



Ebru Yücel¹, Yaşar Doruk Kılıçaslan², Rasim Levent Kılıçaslan³

DOI: 10.17942/sted.1717996

Geliş/Received: 13.06.2025
Kabul/Accepted: 16.04.2026

Summary:

As an idea that opposes to Idealism and Romantism which believes the world would became a better place and humanity can improve its knowledge and skills; Nihilism proposes that in reality there can not be any knowledge and the knowledge that we know is an illusion. Therapeutical Nihilism is an XIXth century phylosophical movement claims that modern and scientific medicine can not cure the sick people from any disease. On the other hand, the diagnostic and therapeutic inventions of XIXth century and improvements in healing procedures, the discovery of ultimate cures for almost all illnesses eliminated this belief. Besides in some radical and anti-modernist or primitive societies therapeutic nihilism has still been commercialized and labeled as traditional medicine, complementary medicine, alternative medicine, holistic medicine, funtional medicine or complementary medicine.

Keywords: complementary medicine; traditional medicine; social psychiatry; ethics

Özet:

Nihilizm; dünyanın daha iyi bir yer olacağı ve insanlığın daha iyiye gideceğine inanan Romantizm ile idealler dünyası ülküsüne inanan İdealizm'e karşıt, aslında hiçbir bilginin var olmadığı, her türlü bilginin aldanma olduğuna inanan bir felsefi akımdır. Terapötik Nihilizm ise, insanların bilimsel tedavi yoluyla iyileştirilmesinin mümkün olmadığına, ilaçların faydasız olduğuna inanan bir XIX. yüzyıl düşünce akımıdır. Terapötik Nihilizm, XIX. yüzyıl sonunda tıp alanındaki buluşlar ve XX. yüzyılda tanı ve tedavi olanaklarının gelişmesiyle tarihe gömülmüşse de dogmaları benimseyen toplumlarda Geleneksel Tıp, Tamamlayıcı Tıp, Holistik Tıp, Fonksiyonel Tıp ve Alternatif Tıp adıyla halen pazarlanmaktadır. Bu makale Terapötik Nihilizm tarihini ve bugünkü biçimlerinin temelini açıklamak amacını taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: geleneksel tıp; tamamlayıcı tıp; sosyal psikiyatri; tıbbi etik

¹ Dr., Polatlı State Hospital Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Specialized (Orcid no: 0009-0002-8467-5162)

² Dr., TOBB Economy and Technology University School of Medicine (Orcid no: 0009-0003-3797-5725)

³ Dr., Dışkapı Training and Research Hospital General Surgeon, Medical History and Ethics (Orcid no: 0000-0002-3482-584X)

Introduction: What is the definition Nihilism and concept of Therapeutic Nihilism?

"Nihilism", derived from the Latin word nihil meaning 'nothing'; is an approach to knowledge, value and Ontology (philosophy of being) that emerged in the XIXth century. Nihilism, in philosophy of knowledge, argues that all knowledge is delusion and that a knowledge does not actually exist; in moral philosophy, there are no values that determine human actions; in philosophy of being, it rejects the systems of science and philosophy, and accepts that science cannot solve the social problems (1).

The Greek philosopher "Sophist" Gorgias is considered the oldest Nihilist. According to Gorgias; nothing actually exists. There is no entity that can be agreed upon and said to exist. Even if something exists in some way, it cannot be known whether it exists or not. Even if something exists in some way and is known, this information cannot be conveyed to others. The "Sophists" explain their view that existence cannot be known with the difference between language and sensation. According to them, language, which consists of symbols used to convey thoughts, is actually not reliable. Communication between people through language is incomplete, information based on sensation and perception is relative; therefore, there will be no common meaning about entities. The most deficient aspect of Nihilism is its negative perception of life (1).

