

European Nihilism and Its Overcome: Nietzsche and Heidegger

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Abstract

In essence, nihilism is the negation of traditional western metaphysics and the negation of the western civilization. Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism firstly was to associate the nihilism with the Platonism which was the origins of western metaphysics, and then he pointed out that the final result of Platonism was nihilism. On this basis, Nietzsche criticized the previous all values in hierarchy and set up the new highest value namely the will to power, in order to overcome the European nihilism. However, the highest value which is called the will to power by Nietzsche still fell into the stereotype of metaphysics of subjectivity. By questioning the being, Heidegger overcame the traditional metaphysics and nihilism, but his philosophy only strengthened the metaphysics of subjectivity at a higher level in essence, so Heidegger did not fundamentally overcome the traditional metaphysics and European nihilism. In the context of western philosophy, only abandoning itself by the metaphysics of subjectivity, it could fundamentally overcome the problems of nihilism.

Key words: Nihilism; Nietzsche; Heidegger; Overcome

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INTRODUCTION

Nihilism was the circumstance of history and the living condition. Nihilism was a constantly changing historical

process. The real, super perceptual being had gradually lost its dominant position in the hearts of the people since Plato, until the last thorough collapse. The human spirit and faith had plunged into darkness, the life was negative and decadent, and the social order became chaotic. The influx of nihilism made the entire human society involve into infinite spiral. The great German philosopher deeply thought the problems of nihilism with profound thinking, and actively looked for ways to overcome the nihilism, then formed the critical theory of nihilism with unique characteristics. In this great historical event, Nietzsche and Heidegger became the leader due to the unique vision of their theory and their peculiarity discussion on nihilism.

1. OVERVIEW OF NIHILISM

"Nihilism" was "nihil" in Latin which said "no" (nothing of all). The primitive meaning of nihilism was "no", and then it was extended as a opinion "no" which was not loyal to any country, faith or individual, and it was a theoretical position without a goal. The earliest use of the word nihilism was in the period of the French Revolution, and it referred to the people whose actions and opinions were considered worthless. Heidegger believed that Jacobi was the first people using the nihilism in the philosophy, and Jacobi thought that the transcendental idealism philosophy of Fichte he opposed was nihilism. As a negative mental attitude, nihilism began to popular with the appearance of "Fathers and Children" by Turgenev. The protagonist Bazarov was a nihilist. He did not obey any authority, and he did not follow any principle no matter how the principle was considered sacred.

In ancient Greece, the Greeks regarded life as the rule of all action, and all actions were based on life. Any thought or behavior that were able to enhance the vitality were moral, and any thought or behavior that obstructed life were immoral. However, such a kind of moral values might lead to solipsism, and everyone would make

judgments to a behavior according to their own vitality which was different from others. The sage movement was the extreme development of this kind of moral values. Socrates opposed the Sophists. He believed that the final result would be unlimited brought people into a world full of fear, if we considered the life instinct as the highest standard of morality. So, he thought we should established a moral value which bounded the life instinct with reason. After that, his student Plato climaxed his ideas. Plato proposed the idea world concept which was completely different from the real world, and he thought that the people in this world could only rely on reason to control what they had done. The idea word with rational thinking is the meaning of people's life. In the middle ages, due to the development of Christianity, God became the source of the world and the source of the meaning of people's life. Christian theology required all works serve to the theology, and it only had a sense once the ration belonged to the faith. The "Philosophy was the handmaiden of Theology" by Tertullian was the embodiment of this idea.

Since modern times, people did not view the objective, highest things as the highest purpose and meaning of people's life. The movement was began by Descartes, and he opened a new perspective to understand the world. Descartes doubted everything, and finally determined the existence of the world through self consciousness. In a simple sense, God and the world were confirmed by one self consciousness. Descartes' philosophy had greatly improved the status of people, because it believed that all of the world were recognized by the people's self consciousness. The basic philosophy position was called as "subjective philosophy". The principle of self-consciousness "cogito" closely reflected the awakening of the subjectivity of modern philosophy since Descartes. The meaning of subject was no longer the subject in the Aristotle's judgment, but the people's reason especially cognitive ability.

