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## Fundamental Questions about Nothing

### **Abstract**

*The paper attempts a philosophical critique of the insignificance and absurdity usually associated with the concept of Nothing or Nothingness in everyday and scholarly discourse by paying attention to some fundamental questions about Nothing. Drawing on the rich tradition of Western and Eastern ideas and philosophies, the paper shows that the concept of Nothing is worth paying attention to, at least for the reason that it is futile not to do so. The futility of downplaying Nothingness is amply buttressed by drawing on the rich philosophical (and scientific) traditions of the West which though, permeated with attempts to derogate Nothingness as nonsensical, turns out to be a rich source of affirmation of the importance of the concept of nothingness in the history of ideas in general and philosophy in particular. The aim is plainly to show that the concept of nothingness is one deserving every possible attention in philosophical and social discourse.*

### **Key words**

nothing, being, void, emptiness, metaphysics, science

### **Introduction**

Nothing! A glance at a dictionary simply reveals the lexicographical meaning of the word as “no thing: not anything” and ‘Nothingness’ as “the state of being nothing or of not existing: emptiness”.<sup>1</sup> It will therefore sound absurd to ask someone to ponder about the concept of nothing; for it seems irrelevant or absurd to do so. But ‘nothing’, ‘nothingness’, ‘not’, ‘negation’, ‘no’, ‘non-being’ are concepts that have meanings – regardless of the meaning attributed to them – and are used in everyday discourse. “There is *nothing* here”; “He rose from *nothing* to something”; “God created all things from *nothing*”; “I do *not* have any reason to live again”; “In the beginning, there was *nothing*, an *empty* void”; etc. Then why does it seem worthless to investigate the concept of Nothing? What reasons are there to talk about Nothing? Do we misconceive or misuse the concept Nothing or it affiliates in our everyday or scholarly dis-

<sup>1</sup>

See the *Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary: International Students' Edition* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1985).

course? What then is Nothing? Is the individual confronted with nothingness in his everyday experience? These are fundamental questions about Nothing which the paper attempts to answer.

### Why does investigating ‘nothing’ seem worthless?

“All roads are blocked to a philosophy which reduces everything to the word ‘no’. To ‘no’ there is only one answer and that is ‘yes’. Nihilism has no substance. There is no such thing as nothingness, and zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing. Man lives more by affirmation than by bread.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the view held by many, even scholarly disciplines like science and philosophy, about nothingness. Science claims to be concerned with what is and Nothing else.<sup>3</sup> As Martin Heidegger says: “Science want to have nothing to do with the nothing”.<sup>4</sup> Traditional (Western) metaphysics, following the footprints of the Parmenidean slogan of “Being is. Non-being is not”, claims that it is concerned ultimately with the study of ‘what is’, ‘the One’, ‘Being’, ‘the substratum’, or the ‘it is’. Following Parmenides’ claim that Being, the one is and non-Being, Becoming, Change, Motion is an illusion, traditional metaphysics gives priority to the study of the one being or substratum because it assimilates and mobilizes all that there is and frowns at non-being and becoming. What is is; what is not, is not. Nothing comes to be and nothing goes out of being.<sup>5</sup>

The phenomenological doctrine of intentionality has shown that in thinking of Nothing, thinking will go against its normal procedure of always thinking of something and hence be forced to go against its own nature. It also offends against reason, when it takes Logic as the court of appeal, to think of nothing.<sup>6</sup> The only way Logic or reason allow the use of the pronoun ‘Nothing’ is as negation or ‘not’, say in the rule of *Double Negation* ( $\sim\sim p$ ) or *Modus Tollens* ( $p \supset q, \sim q, \sim p$ ), because it simply expresses the opposite of what is.

These claims make it seem worthless to articulate or ponder on Nothing because the ‘what is’ dominates all spheres of discourse. Then, why ponder on Nothing?

### Why ponder on Nothing?

The utmost importance and need to talk about Nothing is evident in the pre-occupation of the disciplines, schools of thought and systems that see the articulation of nothing as worthless because they are primarily driven by the urge to overcome nothingness.

*Science* says it is concerned with ‘what is’ and has nothing to do with nothingness. But science itself is founded on nothing. The basis of scientific thinking especially in physics to which scientists argue vehemently that all other sciences is related and reducible,<sup>7</sup> are substances or things that are unobservable – subatomic particles, the alpha, beta and gamma rays, magnetic fields, the Newtonian ether, etc. – but which are essential for explanation of empirical, observable phenomenon. In fact, they form the fundamental and preliminary basis for the explanation of things and without them science is nowhere. Though scientists would contend that these entities, especially the atom, are corporeal, it is arguably true that they are mere theoretical constructs to supplement or replace ‘Nothing,’ ‘void’ or ‘emptiness’. The atomists of ancient Greek, Democritus and Leucippus specifically, made it vivid that science is

essentially founded on Nothing, an empty void. Refuting the Parmenideans, Leucippus wrote:

