Orientation within Nihilism.
A Response to Paul van Tongeren

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1. The Self-Referential Structure of Nihilism according to Paul van Tongeren

1.1. Paul van Tongeren's framing of the term nihilism is – without intending to flatter him – the clearest, most concise and most plausible I have ever come across about nihilism in Nietzsche's sense. Especially convincing is his concept of nihilism *in stages*, which Nietzsche developed over time. In Paul van Tongeren's concise summary:

> Nihilism as conceptualized by Nietzsche has at least three different stages and the concept 'nihilism' has accordingly a threefold meaning: it is (in an inverted chronological order) (3) the corrosion of (2) the protective structure that was built to hide (1) the absurdity of life and world.

1.2. Paul van Tongeren further accentuates the twofold self-referentiality of this three-stage structure, which is generated by nihilism itself. The insight into the meaninglessness of life and world leads to its concealment by the Socratic-Platonic philosophy, by Christianity, and by the intertwined tradition of both in Europe. This tradition in turn led to its own corrosion and eventually, for Nietzsche, to its self-undermining. For the ancient world, self-referentiality was – as a figure of thought – merely irritating: Socrates knows that he knows nothing; Plato writes that he does not write. However they did not develop their philosophies from such irritations. For millennia, the irritating self-referentiality was kept away by Aristotle's metaphysics of being. In modernity, it became the object of increasing fascination; Descartes made his philosophical grounding figure out of it. It allowed Nietzsche to grasp nihilism as both a

coherent and a differentiated phenomenon.

1.3. The self-referentiality of nihilism however makes every form of engagement with it self-referential, without thereby rendering it contradictory. For its own denial is – in the form of nihilism (2) – part of its very structure and therefore nihilistic too. In the context of European thought, nihilism is thus inevitable. Accordingly, there cannot be anything 'beyond' nihilism. Just as the being of thought, for Descartes, and the being of speaking, for Wittgenstein, cannot be denied (for this would be their very confirmation), so nihilism cannot be denied because the being of thought can only be thought of and the being of speaking can only be spoken about. At the same time it cannot be verified that what is being thought of or spoken about agrees with the 'beyond' of that thinking and speaking, i.e. whether it agrees with the so-called 'real' being or Kant's 'thing in itself'. In modernity, nihilism is first of all the nothingness of the 'thing in itself'.

1.4. Nevertheless, the 'process of corrosion' [*Auflösungsprozeß*], which Nietzsche mentions in his Lenzer Heide note (§ 2) (the "antagonism that we cannot value what we recognize, while we must not further value the lies which we would like to tell ourselves"[1]) and which Paul van Tongeren calls nihilism (4), might develop into a process of liberation. Nietzsche described this process – according to my interpretation of it – step by step in the fifth book of his *Gay Science*.[2] The process of liberation allows for a going beyond nihilism (2) within nihilism (1).

2. The "most fundamental nihilism" [*grundsätzlichste Nihilismus*] according to Nietzsche

2.1. The "first" nihilism Nietzsche speaks of in his Lenzer Heide note (§ 3) seems to be the Greek pessimism, which in his *Birth of Tragedy* he had culminate in Silenus' verdict that the best option would be to not be born, while the second best option would be to die soon. While nihilism (1) was concealed by the protective structure of Greek metaphysics and Christian religion (2), it virulently remained and rumbled as an "inexorable, radical, most profound suspicion" [*unerbittlichster, gründlicher, unterster Argwohn über uns selbst*] (GS 346, KSA 3) and emerged again as "God is dead" in nihilism (3). Nietzsche's correspondences with friends show that this first

nihilism can indeed drive one into desperation, though this is not the case for Nietzsche himself.[3] Only the appearances of beauty provide a comforting remedy – as demonstrated by Nietzsche's teacher, Schopenhauer.