Modern philosophy actively established the status of the subject by the difference between the object and the subject. For Descartes, the world was determined by the "cogito". For Kant, knowledge was formed through "thing-in-itself" and self consciousness. For Hegel, the law of nature was the spirit of the law, and the absolute spirit was through the human spirit to know themselves. The development of modern philosophy had gradually strengthened the metaphysics of subjectivity. The subjective philosophy described the word by dividing in two. In this kind of logic of thinking, the world and people's understanding was divided. However, the world was what we had to know, so it was natural to sever the relationship between people and the world. Later, the development of scientific rationality made the natural science had been greatly developed, the development of the modern industry made the people's ability to conquest

and overcome the natural had been greatly improved, and the human civilization had achieved an unprecedented achievement. The outspread rationalism made people become the master of the world and omnipotent. The unlimited growth of people's subjectivity led to the arrival of the era of technology called by Heidegger and the one-dimension of people's one-sidedness, which fundamentally dis severed the relationship between human and nature in philosophy. In Nietzsche's opinion, such a state of life was full of deceptive, and it was out of people's real life situation and didn't pay attention to the fundamental significance of human existence, which just changed a way to kill the desire of people to find the ultimate value. So he sent a cry of "God was dead" to the contemporaries, which would remind people not to give up the questioning to the source, and all the existing order and regulations would be broken and became meaningless.

2. NIETZSCHE'S THOUGHT ON THE VALUE

Nietzsche was the first philosopher to propose and consider the problem of nihilism. "What was the meaning of 'nihilism'? - self disgrace of the highest value." The self disgrace of the highest value was the essence of European nihilism, which was the basic views of Nietzsche on nihilism. The highest value was the whole metaphysics of the west, that was, the Platonism. In Nietzsche's view, Platonism was started by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato which was a set of metaphysical thinking mode. The core of Platonism lied in: in addition the phenomenon world, there was a eternal and unchanging idea world. Between the two worlds, the phenomenon world was a false and lower world, and the idea world was a reality and higher world, so the idea world would be the principle and basis of the phenomenon world. Plato divided the world into idea world and physical world, and put forward the idealism which was the starting point and the basic principles of Plato's whole philosophy. This was the myth created by Plato, which promised a more real and eternal world in order to diminish the perceptual world. Platonism not only referred to the philosophy of Plato, but also included all the western philosophy. Nietzsche believed that the philosophy after Plato was all sorts of deformation of Platonism in essence, and he summarized Platonism as four stages in the *Twilight of the Idols*.

The first stage was that Plato himself claimed that only the idea world was true and the idea world was the basis and principle of the perceptual world, which was the original source of all the Plato's myth.

The second stage was the birth of Christianity. In this stage, people turned the philosophy of Plato into a kind of absolute truth and sacredness gradually, as a result the God of Christian was born. Christianity promised to give people a good, the sacred heaven with honey and

milk, taught the general public to believe in God, believe in Jesus Christ and believe the other world which we could not reach on. The birth of Christianity turned the philosophy of Plato into a popular theology and “Platonism of people” called by Nietzsche. Christianity was the theological distortion of Platonism.

The third stage was the enlightenment spirit of modernity. In this stage, Nietzsche criticized the philosophy of Kant. The enlightenment believed that the real world of Plato could not be achieved and could not be proved. But when the spirit of Enlightenment had just begun, it was once again hypnotized by Kant who was called the great Chinese in Konigsberg. Kant thought that the real world of Plato was not to be known and not to be proved in logical rationality, but it was indispensable in practical rationality. Because of the incognoscibility in the logical rationality, it highlighted the importance of the real world in practical rationality. The real world was not a subject that could be recognized, and it was “a comfort, an obligation and a command” in practice of people. In this way, Kant called back the world with nothingness and made the subjective myth of the modern. Kant’s moral metaphysics was the modern deformation of Platonism.

The fourth stage was the emergence and development of positivism. Positivist did not believe the real world of Plato, and they doubted and denied the real world, because the real world was not empirical. But positivism still believed there was a world which was empirical, and they thought that it was the perceptual world. This was a world which was completely different from the Platonism and was regarded as a false impression by Plato. However, only the perceptual world could be proved and it was a real world. However, positivism was still a deformation of Platonism. Because it thought that the real world created by Plato was not proved, and took the perceptual world as the world which could be proved, so the positivism was a kind of “Inverted Platonism.”

