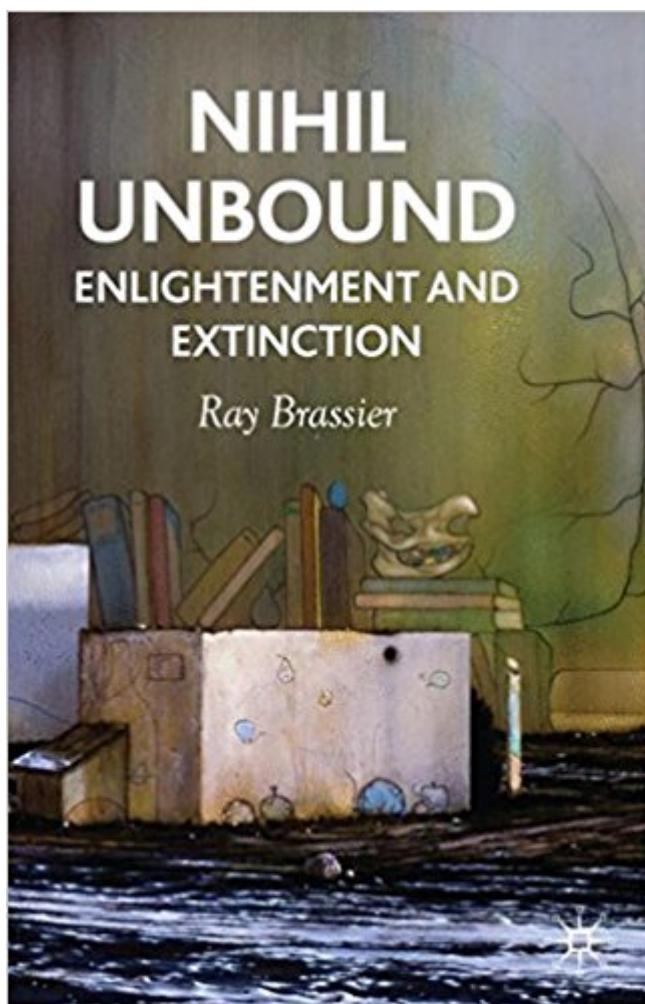


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Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment And Extinction



Synopsis

This book pushes nihilism to its ultimate conclusion by linking revisionary naturalism in Anglo-American philosophy with anti-phenomenological realism in French philosophy. Contrary to the 'post-analytic' consensus uniting Heidegger and Wittgenstein against scientism and scepticism, this book links eliminative materialism and speculative realism.

Book Information

Paperback: 275 pages

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007 edition (November 8, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 023052205X

ISBN-13: 978-0230522053

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.1 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #623,844 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Analytic Philosophy #229 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Phenomenology #252 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Existentialism

Customer Reviews

'[A] powerfully original work which determinedly sets in motion profound and searching questions about philosophy in its relation to the universe described by scientific thought, and to human ends [...] Forcibly disabusing use of the assumption that we have somehow dealt with the problem of nihilism, this book reawakens, and even intensifies the troubling, disruptive power for thought that it once heralded.' - Robin Mackay, Parallax 'Nihil Unbound makes good on many of its promises, chief among them providing the reader a rare experience: actual philosophical discovery [...] Brassier's [...] work provides stunning evidence of at least one of Adorno's contentions: "Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism." - Knox Peden, Continental Philosophy Review 'Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek are the most renowned incarnation of a contemporary European philosophy finally in the process of stepping out from under the shadow of Kantian transcendental idealism and its complex, two-hundred-year aftermath [...] Ray Brassier too is one of the thinkers at the forefront of these exciting new developments.' Adrian Johnston, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology

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Highly thought-provoking book on an underexplored topic. The author is exceptionally brilliant.