“The void is a not-being, and no part of what is is a not-being; for what is in the strict sense of the term is an absolute plenum. This plenum however is not one; on the contrary. It is a many infinite in number and invisible owing to the minuteness of their bulk. The many move in the void (for there is a void); and by coming together they produce coming-to-be, while by separating they produce passing away. However, they act and suffer action whenever they change to be in contact (for there they are not one), and they generate by being put together and become intertwined. From the genuinely one, on the other hand, there could never have come to be a multiplicity, nor from the genuinely many a one: that is impossible.”<sup>8</sup>

The world, according to Leucippus nay the atomists, is thus constituted of indivisible things moving in an empty void from which being evolves and vanishes into. The atomist consciously endorsed the void to explain empirical phenomenon such as movement, compression, and absorption. John Burnet therefore says that “it is a curious fact that the Atomists, who are commonly regarded as the great materialists of antiquity, were actually the first to say distinctly that a thing might be real without being a body”<sup>9</sup> but merely an absolute plenum or a matter-filled space. Science therefore is essentially dependent on the vacuum or Nothingness, which it rejects. As Podolny says,

“This omnipresent medium call (...) a vacuum, that is emptiness, or ‘nothing’, is by no means simply a container of all forms and variety of matter. Vacuum influences everything it surrounds (...), experiments in elementary particle physics is the result of interactions of the particles with one another and with the vacuum (...) the layout of our Galaxy and the universe itself, constitute a cosmic whole that is built on a foundation of the void or vacuum.”<sup>10</sup>

The importance of the vacuum for scientific investigation is reinforced by modern quantum electrodynamics. Quantum electrodynamics affirms that an electron, proton and photon occasionally emerge spontaneously from a perfect vacuum. And when this spontaneous generation occurs, the three particles exist for a brief time, and then annihilate each other leaving no trace behind. Such a spontaneous temporary emergence of particles from a vacuum is called a ‘vacuum fluctuation’ and it is commonplace in quantum field theory, according to which a vacuum is not exactly nothing but is teeming with all

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Victor Hugo, quoted in Roy Sorensen, “Nothingness”, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Spring 2009 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/nothingness/>. Accessed May 28, 2009.

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Jim I. Unah, *Heidegger: Through Kant to Fundamental Ontology* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1997), p. 236.

4

Martin Heidegger, quoted in P. Marhenke, “The Criterion of Significance”, in: Leonard Linsky (ed.), *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), p. 158.

5

Jim I. Unah, *Even Nothing is Something. Inaugural Lecture Series* (Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2006), pp. 4–5.

6

J. I. Unah, *Heidegger, op. cit.*, p. 234ff.

7

Cf. Jack A. Aigbodioh, *Philosophy of Science: Issues and Problems* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1997), pp. 18–19.

8

Leucippus, as cited by Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 86.

9

As cited by B. Russell, *loc. cit.*, pp. 86–87.

10

Roman Podolny, quoted in J. I. Unah, *Even Nothing is Something, op. cit.*, p. 16.

sorts of quantum particles called ‘virtual particles’ that fluctuate between being and nothingness.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to Frank W. H. Czek, “Perhaps the reason that there is something instead of nothing is that nothing is unstable”.<sup>12</sup> This nothing, according to Alexander Vilenkin, is “a state with no classical space-time... the realm of unrestrained quantum gravity; it is a rather bizarre state in which all our basic notion of space, time, energy, entropy, etc., lose their meaning.”<sup>13</sup> It is in this sense that quantum theorists, using the big bang theory, explain the coming-to-be of the universe simply as coming out of nowhere completely in accordance with the laws of quantum physics, and creates along the way all the matter and energy needed to build the universe as we now see it. This view of the origin of the universe, as proposed by scholars like Edward Tryon,<sup>14</sup> is often criticised by classical physicists because of the belief that it violates conventional laws of physics basically that concerning the conservation of mass and energy. However, quantum physicists like Alexander Vilenkin and Alan Guth uses the theory of ‘inflationary universe’ to show how this does not happen. The theory of an inflationary universe can be stated thus:

“First, there is a primal Big Bang, a ‘quantum tunnelling from nothing’, and then, after a brief phase of ‘runaway exponential expansion’, the energy accumulated would at the termination of this phase become converted into matter and radiation, and the universe would then proceed to develop more or less as we have come to understand it.”<sup>15</sup>

Hence, unlike classical physics that sees the vacuum as worthless to being and scientific investigation, quantum physics see the vacuum or empty space as the only viable explanation for the emergence and passing away of being.