Then, as the highest value, why the Platonism disgrace itself? We could see some clues in the four stages of Platonism which we understood previous. In fact, the emergence of positivism contained the self disgrace of Platonism. According to the understanding of Platonism, the idea world was the principle and basis of the phenomenon world. Therefore, if we denied the idea world, that was, there was not principle and basis, so the perceptual world also didn’t exist. Because the real world was the principle and basis of the perceptual world, the latter disappeared, of course, the former could neither be nor necessary. Positivism made the highest value self disgrace, and we not only abolished the real world but also denied the perceptual world in this movement, so it was inevitable that nihilism was born. The self disgrace of the highest value led to the birth of the nihilism, and Nietzsche understood the fate of Platonism in one sentence: God was dead.

After having an insight into the historical process of nihilism, Nietzsche certainly no longer believed in the dead Platonism myth, but the problem how could we really go back to the perceptual world which was denied by Plato was placed in front of Nietzsche. According to the logic of the positivism, when we denied the real world, at the same time we also rejected the perceptual world, thus it eventually led to nihilism. Nietzsche realized that nihilism was relative to the real world of Platonism, and it was closely related with the real world. The birth of nihilism was also measured by the real world. If there was no the so-called real world in the original, so naturally there was no so-called “nothingness” or “nihilism”. Once we realized this point, we got rid of the fundamental demons of Platonism, so we could recognize the meaning of life again in the understanding of ordinary life. Nietzsche believed the “will to power” was the root of the world and people, rather than the so-called “idea” by Plato.

The “will to power” was the basis of Nietzsche’s theory, which made people life as a kind of impulse and creativity and expand in the process of self expression of creative activities. “Der willer Zur Machte” and “Machte” were from the verb “Machen”, which meant doing things. This was not only a “thinking” and “desire”, but also taking action, because it was “doing things”. The “will to power” was also the nature and meaning of human, so we could not live like slaves, because it was a way of life that would hinder the will to power. We wanted to live like the master, so we had to fully publicize their power will.

Nietzsche believed that the essence of life was the will, which was a kind of self desire, an instinctive impulse and the power of creation which could do the self creation and self expansion. What he called the “Power” referred to the power to “conquer”, dominate and enslave other things, and the self-expansion ability of life. At the same time, the power was generalized here, which referred to people’s vitality to develop, expand and surpass themselves rather than the will in the pursuit of political power. The people who could fully publicize their will to power and lived in full accordance with the publicity of their will to power was no longer a slave, but the real master, and Nietzsche called the people “superman”. The superman gave full play to the will of his own life, and lived fully in accordance with the will to power, and he was the new people who got rid of the state of nihilism. But superman was not a specific person, and he didn’t exist, and he might exist in the heavens, who constituted the 1,001st ethnic groups. Superman was a kind of new people who overcame the problems of nihilism.

In Nietzsche’s thinking about nihilism, we could see that there was a self-evident premise in Nietzsche’s thinking, that was, he put the whole western metaphysics as a kind of value theory. The nihilism was the self disgrace of the highest value, and the existence theory of

Western metaphysics had become a kind of the highest value theory. Plato's idea world, the Christian God, the absolute command of Kant and the will to power of Nietzsche's own was the highest value. This behavior put the value itself as the ultimate principle and basis in fact. From the highest existence to the highest value, considering that the highest existence was equal to the highest value, the behavior of Nietzsche was surely perpetrating a fraud. So, no matter how much Nietzsche criticized the Western Metaphysics, no matter how much he revolted Platonism, the final result was still not out of the dualistic framework of Platonism at a higher level. Nietzsche's criticism of metaphysics was still a kind of value criticism, and the setting of the highest value still was confined to in the dual structure of the traditional philosophy. So Heidegger said "Nietzsche was the last metaphysics". Any value was based on the premise of the subject, and it would be valuable only the subject existed. While Nietzsche reappraisal of all values, he set up a new highest value. Therefore, the nature basis of "Nietzsche's metaphysics, and the accompanying 'classical nihilism' could clearly defined as unconditional metaphysics of subjectivity of the will to power."