I am writing this review for the same reason I read Brassier's book: it's for class. But it is a fun class and the book is just as good, so don't let that fact discourage you from reading the remainder of this review. Let's just say that I would much rather read Brassier for a second time than read something boring like Descartes or some other dead guy or even the remainder of this review for a first time. That is not to say that this is a bad review (or a review that is bad). If I were assigned to review my review of Brassier's book I'd give it a 3/5, good at times but overly self-aware and a bit off-topic. I would rather read Brassier than this review. And I would rather read Chapter 7 of his book six more times than read the whole thing twice. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* is dense in content and form. Brassier reads Paul Churchland, Adorno and Horkheimer, his colleague Quentin Meillassoux (if you haven't read much of this 'speculative philosophy' stuff but want to continue I'd say you should definitely read Meillassoux's *After Finitude*), Alan Badiou, Heidegger, Deleuze, Nietzsche and some other names. He tries to acclimate you with the philosophers he critiques, but in some chapters I found myself wishing I were better acquainted with some of the primary literature. For example, I couldn't keep up with the chapter on Badiou to be honest. It was out of my range. There were certain parts in which I had to do that thing where you go back and reread a passage several times before concluding that you just don't get it. So it's not an easy read but it's well organized and very interesting. The format is very simple for the most part. The majority of the chapters are just illustrations of 'this is what philosophy is doing wrong,' so you can technically read one and skip to the third part of the book. But don't, because they are all pretty interesting. Chapter 1 drags on for longer than it should, particularly for something that just illustrates the main concept but doesn't advance it. But it's an important chapter because it sets up the whole frame of the book (hence why it is the first chapter. Like I said, it has good structure and organization). Brassier promotes a form of eliminative materialism but at the same time tries to find a niche for philosophy in a world that has moved on without it. He basically wants philosophy to promote the scientific image, because otherwise philosophy will continue to be as obsolete as it has been ever since Kant. Science has advanced; philosophy must catch up and find itself a useful job. Here's a quick summary: Ray Brassier attacks the pervasive remnants of flawed human-centered ideology by

delving into the consequences inherent in scientific calculations about the destruction of everything (including space-time). In other words, Brassier takes the prediction that the fabric of matter itself will eventually disintegrate and then investigates its implications on human self-understanding. His goal is to change the discourse of philosophy, a discourse that erroneously places consciousness and thought as the apex of all becoming. By looking at the inevitable implications of extinction he affirms the inconsequence of human existence. Brassier criticizes mainstream philosophy discourses because they obstinately hold on to the notion that humans are of consequence in the universe. He ridicules this visceral human yearning for cosmic importance, and chastises philosophers for softening the news in order to console "the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem" (Preface xi). Brassier wants none of this baby stuff. He demands that metaphysicians push nihilism to its most obvious conclusion: that extinction retroactively annihilates all meaning. He pierces into the depths of the bleak void of nothingness, stares at it in the eyes, and returns to tell us that extinction has "always already occurred." We are already dead. First of all reader, you must know that in "one trillion, trillion, trillion (10^{1728}) years from now the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself, terminating the possibility of embodiment" (228). Not only does this imply that life, thought, space, and time will perish, it also logically proves that it has already happened. As Brassier puts it "everything is already dead" (223). The extinction of all has "retroactively" annihilated everything. This post-asymptopian state of "eternal and unfathomable blackness" already encompasses all diachronic events and forces us to confront implications that are far beyond them (228). Extinction pervades the present by encompassing "a future that has already been, and a past that is perpetually yet to be" (230). This eternal, ever-expanding nothingness is the only thing that exists. That is to say everything is already nothingness. Brassier's nihilism does not reduce human existence to some sort of subjectivism. On the contrary, it strips it of all its clutter. Nihilism allows us to observe a reality that "is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the 'values' and 'meanings' which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable" (Preface xi). It is this atavistic need to urgently hold on to the illusion of meaning that impedes intellectual progress, and it is only by accepting that extinction and its subsequent nothingness eternally pervade all reality that humans can frame their ponderings appropriately. It is the role of philosophy to clear the way for the advancement of science and to create a dialogue through which both can advance towards intellectual maturity. It's a good book but it can be tough to read at times if you are not acquainted with some of the philosophers Brassier critiques. Chapter 6 & 7 are the best parts (particularly the sections on Nietzsche). Read it if you get a chance.