In another related sense, scientific investigations, enquiries and research are quests to fill a vacuum. Can you fill what you do not acknowledge? To the scientist, there is always an emptiness, a vacuum in one aspect of life or another that needs to be filled with something; an absence of something. This is the reason why scientific research progresses; there is always an absence to be filled. In this sense, even something becomes nothing. For example, a scientist who wishes to improve on an automobile because he feels there are vacuums or emptiness that needs to be filled is been confronted with nothingness. In this sense, it is not the void from which being evolve and pass into but an absence of something. When someone walks into a room with a bed and a table and still says: “There is *nothing* in this room”, it simply means that there is an absence of something, a non-being, of what he desires. A scientist confronted with this situation tries to fill the vacuum. Thus, scientific investigation is also about what is needed to fill the vacuum or Nothing.<sup>16</sup> But how? By going into the wilderness of thought, into nothing. Why then should we not talk about nothing? Science is therefore intrinsically dependent on nothing, emptiness or vacuum. Johannes Kepler is one scientist who recognized this because his hypothesis on how the moon influences the tides required caused chains in empty space. But he was quarried for this by Galileo who held that he (Kepler) was silly to believe something like this. Newton therefore made an erroneous suggestion that the space of causal chains between the moon and the Earth was not empty but filled with a *transparent weightless substance* which he called *ether*, arguably a theoretical posit to replace Kepler’s empty space.<sup>17</sup>

*Traditional Metaphysics* also claims to be the study of ultimate reality, the essence of Being and Nothing else.<sup>18</sup> Having the belief that “Being is; non-being is not,” and with a passionate disregard for void, emptiness or nothingness, most traditional metaphysicians sought for the essence of being, the primor-

dial being among existing entities. Thales claimed it was water; Anaximenes thought it was air; in the medieval period, God was the primordial entity. Traditional metaphysics was thus unable to capture the true essence of things that evolves beings and into which beings pass into.

However, if science or physics is the study of beings or things in the world that have evolved or stemmed from the subatomic particles intermingling in the void or nothingness, metaphysics (*meta ta physica*) should logically be a going beyond beings to the study of the nothing, the void, the emptiness or essence from which things stem from and vanishes back into. This is Heidegger's conception of metaphysics. In his *What is Metaphysics*, he opines that if the sciences are preoccupied with beings only and Nothing else, solely beings, and beyond that, Nothing, then a metaphysical inquiry should bother on this Nothing which sciences give up as nullity.<sup>19</sup> Hence, he reformulates the metaphysical question as “why are there beings rather than Nothing?” which, he says, is a fundamental question.<sup>20</sup> In other words, what is the nature of the vacuum or nothing from which beings stem from? A deep appreciation of this radical metaphysical question as appositely stated by Heidegger helps the metaphysician to realize that the ultimate nature or reality of things is a wilderness of thought, a vacuum from which everything, and anything can evolve from. It gives rise to a radical metaphysics that does not reduce the multifaceted reality to just one of its aspect – ‘reality is matter,’ ‘reality is idea’, etc. – for all of these are manifestations of the void, of nothing. Anaximander is probably one of the few ancient Greek philosophers whose metaphysical view was of this radical sort. Though not so admired in his time for his positions, he however maintained that the primal substance is infinite, eternal, and ageless and it encompasses all the worlds for he thought our world only one of many. The primal substance is transformed into the various substances with which we are familiar, and these are transformed into each other.<sup>21</sup> As to this he makes an important statement:

“Into that from which things take their rise they pass away once more, as is ordained, for they make reparation and satisfaction to one another for their injustice according to the ordering of time.”<sup>22</sup>

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See William E. Carroll, “Big Bang Cosmology, Quantum Tunnelling from Nothing, and Creation”, *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1988), p. 60.

12  
Frank W. H. Czek, quoted in James Trefil, *The Moment of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 205–206.

13  
Alexander Vilenkin, quoted by W. E. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

14  
Edward Tryon states in “Is the Universe a Vacuum Fluctuation?”, *Nature*, No. 246 (1973), p. 396, that: “In my model I assume that the Universe did indeed appear from nowhere... Contrary to widespread belief, such an event need not have violated any of the conventional laws of physics.”

15  
W. E. Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

16  
Cf. J. I. Unah, *Heidegger, op. cit.*, p. 236.

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R. Sorensen, *op. cit.*

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Cf. J. I. Unah, *Heidegger, op. cit.*, p. 236ff.

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See Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics”, in: Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, David Farrel Krell (ed.) (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997), pp. 95–98.

20  
*Ibid.*, p. 95.

21  
See B. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 46–47.

22  
Anaximander, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.

Genuine metaphysical inquiry must therefore recognize and articulate the non-being described by Anaximander as infinite, eternal and ageless, which causes entities to be and not to be. If this is the case, why then should we not talk about Nothing?

The *phenomenological doctrine of intentionality* is yet another view that seems to threaten the articulation of nothing. As noted earlier, the phenomenological doctrine of intentionality is the view that thought is always the thought of something, not of nothing. This view was once opined long ago by Parmenides when he said that “the thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same; for you cannot find thought without something that is, as to which it is uttered.”<sup>23</sup> But it was brought to limelight by the father of phenomenology Edmund Husserl. It is a quick court of appeal for those who deny nothingness or empty void. But such forget that Husserl also opines that for intentionality to be genuinely possible, the subject (ego) who directs his thought towards an object must go into transcendence, what Heidegger calls the finite transcendence of man.<sup>24</sup> Transcendence is the projection of the ego into nothingness as a field or region of encounter to establish and re-establish what is.

