

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nihilism and Technology by Nolen Gertz

Review by: Steven Umbrello

Source: *Prometheus*, September 2020, Vol. 36, No. 3 (September 2020), pp. 289-290

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/prometheus.36.3.0289>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Pluto Journals* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Prometheus*

JSTOR

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nihilism and Technology**, Nolen Gertz (2017) Rowman & Littlefield, London, 242pp., £54.95, hardback, ISBN: 9781786607027

At times uncanny, yet thoroughly unsettling, Nolan Gertz's *Nihilism and Technology* is an unquestionable synthesis of Nietzschean philosophy of nihilism brought to bear on our often overlooked uses and co-construction of technologies. *Nihilism and Technology* is, more often than not, a forceful analysis of how the human-technosocial world is becoming ever more nihilistic. Gertz eschews the overdone and clichéd positions of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism in favour of a reimagining of Nietzsche's evaluation of nihilism with an analysis of human-technology relations. What results is a graceful marriage of traditionally convinced Nietzschean concepts and post-phenomenology; something that has yet to be achieved with modern technology.

Moving through various technologies and systems that have taken root in society, such as cell phones and Tinder, Facebook and Twitter, *Nihilism and Technology* explores how technology co-constructs our conception of values and how values are continually implicated in technological design. Rather than pose a bifurcation between 'good' and 'bad' technologies, Gertz aims at a philosophy of techno-nihilism. What he shows is that the embeddedness of technology is so rooted that its separation, even conceptually, from the human quotidian is impossible. Because of this, he argues that the dangers of technology do not come from existential risks, but from the daily trend towards nihilistic people–technology relations.

The book begins with a thorough introduction to the philosophy of nihilism, which naturally moves to Nietzsche as the foundational figure for the rest of the book. Gertz makes a clear delineation between two forms of nihilism, the classic Nietzschean question of determining what the significance of values is (i.e., the meta-value question), which is active nihilism, and the passive nihilism which desensitizes individuals to accepting values passively without question. He additionally introduces the philosophy of transhumanism, which seeks to surpass the biological constraints and limitations of humankind with technological interventions. Gertz argues that transhumanists, who aim to arrive at the technological post-human, still fall into the pit of passive nihilism by replacing the Christian god and its associated values with the posthuman, retaining the traditional moral values associated with the former under the façade of a radical techno-fix.

Gertz follows this by drawing on the post-phenomenology of Don Ihde, outlining the various human–technology relations that are implicated with technology. Gertz then proposes a synthesis between human–technology relations and nihilism, resulting in 'nihilism relations' where humans relate to technology as if there were no other choice. Here he argues how humans willingly abdicate responsibility to technologies as a reasonable cost for being interconnected, informed and entertained, all the while believing that continued innovations will somehow provide fundamental value in our relations with them. He argues that we have become so desensitized to our human-technology relations that the technology–nihilism relations seem to be the only way to go about being in the world.

Proceeding from this, the book shifts strategy to applying these nihilism relations to various cases and examples. The 'designed-for-addiction', 'designed-for-passive-engagement' technologies ultimately separate human actors from their actions by giving them a distraction to the world of suffering while ultimately leading to a vicious cycle of further suffering. As with Nietzsche's analysis of Christianity, the nihilistic relations of humans with technologies begins with the premise of the alleviation from existential suffering, but passively results in further existential suffering because of its ability to be used to inflict suffering. What Gertz ultimately argues is that we cannot

switch our deity from god(s) to Google without first seriously investigating the underlying value of doing so, and the values, if any, that are implicated.

At its core, the book is less of a dry, academic text and more of a satire on technology and our relations with it. Gertz writes with a prose that is often tongue in cheek and at some points outright funny. It shifts the reader outside the consciousness of binary value judgements of technology. Good and bad become secondary as Gertz moves beyond the concepts to a meta-evaluation of how we live in the world with our technologies, or separated from them. *Nihilism and Technology* is a timely and original text that should be given exposure beyond the walls of the academy. Its philosophical rigour and treatment of human–technology relations makes it widely readable. It comes highly recommended.

Steven Umbrello  
Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies  
Steve@ieet.org