Nietzsche realized the problems of his philosophy by himself, so he called his philosophy "positive nihilism". Nietzsche distinguished between the "negative nihilism" and "positive nihilism". One was the nihilism which as a symbol to improve the spirit: "positive nihilism" (deraktiveNihilismus). The other was the nihilism which as a symbol to decline and reverse the spirit: "negative nihilism" (derpassiveNihilismus). Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism first was to connect the nihilism with the Platonism which was the origin of western metaphysics, then considered the history of western philosophy as various deformation of Platonism, and finally pointed out that the final result of Platonism was nihilism. On this basis, Nietzsche considered the highest ontology as the highest value theory, equated existence with value, criticized the previous all values in hierarchy and set up the new highest value namely the will to power, in order to overcome the European nihilism. However, the highest value which was called the will to power by Nietzsche still fell into the stereotype of metaphysics of subjectivity; and whether we could consider the existence as value was a problem which need to be clarified. Although Heidegger agreed with the Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, but he criticized Nietzsche in this sense at the same time.

3. HEIDEGGER'S THOUGHTS ON THE EXISTENCE

Heidegger deeply understood and thought about the problems Nietzsche thinking, at the same time he studied Nietzsche's own thoughts. He reexplained the problems of

the European nihilism at the root of the thought, at the same time he explained Nietzsche's own thoughts with creative thinking. Nietzsche with more than 2,000 pages was the thoughts quintessence of Heidegger thinking about this problem. Heidegger's view of Nietzsche had two sides. In the understanding of nihilism, on the one hand, Heidegger agreed to Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, and he thought that "nihilism was the basic motion of European history"; on the other hand, Heidegger did not agree with the method which Nietzsche used to overcome nihilism, and he believed that Nietzsche still solved the problems of nihilism in the dualism structure of Western metaphysical, so Nietzsche's philosophy was still a kind of nihilism in the more original level.

The way to overcome nihilism of Heidegger was extremely characteristic. Since Nietzsche's philosophy was the starting point of Heidegger's philosophy, so Heidegger criticized Nietzsche at the root of the thingking firstly. He believed that the concept of nothingness had nothing to do with the concept of value, and there was any essential relationship among the "nothingness", "nihilism" and value thought. He believed that the concept of nothingness was only relative to the concept of existence. Nothingness and nihilism referred to the being in the existence, so it was a concept of being, rather than a concept of value. It explained the meaning of "nothingness" from the root, that nothingness had nothing to do with the value, and nothingness was the being in the existence. So, Nietzsche's nihilism was no longer a nihilism of axiology, but was a nihilism of ontology. According to ontology, Nietzsche's thought was still the nihilism, and it was the nihilism of ontology. Heidegger's thought was more complete than Nietzsche's philosophy, and he believed that the essence of nihilism was not only "God was dead" or "the self disgrace of the highest value" but metaphysics itself. Metaphysics was the nihilism also. The nature of metaphysics was the nihilism, because its way of thinking was dichotomy of subject-object, which behaved most obviously in the process of German classical philosophy, and this way of thinking was based on the separation and confrontation between human and the world. To really overcome nihilism, the only correct way was questioning the being. Only questioning the being and returning to the problem of origin, we might overcome the nihilism.

The way of human being was first to encounter with the world and to deal with it, and the way of human being was "being-in-the-world". In the process of such being, the other things in the world which were related to beings were revealed. In such a way of living, natural objects were "things ready to hand", and there was a "coexistence" relationship between people and other people, which showed the "trouble" of people. Trouble had two kinds of state: authenticity and inauthenticity. The coexistence of inauthenticity had the difference between the "ordinary

people” and “intervention”. “Ordinary people” was to disappear oneself in others, and intervention was to make oneself instead of others. Ordinary people lost the true self step by step: Obeying others, becoming the ordinary people, accommodating himself to others, having the public nature, following the herd and having no irresponsibility, losing the adaptation feeling finally. The coexistence of authenticity was “detachment”. There was a balanced relationship between himself and others, and he could also build their own body to respond to others.