“Transcendence describes the activity of the human mind, in the domain of nothingness. This activity of the mind happens as a conscious reaching out or going beyond something to the region of nothingness to affirm what is. Transcendence portrays thought as the locomotion of existence and the lawmaker of experiences. Thought or consciousness is always reaching out to something, always passing over always transcending beings to their being.”<sup>25</sup>

As Husserl says, “it is an outward moving vector.”<sup>26</sup> Consider Kant’s experience in his analysis of the transcendental imagination. He found a transcendental object X which he assigned as index zero. He discovered nothingness in the seat of man’s mental powers – the transcendental imagination.<sup>27</sup> In fact, intentionality is impossible without the recognition and employment of nothingness. Even in Husserl’s *epoché* (bracketing) what is required of us? A state of nothingness, where we strip ourselves of everything and presuppositionlessly encounter the object as it is, as it present itself in a state of nothingness. Why then won’t we articulate Nothing?

*Logic* is another system that seems to threaten the articulation of nothing. Since its quantifier has existential import, each of its logical laws implies that something exists. For instance, the principle of identity: Everything is identical to itself entails: there exists something that is identical to itself.<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Russell argues that logicians are not hostile to the idea of an empty world as a resource for metaphysicians. They do not want to get involved in metaphysical disputes. They feel that logic should be central with respect to the existence of anything.<sup>29</sup> And nothingness, reason shows, does not imply the existence of anything.

But logic or reason supports vibrantly negation. In *Modus Tollens* rule of formal logic, for example, it is stated that:  $p \supset q, \sim q, \sim p$ . This implies that, if p implies q and there is absence of q, therefore there is no p. If, for example, whenever rainfalls, the ground is wet; the ground is not wet, then, the rain did not fall. Logic therefore employs negation in constructing valid statements. If reason which supports negation in logic is also the means, and thinking, the way to an original comprehension of Nothing and its possible revelation, then the very possibility of negation as an act of reason and consequently reason itself, are somehow dependent on Nothing.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Nothing precedes the negation; it is primordial to it. Heidegger says thus

“Does the nothing exist only because the not, i.e., negation exists? Or do negation and the not exist only because the nothing exists? We maintain: The nothing is more primitive than the not and negation. We know the nothing. The nothing is the simple negation of the totality of being.”<sup>31</sup>

Nothing itself is thus a product of reason just in the same sense as the negation in logic but it precedes the negation in logic because it is itself a simple negation of the totality of being.

*Mathematics*, a sibling of logic, also affirms Nothingness or emptiness. Mathematics can be reconstructed in terms of sets given the assumption that something exists. From *A* we derive the set containing *A*, then the set containing that set, then the set containing that larger set, and so on. Through ingenious machination, all of mathematics can be construed from set and contemporary set theories like to spin this amusing structure from the *empty set* in order not to assume the existence of contingent beings.<sup>32</sup> Mathematics thus bases its structure on Nothing though would prefer to call it an empty set.

Considering the foregoing, therefore, the articulation of Nothing is very essential and worthwhile as all points raised to prevent such rather helps in a better articulation. What then is Nothing?

### What then is Nothing?

“Whatever we may make of it, we do know the Nothing, if only as a word we rattle off every day. For this common nothing that glides so inconspicuously through our chatter, blanched with the anemic pallor of the obvious, we can without hesitating furnish even a ‘definition’. The nothing is a complete negation of the totality of beings.”<sup>33</sup>

We can define Nothingness in several interrelated ways. The most essential of these is the definition of Nothing as that primordial state from which beings evolve and vanish or pass into. This is the first sense in which Heidegger uses it (the primordial sense). He says that in this sense, it refers to Pure Being which makes possible the occurrence of beings. In this primordial sense, Pure Being reveals itself as nothing, as an “opening of a self-concealing sheltering”. Pure Being is thought as the Nothing which grants being, truth and thinking. The Nothing of being in the first primordial significance is that from which beings emerge and into which they withdraw. This is the Nothing which is revealed in the experience of dread and the anticipation of death all through man’s existence. Heidegger describes the Nothing as the ground of

23  
Parmenides, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 67.

24  
M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

25  
J. I. Unah, *Even Nothing is Something*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

26  
Edmund Husserl, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 13.

27  
J. I. Unah, *On Being: Discourse on the Ontology of Man* (Lagos: FADEC Publications, 2002), p. 135.

28  
R. Sorensen, *op. cit.*

29  
Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), p. 203.

30  
J. I. Unah, *Heidegger*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

31  
M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

32  
R. Sorensen, *op. cit.*

33  
M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

all nullity and the seal of man's inevitable finitude.<sup>34</sup> This is also the sense in which Anaximander uses it as we have seen above. Mr. A is born (comes into being from nothingness) and Mr. A dies (passes away into nothingness).

