

Thinking the Nothing

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Abstract. Why is it so easy to consider the Nothing? Are we entirely confident in what we mean by the Nothing? 'What is' the Nothing and how can we enter into thinking 'it'? Our entry into thinking the Nothing will prove most thought worthy, that is to think what has no 'features'. We will investigate the Nothing with respect to Martin Heidegger's What is Metaphysics? This work will be our guiding light into what appears to be a dark area in philosophy and our task will be to shed light onto this oddly familiar notion. This investigation will prove to be unlike any other in academic philosophy.

Within the intellectual landscape we as thinkers, have a limited scope of investigation. We are the new dogmatists, with our persistent scientific and logical intellectual orientations. Science and logic stand out as the supreme intellectual movements, from which philosophy has attempted to align itself with. As such, a place for developing or engaging in other intellectual endeavors has been left out or entirely disregarded. We have not left adequate space or created a place where we can easily enter into a dialogue with other intellectual spectrums and respect their capabilities. Whether or not we are aware of this polemic, we can address this issue through an investigation like no other in academics. That is, we can enter into a particular discourse and think in other ways, less articulated in our intellectual traditions. Our challenge here is to think the Nothing, for which we have covered over or entirely forgot about. Thinking through the Nothing and exposing various ways we can address this way of thinking unlike any other in academic philosophy will be our project. Our

tool for dis-covering here is Martin Heidegger's What is Metaphysics?¹ The title of our project suggests that I am already emphasizing what Heidegger develops throughout his inaugural lecture, namely thinking the Nothing.

Our intuitive response to such a vague proposal of 'thinking the Nothing' is to ask what is the Nothing. What does it mean in accessible terms, to think the Nothing? The immediate answer to 'what is' the Nothing will be revealed as an impossible quest with the Nothing.² That is, we cannot adequately come to terms, with thinking the Nothing, through the investigative question of 'what is.' The reason for this will be a separate objective here; we will consider why the question of 'what is' cannot satisfy an entry into thinking the Nothing. However, addressing the inquiry of 'what is' will have to wait until we first consider 'from where'³ we are entering into thinking the Nothing.

Science and Things

Martin Heidegger's project in thinking the Nothing is related to his ontology, or study of being(s). In the text of What is Metaphysics Heidegger spells out for us that science also shares in this investigation of beings. The scientific preoccupation with beings allows Heidegger to critique it in the

¹ Heidegger, Martin. "What Is Metaphysics." Martin Heidegger Basic Writings. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993. 93-110.

² We will consider why the question of 'what is' the Nothing, lacks the potential to address the Nothing. The framework of the question prohibits an adequate articulation of the Nothing.

³ We will first contextualize our thoughts about thinking the Nothing through describing what Martin Heidegger is writing from outside of, intellectually speaking. That is, outside of the scientific and traditional logical modes of investigation. First, we will consider the Nothing with respect to scientific inquiry.

manner that he does. The scientific project is an *"irruption"* of *"man"* *"into the whole of beings, indeed in such a way that in and through this irruption beings break open and show what they are and how they are."* Heidegger furthers the orientation of science through its concern, understanding, and *"guidance"* with beings. However, the limit and boundary for science resides with beings *"and nothing besides"*, *"beings themselves-and nothing further"*, *"beings themselves-and beyond that nothing."* In slightly obvious terms, science is always preoccupied with some-thing. For the scientist, some particular thing is present for the scientific evaluation. For instance, the biologist always has a specimen to work with. In fact, even the hypotheses for the entirety of an experiment are centered on its preoccupation with a thing, whatever this particular thing may be. What Heidegger suggests in his evaluation of what science 'is' concerned with, is precisely that science leaves out the Nothing. This is no fault of the sciences; their goal from the onset has always been the objective 'truth' about things. The emphasis Heidegger places is on the ease of speaking about the Nothing, how quickly we digress into considering the Nothing with respect to what science does not accommodate into its register. The lack or complete absence of every-thing serves as the 'place'⁴ where science claims no indications or theories. From the scientific orientation of things, Heidegger introduces us to what lacks in our intellectual spectrum as a

⁴ I am writing completely figuratively about a location of thought; no-thing does not have an actual place to reside.

whole, namely that we have yet to articulate the question of the Nothing, if such a question can adequately be addressed. We must admit that this question of the Nothing particularly is Heidegger's agenda and not the sciences. However, it nonetheless shows us the possible boundaries of the 'almighty' sciences and challenges us to re-think⁵ science as the basis for discovery after the Copernican revolution.

