

Mephistopheles Waltzes with Postmodern Demons

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (July 2024)



Mephistopheles, Konstantin Korovin (1906)

*More brains have I than all the tribe
Of doctor, magister, priest, and scribe.
From doubts and scruples my soul is free;
Nor hell nor devil has terror for me.—Goethe, Faust*

Pascal's Wager, leap of faith

Postmodernity is a values-devouring machinery that cranks out hapless and helpless—and to use Friedrich Schiller's term—"little people."

In what corner of postmodern values, arts, fiction, literature, and life do we encounter even a semblance of redemption? Perhaps tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...

Blaise Pascal's (1632-1662) Wager is a simple and intelligent leap of faith. Pascal was a mathematician, physicist and Catholic philosopher. In *Pensées* Pascal considers belief in the existence of God on practical grounds.

Pascal's Wager is uncomplicated and elegant reasoning: either God exists or he does not. Reason is not enough to demonstrate or refute the existence of God. God is outside the purview of scientific 'proof.'

God, Pascal contends, is encountered on existential terms. For this reason, rational persons must wager to accept the existence of God—as believers. This means engaging in a life of belief in God that is guided by moral, spiritual and existential principles that are consistent with eternal life. If God exists, believers gain eternal life. On the other hand, if God does not exist, and death is final, all that believers lose is worldly pleasures that are finite to begin with.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard picked up Pascal's embodiment of the leap of faith in his books *Fear and Trembling* and *Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. Kierkegaard argues that faith transcends reason and logic. Instead, faith beckons existential engagement with human reality.

Kierkegaard's leap of faith can never be a moral/spiritual condition that pertains to mankind, that is, collective humanity. Rather, the leap of faith is an existential/metaphysical mode of being that is only addressed by concrete, individual human persons. Kierkegaard is credited as being the first existentialist philosopher—and a Christian to boot.

Kierkegaard warns that the leap of faith is not a one-and-done event that eventually becomes comfortably subsumed by the demands of daily life. The leap of faith is consistent with the existentialist credo that we must justify our existence on a daily basis.

Consequently, only existential, self-reflecting subjects can engage in the leap of faith as an authentic and morally consistent way of life. Therein lies the difficulty and challenge of accepting the leap of faith for most people, Kierkegaard reminds us. The leap of faith is a test of human convictions, especially in the face of daunting groupthink naysayers and the hedonistic allure of a nihilistic era.

Nihilism

Nihilism is destructive and immoral.

Seeking to undermine human values, morality, knowledge and meaning, nihilism is a virulent negation of the affirmation of life. Nietzsche refers to nihilism as the "will to nothingness."

The spiteful embrace of nothingness is only the tip of the spear of what defines nihilism. Yet, this does not mean that nihilism lacks a reason for being such. But what reason? While nihilism is immoral, it is not amoral. Even nihilists cannot have it both ways. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset offers a clue. Ortega refers to nihilism as “the reason of unreason.”

The Russian writer Ivan Turgenev helped popularize the term in his 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. His morally chic characters, who seek emancipation from human values, assert that “nothing must be accepted on faith” and to “deny everything.”

Regarding the annihilation of values, there are no coincidences in the postmodern world. Nihilism, from Latin *nihil* (nothing) asserts the belief in nothingness. That is, the establishment of no beliefs. This is one of the many fundamental contradictions of nihilism, for nihilism is a form of radical skepticism that affirms the destruction of moral values, purpose and meaning in human existence.

How does one proclaim the negation of objective values and simultaneously believe that one has no values? This is dishonest intellectual and moral calisthenics. It is also glaring hypocrisy. Why not admit that one has destructive values that aim to annihilate the hierarchy of values?

Nihilists decry the hierarchy of values as traditional values. Yet, people who hold that objective values make up the scaffolding of human existence defend objective values against those who negate them by appealing to a scale of values. In other words, objectivists must be consistent in their realization that they can fall into error. On the other hand, nihilist *believe* they can't be wrong given that there are no objective values. This is sophomoric, vindictive posturing.