The way and manner in which we evolve and vanish into Nothing is elaborated on by the subtraction argument. Leibniz had noted that to explain why something exists, we appeal to the existences of something else *ad infinitum* until we regress into Nothing. This is often referred to as Leibniz's Limbo or the explanatory trap. This, according to the subtraction argument, makes the possibility of emptiness self-evident. Thomas Baldwin illustrates the argument this way. Imagine each object vanishing in sequence. Eventually you run to three objects, two objects, one objects and then *Poof!* There's your empty world.<sup>35</sup> Wole Soyinka also explains this point aptly when he says

"My imagination insisted on conjuring up this (...) primal state of nothing which the world has been before the creation of anything, animate or inanimate (...) I found myself impelled by a curiosity to experience the absolute state of non-being, of total void – no trees, no rocks, no skies, no other beings, not even I."<sup>36</sup>

It is in this sense of subtraction or passing away of beings that Heidegger defines nothing above as the simple negation of the totality of being. When man finds himself in this state of imagination, he is in a state of Nothingness, a wilderness of thought. This sense of nothing as the total negation of being cannot be discussed without drawing some vital points from the idea of supreme emptiness, absolute nothingness, or pure experience as found in the non-theistic tradition of (Zen) Buddhism. This has been fantastically and scholarly developed by the Kyoto school of Japan into a systematic philosophical analysis by such eminent scholars as Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji. These philosophers are united by the application of Buddhist experience to philosophy.<sup>37</sup> For example, the works of Nishida Kitaro, one of the leading scholars of the Kyoto school, was essentially driven by the quest to understand Buddhist experience and notion of nothingness.<sup>38</sup> Thus, he says that,

"... but at the core of Oriental culture that has nourished our ancestors for thousands of years is there not hidden something like 'seeing the form of the formless, hearing the sound of the soundless'? Our hearts cannot help but search for this sort of thing. I would like to attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for this demand."<sup>39</sup>

It is on this idea that he builds his own system of philosophy and these years of creativity saw the origin of many motifs and terms associated with the Kyoto school: *basho* (place) as it relates to absolute nothingness, pure experience, the logic of *topos* (nothingness), the self-consciousness of the universal, action intuition, and so on.<sup>40</sup> The most essential of these is the concept of absolute nothingness or supreme emptiness.

According to Robert E. Carter, absolute nothingness is the universal of all universals. As a concrete universal, it determines everything else in determining itself.<sup>41</sup> It is that in which and through which the world and the mind alike are illuminated. In this supreme emptiness which can neither be an end nor a beginning, time varnishes in eternity, meaning is emptied out in truth, and a becoming is restored to its suchness. Here, nothing can remotely approximate to fulfilment be it temporal or otherwise.<sup>42</sup> For Nishida, absolute nothingness as the absolute negation of the substantial standpoint subsumes the four old paradigms of the framework of thinking and its field from the ancient period of Western philosophy to Nietzsche namely relative being, relative nothingness, absolute being, and *nihil*. For Nishida, the world finds its ultimate locus



in absolute nothingness. This is the logic of *basho* often seen as the crux of Nishida's works whereby he brings all things back to their "place" in absolute nothingness. This logic is supposed to do more to knowledge of the individual *qua* individual than Aristotle could. Nishida hopes to prove that the intuition of absolute nothingness restores access to things in their thusness, and that the self is at each moment in the process of transformation, now losing every trace of itself in nothingness, now blooming selflessly with the flowers and like one of them, now meeting another and making the encounter into its own self.<sup>43</sup>

Absolute nothingness can thus be understood in this sense as the pull of being, the supreme emptiness that accounts for the coming-to-be and passing-away of things. Brian Swimmer's assertion concerning an "all-nourishing abyss" becomes instructive in this regard:

"The universe emerges out of all-nourishing abyss not only fifteen billion years ago but in every moment. Each instant protons and anti-protons are flashing out of, and are as suddenly absorbed back into, all-nourishing abyss. All-nourishing abyss then is not a thing, nor a collection of things, not even, strictly speaking, a physical place, but rather a power that gives birth and then absorbs existence at a thing's annihilation."<sup>44</sup>

In a related way, Heidegger defines Nothing as that which hits one's face after separating the different profiles of a being. Nothing in this sense is that which one finds or encounters when one tries to penetrate the interior of being. This sense of nothing is also responsible for man's indigent dynamism or man's naïve hunger to keep making meaning or "annihilate" what he is for what he is not. Heidegger describes this Nothing as *Dasein's Transcendence*.<sup>45</sup> Take, for instance, a piece of electronic, say, a radio. Dismantle its component parts – the speaker, the antenna, the wires, the control switches, the panels, the battery, etc. – what do you find left, what hits you? Nothing. Nothing hits you in your quest to penetrate the being of the radio.

34  
J. I. Unah, *Heidegger, op. cit.*, p. 235.

35  
Thomas Baldwin, "There Might Be Nothing," *Analysis*, No. 56 (1996), pp. 231–238.

36  
Wole Soyinka, *The Credo of Being and Nothingness* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1991), p. 1.

37  
Diana L. Pasulka, "Review" of James W. Heisig's *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, No. 10 (2003), p. 63.

38  
See Yasunari Takada, *Transcendental Descent: Essays in Literature and Philosophy* (Tokyo: The University of Tokyo Centre for Philosophy, 2007), p. 94.

39  
Nishida Kitaro, quoted in Robert J. J. Wargo, *The Logic of Nothingness: A Study of Nishida Kitaro* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pp. 2–3.