“Being-in-the-world” and “coexistence” was the process of human being, and the process was the concept of timeliness, so the time was the real way of human being. Heidegger divided the time into the past, the present and the future, and the corresponding states of human being was depravity, abandoned and survival. The mentality was the general display way of the depravity state. Fear was the display way of inauthenticity and anxiety was the display way of authenticity. Language was the general display way of the abandoned state. Gossip, curiosity, and ambiguous was the display way of inauthenticity, and conversation was the display way of authenticity. The understanding was the general display way of the survival state. Waiting, watching and forget was the display way of inauthenticity and design was the display way of authenticity. But Heidegger didn’t think that all the above were the authentic being of human. The time of authentic being is future, past and now, and their state of being was going ahead of oneself—having been in-being in the world. Trouble was the general display way, fear was the display way of inauthenticity, and the decision to die was the display way of authenticity. People only real faced and thought about their own death, he was able to live a real life. But as an incomplete works, *Being and Time* was a book that was not finished at last, and Heidegger’s reflection of his thinking in his book *Nietzsche* had to catch our attention. Heidegger believed that the book *Being and Time* had the risk of further improving and consolidating the subjective thinking, which was the basic reason in fact that *Being and Time* was not finished. The theme of *Being and Time* was to question the meaning of being. Heidegger thought that there was some meaningful discussion about the problem from the perspective of “dasein”, he felt that this kind of thinking method did not make people feel that there was a primary understanding of the problem. The basic reason of Heidegger’s reflection was that he thought his thinking was still confined to the he modern way of thinking and considered the human as the subject.

Compared to the traditional subject which was set to dominate the world, “dasein” could not be regarded as the subject. It did not have the illusion of power of the concept of the traditional subject which made all into their

own control, and it didn’t set itself, but it was put into being. The basis of its being was not in its subjectivity, but in outside of itself. Therefore, after Heidegger clarified the special meaning of his “dasein” again and again, he asked: How could the thing which was not produced from the subject be “subject”? The basic structure of the classical subjectivity was experiencing oneself in a self-relationship. But this did not mean that it was also regarded as its own origin, but only said that it was speechless for its origin or basis. In fact, since Descartes appealed that the God was the basis of the subject, the concept of subject of the modern subjective philosophy tended to have exterior basis, although they are self-relationship and self- definition. Most importantly, subjective philosophy was that it was a kind of relationship, a kind of self-relationship. The concept of Heidegger’s early “dasein”, even *Being and Time*, belonged to such a mild theory of subjectivity. This theory of subjectivity could also criticized the classical theory of subjectivity, but it still did not transcend itself and overcome the subjectivity, it retained the main feature of a theory of subjectivity, that was, self-relationship.

In the process of continued thinking, although Heidegger realized that his thinking was problematic which was possible to further deepen the danger of subjective metaphysics. But like Nietzsche, Heidegger was conceited, and he did not think that his exploration had no value or was not worth mentioning. In contrast, he gave him confidence in his works, while there were some problems in the way of questioning the being (By way of distinguishing) in *Being and Time*, but the theme of this book was unquestionable and correct. Questioning the being was the only way we could used if we wanted to overcome nihilism, and the others would be unsuccessfully and even promoted the development of nihilism. Thus, Heidegger abandoned the traditional metaphysics language (the language to distinguish between subject and object) in his later stage, and resumed questioning the meaning problems of being. However, the late Heidegger’s test was unsuccessful. Because he used the hitting parentheses way which he learned from his teacher to understand the language, and this could only fell into the predicament of the negative language, thereby further denied the entire Western civilization recorded by the language. To a certain extent, his behavior promoted the development of nihilism. Heidegger’s way to overcome metaphysics and nihilism by questioning the being was not successful. His early philosophy strengthened the subjective metaphysics at the higher level, and his later philosophy was be caught in the unspeakable dilemma.

CONCLUSION

The explorations to overcome the nihilism of the two philosophers Nietzsche and Heidegger were unsuccessful.

As a result of their efforts, they ended up again into the subjective metaphysics and repeated the mistakes of the Western metaphysical dualism. The biggest enlightenment which the explorations on the nihilism of Nietzsche and Heidegger gave us was that it was necessary to overcome the western metaphysical dualism. In the context of Western philosophy, only the subjective metaphysics sublimate itself, we could overcome the nihilism problem fundamentally. On such a new settlement road, subjective metaphysics no longer separated the “existence” and “being”, but tried to think the existence by the being, so as to step up a “road to freedom”. In this road, the purposiveness, rationality and dialectic, technology and art, were the necessary carrier. They worked together to promote the realistic history, and in this history, they

presented people a more and more real value goal-human’s freedom.

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