In a pathologically twisted and perverted way, nihilism's destruction of values enables nihilists to believe in

something vague and ambiguous. Let us refer to this as moral convenience. This is the dysfunctional and hypocritical state of human values, circa 2024.

We are left with the head-scratching task of identifying the dominant motifs and themes that rule human life in postmodernity. It is important to identify these, if we are to understand the self-consuming and suicidal plight of Western civilization today. For sentient and thoughtful people, this is hardly a difficult task. The destruction of the hierarchy of values offers a clue about where to start this search. While intrinsically repulsive, the good thing about postmodern nihilism is that it is transparent, a neon rabbit out of a hat that enables everyone to witness the effects of nihilism for themselves, if they care to do so.

Nihilism's perverted and self-loathing celebration of mayhem and penchant for the destruction of values no longer hides, being content to exist on the fringe of society, like it did in former eras. Instead, nihilism is an arrogant and abrasive reversal of values. Nihilism demands to be placed on a pedestal. Nihilism taunts rational and moral people to join its ranks—or else. Safety in numbers works best, we are told.

Nihilism originates in a pathology of self-hatred and malign zest for destruction of virtue, moral goodness and innocence. Nihilists reap great satisfaction and power from seeing others, besides themselves, go down with the ship. This is why one of the staple components of nihilism is the hatred of human life. Nihilism became normalized in the twentieth century, establishing aberrant dysfunctionality as the dominant form of human life, for nihilism creates and is fueled by dysfunctionality.

Because nihilism is much more than the negation of moral values, it spreads like an aggressive cancer, corrupting all aspects of postmodern life. Consider how nihilism promotes the manipulation of the Other, proliferation of lies,

disinformation and hypocrisy.

It is the task of rational people of good will to realize that the ultimate goal of postmodern nihilism is moral, spiritual, cultural, and social-political scorched-Earth warfare, where nothing noble, beautiful, innocent and pure must be left standing.

Mephistopheles and Redemption in the Postmodern World

Mephistopheles, aka Mephisto is a conniving conjurer demon and messenger of Satan. Mephistopheles' task is to exploit people who lack moral courage: purveyors of chic radical skepticism who pretend that the degenerate values of nihilism are a sustainable way of life.

Mephistopheles throws morsels of carnal pleasure at morally anemic people, like park goers fling crumbs at pigeons. Incidentally, it takes no courage to embrace skepticism about everything, only the inability for self-reflection. The inability for self-reflection is a psychological staple of projection, affectation and hypocrisy. If redemption is attainable, self-reflection must be the starting line.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Carl Jager (19th C)

Radical skepticism about everything, which is a central tenet of nihilism, signals a pathological condition of moral frailness that evades the possibility of redemption. This comes as a consequence of the privation of moral purity that nihilism and relativism corrupt.

The possibility for redemption only exists for individuals, not collectives of any stripe, especially in light of the practice of sincere self-reflection that leads to authenticity. As the hierarchy of values is squashed in the postmodern world, alerting us to the great aspiration of nihilism, redemption will exercise a diminished role in human existence. Collectivism, moral cowardice and inauthenticity go hand in hand.

While Mephistopheles conjures up baleful postmodern demons that are the driving force of the spirit of our era, it remains up to God to clean up the crime scene that is postmodernity.

Mephistopheles is a high-ranking devil in German folklore that dates back to the fourteenth century. Making its appearance in works of alchemy and magic, Mephistopheles offers the alleged emancipation from good and evil that conjuring up an intermediary between man and Satan offers people who are dissatisfied with life.

The English playwright Christopher Marlowe wrote *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* some time between 1588 and 1592. Marlowe was murdered in a mysterious fashion. Anthony Burgess' novel *A Dead Man in Deptford* brings novelistic flair to Marlowe's mysterious and morally duplicitous life.

Faust is a scholar who seeks more knowledge than science, history, philosophy, and human experience can offer. The leap of faith, in any way or form, does not occur to Faust. Existentially bored with the life he leads, Faust makes a pact with Mephistopheles, who warns him that everything, including knowledge, comes with a price.

