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**FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY**  
**DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Nihilism is a humanism**  
**SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

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### **Key words:**

nihilism, humanism, lightness, weight, being, becoming, freedom, responsibility, solidarity, anxiety, the uncanny, dehumanization, derealization, doubling, technology, transhumanism, accelerationism, techno-nihilism, techno-feudalism, depressive realism, capitalist realism, will, pacifism, anarchism, atheism, agnosticism

### **Summary**

In this thesis, we have attempted to merge two philosophical positions that may seem contradictory, namely nihilism and humanism. The title of this thesis suggests that nihilism and humanism are compatible philosophical views if understood the right way. We attempt to recover both nihilism as a critical stance and humanism as a constructive doctrine. The nihilist humanist position uses the creative force of active nihilism to rebuild values on new grounds, being opposed to passive nihilism, which is more accentuated nowadays by the concerning relationship that man has with technology. Nihilist humanism will mean a critique of the dehumanizing technology that facilitates the overcoming of the human, thing that leads to the limitation of the freedom of individuals and to the impossibility of conceiving humanism in the

absence of a common human condition or human experience. Nihilism can also mean emancipation when it leads to the weakening of the foundations of great theoretical constructions, and humanism can lead to solidarization between people, based on non-violent resistance in the face of oppression.

*The fundamental issue* that this thesis tries to tackle is whether we can overcome contemporary nihilism, announced by Friedrich Nietzsche as a disease from which Western culture suffers, being founded on top of idealism and Christianity. Also, through escapism facilitated by technology and the virtual spaces that it generates, Nolen Gertz considers that passive nihilism is more present than ever because we are more capable of avoiding confrontation with reality in a parallel world that does not have to be imagined by a subject. We cannot discuss of humanism in the same way we used to because, at the advent of transhumanism, the human condition is no longer a constant, and human experience can easily be overcome through accelerationism; therefore, humanism has to be redefined. Through the revaluation of humanist values, the basis of which was practically destroyed during the time of nihilistic totalitarian regimes and which were also theoretically deconstructed in the period that followed, we are attempting to found a new vision of the human being as the possessor of freedom, responsible and solidary with its peers in the present context in which we are faced with a new crisis of humanity.

The basic *hypothesis* of this thesis is that we can formulate humanism from a nihilist standpoint, the same way in which Jean-Paul Sartre does starting from the existentialism that he proposes. The radical freedom that we have at our disposal can be conceived starting from nihilism as well, a standpoint that releases us from constraints, but that should also make us responsible for our actions. If we are to propose a real critique of humanism, we need to make use of the deconstructive force of nihilism, but also of the creative force that it offers. If we wish to conceive of a positive form of nihilism, we must see it as a humanism, that is as an ultimate expression of human freedom. Sartre considers that we must surpass the idea of human nature, but that there exists a common human condition that can lay the groundwork for humanism, along with the absolute freedom that we possess by ourselves, not as a given from a supreme divine or human instance. The idea that we start with is that we can conceive of humanism even in the case of a technologically modified human condition.

*The objectives* of this thesis were, first and foremost, the clarifying of key terminology, both nihilism and humanism having had multiple meanings over time, and both maintaining diverse connotations in the present. We wish to precisely separate active nihilism, the one that

creates values, from passive nihilism, the one that has a destructive meaning or that supposes the avoidance of confrontation with reality. Also, we will make a clear differentiation between nihilist humanism, which involves skepticism and a type of secularism based on dialogue, and the humanism of militant atheism, based on scientism and an unconstructive form of criticism of any religious idea. We will introduce the concept of *weight of becoming* in parallel to *the lightness of being*, to reinterpret the how we perceive our freedom, but also *the experience of uncanny* in parallel with *the concept of anxiety*, to describe some of the dehumanizing effects that our relation technology has.

*The research methodology* is a classical one, we have used the methods of lecture, analysis and interpretation of different philosophical conceptions tied to the chosen theme. We kept note however of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of our theme, and we have not limited the research to the philosophical domain to discuss the different aspects of nihilist humanism. We have used analyses of different literary works to illustrate some of the ideas proposed in the comparison of *lightness* and *weight*, the way they were first discussed by Milan Kundera, which we have associated with *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand and *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. We have made references to mythology and religion as well in the juxtaposition of *Dionysus* and *Christ* as paradoxical figures, tied with the conception of Nietzsche regarding the affirmation of life. We included notions from psychoanalysis and psychology in the chapters regarding anxiety, the uncanny or depressive realism. Very important were also the connections with political theory that helped us develop the conception of nihilist humanism in relation to anarchism, pacifism and the secular society.

