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Nihilism as Method: Clearing Values in Philosophical Counselling

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Abstract

This paper argues that nihilism, typically associated with meaninglessness, can be leveraged as a productive method in philosophical counselling. It proposes that through active nihilism, clients can critically confront and deconstruct inherited values, allowing them to reconstruct meaning aligned with their own experiences rather than accepting externally imposed beliefs. Drawing on Nietzsche's distinction between passive and active nihilism, the paper presents nihilism not as a pathological state to overcome but as a diagnostic and reflective tool that facilitates epistemic and axiological inquiry. This approach diverges from traditional existential therapies by emphasizing value clarification through radical doubt and critical reflection, rather than emotional resolution. The paper further explores how modern socio-cultural conditions, including digital life and algorithmic pressures, extend Nietzsche's insights into contemporary experiences of meaninglessness. Ultimately, it contends that philosophical counselling's role is not to eradicate nihilism but to work through it, helping clients clear obsolete values and discover authentic commitments in an indifferent world.

Keywords: Existential Nihilism, Philosophical Counselling, Active Nihilism, Will to Power, Meaning-Making, Value Deconstruction

1. Introduction

This essay argues that nihilism, often seen as an expression of meaninglessness, can instead serve as a productive tool in philosophical counselling. By confronting clients' doubts, counselling can use nihilism to help

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individuals break down assumed values and identify beliefs that resonate on a personal level. This journey, guided by active rather than passive nihilism, enables clients to reconstruct a sense of meaning in alignment with their own experiences and aspirations.

Especially in this age, but not only now, humanity confronts the void; the feeling that all our endeavours and struggles are for naught, that our suffering does not matter. Kierkegaard (2013, p. 54) suggested that once we make a decision, we should not entertain the opposite choice; choosing one path means fully committing to it and discarding the alternative from our reasoning. This commitment reflects his idea of existential responsibility: the notion that we shape our existence by the choices we embrace, without lingering on what could have been. This raises an important question, why should we care about existence rather than embracing nihilism? For Kierkegaard, meaning is inherent in the act of making and committing to personal choices, while Nietzsche saw meaning as something that emerges from the will to power, the drive to create and affirm life amid challenges. This contrast provides a foundation for exploring how active nihilism can serve as a path toward individual meaning-making, even in a seemingly indifferent world.

Existing existential therapies, such as Frankl's logotherapy (1959), Yalom's existential psychotherapy (1980), and van Deurzen's existential counselling (2012), seek to help individuals rediscover or reaffirm meaning through interpersonal or spiritual grounding. While effective in many clinical contexts, these paradigms often presuppose the necessity of value reconstruction as a therapeutic end.

By contrast, this paper introduces a reinterpretation of nihilism, particularly Nietzsche's concept of active nihilism, as a methodological tool rather than a pathological state. Instead of seeking to overcome nihilism, this approach embraces it temporarily as a diagnostic lens. What I propose is not a new form of therapy, but a philosophical stance in counselling: nihilism as a critical filter that helps clients suspend inherited beliefs and test their values under pressure. In this way, nihilism functions not as a symptom to treat but as a method of clarifying what genuinely matters.

This model diverges from existential psychotherapy by foregrounding epistemic and axiological inquiry rather than emotional resolution. It aligns more closely with the Socratic method and philosophical scepticism, aiming not to provide answers but to refine the questions clients ask about meaning, purpose, and value. By inviting clients into a space of radical doubt, the counsellor can facilitate a more authentic reconstruction of beliefs, grounded not in comfort or tradition, but in critical reflection.

In today's world, why should an individual strive for a fulfilling life or something resembling it? Values often come at a high cost, and this pursuit can lead people to feel increasingly isolated, even pushing them toward a more

nihilistic perspective. The fact that nihilism is so pervasive in today's age is not surprising; by now, it is almost normal and people try different ways to fight it almost naturally. This can be witnessed with the naked eye: if the socio-economic system does not provide meaningful values, one might turn to a friend group, a book club, a hobby, a job, a political stance, a religion, and so on. These are not ineffective coping mechanisms, but they often fail to address the deeper existential question, what if nothing really matters in a cold, indifferent universe? And how should one confront this issue through philosophical counselling? While it may seem paradoxical for a self-described nihilist to seek meaning through counselling, this act can reveal underlying values or goals that may not be apparent. In this structured setting, clients often find themselves asking not about absolute nihilism but rather exploring *what if nihilism is true*. This shift reframes nihilism as a philosophical issue that can be discussed and, possibly, resolved, offering a productive angle for counselling. Thus, the client's concern is not pure nihilism but rather an inquiry into meaning and value within a seemingly indifferent universe. Their exploration of 'what if nihilism is true' becomes a starting point, opening the door to discuss values, meaning, and the potential for personal fulfilment even within a framework of existential doubt. A client, then, comes with a different problem, they ask "what if nihilism is true". This approach for a philosophical counselling session assures the client that this issue can be talked about, can be resolved. Also, this is not to say that all clients would come up with this problem all the time, yet it is a problem which needs attention as the question of existence being meaningless is often asked by human beings.

