp. 8-10. Originally published in 1891.
[173] Dienstag, p. 89.

phenomenal meaning adequately fill the void of absolute metaphysical meaninglessness? Or, in other words, can human life avoid suffering? Schopenhauer's response was, no. "Time is that by which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value."[174] For Schopenhauer, phenomenal projections are inherently devoid of value.

According to the pessimistic view, an eternal metaphysical disconnection exists between phenomenal experience and metaphysical reality. Time-ordered, phenomenal reality is necessarily inferior to metaphysical reality because it is perpetually overcome by the a-temporal flux of the metaphysical universe. Rationality in cognition, while being the criterion for human existence, is also the source of inescapable suffering. Schopenhauer wrote:

> "[T]he absence of reason restricts the animals to representations of perception immediately present to them in time, in other words to real objects. We, on the other hand, by virtue of knowledge in the abstract, comprehend not only the narrow and actual present, but also the whole past and present together with the wide realm of possibility."[175]

He further wrote:

> "[A]nimals are much more satisfied than we by mere existence… primarily due to the fact that [they remain] free from care and anxiety together with their torment."[176]

Because human beings can never reconcile phenomena and noumena, humans can never alleviate the existential conditions of desiring and longing that cause suffering. Suffering could never be eradicated from the human condition because universal will never reaches its end, while time-ordered phenomenal life vainly strives to assign its movement a purpose. Schopenhauer wrote:

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[174] Ibid. p. 92.
[175] Ibid. p. 87.
[176] Ibid.

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> Absence of all aim, of all limits, belongs to the essential nature of the will in itself, which is an endless striving… the same thing is also seen in human endeavors and desires that buoy us up with the vain hope that their fulfillment is always the final goal of willing. But as soon as they are attained, they no longer look the same, and so are soon forgotten, become antiquated, and are really, although not immediately, always laid aside as vanished illusions… the will always knows… what it wills her and now, but never what it wills in general. Every individual act has a purpose or end; willing as a whole has no end in view.[177]

Suffering unfulfilled desire is the baseline of human existence, for Schopenhauer. "All enjoyment is really only negative, only has the effect of removing a pain, while pain or evil, on the other hand, is the actual positive element and is felt directly."[178] He did, however, allow for temporary reprieves from human suffering. According to Schopenhauer, to make life bearable humans must learn the unique art of living a phenomenal life that wills in accordance with the usurping will of the metaphysical universe. In other words, humans must learn to will in a simpatico relationship with the meaningless universe. That is, humans ought to will against willing meaning. Schopenhauer suggested aesthetic absorption and ascetic ethics for making the suffering of human life bearable by willing non-will. He advocated for the destruction of self-consciousness in metaphysical reality.

In the aesthetic moment of art absorption, argued Schopenhauer, one is momentarily released from the time-ordered logic of phenomenal existence, away from the self-awareness of human consciousness, and above the suffering of the human experience. Contemplating great works of art transforms phenomenal being into a will-less subject. And, since willing is the source of suffering for Schopenhauer, will-less-ness

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[177] Ibid. p. 96.
[178] Ibid. p. 93.

is the best means for quasi-avoidance. Only when phenomenal will and its desire create

meaning are abandoned, claimed Schopenhauer, can one have peace. He wrote:

> Instead of the restless pressure and effort; instead of the constant transition
> from desire to apprehension and from joy to sorrow; instead of the never-
> satisfied and never-dying hope that constitutes the life dream of the man
> who wills, we see that peace that is higher than all reason, that ocean-like
> calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquility, that unshakable confidence
> and serenity, whose mere reflection in the countenance… is a complete
> and certain gospel. Only knowledge remains; the [phenomenal] will has
> vanished.[179]

The only intelligent response to human existence is resignation, according to

Schopenhauer. Where Fichte urged giving up on metaphysical reality, Schopenhauer

argued for giving up on the phenomenal will as a way of dispersing the tension between

phenomena and noumena.

In facing the horrifying absurdity of metaphysical meaninglessness and the

burdens of rational judgment in the face of universal usurpation, according to

Schopenhauer's pessimism, human life is reduced to a form of suffering. Yet, human

phenomenal life can find reprieve through aestheticism. Apprehending great art is a

moment of scratching through the veil of phenomenal will to universal will. In moments

of pure aesthetic contemplation, "The artist," according to Schopenhauer, "lets us peer

into the world through his eyes"; and, "that he has these eyes … is the gift of genius."[180]

He wrote:

> "[O]nly through pure contemplation … which becomes absorbed entirely
> in the object, are the ideas comprehended; and the nature of the genius
> consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation… this
> demands a complete forgetting of our own person."[181]

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[179] Ibid. p. 108.
[180] Ibid. p. 109.
[181] Ibid. p. 109.

For Schopenhauer, aesthetic experiences are a form of being "absorbed entirely in the object … through pure contemplation," which elevates human phenomenal experience, momentarily, beyond its original condition.

Great art is an achievement because it reflects the uniquely human capacity to represent its existential condition abstracted from the phenomenal categories of time and duration; yet, in metaphysical terms, aesthetic absorption remains a fleeting and ultimately meaningless phenomenon. Regarding the transience of aesthetic absorption, Schopenhauer wrote:

> [T[here always lies so near to us a realm in which we have escaped entirely from all our affliction; but who has the strength to remain in it for long? As soon as any relation to our will, to our person, even of those objects of pure contemplation, again enters consciousness, the magic is at an end.[182]

Great artists, on this view, are gifted with insight into the complex relationship between phenomenal reality and metaphysical reality. They possess the ability to suppress the individuation of phenomenal life in representing universal will. Thus, in the moment of aesthetic appreciation, the contemplator of great art is drawn outside the human condition. Schopenhauer wrote:

> On the occurrence of an aesthetic appreciation, the will thereby vanishes entirely from consciousness… this is the origin of that satisfaction and pleasure that accompany the apprehension of the beautiful… to become a pure subject of knowing means to be quit of oneself."[183]

Despite the temporary reprieve of aesthetic absorption, human life is "a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact [life's] ultimate

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[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid. p. 110.

constituents."[184] Existential pain and suffering result from desiring and longing; and where the suffering of these manage to be imperfectly avoided, the suffering of boredom will take its place.[185] For Schopenhauer, boredom entails suffering the inability to conquer desiring itself, and settling for the dullness of previous accomplishments. Boredom is a form of decadence that rests on the dull comfort of previously achieved desires in order to avoid continued suffering. The appropriate response to the suffering of human life, however, is phenomenal resignation.

The ascetic life of saints in monastery is Schopenhauer's preferred analogy for phenomenal resignation. The phenomenal will of the saint is theoretically opposed to desire since it abides only by God's universal will. Schopenhauer's point was that phenomenal will-less-ness requires constant willing. He wrote:

> We must not imagine that after the denial of the will-to-live has appeared through knowledge… such denial no longer wavers or falters, and that we can rest on it as an inherited property. On the contrary, it must always be achieved afresh by constant struggle… that whole will-to-live exists potentially so long as the body lives, and is always striving… We therefore find in the lives of saintly persons that peace and bliss we have described, only as the blossom resulting from the constant overcoming of the [phenomenal] will… for on earth, no man can have lasting peace.[186]

Schopenhauer acknowledged that pessimism requires constant activity. Also, he added that pessimism, like the life of saints, entailed an implicit moral code. Although he rejected religious interpretations of moral law, i.e., Christianity, and metaphysical interpretations of moral law, i.e., Kantian idealism, he still considered morality a consequence of the subdued self-interest implicit to phenomenal resignation. For example, Schopenhauer wrote:

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[184] Ibid. p. 98.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid. p. 111.

> Stoic ethics is originally and essentially not a doctrine of virtue, but merely a guide to the rational life, whose end and aim is happiness through peace of mind. Virtuous conduct appears in it, so to speak, only by accident, as means, not as end.[187]

Pessimistic morality similarly accomplishes indirect virtuous ends, as a means of intelligent response to universal meaninglessness.

For Schopenhauer, suffering is an inescapable dimension of human phenomenal life. His overall denial of any positive meaning for human existence is demonstrated in his position on death. He viewed death as the ultimate release from human suffering because it is the cessation of phenomenal will. He claimed that human existence ought to welcome death. According to Schopenhauer, humans are the only beings who suffer the dread of death in life. Dread and fear of death is part of the time-ordered suffering of human existence. But, for Schopenhauer, death, as the cessation of phenomenal will, is a return to the primacy of the universal will. Fear and dread of death is a fallacy of human existence. Schopenhauer wrote:

> As far as you are an individual, death will be the end of you. But your individuality is not your true and innermost being: it is only the outward manifestation of it. It is not the thing-in-itself, but only the phenomenon presented in the form of time; and therefore with a beginning and end. But your real being knows neither time, nor beginning, nor end, nor yet the limits of any given individual. … So when death comes, on the one hand you are annihilated as an individual; on the other, you are and remain everything.[188]

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[187] Ibid.

[188] Schopenhauer, *Pessimism,* pp. 50-54.

Death is not the end of existence; it is the end of phenomenal individuation, which is the cause of human suffering. Conceiving death as a disconnection, and not a reconnection, prioritizes the unreality of phenomenal will over the reality metaphysical will.[189]

Schopenhauer's philosophy expanded on Fichte's turn against rationality. But, where Fichte turned against rationality as a way towards finding phenomenal freedom, Schopenhauer turned against rationality by rejecting phenomenal life altogether. Where Fichte reveled in the possibilities of phenomenal imagination beyond existential exhaustion, Schopenhauer abhorred all phenomenal projections and sought phenomenal resignation from suffering.

On the pessimistic perspective, human life suffers the fate of creating phenomenal value and meaning in a world that eternally destroys phenomenal meaning and value. Phenomenal resignation of the will is the only intelligent response, according to Schopenhauer. Through the practices of asceticism and aestheticism, the human condition can find momentary reprieves. Ultimately, though, human life is not worth living according to the pessimist. Friedrich Nietzsche's conception nihilism adopted Schopenhauer's rejection of metaphysical certainty, but he challenged Schopenhauer's claim that the value of human life is not justifiable.

Nietzsche's Philosophy of European Nihilism

The pessimistic perspective that there are no universal truths inspired Nietzsche's philosophy of nihilism. Philosophical pessimism regards the logical form of human phenomenal projections, and their accompanying powers of rational judgment, as indispensable tools for human life and its affairs, but not apparatuses for uncovering

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[189] See, "The Vanity of Existence," in *Studies in Pessimism*.

universal truth. Nietzsche considered traditional modern European philosophy, especially

Kant's transcendental idealism, to be wholly fallacious renderings of truth. He initially

agreed with Schopenhauer's critique of Kantian idealism as an unjustifiable optimism,

but despite his initial approval of Schopenhauer's pessimism, he went on to consider it a

weak display of phenomenal will, which he called passive nihilism. His final evaluation

of Schopenhauer's pessimism led Nietzsche to consider all modern Western philosophy,

"European nihilism."[190]

Nihilism, for Nietzsche, describes phenomenal life living through dead or dying

value systems. It is the situation of realizing that the meaning and significance of

phenomenal projections are not metaphysically grounded, and thus, "traditional" values

no longer justify belief. Nihilism denotes both the existential situation of dying values

and the host of responses possible therein.[191] A nihilistic situation can be either complete

or incomplete, and nihilistic responses can be either weak or strong.[192] Incomplete

nihilism admits the devaluation of traditional values, but does not attempt to replace

them.[193] Complete nihilism faces the project of valuing in the absence of metaphysical

values. Complete nihilism can be divided into two categories: passive and active.[194]

Passive nihilism responds to the fall of traditional values by denying the value of

phenomenal projections. It devalues the value of phenomenal life altogether. Passive

nihilism describes Schopenhauer's pessimsim, according to Nietzsche.[195] Active and

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[190] Dienstag, p. 163.
[191] See, Byron Williston, "'Complete Nihilism' in Nietzsche," in *Philosophy Today*: Winter 2001; 45, 4; pp. 357-369.
[192] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of all Values*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Digireads.com Publishing: 2010), sec. 22, p. 17.
[193] Gillespie, p. 179.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

strong nihilism not only rejects decadent values with pessimistic truth, it also positively

seeks to create newer and healthier ways of valuing; this is Nietzsche's nihilism.[196]

Weak Nihilism: Nietzsche's Criticism of Modern Western Philosophy

Nihilism describes the situation of facing a pessimistic devaluation of traditional values.

Weak nihilism responds to pessimism by either seeking to resurrect the monistic form of

traditional values, or entirely denying the value of phenomenal valuing. Passive nihilism

is a form of weak nihilism that wills against human willing. From Nietzsche's

perspective, Kant's transcendental idealism and Schopenhauer's pessimism represent the

pillars of modern European philosophy's passive and weak nihilism. Kant's rational

idealism, for instance, is a form of weak nihilism because it limits the value of

phenomenal will by negating the value of its dynamism; by making the meaning of will

subordinate to metaphysical categories of pure reason, transcendental idealism destroys

the value of freedom in phenomenal life. Both Kant and Schopenhauer represent weak

nihilistic philosophies rejecting the vitality of life. For instance, Nietzsche wrote:

> The logic of pessimism leads finally to nihilism … the notion that there
> are no values, and no purpose: the recognition of the part that moral
> valuations have played in all other lofty values. Result: moral valuations
> are condemnations, negations; morality is the abdication of the will to live.
> …[197]

Moral philosophies inherently presuppose negative judgments concerning the value of

human existence; as such they necessarily negate the value of the dynamism and freedom

of phenomenal will, thereby condemning life. By confining the meaning of phenomenal

freedom to immorality (Kant), and suffering (Schopenhauer), modern European

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[196] Ibid.
[197] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* sec. 11, p. 12.

philosophy traditionally rejects the fundamental freedom of the human situation. Hiding

behind either the optimism of Kant's transcendental idealism, or the "intelligence" of

Schopenhauer's pessimism, traditional modern European philosophy theoretically denies

the human existential condition. Nietzsche further wrote:

> Nihilism will manifest itself as a psychological condition … when man
> has fixed a totality, a systematization, even an organization in and behind
> all phenomenal, so that the soul thirsting for respect and admiration will
> wallow in the general idea of a highest ruling administrative power …
> "monism:" … man becomes obsessed by a feeling of profound relativity
> and dependence in the presence of an All which is infinitely superior to
> him, a sort of divinity. … [But] lo, there is no such general good! … There
> still remains the subterfuge which would consist in condemning the whole
> world of becoming as an illusion, and in discovering a world which would
> lie beyond it, and would be a real world. The moment, however, that man
> perceives that this world has been devised for the purpose of meeting
> certain psychological needs, and that he has no right whatsoever to it, the
> final form of nihilism comes into being, which comprises a denial of the
> metaphysical world, and which forbids itself all belief in the real world.[198]

Enlightenment philosophy responded to pessimism produced in the crisis of

Christianity by constructing transcendentalist conceptions of truth and reality continuing

the religious tradition of locating the value of human values outside the sphere of human

willing. The spirit of "monism" in moralistic judgments on universal reality, locating the

meaning of human life in terms of the meaning of universal reality, is what marks both

Kant's optimism and Schopenhauer's pessimism as weak nihilism. Weak nihilistic values

directly or indirectly depend on metaphysical conceptions of truth, and are the opposite of

values rooted in freedom and power. From Nietzsche's perspective, Kant's idealism

optimistically posits a rationalistic, metaphysical, "real world," which Schopenhauer's

pessimism rejects. But, Schopenhauer's pessimism remains weak in that it indirectly

makes a metaphysical judgment against the value of phenomenal will through its ethic of

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[198] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* sec. 12, pp. 13-14.

resignation. Thus, Schopenhauer represented the final stage of European nihilism, which began with an optimistic monism positively valuing metaphysical reality and ends in a pessimistic monism negatively evaluating the metaphysical world. Nietzsche wrote:

> To what extent does Schopenhauerian nihilism continue to be the result of the same ideal as that which gave rise to Christian theism? The amount of certainty concerning the most exalted desiderata, the highest values and the greatest degrees of perfection, was so great, that the philosophers started out from it as if it had been an a priori and absolute fact: "God" at the head, as the given quantity—Truth. "To become like God," "To be absorbed into the Divine Being"—these were for centuries the most ingenious and most conceiving desiderata. …[199]

The crisis of Christianity, the rise of modern philosophy, and the conclusions of modern pessimism depict the rise and fall of European nihilism in Modern Western philosophy. Nihilism emerged through the monistic rationalism of Descartes and continued through the transcendental idealism of Kant. The insistence on valuing absolute truth held over from Christianity by Enlightenment thought eventually ran its course, and modern conceptions of rational certainty were exposed by Fichte and Schopenhauer as illusions and falsities. The role of rationality in modern Enlightenment philosophy served as metaphysical justification for the value of modern European ideals. That is, traditional modern European philosophy attempts to bulwark against the pessimism revealed through the modern crises of Christianity with ideals of pure reason. Schopenhauer responded to the idealism of traditional modern philosophy by denying the metaphysical value of rationality, order, and purpose in human existence. Nietzsche grew to reject Schopenhauer's pessimism alongside the idealism it opposed. Of Schopenhauer's pessimism, Nietzsche wrote:

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[199] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* sec. 16, p. 15.

Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. Thus the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim and meaninglessness is the psychologically necessary affect once the belief in God and essentially moral order becomes untenable. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered the interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were vain.[200]

Pessimism need not result in the weakness of modern European philosophical idealism, or the passivity of Schopenhauer's phenomenal resignation. More importantly, pessimism can invigorate human life and promote the dynamism of phenomenal will. For instance, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche argued that ancient Greek societies accomplished healthy relationships with pessimistic truth through a juxtaposition of the Dionysian spirit of music and the plasticity of Apollonian art, imagery, and lyrics.[201] The Dionysian represents the eternally fluid nature of universal will. Dionysus, the God of wine, is symbolized in the sound of music, which is reflective of the disembodied transcendence of universal will, argued Nietzsche.[202] The Apollonian, contrastingly, represents the formal world of phenomenal order. Apollo, the God of light and illumination, represents rationality and order through the plasticity of art forms.[203] Nietzsche praised pre-Socratic Greek society for their Dionysian strength of phenomenal will in facing metaphysical pessimism as represented through their aesthetic combining of music, imagery, and lyricism in the production of Attic tragedies.[204] For Nietzsche, combining the Apollonian and the Dionysian in aesthetic representations of tragedy are the highest cultural responses to the human condition.

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[200] Ibid. Sec. 55. p. 29.
[201] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books: 1956).
[202] Gillespie, pp. 208.
[203] Ibid. p. 209.
[204] Ibid.

Nietzsche further claimed, "The Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysius."[205] Pre-Socratic Greeks healthily faced the pessimistic truth of universal flux and chaos. For instance, contrasting the pessimism of ancient Greek interpretations of tragedy with the optimism of Socratic interpretations, he wrote:

> [The] optimistic element, which having once penetrated tragedy, must gradually overgrow its Dionysian regions and impel it necessarily to self-destruction.… Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to knowledge and insight the power of panacea.[206]

Nietzsche rejected moral interpretations of tragedy for the same reason he rejected moral interpretations of universal reality. Attic tragedy, however, laid bare the human existential situation of facing indeterminate metaphysical flux. According to Nietzsche, the heroes of Attic tragedy symbolized the imminent failures of human phenomenal life attempting to order metaphysical chaos. The tragic hero demonstrates the limits of phenomenal will against the usurping and immutable power of the universe. He wrote:

> Tragedy… is in its essence pessimistic. Existence is in itself something very terrible, man something very foolish… the hero of tragedy does not prove himself… in a struggle against fate, just as little does he suffer what he deserves. Rather, blind and with covered head, he falls to his ruin…[207]

According to Nietzsche, pre-Socratic Greeks birthed tragedy as a healthy phenomenal response to metaphysical pessimism, while Socratic philosophies brought about the decline of human phenomenal life by killing tragedy. He argued that healthy relationships with metaphysical pessimism dissipated with the influence of Socratic rationalism:

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[205] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 10.
[206] Ibid. pp. 14-15.
[207] Dienstag, p. 169.

Is pessimism necessarily a sign of decline…as it once was in India and now is, to all appearances, among us, "modern" men and Europeans? Is there a pessimism of strength?… And again: that of which tragedy died, the Socratism of morality, the dialectics, frugality, and cheerfulness of the theoretical man—how now? Might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline… is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism?[208]

Nietzsche considered modern European philosophy a fearful fleeing from the human condition. Contrarily, metaphysical meaninglessness did not diminish the value of human life for ancient Greeks; it made human life more precious. But, where modern European philosophy resolved to be "scientific about everything," it demonstrated a fearful fleeing from the pessimistic truth of human existence. European philosophy from Socrates to Kant can be read as a revelation of fear and weakness in flight from the pessimistic truths of human existence.

Nietzsche agreed with Schopenhauer that human life could be buffered against the absurdities of pessimism through aesthetics. However, he later augmented that position, claiming that even Attic tragedy represents a "terrestrial comfort."[209] In *Twilight of the Idols: or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer* (1859), Nietzsche argued for the value of human valuing in spite of pessimistic knowledge, and not as a way of coping with it. In the preface to the second publishing of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he likened valuing in spite of pessimism to laughing in the face of the absurd; he advised, "One ought to learn how to laugh, if one is bent on being a pessimist."[210] Where Nietzsche's earlier thought followed Schopenhauer in trying to make life bearable through aesthetic absorption, his later thought argued for the value of "laughing," or valuing in spite of ultimate meaninglessness.

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[208] Dienstag, p. 171.
[209] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, "A Critical Backward Glance," VII, p. 15.
[210] Ibid.

Nietzsche's mature analysis considered Schopenhauer's phenomenal resignation to be a form of moral resentment against the universe and human existence. Moral ressentiment, for Nietzsche, values impotence and weakness as "good" in the face of power and strength.[211] Nietzsche wrote:

> "What does the etymology of the terms for good in various languages tell us?" … The basic concept is always noble in the hierarchical, class sense … This development is strictly parallel to that other which eventually converted the notions common, plebian, base into the notion bad … It was the Jew who, with frightening consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value equations good/noble/powerful/beautiful/happy/favored-of-the-gods and maintain, with the furious hatred of the underprivileged and impotent, that "only the poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, sick, and ugly, truly blessed.[212]

Schopenhauer's philosophy displays the quintessence of nihilism, according to Nietzsche, as pessimism mixed with moralism.[213] Schopenhauer implicitly demonstrated moral resentment against the immutable will of the universe by valuing phenomenal resignation. Schopenhauer's devaluation of valuing is done out of impotence and weakness, not activity and strength. His philosophy concerning the intelligence of resignation attempted to make phenomenal weakness "good" in relation to the "bad" immutability of universal will. That is, Schopenhauer's phenomenal resignation depended on a moralistic appraisal of universal will. The structure of his argument for resignation treated the illusory nature of phenomenal reality as something to be devalued precisely because humans cannot overpower it. "Schopenhauer, who desired it otherwise, was obliged to imagine this metaphysical basis as the antithesis to the ideal, as 'an evil,

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[211] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals,* trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Books: 1956). Sec. IV, p. 162.
[212] Ibid. Sec. VII, pp. 166-167.
[213] Dienstag, p. 177.

blind will.'…"[214] Although Schopenhauer rejected metaphysical conceptions of morality,

his move to value resignation was nevertheless moralistic condemnation of universal will

as deceptive, false, or "evil." Of Schopenhauer's moralistic pessimism, Nietzsche wrote:

> A pessimist, a world-denier and God-denier, who comes to a halt before morality—who affirms morality and plays the flute [a pastime of Schopenhauer's] affirms laede neminem [hurt no one] morality: what? Is that actually a pessimist?[215]

Schopenhauer's resignation was a moral indictment against the universe

camouflaged within pessimistic truth. Without the moralistic overtures, Nietzsche argued,

true pessimism is a primordial confrontation with the universe that does not evaluate but

affirms or rejects. Pessimism accepts that universal will "aims at nothing and achieves

nothing."[216] Pessimistic knowledge does not entail a judgment against universal will.[217]

Rather, pessimism refers to the "innocence of becoming."[218] "To believe in morality is to

pass sentence on existence."[219] Schopenhauer endorsed the wisdom of Selenas that "not

to be born is best… the next best thing by far is to go back… where [man] came from, as

quickly as he can."[220] However, Nietzsche read Schopenhauer's endorsement of that

wisdom as representative of a moralistic desire to keep the absurdities of human

existence at bay, effectively judging them. Since the pessimistic truth is that human

phenomenal perspectives admits of no universal truth, it follows that there is no

perspective from which to judge the existence. Schopenhauer contradicted the logical

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[214] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 16, p. 15.
[215] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmerman, from *Nietzsche's Best 8 Books: An Ebook to Search the Spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Bill Chapko (Nietzsche Love of Fate Series: 2010), sec. 186.
[216] Dienstag, p. 178.
[217] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 12, p. pp. 13-14.
[218] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), "the Four Great Errors," sec. 8, p. 182.
[219] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 6, p. 11.
[220] Dienstag, p. 176.

trajectory of his pessimism by introducing a moralistic judgment against universal will.

Schopenhauer's pessimism relies on a judgment against universal will in order to

determine phenomenal life as valueless, and the intelligence of resignation as valuable.

However, reliance on "vast generalizations" of metaphysical values in order to establish

the value of phenomenal life reflects "pathology," according to Nietzsche. For instance,

Nietzsche wrote:

> Nihilism represents an intermediary pathological condition (the vast generalization, the conclusion that there is no purpose in anything, is pathological) … That there is no truth; that there is no absolute state of affairs—no "thing-in-itself." This alone is nihilism, and of the most extreme kind. It finds that the value of things consists precisely in the fact that these values are not real and never have been real, but that they are only symptoms of strength on the part of the valuer … [221]

Weak nihilism, including transcendental idealism and Schopenhauer's pessimism, is a

form of existential pathology because it seeks to make vast generalizations about

universal reality, which implicitly involves a fallacious logic of attaching a moral value to

the universe.

Nihilism is the situation of facing the absence of universal truths. How one

responds to the absence of universal truth is the indicator of existential health. The human

existential condition is a situation where humans must necessarily create meaning out of

meaninglessness. Those who cannot do so without metaphysical assertions demonstrate

weakness. According to Nietzsche, a strong will is needed to value human life without

metaphysically conceived bases for doing so. Regarding the passive nihilism of

pessimism, Nietzsche wrote:

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[221] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 13, p. 14.

> One grants the reality of becoming as the only reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to after-worlds and false divinities—but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it.[222]

The exhaustive situation of having pessimistic knowledge, and not wanting to know it, but being unable to deny it, is the potentially debilitating circumstance of passive nihilism, according to Nietzsche; and, "the weak perish of it."[223] He wrote:

> It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world…[224]

Schopenhauer's pessimism is a weak and passive nihilism that refuses to actively value in response to pessimism. Rational idealism, likewise, is a weak nihilism that seeks to replace one set of metaphysically conceived beliefs, Christian ideals, with another. Traditional Western philosophy then, from Nietzsche's perspective, is a prolonged response of weakness to the truth of pessimism. Western philosophy, from Socrates through Descartes, Kant, and even Schopenhauer, betrays a pathological dependence on metaphysical objectivity for valuing human life. In the unique case of pessimism and passive nihilism, Schopenhauer forbade himself access to "false divinities," but was unable to value human life in their absence and responded with a moralistic condemnation of existence.

Where traditional Western philosophy produced optimistic conceptions of the cavaliering powers of rationality within human existence, Schopenhauer proposed an existential asceticism that was strong in its rejection of modern optimism, but weak in its response to metaphysical meaninglessness. Nietzsche sought to develop a stronger, non-

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[222] Ibid. Sec. 12, p. 12.
[223] Ibid. Sec. 37, p. 21.
[224] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 585, p. 227.

moralistic version of Schopenhauer's pessimism. Schopenhauer's was perhaps the noblest philosophical attempt of modern European philosophy to face the truth of pessimism. Yet, valuing against phenomenal will out of impotence is resentment and not the spirited activity of strong nihilism. Nietzsche argued that only strong nihilism could healthily transition, or more precisely, transvalue decadent nihilistic values.

Strong Nihilism: Nietzsche's Trans-valuation of Values

Motivated by the shortcomings of Schopenhauer's pessimism, Nietzsche argued that having acquired pessimistic knowledge, one must not only learn to laugh, but also how to philosophize. Nietzsche considered pessimism like a "hammer" that dismantles traditional beliefs and values. For instance, in Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche wrote:

> We, who have different beliefs … Where have we to fix our hopes? In new philosophers—there is no other alternative: in minds strong and original enough to initiate opposite estimates of value, to transvalue and invert "eternal valuations."[225]

Pessimism hammers and destroys metaphysically conceived values. Pessimism is a form of passive nihilism that destroys traditional values, while also rejecting phenomenal valuing. Strong nihilism, however, is pessimism that destroys weak values, and active nihilism that constructs stronger ones. Strong nihilism is the healthy end of pessimism; passive nihilism is pessimism combined with weakness. According to Nietzsche, pessimism "in the hand of the strongest becomes… [an] instrument with which one can make oneself a new pair of wings."[226] Pessimism accompanied by strong nihilism enables creation of new forms of meaning. Nietzsche refers to pessimistic knowledge as the

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[225] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sec. 203.
[226] Dienstag, p. 181.

sensibility through which truly new values and meanings can be sought, but it is pessimism and active nihilism that is "precisely how we find the pathos that impels us to seek new values."[227]

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885), Nietzsche wrote extensively on the weak nihilism of the "last man" of modern Europe, and the struggles of the "higher man" to bring into existence the nihilistic strength of the Ubermensch, or Dionysin man.[228] Through the demon, Zarathustra, Nietzsche disparaged modern European humanity, the "masters of the present," as decadents pursuing the question: "How may man preserve himself best, longest, most agreeably?"[229] The "last man" is the modern European nihilist, who wishes to remain the last man, and initially appears as a Kantian optimist, but ends as a Schopenhauerian pessimist. The modern European nihilist attempts to write the final chapter on human becoming. As an optimist, "the most cherished beliefs of the last man are those of 'freedom,' 'progress,' 'justice,' and 'great events.'"[230] The modern optimist deifies the quasi-completeness of his system of ordering phenomena, treating human values as universal. Thus, the modern optimist is a nihilist that deifies human values. This nihilism is reactive against metaphysical meaninglessness, but weak in its reaction; it reacts to pessimistic meaninglessness with transcendental ideals abhorrent to and in denial of the human existential situation. Kant's transcendental idealism is an example of the "last man's" nihilism.

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[227] Dienstag, p. 182.
[228] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1997).
[229] Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, "the Higher Man," sec. 3. P. 277.
[230] Williston, "Complete Nihilism," p. 361.

The "higher man" is a pessimist; Schopenhauer is an example. The higher man rejects the optimism of the last man's totalizing valuations of human meaning.[231] The higher man goes through two stages: initially he negates and destroys traditional values, but then he struggles to affirm and build newer values. It may be argued, as Michael Gillespie does in *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, that it is a mistake to attribute destruction to Dionysian man. Gillespie adopted Giles Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's nihilism, where the activity of Dionysian man is a pure affirmation removed from the negating activity of the pessimistic higher man. Deleuze defined reactivity as "that relation of primary forces that is involved in conservation, adaptation, and utility. Activity on the other hand, refers to those forces that subjugate, dominate, appropriate, and possess."[232] For Deleuze, human consciousness is inherently reactive," and responds to the activity of external stimuli, including existing values.[233] The fall of the last man, for Deleuze, is his allowing of the active elements of values to become permeated by the reactive constitutions of the mind. For the last man, reactivity is asserted as activity. For instance, in Zarathustra, Nietzsche argued that after the pessimistic "higher man" wanders into the wilderness beyond traditional values, the demon approaches and affirms his journey. Then, the demon leaves him. The demon later returns to find the higher man praying before an "all-affirming ass."[234] That is, after the advance of rejecting optimism, the higher man grew weary in pessimism and struggles to simultaneously be a destroyer of existing value and a creator of newer ones. From Deleuze's perspective, this revealed the

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[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid. p. 365.
[233] Ibid. See also, Giles Deleuze, "Active and Reactive," in *The New Nietzsche,* ed. by Davis B. Allison (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) p. 81.
[234] Ibid. p. 362.

last man as defined by "the reactivity of his valuations;" or, he who allows human values to lose their active elements.[235]

"With the higher man the reactive will has become conscious of itself."[236] As a pessimist the higher man understands the last man's valuations as a need for spiritual comfort from pessimistic truth. Yet, the higher man cannot have the last man's comfort in traditional valuations because he rejects metaphysical idealism. At the same time, the higher man, becoming conscious of his own will, feels the human existential need to construct value, but "fears regressing back to reactivity."[237] "This is why he despises himself. Each higher man has in his own way fallen from grace with both God and Man."[238] At this moment, the higher man risks collapsing into the last man. Gillespie argued that the capacity of the higher man to revert back to reactivity marks the difference between the active nihilism of higher man and the purely active character of Dionysian man. The higher man, for Gillespie, is actually the highest instantiation of the last man: "The hope expressed in the initial distinction between the two types is abandoned as Nietzsche subjects his contemporaries to a blanket condemnation."[239] On this view Kant can be viewed as the last man, and Schopenhauer can be viewed as the highest last man, or the passive nihilist who grew weary.

On Byron Williston's reading of Nietzsche's nihilism, however, the Dionysian man is by definition a strong nihilist, and cannot be considered apart. The Dionysian man requires an "alliance with the force of reactivity … as a means to his own

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[235] Ibid. p. 365.
[236] Ibid. p. 361.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid. p. 362.

enhancement."[240] Deleuze, argued that "becoming-active is affirming and affirmative, just as becoming-reactive is negating and nihilistic."[241] Where Gillespie and Deleuze drew clear lines of demarcation between the activity of Dionysian man and the reactivity of the last and higher man, Williston argued, "Nietzsche thinks that the passive nihilist's very knowledge of the perspectival character of all truths must be denied at [the stage of Dionysian man] and this denial is a characteristic element of all becoming-reactive. Without this move to reactivity 'life itself would be impossible.'"[242] In other words, complete nihilism, on Williston's view of Nietzsche, is a feature of the human life process where pessimistic, or passive nihilistic destruction of traditional values and strong nihilistic productions of new values create a Dionysian disposition, which entails elements of reactivity. Nietzsche argued that Dionysian man ought to value with the seriousness of a child at play, but with an adult understanding of childhood play. The seriousness of a child at play represents pure activity, but adult understanding of that activity is molded by the reactivity of its disposition against seriousness. Nietzsche wrote:

> The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred "yes."[243]

An adult understanding of child's play means interpreting her or his human productions of meaning as innocent, without appeal to universal certainty, while retaining an element of reactive nihilism to the extent that it remains on guard against metaphysical valuations, i.e., resentment

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240 Ibid. p. 365.
241 Deleuze, "Active and Reactive," p. 99.
242 Williston, p. 366.
243 Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, "The Three Metamorphoses, Sec. 1, p. 22.