We can make a *synthesis of each chapter* following the most important concepts discussed in each of them. *In the first chapter*, we have presented a short history of the concepts of nihilism and humanism with the focus on highlighting their philosophical as well as their political aspects. In a political sense, nihilism had destructive and violent characteristics, even though its demands were liberation and negation of the power of oppressive authorities, while humanism with its roots in Christianity is seen today most of all as an anti-religion stance correspondent to militant atheism. We have made a comparison between two mythological characters to describe two distinct attitudes we can have regarding freedom, Atlas from Rand's novel, who shrugs off the burden of society from his shoulders, and Sisyphus who in Camus' view finds happiness in the eternal labor that burdens him. This parallel demonstrates why *the lightness of being* is unbearable, while the *weight of becoming* is the correct understanding of the freedom that must make us responsible. In this chapter, we have shown the paradoxical

connection between Nietzsche's philosophy and a type of authentic Christianity that should value life instead of emphasizing death and a world beyond this one. The joining between Dionysius and Christ, two Gods of paradox and symbolizing death and resurrection, can lead us towards the valuable idea of the coexistence of contraries. These religious figures can also symbolize the eternal recurrence of the same, an idea important to Nietzsche that we can regard as a completion of nihilism.<sup>1</sup>

*In the second chapter*, our inquiry started by outlining the concept of anxiety, central in existentialist philosophy where it's seen as an overwhelming experience of freedom, and we have proposed *the uncanny* as a concept useful in describing man's experience in the interaction with artificial intelligence or with humanoid robots. The uncanny is experienced as the awareness of the lack of freedom revealed by the technologies that imitate human intelligence or predict human behaviors. Along with this process of *dehumanization* made possible through the loss of freedom, *the uncanny* is also experienced following the feeling of *derealization* associated with the escape into the virtual worlds generated by artificial intelligence, but also as an awareness of the *doubling* of the subject that becomes self-estranged. Nietzsche names nihilism the „uncanniest of all guests”<sup>2</sup>, so we can regard this concept as a key in the revealing and overcoming of nihilism that is an uncanny occurrence because it appears as a negative consequence of the idealism that we have assumed in the past.

Transhumanism and accelerationism are niche philosophical ideas that stand out because of their shared exaggerated technological optimism. Transhumanism proposes the overcoming of the frail human condition through the use of technological augmentations of the body or the human mind to surpass the limits of our actual condition and to extend our capabilities. Accelerationism proposes the embracing of the post-human and the overcoming of human experience, through the acceleration of the disruptive effects that capitalism has over the present social organization and the installment of a technocratic corporate governing model that is both anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. Both doctrines have in common the promotion of the idea of technological Singularity which could make possible the emergence of an artificial superintelligence, based or not on the human mind, that could lead to a radical and unpredictable transformation of human beings. This aspect outlines the similarities between transhumanism, accelerationism and a religious type of thinking, the technological optimism leading only to the conceiving of an artificial divine being that could solve all problems of humanity. We have also discussed techno-nihilism as an attitude that we human beings have regarding technology, which we often use to amplify nihilism by avoiding reality and choosing to escape in the virtual realm. Techno-feudalism points to a mutation of traditional capitalism because digital corporations hold all of what Yanis Varoufakis names

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<sup>1</sup> Volpi, Franco, *Nihilismul*, traducere de Teodora Pavel, Iași, editura Institutul European, 2014, pp. 106-107

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, translation by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, p. 7

*cloud capital*. We find ourselves forced to pay rent to these companies just to have access to markets and to resume our activities as serfs to feudal-like overlords.<sup>3</sup>

*In the third chapter*, we have analyzed nihilism in connection to depressive realism and capitalist realism. If in the case of the depressed subject, we notice an inclination towards realism that deserves to be pointed out, capitalist realism is directly linked to depression, as this psychic disorder is more and more widespread in the present capitalist system that has deemed any alternative impossible. Mark Fisher names the affection most characteristic of the current state of affairs „depressive hedonia”<sup>4</sup>, an affection that comes as a result of the following pleasure at any cost, an action that becomes mandatory under consumerism. Escapism is how man tries to escape from the grim reality of the lack of alternatives to capitalist realism, leading to the manifestation of nihilism as a baseless optimism; this is why Gertz sees pessimism, cynicism and apathy as different from nihilism and as attitudes that could serve to expose it. In this chapter, we have also taken into account the life-denying attitudes that can manifest as antinatalism, suicide or murder. Nietzsche’s philosophy can help us counter these views through the idea of the affirmation of life and the overcoming of nihilism that only leads to the negation of the will to life.