A conversation of this nature might lead the counsellor to guide the client toward identifying which values still hold significance, what makes life matter to them personally. While common answers might include love, art, or community, these may not satisfy individuals sceptical of inherited cultural narratives or emotionally charged ideals. For those unconvinced by the promises of romanticism or collectivism, nihilism can offer a philosophical starting point.

Rather than viewing nihilism as a philosophical conviction in itself, this paper treats it as a structural illusion, a position that collapses under its own internal contradictions. One cannot coherently speak about the meaninglessness of all things without simultaneously attributing meaning to the claim itself. This paradox does not render nihilism useless; on the contrary, it reveals its utility as a critical instrument. In philosophical counselling, this contradiction can become a pivot point, helping clients strip away inherited values that no longer serve them and examine which ones endure under scrutiny.

With this conceptual foundation in place, we turn to Nietzsche, the philosopher who, more than any other, mapped the existential terrain where nihilism begins and meaning must be reinvented.

2. Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Genealogy of Values

Friedrich Nietzsche's contribution to the understanding of nihilism is both diagnostic and directional. Rather than framing nihilism as a singular worldview of despair, Nietzsche proposes a typology (passive nihilism and active nihilism) that maps the existential consequences of value collapse and the possible responses to it (Nietzsche, 2000, §§22–23). Passive nihilism reflects a surrender to the realization that the traditional sources of meaning religion, morality, metaphysics) have lost their binding power. This form of nihilism emerges when one acknowledges the death of God but fails to act in the face of that recognition. In contrast, active nihilism does not mourn the loss of absolute values; instead, it sees their destruction as an opportunity to affirm life through the creation of new, individually grounded value systems.

As Reginster (2006) clarifies, Nietzsche does not view nihilism as a terminal state but as a transitional phase in the evolution of consciousness. It is not the conclusion of meaning, but the moment of awareness in which inherited meanings are exposed as hollow. Active nihilism, then, represents the moment when the individual refuses to be defined by this absence and begins the process of revaluation. This process is not merely intellectual but existential, it demands existential courage, the willingness to question received beliefs, and the confrontation with meaninglessness as a generative void. Reginster writes, "Nihilism is the unavoidable consequence of taking moral and metaphysical values seriously, only to discover their groundlessness. But it is also the condition of possibility for their re-creation" (Reginster, 2006, p. 87).

Within philosophical counselling, this distinction has powerful implications. A client experiencing passive nihilism may articulate feelings of futility, detachment, or indifference. The counselling task is not to dismiss these experiences, nor to impose new meanings externally, but to accompany the client through them, to recognise the lucid insight that emerges when one realises that many inherited values are unchosen, performative, or even coercive. Here, active nihilism becomes methodological: not a philosophy to live by, but a lens for interrogating the validity of values. The counsellor can facilitate this transition not by offering answers but by creating the conditions for a value-clearing process, an existential pruning that prepares the ground for revaluation. This does not mean fabricating new ideologies, but discovering which commitments genuinely withstand doubt.

One of Nietzsche's most psychologically incisive concepts is that of *bad conscience* (schlechtes Gewissen), which he describes in the *Second Essay of On the Genealogy of Morals* as the internalization of instinctual drives under the conditions of social constraint (Nietzsche, 1989, §16). In pre-moral societies, instincts such as aggression and desire were outwardly expressed through physical

action. But as communal life developed, these drives could no longer be acted upon freely. The result was a psychological reversal: instincts turned inward, becoming guilt, remorse, and self-punishment. The human being, Nietzsche writes, becomes "an animal with the right to make promises," but also one who suffers from the repression of its natural vitality (Nietzsche, 1989, §2).