The value of human values cannot be justified in metaphysical terms without appealing to some form of resentment in the form of universal judgments. Therefore, Nietzsche argues, human existence is only justifiable in phenomenal terms, as an aesthetic achievement. Unlike Schopenhauer's conception of aestheticism, where he thought art could lift humans beyond the phenomenal, Nietzsche argued that "strong" art does precisely the opposite.[244] Strong art does not avoid phenomenal value; it instead superimposes value onto universal reality. Strong art accepts pessimism and metaphysical meaninglessness, but does so while valuing the aesthetically valuable arrangements of phenomenally ordered perspectives. Despite insignificance on a metaphysical level, strong art relies on its uniquely phenomenal constitution to forge human meaning in a meaningless universe. For Nietzsche, art is not a means to militate against human existence; it is an empowered reflection of that existence. Art aesthetically symbolizes the fragmentation of universal will that is phenomenal representation. For Schopenhauer, the fragmenting of universal will into phenomenal wills is the source of human suffering and is wholly unjustifiable. For Nietzsche, the individuation of phenomenal will simply requires an aesthetic justification rather than a metaphysical one.

Although human phenomenal life and its productions are doomed to decay and lack meaning in a metaphysical sense, the eternally repetitious opportunity to, at every instance, produce phenomenal value within metaphysical reality requires a certain style, or aesthetic. Nietzsche's nihilism is an attempt to develop an aesthetic for justifying the human condition. Nietzsche argued that human's should approach life as an artist approaches art.[245] The artist knows their productions lack universal significance, yet they

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[244] Dienstag, pp. 182-183.
[245] Ibid.

find meaning in their productions. Furthermore, upon completion, each artistic piece reminds the artist of the need to create newer art. The artist cannot, and should not, ever cease to produce art as long as he is alive. Likewise, for Nietzsche, phenomenal life requires constant production and becomes pathological when it attempts to "finish" the process of making life valuable. The weak nihilism of modern European philosophy, from this perspective, attempts to finish the project of valuing human life by constructing metaphysical bases for its value. Strong nihilism, on the other hand, is able to value without metaphysical meaning.

Human existence faces nihilism, because it is a condition of having to create meaning in a meaningless world, according to Nietzsche. The moment of phenomenal becoming is an eternally recurrent one. That is, each moment of phenomenal existence eternally recreates the opportunity to choose meaning. The eternal recurrence of the phenomenal moment of meaning production perpetually places human life in relation to some moment of universal reality. He wrote:

> If the universe may be conceived as a definite quantity of energy, as a definite number of centres of energy… it follows there from that the universe must go through a calculable number of combinations in the great game of chance which constitutes its existence. In infinity, at the same moment or other, every possible combination must once have been realized; not only this, but it must have been realized an infinite number of times. And inasmuch as between every one of these combinations and its next recurrence every other possible combination would necessarily have been undergone, and since every one of these combinations would determine the whole series in the same order, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the universe is thus shown to be a circular movement which has already repeated itself an infinite number of times, and which plays its game for all eternity.[246]

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[246] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* Sec. 1066, p. 386.

The eternal recurrence of the phenomenal moment constitutes the nihilistic condition of human freedom and choice. Because each instance of phenomenal experience is a relationship to some configuration of the universe, human life involves perpetual re-presentations of an infinitely recurring universal "reality." Pessimism is human life seen through the lens of the eternal recurrence of the phenomenal moment. However, only the strong nihilist does not perish under the metaphysical meaninglessness of the eternal recurrence. Pessimism, or passive nihilism, grows weak and is unable to value in light of knowledge of the eternal recurrence; but the active nihilist embraces the situation as potentially the "Greatest elevation of man's consciousness of strength."[247]

The truth of pessimistic knowledge is revealed through knowledge of the eternal recurrence of the phenomenal moment. The eternal instability of human freedom and choice reflects the flux of universal will. But, the strong nihilist does not cower in submission to the instability of existence; rather, the strong nihilist wills strongly by valuing in spite of metaphysical instability. That is, the strong nihilist phenomenally wills with meaninglessness already accounted for. Pessimism and some elements of reactive nihilism are requisite for strong nihilism. However, if pessimistic knowledge of the eternal recurrence is not accompanied by strong wills, Nietzsche explains, "it can be the most oppressive thought… provided it not be prevented, that is to say, provided all values be not transvalued."[248] Strong wills enable the strong nihilistic process of trans-valuing. Trans-valuation is necessary to transform the destruction of pessimism and passive nihilism into healthier modes of valuing. Strong nihilism transvalues traditional values by not only devaluing their metaphysically conceived bases, but by also creating values that

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[247] Ibid. Sec. 1060, p. 383.
[248] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* Sec.1059, p. 383.

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do not depend on metaphysical support. The trans-valuation of all values requires the

strength of strong nihilism to value without metaphysical meaning. Nietzsche wrote:

> The means of enduring [the eternal recurrence]: the transvaluation of all values. Pleasure to no longer be found in certainty, but in uncertainty; no longer ' cause and effect,' but continual creativeness; no longer the will to self preservation, but to power; no longer the modest expression 'It is all only subjective,' but 'it is all our work! Let us be proud of it.'[249]

Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal recurrence does not proscribe a determined

set of values, or what to be "proud" of; it only explains that which must be taken into

account if phenomenal life is to be valued healthily. Nietzsche's valuation of human

existence does not invoke the moralistic logic of goodness or badness, as did

Schopenhauer and Kant, but rather it invokes the languages of strength and weakness.

For example, where Kant championed the a priori goodness of the metaphysical category

of rationality in constructing pure reason as the basis of human values, Nietzsche

championed existential strength and existential freedom as the basis of human value.[250]

Nietzsche used the phrase, "Amor Fati," or love of fate, to describe the health and

freedom of strong nihilism.[251] Amor Fati indicates a phenomenal will that loves and

embraces the human existential condition of fated eternal recurrence. The strong nihilist

rejects the false comfort of metaphysical ideals and uses pessimistic knowledge as a

means to live without a need for absolutes; this is a feat that only the strongest of will,

Dionysian men, who love the eternal recurrence, could withstand.

For Nietzsche, the human condition is an eternal recurrence of the phenomenal

moment where the strong and noble advance the horizons of human phenomenal life by

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[249] Ibid.
[250] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* Sec.1041, p. 377-378.
[251] Ibid.

demonstrating amor fati through a strong will to actively become. Pessimism and nihilism are existential attitudes that, for Nietzsche, can justify human life despite its metaphysical meaninglessness. Existential strength within nihilistic circumstances begins with pessimistic rejection of metaphysically based values, and then a move to construct non-decadent values grounded in a love of possibility and uncertainty. Jacobi's fears were fully realized in Nietzsche's philosophy of strong nihilism. For example, Nietzsche might read the immorality and destructiveness of nihilistic populations as a dizzying representation of what the process of trans-valuation actually looks like. The point of strong nihilism, however, is not to simply endorse destruction and chaos, as Jacobi suggested; such a view would properly be called weak or passive nihilism. Rather, strong nihilism draws on the dynamism and freedom of human phenomenal will to construct a valuable human existence not premised upon decadent metaphysical ideals. Nietzsche's nihilism does not advocate for blind destruction or disdain for others; but it does caution against idealist values rooted in other-worldly sources, articulating phenomenal health and freedom in terms of strong nihilism.

Pessimism is a theoretical hammer revealing, "Europe must be brought face to face with the logic of facts, and confronted with the question whether its will for ruin is really earnest."[252] Nietzsche specifically viewed the nihilistic threat as a "consequence of a leveling-down to mediocrity" of European culture and thought revealed through modern morality and pessimism.[253] However, one could argue, European nihilism presents a more fundamental threat to humanity. European nihilism not only endorses a leveling-down of the dynamism of phenomenal will by constructing metaphysical

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[252] Ibid. Sec. 1054, p. 382.
[253] Ibid. Sec. 953, p. 353.

standards for valuing human life, it also denies the majority of the world's humans entry

into the human category, while simultaneously building a lasting socio-political, "human"

world around the value of such exclusions. That is, modern European nihilism deified the

value of whiteness, and denied the value of blackness, in justifying the value of human

life.

White Nihilism: Antiblack Racism as a Weak Nihilistic Denial of Human Life

If Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche are correct, human reality is lived and

experienced within a constant structuring and restructuring of complex matrices of

meaning and desire. Philosophical systems attempting to arrest the inevitable processes of

structuring and restructuring the meaning of human reality is precisely what Nietzsche

called weak nihilism. Antiblack racism, from this perspective, could be interpreted as a

form of weak nihilism because it attempts to arrest human development by destroying the

possibility of producing values beyond the imagined metaphysically normative value

whiteness. In modern European philosophy, human life is denoted by rationality in

cognition, and rationality in cognition is denoted by modern Western conceptions of

human beings as racially white. Nietzsche wrote:

> The 'real world,' in whatever form it has been conceived hitherto—was
> always the world of appearance over again… the world of appearance, i.e.
> a world regarded in the light of values; ordered, selected according to
> values—that is to say, in this case, according to the standpoint of utility in
> regard to the preservation and the increase of power of a certain species of
> animals.[254]

The availability of particular discursive resources within a cultural way of life tends to

delimit possibilities for creating meaning. Underneath every cultural way of life is an

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[254] Ibid. Sec. 566-567, pp. 217-218.

ordering of philosophical conditions enabling that reality. The reality of antiblack racism in American cultural life is transcendentally rooted in the weak philosophical ideals of European nihilism. Antiblack racism is philosophically structured according to modern European existential needs espoused in their philosophical traditions.

The rationalization of antiblack racism is a product of modern European philosophy. Modern European philosophy interpreted the geo-political practices of Western colonialism, slavery, genocide, and antiblack racism within a constellation of metaphysically conceived ideals. Modern European culture produced a philosophical idealism claiming human understanding could know with optimistic certainty the nature of the universe, including the ultimate value of human life. Concomitant with the atrocities of modern Western colonialism and antiblack racism, then, was a traditional modern European philosophical understanding concerning idealist perceptions of the "real world."

Modern antiblack racism depends on transcendentally idealist articulations of rationality in cognition as that which creates the basis for meaning and value in human life, alongside an idealist view that only white people possessed rationality, and therefore humanity. For instance, criticizing Descartes' attempt to develop a singular rational human perspective, Nietzsche wrote:

> It belongs to the nature of thinking that it adds the unconditioned to the conditioned, that it invents it—just as it invented and thought of the 'ego' to cover the multifariousness of the processes: it measures the world according to a host of self-devised measurements—according to its fundamental fictions 'the unconditioned,' 'end and means,' 'things,' substances,' and according to logical laws, figures, and forms… The origin of thought, like that of feelings, cannot be traced: but that is no proof of its primordiality or absoluteness![255]

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[255] Ibid. Sec. 574, p. 220.

Traditional modern Western philosophy adds the "unconditioned" weight of

metaphysical reality onto the "conditioned" existence of its phenomenal projections.

Antiblack racism in America, for instance, portends to be metaphysically sanctioned by

objective understandings of human reality. Nietzsche condemned the whole affair of

metaphysically conceiving human values. He wrote:

> To assert the existence as a whole of things concerning which we know
> nothing [universal reality], simply because there is an advantage in not
> being able to know anything of them, was a piece of artlessness on Kant's
> part, and the result of a recoil-stroke of certain needs—especially in the
> realm of morals and metaphysics… the idea of the 'true world' or of
> 'God' as absolutely spiritual, intellectual, and good is an emergency
> measure… [256]

For Nietzsche, the modern European world was an "adjusted world which we [they]

believe to be real."[257] Antiblack racism violently enforces the reality of European world-

views onto the world's non-white, and especially black people. Nietzsche criticized "the

real world" when he wrote, "We have created a conception in order to be able to live in a

world, in order to perceive just enough to enable us to endure life in that world."[258] The

modern Western world is a world constructed according to the existential and

philosophical needs of Europeans. According to Nietzsche, the opposite of the modern

European world-view is not "the real world," but the "amorphous and un-adjustable

world consisting of the chaos and sensations—that is to say, another kind of phenomenal

world, a world which to us is 'unknowable.'"[259] There is an inherent contradiction

performed in pointing out the unreality of the world by referring to the realness of

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[256] Ibid. Sec. 571-73, p. 219-220.
[257] Ibid. Sec. 569, p. 219.
[258] Ibid. Sec. 568, p. 218.
[259] Ibid. Sec. 569, p. 219.

unreality, which amounts to "the really real." Nevertheless, Nietzsche's primary point is that there are other, healthier ways of phenomenally representing reality beyond European nihilism.

European nihilism is a foundational element in antiblack racism. As Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism helps to explain, black people experience phenomenal and existential invisibility within antiblack racist worlds because they are theoretically considered against weak nihilistic conceptions of humanity, according to which black humanity belongs to "another kind of phenomenal world" that is "unknowable." Antiblack racism reflects a modern European existential need to deny, or make unknowable, black phenomenal existence in order to render the human (white) phenomenal perspective valuable. Nietzsche's philosophy implicitly exposes the weak nihilistic solipsism at the heart of antiblack racism in his critique of European nihilism, especially where he raises the possibility of alternative ways of valuing human existence. Nietzsche wrote:

> The question how 'things-in-themselves' are constituted, quite apart from our sense perceptivity and from the activity of our understanding, must be answered by a further question… The question is whether there are not a good many more ways of creating such a world of appearance—and whether this creating, rationalizing, adjusting, and falsifying be not the best-guaranteed reality itself: in short, whether that which 'fixes the meaning of things' is not the only reality…[260]

Modern Western reality situates whiteness is that which "fixes the meaning of things." That is, modern Western reality has proceeded according to the ideal that white people exclusively occupy the human phenomenal perspective.

Nihilism and antiblack racism thoroughly permeated much of modern Western philosophy and its discourses on human understanding. For instance, after Descartes

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[260] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* Sec. 569, p. 219.

introduced *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628), modern European philosophy

famously produced volumes of texts espousing knowledge of the universal dimensions of

humanity. In addition to his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), there were John

Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), George Berkeley's *A Treatise*

Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (1710), David Hume's *Enquiry*

Concerning Human Understanding (1748), and of course, Immanuel Kant's *On the*

Different Races of Man (1775) and *A Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), to list several.

Antiblack racism is intrinsically connected to many, if not most, modern European

philosophical ruminations about the relationship between phenomenal and metaphysical

reality. A brief philosophical-anthropological sketch of Enlightenment understandings of

the human category reveals that modern European philosophy and antiblack racism

cannot be theoretically detached from each other.

Antiblack racism is predicated upon European nihilism. Modern European

philosophies were produced by allegedly "value free subjects… observing, comparing,

ordering and measuring in order to arrive at evidence sufficient to make valid inferences,

confirm speculative hypotheses, deduce error-proof conclusions, and verify true

representations of reality."[261] The philosophical bases of Western life involves the

antiblack racist legacy of situating European existential dispositions as the philosophical

perspective from which to inquire about reality, or the perspective from which

phenomenal representations of the external world are validated. In other words, whiteness

is the philosophical capacity to order in a presumed value-free and neutral way.

Whiteness is humanity. Given Nietzsche's criticism of idealist conceptions of humanity,

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[261] West, *Prophesy!* p. 53.

antiblack racism can be read as inherently nihilistic. Criticizing idealist formulations of reality, Nietzsche wrote:

> 'Appearance' is an adjusted and simplified world, in which our practical instincts have worked: for us it is perfectly true… the world, apart from the fact that we have to live in it—the world, which we have not adjusted to our being, our logic, and our psychological prejudices—does not exist as a world 'in-itself;' it is essentially a world of relations…"[262]

The modern European nihilistic proclivity for distancing itself from the phenomenal roots of its value productions is an indication of existential exhaustion, suffering, and weakness. The weakness of phenomenal will establishing the antiblack racist world is evidenced through its willing that there be no other world of value beyond whiteness. Thus, the story of black life in the antiblack racist Western world could be told as one situated by the weakness of European philosophical attempts to construct universal truth and reality.

Modern European understandings of he human category traditionally rendered black humanity as either non-existent, or only comprehensible in relation to the metaphysical meaning of modern conceptions of (white) humanity. For instance, modern European thought first described black humanity in biological-anthropological terms of inferiority, i.e., Francois Bernier and Francois-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), before evolving into philosophical-anthropological condemnations, i.e., Immanuel Kant; eugenic assaults, i.e., Arthur De Gobineau and Francis Galton; and existential and phenomenological denials of black humanity, i.e., G.W.F. Hegel, to list a few key moments. Some modern European thinkers claimed (white) Europeans had an entirely different evolutionary

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[262] Nietzsche, *Will to Power,* Sec. 568, p. 218.

history from (black) Africans.[263] Others claimed that a purely rational basis for ordering and ranking the various anthropological data of "other" cultures was conceivable. Still, others argued that an explanation of the inferiority of non-white cultures could be articulated in existential and phenomenal terms as a result of black people lacking phenomenal human capacities.

Some early modern European thinkers claimed a distant anthropological relation between white and black people resulted in antithetical qualities inhering between the two.[264] For instance, in *Voyages de François Bernier* (1670), in an essay entitled, "A New Division of the Earth According to the Different Species or Races of Men Who Inhabit It," Bernier argued that geographically identifiable physical differences in human groups are anthropologically and aesthetically important.[265] In the process, Bernier asserted the normative status of "generally all Europe" in human anthropology. He praised, "a small part of [northern] Africa… [and] a good part of Asia," where, "although the Egyptians… and the Indians are very Black, or rather copper-colored, that color is only an accident in them, and is because they are constantly exposed to the sun."[266] The accidental nature of Egyptian blackness, for Bernier, meant they were not "a species apart." Bernier wrote:

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[263] Allegations of African ape ancestry were scholarly popular in the 1750's where modern European conceptions of humanity were taking shape. West, *Prophesy!* p. 56.

[264] See, Georges Louis Leclerc de Buffon, *Natural History of Man* (1788)*,* where it is argued that black skin is an epidermal result of hot climate. Buffon claimed Africans possessed only the "seeds" of every human virtue.

