

Book Review

Nihilism and Technology

Nolen Gertz

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Nolen Gertz's *Nihilism and Technology* is a commendable book that analyzes the human-technology relations by applying Nietzsche's nihilistic views to technology. By exploring the intertwinement of technology and nihilism, the book underscores its thesis that technologies are our means of escapism from the meaninglessness of our lives. This book turns away from the technophilic and technophobic views of technology and instead moves us toward questioning "how technologies both shape and are the result of... ideological definitions" (Gertz, 2018, p. 7). This is an awakening read that leaves the readers pondering over the numbing effects of technologies.

Chapter 1, "Nietzsche and Chill," serves as a necessary introduction to the chapters that follow. Gertz begins his investigation by looking at what he calls "leisure-as-liberation" in technological design where technologies are understood to liberate us to have more leisure time. Technology is taken to be a way of life that works to offload humans from the daunting chores that prevent them from having free time. Today, the boundaries between humans and technologies have become blurred that it has become difficult to tell where technologies end and humans begin. Neither humans nor technologies could exist independently of one another. The distinction between humans and technology is a result of the dualistic modes of thinking.

Gertz takes a philosophical stance in the following chapter by investigating the meaning of nihilism. He rejects the understanding

of nihilism that is associated with not caring and rather associates it with the "caring for life" (Gertz, 2018, p. 7). Nihilism is prevalent in daily life, and according to Nietzsche, is intertwined with morality. Sartre captures the nihilism of everyday life maintaining that nihilism is a way to unburden ourselves from being ourselves. What is normal is not caring and not wanting accountability. This is the normalcy of nihilism. Gertz points that while Sartre allows us to understand nihilism in everyday life, Nietzsche provides insight into the relationship between nihilism and life itself that he defines as the "will to power" (Gertz, 2018, p. 21). Nihilism is the reason we can question our values. By highlighting the role of asceticism in Nietzschean philosophy and the way that no other ideal can compete with ascetics, Gertz points that Nietzsche can help us explore the field of technology. An intriguing question that Gertz raises is whether technology can be a manifestation of active or passive nihilism. Gertz contends that Nietzsche has taken for granted that to be human must be necessarily associated with embodiment. Yet, Gertz discusses transhumanism to argue that embodiment is not necessarily a requirement for being human. While "overman" is Nietzsche's goal, Gertz assumes that Nietzsche would perceive transhumanism as a continuity of the nihilism that his overman was supposed to overcome. Gertz closes the chapter on a pessimistic note that technologies are a sign of human decline that while they help us progress, they make us more self-destructive and nihilistic.

Martin Heidegger's concerns about modern technology and Don Ihde's analysis of human-technology relations are explored in chapter 3, "The Hammer of God." Despite its technical jargon, Gertz develops a philosophy of technology in this chapter. Central to Heidegger's analysis is that the essence of technology is nothing technological. While ancient technology for Heidegger is a way of bringing-forth what nature and humanity are capable of, modern technology challenges nature. Technology has become a means to an end; and humans, too, have become instruments for technology. Heidegger's pessimistic view is countered by Gertz's view which holds that humans must ultimately remain in control. Gertz highlights the powerful resemblance between Heidegger's understanding of the essence of technology, which

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he calls enframing, and the essence of nihilism, which is the will to power. Ihde's human-technology relations are not strictly about how humans relate to technology, but rather how "humans and technologies become what they are," (Gertz, 2018, p. 61) and how they co-constitute one another. According to this view, tools do not exist independently of the human-technology relation in which they are engaged. Contrary to Heidegger, Ihde does not see our relationship with technology as dystopic. Rather, we are aware of what technology does, yet we continue to use it nonetheless. By bringing Nietzsche and Ihde together, Gertz introduces a new human-technology relation that he calls nihilism relations which describes the ways we use technologies while overlooking their dangers.

The remaining two thirds of the book presents case studies on how various technologies play a numbing effect in our lives. Chapter 4, "Ecce Hulu," takes a practical turn by building on chapter 3 to explore techno-hypnosis as a nihilism-technology relation. By applying Nietzsche's "self-hypnosis" practices to technologies, we can identify the hypnotic appeal of technologies which is our attempt to avoid the burdens of consciousness. We immerse ourselves in self-hypnosis, as a form of nihilism, to evade pain, fear, or regret. Similarly, techno-hypnosis explain how technologies are tools for us to carry self-hypnosis, to escape reality, and to achieve "zoning out" (Gertz, 2018, p. 61). From television and YouTube to virtual reality and augmented reality, we came to see technologies as hypnotizing, where this hypnotizing effect is not only pleasurable but also justifiable. We grew so comfortable with "watching as a way of life" (Gertz, 2018, p. 70). The hypnotic nature of technology is understood as a feature rather than a fault. Gertz highlights that techno-hypnosis is not without dangers. Techno-hypnotic technologies reduce our awareness and presents us with the world view which we take for granted as reality. They result in self-denial that reduces our awareness. Technologies are hypnotic "because we want to be hypnotized" (Gertz, 2018, p. 85).

