The Abuse of Nihilism: And Strauss's Critique of Modernity

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Abstract: Our society is going through a profound crisis, with a series of problems such as loss of morality, collapse of faith, and decay of values flooding the whole society, and the standards of value judgment about right and wrong, good and evil, and justice becoming blurred, and people doing whatever they want, with unimaginable consequences. What we need to do is that in the face of value nihilism is not to escape, but to understand this crisis and nihilism. Many scholars have expressed their thoughts on nihilism, the most typical one being Strauss. Strauss proposes that the ultimate of modernity is nihilism and points out that only natural justice can overcome nihilism. This paper attempts to discuss both Strauss's modernity and nihilism critique, explore the roots and development of nihilism, and then explore possible ways out.

Keywords: Nihilism; Strauss; Modernity.

1. Introduction

As society continues to develop, human beings are immersed in the developed material world, experiencing the endless enjoyment brought by economic development and technological progress. While immersed in the materialistic world and enjoying the "happy" society, most people have given up the goal of struggle and generally fallen into a state of value loss, and the spiritual world is filled with emptiness, blindness, anxiety and decadence. Faced with the nihilistic dilemma of declining values and lack of faith, individual behavior loses its rational basis, everyone has his own rules of evaluation, and the standards of value judgment such as justice and injustice, good and evil, right and wrong become blurred and do not have objectivity, and human beings are no longer blamed or punished for evil. Human beings are caught in nihilism, but they can do nothing about it.

After experiencing two world wars and the rapid economic development of Western society, Strauss found that various problems had emerged in the process of development, the most prominent of which was the problem of modernity. Strauss believes that the prevalence of nihilism goes back to the rise of modernity, which, due to the decline of classical natural justification, has led to the gradual abandonment of absolute values for modern man and the loss of the purpose and direction of action. The nihilism here is mainly the nihilism of value and morality, and the root cause of this nihilism is the abandonment of morality and value neutrality by modernity. According to Strauss, the crisis of modernity is manifested in the fact that "he no longer knows what he wants he no longer believes that he can know what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong." Here "not knowing" is a kind of uncertainty, and "unsure" is a wandering, skeptical state of mind about faith, but both show a negative attitude, and finally both give up the ultimate standard of value evaluation. Then, the only basis for value judgment is the blind preference standard, which changes with time, space and people, and the relativization and subjectivization of value is inevitable. At the same time, there is no valid reason to support or oppose the superiority of one value over another, and all values are the same. All values are simply a reflection of people's different preferences. The final result is that human beings no longer believe that there are any objective things or theories to support our subjective choices, they no longer believe in the existence of so-called eternal and universal objective values, they no longer believe in the existence of things that are originally justified, the ultimate standard of value evaluation is lost, and human beings gradually move towards the abyss of nihilism. Based on this, Strauss proposes that in order to overcome the crisis of modernity and nihilism, we must go beyond modernity and nihilism, especially after the collapse of absolute values, whether Strauss' proposal to return to the classical approach is feasible, and if not, what is the way out?

2. Literature Review

2.1. On Nihilism

Many Western scholars have their own unique perspectives on nihilism, but they all have a negative attitude toward it, typically Nietzsche, Heidegger, Strauss, etc. Nietzsche proposed "the death of God! .... This statement undoubtedly destroyed the Christian faith in Western society, and the absolute value collapsed, and people generally fell into a state of self-submerged nothingness. Nietzsche believed that modernity had allowed nihilism to grow and spread, and that this nihilism was a corrupting disease. In his view, nihilism means "[1] the self-deprecation of the highest values. There is no purpose, no answer to purpose." It is a state of transition from the collapse of the old faith to the establishment of a new one. Nihilism is a double meaning: nihilism as a criterion for the improvement of spiritual power is positive nihilism, and nihilism as the decline and regression of spiritual power is negative nihilism. Nietzsche's critique of nihilism is a positive nihilism, and he believes that in order to overcome nihilism, it is necessary to rediscover the value of sensual life, to manifest the spirit of the god of wine and the superhuman will to power, and thus to re-affirm the meaning of life. Heidegger
believes that Nietzsche's critique of nihilism is still within the metaphysical tradition and does not really overcome nihilism. Heidegger connects nihilism with being and being-happening, and from the perspective of being, he believes that being and nihilism are relative, and that the abandonment of being the abandonment of existence, or forgetting, is what gives rise to nihilism. Berlin argues that relativism is the cause of nihilism, while he shows that pluralism is not relativism. In "The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Critique of Modern Nihilism," Koros divides modern nihilism into political nihilism, moral nihilism, existential nihilism, epistemological nihilism, and cosmological nihilism, of which all four are philosophical except for "political nihilism. nihilism.