This internalisation, Nietzsche argues, is not inherently noble or ethical, but rather the product of social necessity and religious manipulation. The *priestly caste*, through its elevation of asceticism, transforms suffering into moral currency, pain is a spiritual redemption and guilt is a sign of virtue (Nietzsche, 2005, §23). As Burnham (2015) points out, this psychological economy creates subjects who experience their strongest emotions as sins and their most vital impulses as threats to their own worth. Over time, this conditioning does not disappear, it evolves. In secularised modernity, it may reappear as *perfectionism*, chronic guilt, or the compulsive drive to self-optimise.

In the context of philosophical counselling, Nietzsche's analysis offers a powerful tool for exploring how *value systems are internalised*. Clients may present with persistent self-blame, shame, or feelings of worthlessness, not always due to trauma or pathology, but because they live under a moral code they did not choose. These inherited systems, whether religious, cultural, or ideological, demand sacrifice, obedience, or productivity, often without reflection. By helping clients trace these emotions back to the moral scripts that produced them, counselling can reveal that the guilt they feel is not always an insight into wrongdoing, but often the residue of unexamined moral programming.

The task, then, is not to simply discard guilt but to interrogate it: *what kind of self is presupposed by this guilt? Whose values does it serve? What drives are being denied in order to appear "good"?* Philosophical counselling, drawing on Nietzsche's insights, allows for a process of what Yalom (1980) might call *existential uncovering*: a movement from reactive guilt to self-directed freedom. Bad conscience is not eradicated, but deconstructed, giving the client a chance to reclaim their instincts, not as dangers to suppress, but as sources of vitality to reinterpret.

Although Nietzsche originally framed bad conscience within a religious-moral context, its dynamics clearly persist in secularised modernity. The same psychological architecture, where instinct is suppressed, and self-worth becomes dependent on external judgment, has not disappeared. It has, instead, been reconfigured. In modern clients, this manifests not as fear of sin, but as chronic inadequacy: the sense that one is never productive enough, desirable enough, or aligned with the prevailing cultural code. This continuity between Nietzsche's moral genealogy and today's internalized performance metrics suggests that bad conscience has not died with God, but has found new gods to serve, ones made of algorithms, influence, and perpetual self-monitoring.

This continuity invites a return to Nietzsche, not to revisit historical critique, but to explore how the death of God was never the end of value, only the end of its old justification. What follows is not silence, but simulation. As such, Nietzsche's genealogy does not merely explain where we came from, but where we now find ourselves.

Nietzsche's critique does not end with the death of God or the decline of religious belief. Rather, his insights gain new relevance in the secular systems that now dominate meaning-making: consumer capitalism, digital media, self-branding culture, and bureaucratic regulation. While the priest may no longer sit at the altar, the functions of moral surveillance, guilt-induction, and norm enforcement have been redistributed across technological and institutional interfaces.

Today, one does not need to confess to a religious figure to experience moral anxiety; a performance metric, an unread message, or a fitness tracker can elicit the same sense of failure. The inner voice of judgment, once attributed to divine authority, is now outsourced to algorithmic systems that reward conformity and visibility while punishing deviation with social invisibility. As Gertz (2019) argues, algorithmic life introduces a new structure of passive nihilism: one in which stimulation replaces reflection, and constant presence masks existential absence. The individual becomes a user profile, constantly curated, optimised, and exposed to comparison.

These mechanisms foster what might be called digital bad conscience, a compulsive loop of visibility, guilt, and performance. The demand to be productive, attractive, ideologically consistent, and perpetually "on" mirrors the ascetic demands Nietzsche identified in Christianity. The new morality is not grounded in sin but in inadequacy: the idea that one could always be doing more, better, faster. Instead of confession, we have self-tracking. Instead of salvation, we have relevance. This is not a rejection of values, but their mutation into hyper-performative metrics. The individual becomes their own priest and supplicant, enacting a form of algorithmic self-punishment.

For philosophical counselling, this modern structure of nihilism presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Clients may arrive not because they lack meaning in an abstract sense, but because they feel invisible to the systems that confer recognition. They are often caught between the erosion of traditional values and the emptiness of their replacements, what Nietzsche hints at in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1974, §125) as a time when one is 'still wandering through an infinite nothing, a vacuum in which old values have collapsed and new ones remain uncreated. Counselling, in this context, becomes a space not for producing new ideologies, but for questioning inherited scripts, whether religious, capitalist, or digital, and for reconstructing meaning from the ground up.