2.2. Soon after the Lenzer Heide note, Nietzsche calls the first nihilism the "most extreme" one, and he explicitly connects it to the fact that there is "no truth [,] no absolute consistency of things, no 'thing in itself'" and that truth, which one wanted to believe in, is a "*value*" which did not and does not "correspond" to a "reality". Instead it is "only a symptom of power on the side of *value-setting*, a simplification for the *sake of life*."[4] There is neither truth nor reality; only the power for value-setting and simplification: both are carried out for the sake of life – this is what we call constructivism today.

2.3. After this, Nietzsche used the term "*radical nihilism*" and calls "the insight that we are not in the least justified to assume a beyond of … or an as-such of things, which is 'divine' or corporeal morality" "the conviction of a complete untenability of being [*absoluten Unhaltbarkeit des Daseins*]."[5] This is the language of orientation: one seeks footholds in orientation, and if one does not find any, then one is lost and disoriented.[6] Nietzsche used the term 'orientation' in his letters, but not in his books, probably because it had been used extensively by Eugen Dühring, with whom he did not want to be confused. However, in his books he often mentions the term 'foothold' [*Halt*], which one seeks and which one can easily lose. Today, the term 'groundlessness' [*Haltlosigkeit*] in a 'beyond of' orientation, i.e. of a 'hold' of the human orientation transcending it, might best reflect the sense of the first and initial nihilism.

2.4. In 1888, Nietzsche eventually calls nihilism (1) the "most fundamental nihilism" [*grundsätzlichster Nihilismus*], grasping with this concept philosophy as a whole, in the way he had "understood and lived" it until then, namely as "the voluntary seeking of even the execrated and infamous parts of existence."[7] After Nietzsche's further specification of the terms in 1887, this is an "active" nihilism, as opposed to a "passive" one. It requires "strength," "force," or "power of the mind."[8] The most fundamental nihilism is an "experimental philosophy": the philosopher's endeavor to proceed as far as possible in discovering nihilism. He or she is not to stand still "at a no, at a negation,

at a will." Instead he or she seeks to proceed "all the way to the reversal – to a *Dionysian Yes-saying* to the world, as it is, without deduction, exception or selection."[9] Much earlier, in 1881, Nietzsche formulated this as "I am falling until I reach the ground — and do not want to say anymore: 'I am searching for the ground!'" [*Ich falle, bis ich auf den Grund komme — und will nicht mehr sagen: ‚ich forsche nach dem Grunde!'*].[10] Protruding into the most fundamental nihilism is possible only gradually and step by step: as a letting-oneself-fall into the abysses [*Abgründe*] underneath all reasons and foundations [*Gründe*]. The ground which one hits then is one where nihilism can no longer be borne. Nietzsche does not ask *whether* one is able to bear the full truth of nihilism as a complete loss of orientation – nobody is capable of this because one still has to be able to orient oneself also in this – but he asks *how much* of this truth one is able to bear: "'How much truth can a spirit bear, how much truth can a spirit dare?' – that became for me more and more the real measure of value."[11] The guiding differentiation is no longer only that of truth and falseness. Instead, on the one hand, it is courage and power, and, on the other, it is the anxiety of being able to bear the truth of the truth: "the really dreadful anxiety is: the world *is no longer meaningful*."[12] The rank of a spirit is constituted by the extent he or she is able to face the most fundamental nihilism. The problem of nihilism is the anxiety of nihilism.

3. An Overcoming not of Nihilism, but of its Attendant Anxiety

3.1. The most fundamental nihilism cannot be overcome; instead one has to face it.

It is especially Heidegger, and not Nietzsche, who speaks of the "overcoming of nihilism."[13] Heidegger connects nihilism with its overcoming because he defines it according to the famous note from 1887 in which nihilism means that "*the highest values are devaluing themselves*."[14] This requires – Nietzsche often speaks in this way – a "new value setting" [*neue Wertsetzung notwendig*].[15] Heidegger would later generalize this: Nietzsche "wants to overcome nihilism by any means [*will die Überwindung des Nihilismus in jeder Form*]."[16] But the quoted passage also says: "*Nihilism is a normal condition* [*Der Nihilism ein normaler Zustand*]." Nietzsche does not say either that nihilism could or that it should be *overcome* by the thought of eternal recurrence. This thought, on the contrary, even amplifies nihilism to an extreme.[17] In his second *Nietzsche* volume, especially in his comprehensive essay "The European Nihilism", Heidegger indeed

