

Būties teorija ir filosofija

NIHILISM, PERFORMATIVITY AND THE ONTOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE*

Rita Šerpytė

Vilniaus universitetas, Religijos studijų ir tyrimų centras
Center for Religious Studies and Research, Vilnius University
Universiteto g. 9/1, LT-01513 Vilnius
Tel. (+370 5) 2 66 76 13; fax (+370 5) 2 68 71 89
E-mail: paštas.rita.serpyte@rstc.vu.lt

The article deals with the problem of performativity in the treating of nihilism. In order to disclose acute, but at the same time, concealed angles of this problem, the analysis of nihilism is being turned to the so called "ontology" of everyday life. The theoretical approach of Maurizio Ferraris ensure the rich field of investigation as well as provide with the object of theoretical critics. By using theoretical attitudes of the "diagnosticians" of nihilism as well as the arguments of Austin, Benveniste, Agamben etc., the article discusses and opposes the nihilism as the theory of reality. The investigation demonstrates the impossibility to understand nihilism as a simple theory of reality and discloses the requirement to reconsider nihilism as the performative.

Keywords: nihilism, everyday life, ontology, performativity, true, reality.

The relationship between nihilism and 'everyday life' is multifaceted and any analysis of it requires highlighting certain premises and, simultaneously, a choice of a certain specific perspective on investigation. The premise of my article and my perspective of investigation is, first of all, related to the context of the problem of nihilism. Therefore, I will try to see what we call today (and not only today) 'everyday life' from the perspective of issues related to nihilism.

The emergence of the phenomenon of nihilism, the 'first' diagnosis of nihilism, was related to a certain expression of an 'attitude' towards everyday life. I refer to a

letter written by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi to Fichte in 1799, *Nihilism and Faith*. Accusing not only Fichte, but also the entire German idealist philosophy in Fichte's person and the worldview based on it, Jacobi does it from the position of the 'common sense', the 'everyday consciousness'. In discussions inspired by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, realism and dogmatism were opposed to idealism, and the term 'nihilism' started to be used in definitions of a philosophical operation, by which idealism seeks to remove and annihilate reality as a product of common sense through reflection. Thus, we could say that the first 'diagnosis' of

* Straipsnio rengimą finansiškai rėmė Valstybinis mokslo ir studijų fondas.

nihilism is announced, the first ‘announcement’ of nihilism takes place in the name of ‘common sense’.

On the other hand, however, it is obvious to everybody who knows even a little about theoretical investigations of nihilism that usually nihilism is linked not with the views of the masses, but with a certain exceptional and sophisticated intellectual position. After all, all known personifications of nihilism declare nihilism by rather radically opposing the ‘common sense’ and not so much by following its rules: not only the protagonists of the so-called ‘Russian nihilism’ – Turgenev’s Bazarov, the entire gallery of Dostoyevsky’s nihilists, starting with Raskolnikov, Stavrogin and concluding with the most refined nihilist, duke Mishkin, the ‘idiot’, but also Nietzsche’s superman, Jünger’s *Beobachter* (observer), not even mentioning the embodiments of G. Benno’s, Camus’, Sartre’s, Baudrillard’s perspectives on nihilism.

In one of his essays, the *Discreet Charm of Nihilism*, Czesław Miłosz has defined a nihilist as ‘ordinary’ saying:

First, a fringe of the aristocracy cultivating literature and art, elegant, freed from the coarser superstitions. And churches filled with the pious, the scent of their incense and their prayers. They would come to a common frame of mind (Miłosz 1998: 22).

Despite this ‘definition’, there is an opinion and even a theoretical position that nihilism is not the self-awareness of the masses, not a ‘token’ of everyday mind, but that it constantly remains as an expression of a sophisticated intellectual attitude. John Milbank points to nihilism as an *intellectual* ‘possibility’ and even a certain ‘choice’. By agreeing indirectly with the investigations

of nihilism in the continental philosophical tradition, Milbank discusses nihilism as deeply related to the thinking of modernity. In his book *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, he defines nihilism as an ‘intellectual stance’ (Milbank 1990: 213). Thus, Milbank considers nihilism as “the home of an intellectual” and, simultaneously, that which points to choice. Moreover, the approach to nihilism as an intellectual position points to the “possibility of nihilism” (Milbank 1990: 217).