2.2. On Strauss's Nihilism

The study of Strauss's nihilist theory has been carried out in several aspects: First, nihilism is examined from the perspective of the critique of modernity. Since the core of Strauss's research is the problem of modernity, most scholars at home and abroad have viewed Strauss's thought from this perspective. Pi argues that an important aspect of Strauss's theory of modernity is implicit in the difference between classical and modern. Classical philosophers believed that there was no possibility of "reconciliation" between politics and philosophy, between the minority and the majority, but modern political philosophy believes that it is possible to "reconcile", and this reconciliation is the formation of a generally autonomous, socially integrated, self-reproducing, power- and autonomy-based political community. This reconciliation is the formation of a generally autonomous, socially integrated, self-reproducing, power- and autonomy-based political community. For Strauss, this is the society of positivism and nihilism. Starting from the "three waves of modernity," Tian Guangyuan believes that nihilism, the crisis of modernity, is formed in one wave of modernity after another. The representative figure of the first wave was Machiavelli, who removed morality from politics; the second wave regarded human nature as historical rather than natural, and gradually departed from the naturalism of classical political philosophy; the driving force of the third wave was Nietzsche and Heidegger, who pushed historicism to the peak, and people fell into the dilemma of nihilism.[2]

Second, Strauss's nihilistic theory is examined from the perspective of the critique of historicism. Strauss regards historicism and positivism as the most representative trends of thought under the crisis of modernity, especially historicism. Many scholars have explored and studied historicism along Strauss's lines. Zhang Wenxi believes nihilism is the inevitable result of the development of historicism and distinguishes Marx from historicism through Marx's criticism of the historical school, arguing that both Marx and Strauss have the purpose of overcoming nihilism.[3] Some scholars have also questioned Strauss's historicist path of thought. Niu Zihong argues that historicism opposes universal values based on natural law, and that it does not necessarily lead to relativism or nihilism. Marx's historicism, that is, both recognizes the variability of all value criteria and establishes such criteria on an objective basis, thus making historicism not lead to nihilism. [4] Third, contrasts Strauss with other thought will, especially contrasts Strauss with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Arendt, and Berlin. Bens recognizes Strauss' thought in terms of the different views of Strauss, Nietzsche, and Heidegger on classical political philosophy. He points out that while Strauss and Heidegger share "the failure of modernity's attempt to understand human existence on the basis of modern science and its 'conquest of nature,'" they differ on the roots of nihilism. Strauss sees nihilism as a result of the modern abandonment of the classical, a rupture between the two. Heidegger, on the other hand, sees the connection between modern science and classical philosophy as the cause.[5]

To sum up, although each school of thought has a unique opinion on nihilism, from Strauss's perspective, nihilism is closely related to the development of modernity, and the exploration of nihilism is essentially an examination of the critique of its modernity. Then, is the crisis of hedonism in the political sphere, the question of the meaning and value of life that people have given up in modern society, the inevitable result of modernity, or is there another reason for it? Therefore, the focus of this paper is to clarify the relationship between modernity and nihilism, to analyze the causes of nihilism, and to explore the way out of nihilism.

3. Modernity and Nihilism

Why do people still feel anxious, empty and decadent in contemporary society despite their material abundance? Apart from Nietzsche, Strauss is a representative of the reflection on nihilism, which he believes is the product of modernity and the ultimate expression of modernity. So, how does modernity lead to nihilism?

