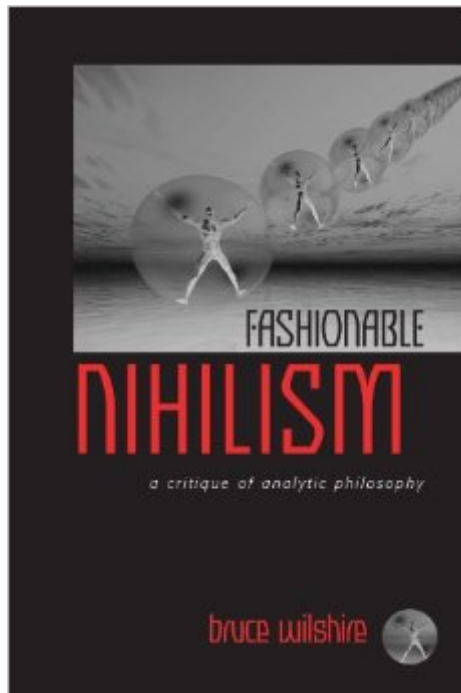


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Fashionable Nihilism: A Critique Of Analytic Philosophy



Synopsis

One of America's foremost philosophers reflects on the discipline and its relation to everyday life. Thoreau wrote that we have professors of philosophy but no philosophers. Can't we have both? Why doesn't philosophy hold a more central place in our lives? Why should it? Eloquenty opposing the analytic thrust of philosophy in academia, noted pluralist philosopher Bruce Wilshire answers these questions and more in an effort to make philosophy more meaningful to our everyday lives. Writing in an accessible style he resurrects classic yet neglected forms of inquiring and communicating. In a series of personal essays, Wilshire describes what is wrong with the current state of philosophy in American higher education, namely the cozy but ultimately suffocating confinements of professionalism. He reclaims the role of the philosopher as one who, like Socrates, would goad us out of self-contentedness into a more authentic way of being and knowing.

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Customer Reviews

This book is a "must read" for anyone interested in the recent history of philosophy in America, or who cares about its future. Wilshire takes sure aim at a philosophy that "mangle[s] the roots of our thinking-feeling-evaluating selves." Analytical philosophy, an approach to consciousness and self that weds philosophy to the style of natural sciences, can disable self-conceptions, leaving us with nihilism. It can all too easily reduce flesh or body to lifeless matter, morph minds and imaginations into chemicals and 'wiring,' and deflate sacred ceremony and myth to no more than childish mimicry and fable. Whatever happened to Socratic "care for the soul"? These elegantly crafted essays are a treat to read. Wilshire nurtures an affirmative celebration of the passion of philosophy. No one will

want to miss his account -- the best I've seen -- of the battle in the late '70's between mainstream analysts and marginalized American phenomenologists and existentialists for recognition in the American Philosophical Association. Later chapters rethink Native American thought, consider Henry Bugbee, a neglected American "philosopher of intimacy," and revisit William James' concern for 'the spiritual.' Wilshire ends with a elegiac meditation on his daughter's death that bears out his philosophical spirit -- such proof as can be given that nihilism does not speak the final word.

I found this book of considerable value for understanding the philosophical situation in America today. It demonstrates very convincingly the deep differences between analytical and continental/American approaches to the field, and this is already quite informative. But it goes on from here to show that analytical philosophy is unable to assume the responsibility of pursuing a genuinely humanistic and humane thought -- and thus is unable to address the great issues of our day. At its core, it is a nihilistic enterprise that is absorbed in the play and interplay of linguistic and conceptual systems, thereby sealing itself off from the most profound ethical and political issues of the contemporary world. Despite its remarkable logical power, it becomes a self-inhibiting and self-defeating way of doing philosophy. Something else is called for, and the author points to this other direction -- inspired by American and continental philosophy -- eloquently and forcefully.

Professor Wilshire calls for, and admirably practices, self-reflection, as he critiques the commercialization/professionalization and dehistoricizing trend of analytic philosophy. He celebrates freedom and ecstasy in a spiritual, passionate inquiry committed to pursuing difficult questions, wherever they may lead. He takes risks, not least of which is deliberately remembering, even that which is most painful. Someone who has survived academia without being tainted by it, he is also one of the very few men who can truly appreciate the radical feminist theology/theology of Mary Daly. What's not to love?

Socrates died long ago but his influence continues. Wilshire's Fashionable Nihilism continues his tradition of stinging us into awareness, of stopping us in our sleepwalking and demanding that we wake up and question our benumbing assumptions, of prompting us to inquire whether we are as fully alive as we might be. Wilshire tears into the reigning analytic philosophers absorbed in technical conversations with each other. With philosophical problems nearly consuming us as a nation, Wilshire's book explodes coteries and cliques and directs our attention to the pressing world all around us.

This isn't your typical philosophy book. In fact, part of Wilshire's aim is to help us fathom what's wrong with the typical philosophy book. I think he can succeed for most readers who aren't already too far gone. Via nine essays covering a range of interrelated topics, Wilshire uses his very personal writing style to try to jar us out of the numbingly austere technical mentality which is endemic to analytic philosophy. The hope is that we will wake up and thereby embrace our actual lived experience more fully, in all its dimensions, depths, and contours. To accomplish this, Wilshire pluralistically draws on pragmatism, phenomenology, existentialism, and Native American worldviews, thereby revealing the fundamental concordance among these worldviews. I think that much of Eastern philosophy also fits in here, but he doesn't really go into that. The earlier essays tend to be reasonably straightforward, with parts that are even easy and fun. As we progress through the book, the essays become denser and take on an increasingly spiritual bent. In the final essay, Wilshire discusses the life and death of his daughter, and I was moved to tears ... This is a powerful book, and I highly recommend it to anyone who turns to philosophy to help grapple with difficult and important existential matters, rather than just using philosophy as yet another distraction (albeit a highbrow intellectual one).

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