# Nihilism And Existentialism

What is one's purpose in life? What meaning does life have? These are a few of the many questions that countless philosophers and ordinary people have been asking for centuries. This idea of questioning the reason for life is known as existentialism. We have all at one point or another questioned the meaning of our life in relation to the world and its history. Some have taken this idea further and concluded that life is meaningless. Every action, from passing an exam to getting married, has no value. Nothing that one does in this life matters. This is the belief in nihilism, also known as the "philosophy of nothing." These belief systems may seem foreign to most, but over the course of this world's history, many people have and some still do believe in them. Having no values and believing in nothing appears to be difficult to uphold in today's world where it seems as though there is always a right and a wrong. So, how are nihilists and existentialists able to live in this society? How do they view the world in terms of human nature, the state, and religion?

Human nature and the societal institutions of the state and religion are approached in distinct ways by nihilists and existentialists. Although they may seem similar, the philosophies of nihilism and existentialism differ substantially. To understand how the values and morals of a nihilist are different than that of an existentialist, it is imperative to first discuss the beliefs that are present within each ideology. According to Alan Pratt, Professor at Embry-Riddle University and better known for his research on existential nihilism and the meaning of life, nihilism is the belief that "all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated" (Nihilism ¶1). The government, religion, and morality are all rejected by nihilists and instead the idea that life is meaningless is adopted.

Existentialism, on the other hand, is a theory that emphasizes the existence of an individual solely based upon their own free will and thought. According to this belief of existentialism, first we are simply born, and then it is up to each of us to choose the type of person we are or will become. We have no set path that we are destined to follow and we are void of any predetermined purpose. One of the basic cardinal aspects of existentialism is that humans are born into a universe where our life, the entirety of the world, and our actions, big or small, lack any importance. As esteemed professors and authors Douglas Burnham and George Papandreopoulos discuss, human beings need meaning, but we are stuck in a meaningless universe; we are searching for answers in a world without any answers, and this is knows as the absurd (Existentialism ¶13). We do, however, have the freedom and responsibility to create our own moral code and we must design the morality we want to abide by. Furthermore, according to existentialism, since there is no teleology, "the doctrine of design and purpose in the material world" (Lexicon), it is safe to say that there is no reason behind the existence of the world. If there is no reason behind the creation of the world, then there is also nothing that we must absolutely follow; there is no fate, no order, and no rules. This is where existentialism overlaps with nihilism.

In nihilism, it is believed that the values and morals that one holds to be true are inherently meaningless. Rules mean nothing. Death also is meaningless and so it does not matter whether one is alive or dead. We live and then we die, that is all. It is also imperative that during our lifetime, we do not follow the norms set forth by others, whether it be the expectations of society

or even the laws created by the government.

Today, in most countries around the globe, the government establishes a set of rules and the civilians willingly conform to these laws. For the average person, these laws hold a certain value which is why they are upheld and still stand. This value is partly established by the government itself because the people do not get to choose which laws they will and will not follow. The government enforces these laws by establishing fear through the punishment of those who do not adhere to the common law. For a nihilist these laws are meaningless. Nihilists ignore these laws because they hold no true value in their eyes.

Within nihilism, there is a subcategory known as legal nihilism. According to the Parker School Journal of East European Law, legal nihilism pertains to the negative attitude towards the law (354). This form of nihilism negates the belief that societal organization is the result of the great institution of law. Researcher and activist Evgenia Ivanova even went so far as to say that legal nihilism is a destructive phenomenon while discussing the Russian nihilist movement. This movement occurred around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where a loosely organized revolutionary movement was linked to nihilism. The revolution called for the creation of a society based on rationalism and materialism. It was during this that anarchist leader Mikhael Bakunin wrote: 'Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too" (The Reaction in Germany ¶6). Bakunin called upon the public to retaliate against the state's governance over the people; to Bakunin this control was slowly, but surely clawing away at human freedom. It was at this point in time that nihilism was forcefully at the forefront of politics. The revolutionists not only challenged the state but also the religious authority in charge.