In his book *Genealogy of Nihilism*, Conor Cunningham observes that Milbank’s reference to the ‘possibility of nihilism’ still does not answer the question what this all entails (Cunningham 2002: 170). Cunningham asks: is a “possibility involved in nihilism” or is nihilism seen as “a possible alternative”? (Cunningham 2002: 169–170). Cunningham himself argues emphatically not for nihilism as a choice but for nihilism as something that eliminates choice and includes all (possible) choices. “Nihilism is not a choice but all choices” (Cunningham 2002: 170).

I would add, however, that being *haire-sis*, ‘choice’, nihilism ‘happens’ on the level of a certain ‘discourse’, certain ‘logic’, which we could not call ‘everydayness’ – the ‘everydayness’ discourse or the logic of ‘common sense’.

I would say rather paradoxically, if there could be an impression or even an appearance that nihilism ‘happens’ by penetrating the everydayness discourse, then its ‘logic’, expressed by the formula $A = -A$, is not the logic of ‘common sense’, and it is, in terms of the ‘categories’ of ‘everyday consciousness’, perhaps, even the opposite.

An example from contemporary philosophy illustrates the problematic nature of nihilism's relationship with everyday consciousness and the attitudes of common sense, which means also, with the realist position in philosophy. I mean Maurizio Ferraris' research into the ontology of everyday life. In his elegantly refined book, *Il tunnel delle multe. Ontologia degli oggetti quotidiani*,¹ he includes nihilism into his 'catalogue' of social objects of everyday life. Nihilism is listed among the social objects of everyday life, catalogued in the alphabetical order, by dedicating to it approximately three pages of the book².

In those few pages, Maurizio Ferraris suggests, as he says, not only a diagnosis of nihilism, but also the quickest way to recover from the disease:

"If nihilism is, as everybody who has ever talked about it repeatedly agrees, a disease, I would like to suggest (one) diagnosis and (one) way to cure it with the help of objects" (Ferraris 2008: 136). Then he adds: if you give it due thought, you will see, you will recover in a couple of minutes, having spent less than one euro.

Thus, according to Ferraris, the fundamental thesis of nihilism is as follows: "If God is dead, then everything is possible". This phrase has two meanings. The first tells: "If God is dead, then I can behave also in a morally unacceptable way because values no longer exist: I can kill old ladies, etc." The second phrase, however, says the following: "with regard to the fact that, in general, I do not like behaving in an

unacceptable manner, I feel exhausted and desolate" (Ferraris 2008: 136).

This is not enough though. According to Ferraris, this phrase should also mean that "if God is dead, then $2+2=5$, and the Moon is made of cheese" (Ferraris 2008: 136). Ferraris explains that the following is suggested by this idea: if there was no negation of the world, a negation with regard to physical and ideal objects, which are made dependent on the subject's will, there would be no moral nihilism which is an obvious consequence of the former.

In other words, we could think that if there was no nihilism promoted by Jacobi and linked to German idealist philosophy, there would also be no Dostoyevsky, Raskolnikov or Stavrogin. Perhaps, this is why even Dostoyevsky's phrase "everything is permitted" is read by Maurizio Ferraris as "everything is possible," because he derives the moral meaning of nihilism from the 'ontological' meaning and considers it as rooted in the latter. Does this mean that the Italian philosopher approaches nihilism similarly to Jacobi by criticising it from realist positions or even from the point of view of 'common sense'?

Before answering this question, let us look at the method of recovery from nihilism as construed by Ferraris. In an attempt to show that nihilism cannot touch either physical or the so-called ideal objects, Ferraris does not look for an argument against nihilism only among the so-called social objects. However, since, according to Derrida and Ferraris, "nothing social exists beyond the text" (Ferraris 2008: 138), we should think that the question of the nihilism of social objects does not raise any doubts to

¹ See M. Ferraris. *Il tunnel delle multe. Ontologia degli oggetti quotidiani*. Torino: Einaudi, 2008.

² See also *Ibid.*, p. 136–139.

the Italian philosopher. After all, the ‘real’ existence of social objects, ‘independent’ of the subject, is denied by their very recognition as social objects. Meanwhile, “the world exists silently beyond our interpretations”, Ferraris says (Ferraris 2008: 137). This statement is, perhaps, dedicated to Nietzsche. And he offers the following way to recover from nihilism.