widens the spectrum of nihilism, but he also identifies a "classic nihilism" for Nietzsche, according to which the truth of metaphysics loses all value and which also demands the "task of a *new* setting of values." Heidegger constructs this as Nietzsche's "own 'metaphysics'" of the will to power, which, in turn, is to surpass nihilism by overcoming it.[18] In doing so, Heidegger diverges even more from Nietzsche's texts as well as from those compiled by Peter Gast and Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, which he adheres to against his better judgment.[19] He goes so far that he even imputes Nietzsche with not having understood the "secret essence of nihilism," which is value-thinking in itself.[20] "Thought from the essence of nihilism, Nietzsche's overcoming is merely the completion of nihilism."[21] (Nevertheless, this is an important hint, to which we will return.) In this way, overcoming nihilism and wanting-to-overcome it becomes again doubtful for Heidegger.[22] Prior to this, in *Being and Time,* Heidegger did interpret anxiety [*Angst*] as the basic disposition of being and as its "distinguished disclosedness" (§ 40), connecting it to Kierkegaard – but not to Nietzsche.

3.2. Nietzsche did not speak of overcoming, but rather of the "*self-overcoming of nihilism*." It is a moment in the self-referentiality of nihilism and it applies to the nihilism (2) of ideals. In a planned book chapter, "The overcomers and the ones that are overcome," he puts the "doctrine of eternal recurrence" and "of the rank order of values" under this heading.[23] This is also the place of Nietzsche's speaks of the "fight against nihilism"[24] or the "fight with nihilism".[25] Regarding the most fundamental nihilism, which emerges again in Nietzsche's time as the "advent of nihilism", Nietzsche's "future gospel" – entitled "*The Will to Power*. Attempt at a Revaluation of all Values" – will not overcome, but "replace [*ablösen*] that complete nihilism in some future." Nihilism is complete and at the same time replaced, if one "has lived it through to the very end," if one has "left it behind, under, outside of oneself…" Then, one can live calmly with it, without anxiety, which is what Nietzsche says about himself.[26]

4. Orientation within Nihilism

4.1. Nihilism is replaced when it is completely performed and one is no longer afraid of it. Then, one is able to orient oneself *within* nihilism. How this works I cannot fully explain here. I have tried to describe it in my *Philosophy of Orientation*, and I further

developed this description in my *Orientation within Nihilism: Luhmann meets Nietzsche*, where I have compared the guiding concepts of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy and Niklas Luhmann's sociology.[27] The result is that human orientation offers sufficient foothold in itself, without having to rely on a foothold beyond itself, which would be a foothold that claims to be given independently of decisions made in orientation. Instead, all distinctions can be regarded as distinctions of our respective orientations, which are in part individual ones and in part social constructions; therefore all these *distinctions* of our orientations and for our orientations are *decisions* of orientations and for orientations. There is – one can learn from Nietzsche and, in a new version, from Luhmann – no truth or falseness, no good or evil, etc, as such. Instead humans in society *distinguish* between true and false, between good and evil only insofar as they need to for their orientations within respective living situations. They – in Nietzsche's terms – 'create' or – in Luhmann's terms – 'construct' sense and meaning in the very cases which do not yet offer sense or meaning by themselves: 'sense' understood as created or constructed coherences where at first was incoherence; 'meaning' understood as sense of words, which allow creating or constructing such coherences. The "true thinking and meaningful life" – which is at stake for Paul van Tongeren – is what we create by ourselves. Human orientation catches us falling into groundlessness: it is the constructive response to nihilism.