"Therapeutic Nihilism" is the concept of the claim that it is impossible for people and societies to get rid of diseases with treatment. The concept dates back to the American philosopher and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), who lived in the XIXth century. Although the term was formed later with its definition of the concept, the view of Therapeutic Nihilism actually dates back much further. The first works of Therapeutic Nihilism belong to Michael de Montaigne, who is famous for his essays and is also a philosopher. In his writings in the XVIth century, Michael de Montaigne expressed the view that treatments do more harm than good to patients; instead of these harmful treatments, he stated that what should be done is to encourage the body to heal itself (2,3).

In clinical medical practices, although the evaluation of each finding and case in line with clinical requirements is a guide for diagnosis,

some physicians in the XIXth century did not consider drug therapy as the most reliable treatment method because definitive research reports on its accuracy were not published. Physicians in this period mostly believed that in order to provide an effective treatment, the body fluids should be drained, blood should be taken, balanced fluid intake should be ensured orally, and the balance of body fluids should be regulated by regaining the natural state of fluid loss by sweating or urinating (2,3).

Ivan Illich, one of the advocates of Therapeutic Nihilism, stated in his book "Medical Nemesis" that he believed that the reason for the increase in human life expectancy was not only the discovery of drugs and treatments but also good nutrition and improved hygiene, and that there were too many doctors and prescriptions. Therapeutic Nihilists also accused doctors of creating more diseases, arguing that the presence of too many doctors in society would lead to more malpractice which would lead to increased problems caused by doctors (2,3).

Therapeutic Nihilism disappeared with the introduction of effective diagnostic tools, drugs and treatment methods with the therapeutic revolution in the XXth century. In the late XXth century, with the inadequacy of surgical and medical treatment and radiotherapy for some viral diseases and advanced cancers, the suspicions of patients, their relatives and some segments of society against scientific modern medicine increased (2,3).

Until the XIXth century, physicians used to learn the history of the disease through anamnesis, identify the symptoms and diagnose the disease, and prescribe diet and phytotherapy drugs. Traditional practices in treatment made medicine reliable in the eyes of the society. When the number of physicians increased and medicine became organized, medicine was described by the society as a monopolistic oligarchy that protected physicians against the interests of the patients, and the argument emerged that although the real treatments of diseases were known, real treatments were not given by drug monopolists and physicians, but drugs that seduced the symptoms were given (2,3).

Although XIXth century medicine could diagnose

patients, it could only cure a few diseases. Treatment was limited to care support and applications. The relationships between patients and doctors were personal and behaviors were governed by social traditions. Preventive family health services were inadequate against the common diseases that a doctor encounters today, such as dysentery, diphtheria, chickenpox, scarlet fever, syphilis, meningitis and puerperal fever. The doctor would monitor the patient, give bed rest and diet, and try to treat them either by using the "Hippocratic Medicine" practices based on the principle of "first do no harm" or by choosing certain methods such as enemas and bloodletting (2,3).

Despite the acceptance of diseases as "ontological entities", the knowledge of their transmission and clinical course, and the isolation of their agents; treatment was ineffective. As a reaction "Hippocratic Medicine" emerged based on the idea that the body heals itself. William Gull put forward the idea that "there is a patient, not a disease" with "approaching patients primarily as individuals". Thomas Sydenham's Therapeutic Nihilism, which predicted that existing drugs and treatments did more harm than good, the ancient Hippocratic Medical approaches were adopted with the principle of "first do no harm" (2,3).

Therapeutic Nihilism while transition from Humoral Pathology to Cellular Pathology Theory

The late XIXth century was a period when anomalies in the "Humoral Pathology Theory" paradigm, whose validity had been questioned since the XVIth century, became more frequent, the consistency of this paradigm was questioned, but the "Cellular Pathology Theory" that would replace it had not yet reached the level of a paradigm. During the 2500 years in the past, "Humoral Pathology Theory" period put forward by "Hippocrates" and developed by "Galenos", the medicine, which was considered a respected profession, could not treat the cases that were considered as incurable diseases (2,3).