By re-engaging Nietzsche's idea that nihilism is not just collapse but a selective clearing, philosophical counselling can help individuals assess which of

their commitments are real, which are imposed, and which merely simulate significance. This process is neither anti-modern nor nostalgic. It is a confrontation with the present: lucid, value-critical, and existentially honest.

3. Active Nihilism as Method: Revaluation Through Philosophical Counselling

Where passive nihilism leaves the individual paralysed by the collapse of meaning, active nihilism marks the decision to move forward, not by finding an external source of value, but by becoming the one who creates it. In Nietzsche's view, this is not an optimistic turn, but a courageous confrontation. The values inherited from religion, tradition, or ideology are not simply missing; they have lost credibility. The individual must now decide whether they will mourn the loss of certainty or begin the difficult work of revaluation.

To become an active nihilist is to affirm life even when no metaphysical guarantee exists. It means recognising that values do not descend from above, they are created, tested, and lived through action. This does not mean indulging in relativism or hedonism; it means taking responsibility for one's own meaning-making. The task is not to fabricate beliefs for comfort, but to examine which values survive existential doubt and still matter when no one is watching.

In counselling, this shift appears when a client begins to question not just their suffering, but the values through which they interpret that suffering. Instead of asking "Why am I unhappy?" they begin to ask "What do I believe I should be?" or "Whose expectations am I trying to meet?" These are not psychological questions alone, they are philosophical, and they require a space where the client is invited to confront their ethical inheritance without being rushed into premature meaning-replacement.

Active nihilism is not a therapeutic endpoint, nor is it a solution. It is a method, a mode of holding doubt long enough for clarity to emerge. It is about learning to say "no" to values that no longer serve, not for the sake of rebellion, but to make space for a more coherent "yes." As Nietzsche famously wrote, later echoed by Frankl, "He who has a 'why' to live for can bear almost any how." But finding that "why" requires first the destruction of false ones. Yet in a society saturated with prefabricated meanings, the challenge is not just internal, it is environmental.

The modern world offers many replacements for meaning, consumerism, productivity, self-improvement rhetoric, digital identity, but these often serve as distractions. They simulate value without the risk of commitment. In contrast, philosophical counselling grounded in active nihilism challenges clients to move through the void, not around it. It respects their suffering not as a problem to fix, but as a signal that certain values no longer hold.

To "become an active nihilist," then, is not to adopt a belief system, but to engage in an existential practice. It is the disciplined refusal to pretend, and the slow cultivation of values that can survive self-scrutiny. The counsellor's role is not to guide the client toward truth, but to accompany them in the unsettling work of clearing the ground, until something true begins to grow.

4. Mapping the Void: Nihilism as Method in Counselling

In philosophical counselling, nihilism can function not as a worldview to adopt or reject, but as a method: a reflective lens that enables clients to examine inherited, unexamined, or incoherent value systems. Rather than positioning nihilism as an endpoint, one in which all meaning collapses, it becomes a tool for introspection, one that questions the legitimacy of imposed norms and invites personal revaluation.

This approach does not require the client to become a nihilist in a doctrinal sense. Instead, it invites them to engage with nihilism as a filter, temporarily suspending unquestioned beliefs in order to identify what still holds meaning after critical reflection. In this way, nihilism functions similarly to philosophical scepticism, it clears the ground, not for destruction's sake, but to make space for meaning grounded in personal experience and existential coherence.

As noted by Marinoff (2001), philosophical counselling is uniquely equipped to facilitate this kind of existential inquiry. Unlike clinical psychotherapy, which often prioritizes diagnosis and treatment, philosophical counselling offers a non-pathologizing space for clients to confront value-based uncertainty without seeking premature resolution. Mick Cooper (2016) further emphasizes that existential approaches in counselling are less about solving problems than about enabling individuals to engage with the fundamental conditions of human existence, freedom, meaning, and mortality, in a reflective and personal way. In this context, nihilism does not destabilize the client, but becomes a companion in navigating uncertainty: a temporary clearing, not a final collapse.

At its core, nihilism declares that life lacks inherent meaning or value. Yet in making this declaration, nihilism enters a philosophical paradox: it asserts the value of a claim, that *nothing has value*, using the very structures it aims to deconstruct. To say "nothing matters" is, in itself, a meaningful act. It places value on negation, on truth-telling, or at least on disillusionment. Thus, nihilism relies on *an implicit value stance* even as it seeks to dismantle all others (Nietzsche, 2000, §12; Reginster, 2006, pp. 31–33).

