

Nihilism and Insanity: From Nietzsche to Foucault

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Doi: 10.56334/sei/8.2.30

Received: 07.12.2024; Accepted: 11.03.2025; Publication: 02.04.2025

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between nihilism and insanity, examining the philosophical trajectories of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. The connection between these two thinkers is traced through their respective works on madness, with particular focus on Foucault's *The History of Madness* and Nietzsche's concept of nihilism. The article discusses how madness is both a reflection and an expression of nihilism, with the implications for human identity and society. It investigates Foucault's critique of modernity and the role of madness in revealing the human condition, as well as Nietzsche's view of the inevitability of nihilism in the wake of the "death of God." By connecting these philosophical themes, the article sheds light on the complex interplay between personal identity, societal norms, and the philosophical concept of madness. The article concludes by emphasizing the enduring relevance of Nietzsche and Foucault in understanding the psychological and social dimensions of human existence.

Keywords: Nihilism, Insanity, Nietzsche, Foucault, Modernity

Introduction

Madness, as both a human and social phenomenon, is intertwined with several complex issues. Most notably, these issues are reflected in the modern and contemporary philosophical thought of Western civilization, which has evolved since the European Renaissance, particularly during the Age of Enlightenment.

The research and exploration during this period were closely linked to the groundbreaking discoveries made during the same era. These discoveries unfolded alongside the major questions of the eighteenth century, reflecting the goals of modern and contemporary man across various economic, social, political, and cultural levels, including philosophy.

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Citation: Zaoui W. (2025), Nihilism and Insanity: From Nietzsche to Foucault. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(2), 447-452. <https://imcra-az.org/archive/358-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-2-volviii-2025.html>

Thus, the primary question that emerged at the beginning of the philosophical exploration of the self was the search for the sources of the self and history, including its burdens. This was later explored through philosophical, sociological, and anthropological analysis in the nineteenth century. This era also saw political, social, economic, and technological revolutions. These revolutions were intertwined with the broader philosophical considerations of modernity.

The major questions posed within the framework of Western civilization's philosophical inquiry, particularly concerning modernity, were focused on the components of the modern mind. These components were built on the lofty goals of modern man, such as knowledge, freedom, brotherhood, democracy, human rights, free economy, social relations, international relations, scientific and technological discoveries, and the development of robotics and virtual knowledge. All these factors contributed to motivating humanity to better understand itself and its surroundings. This shift called for a reevaluation of the past, particularly the history of ideas and practices, from a new philosophical perspective.

It is clear that the French philosopher Michel Foucault is one of the few thinkers who excelled in approaching the archaeology of human knowledge. He achieved this by identifying and selecting the core aspects of knowledge within its philosophical dimension.

Foucault's approach began with presenting his understanding of the world and the events that shaped it, particularly after the Second World War. The wounds of the war were still fresh, and the European mind began to question the humanity of man and the history of humankind. Foucault's response focused on the marginal and often forgotten parts of society. Through this, he laid the groundwork for a new perspective in the history of contemporary Western philosophy. For Foucault, issues like insanity, the medical clinic, imprisonment, sex, language, and material objects all motivated his exploration into what he considered the true question of reality—the question that connects answers to lived experiences.

The starting point for Foucault was to present madness as a central theme in both life and reality. In his research work *The History of Madness in the Classical Age*, Foucault offers an in-depth archival exploration of the history of madness (Foucault, 1972). This work was primarily aimed at expanding upon the ideas put forth by another philosopher in the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's analysis of nihilism, born out of the "death of God," marked a shift in philosophical thought. Nietzsche's nihilism emerged from an ongoing investigation into the will to power, which sought to overturn existing values and create new structures based on more humane and realistic values. These new values were intended to confront the barbarism and alienation experienced by modern man, particularly following the European Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the onset of the modern era.

The importance of the epistemological question in Foucault's work lies in the beginning of the dislocation of cognitive concepts to understand their essence and to deconstruct their

meanings. Foucault's reading of Nietzsche in the 1950s opened vast horizons for understanding Western history, as confirmed by Cross in his significant work on Foucault (Cros, 1989, p. 14-15).

Foucault's studies, particularly *The History of Madness* and later *The Birth of the Clinic*, serve as a crucial prelude to his quest for the truth of humanity, especially in light of the rise of absolute modernity, which culminated in the end of madness and nihilism.

In this context, it is important to reconsider what Nietzsche presented about nihilism, both in culture and practice within the Western world. This includes the various political movements in France, Russia, and elsewhere, as reflected in the ideas of Fourier, Bakunin, and others, who justified the unjustifiable in order to establish new values. These new values were intended to replace the existing philosophical and political values by "destroying the modern mind," as George Lukács put it (Lukács, 1980).

Looking at the emergence of the medical clinic in the seventeenth century (1656 AD), it becomes clear that its main purpose was to categorize mental illnesses among the marginalized, beggars, and those with various disabilities. These individuals were seen as part of the long queue awaiting their inevitable end. This serves as the foundation for many of Foucault's attempts, especially in *The History of Madness in the Classical Age* (Foucault, 1972), and later in *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault, 1995).

Habermas correctly identified the true meaning that Foucault sought in all his works, culminating in his examination of the ego's role in modernity, particularly through the criticism he advanced in alignment with the Enlightenment tradition (Habermas, 1989, p. 124).