4.2. When we seek sense or meaning, but cannot create it, we tend to call its absence "chaos." This is how Nietzsche describes, in the famous § 109 of his *Gay Science*, the "general character of the world [*Gesammt-Charakter der Welt*]" before our orienting constructions: it is "to all eternity chaos; not by the absence of necessity, but in the sense of the absence of order, structure, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic humanities are called." This is also a way to formulate the most fundamental nihilism. At a later time, Nietzsche describes how he is able to live with it: as a consciously nihilistic philosopher, who – to use Derrida's term – is able to deconstruct the ordering constructions of chaos again and again as far as his orientation endures it: "A philosopher recovers differently and by different things: he recovers, for instance, within nihilism. The belief that there is no truth, the nihilist's belief, is the great stretching of limbs for the warrior of insights, who is relentlessly fighting with so many ugly truths."[28]

5. Nihilism of Value Orientation?

5.1. For Paul van Tongeren, the nihilistic values corrode within nihilism (2) – as a result of the nihilism. Nietzsche repeatedly says that for this reason it is necessary to revalue all values and/or create new values: "We are, some time or other, in need of *new values*…"[29] The note, where Nietzsche – in the context of writing a "preface" for his main work – describes "the advent of nihilism" [*Heraufkunft des Nihilismus*] and its replacement by "a counter movement" [*Gegenbewegung*], is preceded by a preliminary stage of it. Here, with regards to the "advent of nihilism," he at first speaks of one of "the gravest *crises,*" of a "moment of the *most profound* self-reflection [*Selbstbesinnung*] of humanity" and of the "question" whether "humans [*der Mensch*] will recover from it," whether they have the "power" and are able "to master this crisis," i.e. to no longer suffer from it. But here he does not deal with new values. Instead, it is followed by a passage which Nietzsche did not use for the planned preface of the planned main work:

> the modern man tentatively believes in one value, then in another one, and drops it again: the circle of the survived and dropped values fills up more and more; *the vacuum* [*Leere*] *and scarceness* [*Armut*] *of values* is felt more and more; the movement is unstoppable – although its delay is attempted on a large scale – Finally he dares a critique of values as such; he *recognizes* their origin; he sees enough to no longer believe in any value; there is the *pathos*, the new shudder…[30]

The crisis of values is followed by the critique of values as such. The mere possibility of devaluation devalues all values as such: they lose their binding nature and their reliability. For this reason, Heidegger rejected the semantics of values altogether, for which Nietzsche had strongly advocated and which was systematically unfolded by the philosophers of neo-Kantianism. For Heidegger, however, it distorted the question of being.[31]

5.2. But there are more reasons to question the semantics of values. Luhmann, as a sociologist and as a great philosopher as well, pointed out[32] that the development of the semantics of values in the nineteenth century might have had the function of creating some new leeway for ethics in opposition to the old semantics of norms, which until then

dominated legal discourse. While the semantics of values indeed requires one to adhere to values, it leaves it open which values these are. Since values clearly differ from non-values by indicating a preference without doubt – e.g. peace over war, prosperity over poverty, freedom over slavery, happiness over unhappiness – they are always already regarded as good. If one adheres to them when acting or when justifying one's actions, then one is already on the morally safe side. But acting is not in itself valuable or reprehensible: "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only moral interpretations of phenomena…" (BGE 108). Since actions are *interpreted* as valuable in the first place, they can be seen in one way or another. The same actions by different people – as far as there are same actions at all – can be interpreted by means of different values. By means of the same values – as far as there are same values at all – one can act in different ways. And if skillfully performed, the same actions can be justified with different values to different people. In doing so, values do not have to contradict each other because their number is neither defined nor organized. Contradictions only emerge when they are derived within a system from a first principle. Instead, values are selectable; by skillfully selecting certain values, everything can be justified. Therefore, values are not binding in the same way as norms were. They are binding and not binding at the same time. They allow room for deciding on them.

5.3. Therefore, values are pointless too. They do not offer real orientation and a secure foothold. They are, as values, nihilistic in themselves. While Nietzsche might have seen this already, he possibly shied away from this final abyss and shuddered before it. For the revaluation of values and the creation of new values would then be pointless again, and Nietzsche, by adhering to the semantics of values, would himself be a delayer on a large scale.

