

Nihilism and Turgenev's novel "Fathers and Sons"

Post by "Martin" of April 20, 2023 at 5:30 AM

Ivan Turgenev writes in the epilogue to his novel "Fathers and Sons" that a young physician he had known inspired him to write the novel and to embody that physician in that novel.

He noted a similar mindset in other people as well but did not find it described in the literature known to him. Therefore, he created the term "nihilist" for this novel, apparently not knowing that "nihilism" had already been used previously.

The disciple of the nihilist physician in the novel defines a nihilist as "a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle without prior examination, no matter how revered it is." (My translation from the German translation in Chapter 5)

Turgenev was sympathetic to the ideas of the nihilist physician in his novel except for that nihilist's rejection of art. The novel became well known in Russia soon after the publication and was misinterpreted by political factions in Russia. Members of those factions falsely accused Turgenev to support the respective opposing faction with his novel whereas Turgenev merely attempted to capture the zeitgeist / revolutionary spirit of the young generation.

Some revolutionaries did call themselves nihilists after the novel had popularized the word. Nihilism was apparently used as a catch phrase for everything to which the older generation and those in power were opposed to.

The nihilism in Turgenev's novel as quoted above appears to be mostly compatible with Epicurus' philosophy. However, the meaning of nihilism has become much broader than in that quote. Within the novel, it is expanded to political nihilism and moral nihilism with usefulness as replacement for the traditional ethics based on Christianity.

Naive application of materialism to whatever aspect without thinking further has led to nihilism as negation of meaning in that aspect already in ancient philosophy. None of the philosophers who I have seen labeled as nihilistic so far were actually nihilists in every aspect but rather warned against nihilism or used it as a strawman to explain their own opposing views. E.g., Nietzsche wrote about nihilism not to propagate it but to diagnose it as a mindset with potentially catastrophic consequences and to overcome it. Albert Camus was apparently not a moral nihilist. Existentialism was rather a movement which did not get stuck in nihilism but build humanist ethics from materialism. Buddhism in general and Buddhism's concept of Nirwana in particular have nothing in common with nihilism. Buddha himself opposed the nihilists of his time.

Epicurus' philosophy shares materialism with nihilism and includes cosmic nihilism. Other types such as moral nihilism, epistemological nihilism and existential nihilism are apparently not

compatible with Epicurus' philosophy. Correspondingly, nihilism occurs in many comments in this forum as synonym for extreme skepticism, despair or absence of meaning.

More on "Fathers and Sons" as a recommended good read:

Whereas I usually prefer reading plays over novels, I enjoyed "Fathers and Sons" very much and got close to shedding sentimental tears at the end.

The novel is mostly humorous and touching. It creates an authentic Russian atmosphere, e.g., by incorporation of many Russian proverbs, descriptions of locations, weather conditions and traditional things and customs, and references to actual historic events.

The main characters are convincingly worked out. I liked all of them.

The nihilists in the novel appear to be rather talk-only when it comes to politics, in analogy with most leftist student groups in Germany of the last 50 years and the rebel leaders in the movie "Life of Brian".

The conflict between young nihilists and the elder in the novel appears to be merely the then contemporary variant of the eternal conflict between generations.

That conflict is surprisingly mooted in the father-son pairs to which the title refers.

Spoiler alert for those who consider reading Turgenev's novel "Fathers and Sons"!

The conflict becomes serious between the nihilist physician and the uncle of the nihilist physician's disciple and culminates in a duel.

The widowed father of the nihilist physician's disciple is reminded of the severe generational conflict he had with his mother in his own youth when he notices with some sadness the mental gap between himself and his son.

The son gives him (Ludwig) Buechner's book "Kraft und Stoff" to read (an introduction to scientific materialism for the general public actually published in 1855). He tells his brother: "Either I am a fool, or the author is insane. But certainly, I am a fool." (my translation from the German translation in Chapter 10)

That father has a baby with a young commoner and does at first not marry her to avoid offending his brother, who later on actually urges him to marry her.

That anglophile Russian traditionalist brother ironically ends up as somewhat nihilistic himself, living in Germany in his old age because of the relatively milder climate there.

The nihilist physician lives up to his nihilism by staying calm when faced with death twice but sometimes becomes comically inconsequential, especially when his nihilistic disregard for societal taboos propels him to inappropriate actions upon falling in love twice in contrast to his nihilistic dismissal of love.

An intellectual princess evokes the cliché of tsarina Katharina.

The initially eager disciple of the nihilist physician abandons nihilism and assumes his role as a rural aristocrat after marrying the younger sister of that princess.