[265] Francois Bernier, ""A New Division of the Earth According to the Different Species or Races of Men Who Inhabit It," in *The Idea of Race, e*d. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2000), pp. 1-4. See also, Francois Bernier's, *Travels in the Mogul Empire* (1670). The text was a compilation of his travel recordings through Egypt, India, and Persia. He cited five, "species," of humans as relevant for proper geographical understanding of humanity.

[266] Bernier, p. 2.

> What induces me to make a different species of the Africans are… their hair, which is not properly hair, but a species of wool, which comes near the hair of some of our dogs.[267]

Modern Western anthropology was founded according to such beliefs concerning distinctions of inherent superiority and inferiority residing within racial difference. The biological and anthropological arguments of Bernier, Voltaire, J. G. von Herder, and J. F. Blumenbach, to name a few, helped establish the white-normative sensibilities of modern European thought concerning the human category, which included Galton's eugenic claim that the health of the human race depended upon conquering the "degenerative" races.[268]

Modern European anthropological models of humanity presumed the inferiority of non-white, and especially black races. Immanuel Kant furthered the modern European antiblack racist sentiment by supplying a philosophical correlate to biological-anthropological models of white superiority. Kant developed a philosophical-anthropological model of humanity. In addition to anthropology, Kant produced philosophy concerning the transcendental conditions of knowledge formation, wherein he concluded that only certain races of human beings possessed the full capacities of humanity. Kant understood his anthropology to be the empirical correlate of his philosophy.[269] For example, in his essay, "The Different Races of Mankind" (1775), Kant listed a detailed racial taxonomy suggesting the inferiority of non-whites as a natural, moral, and intellectual result of misuse and/or lowered intellectual capacities and will. Kant wrote:

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[267] Ibid.

[268] Francis Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims," in *The Idea of Race, e*d. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2000) pp. 79-83.

[269] See, Mathew R. Hachee, "Kant, Race, and Reason," on Hachee's Michigan State University website, https://www.msu.edu/~hacheema/kant2.htm.

When a people does not perfect itself in any way over the space of centuries, so it may be assumed that there exists a certain natural predisposition that the people cannot transcend.[270]

Kant argued that anthropological study suggests African peoples failed to transcend primitivism because of a lack of intellect and/or autonomy of the will. Such beings, Kant thought, included the black-bodied "south sea islanders," wherein "every man should let his talents rust and should be bent on devoting his life solely to idleness, indulgence, procreation, and, in a word, to enjoyment."[271] In another essay, "Perpetual Peace" (1795), Kant wrote:

[T]he negro countries, the spice islands, the Cape [of Good Hope] etc. were, on being discovered, looked upon as countries which belonged to nobody; for the native inhabitants were reckoned as nothing…. Oppression of the natives followed, famine, insurrection, perfidy and all the rest of the litany of evils which can afflict mankind…[272]

Kant literally depicted the black subjects of Western colonialism as non-entities, "nothing," or "nobody" for whom human rights of autonomy do not apply. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), in a section entitled, "On How to Discern Man's Inner Self from His Exterior," Kant argued that the global domination of black people is best for all humanity.[273] According to Kant, blacks were incapable of anything more than a "slave culture."[274] He proclaimed that the advancement of humanity is and ought to be centered in Europe. Black people have been traditionally viewed from such modern Western philosophical perspectives as lacking intellectual capacities for

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[270] Ibid. Sec. 3.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace,* trans. M. Campbell Smith (New York: Garland Publishing, 1972), pp. 139-142.
[273] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 183-238.
[274] Ibid.

human development, as invisible non-beings there only to be appropriated by human

beings.

Antiblack racism is fundamentally premised upon modern idealist philosophies

concerning the value of humanity in the metaphysical universe. Modern European

philosophy exhibits an attempt to universalize modern white normative

conceptualizations of the human being. To illustrate further, at the dawn of the nineteenth

century, Hegel's, "A Geographical Basis for a World History," from his *Lectures on the*

Philosophy of History (1837), cemented the metaphysical legacy of modern philosophical

dispositions of European nihilism and white-normativity, which I call "white nihilism."[275]

Hegel wrote:

> Africa proper… The characteristic part of the whole continent as such… the
> consciousness of the inhabitants has not yet reached an awareness of any
> substantial and objective existence. Under the heading of substantial objectivity,
> we must include God, the eternal, justice, nature, and all natural things. When the
> spirit [rational phenomenal capacities] enters into relations with substantial things
> such as these, it knows that it is dependent upon them; but it realizes at the same
> time that it is a value in itself in so far as it is capable of such relationships. But
> the Africans have not yet attained this recognition of the universal…what we call
> religion, the state, that which exists in and for itself and possesses absolute
> validity—all this is not yet present to them…The characteristic feature of the
> negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any
> substantial objectivity—for example, of God or the law—in which the will of man
> could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being. The
> African… has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an
> individual and his essential universality… has not progressed beyond his
> immediate existence… The Negro is an example of animal man in all his
> savagery and lawlessness, and if we wish to understand him at all, we must put
> aside all our European attitudes. We must not think of a spiritual God or of moral
> laws… For this very reason, we cannot properly feel ourselves into his nature, no
> more than into that of a dog, or of a Greek as he kneels before the statue of

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[275] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "A Geographical Basis for a World History," Appendix A, in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980} pp. 173-190. This text was a collection of lectures given by Hegel at the University of Berlin in 1821 and 1831. The collection was published as a text in 1837.

Zeus… The condition in which they live is incapable of any development of culture, and their present existence is the same as it has always been.[276]

Hegel's understanding of human phenomenal life fundamentally rejected the idea of black humanity. Hegel counted black people as having only attained "immediate existence," or a pure sentience that lacks intellectual capacity for subjective reflection beyond immediate sensation. Immediate existence could be contrasted with phenomenal existence, wherein the subjective capacity for reflection and transcendence separates human being from animal consciousness. Human being involves occupying an existential condition where consciousness experiences itself as a phenomenal being. For Hegel, black humanity was the opposite of human consciousness because it was marked by an inability to experience itself as a phenomenal being; black humanity, for Hegel, is "animal man."

Whereas Descartes and Kant relied purely on analytic approaches in their philosophies, Hegel emphasized imagination as fundamental to philosophy. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel creatively subjected modern European philosophy to cultural historicizing, while simultaneously developing a rationalistic metaphysical narrative for humanity with a particularly white-normative end.[277] Modern European philosophy, from Descartes trough Kant and Hegel, depended on transcendentalist notions of human phenomenal consciousness. Descartes articulated the transcendental dimensions of human consciousness in the form of the thinking ego, Kant developed it in the form of synthetic a priori capacities, and Hegel articulated it in terms of a metaphysical teleology of phenomenal spirit. Implicit within each of these

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[276] Ibid. pp. 174-175.
[277] Gillespie, pp. 195-196. See also, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind,* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

foundations of modern Western philosophy is an existential dependence upon an ontological notion of whiteness in justifying human life. Ontological notions of whiteness treat the value of white-normative conceptions of humanity as natural features of metaphysical reality. The White nihilism of modern European philosophy thus created a Western reality that delimits the "theoretical alternatives and strategic options regarding the idea of white supremacy."[278] In the words of Cornel West, the modern philosophical basis of Western reality "makes the implicit notion of white supremacy unavoidable if one wishes to have any hope for knowledge formation and understandings of reality."[279]

Weak nihilistic valuations of whiteness have functioned as an ontological feature of American realty. For example, the 18th century antislavery advocate, Benjamin Rush, could only conceive of rejecting the chattel enslavement of black people by arguing that they ought to be cured of the disease that causes their mistreatment: black skin.[280] It was simply a pre-given truth in Western cultural reality that black skin marked deviance from what was normative in human being. Even America's most famous anti-slavery abolitionist, President Abraham Lincoln, nihilistically affirmed the value whiteness as axiomatic in human life. Lincoln did so during his fourth debate with Democratic presidential nominee, Stephen A. Douglass, in 1858. Lincoln stated:

> There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality…there must be superior and inferior…I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.[281]

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[278] West, *Prophesy!* p. 59.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid. p. 61.
[281] See, Abraham Lincoln's speech at Charleston, Illinois, Sept. 18th, 1858, and Alton, Illinois on Oct. 15th, 1858, in *Civil Rights and African Americans*, ed. by Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 171-174.

What is crucial is the way Lincoln referred to his preference of the value of whiteness as that which any "man" would prefer.

In the landmark American Supreme Court case, *Dredd Scott V. Sandford* (1856), determining black inferiority as a legal precedent, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney further espoused American convictions of the axiomatic nature of black inferiority. Taney wrote:

> [Black people] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and all together unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. The opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race.[282]

Also, President Thomas Jefferson, a drafter of the American Constitution lauding the universal and inalienable rights of all human beings, argued that according to history, science, and philosophy, black people were an inferior race and ought to be enslaved, if not removed "beyond the point of mixture." Jefferson wrote:

> Advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.[283]

In other words, antiblack racism in America is a playing out of deeply rooted philosophical dispositions developed within modern European philosophy.

Nietzsche's analysis of modern European humanity revealed its philosophical bases as a weak nihilism rooted in fear. Concerning the psychology of modern European philosophers, Nietzsche wrote:

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[282] Roger B. Taney, "Dred Scott v. Sandford: Court Opinion," in *Civil Rights and African Americans*, ed. by Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 162.
[283] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), (London: Burlington House, 2002) Sect. 14, p. 270.

That which has been most feared, the cause of the greatest suffering… has been treated with the greatest amount of hostility by men, and eliminated from the "real" world. Thus the passions have been step by step struck out, God posited as the opposite of evil—that is to say, reality is conceived to be the negation of the passions and the emotions (i.e., nonentity)… Change and perishability were also feared; and by this fear an oppressed soul is revealed, full of distrust and painful experiences.[284]

Pessimistic truth, or a lack of metaphysical meaning for (white) humanity, is "that which has been most feared" and "the cause of the greatest suffering" in European modernity. From this perspective, black humanity is the antithesis of modern European nihilistic conceptions of (white) humanity, and is feared by whites because its existence denigrates the core of what keeps their suffering at bay. The existence of black humanity threatens what holds modern European existential life together, i.e., white nihilism. When Nietzsche argued that the world, apart from the fact of European "psychological prejudices," did not exist as an in-itself, but was "essentially a world of relations," this could be read as meaning a world of human phenomenal relations.[285] There is no meaning in the world that is not the product of human phenomenal relations. Nietzsche further argued, "Under certain circumstances [the world] has a different aspect from every different point at which it is seen."[286] There not only exists other ways of phenomenally relating to reality, but their exists multiple phenomenal points from which the world can be viewed; thus, no particular phenomenal perspective can be determined as real or unreal, because all are equally unreal. Yet, in the case of antiblack racism in the Western world, there remains a weak nihilistic fear on the part of its adherents that

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[284] Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, Sec. 576, p. 221.
[285] Ibid. Sec. 568, p. 218.
[286] Ibid.

devalues human existence unless it is buffered by metaphysical constellations of rationality as whiteness.

Antiblack racism's denial of black phenomenal existence is motivated by modern European philosophical attempts to deny the pessimistic truth of the human existential condition: human life is metaphysically meaningless, and we live in a world of others with whom meaning is forged. Dependence on white normative, weak nihilistic conceptions of the value of human life is a complete abnegation of the totality of human existence. Thus, white nihilism's philosophical denial of black humanity depicts the pessimistic flight from the human condition, from the pessimistic truth that lurking behind their optimistic valuation of themselves is an abysmal meaninglessness. Black phenomenal existence betrays the unilateral imposition of metaphysically decreed white normative values of modern Europe as philosophically weak. That is, black phenomenal life, by virtue of its mere existence, militates against the philosophical and existential bases of the modern Western world. European culture directs hostility towards that which jeopardizes the reality of the human world. Thus, when Nietzsche writes, "The other 'creatures' act upon us; our adjusted world of appearance is an arrangement and overpowering of its activities: a sort of defense measure," he implicitly belies the logic of antiblack racism as a deluded act of white retaliatory resentment in pursuit of self-preservation through metaphysical self-aggrandizement.[287] Any activity of "the creature" is devalued by the "adjusted" reality of European culture, and is therefore perceived as illegitimate. Any reality constructed against modern European constructions of the real world causes fear and is met with hostility. The white nihilism of antiblack racism, then, is an existential and philosophical disposition seeking to avoid the pessimistic condition

[287] Ibid. Sec. 569, p. 219.

of the eternal recurrence by relying on weak nihilistic metaphysical self-valuations made possible only by denying the existence of other phenomenal perspectives, i.e. non-white and black human beings.

Antiblack racism is at its core a modern philosophical and existential injunction made against black phenomenal life by European cultural quests to remove the "irrational," and "evil," causes of suffering in the (presumed white) human world. Those seen (as invisible) from a white nihilistic perspective as the antithesis of humanity are feared, loathed, and assaulted when they make their existence known. Modern Western philosophy and antiblack racism has traditionally understood black humanity as ontologically absent and existentially invisible precisely because of the threat it presents to the value structures of (white) human life. Existing from the space of black non-existence means living one's humanity in the face of demands against being human. To be black in the United States, a country born of such values and metaphysical worldviews, means having to defend the legitimacy of one's phenomenal existence against weak nihilistic claims denouncing it. In antiblack racism, black people are demanded to struggle against the legacy of white nihilism, which is grounded in modern European conceptions of universal truth.

Conclusion

Nihilism is the situation of struggling against universal meaninglessness, where the pessimistic truth is that there are no universal truths in human life. Nietzsche's analysis of European nihilism implicitly reveals the motivating belief structures underlying antiblack racism. White nihilism describes the modern European nihilistic construction of the

human category as white-normative. It is to white nihilism that nihilism in black America responds. Similar to Schopenhauer's weak nihilistic attempt to produce a final will that would put an end to human suffering, antiblack racism attempts to produce a final valuation of humanity that puts an end to further valuations.

Finally, although Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism can be used to reveal the implicit weak nihilism of antiblack racism, one should not think that Nietzsche himself was not an antiblack racist. Nietzsche was an unapologetic believer in white superiority. However, Nietzsche's belief in the superiority of whites differed from the traditional philosophical tropes of antiback racism; his acceptance of Western anthropology and history, not his acceptance of modern Western metaphysical ideals, fundamentally shaped Nietzsche's antiblack racism. He thought history had simply borne out the fact that some people (whites) were stronger, nobler, of greater will, and therefore most primed to produce Zarathustrian man. However, his theoretical commitment against modern idealism distinguishes his antiblack racism. In traditional form, antiblack racism attaches a metaphysical value to whiteness; for Nietzsche the supremacy of whites is purely empirical. For Nietzsche, strong wills do not need metaphysical support to backup their superiority.

Nietzsche's antiblack racism may actually be more nefarious than traditional antiblack racism. Imagine how much more difficult would it be to argue against the morality of black chattel slavery, for instance, if it were never argued to be moral in the first place. The fact that antiblack racism traditionally depends on structuring the category of the human subject in metaphysical terms shows that, in its traditional form, it is a weak nihilistic value system. Traditionally, the antiblack racist, like Schopenhauer,

displays an implicit moralistic desire to be "good." And, similar to Schopenhauer's quest to make human existence bearable by subduing phenomenal will through an implicitly resentful judgment against universal reality, antiblack racism and white nihilism attempts to make white existence bearable by subduing black phenomenal life through an implicitly resentful judgment against the human existential condition. As a result of white nihilistic attempts to order Western reality according to universal truths, antiblack racism functions to annihilate black phenomenal perspectives en route to aiding whites avoid pessimistic reminders of the metaphysical meaninglessness of their values.

Antiblack racism exhibits the basic form of Nietzsche's conception of weak nihilism. Blackness is traditionally represented in the modern Western human sciences as wild, chaotic, animal being, which the whiteness of rationality in phenomenal perspectives tame. Unless the human world is to "degenerate" in Gobineau's sense, or fall prey to evil and immorality in Jacobi's sense, or become unjustified in its phenomenological movements in Hegel's sense, the rational order of whiteness must be superimposed on the irrational chaos of blackness. White nihilism is the axiomatic constellation upon which the traditional meaning of the Western antiblack racist world has been built. Antiblack racism's entailment of traditional philosophical tropes of modern European philosophy, namely, transcendental idealism in conjunction with white-normative categorizations of the human subject, displays a weak nihilism, which I call white nihilism.

If, as this chapter has argued, the presumed value of whiteness and antiblack racism are premised upon weak nihilism, and if Nietzsche is right that there are multiple ways of responding to weak nihilism, some of which require richer and stronger, more

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active forms of nihilism, then both the diagnosis and prognosis of Cornel West's analysis of black nihilism are severely limited. A fuller analysis of black nihilism must not only demonstrate an understanding of white nihilism as the root of the imposed meaninglessness of black existence; it must also consider whether strong nihilism can be is a healthy response to the weakness of white nihilism and antiblack racism. West's analysis of nihilism in black America perhaps identifies one type of nihilistic response to the meaninglessness and invisibility conferred onto black life through antiblack racism; but, in general, his analysis of nihilism in black America levels the dynamism of black nihilism by only considering its weaker dimensions. This chapter has argued that antiblack racism is an implicitly weak nihilistic philosophical enterprise seeking to arrest the organic processes of human life according to modern European idealist conceptions of the role of whiteness, i.e., rational humanity, within the metaphysical universe. The succeeding chapter will use the thought of Frantz Fanon to further argue that strong nihilism is the healthiest response to the white nihilism of antiblack racism.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK NIHILISM

Antiblack racism depends on denying, or making invisible the phenomenal subjectivity of

black people. Sometimes, lived responses to black invisibility include the conclusion that

meaning in life is devoid of value, i.e., black pessimism and nihilism.