'What is' and Logic

Let's return to the 'what is'⁶ as a mode of inquiry. We have already described how science cannot consider the nothing; now we can understand how the question of 'what is' shares equally in troublesome inquiry. The question regarding 'what is' presupposes 'a thing' in advance to be investigated. If we are to ask 'what is' this paper made of, we grant within the question, a particular thing to be analyzed. All questions of 'what is' presuppose the thing in advance. Science and its investigation into beings share the intellectual zone where 'things' become the 'objects' of analysis, and besides that "*nothing else*". 'What is', already gives in advance, 'a thing' from where one begins thought. In following this analytic of 'a thing' 'what is', falls short of adequately articulating a question of the Nothing. Neither does the 'what is' have the possibility of ever

⁵ Re-thinking here would be like re-evaluating where science can establish its propriety in intellectual movements.

⁶ For example, the 'what is' can be thought of as any investigation that begins with "what is" x or y, "what is" this or that. This 'what is', is a common form of inquiry we use to describe or unfold an investigation into some-thing.

addressing the Nothing, precisely because the Nothing does not have the 'qualities'⁷ for one to deduce properties of 'a thing' as such. The Nothing is conceptually problematic for both science and 'what is' but it does not end there. Logic, which shares a deep relation with science and the 'what is', cannot come to terms with the Nothing. Thinking the Nothing positions us to think contrary to logic. In logical investigations, we posit the object of inquiry in traditional subject predicate form. The Nothing, as complete absence prohibits this by remaining without properties of being, it remains thing-less, subject and predicate-less. Heidegger points out the impossibility in logic to think the Nothing. To this impossibility he states, "*Since it remains wholly impossible for us to make the nothing into an object, have we not already come to the end of our inquiry into the nothing-assuming that in this question "logic" is of supreme importance, that the intellect is the means, and thought the way, to conceive the nothing originally and to decide about its possible exposure.*"⁸ To this riddle the answer is, in short, we can operate outside the framework of logic. In fact, it is necessary to use other means to think the Nothing. Heidegger spells out thinking the Nothing in others terms slightly later in his speech stating, "*For the nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple.*" The "*negation*" here is what we can think of as the not; the beings that are not⁹,

⁷ The Nothing lacks any thing-like quality, in so, it lacks all possible properties.

⁸ Pg. 97

⁹ This is illogical, since, as we have already stated that any inquiry of beings posits a being as there. This illogical statement here is only for means of grasping, though illogically, what the Nothing can

which in are course of inquiry is all-things. Yet Heidegger maintains that “*the Nothing is more original than the not and negation.*” Given that Heidegger is correct, where¹⁰ do we think now? With science, the question of ‘what is’, and formal logic means to which we cannot utilize in order to think the Nothing, what are we left with to think? How did we ever get to this conception of the Nothing if in fact, all these previous traditions of thought prove inadequate to conceptualizing the Nothing? How is it that this Nothing has not completely evaporated and why do we still cling to this oddly familiar conception of the absolute absence of every-thing?

Mood and the Nothing

It is not from the intellectual spectrums that we become acquainted with the Nothing. After all, we have already expressed what the intellectual traditions could not previously articulate. The Nothing does not ‘come across’ as merely a conceptual epistemic concern. We do not say, “Oh shoot, how can I adequately think of the Nothing epistemically?” Heidegger maintains that in order for us to begin to formulate the question of the Nothing, it “*must be given beforehand. We must be able to encounter it.*” Given that the Nothing is a negation of the totality of beings, this must be wherein we encounter the Nothing. Yet, how or where do

be conceived of through a logical structure. Following the sentence to its end you will notice I adjust the logic in correct order and write of all-things as the idea to be negated.