Nietzsche was acutely aware of this paradox. He warned that passive nihilism could lead to resignation and meaning-collapse, but also recognized that nihilism cannot sustain itself as a *final conviction*, because to live as a nihilist is to live *against* something, and that presupposes a standard of judgment (Nietzsche, 2000,

§§23–24). In this way, nihilism undermines its own authority. It cannot function as a total worldview because it collapses under the weight of its internal contradiction: *to affirm the meaningless is still to affirm* (Reginster, 2006, p. 36).

From the perspective of philosophical counselling, this contradiction is not a flaw to be solved, but a condition to be explored. Clients who express nihilistic despair are often not expressing true indifference, but a disillusionment with inherited values. They care deeply that nothing seems to matter. This care signals the presence of values that may still be waiting to be rediscovered, redefined, or reimagined. In this sense, the client's nihilistic stance often signals not apathy, but frustration, a response to the collapse of values that once felt stable, and a longing for something more authentic to emerge. What appears as negation is often a kind of subterranean affirmation: the sense that something ought to matter, even if nothing currently does.

Rather than disqualifying nihilism for its self-undermining tendencies, we may see its internal contradiction as a mirror of existence itself. Human life, like nihilism, is structured around paradox: we begin in birth, only to end in death; we pursue meaning in a universe that does not provide it unconditionally. From this perspective, the "failure" of nihilism to fully annihilate value is precisely what makes it philosophically honest. It does not overcome contradiction; it inhabits it.

In this light, nihilism becomes not a doctrine to escape, but a lens through which to view the paradoxical nature of being. Its sincerity lies in its refusal to offer easy metaphysical answers, while its usefulness lies in its capacity to reveal the moment when meaninglessness itself becomes meaningful, as the ground upon which new values might emerge. Life does not need to resolve this paradox; it is lived through it. And philosophical counselling, rather than bypassing this space, can accompany clients within it.

Much like Galileo's quiet insistence that the earth still moved, even when truth itself was condemned, clients in philosophical counselling may come to realize that some truths remain, even when the systems that support them fall away. The function of nihilism, then, is not to silence these truths but to strip away the false authorities around them. In this sense, nihilism is not only a method of critique, but a quiet gesture of insistence: and yet it moves.

5. Revaluing the Void: Concluding Reflections on Nihilism as Method in Philosophical Counselling

This essay has argued that nihilism, far from being a destructive worldview or a symptom of despair, can serve as a powerful methodological tool within philosophical counselling. Drawing on Nietzsche's distinction between passive and active nihilism, it has positioned nihilism not as a belief system to be embraced or

avoided, but as a reflective lens, a way of interrogating the values we inherit, internalize, and often unconsciously obey.

Chapter 2 provided a conceptual foundation by revisiting Nietzsche's theory of nihilism and its connection to guilt, repression, and the legacy of priestly morality. Through this framework, we saw that nihilism is not simply the loss of value, but the exposure of hollow values, a clearing that enables revaluation. This historical and philosophical groundwork allowed us to understand nihilism not as a pathology, but as a diagnostic condition.

Chapter 3 introduced the notion of active nihilism as existential practice, emphasizing personal responsibility and the courage to confront value-collapse without retreat into ideological replacements. It reframed the counselling encounter as a space not of solution, but of lucid confrontation, in which the client must discover which values can withstand doubt and still matter.

Chapter 4 expanded on this by formalizing nihilism as a tool: a strategic method for value deconstruction. It engaged the paradox of nihilism, that it destroys value only by appealing to it, and argued that this contradiction mirrors the existential paradox of life itself. From this paradox emerges not defeat, but potential: a way of making space for the emergence of values grounded in experience, coherence, and integrity. Within this framework, nihilism becomes a mirror, not of despair, but of clarity.

Across these chapters, the essay has responded to the core question of how philosophical counselling can address modern experiences of meaninglessness, disillusionment, and inherited moral fatigue. By adopting nihilism as a methodological filter rather than a metaphysical stance, counsellors can support clients in clearing the debris of obsolete values and preparing the conditions for revaluation. This approach neither denies the reality of value collapse nor rushes to replace it; instead, it honours the difficulty of the void and its transformative potential.

In revaluing the void, we do not overcome nihilism, we work through it. It is precisely in the act of standing within its contradictions that new commitments can emerge. Philosophical counselling, in this light, becomes not the cure for nihilism, but its most honest companion.

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