The legend of Faust was immortalized in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragic play *Faust*. The play was published in two parts: Part I in 1808, with further revisions by the author in 1828-1829; Part II was published posthumously in 1832.

From the start, restless Faust taunts the powers that be: "All that philosophy can teach/The lore of jurist and of leech/I've master'd, ah! And sweated through Theology's dead deserts, too/yet here, poor fool! For all my lore/I stand no wiser than before."

In part I, Goethe explores Faust's moral vacuity and existential listlessness. Faust is presented as a vain man who employs the aid of Mephistopheles to make his life worthwhile. In addition to knowledge that only God is privy to, Faust desires riches, women and carnal pleasures. Underlying Faust's want of carnal pleasures is his inability to accept life on its own terms. Faust aims to twist human reality to suit

himself.

Goethe's *Faust* was published, especially part I, as the Age of Enlightenment was coming to an end. The Enlightenment promoted rationalism as the ultimate harbinger of empirical knowledge and social/political progress. That is, rationalism touted as an end not as a means (tool) of knowledge.

The enlightenment was preceded by the Scientific Revolution. Faust finds himself dissatisfied with the little he believes he knows, even though he has enlisted the aid of science to reveal the mysteries of human life. The good doctor takes the promises of progress that the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment promise hook, line, and sinker.

Mephistopheles, Postmodernity, Redemption, and the Leap of Faith

It is a curiosity that Christianity identifies a duplicitous and scheming devil like Mephistopheles to assuage the moral vacuity and existential boredom of Faust and that ilk. How is that significant?

Goethe's *Faust* is a visionary case of philosophical perspicuity—the last of its kind in classical literature. Goethe anticipated that modernity and whatever that era would give way to—postmodernity—would see the ranks of souls in purgatory swell.

Is there a more appropriate way to describe postmodernity than as a worldly purgatory?

Faust anticipates Nietzsche's 'last man' (Letzter Mensch) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the prototype poster child of nihilism. The last man vacillates in the world, for it cannot be said that this being cares for living and authentic existence.

Faust is satiated with the comfort that scientific knowledge has brought about. Yet, he is not content. He wants to possess God's knowledge. Is this type of person even capable of contentment, redemption?

Like school children when the teacher momentarily leaves the room, the last man relishes nihilism in a world where God has been pronounced dead. Nietzsche is adamant: "The opposite of the overman [Übermensch] is the last man: I created him at the same time with that. Everything superhuman appears to man as illness and madness. You have to be a sea to absorb a dirty stream without getting dirty."

Faust heralds demonic and carnal pleasures. He is on a quest to suck the marrow of life in the here-and-now. For him, there is nothing more. What is left to do for morally/existentially gutted people? Faust is the ringleader of a new form of *emancipation* that will eventually come to fill the ranks of purgatory, the anteroom of heaven and hell.

Faust has a flair for perdition, as long as he is rewarded with instant, worldly pleasures. He mocks goodness and virtue. Faust convinces himself that time is short and life oppressive, banal and, most importantly, pointless. For this reason, everything that has been created must be annihilated. Faust finds great power in destruction. The doctor wants to go out in a trickle of nihilistic apocalypse:

*I've galloped merely through the world, I own.
Each pleasure by the hair I'd seize,
Cast off whatever failed to please,
What 'scaped me let unheeded go.
First craving, then achieving, then
Longing for something new again;
And stoutly on through life went storming so,
Grandly at first, and foremost in the race,*

*But sagely now, and at a sober pace.
Of man and earth I know enough; what lies
Beyond is barricaded 'gainst our eyes.
Fool, who with blinking gaze out yonder peers,
And dreams of kindred souls in upper spheres!
Let him stand firm, and look around him here.
Not dumb this world to him that bears a brain:
Why things he knows will in his grasp remain.*

It is not a stretch to suggest that Mephistopheles is the patron devil of postmodernity.

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*](#), [*Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*](#), [*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy*](#) and [*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [*Philosophy Today*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [*Philosophical Perspective on Cinema*](#).

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