Chapter 5, "Amor Fitbit," tackles a second human-nihilism relation which is "mechanical activity." While techno-hypnosis is one way to self-hypnotize through technologies, mechanical activity is another to avoid ourselves through repetitive tasks. Gertz discusses Fitbit as a technology that tracks our fitness and quantifies our lives in a way which separates the action from the actor, leading Nietzsche to label this behavior as nihilistic. Central to this chapter is the question of "who is the "you" that the Fitbit is monitoring, motivating, and attempting to understand?" (Gertz, 2018, p. 93). Humans have been transformed into measurable data that their personhood and individuality have been stripped. People blindly obey Fitbit's orders to "Move!" demonstrating that algorithms and devices prompt decisions for us. Algorithms today are reliable in predicting human behavior because humans are predictable, resulting in us becoming not only measurable but also uniform. Ironically, while no one really knows how algorithms work, we still trust them.

Whereas chapter 5 focuses on techno-hypnosis, this chapter, "The Uber Mensch," looks at a third human-nihilism relation that Nietzsche calls "petty pleasures" which is a type of reward that we get out of helping others to compensate for our own powerlessness. Nietzsche's claim here is that "we help others in order to help ourselves" by demonstrating our own power (Gertz, 2018, p. 111). While the selflessness in the two previous forms of nihilisms was based on escapism into mindless activities, selflessness with petty pleasures is found in altruistic activities. Gertz uses "pleasure

economics" to describe the use of technologies in helping others. Given the unprecedented role of technologies today, people not only help others by exchanging gifts, sending money, or renting their homes, but also renting their bodies by using sites like TaskRabbit. Pleasure economics is not without dangers. While it allows us to enjoy the power of generosity, it also lets us feel the power of cruelty and reducing others to their neediness. Central to this chapter is the "sharing economy," which is not only about commodities and services, but also sharing experiences and trust which is the result of uploading personal information onto websites. This sharing, however, leads to judging and discrimination. Gertz raises a controversial question: have we grown so dependent on technology for feelings of pleasure that we can no longer experience community with others without the applications of pleasure economics?

The title of chapter 7, "Thus Spake Zuckerberg," is a nod to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1997). This chapter looks at the technology-nihilism relation which Gertz labels "herd networking." Nietzsche argues that we join the herd because it provides us the opportunity to avoid the burden of being who we are. Social networking platforms are re-forming what engagement means. But similar to the dangers associated with pleasure economics, herd networking has its own dangers which leads people to craft certain identities and content that meshes with the platform to the extent that we have become our content.

Chapter 8, "The Trolling of The Idols," explores Nietzsche's final human-nihilism relation, "orgies of clicking," which is a term that explains our "tendency to express our orgies of feeling in and through technologies" (Gertz, 2018, p. 162). Nietzsche describes the orgies of feeling as constitutive of the "guilty" human-nihilism relation as they are about emotional explosions. While the orgies of feeling lead to self-destruction, the orgies of clicking lead to the world-destruction. Gertz uses trolling and flash mobs as instances where the dangers of the orgies of clicking can be seen. Pertinent to this chapter is Gertz's comparison of the Internet to a playground where the comments section can provide us with a space to "virtually explode" (Gertz, 2018, p. 167) and discharge our instincts, which is referred to today as "trolling". Trolling is nihilistic as a troll refuses to admit that they are a troll. The self-created online anonymity leads to what can be labelled as virtual-actual dualism which separates online actions such as trolling from real life. Trolling can be perceived as an evasion of one's reality, like techno-hypnosis, and of one's accountability, such as data-driven activity. Gertz compares trolling to flash mobs for while the earlier is about hiding from the responsibility of attacking others; the latter is about transforming oneself into a performer who denies responsibility for the performance. Social media has resulted in strangers suddenly gathering in the same place to perform the same activity enabling the herd networking of trolling and flash mobs.

While the previous chapters examined specific technologies, the concluding chapter, "Google is Dead," attempts to answer the question of "how we should respond to the relationship between our nihilism and our technologies" (Gertz, 2018, p. 10). Here Gertz compares between God who once functioned as a guide for the lost and Google which is our present-day guiding star that provides us with answers. Today, technologies are omniscient and omnipresent. Google works to demonstrate our never-ending nihilistic reliance on external sources. Gertz concludes that evading technologies won't eliminate their effects on us. Rather, humans need to find ways to understand what it means to be human by moving from

passive to active nihilism, a view that leads to taking a more critical stance toward the human-technology relationship and to understand what “progress” means.

Thanks to its accessible language and abundant examples, this book would appeal to the general audience outside the confines of philosophy departments. By applying Nietzschean nihilism, Gertz provides a brilliant analysis of how modern-day technologies have reshaped our lives. He leaves his readers reflecting on the social implications of technology and offers them an invitation to get out of the cave and conquer their shadows.

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