Cornel West famously wrote about nihilism in black America. He argued it was a

"disease of the soul," and prescribed Black American Christianity for a healthy black

existence.[288] Derrick Bell, in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), wrote about

pessimism in black America.[289] He argued that pessimism is an intelligent response to the

permanence of racism in American reality. It could be argued that Bell and West offer

weak nihilistic responses to antiblack racism, which I shall call "weak black nihilism."

Frantz Fanon, however, presents a strong nihilistic response to antiblack racism, which I

will in turn call "strong black nihilism." The black existential condition of living through

antiblack racism is a nihilistic situation in which one can respond weakly or strongly.

Fanon announced the strength of his response when he proclaimed:

> I do not come with timeless truths. My consciousness is not illuminated
> with ultimate radiances. Nevertheless, in complete composure, I think it
> would be good if certain things were said.[290]

Fanon's would be compelled to reject the timeless truth of Bell's pessimism and

the "ultimate radiances" of West's optimism. He provided a descriptive ontology of the

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[288] Cornel West, *Race Matters*, pp. 17-31. See, also, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*
[289] Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
[290] Frantz Fanon, trans. Charles Lam Markman, *Black Skin; White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 7.

black existential condition. His analysis helps identify antiblack racism as a nihilistic

circumstance where the value of black people is considered against the metaphysical

functioning of the value of whiteness, i.e., white nihilism. Fanon encouraged a trans-

valuation of the value of whiteness and blackness through a strong nihilistic response to

antiblack racism. He proposed nothing short of "the liberation of the man of color from

himself," for whom he said, "there are two camps: the white and the black."[291] After

offering a critique of West's optimism and Bell's pessimism as weak nihilistic responses

to antiblack racism, I will explain Fanon's strong nihilism, which adopts Jean-Paul

Sartre's view of existential freedom, as a form of black nihilism that is preferable to Bell

and West's..

A Critique of Cornel West's Optimism as Weak Nihilism

West argued that struggles against antiblack racism in America require prophetic,

metaphysically situated interpretations of reality. He recommended the black American

Christian tradition, which, he argued, makes sense of black invisibility and struggles

against antiblack racism by symbolizing the value of black life in terms of biblical

narratives, such as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.[292] The black American Christian

tradition symbolically links the biblical crucifixion of Jesus Christ with black sufferings.

For instance, West wrote:

> [Black people have] transformed a prevailing absurd situation into a
> persistent and present tragic one, a kind of "Good Friday" state of
> existence in which one is seemingly forever on the cross.[293]

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[291] Ibid. p. 8.
[292] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, pp. 109.
[293] Cornel West, "Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual: Martin Luther King, Jr.," in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 1999), p. 427.

He further wrote:

> Ultimately, triumph indeed depends on the almighty power of a transcendent God who proleptically acts in history, but who also withholds the final, promised negation and transformation of history until an unknown future. In the interim, imperfect human negations and transformations must persist.[294]

The black American Christian tradition attaches a metaphysical value to the meaning and suffering of black people; it includes an ultimate faith in the power of God's "almighty power" to negate and transform the reality of antiblack racism.[295] God is the author of human history, and his transcendent will is what promises victory in the struggle against antiblack racism.

West's response to antiblack nihilism is an optimistic valuation of black life symbolizing God's will as being on the side of the oppressed. On this view, a "subversive patience" sustains existential health through black struggle against antiblack racism.[296] Since God promises black liberation which has already "occurred but was not yet consummated, with evil conquered but not yet abolished," in the "interim," West said, socio-political struggle continues.[297]

Metaphysical conceptions of the value of black humanity dignify black American Christians with a sense of "sombodiness in a situation that denies one's humanity."[298] They are not "logical or reasonable," according to West, but rather, "such belief is requisite for one's sanity."[299] Black American Christianity is a "hope-laden articulation of

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[294] Ibid. p. 96.
[295] Ibid. pp. 97-98.
[296] West, *Reader*, pp. 435-439.
[297] West, *Reader*, p. 427.
[298] West, *Reader,* p. 436.
[299] Ibid.

the tragic quality of everyday life."[300] West argued that pessimistic understandings of reality meant "suicide for the downtrodden."[301] His primary concern was that without metaphysically situated values of the value of blackness, antiblack racism and black existential invisibility can elicit debilitating forms of pessimism and destructive forms of nihilism. He characterized black nihilism, following Jacobi, as a lack of religious faith promoting "worthwhile-ness of life and a perception of the objective character of the moral order," which, West deemed suicide.[302] However, pessimism and nihilism may be an indication of existential health, provided a distinction is made between strong and weak nihilism.

West argued that pessimism "discourages purposeful struggle, especially communal and collective struggle."[303] Serious pessimistic philosophy expresses "the ironic consciousness of the declining petit bourgeois," which produces "profound insights," but means "suicide for the downtrodden."[304] For instance, regarding the pessimism entailed in ancient Greek tragedies, he wrote:

> The purpose of suffering is rendered problematic and the knowledge resulting from suffering is suspect. The very notion of a moral order is called into question and displaced by a preoccupation with the consciousness occupying the suffering, the details of the context in which the suffering occurs and the ways in which suffering is evaded or tolerated. This viewpoint has little persuasive power for black Christianity in that its rejection of any end or aim of human existence discourages purposeful struggle … it is disenabling for degraded and oppressed peoples. The tragic sense of life in black Christian eschatology views suffering as a stepping-stone to liberation. Yet liberation does not eradicate the suffering in itself. Therefore suffering is understood only as a reality to resist, an actuality to oppose. It can neither be submitted to in

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[300] Ibid. p. 437.
[301] Ibid. p. 438.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid. p. 438.
[304] Ibid.

order to gain contemplative knowledge nor reified into an object of ironic attention. Rather, it is a concrete state of affairs that produces discernible hurt and pain, hence requiring action of some sort. Black Christian eschatology focuses on praxis against suffering, not reflection upon it …[305]

Pessimism can produce insight into human suffering, but black American Christianity does not seek to "gain contemplative knowledge" of suffering.[306] Rather, "ultimately, with the aid of divine intervention, suffering is overcome."[307]

Following Søren Kierkegaard, West argued that black nihilism is an inherent lack of Christian faith in despairing over the meaninglessness of one's life. However, unlike Kierkegaard, who argued that nihilism was necessary, West argued black nihilism had no redeeming qualities. Where Nietzsche, for example, argued that strong values could come from nihilism, provided they forfeit metaphysically conceived bases, West promotes metaphysical values:

[Black American Christianity] linked God's plan of salvation to black liberation—inseparable, though not identical—and bestowed upon black people a divine source for self-identify—for example, as children of God—that stood in stark contrast to the cultural perceptions and social roles imposed upon them by a racist American society.

Despite West's misgivings, a serious pessimistic critique of black Christianity may be conducive to healthy responses to antiblack racism. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism adopts a pessimistic disposition toward metaphysically conceived values. Sartre was a nihilist critical of metaphysical responses to nihilism. Nihilism not withstanding, Sartre argued for the value of commitment to existential freedom. For instance, Christina Howells argued, in "Sartre and the Language of Literature," that

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[305] Ibid.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Ibid.

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Sartre conceived of the commitment to existential thought and freedom as "dialectically interdependent; thought comes into being through language; language clarifies and defines thought."[308] Although Sartre is critical of the capacity of language and literature to also alienate human beings from existential freedom in the first volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the value of human existential freedom, for Sartre, entails an actional commitment to producing literature and language promoting the value of human freedom and responsibility.[309] Existential freedom also entails anguish and forlornness. Sartre's notion of "forlornness," like Kierkegaard's, "despair," is an organic part of human existential development.[310] "Despair," described a realization of the absence of metaphysical truth in human life. Sartre described despair as "anguish," adding that it was borne out of implicit knowledge of human responsibility for creating value, or what I call "phenomenal responsibility." Anguish involves the absurd task of creating meanings for which we are responsible, in a world that is ultimately meaningless. Human beings can flee the absurdity of the human existential situation by denying existential freedom and responsibility for valuing, which Sartre called, "bad faith."[311]

"Bad faith," faith is the ironic human phenomenal capacity to deny its existential freedom and responsibility; it is ironic because the denial responsibility affirms one's existential freedom, for which one is responsible. Bad faith is similar to the ironic will of Schopenhauer's resignation in that it requires a contradiction of the will. Bad faith is an

[308] Christina M. Howells, "Sartre and the Language of Literature," in *The Modern Language Review,* Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1979), pp. 572-579.
[309] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (New York: New Left Books, 1976).
[310] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957).
[311] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction to Existential Thought,* ed. Steven Luper (London: Mayfield Publishing, 2000), pp. 291-302.

attempt to fill the vacuous void of human meaning with values one can deny

responsibility for producing. Sartre wrote:

> To posit as an ideal the being of things, is this not to assert by the same
> stroke that this being does not belong to human reality? … [In] order that
> the concept of bad faith can put us under an illusion at least for an instant,
> in order that the candor of "pure hearts" can have validity for human
> reality as an ideal … [consciousness] posits not merely an ideal of
> knowing but an ideal of being …[312]

In other words, conceptualizing reality as an ideal is a form of bad faith that treats human

values as inherent features of the metaphysical universe. The transcendental nature of

black Christian belief systems, for example, considers God's will to be the basis of the

value of black life; it evidences bad faith by locating the value of human values outside

the scope of human affairs, which Nietzsche considered weak nihilism.

Viewed through the pessimism of the existentialist perspective, human life is

despair and anguish because it is a perpetual condition of facing responsibility for human

meaning. Anguish is not the result of a lack of religious faith; it is a confrontation

between human phenomenal awareness and its own sense of existential freedom precisely

because freedom is the only grounds by which to value human existence. For instance, in

The Ethics of Ambiguity (1947), Simone De Beauvoir argued that human freedom cannot

be realized in the abstract, but "requires the realization of concrete ends, or particular

projects."[313] She also argued that "[H]uman freedom is the ultimate , the unique end to

which man should destine himself," calling it the "universal, absolute end."[314] For both

Sartre and De Beauvoir, Bad faith is an existential attempt to escape our "original

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[312] Ibid. pp. 294-295.
[313] Simone De Beauvoir, *the Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).
[314] Ibid.

relation" to values, which requires facing the anguish of existential freedom and responsibility, by constructing metaphysically based ideals.[315] Sartre wrote:

> There is … anguish when I consider myself in original relation to my values. Values in actuality are demands which lay claims to a foundation. But this foundation can in no way be being. For every value which would base its ideal nature on its being would thereby cease even to be a value and would realize the heteronomy of my will. Value derives its being from its exigency and not its exigency from its being. It does not deliver itself to a contemplative intuition which would apprehend it as being value and thereby would remove it from its right over my freedom. On the contrary, it can be revealed only to an active freedom which makes it exist as a value by the sole fact of recognizing it as such. It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself being without foundation. It is anguished in addition because values, due to the fact that they are essentially revealed to a freedom, can not disclose themselves without being at the same time "put into question," for the possibility of overturning the scale of values appears complimentarily as my possibility. It is anguish before values which is the recognition of the ideality of values.[316]

Values are based on human freedom and choice, not universal being; human beings are the creators of values in a valueless world. Sartre further wrote:

> [I]f man has once become aware that in his forlornness he imposes value, he can no longer want but one thing, and that is freedom as the basis as his values … The ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for freedom as such… I may pass judgment on those who seek to hide from themselves the complete arbitrariness and the complete freedom of their existence…. Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position. It isn't trying to plunge man [further] into despair at all. But, if one calls every attitude of unbelief despair, like the Christians, then the word is not being used in its original sense… not that we believe God exists, but we think that the problem of His existence is not the issue… it is plain dishonesty for Christians to

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[315] Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction*, pp. 294-295.
[316] Ibid. p. 288.

make no distinction between their own despair and ours and then to call us despairing.[317]

Sartre draws a clear distinction between Christian despair and existential despair. Existential despair, anguish, and forlornness are descriptions of the human existential condition, not moral evaluations of it. Like Nietzsche, Sartre sought respond healthily to the absurdity of the human existential condition. For instance, Sartre exclaimed, "I'm quite vexed that that's the way it is; but if I've discarded God the father, there has to be someone to invent values."[318] West depicted black nihilism as a pessimism is "disenabling, " but from the perspective of existential freedom and responsibility, "existentialism is optimistic, a doctrine of action …"[319] where West argued pessimism lead to resignation, Sartre, similar to Nietzsche, argued that pessimistic existentialism could lead to action.

The human existential condition is a complex framework wherein consciousness lives a tenuous existence between its phenomenal freedoms and its existential parameters, or as Sartre termed it, "transcendence" and "facticity."[320] Sartre wrote:

> That unity do we find in these various aspects of bad faith? It is a certain art of forming contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negation of that idea. The basic concept which is thus engendered utilizes the double property of the human being, who is at once facticity and transcendence. These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity.[321]

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[317] Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, pp. 45-51.
[318] Ibid. p. 49.
[319] Ibid. p. 51.
[320] Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction,* pp. 294-295.
[321] Ibid. p. 294.

Bad faith attempts to deny the human condition by conflating its constitutive elements. The factical dimensions of human life, defined as "the factual condition of man, beyond the psychological," are falsely identified with its transcendent dimension, which consists of the phenomenal capacity to project beyond immediate experiences.

It is bad faith to regard oneself as pure transcendence, since human beings are a relationship between our transcendent capacities and our factical limitations. However, this is precisely what antiblack racism does; it collapses the categories of transcendence, phenomenal being, and humanity into the idea of whiteness such that white people function as transcendence, and black people function as facticity.[322] Put differently, bad faith whiteness assumes "a plane where no reproach can touch me since what I really am is my transcendence."[323] However, Sartre wrote:

> [The] ambiguity necessary for bad faith comes from the fact that I affirm here that I am my transcendence in the mode of being of a thing. … [Believing that] our transcendence changed into facticity [sic.] is the source of an infinity of excuses for our failures of weakness.[324]

This passage could be read as a direct description of the weakness of white nihilism manifested in antiblack racism. Furthermore, Sartre wrote:

> [M]an is constantly outside of himself; in projecting himself, in losing himself outside of himself, he makes for [mankind's] existing; and on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist; man, being this state of passing beyond, is at the heart, at the center of this passing beyond. There is no universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity.[325]

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[322] Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999).
[323] Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction,* p. 294.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 50.

Sartre argued that human life is a perpetual choosing of modes of being, for which we are responsible, and for which existential health requires embracing the absurdity of our simultaneous being and nothingness.

Healthily living through the anguish and forlornness of the human condition, in a world with other human beings, entails embracing not only the duality of individual consciousness, but also the inherent duality of inter-subjectivity in creating human reality. Bad faith, is not only a lie about the human existential condition that one personally believes, it is also a deceiving of others about the fundamental inter-subjective nature of reality. Sartre wrote:

> [Although] this metastable concept of "transcendence-facticity" is one of the most basic instruments of bad faith, it is not the only one of its kind. … [There] is anther kind of duplicity derived from human reality which we will express roughly by saying that its being-for-itself implies complimentarily a being-for-others. Upon anyone of my conducts it is always possible to converge two looks, mine and that of the Other. The conduct will not present exactly the same structure in each case. … [As] each look perceives it, there is between these two aspects of my being no difference between appearance and being—as if I were to myself the truth of myself and as if the Other possessed only a deformed image of me. The equal dignity of being possessed by my being-for-others and by my being-for-myself, permits a perpetually disintegrating synthesis and a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself to the for-others and from the for-others to the for-itself.[326]

Just as bad faith is a denial of the relationship between facticity and transcendence within the subjectivity of individual human consciousness, on the inter-subjective level, in a world of others, bad faith implies a denial of the relationship between the meaning one attaches to their own being and that which the "Other" places on it. Further regarding the relationship between existential freedom and the existence of Others, Sartre wrote:

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[326] Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction,* p. 294.

> A man who belongs to a Communist or revolutionary union wants concrete goals; these goals imply an abstract desire for freedom; but his freedom is wanted in something concrete. [Existentialists] want freedom for freedom's sake and in every particular circumstance. And in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on ours. Of course, freedom as the definition of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is involvement…[327]

Human freedom, for Sartre, is bound up with the existence of others, and functions on at least two levels. On one level, "man is freedom," meaning human beings are phenomenally responsible for the values they create. On another level, since there is "involvement" in terms of living in a world with others, existential freedom and responsibility in value production connotes the Other's freedom to do the same. Existential freedom necessarily entails "involvement" with others. That is, healthy existential being inherently acknowledges the interdependence of existential freedom and responsibility of self and other in constructing human reality.

If Sartre is correct, man is an existential freedom that creates phenomenal meaning for which he is responsible. As a result, the human world is one of interconnectivity between phenomenal beings projecting meaning. Sartre identified those who believe, or demonstrate, that human beings do not have this sort of existential freedom and responsibility, or that the human world is not dependant on such interconnectivity, as "cowards."[328] Such peoples, and societies, commit to bad faith evaluations of human life by conflating phenomenal projections with universal reality. Sartre also labeled them "stinkers," who deceive regarding the value and necessity of their values, when in fact all human values are premised upon the "contingency of man's

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[327] Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 46.
[328] Ibid.

appearance on earth."[329] From this perspective, European (white) nihilism and antiblack racism clearly "stink." However, West's response to black nihilism, on this view, as a metaphysical appeal to the value of black life, also has a stench.

West's response to nihilism in black America prioritized the metaphysical over the phenomenal when articulating the value of black life. White nihilism also assumes that the value of white people is a metaphysical truth. West responds to the idea of universal whiteness, with the idea of a universal blackness. While acknowledging the fallaciousness of whiteness as a metaphysical standard for valuing human life, West paradoxically responds to white nihilism by also endorsing a metaphysical system for valuing black humanity. That is, West responds to the weak nihilism of antiblack racism with the weak nihilism of black American Christianity.