3.1. Modern Natural Rights and Nihilism

Strauss argues that modernity is rife with nihilistic incentives, and that the rationality, freedom, and power proclaimed by modern political philosophy have led people to stop pursuing the highest sense of good, and that it is the modern departure of natural rights from classical natural justice that has led to nihilism. The rupture between modern political rights and classical natural justification did not happen overnight, but was a gradual departure in the process of modernization. According to Strauss' understanding, nihilism arises under the crisis of modernity, and the process of modernity's development is in turn the course of the gradual deepening of the crisis of modernity. He believes that the evolutionary process of modernity is divided into three stages.

The first stage of modernity began with Machiavelli. Strauss considers Machiavelli as the pioneer of modern political philosophy, who abandoned the natural justification of classical political philosophy and switched the classical political philosophy's concern with the contingent to the real, focusing on "how people actually live" and how individuals can overcome their own limitations with their acquired efforts, and how people can control their own destiny. The individual can overcome his own limitations by his own efforts, and he can control his own destiny. As for virtue, in the classical perspective, politics is subordinate to virtue, and politics is only a means to an end, virtue is the final end, the moral pursuit of citizens through politics. Machiavelli, however, elevates politics to a supreme position and puts virtue at the service of politics. At the same time, moral and political problems can be converted into technical problems to be solved, and the solution of political problems requires rigorous institutions, not virtue. The foundations on which classical political philosophy rested were also destroyed. The successor to Machiavelli was Hobbes. Hobbes believed that the state was artificial and controlled by people's passions, and therefore the theory of the state should be built around the
"actual" rather than the "supposed". In Hobbes's natural law, rights began to be the center of the theory, and the duties that people should do were deduced from rights, emphasizing the supremacy of human rights and the derivation of duties from rights. Locke, on the other hand, continued to develop the natural law along the lines of Hobbes, most notably in his argument for natural rights, equating happiness with "the possession of what produces the greatest pleasure."[6] The dissatisfaction of human material desires led to the birth of power, and in order to avoid such suffering, people should strive for greater power to achieve their own happiness. The first wave of modernity was initiated by Machiavelli, through Hobbes and then Locke, gradually forming the initial state of modern political philosophy, and the natural justification gradually disappeared. The ideas they put forward also laid the foundation for the Western idea of liberal democracy and equality.

The second wave of modernity was started by Rousseau. According to Strauss, Rousseau had already discovered the dangers of the first wave of modernity and tried to avoid it by revising some of the ideas of the first wave, but "made a greater mistake". Rousseau's state of nature is a world of peace, equality, and freedom, where nature provides for the good of the people. With the rise of private ownership, inequality, and slavery, the state of nature was gradually transformed into a state of society, and in order to protect the rights of nature, people formed a community by contract, and formed a common will, i.e., the public will. All the people of the community were to submit themselves to the common will. He took the public will as the basis of justice, not as "nature" or "oracle", and all social and political issues were judged on the basis of the value of the public will, and the "public will" became the "public will" becomes a standard. For Strauss, this was a serious departure from classical political philosophy. At the same time, Rousseau believed that human characteristics were not born, but were the result of active or passive adaptation to and overcoming of nature, and were the product of historical development. At this point, historicism emerged. In the second wave of modernity, the process of modernity was accelerated by the actions people took in order to gain greater freedom, and people made choices by virtue of their subjective and blind freedom, making the standard of value subjective. "The contemporary rejection of the theory of natural power then leads to nihilism - no, he is equivalent to nihilism."[7] The third wave of modernity was initiated by Nietzsche and culminated by Heidegger. Nietzsche believed that it was a delusion to try to find eternal truth in history, and that all thoughts, actions, and things in the world are historical. The so-called truths and standards of value are only relative. He pointed out that "all ideals are the result of human creative activity, the result of free human planning". This claim attributes everything to the free creation of man, and all rooted ideas become unsupported. At this point, Nietzsche abandoned his insistence on history and proposed "revaluation of all values", but he also said that "God is dead" and the only basis and criterion for judgment is "the will to power, and it is the "will to power" of the "superman". The "will of power" of the "superman". This means that man is no longer subject to nature or to the will of God, nor does he have to act according to his acquired "rights", but by virtue of his "will", he becomes the master of his own destiny. Although Nietzsche wanted to theoretically retrace his steps like Rousseau and found the "will to power" in pre-Socratics, liberating virtue from the summary of absolute reason, when he saw morality as a kind of bondage and wanted to get rid of it, when he thought that everything was created by himself, wasn't it a step away from nihilism? Heidegger goes further along the lines of Nietzsche, who denies the possibility of a good life in terms of both reason and revelation, and who examines all thought in history, in time, and in each thinker's own time, at which point philosophy and God are abandoned as unfounded conceptions, and universal moral norms lose their condition of existence. Heidegger argues that "the whole itself can never be grasped, or rather, it is not comprehensible; human thought is essentially dependent on something that is unpredictable, that can never be an object, or that can never be grasped by the subject; 'to be' in the highest sense does not mean-or, at any rate, it does not necessarily mean-'to be always' (to be always)."[8] And then, Heidegger's thought shifted further by arguing that all human destinations are subservient to mysterious forces and that everything has a destiny of its own. This thought led people into a deeper nothingness.

