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## Book Review: The Specter Of The Absurd

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is possible depends on his being able to refute the idea that "exist" is not a descriptive predicate, but he devotes only about a page to refuting this common idea (p. 19). His strategy is to claim that "exist" seems descriptive when the grammatical subject is a proper name and that the burden of proof is on his opponent to show that "exist" has a different meaning when the grammatical subject is a common noun. But when we consider the point of saying "Ronald Reagan exists" (his example), we may well conclude that "exist" here does make a different point (have a different meaning) than it does in "Cows exist." Frequently his argument turns on undefended claims about what is better and on assumptions about what is logically possible. He asserts that God is greater if it is logically impossible for any being to come close to God in the number and degree of its perfections (p. 24). (To counter the claim that God is greater if God could create such a being, he replies that doing so would lessen God's perfection. It is not obvious to me that this is so. I wonder too how one individuates God's perfections.) His argument in Chapter 4 depends on defining a number of artificial concepts; I suspect that Dore's opponent would doubt the logical possibility of these concepts, but Dore never considers this problem. Certainly, my asking these questions does not show that Dore is wrong in any of these claims, but I do think it shows that he might well have devoted more attention to their defense.

*The Specter of the Absurd*, by **Donald A. Crosby**. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. Pp. IX and 456, \$59.50 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

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This insightful, balanced, and clearly written study of the intellectual sources of modern nihilism stands out by the width of its range. In the first part the author distinguishes no less than five different types of nihilism. *Political* nihilism began in the revolutionary societies of mid-nineteenth century Russia; *moral* nihilism rejects all moral principles or denies that they can be rationally justified; *epistemological* nihilism either relativizes truth claims or denies even commonality of *meaning* among different cultures; *cosmic* nihilism assumes the cosmos to be devoid of intrinsic intelligibility or at least of human value; to *existential* nihilism, the most fundamental and in common usage often the only known type, human existence itself appears absurd. All of these varieties are duly illustrated by texts taken from representative philosophical or literary sources. Obviously, then, this study extends the limits of its subject well beyond the traditional definition. By more conventional standards most of what the author describes as epistemological nihilism and

much of what he regards as cosmic or even as moral nihilism would be reckoned to be causes or sources of the phenomenon rather than part of its essence. The author himself has not completely abandoned the traditional view, since some of what in the second part passes for “arguments” conducive to nihilism reappears later in the guise of philosophical “sources” and, indeed, partly coincides with what the first part had described as the essence of “epistemological nihilism” itself.

However we choose to define it, we all agree that nihilism is a modern phenomenon that only in the last century fully surfaced. Not surprisingly, then, its justification is all to be found in the intellectual baggage of modern culture: the eclipse of the belief in God, a relation to nature dominated by the objectivist view of the scientific revolution, the absolute priority of the human spirit, an unprecedented demand for absolute cognitive certainty, an individualist concept of human associations. In contrast to the exclusively modern character of the arguments, the “religious sources” of nihilism, discussed in part III, extend in part to the origins of the Christian and indeed of the theistic worldview. According to Crosby, they created certain conditions without which modern nihilism would never have emerged in the form it did. Nevertheless, the questionable assumptions that came with the Christian culture, such as that of an anthropocentric universe in which nature functions as a servant to human interests, or of value exclusively derived from a transcendent source, had no nihilistic impact until they became mixed with different, more modern and more explosive ones. From those “religious” sources, the author distinguishes what he calls the “philosophical” ones. Among them we find, in one form or another, all the assumptions characteristic of modern epistemology—subjectivism, objectivism, scientism, as well as the ideologies that have determined the political and moral theories of the last three centuries—individualism, separation between fact and value, absolute voluntarism. In this part we find some of the author’s most perceptive insights, especially in the tenth and eighth chapters devoted respectively to modern moral and political theories, and to the seeds of nihilism in Descartes’ thought. Throughout Donald Crosby proves to be a knowledgeable and reliable guide in the complexities of modern philosophy in general, and of some individual figures in particular—I would single out Sartre, Monod, Mill, and Schopenhauer. On the other hand, I find it hard to recognize Hegel or any of the German idealists in the “subjectivist” picture here drawn of them.

A more substantial target of criticism, however, in this otherwise excellent study are the repetitions and omissions. The author’s somewhat idiosyncratic division of his subject into types, arguments, and two kinds of sources has resulted in a great deal of overlapping. This structural defect would remain a minor imperfection had it not affected the readability and, above all, the intellectual focus of the study. As ever subtler distinctions attempt to bring

order to a subject that continues to expand beyond definable limits, the reader finds him/herself wondering: What, then, in the end is nihilism *itself*? Is it no more than the sum total of those loosely connected currents in modern thought which together have created the crisis to which we vaguely refer as "the modern predicament?" Too much in the discussion of modern philosophy receives undeserved attention, forcing the reader to cover, often more than once, all too familiar territory without precisely knowing where it will lead him or her. (This too scrupulously scholastic approach may, however, enhance the book's qualifications for classroom adoption!) Moreover, has the author been sufficiently critical in granting a central place to thinkers because of their frequent reference to the term *nihilism*? Nietzsche, largely responsible for the philosophical popularity of the term, regarded nihilism as the outcome of, and the major threat to, Western culture which his own work meant to overcome. Yet here he appears as one of its main representatives. I should hasten to add that this paradox is not of the author's own making. He distinguishes the "passive," cultural nihilism which Nietzsche combats from his own "active" one. Yet the terminological confusion created by the dual role is neither analyzed nor resolved. Even Sartre's place of honor in this work made me wonder whether his insistence on the "annihilating" quality of the mind has not too hastily been associated with "nihilism" proper. The answer to those critical questions remains uncertain, because the very comprehensive definition of the subject justifies the prominent presence of both Nietzsche and Sartre. What leaves me in no doubt, however, is the significance of one omission. Crosby mentions but fails to discuss Heidegger, the only modern thinker who has probed the *metaphysical* significance of nihilism. This absence confirms the impression that, despite his solid and perceptive acquaintance with modern philosophy, the author nevertheless tends to shy away from a strictly metaphysical reflection on his subject. In general, he prefers to stay with epistemological issues and their moral and existential consequences. But in choosing this approach he remains within that subjectivist perspective which lies at the root of modern nihilism and, by his own account, partly coincides with it. It would be ungenerous to criticize a book that gives so much for refusing to give more. Instead we ought to feel grateful to the author for having provided us with the intellectual material needed for a metaphysical reflection. Professor Crosby's book deserved better editorial care than it received from its publishers. It contains many printing errors (e.g., Descartes', Hobbe's, Schopenhauer—all of them repeatedly) and, at least on my copy, the cover is bound upside down.