Here it is. A nihilist gets up in the morning and wants to have a cup of coffee. Yet he cannot find it: it has finished. Is everything possible if there is no God? Could this be the intrusion of Nothing into everyday life? (Ferraris 2008: 138). Ferraris wouldn’t think so. The physical world goes on, despite our theories. Coffee has finished and that’s it. The nihilist wants to go to the bar downstairs, but he puts his hand into his pocket and finds only 20 cents instead of 80 cents (Ferraris 2008: 138–139). Here I would like to interfere again and ask: is a hand in a pocket searching for cents an example-argument against Sartre’s nihilism?³ (Sartre 2007: 40–42). So, he finds only 20 cents instead the 80 cents he needs. Let us say that this character – the nihilist – is one of those nervous students of Dostoyevsky. Yet he cannot turn those 20 cents into 80 cents. Even if there is no God, in this case, not everything is permitted. He goes down to the bar, orders the coffee and leaves. Perhaps, at least this time, if there is no God, everything would be permitted. But no, the barman runs after him, and you cannot say to the barman: “If there is no God, everything is permitted”; you can say only “put this please on

my account, I will pay tomorrow”. Thus you will have to get some money, but you will recover from nihilism for a very small price (Ferraris 2008: 137–139).

This description of an everyday situation given by Ferraris looks rather like a philosophical anecdote about nihilism and not so much as theory.

Yet however – seriously or with humour – we looked at this ‘nihilism’ presented by Ferraris, there is still a question to answer: how can it be really? Can it be that, in Ferraris’ view, two nihilisms lump together, cross or intersect (a twofold approach to nihilism) – the two nihilisms discussed by Kant’s contemporaries. One of them would be the notion of nihilism originating from the ‘common sense’ principle which targets its ‘critique’ – the removal and annihilation of ‘reality’ inspired by Kantian philosophy; *i. e.* the notion of nihilism, which means a reduction of reality to structures ‘accessible’ to common sense and everyday consciousness. The other one representing the opposite (transcendental, idealistic) perspective, which, to tell the truth, has not taken root in the thinking of modernity, but means the annihilation of reality ‘accessible’ to ‘common sense’.

So what does the ‘naive’ example of Ferraris show? What is his attitude towards nihilism? Does this example confirm the revival of Jacobi’s nihilism? Is Ferraris only a late descendant of Jacobi criticising Kant and the transcendental tradition of philosophy from revived ‘empiricist positions’? Or is it rather on the contrary?

Moreover, and despite one or another answer to the question about nihilism, we also have to answer one more question:

³ See also: “J.-P. Sartre’o ontologinis nihilizmas”, in: R. Šerpytytė. *Nihilizmas ir Vakaru filosofija*. Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2007.

what does the insight into the manipulative power of the subject of modernity really mean (which Ferraris mentions and which is discussed by the Western philosophical tradition relating nihilism to the thinking of modernity)?

First of all, I would like to observe that Ferraris' example is a good opportunity to see that the problem of nihilism is not, in fact, (only) the (ontological) problem of the nature of reality. This example of an 'everydayness nihilism', although indirectly (perhaps, against Ferraris' will), reveals the fact that nihilism is not a 'description' of reality, but is a 'diagnosis' of reality. If we looked back, then we could notice that also Jacobi and his contemporaries, when they named something as nihilism, they not just developed the theoretical argument over the different understanding of the (ontological) basis of reality, but declared/established a certain condition of reality, the nihilist condition.

The approach to the nihilist gesture as an announcement, a 'diagnosis', is usually linked to Nietzsche. We would have to admit though that such a 'structure' of the nihilist gesture becomes apparent already in the writings of Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, which acquire a special and particularly effective form of a literary *announcement*. A nihilist most often presents himself not only as an 'announcer', a 'diagnostician', but also as a 'prophet'. Yet he is often identified simply with theory, perhaps, due to the not always 'open', direct', character of the announcement, due to the tension between the 'announcement' and the 'theory' inherent in nihilism. It is obvious that both the nihilism criticised by Jacoby and the one

announced by Sartre look more similar to 'conceptions' of reality than to 'diagnoses' or 'prophecies'.