If you ever thought you were important, you're wrong. In so many words, this is one of the axioms of Brassier's "Nihil Unbound." In three parts and seven chapters, Brassier sets up the argument that because extinction is nigh, there is no point in trying to extract a meaning from the lives we perceive. As Brassier states in the book's preface, "Philosophers would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature." Brassier defends nihilism as a necessity. No longer is nihilism thought of as the bleak alternative to Meaning, but a necessary realization of imminent extinction. Brassier calls nihilism a "crisis of meaning," with both the crisis and the concept of meaning understood through the way that we have been historically conditioned to understand. Whereas the nihilistic view of the past came from the acknowledgement that "God" is beyond our understanding, therefore our lives fall short of any kind of substantial Meaning, the nihilistic view of contemporary times comes from the fact that now we can grasp the science from which nature and our universe is constructed. The more that is known about science, the more a single point is driven in like a nail into the fibers of our being: humanity is not important. Each chapter of "Nihil Unbound" focuses on a different philosopher. Brassier's main focus in spotlighting each of these thinkers is to rail against any kind of human-centered philosophy. With extinction as imminent as ever, "philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem" (xi). The fatal flaw of philosophy is exposed: all philosophy is man-made, from the minds of humans who are trying to explain the conditions of being human. Brassier encourages us to stray from this with the path of nihilism. When humanity neglects its own self-interest, the root of philosophy can be centered around reality. Without nihilism, we are trapped inside the box of our own understanding. If we are still to be tied to our idea of Meaning, we cannot imagine a world which we are not part of. In order to do so, we must accept that we are already dead. Brassier's brand of nihilism encourages just that. Philosophy should not affirm or justify human existence, but rather, allow us to overcome our existence. Ray Brassier's thinking reminds one of a specific short story by Ray Bradbury. "Homecoming" tells the story of a boy named Timothy, who is the only mortal being in a family of mortals. He is treated differently by his siblings for his lack of immortality. Knowing that he will be outlived by everyone he knows forces Timothy to face his mortality every day. Timothy is nearing extinction. Unsure of his life's purpose, he is constantly on the search for meaning. "Oh, to have strong teeth, with incisors like steel spikes. Or strong hands, even, or a strong mind... But, no, he was the imperfect one, the sick one. He was even--he shivered and drew the candle flame closer--afraid of the dark." (Bradbury, 10). Timothy,

like the rest of mankind tends to do when faced with extinction, revels in his own fears and loathes in the fact that his life is worthless. The title, "Homecoming," refers to the family reunion that Timothy's family is preparing to attend. At the Homecoming, Timothy speaks with his Uncle Einar and confides in him his fear of death. "Don't feel badly, Nephew Timothy. Each to his own, each in his own way. How much better things are for you. How rich. The world's dead for us. We've seen so much of it, believe me. Life's best to those who live the least of it. It's worth more per ounce, Timothy, remember that." (Bradbury 17). Uncle Einar's words should serve as words of comfort to the entire human race. As we approach extinction, we are also steadily approaching a more precious life. Brassier calls life meaningless, and this is true. The only meaning that we can attempt to ascribe to our existence is the meaning that we create ourselves, meaning that has no value except to ourselves. Of course, mortality is a jarring idea, and the story ends with Timothy crying himself silently to sleep. The concepts in "Nihil Unbound" are universal, and offer a strange comfort to anyone who finds their imminent mortality frightening or jarring. A background knowledge of the philosophers discussed is implied by the author, so I would not recommend it to anyone who is especially new to the field of philosophy. And like most philosophical works, "Nihil Unbound" tends to fall prey to unnecessary jargon and overly verbose language. I give this book 3 stars.

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