For Strauss, the departure of modern political philosophy from classical political philosophy in the development of modernity allowed for the creation of nihilism. This is summarized on three levels: first, the shift from obligation-led to right-led. Modernity puts rights first, and therefore they always pursue rights before obligations in their own interest. The result is that moral standards are left behind, and everything is based on profit, which is no standard at all. Secondly, from concern for "what should be" to concern for "what is". In modern times, we no longer seek for an ideal political order and a good society, and we take "living in the present" as a dogma. In fact, this is also to put human interest and will in the forefront, and ignore the role of morality. This is another way of verifying the abandonment of values guided by the tendency of "rights". Third, the view of rationality. First, reason occupies a certain position in both classical and modern times. But the classical view is that reason is not omnipotent and that human reason must be subordinated to the laws of nature. The modern natural right honors an instrument of reason, which not only lacks value but also has an arrogance that reason can control everything, including all kinds of chance. It is the modern rejection of classical liberal justification that has led people to the quagmire of nihilism.

3.2. Modernism and Nihilism

In his discussion of modernity, Strauss includes positivism, historicism, and liberalism in his critique, which he sees as the culprits that led to the eventual creation of nihilism. Positivism is strong factual judgment and opposes value judgment. They believe that science is based on empirical facts and can only answer questions within the scope of experience, for whether it reflects the essence of things as well as objective laws, this question has exceeded the scope of human understanding and cannot be answered by man, so it should remain value-neutral. Strauss believes that this ability to be value-neutral and to oppose value judgment is a complete rebellion against classical philosophy. For classical political philosophy, natural justification is grounded in value judgments of good and evil, right and wrong. If society were to adopt a neutral attitude toward everything, without value judgments, wouldn't it be completely meaningless for us to distinguish between good and bad, good and evil, etc. This would mean that there would be no fetters, all behavior would be allowed, and society would eventually become chaotic and
dangerous. It is in this way that Strauss argues that positivism provides the possibility for nihilism to arise.

Historicists believe that everything is relative and deny the existence of universal values in this world. They believe that any scale of value is relative, that people in different times and regions have different understandings of the same thing, and that people in different regions of the same time will have different views of the same thing. Historicism believes that there is no such thing as eternal affairs or values, nor is man capable of grasping absolute truths that transcend everything, so the value goals or beliefs that people revere under different historical conditions are all equal, and there is no difference between high and low, noble and low. When there is no unified standard, we are also unable to make value judgments on the affairs around us and fall into a state of chaos and confusion. It can be said that historicism paved the way for the development of nihilism. Strauss considered nihilism to be the pinnacle of historicism.

