Existentialism vs Nihilism

Existentialism and Nihilism are schools of thought that are similar in beliefs prompting many to mention them in the same breath. However, these are two different philosophies with many differences, which will be highlighted in this article for the benefit of the readers.

What is Nihilism?

Nihilism is a school of thought that has wrongly been misinterpreted as being a belief in nothing. A far realistic way of looking at Nihilism is to discard beliefs and values, as they serve no real purpose, and there is no positive outcome of keeping such faith and beliefs. Nihilism comes from the word nihil that means nil.

Nihilism does not concur with belief in final purpose or outcome. It is a theory that suggests no meaningful purpose of life. It is better characterize Nihilism as faith in nothing rather than belief in nothing. These two are totally different meanings that can be explained with belief in existence or non existence of God. If you are a Nihilist, you would not believe there is no God. Instead, it is better say that since it is nearly impossible to prove that God exists, it leads to absence or low confidence in the existence of God.

Similarly, if your wife has cheated on you, you would not say that it does not matter to you. But you would simplify the situation saying there is no way to check if spouse would not cheat in the future, and hence if she did cheat now it is not a surprise for you.

What is Existentialism?

Existentialists feel that they are not dependent upon their beliefs but actions, and even though there is little or no meaning of life, it is their freedom and responsibility, which is needed to eke out a meaning of life. Existentialism is pessimistic in nature as it believes that life is uncertain as also is our future. It takes individuals to carve meaning out of their own lives. Thus, every person is a product of his own choice and actions rather than being a victim of his circumstances.

What is the difference between Existentialism and Nihilism?

• Existentialism believes in the moment or now and here, while Nihilism believe in nothing or at least faith in nothing.

• Nihilism rejects any universal truth. The philosophy arose in early 19th century in Russia as a revolt of the existing structure recommending rejection of social constructs.

• Existentialism, though it too does not believe in any meaning of life, suggests that every individual is a product of his actions and not beliefs.