40  
Thomas P. Kasulis, "Introduction", in: R. J. J. Wargo, *op. cit.*, p. x.

41  
Joseph S. O'Leary, "Review" of Robert E. Carter's *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitaro*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1997), *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1–2 (2002), p. 166.

42  
Y. Takada, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

43  
J. S. O'Leary, *op. cit.*, pp. 166–167.

44  
Brian Swimmer, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 100.

45  
M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 105f.

Another sense of Nothing or Nothingness is that it is an absence of something. Remember our previous instance in our discourse of science and nothingness. Someone walks into a room and says: “There is *nothing* in this room” even when there is a bed, a table and a chair. In this situation, *nothing* stands for an absence of what the individual wants; hence the things in the room are nothing to him. Here even something is nothing. This also means that even the “absence” is as well something to someone who needs it, say, someone who needs the bed or the table or the chair; hence in this case, even what is nothing to the first person is something to the latter. This sense is closely related to that explained above because the feeling of the absence of something fills one with the urge to fill the vacuum, make something out of nothing.

The vast understanding of nothing in this sense is responsible for the flourishing of the philosophical movement of existentialism. Existentialist philosophers generally recognize Nothingness as the source of dread, finitude, absurdities, facticity as well as meaning and existentiality (good faith) of human life. Jean-Paul Sartre is one existentialist who vehemently presents the role Nothingness plays in human existence in his *Being and Nothingness*. According to Sartre,

“Human reality carries nothingness within itself... Man is the being through whom nothing comes into the world... The being by which nothingness comes into the world must be its own nothingness... Man is always separated by nothingness from his existence. The being by which nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its being the nothingness of its being is in question.”<sup>46</sup>

According to him, when we go about the world, we have expectations which are often not fulfilled. For example, Pierre is not at the cafe where we thought we meet him; so there is a negation, a void, a nothingness in the place of Pierre. When looking for Pierre, his lack of being there becomes a negation; everything he sees as he searches the people and the objects about him are ‘not Pierre’. Thus, Sartre asserts that “it is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation”.<sup>47</sup> Understanding man, which is the cardinal focus of existential philosophy, is therefore centred on the articulation of the Nothingness of the being of man. In Existentialism, Nothingness is viewed from the bias of self-existence, as the ground of self-existence and thus, as something lying outside of the existence of the self from which the self-draws meaning, that is, self-existence is suspended in Nothingness.<sup>48</sup> But does man encounter the Nothing?

### How does man encounter Nothing?

Heidegger gives an apposite reply in his analysis of *Dasein* (his technical name for man as being-there). According to him, *Dasein* who is essentially finite finds itself stationed in

“the midst of beings that are revealed somehow as a whole. In the end an essential distinction prevails between comprehending the ensemble of beings in themselves and finding oneself in the midst of beings as a whole. The former is impossible in principle. The latter happens all the time in our existence. It does seem as though we cling to this or that particular being, precisely in our everyday preoccupation, as though we were completely abandoned to this or that region of being.”<sup>49</sup>

In this existence of *Dasein*, is he brought face to face with Nothing? He is, Heidegger says, in the mood of anxiety.<sup>50</sup> According to Heidegger,

“Anxiety reveals the nothing. We ‘hover’ in anxiety. More precisely, anxiety leaves us hanging because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves (...)

in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves (...) Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterances of the 'is' falls silent."<sup>51</sup>

The Nothing does not reveal itself as a being. rather it is encountered 'at one with' beings by making itself known with beings and in beings expressly as a slipping away of the whole.<sup>52</sup> It is in this revelation of Nothing that *Dasein* as existence approach and penetrate beings and relate with beings through *transcendence into nothing*. Heidegger says aptly,

"*Da-sein* means: being held out into the nothing. Holding itself out into the nothing, *Dasein* is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call 'transcendence'. If in the ground of its essence *Dasein* were not transcending, which now means, if it were not in advance holding itself out into the nothing, then it could never be related to beings not even to itself. Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom."<sup>53</sup>

Being held out into the Nothing makes man a lieutenant of Nothing. We are so finite that our finitude entrenches itself in existence that our most proper and deep limitations refuses to yield to our freedom. But being held into Nothing, is our surpassing of beings as a whole. It is transcendence.<sup>54</sup> Nothing, Heidegger says, is therefore same as Being. "Pure Nothing and Pure Being are therefore the same"<sup>55</sup> Being and Nothing belong together because Being itself is essentially temporal (finite) and reveals, itself only in the transcendence of *Dasein* which is held out into Nothing. Thus the saying in tradition metaphysical thinking that: *ex nihilo nihil fit* – from nothing, nothing comes to be – Heidegger says, can thus be rewritten as *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit* – from the Nothing all beings as beings come to be.<sup>56</sup> This reaffirms once more that Nothing is the pull from where things evolve from and once again vanishes into. And human existence can only relate to beings if it holds itself out into the nothing via transcendence.