¹⁰ Where here, is in place of ‘what’ for conceptual purposes. Thinking where instead of ‘what’ gives us a means to conceptualize a place from where thought arises. As we have addressed, ‘what’ is slightly misleading with respect to investigating what is ‘not’.

we find the totality of beings in our lives? Heidegger suggests that we can conceptualize the totality of beings 'ideally' or in ideas and think this negated, but this is not satisfactory for the full array of thought. Similarly, we can think the taste of an orange but it's in the actual tasting of it that proves more thought worthy. The task in thinking the Nothing is addressing 'it', in its existential density. We should not consider the Nothing as a mere conception, or an epistemological concern, rather to develop or reveal it from an experience of 'it'. Moods will prove to be our entry into thinking the Nothing in its existential density. Mood as a form of attunement reveals to us beings as a 'whole'. That is, through a mood, our being, our very existence attunes to all-other beings¹¹. In our being 'carried away' by moods, Da-sein¹² encounters itself within beings as a 'whole'.¹³ In a sense we 'vibe' with being as a whole, and proceed on with and through it, whether it be anxiety or boredom. In showing us an attunement towards all things, our mood also conceals from us the Nothing. *"In a familiar phrase this indeterminateness comes to the fore,"* the anxiety of what cannot be discovered, what cannot be brought to attention. *"We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this "no hold on things" comes over us and*

¹¹ We could rightly say that with-in a mood, our experience of this or that mood 'fits in' with our attunement to "what's going on". For a deeper understanding, our analysis here will focus on Anxiety.

¹² Translates into Being-there but for a more concrete understanding human existence is also commonly cited.

¹³ All beings.

remains."¹⁴ In the same fashion that the Nothing does not allow for logical epistemic inquiry, anxiety, revealing the Nothing, "*robs us of speech.*" When others ask, "what is wrong" in our moments of anxiety, we rightly respond, "oh nothing." In the attunement of anxiety, Da-sein loses itself, so to speak with-in what cannot be disclosed. In this loss, the mood of anxiety comes over us, from outside of us and covers over beings as a 'whole', which leaves us in a kind-of vacuumed like state. With-in this vacuumed state no-particular-thing takes on its former representation, meaning, or significance. From the anxiety, which reveals¹⁵ the nothing, yet also conceals¹⁶ 'it', we move towards another possibility brought about by the Nothing.¹⁷ This is the possibility for beings to disclose themselves.

Beings and the Nothing

*"Beings are not annihilated by anxiety, so that nothing is left."*¹⁸ Rather, beings are in constant retreat with-in anxiety; they remain 'out of bounds', so to

¹⁴ Pg. 101

¹⁵ Anxiety 'reveals' the Nothing in the sense that 'it' discloses in our existence a particular instance, wherein beings as a 'whole' do not remain present for circumspection. In this absence, no-particular-thing stands out; things remain absent or out of thought.

¹⁶ This 'concealment' is the impossibility of adequately conceptualizing a logical idea of complete absence. Our traditional logical structure prohibits articulation or speaking of what cannot have presence. That is, how can we talk about what has no space, what occupies no place, what has no properties, what lacks any being? Our logic of 'things' does not articulate no-thing.

¹⁷ This is a possibility brought about by complete absence.

¹⁸ Pg. 102

speak, outside of presence for inquiry. “*The nothing itself nihilates.*”¹⁹ This nihilating Nothing is always in a constant retreat and absence from being. ‘It’ cannot occupy the ‘place’ of being where ‘things’ dwell due to ‘its’ very nature or lack there of. In Anxiety, where the retreat of beings as a ‘whole’ happens, we attune to the Nothing; this is also the mood we can focus on to think the Nothing. We see that this retreat is not a mere “negation” or “not”, rather it is an original removal or distancing from the totality of beings, so that when the mood has set in, no-thing ‘remains’.²⁰ Heidegger states “*Holding itself out into the nothing, Da-sein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This beyond beings we call “transcendence.”*”²¹ In being held out beyond beings, our attunement to the mood allows a way of relation to things as such. The distance which the nihilating Nothing ‘creates’, and allows for the world of concern to enter into thinking. That is, the world of distance, which the Nothing provides as the “*retreat*” of beings, is that which grants access to ‘thinking beings’²², or for relation with beings to occur. It is in the withdrawn aspect of the Nothing where we find ‘space’ to transcend. It is in the ‘place’²³ of the Nothing where Da-sein relates to beings and their various dis-positions. Only with a