"Hippocrates" explained all diseases with the "Humoral Pathology Theory" in the XIVth century BC. Hippocrates believed that diseases developed depending on the change in the basic fluids in the body called "humor". He classified these

basic fluids, which also ensured the continuation of life, as "blood," "yellow bile", "phlegm" and "black bile". Blood was symbolized with air, its color was red, its season was spring, its organ was heart, its properties were hot and moist. Yellow bile was related to the basic element fire, its color was yellow, its season was summer, its organ was liver, its properties were hot and dry. Black bile was symbolized with earth, its color was black, its season was autumn, its organ was spleen, its properties were cold and dry. Phlegm was related to the element water, its color was white, its season was winter, its organ was brain, its properties were cold and moist (2,3).

When these vital fluids were together in balance, the person was healthy. When one of the fluids increased or decreased, the diseases occurred. Since the body overheated due to excessive blood production, febrile seizures and paralysis could occur. Anemia reduced vitality, and blood loss due to wounds caused loss of consciousness, coma, and death. Imbalances could be corrected by lifestyle changes or some simple surgical methods such as medical or limited bloodletting. A patient whose liver was filled with excess blood or whose blood was polluted with toxins needed to have their blood let out, or "Cupping". According to the "Hippocratic Medicine" prevention from disease more important than treatment (2,3).

The reason why this theory, which guided medical practices for a long time, could provide detailed explanations for every situation was that its explanations based on opposites such as hot-cold, moist-dry were understandable even to illiterate ordinary people. Although the "Humoral Theory of Pathology" by the time rejected its main principle of "treatment with opposite" and replaced it with the controversial principle of "treatment with similar"; and again, changed its main belief that "disease was a physiological condition specific to the person" and put forward the concept of "disease as an ontological entity"; grasped from "Paracelsus's Chemical Medical Concept" that used heavy chemical metals in treatment; and was flexible enough to include "Paracelsus's Polypharmacy Treatment", yet despite all its bending and twisting still was inadequate to explanation of diseases (2,3).

In the XIXth century, the 2500-year-old Humoral Pathology Theory replaced with Vichow's

“Cellular Pathology Theory”, the basis of scientific medicine, was proven. Infectious diseases decreased with “Lister’s Hygienic Practices”. When antibiotics became more effective in treatment, doctors abandoned the glamorous but ineffective artistic medicine aimed at pleasing patients. In the medical world under the rule of science and technology, the Hippocratic Medicine practice of the doctor closely caring for his patient and pleasing him disappeared. The views that doctors could not actually treat most diseases and that the drug cartels formed in the XIXth century did not offer real treatments to the patients revived Therapeutic Nihilism (2,3).

Discussion: Therapeutic Nihilism as Traditional and Complementary Medicine

Movements rejecting scientific medicine first emerged in the XIXth century. Therapeutic Nihilism and Alternative Medicine treatment philosophies reflected the views of sociopolitical radicals at that time, as they do today. Therapeutic Nihilism followers claimed that scientific medicine was closed to the public and the outside world, glorified doctors but prevented the spread of true knowledge. George Bernard Shaw called institutional scientific medicine “a conspiracy against the people.” Therapeutic Nihilists also accused modern medical practices of being unnatural. Insisting on returning to a simple life, these philosophers praised a simple life and claimed that Alternative Medicine philosophies followed nature. With health being seen as a means of consumption and patients as customers, the presentation of different treatment methods, which are contemporary income-generating views of Therapeutic Nihilism, and the demand for them has increased. Magnetic, chemical or herbal methods marketed to the hopeless patients in diseases that require definitive treatments, such as cancer, were not legally prevented, but instead were adopted (23).

In Turkey, on October 26, 2014, the Ministry of Health published the “Traditional and Complementary Medical Practices (GETAT) Regulation”, and attempted to control the unregulated healthcare practices that emerged as a result of Therapeutic Nihilism, which are defined as “Traditional and Alternative Health Practices” by the Turkish Medical Association.