6. Conclusion

I agree with Paul van Tongeren that Nietzsche's "most fundamental nihilism" aptly describes our situation of orientation. However, there might also be a step beyond nihilism, namely by being no longer afraid of it. The anxiety ceases by virtue of that which started with Descartes, which emerged most distinctly with Kant and Hegel, and

which is now called “constructivism.” It is the insight that we – as humans in society – are able to make sense from senselessness and create meaning from meaninglessness. Both of which allow us to live for a certain time – until new situations require new constructions. For this we no longer need the old metaphysical and transcendental terms based on timelessness, such as being, reason, or the subject. We already have more complex terms that can cope with time and evolution, even with the evolution of terms. One of them could be the term of orientation, which was made prominent in philosophy by Kant, who did not anticipate that one day it might supersede his term of reason. By overcoming the fear of nihilism one gains a serene or simply “cool” orientation within nihilism. Today – after Nietzsche opened our horizons for it – we are able to live within nihilism without a world beyond. In addition, we are evidently capable of orienting ourselves within the ethical leeway which has been created by the semantics of values. In terms of Nietzsche’s § 346 from the *Gay Science* – one of the few places in the published work, where Nietzsche speaks of nihilism – one does not have to do away with oneself, if one does away with one’s old “venerations.” Venerations are not necessary in order to find orientation.

Translation by Reinhard Müller, Austin/Texas, revised by Andrew Smith and Werner Stegmaier

[1] All translations are our own.

[2] See Werner Stegmaier, *Nietzsches Befreiung der Philosophie. Kontextuelle Interpretation des V. Buchs der „Fröhlichen Wissenschaft“* (Berlin/Boston, 2012).

[3] See Nietzsche's letters to Heinrich Köselitz, 13. März 1881, KSB 6.68; Erwin Rohde, 23. Mai 1887, KSB 8.80-1; Heinrich Köselitz, 10. Nov. 1887, KSB 8.192; Elisabeth Förster, 31. März 1888, KSB 8.281.

[4] NL 1887 9[35], KSA 12.350-352 / KGW IX 6, W II 1, 115-116.

[5] NL 1887 10[192], KSA 12.571 / KGW IX 6, W II 2, 12.

[6] Werner Stegmaier, *Philosophie der Orientierung* (Berlin / New York 2008).

[7] NL 1888 16[32], KSA 13.492 / KGW IX 9, W II 7, 144.

[8] NL 1887 9[35], KSA 12.350-351 / KGW IX 6, W II 1, 115.

[9] NL 1888 16[32], KSA 13.492 / KGW IX 9, W II 7, 144.

[10] NL 1888 16[32], KSA 13.492 / KGW IX 9, W II 7, 144.

[11] NL 1888 16[32], KSA 13.492 / KGW IX 9, W II 7, 144.

[12] NL 1885 39[15], KSA 11.626 / KGW IX 2, N VII 2, 179. There are many examples of his use of the term "Angst" in the sense of 'existential anxiety,' especially in his own letters and with regard to his Zarathustra. See, for instance, NL 1883 15[48], KSA 10.492, und 22[4], KSA 10.629; Z II, On the Land of Culture; NL 1884 31[8] u. [9], KSA 11.361-362; Z IV, The Cry of Distress; NL 1885 40[1], KSA 11.629 / KGW IX 4, W I 7, 76; NL 1886 1[5], KSA 12.12 / KGW IX 2, N VII 2, 168; Letter to Franziska Nietzsche, 19. März 1886, KSB 7.161; Letter to Franz Overbeck, 12. Oktober 1886, KSB 7.264; GS 352; NL 1887 9[72], KSA 12.372 / KGW IX 6, W II 1, 90 ("*Angst Gottes"*), 11[226], KSA 13.88 / KGW IX 7, W II 3, 112.

[13] Martin Heidegger seems to be the most important source for this turn of phrase. See, Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsches Wort 'Gott ist tot'", in: M.H., *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main, 1950), pp. 193-247, and the two volumes of Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen, 1961) (the first one resumes lectures out of the 1936 to 1940, which Heidegger published in 1961). Heidegger took it for granted without any evidence from Nietzsche's texts that the overcoming of nihilism is necessary. The secondary literature takes it for granted also, until today. See, e.g., Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life. Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Mass. / London, UK, 2008) or Eike Brock, *Nietzsche und der Nihilismus* (Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung, Bd. 68) (Berlin / Boston, 2015).