A Critique of Derrick Bell's Pessimism as Weak Nihilism

Derrick Bell emphasized the practical wisdom of acknowledging the permanence of racism. He ironically suggested treating antiblack racist values as metaphysical truths in order to avoid discouragement in defying them. Pessimistic acceptance of antiblack racism, according to Bell, "avoided discouragement and defeat because at the point that [one is] determined to resist her oppression, she was triumphant."[330] Bell's pessimism is an ironic victory similar to the victory of Schopenhauer's resignation. He argued, "the fact of slavery refuses to fade, along with the deeply embedded personal attitudes and public policy assumptions that supported it for so long."[331] He offered statistical data and demographics suggesting America remained uncommitted to addressing antiblack racism

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[329] Ibid.
[330] Bell, *Faces*, p. vii.
[331] Ibid. p. 3

in the years following the signing of American civil rights legislation.[332] Between 1970

and 1990, black Americans saw their socio-economic situation steadily deteriorate.

Unemployment rates remained more than double that of white Americans, black per-

capita income remained less than two-thirds of whites, and black people were three times

more likely to live below the poverty line according to the American Census Bureau.[333]

The statistics and demographics illustrate the persistence of antiblack racist oppression

despite modern black civil rights policies. Bell argued, "The general use of so-called

neutral standards to continue exclusionary practices reduces the effectiveness of Civil

Rights law."[334]

Other scholars in addition to Bell have pointed out America's commitment to

racism after black civil rights legislation. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw, in "Race,

Reform and Retrenchment," argued that contemporary American political discourse

employs a deceptive ambiguity in framing the constitutional meaning of "equality for

all." She argued that restrictive uses of "equality" treat it as "a process, downplaying the

significance of actual outcomes. The primary objective… according to this vision is to

prevent future wrong doing rather than to redress present manifestations of past

injustice."[335] From this perspective, "equality" is achieved when equal access to socio-

political rights and privileges is fully granted to all people. However, if past injustices are

not redressed, argued Crenshaw, "access" to equality can never be "equalized," precisely

because failure to redress past grievances perpetuates the accumulated results of their

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[332] Ibid.

[333] Ibid. p. 5.

[334] Ibid. p. 6.

[335] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-Discrimination Law," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Pellar, Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 105.

existence into future states of affairs. Crenshaw specifically cited the anti-discrimination

laws of the 1980's presidential administration of Ronald Reagan. Many whites continue

to maintain that affirmative action policies, and other "special" programs, are not in

congruence with the meaning of "equality" under the American Constitution. For

instance, neo-conservative scholar Thomas Sowell wrote:

> "The battle for civil rights was fought and won—at great cost—many years ago," and "the right to vote is a civil right. The right to win is not. Equal treatment does not mean equal results."[336]

Crenshaw argued for an expansive understanding of American constitutional

equality focusing on "equality as a result." Crenshaw wrote:

> [Inclusive equality]… interprets the objective of anti-discrimination law as the eradication of subjective conditions of subordination, and it attempts to enlist the institutional power of the courts to further the national goal of eradicating the effects of racial oppression."[337]

An inclusive understanding of equality understands equalization as a result, and not as a

process. Crenshaw's argument supports Bell's claims concerning the permanence of

racism America. The conclusive diagnoses of both Bell and Crenshaw is that late

twentieth century Civil Rights policies have led, ironically, to a continuation of racism in

the name of modern colorblindness, or what can be called, "colorblind racism."

Because of the colorblindness of contemporary antiblack racism in America,

dominant socio-political discourse and attitudes continues to deny, or treat as invisible,

the deep absurdities of American life. Today, antiblack racists camouflage themselves by

advocating for a colorblindness that inherently destroys the terms of black existence and

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[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid.

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struggle. For example, in 2013, the United States Supreme Court struck down key

portions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which was necessary to reinforce the black right

to vote granted by the fifteenth amendment, almost a century earlier, in 1870. Chief

Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. claimed:

> Our country has changed. While any discrimination in voting is too much, congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions. … today … towns are governed by African-American mayors. Problems remain in these states and others, but there is no denying that, due to the voting rights act, our nation has made great strides.[338]

If Bell is correct, Roberts' claim that the country has "changed" is misleading,

and there has been no progress, only an evolution of racism in terms of what is practically

and politically expedient. Bell wrote:

> Today, because bias is masked in unofficial practices and "neutral standards, we must wrestle with the question whether race or some individual failing has cost us the job, denied us the promotion, or prompted our being rejected…. When whites perceive that it will be profitable or at least cost-free to serve, hire, admit, or otherwise deal with blacks on a non-discriminatory basis, they do so. When they fear—accurately or not—that there may be a loss, inconvenience, or upset to themselves or other whites, discriminatory conduct usually follows. Selections and rejections reflect preference as much as prejudice. A preference for whites makes it harder to prove the discriminating outlawed by civil rights laws.[339]

The "neutral standards" of contemporary antiblack racism obscures its presence and

camouflages its operation. According to Bell. Public and private discursive shifts to post-

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[338] Adam Liptack, "Justices Void Oversight Of States, Issue At Heart Of Voting Rights Act," *The New York Times*, June 26th, 2013, p. A1.
[339] Bell, *Faces*, p. 6-7.

racialist language have undermined the language necessary for black struggles against antiblack racism. Bell concluded:

> Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racist patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard fact to accept that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. … African Americans must confront and conquer the otherwise deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status. Only in this way can we prevent ourselves from being dragged down by society's racial hostility. Beyond survival lies the potential to perceive more clearly both a reason and the means for further struggle. [340]

The goal of black pessimism, for Bell, is to find meaning in continued struggle against the indestructible permanence of antiblack racism. Racism's permanence in America ironically signaled a repeated opportunity for triumph through struggle.

Bell concocts several creative public policy scenarios demonstrating creatively pessimistic policy approaches to the permanency of racism in America. Each scenario optimizes black struggles for human dignity while acknowledging the permanence of racism. The "Racial Preference Licensing Act," for instance, attempts to balance reparations for past injustices against blacks against the antiblack racist preference to interact only with whites.[341] Social establishments would need a Racial Preference license, which is expensive to acquire, to practice their antiblack racist preference. Proceeds from the License would support a fund where, ultimately, antiblack racist dollars are used to create better living conditions for black Americans, i.e., no-interest mortgage loans and college scholarships. Also, licensed establishments and their employees would pay an additional income tax. The point of Bell's scenario is to

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[340] Ibid. p. 12.
[341] Ibid. pp. 47-64.

demonstrate the kind of radical thinking necessary to make black life meaningful in spite of pessimistic knowledge of racism's permanence. Bell argued that pessimism must investigate "every racial policy, including those that seem most hostile to blacks, and determine whether there is unintended potential African Americans can exploit."[342]

Bell's pessimism encourages creative ways of exploiting the permanence of antiblack racism to make black life meaningful. However, it must be asked whether Bell's pessimism involves nihilistically viewing antiblack racist values as metaphysical necessities. If Bell is correct, it is a matter of social, political, and legal history that dominant American society has never been committed to opposing antiblack racism. American socio-political institutions have a perfect historical record in failing to seriously criticize the nihilistic status of its white normative ideals. Bell's philosophy demonstrates deep-rooted American commitments to the ideals of whiteness. However, his pessimism also suggests living in relation to antiblack racism as if it were a metaphysical reality.

In existential Pessimism, one faces overpowering obstacles impeding one's ability to construct meaningful and significant values for human life. It is not that one cannot value human life in pessimism, but rather that one faces the project of valuing against an immutable anti-valuing force. Be it Schopenhauer's metaphysical cosmos or the socio-political constellations of racism, the instability of the human valuing project is constantly revealed through pessimism. Thus, pessimism is linked to the experience of having the project of valuing exposed as useless and ineffective in providing existential sustenance. Bell's response to antiblack racism is pessimistic; it involves a determination that certain values, for instance, valuing a complete devaluation of antiblack racist values,

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[342] Ibid. p. 60.

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are useless against the immutability of antiblack racist values, which Bell claimed, leads to "discouragement and defeat." But, antiblack racism depends on a weak nihilistic structuring of white-normative values as metaphysically true; thus, to respond to antiblack racism by treating it as a metaphysical value reinforces its weak nihilism.

Bell's pessimism is opposed to West's optimistic rendering of black struggles against antiblack racism. He did not assert the universal inevitability of black liberation, but rather, the inevitability of black oppression. He demonstrated a form of resignation similar to Schopenhauer's by deferring to an immutable anti-valuing force. Schopenhauer argued that human values ought to adapt to the immutability of the universe's usurping power of them; Bell's pessimism suggests the same response to antiblack racism and white-normative values. To be clear, Bell does not suggest the complete resignation of black will, as Schopenhauer suggested for phenomenal will; but Bell does limit black phenomenal will to valuing a form of limited imagination in order to struggle against antiblack racism. Devaluing existential freedom in deference to that which usurps the value of phenomenal will is resentment.[343] Nietzsche might have read Bell's pessimism as demonstrating resentment against antiblack racism. Bell's pessimism involves a moralistic judgment against antiblack racism because it involves valuing that which one cannot defeat as "bad," making impotence "good," in order to hide from responsibility for weakness, which Nietzsche also called, "bad conscience." According to Nietzsche, moral judgments necessarily demonstrate weakness. For instance, Nietzsche wrote:

> [B]ad conscience is nothing other than the instinct of freedom forced to become latent, driven underground, and forced to vent its energy upon itself.

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[343] Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals,* Sec. III-VI, p. 161-166.

The bad conscience of moral judgments is a sign of weakness; it reflects incapacity to pursue the instinct of phenomenal freedom. On Bell's picture, black phenomenal freedom is necessarily given a pre-determined human reality against which to understand its existential being, despite his claim that valuing black life entails perpetual struggle against that reality. Bell's pessimism resentfully valorizes the value of struggle in defeat. He suggests that black life can be made valuable by primordially accepting the permanence of antiblack racism. In an ironic and unintended way, however, Bell continues the tradition of relating to white-normative European values as universal truths.

The primary problem with Bell's pessimism is that its counsel carries with it commitments to metaphysical treatments of white-normative values. Bell's thought exposed inherent absurdities within contemporary American socio-political discourse on race and racism, specifically addressing nihilism and not optimism as a sign of intelligent response. However, Bell's pessimism remains unacceptable for humans already under the fallacious existential weight of metaphysical renderings of truth and reality. Antiblack racism already demands that black people experience whiteness as if it were metaphysically immutable in the way that one cannot overpower the sun and can only seek the limited triumph of shade.

There is weak (white) nihilism inherent in antiblack racism, and there are weak nihilistic ways of responding to it, which could be called, "weak black nihilism." Perhaps all forms of weak black nihilism, i.e., metaphysically conceived ideals in the struggle against antiblack racism, must be rejected if future generations of black people are to develop healthy notions of existential freedom. West's optimism and Bell's pessimism

are examples of weak black nihilism; one must look for strong black nihilistic responses to antiblack racism. Frantz Fanon's nihilism is a prime candidate.

Frantz Fanon's Nihilism: A Strong Nihilistic Response to Antiblack Racism

Black nihilism is connected to white nihilism, but crucially distinct. European nihilism is a form of weakness and exhaustion in response to the human existential condition being devoid of pre-given values and meaning. Black nihilism uniquely engages the metaphysical proposition of universal nothingness through the additive existential experience of black invisibility. Black existential invisibility is the phenomenon of experiencing one's being through a world that existentially coalesces around the presumption of one's non-existence. For instance, Fanon wrote: "A feeling of inferiority? No, A feeling of nonexistence."[344] The black existential situation involves an existential invisibility where black people have to value against decadent, weak nihilistic value structures, which render black values meaningless. Black nihilistic devaluation of traditional white normative values create a need for the production of new values; but, more importantly, it creates an opportunity to trans-value the value of human values. Strong black nihilism not only rejects white nihilistic values, it trans-values human values by rejecting all metaphysically conceived values.

The meaninglessness of human phenomenal life in relation to the meaninglessness of the metaphysical universe is replaced in black existential life by the immutable meaninglessness, or invisibility, of black existence in relation to the metaphysical meaning of whiteness. Black nihilism is a response to antiblack racism's nihilistic

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[344] Ibid. p. 139.

enforcement of whiteness as a universal ideal. Strong nihilistic struggle against antiblack racism requires devaluing the metaphysically based ideal of whiteness. The Promethean task of trans-valuing the value of humanity from the existential space of black invisibility is a completely nihilistic one, and "the weak perish."[345]

Existential Freedom and Blackness

If antiblack racism is existentially oppressive, then it follows liberation consists of existential freedom. Existential freedom for black people in America requires transcending "the being or ontological limitation of human reality in an antiblack world."[346] Existentialism is a preferred methodology for studying such processes of transcendence, because, as a discipline, it focuses on revealing indubitable truths about human experience. Sartre, for example, articulated the existential parameters of human consciousness in terms of freedom and an inability to lie to oneself about certain existential experiences. He provided a descriptive ontology of human consciousness as an experience of freedom and responsibility. Fanon's contribution deepened Sartre's existentialism by analyzing the additive existential absurdity of the lived situation of black consciousness within an antiblack world.

Fanon employed an existential understanding freedom in the lived human situation. According to this approach, the fact of human consciousness is that its existence precedes essence. Human essence is indeterminable, or non-existent, precisely because consciousness exists prior to the experience of determining meaning. For instance, Sartre wrote:

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[345] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power,* sec. 12, p. 12.
[346] Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, p. 1.

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If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be… Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.[347]

The essence of human being, so to speak, is to lack a determined phenomenal essence outside of freedom and nothingness. Thus, "essence," in an existential sense, differs from the Aristotelian use of the term; there is nothing a priori that we may know about human existence aside from the fact of its phenomenal freedom. However, the "fact" of existential freedom in human life exists as a for-it-self, which renders it a different phenomena from apprehensions of that which exists in-it-self.[348] Unlike Paley's clock, for example, which entailed an essence preceding existence, the human being is a peculiar form of being whose existence precedes essence. The responsibility one has for giving life meaning, and the fact of this responsibility for all human beings, is the objective, or universal human condition.

According to Sartre, "It is impossible to find in every man some universal essence which would be human nature, yet there does exist a universal human condition… the a priori limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe."[349] Existentialist perspectives regard the human condition as neither subjective nor objective, but a sophisticated and complex interplay between the two. Sartre further wrote:

Historical situations vary… what does not vary is the necessity for [man] to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there. The limits are neither subjective nor objective, or, rather, they have an objective and subjective side. Objective because they are to be found everywhere; subjective because they are

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[347] See Sartre, "Existentialism," p. 15.
[348] Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, pg. 24.
[349] Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 38.

lived and are nothing if man does not live them, that is, freely determine his existence with reference to them. And though the configurations may differ, at least none of them are completely strange to me, because they all appear as attempts either to pass beyond these limits or recede from them or deny them or adapt to them. Consequently, every configuration, however individual it may be, has a universal value.[350]

The human existential situation of facing phenomenal responsibility is universal, but individual phenomenal responses may either attempt to "pass beyond" its limits, or "recede from them or adapt to them." Whatever phenomenal way of being in the world one chooses, the universal fact of phenomenal freedom and responsibility of choice is what unifies all human experience.

The human condition is an eternal confrontation with choice and responsibility. The phenomenal self in existential ontology is "nothing," which ironically finds its being through the activity of perpetual becoming through choice. Phenomenal consciousness, on this view, is a freedom living the situation of choice in relation to future modes of being. Consciousness understood as nothingness, or freedom in relation to the possibility of becoming, carries with it the potential for perceiving one's being through a variety of ways, including bad faith and weak nihilism. The act of interpreting one's being in a metaphysical way, or defining oneself in rigid universal terms, elides the human existential situation of "continued choice." For example, Lewis Gordon described human existential freedom and phenomenal responsibility as "facing possibility," and never being able to "settle down." Gordon wrote:

> As a freedom, I seem to have nowhere to settle down. Wherever I land is always posed as an object to me and is therefore not identical with what I am… like a figure attempting to stay afloat on the Arctic Ocean by

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[350] Ibid. pp. 38-39.

hopping from ice cap to ice cap—always facing the possibility of sinking and never facing the condition of standing still.[351]

Human consciousness involves the phenomenal capacity of freedom and nothingness facing the possibility of becoming; it is a form of being that exists for-itself in relation to its possibilities. Choice is demanded at each instance of existential being, and it is the situation of perpetual freedom and continued choice that causes the anguish of human life. Descriptive existential ontology describes human existence as constantly facing the nothingness of its being, requiring the constant activity of producing meaning, where each choice instantaneously brings with it the perpetuity of subsequent choices and further responsibility.

On this view, animals and objects do not suffer the anguish of phenomenal responsibility, since neither one determines their own meaning, and thus do not face responsibility for valuing. The attempt to produce human meaning without the anguish of phenomenal responsibility is bad faith and weak nihilism. Bad faith is an attempt to exist as a phenomenal being whose essence is treated as a fixed object, rather than a freedom. However, from the existentialist perspective, human phenomenal existence is contextualized by an inability to be identical with its projections; thus, the freedom inherent to human phenomenal life has limitations, or existential parameters.

Existential philosophy is primarily about a confrontation between existential limitations and phenomenal freedom. How one chooses to give meaning to life is, at the phenomenal level, entirely one's own responsibility. However, in anguish, human beings realize "we are the ones who must make choices that constitute our selves."[352] The problem of the human condition is that the meaning of its existence is necessarily

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[351] Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, p. 9.
[352] Ibid. p. 13.

indeterminable. The stability of each phenomenal projection is undermined by the necessity of continued choice. Each moment of phenomenal choice entails a future choice to be made. Human consciousness experiences itself at each instance as freedom facing responsibility for how it chooses to be. Choosing to not have choices, that is, choosing to choose without the anguish of responsibility, is a delusion that can only be achieved through denying the human existential condition, which Sartre called, bad faith.

