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A Brief Overview of Nihilism

taken from The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

② ANSWER

Qs in your
notebook

Nihilism comes from the latin nihil, or nothing, meaning not anything, or that which does not exist. It appears in the verb annihilate, meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely. Early in the 19th century Freidrich Jacobi used the term to criticize the romantic idealism of Transcendentalism, a philosophy that promoted optimism and a belief in the perfectability of man.

Nihilism is the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism that condemns existence. A true nihilist would believe in nothing, have no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy. While few philosophers would claim to be nihilists, nihilism is most often associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that its destructive effects would eventually destory all moral, religious and metaphysical convicitons and precipitate the greatest crisis in human history. Nietzsche believed that there is no objective order or structure in the world (no truth) except what meaning we attach to it. For him, nihilism required a radical rejection of all values and cherished beliefs.

In the twentieth century nihilistic themes--
→ *epistomological failure, value destruction, and cosmic purposelessness--have intrigued artists, social critics and philosophers, and today, nihilistic themes are pervasive throughout popular culture. By the end of the 20th*

the nature and quest for knowledge

^{existence / experiential}
century, existential despair as a response to nihilism has given way to an attitude of apathy, indifference, and emotional paralys is often associated with, in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, "giving up on people."

paralysis

Convinced that Nietzsche's analysis was accurate, Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1926) studied several cultures to confirm that patterns of nihilism were indeed a conspicuous feature of collapsing civilizations. In each of the failed cultures he noted that when centuries-old artistic, cultural, literary and political traditions were weakened, the cultures died out. He concluded that Western civilization is already in the advanced stages of decay with nihilism working to destroy civilization as we know it.

- ① What is the main idea of the passage?
- ② Given the situation around the world, do you agree or disagree with the author?
- ③ What is your opinion of Nietzsche's analysis of the world & human existence?