[14] NL 1887 9[35], KSA 12.350 / KGW IX 6, W II 1, 115.

[15] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 1.36.

[16] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 1.241.

[17] NL 1886/87 5[71] (Lenzer Heide, § 6), KSA 12.213 / KGW IX 3, N VII 3, 17.

[18] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 2.34; vgl. p. 2.340.

[19] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 1.413, p. 2.42-43.

[20] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 2.54.

[21] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 2.360.

[22] Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 2.365 ff. Wolfgang Müller-Lauter ("Über den Nihilismus und die Möglichkeit seiner Überwindung", in: W. M.-L., *Heidegger und Nietzsche. Nietzsche-Interpretationen III* (Berlin / New York, 2000), pp. 267-299) shows, indeed, how Heidegger searches for the possibility of overcoming only his version of nihilism (p. 296). That Nietzsche himself does not speak of an 'overcoming of nihilism' seems to have not been seen by him either, despite the fact that he was one of the most thorough Nietzsche interpreters of his time and the strictest critic of Heidegger's metaphysical Nietzsche interpretation. On the contrary, he himself uses the phrase without evidence (p. 289). – For the comprehensive construction of Heidegger, see the concise description by Giuliana Gregorio, "Übermensch und Nihilismus in der Nietzsche-Auslegung Martin Heideggers", in: Dennis Peterzelka / Julia Pfefferkorn / Niklas Corall (eds.), *Nietzsche, der Nihilismus und die Zukünftigen* (Tübingen, 2014), pp. 233-253.

[23] NL 1888 13[4], KSA 13.215 [not yet in KGW IX]. For Karl Löwith, *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, 1st ed. (Berlin, 1935), reprint of the 4th ed. 1984 (Hamburg, 1986), "overcoming" is one of Nietzsche's guiding words (p. 181). He excessively deals with the overcoming of time's temporality (p. 12, and other places), of the human (p. 42, and other places), of heaviness (p. 72), of the "guiltily being" (p. 163), and more. In this respect, he also deals with "Nietzsche's attempt to overcome nihilism within the being of the finite human" by virtue of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same, which is "at the same time an attempt to overcome time being innate in the contingency of the finite being" (p. 162). This is, for Löwith, however the overcoming of "the most extreme nihilism" "by itself" (p. 161). Löwith heavily criticized Heidegger for not having seen this (p. 223). The extent to which Löwith's Nietzsche interpretation is, overall, still viable today may remain open at this point.

[24] NL 1886 5[50], KSA 12.202 / KGW IX 3, N VII 3, 131.

[25] NL 1886 7[31], KSA 12.306 [not yet in KGW IX].

[26] NL 1887/88 11[411], KSA 13.189-190 / KGW IX 7, W II 3, 4-5.

[27] Werner Stegmaier, *Orientierung im Nihilismus – Luhmann meets Nietzsche* (Berlin / Boston 2016).

[28] NL 1887 11[108], KSA 13.51 / KGW IX 7, W II 3, 150 ("der Nihilisten-Glaube" was added later by Nietzsche). Cf. NL 1888 16[30], KSA 13.491 / KGW IX 9, W II 7, 146.

[29] NL 1887/88 11[411], KSA 13.189 f. / KGW IX 7, W II 3, 4.

[30] NL 1887/88 11[119], 13.56 f. / KGW IX 7, W II 3, 146.

[31] Martin Heidegger, "Brief über den 'Humanismus'", in: M. H., *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), pp. 145-194, 179.

[32] Niklas Luhmann, *Grundrechte als Institution. Ein Beitrag zur politischen Soziologie* (Berlin, 1965; 5th ed. 2009), pp. 213-216; "Gibt es in unserer Gesellschaft noch unverzichtbare Normen?" (1993), N.L., *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), pp. 228-252; "Politik, Demokratie, Moral" (1997), in: N.L., *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), pp. 175-195.