Bad faith is an attempt to avoid responsibility for phenomenal choice; it is a denial of what Sartre called the "original choice" of consciousness.[353] In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre argued that anguish is the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself.[354] Anguish is the human existential situation of phenomenal will facing its own freedom. Bad faith is the attempt to flee from human existential responsibility; it is the paradoxical decision to escape the anguish of choice by choosing to deny responsibility for one's phenomenal choice. For example, Sartre wrote:

> If I am anguish in order to flee it, that presupposes that I can de-center myself in relation to what I am, that I can be anguish in the form of "not being it," that I can dispose of a nihilating power at the heart of anguish itself. This nihilating power nihilates anguish in so far as I flee it and nihilates itself in so far as I am anguish in order to flee it. This attitude is what we call bad faith.[355]

That is, bad faith is an attempt to "nihilate" the negating dimensions of human existence through an attempt to live "beyond" the human existential circumstance; it is the attempt to be a for-itself that is simultaneously an in-itself, or God.[356] Bad faith desires to deny the human condition by substituting a particular form of being for the phenomena of

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[353] Sartre, *Existentialism*, p. 71.
[354] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).
[355] Ibid. p. 38.
[356] Sartre, *Existentialism*, pp. 60-67.

being for-itself. Sartre's conception of bad faith is clearly reflected in antiblack racism. White nihilism and antiblack racism involve valuing values that deny the human condition, or bad faith. Nihilistic renderings of humanity according to white-normative ideals enable the construction of antiblack racism and black existential invisibility, wherein black people are forced to nihilistically respond to the metaphysical meaning of (white) humanity.

Existential Invisibility and the Fact of Blackness

The term, "racism," as commonly understood, means what critical race theorists typically call "racial essentialism," the assertion of there being essential traits, essences, or ways of being necessarily inhering in races.[357] Racial essentialism is the imagining of what a race of people really are. Racial essences employ Aristotle's conception of essence, where certain properties are deemed inherent to defining the meaning of a particular object, in this case, the "raced" person.[358] From this perspective, "antiblack racism," would merely suggest a qualifying of the particular object of reference for racial essentialism. However, according to an existential approach to race and racism, the prefix, "antiblack," is not a specification of a type of racism. Rather, "antiblack racism" is an existentially descriptive term labeling the phenomena of racism itself.[359] In particular, the bad faith and, I argue, weak nihilism of antiblack racist denials of black existence is what "antiblack racism" connotes. "Black," here assumes an existential meaning denoting

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[357] See, K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 74-105, for an example of this kind of critical race theory.
[358] Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pg. 15. See, also, Aristotle, *The Basic works of Aristotle: Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, ed. with intro by Richard Mckeon (New York: Random House, 1941), Z, 1029b12-1032a10.
[359] Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, pp. 1-6.

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a lived situation of invisibility in relation to a normative conception of humanity, i.e., whiteness. Thus, terms such as, "black existential life," resist charges of essentialism criticized by critical race theorists, because whether or not one exists as black is not, in an existential sense, strictly a matter of personal identity formation.

There are subjective dimensions of personal identity formation involved in living blackness; however, there are also objective existential dimensions of blackness in spite of which one lives. Fanon illuminates the philosophical uniqueness of phenomenal perspectives developed from the space of black existential invisibility, where the critical roles of one's subjective capacities develop in relation to the objective "lived-experience of the black."[360] From the existentialist perspective, blackness is at first the existential space of non-existence, or invisibility, within which antiblack racist societies situate black phenomenal subjectivities. The objectivity of existential blackness situates subjectivity of each unique black experience. Existential blackness is thus at first not a choice but how one chooses to live blackness; it is an existential situation black people in America live and in relation to which they make choices. Sartre described living in a society where one's existential humanity is challenged. Sartre wrote:

> My consciousness … constitutes itself in its own flesh as the nihilation of a possibility which another human reality projects as its possibility. For that reason it must arise in the world as a No; it is as a No that the slave first apprehends the master, or that the prisoner who is trying to escape sees the guard who is watching him. There are even men [sic.] whose social reality is uniquely that of a No, who will live and die, having forever been only a No upon earth. Others, so as to make the No a part of their very subjectivity, establish their human personality as a perpetual negation. This is the meaning and function of what Scheller calls "the man of resentment"—in reality, the No.

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[360] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, pp. 109-140.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois famously described the "peculiar sensation" of living as a black person in an antiblack racist American society.[361] Du Bois wrote:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[362]

Both philosophers essentially described an inability to function as the source of legitimacy for the value of one's own existence, i.e., phenomenal freedom. However, black "double consciousness," implies a deeper denial of phenomenal presence.

Du Bois could be read as describing black invisibility when writing about the that "peculiar" feeling where the meaning of one's existence is uncertain because it is being determined through the eyes of others. As Sartre argued, defining one's existence solely through the Other is bad faith. But, ironically, antiblack racism situates black existence for the other by demanding that it not exist at all. It is through not existing that black humanity functions as a "No" in relation to the positive thesis of white humanity. Rather than becoming a "man of resentment," or a weak nihilist who treats antiblack racist values as immutable, or requiring God to triumph, Fanon attempts to live blackness as a, yes. Fanon wrote:

> Man is a yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths he has worked out for himself one after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him.[363]

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[361] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Markham: New American Library, 1969).
[362] Ibid. p. 45.
[363] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p. 8.

He also wrote:

> Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation. If it is true that consciousness is a process of transcendence, we have to see too that this transcendence is haunted by the problems of love and understanding.[364]

Nietzsche's nihilism and Sartre's existentialism are apparent in Fanon's thought. If man is not conceived in bad faith, as merely recapture, facticity, or negation, transcendence, he is a "process of transcendence," defined only as a phenomenal freedom to resist definition. As a result, man is a nihilistic situation, where he is constantly uprooted from the stability of each phenomenal moment by the eternal recurrence of phenomenal moments. Thus, man is fated to watch the dissolution of the truths he has worked out for himself one after another. Man is a nihilist, who, to live healthily, must love what he is; man is one who values the freedom and responsibility of forging meaning out of meaninglessness. Loving what one is means not denying what one is, an incomplete freedom. Being what one is, on this view, is to be a nothingness of freedom and responsibility that is forever removed from each phenomenal moment of projecting what one is. It means giving up trying to resolve the antinomy between phenomena and noumena, which is fundamentally counter to traditionally modern European philosophical dispositions. It means giving up on human values established according to metaphysical ideals.

Antiblack racism entails a direct injunction against the existence of black humanity. Human existence precedes essence in the human world, but essence precedes existence in the antiblack world. Here, human reality is a white construction, not unlike Paley's clock. The intuition behind Paley's analogy is that God must be the author of

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[364] Ibid.

reality; the intuition behind antiblack racism is that whiteness is the author of human reality.[365] In antiblack racist systems, through self-aggrandizing, weak nihilistic, bad faith conceptions of themselves, whites desire to be God or at least godlike in relation to black people. White nihilism and antiblack racism introduce metaphysical ideals partitioning human existential spaces along racially somatic and semiotic lines indicating the presence or absence of full humanity. A complete rejection of antiblack racism requires rejecting weak nihilistic values and developing strong ones. Nihilists have been regarded as scourges of civilization going as far back as Jacobi's criticism of Fichte, so the strong nihilist must be willing to be viewed as "wrong" in light of traditionally conceived values. This is why, as Nietzsche warned, the weak tend to perish. Strong nihilism requires confrontation with traditional values normatively held as universally sanctioned; it requires confrontation with people who have the universe on their side.

A strong nihilistic response to antiblack racism entirely rejects its philosophical and existential bases; it must therefore reject metaphysically conceived values traditionally justifying human life. As a result, healthily responses to antiblack racism may also include rejecting traditional black American traditions of resistance, i.e., black American Christianity. Strong black nihilism is a necessarily pessimistic disposition towards white nihilistic values and America's commitment to alleviating black suffering, but it is not Bell's form of pessimism, which treats white nihilistic values as necessary features of reality. Strong black nihilism does not rely on metaphysical language to struggle against or defeat antiblack racism. On my view, strong nihilism is a healthy response that requires the activity of devaluing antiblack racism while trans-valuing

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[365] Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, pp. 140-159.

humanity, or "liberating the man of color" from metaphysical renderings of the meaning of race.[366] Strong black nihilism insists on "a new humanism."[367]

Strong Black Nihilism as Existential Freedom

Fanon's strong black nihilism is explicitly revealed through his criticism of Hegel's master-slave dialectic.[368] Hegel argued that human phenomenal life is the ability to posit universal reality through considerations of one's own being. He wrote:

> [Consciousness] enters into relations with substantial things… it knows that it is dependent upon them; but it realizes at the same time that it is a value in itself in so far as it is capable of such relationships.[369]

Human consciousness, for Hegel, can be established in terms of the individual subjectivity of human phenomenal existence in relation to metaphysical ideals; however, human reality, for Fanon, was comprised of interdependently constituted phenomenal perspectives creating and recreating human cultural worlds.[370] "Natural reality," i.e., reflective thought and consciousness outside of engagement with others, becomes "human reality," when realizing that "the other has to perform the same operation," According to Fanon.[371]

According to Hegel, a dialectic between self and other necessarily constitutes human reality, even when it is represented through the situation of master and slave. Hegel conceded that human reality entails reciprocal recognition of phenomenal perspectives between' he plainly stated that "action from one side only would be

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[366] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p. 3
[367] Ibid. p. 7.
[368] Ibid. pp. 216-222.
[369] George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "A Geographical Basis for a World History," Appendix A, in *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 176-177.
[370] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p. 217.
[371] Ibid.

useless," and both must "recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other."[372]

However, in modern European antiblack racism, black slaves and their progeny were meant to occupy a space of existential invisibility forever precluding reciprocal human recognition. Since weak nihilism underwrites antiblack racist valuations of (white) human life, to demonstrate their fallaciousness by forcing recognition of black phenomenal strength is to become necessarily viewed as nefarious to the (white) human order. But, if one accepts that black people are indeed human beings, rejections of white nihilism and antiblack racism are appeals to the universal fact of human existential freedom and phenomenal responsibility.

Unlike the slave in Hegel's famous dialectic, the black slave must, entirely of his own will, "make himself recognized."[373] Strong black nihilism necessarily involves conflict between black will and white meaning, in the same way that human existence requires tension between phenomenal will and metaphysical meaning, because insisting on recognition of one's phenomenal existence means going against the white metaphysical world. On the other hand, white people in an antiblack racist society do not need, nor desire, recognition from black phenomenal perspectives. As Fanon put it, "what [the master] wants from the slave is not recognition but work."[374]

Blackness in America is born of object-hood and struggle to affirm its phenomenal existence, meaning, and value in a world whose meaning and value is dependent upon denying black existence. When facing antiblack racism, black subjectivities are forced to be as non-beings living, as Lewis Gordon writes, "in

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[372] Ibid.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Ibid. p. 220, footnote 8.

conscious realization of denied insides."[375] This is why, according to Fanon, in antiblack

racist master-slave conflicts, the black slave's phenomenal existence can only be

violently inserted into human existential relationships through a sudden suspension of the

white nihilistic value of white humanity. The violent suspension of white humanity is not

a bad faith denial of the phenomenal presence of white people, but a suspension of the

white nihilistic attitude of mastery commanding black existential invisibility. In order for

black life to emerge as a yes, in an antiblack world, black people must commit strong

nihilistic acts devaluing white nihilistic values. Fanon argued for a sudden, strong

nihilistic replacing of one form of humanity for another. He wrote:

> The end of race prejudice begins with a sudden incomprehension. The occupant's spasmed and rigid culture, now liberated, opens at last to the culture of people who have really become brothers. The two cultures can affront each other, enrich each other... [U]niversality resides in this decision to recognize and accept the reciprocal relativism of different cultures, once the colonial status is irreversibly excluded.[376]

Healthy black struggles against antiblack racism seek to establish non-decadent forms of

human valuing according to the human existential condition. Only under conditions of

existential inter-subjective reciprocal recognition around the universalistic dimensions of

human existence can existentially free human worlds be constructed.

The freedom of black American emancipation from chattel slavery did not

produce existential freedom for black people precisely because it did not entail a conflict

of forced black recognition. "There is not an open conflict between white and black. One

day the White master, without conflict, recognized the negro slave."[377] Such recognition

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[375] Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana*: *Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 48.

[376] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 44.

[377] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p. 217.

continues to be the framework for black humanity in antiblack America; it is the recognition a master gives to a slave. "But the former slave wants to make himself recognized."[378] Fanon wrote:

> I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity, insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions.[379]

Black existential freedom can only be accomplished through confrontation and forced recognitions. Black people in America, upon emancipation, did not have their humanity recognized; they did not become equal with their former masters. When phenomenal value itself is fashioned as being white, and the recognition associated with human phenomenal existence is treated as bestowed from whites onto blacks, the freedom according to black people will entail a white nihilistic understanding of humanity, whereby blacks are allowed to become as nihilistically situated to weak conceptions of existential freedom and humanity as whites.

Antiblack racism destroys the fundamental existential conditions of human life by situating black human phenomenal perspectives outside the self-other dialectic, essentially locking them into a socio-political reality where they function as bodies without original human consciousness to insist upon and fight for. What does the requirement of fighting for one's humanity mean? How does one become human in a world that is already avowedly human? One cannot healthily go from chattel slave to liberated subject without such meta-theoretical questioning of the conditions of humanity and freedom in antiblack racist societies. If Fanon is correct, what this means is that black people in America are like the "slave who is allowed to assume the attitude of the master.

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[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid. p. 218.

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The white man is a master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table."[380] The freedom

of black Americans from chattel slavery "reached the negroes from without. The black

man was acted upon… he went from one way of life to another, but not from one life to

another."[381] Despite emancipation from slavery, black people in America remained black

in relation to white nihilistic understandings of humanity. The result has been that few

black Americans have truly gotten to know liberty, and even fewer know existential

freedom.

Liberty, not existential freedom from antiblack racism, can be negotiated.

Existential freedom from antiblack racism requires confrontation, anguish, decision, and

responsibility. In other words, black existential freedom requires strong nihilistic struggle

against traditional white values. If Fanon's analysis is correct, the experience of human

freedom, the feeling of infinite sublimity in the transcendence of phenomenal spirit, for

black people in America, remains largely a tragic existential tight rope between one's felt

phenomenal freedom and the fact of blackness.

Fanon's philosophical and existential response to antiblack racist values

encourages upheaval. He described the zone of nonbeing as an utterly declivity, but

maintained that "an authentic upheaval can be born."[382] Black upheaval is a rejection of

antiblack racism in all its forms. For instance, even a white woman remarked of how

handsome "the negro" was, Fanon retorted, "Kiss the handsome negro's ass,

Madame!"[383] Healthy and strong human phenomenal wills can and do emerge through

the fact of blackness. Strength is necessary to insist on the value of humanity while

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[380] Ibid.
[381] Ibid. p. 220.
[382] Ibid. p. 8.
[383] Ibid. p. 114.

rejecting weak nihilistic articulations of its value. Fanon could have weakly responded to that by saying, "thank you." But, strength is required to insist on humanity outside of white valuations. Black humanity comes into the antiblack racist world "imbued with a will" to find a meaning in things, but instead finds that it is "an object in the midst of other objects."[384] Black phenomenal existence goes from being an object among other objects, through emancipation, to being a self that is "put together again by another self."[385] In antiblack racist societies, Fanon argued, black people arrive "too late;" the human world already exists and is "anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, made the most of."[386]

Phenomenal imagination and creativity is needed to non-decadently value black life and struggle; but appeals to optimistic renderings of human value and the metaphysical meaning of black struggle need to be forfeited. In, Towards the African Revolution (1964), in an essay entitled, "Racism and Culture," Fanon argued that "In order to achieve this liberation, the inferiorized man brings all his resources into play, all his acquisitions, the old and the new, his own and those of the occupant."[387] Yet, he warned against a "mummification of individual thinking" that tends to produce decadent values.[388] Referencing the "destruction of [black] cultural values, of ways of life" implicit within antiblack racism, Fanon wrote:

> [T]he lines of force, having crumbled, no longer give direction. In their stead a new system of values is imposed, not proposed but affirmed, by the heavy weight of cannons and sabers.[389]

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[384] Ibid. p. 109.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid. p. 121.
[387] Fanon, *African Revolution*, p. 43.
[388] Ibid. p. 34.
[389] Ibid. p. 33-34.

In other words, black humanity is herded towards white nihilistic conceptions of human life. Thus, optimistic responses to antiblack racism, appealing to a traditional "sense of humanity, to love, to respect for the supreme values," according to Fanon, commits the mistake of "forgetting racism as a consequence" that "obeys a flawless logic," and not necessarily a lack of love.[390] Whites do not have a pathological disposition against loving and respecting other whites; it is when it comes to loving and respecting those who are not white that "the white man remains intractable."[391]

The attitude of racism is not "a constant of the human spirit;" but according to Fanon, it is "a disposition fitting into a well-defined system."[392] Thus, the philosophical and existential dispositions involved in antiblack racism require understanding the systematic sources of its values. Black phenomenal life emerges in relation to white nihilistic values historically making white life valuable, which are falsely projected as providing universal meaning for the entire human world. By collapsing black phenomenal perspectives into an object of non-existence, antiblack racism accomplishes "enslavement, in the strictest sense," enabling white people to live in a weak nihilistic reality where they function as Gods, or masters of the universe.[393] Antiblack racism demands that black phenomenal senses of freedom and being for-it-self live as a thing-in-itself, attempting to destroy all black phenomenal systems of reference for human meaning outside of whiteness. As a result, according to Fanon, the entire "social

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[390] Ibid. p. 40.
[391] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p. 120.
[392] Fanon, *African Revolution*, p. 41.
[393] Ibid. p. 33.

panorama" of black existential life is "destructured," and "values are flaunted, crushed, emptied."[394]

According to Fanon, black people in an antiblack world discover black dignity as if "having discovered a spontaneous truth," where "the inferiorized rediscovers a style that had once been devalorized."[395] One could read the black American Christian response to nihilism in black America from this perspective. Black Christianity fits Fanon's description of "traditionalism," which is the hallmark of weak nihilism.[396] Black traditionalist views, according to Fanon, having rediscovered black culture as a spontaneous truth, "goes into ecstasies over each rediscovery… formerly inferiorized, [they are] now in a state of grace."[397] However, at this point, Fanon wrote:

> The culture of the enslaved people is sclerosed, dying. No life any longer circulates in it. Or more precisely, the only existing life is dissimulated. The population that normally assumes here and there a few fragments of life, which continues to attach dynamic meanings to institutions, … in a colonial system these are the traditionalists.[398]

While nodding at the ways black traditionalists strive to preserve "a few fragments of life," Fanon, as a philosopher, is forced to criticize the underdevelopment of thought, or "mummification" of phenomenal freedom that is entailed by traditionalist approaches to black struggle.