Transcendence, therefore, is the projection of *Dasein* into nothingness as a field or region of encounter to establish and re-establish what is. Transcendence describes the activity of *Dasein* in the domain of nothingness. This activity happens as a conscious reaching out or going beyond something to the region of nothing to affirm what is. Transcendence portrays thought as the locomotive of existence and the lawmaker of experience. Transcendence itself is the act of forming relations; the act of forming notion of unity, notions of universality, and notions of homogeneity. With these notions created by transcendence we are able to relate one thing to another, connect one experience to another to make them meaningful. Transcendence also refers to the indigent hunger or native dynamism in man which makes him restless and

46  
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*,  
trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge  
Publishers, 1958), p. 45.

47  
*Ibid.*, p. 41.

48  
See Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*,  
trans. J. V. Breagt (Berkeley: University  
of California Press, 1982), p. 55ff.

49  
M. Heidegger, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

50  
See *ibid.*, pp. 102–103.

51  
*Ibid.*, p. 103.

52  
*Ibid.*, p. 104.

53  
*Ibid.*, pp. 105–106.

54  
*Ibid.*, p. 108.

55  
*Ibid.*, p. 110.

56  
See *ibid.*, pp. 109–111.

eccentric, and which propels him to move from one state of affairs to another, from now to not now, from what is to what is not.<sup>57</sup>

Summarily, in Heidegger's words:

"The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere, for human existence the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to the essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings, the nihilation of the nothing occurs (...) Dasein can relate itself to beings only by holding itself out into the nothing and can exist only thus..."<sup>58</sup>

Heidegger's concept of transcendence is similar to Nishida's concept of pure experience which involves silence and meditation that leads to openness. The Buddhist culture of meditation and silence finds pure experience as "an original experience out of which conceptual experience is carved".<sup>59</sup> Hence, absolute nothingness is known not by conceptual analysis but by a leap beyond conceptual thinking, whereby the tensions and antinomies of conceptual thinking is resolved.<sup>60</sup> Everything clarifies itself to itself through pure experience and it does so within the nothingness wherein pure experience itself arises.<sup>61</sup> The realm of absolute emptiness therefore becomes the realm of the present moment of pure experience and in this moment, the true being of things come to light.

However, the concept of Nothing or Nothingness is commonly misused or misconceived in everyday discourse. In what ways?

### How do we misconceive Nothing?

The main misconception about nothing is the nihilistic use of the concept arising from its lexicographical meaning as 'not anything that is'. From the foregoing, we can say aptly that what is, is inseparable from the question of what is not; what is, is partly nothing and nothing is partly something. But when we see Nothing as the absolute absence of anything, as not anything that is, we misconceive that nihilizing power of nothing through which something comes-to-be to mean a state of 'not anything', of complete insignificance. This is the way and manner in which Western European culture has mostly conceived the concept of Nothing and the result has been purely nihilistic and inhuman. This is vividly reflected in the attitude of the major world religions; the "the other is nothing (not anything at all)" attitude. The way and manner these religions are affecting, dictating or determining the life of modern man is such that produce nihilistic consequences. These aggressive and conquering religions follow this pattern of thinking: "It is this one or nothing else"; "It is this way or no other way". This is nihilism *per excellence*.<sup>62</sup> And what does this result to? Erase that temple! Demolish that mosque! Obliterate that cathedral! Flatten that shrine! Each major religion (and even sects within the same religion) appears periodically incapable of finding its own centre except by the act of reducing the other in some form or the other to nothing. This has been the source of so-called holy wars; it has encouraged scientific and technological improvement of weapons and machinery of warfare in the quest for a universal negation, Armageddon, which will wipe every other except "the closest to God" to nothing.<sup>63</sup>

This "the other is Nothing or the other is not anything that is" attitude is also responsible for the tribal, racial and ethnic conflicts man has witnessed and is still witnessing around the globe today. The Rwandan Hutu-Tutsi crisis, the Nigerian Ife-Modakeke crises and the recent Jos-Plateau crises are instances of attempts to reduce the other to not anything that is. The misconception of the nihilistic power of nothing is therefore of drastic negative effects on man and the world at large.

Another misconception of nothing is the mistake of construing it as being ‘something’, a being out there like every other thing, which could be an unavoidable result in the uncared examination of Nothing; that is, the question as to the what and where of Nothing turns the thing in question into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.<sup>64</sup> This quest to find Nothing as a being out there accounts for why most scholars deny the need for the articulation of Nothing. It is for this reason that Heidegger says that Nothing, which he calls Pure Being is not an existing entity neither is it God but that from which all existing entities derive their being from and it is everywhere. It is the ground of anything that is since we cannot utter being without Nothing.

Therefore, from the foregoing, an improper use of the concept of Nothingness will have negative consequences for the society at large.