*In the fourth chapter*, we have looked at nihilist humanism in comparison to destructive nihilism and secular militant atheism, both inclining towards violence. Nihilist humanism is a radical sort of pacifism that proposes the negation of any form of violence because it is solely how authority imposes itself. This is why we have joined Christian anarchism with nihilist humanism, this way reclaiming an authentic path to Christianity understood as pacifism and different from the institutional Church that has often supported wars caused by states and the violent oppression of people. Nihilist humanism supports the non-violent resistance distinct from the terrorism practiced by Russian nihilists in the nineteenth century, but also from the dogmatic atheism that can lead to the support for problematic military interventions against regimes considered fundamentalist. We have attempted to highlight the life-affirming characteristics of active nihilism and also to recover the Christian roots of humanism which can be understood as a philosophical stance that values every human life equally and that supports solidarity between people. The idea of secularism is much more valuable if we found it on a Christian atheism the sorts of which is discussed by Slavoj Žižek or on a philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> Varoufakis, Yanis, *Technofeudalism. What Killed Capitalism.*, Penguin Random House Group, 2024, p. 80

<sup>4</sup> Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism – Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, Winchester, 2009, p. 29

agnosticism supported by Bertrand Russell, rather than on a scientist atheism that is characteristic of the New Atheism.

*The personal contributions* we made consist of the elaboration of original and innovative concepts that can help us describe the place of the nihilist subject in the present world and the relationship it has with cutting-edge technology. We have described a new way in which we can conceive of freedom and the human being, starting from the idea of the lightness of being and moving towards the weight of becoming, representing the authentic exercising of liberty that makes us perceive ourselves as human *becomings*, dynamical beings capable of self-determination through self-projection. The comparative analyses between Atlas and Sisyphus, respectively Dionysus and Christ, were inspired by the philosophical views of Camus and Nietzsche and highlighted new modes of thought regarding the others and existence as a whole. *The uncanny* is a concept that has been theorized in this manner for the first time, strictly as a negative experience revelatory of the issues in our relationship with technology. The uncanny can help us better interpret the consequences that the development of artificial intelligence and other high-end technologies will have, along with the dehumanizing effects that technology already has on us. This concept can also reveal the dismantling of reality as a coherent structure while we evade into virtual spaces that are accessed not through our imagination, but through our senses. The uncanny manifests itself as well when we realize the doubling of our subjectivity, which includes the virtual image we create that prevails over our authentic self.

Depressive realism was mostly discussed in psychology; thus, another contribution is bringing it into the sphere of philosophy where it can lead to a better and more profound understanding of the effects of nihilism in the context of capitalist realism. The most important original contribution is however the conceiving of nihilist humanism as a new philosophical stance, that looks to integrate many old philosophical ideas of the past while opposing novel anti-humanist tendencies in philosophy. Humanist nihilism proposes a constructive critique of actual humanism, that can support the affirmation of life through radical pacifism and Christian anarchism, but also by adopting an atheist or agnostic outlook in regards to Christianity that can lead to secularization and interconfessional dialogue without taking an anti-religious and scientist stance.

*In conclusion*, we can regard humanist nihilism as a standalone philosophical stance that is founded on the critical power offered by nihilism and that can rebuild a type of humanism adapted to the contemporary world. Starting from nihilism we can attest to the radical freedom that we own, and through the exercise of this freedom decisively, we can become self-



determined beings. Although technology and the actual socio-economic system impose limitations over our freedom, and we are undergoing a process of technological dehumanization because we often choose to avoid facing reality through a techno-nihilistic approach to life, we can navigate all of these difficult circumstances if we counter destructive passive nihilism with a type of active nihilism that can help us create better values. The perceiving of the uncanny is an awareness of the lack of freedom that comes from the problematic relationship we have with technology, with virtual spaces or with our own estranged image, but this can also represent an alarm signal regarding the negative consequences that an uncritical technological optimism can have. We have to counter the nihilism associated with this type of baseless optimism, rather than focusing on the alleviation of the effects of depression that seems to become a widespread disease, that in turn points to a systemic issue and not to a private affliction. Active nihilism must lead us to radical pacifism and to a retrieval of the Christian roots of humanism, that could help us affirm life in the face of any form of oppression and violence.

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