Fanon might read black American Christianity as "[A] passion-charged mechanism making it possible to escape the sting of paradox."[399] That is, it may be an

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[394] Ibid.
[395] Ibid. p. 41.
[396] Ibid. p. 42.
[397] Ibid. p. 41.
[398] Ibid. p. 41-42.
[399] Ibid. p. 42.

appeal to illogic in order to escape the burden of not only black suffering, but also human freedom. He wrote:

> There is a hiatus, a discrepancy between intellectual development, technical appropriation, highly differentiated modes of thinking and logic, on the one hand, and a 'simple, pure' emotional basis on the other …[400]

According to Fanon, "rediscovering tradition… as a symbol of purity … leaves the impression that the mediation takes vengeance by substantializing itself."[401] In other words, appealing to metaphysical traditions may provides, perhaps, an emotional catharsis, but such responses are not active in the sense of "elaborate methods" against antiblack racism. He wrote:

> Falling back on archaic positions having no relation to technical development is paradoxical. The institutions thus valorized no longer correspond to the elaborate methods of action already mastered.[402]

That is, in a nihilistic situation, looking back to weak nihilistic traditional values is precisely the way to further weak nihilism. Such reactions respond to devalued values, which have already decayed. Fanon further wrote:

> The culture put into capsules, which has vegetated since the foreign domination, is revalorized. It is not reconceived, grasped anew, dynamized from within. It is shouted. And this head long, unstructured, verbal revalorization conceals paradoxical attitudes.[403]

The term, "weak black nihilism," can be used to denote the "paradoxical attitudes" of black life insisting on weak nihilistic ways of struggling against antiblack racism. The term, "strong black nihilism," can be used to denote strong nihilistic ways of

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[400] Ibid.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.
[403] Ibid. p. 42.

struggling against antiblack racism by devaluing and trans-valuing metaphysically based modes of valuing humanity. As a white nihilistic value structure, antiblack racism conditions black existential invisibility, which requires strong nihilistic responses to be healthily faced. Derrick Bell and Cornel West demonstrated traditional examples of weak black nihilism in America, and Frantz Fanon's black existentialism articulates strong black nihilism.

Cornel West and Derrick Bell represent traditional responses to antiblack racism, from Fanon's perspective, which do not liberate humanity from the decadent ideals racism, but potentially further entrenches in weak nihilistic attitudes towards the meaning of humanity. Put differently, Bell and West's philosophy advocate for forms of bad faith, which Sartre, De Beauvoir, and Fanon's existentialist attitudes vehemently reject. Fanon If strong nihilist whose existential methodology evokes raw encounters with the lived dimensions of antiblack racism, while simultaneously trying to destroy decadent values and build healthy ones. His descriptive ontological unveiling of phenomenal attitudes allows for something like "existential truth" to emerge through the bad faith of antiblack racism, where commitments to freedom and humanity are made actional as strong nihilistic universal human values. Fanon is an existentialist who cultivates a demand for intellectual integrity in conformity with what is undeniably the case about the human existential condition. West, on the other hand, is a Christian pragmatist who seeks the solace and comfort of bad faith ideals in order to make black life meaningful by disregarding the long-term philosophical implications of such a move. The lack of intellectual integrity and philosophical sustainability of West's response to antiblack racism is neglected since, his program insists that only God's will can eradicate black

oppression in human life. Bell's response to antiblack racism is weak for similar reasons as West's. Bell's program devalues the value of human freedom by suggesting black people abandon faith in the possibility of accomplished freedom in De Beauvoir's sense of the term. Both Bell and West's philosophical approaches to antiblack racism, i.e., Christian optimism and political pessimism, could benefit from the counsel of Fanon's strong nihilism, which suggests a rejection of the metaphysical bases traditional response to antiblack racism depend on for valuing the struggles of black people.

Conclusion

The fundamental question of existential phenomenology is: in what ways does consciousness experience being? For black existential phenomenology, the answer is: black consciousness is made to experience it's being through the white nihilistic ideals of European humanity. If Sartre and De Beauvoir are correct, parameters of meaning for human consciousness are socially established through the dynamism of reciprocal, interactive, subjective-objective, self-other, human relations. However, if Fanon is correct, it is precisely those human beings whose subjectivity is not only unreciprocated, but also denied and forced into a space of non-existence, which constitutes the absurd inhumanity of antiblack racism. Healthy responses to antiblack nihilism means not only rejecting the material dimensions of antiblack racism, but also its philosophical and existential conditions. New forms of valuing humanity are required to move beyond the nihilistic decadence of the antiblack racist world. As Fanon wrote in the opening pages of Black Skin; White Masks, his is the way "toward a new humanism …"[404] And, as Fanon reflected in the closing sentences, the goal of a new humanism is to adopt an existentially

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[404] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks, p.* 7.

open disposition towards the human existential condition and the existence of Others. Fanon stated, "At the conclusion of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness."[405]

Existential analyses of Black struggles against antiblack racism and existential invisibility make visible that which the contemporary Western human world attempts not to see. Articulations of antiblack racism and black invisibility emerge as blemishes, counter-claims menacing against the alleged metaphysical justness of the (white) human world. Black nihilism involves facing a situation where there is no way to insist on full recognition of one's "original relations to value," without appearing violent and pathological of the normative human order. If black existential life involves struggling for meaning from the space of non-meaning, then struggles of back humanity against antiblack racism necessarily involve fighting a nihilistic battle. White nihilism and black nihilism are the two camps in the battle for human existential freedom. White nihilism destroys the meaning and significance of black life in the human world. Strong black nihilism endorses the value of all human phenomenal perspectives that do not "stink." I would like to end this chapter with a quote from Fanon. Fanon wrote:

> I said in my introduction that man is a yes. I will never stop reiterating that. Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity. But man is also a no. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom. Man's behavior is not only reactional. And there is always resentment in reaction. Nietzsche had already pointed that out in The Will to Power. To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act.[406]

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[405] Ibid. p. 42.
[406] Ibid. p. 222.

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CHAPTER 5
CONCLUDING REMARKS: NIHILISM, ANTIBLACK RACISM, AND BLACK YOUTH

Nihilism and antiblack racism destroys the category of black youth. Antiblack racism fundamentally entails weak nihilistic systems of value attempting to delimit the axiological parameters of the value of humanity according to metaphysically functioning ideals of the value of whiteness as phenomenal experience. The dominant traditional response of back Americans to nihilism and antiblack racism has been a "[black American Christian] leap of faith in God or its description of what it is to be a person, what one should hope for and how one ought to act … all these descriptions bear the stamp of [Black American Christian] interpreters, the social and personal problems they faced, and the particular Christian-informed solutions they offered."[407] Cornel West conceded that the Black American Christian view reflected "personal" interpretations of black existence and what it means to struggle against antiblack racism, yet this position paradoxically maintains a "Christian-informed" philosophical disposition, which means committing to a singular religious, or metaphysical, basis for valuing humanity. Christian-informed responses to antiblack racism, therefore, entail an instantiation of what Nietzsche would call, "weak nihilism," which is also precisely what antiblack racism's conditioning of black existential invisibility entails.

West admitted that he did not fully understand nihilism in black youth, or "why the cultural structures that once sustained black life in America are no longer able to fend off the nihilistic threat."[408] Nevertheless, he discouraged nihilism in black youth by

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[407] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, pp. 96-97.
[408] Cornel West, *Race Matters*, p. 24.

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describing its results solely in terms of moral debauchery, destructiveness, and an unrestricting of human will ending in annihilation of self and others. He also claimed, "It must be recognized that the nihilistic threat contributes to criminal behavior."[409] West understood black nihilistic youth as necessarily valueless peoples, whose valueless-ness is a function of their rejection of the source of values; he described them as criminally minded individuals without moral qualms, driven by capitalistic values towards willing destruction; it is the noxious cocktail of capitalistic market-moralities, antiblack racism, existential invisibility, and not being grounded in metaphysical values that, according to West and the black American Church tradition, creates nihilistic black youth and "the possible triumph of the nihilistic threat in black America."[410]

Contrary to West, I have been here arguing that black nihilism can be an honest and open engagement with the inherent interdependences of self and others constituting the value of human values, including (to the chagrin of some) metaphysically functioning values. That is, black nihilism can be a healthy and necessary form of struggle against antiblack racism. West is right that obsessions with capitalistic drives for pleasure and materialism are indicative of pessimism. Schopenhauer wrote extensively on the futility of human desire, especially in the form of pleasure.[411] However, West's generally maligning portrayal of the valueless-ness of black nihilistic youth, as being "like alcohol and drug addiction … a disease of the soul," must be rejected. All forms of nihilism are not like addictions that must be overcome, although some are.

The meaning of black phenomenal life is weak nihilistically fixed by Others, as an in-itself, an object with a given value, which lacks an "original relation" to human

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[409] Ibid. p. 25.
[410] Ibid.
[411] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, *vol. I.*

valuing.[412] The resulting phenomenon of black existential invisibility is an assault on black phenomenal capacities to produce and therefore transcend meaning. If one cannot transcend meaning, one cannot grow. If one cannot grow, one cannot mature. If one cannot grow and mature, one cannot become an adult; and paradoxically, if one cannot become an adult, one can never be a child. In other words, antiblack racism is a denial of black humanity that entails a theoretical erasure of the category of black youth. The notion of black youth could only be such in relation to a discursive framework for black maturity and adulthood. But, a discursive framework for healthy conceptions of black adulthood is precisely what nihilism and antiblack racism eviscerates.

Black youth in an antiblack racist world are made to face existential invisibility, and the nihilistic challenges it presents, as children who are not yet fully developed. That is, they are made to wrestle with the deepest of human existential crises, as children, from within a framework discursively opposed to the possibility of their healthily maturing through it. In other words, the category of black youth within an antiblack racist society is tragically cast to pre-maturely develop within a nihilistic structuring of human reality that values their under-development. West promoted black American Christianity as a "last attempt at generating a sense of agency among a down-trodden people," as his attempt to render the disease of nihilism in black youth conquered by Christian-informed values. However, a fuller philosophical analysis of nihilism and antiblack racism reveals that the traditional sources of value for antiblack racism, as well as the traditional sources of black American Christian values, are weak nihilistic. Strong nihilistic responses to weak nihilism necessarily involve meta-theoretical critiques of traditional formulations of evaluating the value of the category of the human being, i.e., trans-valuation.

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[412] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism: An Introduction,* pp. 291-295.

Black American Christianity does not trans-value the traditional modes of human valuing informing antiblack racism, although it opposes the value of antiblack racism. The human existential condition requires nihilism as an organic part of the human life process. However, weak nihilism is an arrest of the human life process that ought to be overcome; but strong nihilism is a criterion for healthy human existence. If antiblack racism presents an inherently weak white nihilistic context that black humanity must struggle to create meaning in spite of, then strong black nihilism, and not weak black nihilism, is the appropriate philosophical disposition for antiracist struggle. The domination of weak nihilistic ideals concerning what it means to be a human transforms the strength of freedom inherent in human phenomenal capacities into a weakness bearing the stamp of interpreters whom harbor moral resentment against existential freedom and responsibility.

Strong black nihilistic appeals to the phenomenal bases of all human values, including those of antiblack racism and Black American Christianity, brings reproach from both American traditions of oppression and resistance. The existential dilemma of seeking validity for one's existence, but finding it impossible to rely on the nihilistic traditions of one's oppressors, or the nihilistic response of one's cultural traditions of defense, is a unique nihilistic situation which requires strength to overcome. Collapsing one's response back into traditional modes of valuing evidences weakness, and thus the strong black nihilist rejects all such moves.

The phenomenal response of devaluing one's existential freedom in producing values is weak nihilism. Antiblack racism encourages weak nihilism, and so does black American Christianity. Thus, black youth of strong nihilistic will whom attempt to value

against tradition are left to struggle within a world that denies the value of such struggles to produce newer values. That is, antiblack racism perversely forces black youth to prematurely wrestle with problems of weak human nihilism, while simultaneously discouraging strong nihilistic responses. Nihilism is an existential dilemma that requires maturity in understandings of human freedom and limitations to be healthily overcome. However, the weak nihilism of antiblack racism and black Christian traditions penetrate the world of black youths living through antiblack racism, and direct them against strong nihilism. Nihilism and antiblack racism violates the innocence of existential freedom and becoming in black youth by molesting the relationship one has with one's own phenomenal freedom and possibilities. That is, antiblack racism categorically denies healthy black existential development, especially in black youth. The existential situation of the category of black youth within an antiblack racist society, is theoretically developed in relation to philosophically and socio-politically limited reifications of nihilism and antiblack racism, which, as a result, set the category of black youth to live in a world where they are precluded from becoming existential adults, and as such, they are never truly children since they are fixed at the level of children who face adult problems.

In the final line of West's chapter on black nihilism in *Race Matters*, he beckons for black leadership to have "the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by its neck and turn back its deadly assaults."[413] Strong black nihilism produces values beyond West's articulation of black nihilism as necessarily weak nihilism. For West, nihilism is something to be turned back against, rejected; but, as this dissertation argues, it is something to be encouraged while strongly and healthily gone through. It is a mistake in studying nihilism and antiblack racism to collapse black nihilism into weak nihilism.

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[413] West, *Race Matters*, p. 31.

Such a mistake may lead to misreading signs of potentially strong nihilistic responses to antiblack racism as weak nihilism. West considered black nihilism to be necessarily weak, a disposition against human values, and not a philosophical disposition against traditional values. He did not consider black nihilism's potential to be reflective of a serious philosophical challenge to both antiblack racism and black American Christian responses. West believed that black nihilistic youth had simply lost their traditional values. He wrote:

> The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black people with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness…[414]

However, perhaps, black nihilistic youth are by definition disposed against taking for granted the value of their forbearers' values. Perhaps, their strength lies precisely in that ability to value beyond tradition, which is precisely the kind of strength anti-racist struggle requires. Black nihilistic youth do not lose values; they devalue traditional values. West's program cannot accommodate such a distinction because of its Kierkegaardian commitments; for him, the devaluation of Christian values is itself deplorably nihilistic. However, as this dissertation has argued, the devaluation of values is not all that there is to nihilism; further more, as Nietzsche argued, a pessimistic devaluation of values entails a further form of valuing. One can be nihilistic in terms of valuing not valuing; but, one cannot be nihilistic in terms of not having values at all—that would be impossible!

Although Frantz Fanon did not emphasize the term, "nihilism," he emphasized its causes and effects in black existentialism. He identified the black existential zone of non-

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[414] Ibid. p. 23.

being as "a naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born."[415] His depiction of

black life struggling to produce an authentic upheaval, that is, to produce a trans-

valuation of traditional values, inherently promotes strong black nihilism. A strong

nihilistic struggle against antiblack racism and white nihilism entails working towards

creating healthy existential space for the category of black youth.

In conclusion, I have argued that the popular discussion of black nihilism in

America introduced by Cornel West has important limitations. In particular, West's

analysis fails to distinguish between weak and strong black nihilism. By providing a

genealogy of modern European philosophical nihilism, including the rationalism and

transcendental idealism of Enlightenment philosophical-anthropological understandings

of the category of the human subject, I have argued that what Nietzsche calls "weak," or

"European nihilism," entails a normative positing of the universal value of white people

as the basis for valuing human life, which is a form of weak European nihilism that I call,

"white nihilism." The white nihilism entailed by antiblack racism, and the invisibility it

confers onto black phenomenal life, constructs an inhumane existential space through

which black people must fight to make their humanity recognized, while simultaneously

struggling to affirm the value and meaning of their humanity in a world that is ultimately

meaningless, which can be called, the "black nihilistic situation." The traditionalism of

both Cornel West and Derrick Bell's response to the black nihilistic situation, seen from

both Nietzsche and Fanon's perspective, suggest further forms of weak nihilism to deal

with the problem of white nihilism; thus, I label them, "weak black nihilistic" responses,

or "weak black nihilism." Contrarily, "Strong black nihilism," is a healthy response to the

metaphysical interpretations of human and/or white values constituent of weak and or/

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[415] Fanon, *Black Skin; White Masks*, p 8.

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white nihilism. Strong black nihilism rejects all weak nihilistic value systems, including

antiblack racism and the traditional values of black American Christian humanity. Fanon

symbolized his strong nihilistic commitment against both the metaphysical ideals of anti

black racism and the metaphysical ideals of traditional black resistance. For instance, he

wrote:

My final prayer: O my body, make me always a man who questions![416]

This philosophical analysis of nihilism and antiblack racism is intended to be a furthering

of the spirit of Fanon's strong nihilistic prayer, which is a prayer to humanity that it

forever continue to question what it means to be a human being.

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[416] Ibid. p. 232.

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