For Strauss, liberalism emerged with the emergence of modern natural rights, which led to the crisis of modernity and sent people into nihilism. Therefore, liberalism is also one of the causes of nihilism. Libertarianism emphasizes the freedom of individual rights, both positive and active freedom, and the freedom from all fetters, and the right of the individual to determine his or her own behavior, within the limits of the law, without being limited by any outside force, as long as it does not affect the freedom of others. This emphasis on the right to individual freedom, in the words of Rawls, "is the first question modern men ask, what they regard as the authoritative prescriptions of right and reason, and these prescriptions of reason lead to rights, duties, and responsibilities. It is only after this that their attention turns to the good that these prescriptions allow us to pursue and cherish" In other words, rights take precedence over the good. It is this shift that makes the absolute standard of value relative, no longer believing in an eternal, universal, objective standard of value evaluation. This is moral laissez-faire, which is a complete nihilism.

4. The Way Out of Nihilism

4.1. Back to Classical Nature Justified

In fact, Strauss was not the only one to propose the use of ancient Greek nature to overcome nihilism, but so did Karl Lovett. Lovett argues that the negation of the Greek view of history by the Christian transcendental view of history leads to the modern view of history and thus to nihilism. Therefore, to overcome nihilism it is necessary to abandon the Christian view of moral history and return to the ancient Greek view of history as naturally justified, i.e., Stoic naturalism. "The world and the earth are not equivalents. The physical world can be thought without the existence of man as a reference, while man cannot be thought without the world.... The world does not belong to us, but on the contrary, we belong to the world." [9] For Lovett, man is a part of nature, and we have to think of nature primarily, and Lovich is painstaking about his return to the classical. But some scholars point out that what Lovett wanted to recover was the Stoic idea of nature, but what Strauss wanted was the Stoic idea of natural justification.

From Strauss' perspective, to overcome nihilism is to return to the ancient Greek tradition of classical political philosophy and to find natural justice. Strauss believed that classical natural justice could guide human beings, could lead them to a good, virtuous life.

Natural justice begins with the discovery of nature by the people. Before the discovery of nature, the standard of human behavior depended on the habits of life left by our ancestors. But custom, as an artificial product, changes with the community and with the territory, and what is reasonable in one place may be unreasonable in another due to different customs. Thus, ancestral or traditional authority does not have universal applicability. In this case, the people then think about the nature behind things and look for what is eternal behind the phenomena. According to Strauss, natural justification is the origin of things, the standard for judging good and evil, and its justification is determined by natural law and expressed through the rituals of society and human behavior. To return to classical natural justification is to demand that man be guided by natural justification in the form of natural justification. Natural justification represents an ultimate value, an ultimate criterion for judging matters, i.e., the "good". Modern man, on the other hand, places too much emphasis on external material things, and no longer believes that there is an eternal "good" or "justice" worth pursuing, and no longer has ultimate concern, thus leading to the crisis of modernity. Both classical and modern need value judgment, and human society in some sense points to a certain ultimate value, only in the classical is "good" is "justice", the classical natural justification of this objective value, can exclude the establishment on the basis of artificial value This objective value of classical natural justice can exclude the nihilism that results from being based on artificial values. Strauss pointed out that human beings should have a standard to measure everything they do, so that society can develop in a good direction, and there must be morality. Human beings are social animals, and inevitably more or less problems arise in their daily interactions, how to solve them and satisfy everyone? A standard is needed, and Strauss believes that "natural justice" is the best measurement mechanism. In the pursuit of freedom, modern people have neglected human virtue, put rights in the first place, considered obligations and morality as optional, and put morality in an infinitely smaller scale, which is why Hitler came to power and the Jews were slaughtered. To return to natural justice is to reduce rationality to a certain extent, and to ask people to regard duty as their own duty, and to put the interests of the community before individual interests, and to return to "good before right", and to stop doing things that harm others and even society in order to satisfy their own rights and interests. Therefore, for Strauss, classical nature is the best remedy to solve the crisis of modernity and to overcome emptiness.