All this 'medical' (according to Jünger) or prophetic phraseology finally reaches the end when, in his book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin defines the concept of the *performative* (Austin 1975: 4–7). The theory of nihilism acquires a theoretical tool, a concept, which it has missed so much. The category of performative is gaining greater popularity not only among linguists and law theorists, but also, of course, among philosophers. Then the Nietzschean nihilism starts to be treated as a performative⁴.

As we know, the performative as defined by Austin is a linguistic statement that describes not a certain state of things, but a real fact produced directly and immediately. The paradox of the performative lies in the fact that the signification/meaning of a statement coincides with the reality it has produced, founded, by conveying that meaning to it. Thus, a performative utterance can be neither true nor false (Austin 1975: 39–52; 53–66). As we know, this thesis by Austin received many comments and interpretations. Some of them, like the thesis itself, are significant also to the explanations of the performative character of nihilism.

Benveniste separated performative utterances in the direct sense from other linguistic categories with which they could be confused (Benveniste 1966: 273). One of more important things to the theory of nihilism, however, would be a direct link,

⁴ See the most important: Gianni Vattimo. *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*. Milano: Bompiani, (1974) 1999.

noticed already by Benveniste and emphasised particularly by Giorgio Agamben, connecting the sphere of performativity to the domain of law (this is confirmed also by the etymology – the closeness of *ius* and *iurare*) (Agamben 2005: 123). Agamben thinks that law in general can be defined as the area in which all language strives to acquire the value of a performative. However, then we should ask: what use does this have to the theory of nihilism? Let us return to Agamben. It is he who notices (and he does it while discussing the link between performativity and law in Benveniste's wake) that "to create things with words <...> is not such an innocent activity and law can be considered as such a relic in language <...> where words and facts, a linguistic expression and real efficiency used to coincide" (Agamben 2005: 123).

In other words, if nihilism is not a true or false description of reality or 'the condition of things', but a performative beyond the criterion of true/false, *i. e.* truth/error, can we choose to be nihilists or not? Has the thinking of modernity realised such a choice?

And if 'to do things with words' is not such an innocent activity, we can ask more specifically: is Turgenev responsible for the fire in St. Petersburg? Has Nietzsche killed God? And what about coffee? Does the empirical argument suggested in Ferraris' example cure us from nihilism – a nihilism that I have arbitrarily established as a condition in an attempt to disregard the reality of physical things, yet 'coffee', or rather its absence, has revealed the power of physical reality to me and at the same time the impotence of my 'nihilism', even its caricature aspect?

Meanwhile, Agamben asks how a performative realises its goal. This question contains what is important to us: how is the founding power of nihilism realised? How can the simplest statement reach a factual efficacy just by being pronounced? (Agamben 2005: 123). Linguists cannot answer this question. Agamben claims that it looks like they simply believe in the magic of language.

Meanwhile, what remains beyond the domain of linguistic interests is important to the theory of nihilism. In this case it is important that any performative has a self-referential character. "Yet self-reference cannot be exhausted just by the fact that, as Benveniste claims, a performative (utterance) considers itself as a referent because it points to reality that it constitutes", – Agamben says (Agamben 2005: 123). Agamben's insight explains a performative as self-referential; according to it, the self-referential character of a performative always constitutes itself by suspending the normal denotative character of language. A performative word is always construed/stated in *dictum*, which as such has a purely constative structure without which it would remain empty and inefficient. In other words, no *I command*, neither a nihilist *I announce*, would have value or efficacy if there was no *dictum* that would fill them with contents. The constative character of *dictum* is both suspended and evoked when this *dictum* becomes the object of a performative syntagma. Thus, a performative replaces a normal denotative relationship between the word and the fact (thing) with a self-referential relationship (Agamben 2005: 123). This places significance not

on the truth relationship between words and things, but, in Agamben's words, "the very pure form of a relationship between language and the world, now becoming a producer of real links and effects." (Agamben 2005: 123–124). According to Agamben, the old *Law of the Twelve Tables* that expresses the performative power of law does not mean that what is said is true, but that the *dictum* is *factum* and that it binds the persons to whom it is announced by responsibility (Agamben 2005: 124; Watson 1998).