### Concluding remarks

In the attempt made above to give apposite answers to some fundamental questions about nothingness, a necessary endeavour resulting from the absurdity often attributed to it in scholarship and everyday discourse, it becomes obvious that although the history of ideas is suffused with a deliberate attempt to treat nothingness as nonsensical and absurd, it ends up providing a rich tradition of thought that is intertwined and interlocked with the same concept. Hence, from the history of ideas – philosophical scientific, or otherwise – these salient points about the concept ‘Nothing’ or ‘Nothingness’ can be drawn: (i) Nothing is the primordality, the pool from which things evolve in their diverse and multifaceted forms and once again vanish or disappear or withdraw into. (ii) Nothing is that which hits us in the face in our quest to penetrate the interior of being and accounts for man’s hunger to make meaning out of existence. (iii) Nothing also entails the absence of something even amongst many. Here something that is of no interest to us becomes nothing which we try to make something out of, and that nothing as well remains something because it is an absence that is a non-absence to another. In this sense of Nothing, one is moved to fill the vacuum, to make something out of nothing. (iv) Nothing is misconceived as ‘not anything that is’. (v) Nothing is not an existing entity but that pool which all beings derive their being from; the wilderness of thought or primordial substance that manifests as both being and non-being. To be sure, these views do not exhaust the notion of nothingness as can be found in the history of thought neither do they explain comprehensively the consequences such view have for social relations. They simply provide a leeway to unravelling more about nothingness in relation to the social implications of such views held about nothingness.

57

See J. I. Unah, *Even Nothing is Something*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

58

M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

59

Robert E. Carter, *The Nothingness Beyond God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nishida Kitaro* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1997), p. 8.

60

J. S. O’Leary, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

61

R. E. Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

62

J. I. Unah, *On Being*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

63

Cf. J. I. Unah, *Even Nothing is Something*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–21.

64

M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

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### Fundamentalna pitanja o Ničemu

#### **Sažetak**

*U ovom radu se pokušava filozofski kritizirati beznačajnost i apsurdnost koje su obično vezana uz pojam Ničega ili Ništavnosti u svakodnevnom kao i akademskom diskursu obraćajući pozornost na neka fundamentalna pitanja o Ničemu. Oslanjajući se na bogatu tradiciju zapadnih i istočnih ideja i filozofija, rad pokazuje da je pojam Ničega vrijedan pažnje, barem utoliko što je uzaludno to ne činiti. Uzaludnost umanjivanja značaja tog pojma je uvelike poduprta bogatom filozofskom i znanstvenom tradicijom Zapada koja se, iako prožeta pokušajima derogiranja Ništavnosti kao besmislene, pokazuje kao vrijedan izvor afirmacije važnosti tog pojma u povijesti ideja općenito, a posebno u filozofiji. Cilj rada je jednostavno pokazati da pojam Ništavnosti zaslužuje svaku moguću pažnju u filozofskom i socijalnom diskursu.*

#### **Ključne riječi**

ništa, bitak, ništavilo, praznina, metafizika, znanost

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### Fundamentale Fragen nach dem Nichts

#### **Zusammenfassung**

*Das Paper macht einen Kritikversuch der Bedeutungslosigkeit sowie Absurdität, die im alltäglichen wie auch gelehrten Diskurs gemeinhin mit der Vorstellung vom Nichts bzw. der Nichtigkeit assoziiert werden, indem es gewissen grundlegenden Fragen zum Nichts Beachtung schenkt. Sich auf die ergiebige Tradition der okzidentalischen und orientalischen Ideen und Philosophien stützend, hält die vorliegende Arbeit den Begriff des Nichts insofern für achtenswert, als das Gegenteil vergeblich wäre. Die Verfehltheit des Herunterspielens der Nichtigkeit ist reichlich untermauert mittels einer ertragreichen philosophischen (und wissenschaftlichen) Tradition des Westens, die sich, obgleich von Schmälerversuchen der Nichtigkeit als unsinnig durchwoben, als eine auserlesene Fundgrube der Wichtigkeitsaffirmation des Begriffs der Nichtigkeit erzeigt, quer durch die Geschichte der Ideen in genere und namentlich in der Philosophie. Der Artikel setzt sich zum Ziel, zu verdeutlichen, dass dem Nichtigkeitsbegriff jegliche erdenkliche Aufmerksamkeit innerhalb des philosophischen und sozialen Diskurses zukommt.*

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

Nichts, Sein, Nichtigkeit, Leere, Metaphysik, Wissenschaft

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### Questions fondamentales sur Rien

#### **Résumé**

*L'article tente, en prêtant l'attention à quelques questions fondamentales sur Rien, une critique philosophique de l'insignifiance et de l'absurdité qui sont habituellement associées, dans le discours quotidien et académique, au concept de Rien ou de Néant. S'appuyant sur la riche tradition des idées et des philosophies occidentales et orientales, l'article montre que le concept de Rien mérite qu'on y prête attention ne serait-ce que parce qu'il est vain de ne pas le faire. La futilité de la minimisation du Néant est amplement étayée en faisant appel aux riches traditions philosophiques (et scientifiques) de l'Occident qui, quoique imprégnées par des tentatives de déprécier le Néant comme étant absurde, s'avèrent être une riche source d'affirmation et d'importance du concept de néant dans l'histoire des idées en général et de la philosophie en particulier. L'objectif est simplement de montrer que le concept de néant mérite toute attention possible dans le discours philosophique et social.*

#### **Mots-clés**

rien, être, vide, néant, métaphysique, science