4.2. The Possibility of Classical Natural Justification

For Strauss, nihilism is rooted in the crisis of modernity, and in order to overcome the crisis of modernity, we must go beyond the framework of modernity, so he explores the solution to the crisis of modernity from the perspective of classical political philosophy. The pursuit of "freedom" and "rights" is replaced by the pursuit of "goodness" and "justice" by modern right thinking, and people only pay attention to the immediate and real interests. The pursuit of ultimate values is abandoned, and the spiritual world is no longer guided by the highest values, and human society begins to degenerate. With the development of society, people are in a changing and pluralistic society, and various values are flooding in the society, relativism is prevalent, there is no fixed standard for
everything in the world, and people feel that life has no goal and is meaningless, and all this is because modernity denies the eternal and universal truth and gives up the public meaning of morality and value judgment. Therefore, the only way out is to return to the classical. Strauss’s approach does provide a path to overcome nihilism, but it is still problematic from a practical point of view. We are in a society where various cultures and values collide with each other, and the existence of multiple values is already a fact. Even if it is the best way out for people all over the world to follow an absolute eternal value that transcends time, place, and nation, how are we going to reconstruct an absolute value that everyone agrees on? Secondly, in Strauss’ view, natural justice is found by a few virtuous people, and only they can construct a good society and lead people to goodness in the way of "natural justice". The rulers who have power are also subject to the constraints of "natural justice" and "universal reason". However, "natural justice" is the highest absolute value, and its interpretation is in the hands of the rulers. Historically, many rulers have exercised authoritarian rule in the name of "concern for humanity" and "pursuit of morality". Rather than solving the problem of value futility, this may also lead to value arbitrariness and even totalitarianism. Moreover, Strauss believed that such eternal absolute values must exist, but people just need to discover them. If we want to accomplish the whole world to follow the same value, I am afraid that we can only do it by violent means, which will be a bigger disaster. Therefore, a return to classical justification is unrealistic and dangerous.

Although Strauss’ attempt to return to the classical to overcome nihilism is unrealistic, his insistence on the critique of modernity, his initiative to return reason to its original meaning, and to make nature justified can bring us insights to deal with the abuse of nihilism and overcome the crisis of modernity.

4.3. The Realistic Way out of Nihilism

In the current society, it is an established fact that values are pluralistic. But it is obviously wrong to treat all values as reasonable because we want to respect pluralistic values. And for Strauss, pluralism is relativism, and relativism will eventually lead to nihilism. Since a return to the classics is unrealistic, we can only find another way out.

In a value pluralistic society, not all values can be respected, but only rational pluralistic values are worthy of respect. First of all, cults, extremists and terrorist ideas are excluded here. In order to maintain social harmony and bring people back to a meaningful life, it is necessary to find a basic consensus among multiple values. Berlin points out that common humanity gives human beings certain "basic categories" and "commonalities," and it is these commonalities that make it possible to understand each other. Although people of different regions and nationalities have different views on specific issues, general principles can still exist regardless of regional and cultural differences. Therefore, consensus built on the common humanity of people may become the value that human beings follow.

In response to this problem, some scholars also propose to solve nihilism by constructing a universal ethics. Different cultures and values collide with each other in the current society, and the plurality of cultures and values cannot and should not be eliminated. Then, we can only find the biggest convention among different cultures and values, and make use of the trend of globalization to work out a universal ethical consensus through equal dialogue and exchange and consultation, so as to jointly avoid conflicts among civilizations and thus resist value nihilism. However, it is worth noting that universal ethics should be built through mutual tolerance and respect in the exchange of cultures.

5. Concluding Remarks

For Strauss, modernity has led to nihilism, and modern rationality has led to a loosening of values and a proliferation of relativism. Strauss left behind a wealth of interpretations of these beliefs and the crisis of modernity to inspire future generations, although a return to classical natural justice was somewhat impractical and did not effectively prevent the spread of nihilism, but gave us a model for the revival of the old civilization. The emphasis on the criteria of "right and wrong, right and wrong," etc., is instructive for our understanding of modernity and the crisis of modernity. In the face of this nihilistic dilemma, we cannot let it continue to wreak havoc, even though there are various cultures and values in our society, and the line between value pluralism and value relativism is blurred, we can only strive to form a consensus based on peaceful and friendly communication, and build a universal ethic to deal with nihilism.

References