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### March 14, 2014: How Much Damage Has Nihilism Done?

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Title: How Much Damage Has Nihilism Done?

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3/14/2014—I have been writing and thinking about nihilism for a few years now. I have a visceral reaction to statements about “the West,” or about how human rights or science are artificial constructions of some societies, and so forth. I even hate it when gay marriage is talked about in terms of tolerance for a lifestyle of equal dignity. No, it is a matter of justice for gay people. Their love is not a choice but a right. (Yes, I know—this from a man who just wrote in favor of a religious exemption that allows discrimination against that right. Well, politics is compromise). I long for the real. Not certainty in the sense of unassailable argument—an argument that, as Hilary Putnam once said, would convince Hitler that he was a bad man—but the faith that our commitments at least tend toward right and wrong. Science does this, even though paradigms shift, as Kuhn pointed out. The new paradigm is better able to explain the data, or it is more appealing on some other ground that we hope is truer to reality. No scientist talks today about the superiority of one race over another. That is not just political correctness, which of course it is in part and good for that, but because the whole concept of one race in competition with another race turned out to be nonsense within a human species in which everyone could mate with everyone else. But maybe the habits of mind I don’t like are exaggerations on my part and are not that widespread or are not that harmful. I have to consider that possibility. So, it is strangely thrilling to see an example of the harm of nihilism. Here is Zadie Smith, the novelist, in the most recent NY Review of Books, explaining in an imaginary future conversation with her granddaughter about why humans were so slow to do anything about global warming: “So I might say to her, look: the thing you have to appreciate is that we’d just been through a century of relativism and deconstruction, in which we were informed that most of our fondest-held principles were either uncertain or simple wishful thinking, and in many areas of our lives we had already been asked to accept that nothing is essential and everything changes—and this had taken the fight out of us somewhat.” *Elegy for a Country’s Seasons*. So, now our job is to reconnect to the real, not reconstruct some new scaffolding. People are trying to do that. There were two advertisements along these lines in the very same issue of the NYRB. In the arts, John Dadosky has written *The Eclipse and Recovery of Beauty*, based on the thinking of the theologian Bernard Lonergan. In science, most recently, Mark Johnson has written about the scientific basis of morality in cognitive science in *Morality for Humans*. Green shoots as they say on the eve of spring in the Northern Hemisphere.