Therefore, the phenomenon of insanity, as Foucault chronicles it, should be understood in the context of mental illness, which is mainly associated with individuals. This should be approached from a more realistic perspective: that it does not stray far from the broader form of insanity that Nietzsche, both as a philosopher and a future observer of human history, feared. Nietzsche, in presenting himself as someone who fully understood the next two centuries, says in the preface to *The Will to Power*:

What I am telling you here is the history of the next two centuries, what will come, what will not come contrary to what I say is that the growth of nihilism we can already narrate this page of history, because the inevitability is continuing to accomplish its work in this case. This future has come to address us with the tongue of its many signs and precepts, and the inevitable destiny announces itself everywhere, and all the ears are delicate to hear this music of the future, our entire European civilization has been shaken for a long time under pressure that amounts to torture and grief that grows from decade to decade as if it wants to generate a disaster, anxious, violent and wild, like a river that wants to reach its mouth, no longer thinking, but becoming afraid to think (Nietzsche, 2011, p. 7).

Nietzsche warns of the madness inherent in Western civilization, offering a prophetic view of the future of European society. He asserts with certainty that nihilism will inevitably manifest, and that the collective and civilizational madness will explain the major events Europe will experience, particularly the First and Second World Wars. These events would later provide him with the justification to issue his warning. However, it is important to consider what Nietzsche means by *blindness* as a general perspective and *madness* as an individual experience.

Foucault's focus on insanity continues Nietzsche's search for the origins and consequences of nihilism. Nietzsche himself confronted personal insanity, declaring his attachment to madness as a means of escape from his suffering. He passionately exclaims, "Give me insanity, then, divine powers, insanity, so that I may finally come to believe in myself" (Nietzsche, *The Function of Madness*, cited in Deleuze, 1998, pp. 128-129). Nietzsche devoted numerous pages to examining insanity, linking it to nihilism, and discussing the origins of values, which he argued are rooted in the first place of human history. These values, Nietzsche believes, are fundamental to understanding the future trajectory of humanity.

Michel Foucault's work can be seen as a continuation of Nietzsche's exploration of insanity and nihilism. Foucault expands upon Nietzsche's ideas by examining how these concepts manifest in the history of human thought and social structures. The concept of marginalization is revealed through its historical progression, beginning with discrimination, moving to the diagnosis of patients (who were once referred to as the "haunted" and condemned to be burned), and finally evolving into the establishment of institutionalized systems designed to separate the "mad" from the "healthy" members of society. This trajectory continues into modern-day practices of patient care and treatment.

The observation of social structures and individuals, as presented by Foucault, has become a pioneering approach in philosophical, psychological, sociological, and ontological analysis. His work aims to uncover the origins of the ailments that humanity suffers, both as individuals and as groups. Foucault's inquiries remain relevant and continue to engage with the questions that Nietzsche raised in the nineteenth century.

Foucault developed a novel way of observing phenomena and evaluating language. His master's thesis, which later evolved into his seminal work *The History of Madness in the Classical Age*, was a profound examination of the meaning and significance of madness in all its human dimensions. This work seeks to uncover what obstructs human humanity, offering a critical analysis of how society perceives and treats madness. As researcher and translator Mutaaf Safadi explains in his introduction to Foucault's book *Words and Things*, Foucault's work on madness was about "inventing new speech that penetrates the existing language, which breaks the game of significance and meaning on which traditional philology is based" (Safadi, 1989-1990, p. 14).

Foucault's exploration of madness is deeply connected to understanding humanity's search for itself in the void of existence. Madness, in this sense, is an expression of humanity's wandering in search of self-knowledge, not knowing who we are, where we come from, or what our ultimate fate is. These profound questions drive philosophical thought to seek meaning in madness and its role as both an individual and social phenomenon.

Foucault's focus also extends to the madness of geniuses—writers, painters, and great creators—who experience a complex relationship between their brilliance and their insanity. This is evident in figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche, the painter Goya, the novelist Hall Darlin, the poet Antonin Artaud, the painter Van Gogh, and many others. These creators exemplify the link between genius and madness, a connection that Foucault highlights in his distinguished academic work (*Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, p. 554).

Madness is inherently tied to nihilism, and in many ways, it serves as an expression of it. This connection becomes clear when examining the consequences of nihilism within *Homo sapiens* and *Homo non sapiens*. In the conclusion of his work, Foucault presents a set of key insights that interpret madness as a human phenomenon, offering definitional meanings in the form of critical ideas:

1.The madman reveals the fundamental truth of humanity. Madness directs humanity back to its primitive instincts and essentially returns individuals to their earliest stages of childhood.

2.Madness functions as a veil for time and space, serving as an expression of human freedom. It encapsulates the freedom of the individual from societal constraints and linear constructs.

3.The innocence of the madman is, in reality, the innocence of madness itself. Madness represents a kind of irresponsibility that is intrinsic to the phenomenon, making it an individual yet universally human experience in all its forms and consequences.

4.Since humanity discovers its truth through madness, the essence of that truth is unveiled within madness itself. This gives real meaning to human truth, which we can observe in all moral and social aspects. Therefore, any attempt to "cure" madness as a human psychological phenomenon would require the abolition of the evils that permeate the world (Foucault, 1984, pp. 538-540).

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