Eventually though, this idea of self-interest and the mutual benefit of the people instead of the state transformed into "political groups advertising terrorism and assassination" (Pratt ¶4). As the author explains, people began to use nihilism and its ideologies as an excuse to spread chaos and disorder. On March 6th, 2017 in Germany, Marcel Hesse stabbed his nine-year-old neighbor fifty-two times and within an hour of the murder he posted a video and pictures of him posing near the dead boy. Hesse was later arrested for the murder of the young boy as well as that of an ex-friend. In his confession, Hesse said that he killed the young boy because "the universe doesn't care." Many blamed Hesse's actions on nihilism. This may seem justified, but it is necessary to remember that nihilism emphasizes the idea anything we do, any action we take, has no value to it. In Hesse's case, he put no value on human life until he decided to take that life away. The same can be said about infamous serial killers and mass murderers. Some claim that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine shooters, were nihilists. Their disregard for human life could have been linked to nihilism up until they decided to kill. By taking those thirteen lives they had essentially placed a value on murder and death. This goes against the philosophy of nihilism because the ideology's core belief is that nothing has value, including death. Misguidedly using nihilism as his excuse, Hesse had decided not to abide by the authority and the laws of the government.

Existentialists also believe that it is wrong for society to follow laws established by an institution. However, while nihilism states that nothing has value to it, existentialism emphasizes the need to create morals and values. According to existentialism, it is important that each individual lives his own life, as they please, by their own moral code and that following the rules of others instead of creating one's own moral code is inherently ignorance. While it states that people

should not follow the already established laws of the government and echoes nihilism in the case of the meaningless of life, it also emphasizes the importance of each individual creating their own moral code and set of laws. Unlike nihilism, in existentialism the need to create morals and establish values are clear. And so, using the ideas present within existentialism, one could argue that Marcel Hesse created his own moral code of the disregard for human life, and lived up to it by brutally murdering the nine-year-old boy.

As previously stated, both nihilists and existentialists challenge the authority that the institution of religion holds. Quite clearly, nihilism and religion are inherently contradictory. This is due to the fact that nihilism believes that nothing in this world is right nor is it wrong; there is no value to any morals we see as important. Christians, for example, believe that murder is wrong because in the Bible it is written, “Thou shalt not kill” (Romans 13:9 KJV), and since the Bible holds value for them, they follow its teachings and adopt these morals. Nihilists, however, do not put a value on anything, so for them, murder is not wrong nor is it right. In this case, killing is simply an action and reaps no karma or sin. While nihilism establishes that there are no values, religion provides principles that believers must follow.

It is in relation to these principles that religion and existentialism seem to agree upon. One commonality that both ideologies share is the need for morals and values to survive in this world. However, with religion, morals are already preordained for the believers to follow. Existentialism, on the other hand, calls for individuals to ignore these pre-established morals and create their own. Existentialists would argue that religion essentially has an essence, which is described as “a property or group of properties of something without which it would not exist or be what it is” (Lexicon). The idea of the essence of religion goes against the belief that this world has no preset purpose. We choose what we make of ourselves and our actions. Religion is an authority and existentialism challenges authorities already set in place. It wants its thinkers to choose their morals on their own accord and to not blindly to follow those that have been placed upon them.

Existentialism and nihilism are both philosophical ideologies that bring our lives into question. Why do we immediately accept the ideas that we have been taught? Why not create our own morals? Most people today believe in God or at least the in some sort or “higher power,” but existentialism and nihilism have both been on the rise in the past few decades. It is important to understand the reality behind each ideology and exactly what each pertains to in this world. Although both deal with the idea of the meaning of life and essentially our purpose, each has its own belief system. While nihilism rejects any morals and values, existentialism enforces the idea of creating one’s own moral code. Nihilism seems to be on one side of spectrum of the meaning of life: life has no meaning. Meanwhile, most religions are on the other side of the spectrum: the purpose of our life is preordained. It appears existentialism is a combination of both ideologies. We have no predetermined destiny, and so we must be the ones to give our life a meaning.