However strange it may be, but the performative character of nihilism, it seems, this most obvious characteristic of nihilism, is most often disregarded not only by the critics of nihilism and fighters against nihilism, but also by the theorists of nihilism themselves. Nihilism is often treated as a theory describing reality, which has to deny any theory alternative to it. 'Common sense' and realist attitudes can nihilistically fight against 'idealism', 'chimerism', etc., but also they can do the opposite. Yet we would have to say that nihilism has as much in common with 'common sense' as with, for example, transcendental idealism because the 'essence' of nihilism lies elsewhere: precisely in the coincidence of *dictum* and *factum*. It is interesting to note that in its

performativity nihilism is structurally closer to faith (the profession of faith) than to some theory of reality. Paul's *Letter to the Romans* as described by Agamben in *Performativum fidei* (Agamben 2005: 125–126) is, I think, analogous to the performative of nihilism.

Yet to conclude, let us return to Maurizio Ferraris' example. As we can see from it, Ferraris draws a line between the worlds of different objects: the world of physical, ideal and social objects⁵. If nihilism is possible, then only with regard to the latter (world). The argument of coffee, it seems, is not valid here.

Now, we do not want to ask, however, whether the 'realist' theoretical conceptions of our reality or 'common sense' can be a sufficient barrier against us becoming nihilists. Now we want to ask: can a certain 'description' of reality, namely an 'empiricist', 'realist' description of reality, be a description marking the limit of performativity and, simultaneously, the potential of nihilism? Or otherwise: is it true that if there were no 'false' theories of reality, it would be impossible to announce nihilism?

⁵ See Maurizio Ferraris. "Postfazione. Quisquillie e quiddità", in Maurizio Ferraris. *Il tunnel delle molte. Ontologia degli oggetti quotidiani*, p. 233–260. And also: Maurizio Ferraris. *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciar tracce*. Roma–Bari: Laterza, 2009.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. 2005. *Il tempo che resta*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Agamben, G. (1998) 2008. *Il linguaggio e la morte. Un seminario sul luogo della negatività*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Austin, J. L. (1962) 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benveniste, É. 1966. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Cunningham, C. 2002. *Genealogy of Nihilism*. London–New York: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. Agamben, G. 2006. *Bartleby. La formula della creazione*. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- Ferraris, M. 2008. *Il tunnel delle multe. Ontologia degli oggetti quotidiani*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Ferraris, M. 2009. *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciar tracce*. Roma–Bari: Laterza.
- Jacobi, F. H. (1799) 2001. *Fede e nichilismo. Lettera a Fichte*, trad. it. G. Sansonetti. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Jünger, E. (1949) 1989. *Über die Linie*. In Ernst Jünger – Martin Heidegger. *Oltre la Linea*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Milbank, J. 1990. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. London: Blackwell.
- Miłosz, Cz. (1997) 1998. *Road-Side Dog*. New York: Macmillan: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sartre, J. P. (1943) 2007. *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Tomas, Y. 1995. *Fictio legis. L'empire de la fiction romaine et ses limites médiévales*, „Droit“, XXI.
- Vattimo, G. (1974) 1999. *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Watson, A. 1996. *Jesus and the Law*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Watson, A. 1998. *Ancient Law and Modern Understanding*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

NIHILIZMAS, PERFORMATYVUMAS IR KASDIENYBĖS ONTOLOGIJA

Rita Šerpytytė

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje svarstoma performatyvumo problema, iškilusi teoriniuose nihilizmo tyrinėjimuose. Norint atskleisti aštrius, tačiau savaip „paslėptus“ šios problemos kampus, nihilizmo analizė yra kreipiama į vadinamąją kasdienybės „ontologiją“. M. Ferraris kasdienybės „ontologijos“ teorinės nuostatos straipsnyje tampa ne tik parankiu nihilizmo problemos interpretacijos lauku, bet sykiu ir teorinės kritikos objektu. Pasitelkiant ne tik nihilizmo „diagnostikų“ nuostatas,

bet ir J. L. Austino, É. Benveniste, G. Agambeno etc. argumentus, straipsnyje oponuojama nihilizmo kaip tikrovės teorijos traktavimui. Atliktas tyrimas demonstruoja negalimybę nihilizmą laikyti paprasčiausia tikrovės teorija ir iškelia reikalavimą nihilizmą traktuoti kaip performatyvą.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: nihilizmas, kasdienybė, ontologija, performatyvumas, tiesa, tikrovė.

Įteikta 2009 10 01