“Homeopathy”, one of the movements that emerged as a result of Therapeutic Nihilism, is a method developed by Samuel Hahnemann, rejecting drugs; instead of the “Hippocratic Medicine” principle of “treatment with opposites”, he adopted the “Paracelsian Medicine” principle of “treatment with similar” and placed the use of drugs that can cause similar symptoms in the healthy human body as the basis of this practice. His first law was based on the principle of “similia similibus curantur”; similars should be treated with similars. His second law was the “law of infinitely small values”, which was the principle that the effect of a drug increases as its amount decreases. The reduction of the amount was the result of a reaction against doctors prescribing indiscriminate and harmful amounts of drugs. His followers believed that very small diluted doses of pure drugs were more beneficial than large doses of manufactured drugs containing additives. They suggested the plants and fruits could be used in the treatment of diseases by referring to their similarities with organs (34).

“Phytotherapy” is a treatment method with natural plants (drugs) and despite the fact that the same active ingredient is offered as a medicine in purer and therapeutic doses; the fact that the equivalent effect can only be obtained by boiling these plants and consuming liters or kilos of plant extracts, and the complications of multiple organ failure that may develop, has created a patient group of herbalist consultant followers today (35).

“Osteopathy”, was discovered by Taylor Still and claims that the body has the power to heal itself. “Chiropractic” is a similar practice to Daniel David Palmer’s claim that putting the patient’s spine back in place heals. According to believers, Alternative Medicine is optimistic and natural; if people follow the laws of nature, their bodies will heal (36).

The optimism of Therapeutic Nihilism about self-healing reached its extreme with “Healing by Faith”. A similar view was believed in “Solipticism” that the only created being was the soul and everything was made up of the soul, and that “there could be no such thing as somatic disease because matter was an illusion”. Since it was believed that the disease was not in the body

but in the mind, the idea that an illness could be cured by faith was widespread. For Therapeutic Nihilism, Scientific Modern Medicine was pessimistic, but in reality, Alternative Medicine was giving false hope (23).

The Result: Ressurrection of Nihilism as Traditional and Complementary Medicine

The victories of Modern Scientific Medicine, in the first half of the XXth century eliminated Therapeutic Nihilism and reduced the appeal of Alternative Medicine, but when Modern Medicine became increasingly bureaucratic, absolutely scientific and authoritarian, both Therapeutic Nihilism and the complementary Alternative Medicine began to gain strength again. Bioenergy applications such as “Neurofeedback”, “Biofeedback” and plant treatments, namely “Phytotherapies”, as well as methods with spiritual foundations such as “Cupping”, have increased. The ideological and cultural criticisms against western values, as well as the influence of the masses on philosophies such as “Ayurveda”, “Acupuncture” and “Reflexology”, which should be questioned and whose scientific validity has not been proven, have been factors in the resurrection of Therapeutic Nihilism (2-8).

Acknowledgement

We would like to announce our appreciation to Prof. Dr.Yasemin Yalim retired professor of Ankara University School of Medicine department of Medical History of Ethics.

Contact: Rasim Levent Kılıçaslan
E-Mail: levent_kilicaslan@hotmail.com

References

1. Morrell P. Therapeutic Nihilism, British Medical Journal 2003;326(7388):518 doi:10.1136/ bmj.326.7388.518/c, PMC 1169281, PMID 12623895
2. Lindeman M, Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe, Boğaziçi University Press, Istanbul; 2013. p:25-70.
3. Potter R, A Brief History of Medicine. Metis Publications, Istanbul; 2014.
4. Özçakır A, Homeopathy: Traditional Medicine and Complementary Medical Practices, Hipokrat Publishing, Ankara;2019. p:153-62.
5. Erel Ö, Phytotherapy: Traditional Medicine and Complementary Medicine Practices, Hipokrat Publishing House, Ankara; 2019. p:113-25.
6. Kafadar D, Chiropractic: Traditional Medicine and Complementary Medicine Practices, Hipokrat Publishing House, Ankara; 2019. p:163-71.
7. Akca A, Akca F, Hirudotherapy: Traditional Medicine and Complementary Medicine Practices Hipokrat Publishing House, Ankara;2019. p:145-62.
8. Çiftçi S, Avcı B, Acupuncture: Traditional Medicine and Complementary Medicine Practices, Hipokrat Publishing House, Ankara; 2019. p:35-57.