¹⁹ Pg. 103

²⁰ Things do occupy place here, they just happen to be void of presence to us. That is, they lose there former meaning, reference, and significance, as we have described earlier.

²¹ Pg. 103

²² Thinking of beings, which is not equivalent to Descartes “thinking thing.”

²³ Again, the Nothing occupies no particular actual place like a stone or rock would. This ‘place’ is analogous to help in and center thinking the Nothing.

distance or when a distance is possible can we relate to 'things'. Part of this distance is the possibility of beings disclosure, or the space for things to disclose themselves. The nihilating Nothing provides the 'grounds' for beings to encounter relations to being. "*For human existences, the nothing makes possible the openedness of being as such.*"²⁴ In other words human existence can only relate to beings if it is "*held out*" into the Nothing and transcends distance.²⁵ Heidegger expresses that the history of thinking the Nothing has been thinking 'it' as "*nonbeing*". He states, "*The cursory historical review shows the nothing as the counter concept to being proper, that is as its negation.*"²⁶ Heidegger re-thinks the Nothing and indeed takes it to a new level in his locution of transcendence brought about through the Nothing, with-in Da-seins mood. "*The nothing does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings but reveals itself belonging to the Being of beings.*"²⁷ The Nothing is invoked in the generative process of dis-covering the world and in a particular sense, thinking the world. Withdrawal or distance makes possible, the world of difference and alterity by evacuating a place for beings to arise.²⁸ The Nothing, reminds us of

²⁴ Pg. 104

²⁵ This means, going beyond range or limit and re-encountering and thinking being(s).

²⁶ Pg. 108

²⁷ Pg. 108

²⁸ In part, arise here, is intended to remind us that the world of beings, are not readily and fully available entities for complete circumspection. We don't consider a chair and immediately cognize all the possible qualities, meaning, reference, and significance of that chair. Rather we have to engage with the chair, use it, measure it, re-invent it, fix it, relocate it. The chair exists partially in the sense that our capacity for thinking the chair is finite; our cognitive capacity always factors in anew in the chairs qualities, features, dimensions, etc.

this “*retreat*” of beings, or withdrawal of beings in an exaggerated fashion. In this reminder, being(s) are not complete, isolated entities rather they share the world. A key theme to carry over from Heidegger’s work of Being and Time is that Da-sein is a being-in-the-world. Implied in this conception of being is the interrelated relatedness with-in the world. We exist with-in the world and at every moment, we are exposed to other beings. Withdrawal approximates the world of difference and distance with-in the world we live in. This distance is what allows us to relate to ‘things’.²⁹

What Is Metaphysics?

Heidegger explicitly states the question of the Nothing “*is a metaphysical question.*” His initial question presented in the title of his inaugural lecture starts us in the challenge to think the Nothing. In addressing or trying to articulate the question of the Nothing, Heidegger engages in metaphysical discourse. In thinking the Nothing, we enter into a metaphysical development, wherein the questioner (us), progresses through what we are familiar with (our moods), and proceeds to think the Nothing. The Nothing, as we have developed, is not merely the absence of all things, non-being, or negation. It ‘is’, as far as

²⁹ Part of this relation and thinking this relation is re-cognizing the partial availability of things, so that they are no longer thought of things or beings with complete presence. With the example of the chair, this partial availability of the chair allows for difference and distance, for new possibilities as well. The chair at each moment is not fully available for complete circumspection. Some-thing about the chair is always lacking within our cognitive capabilities. That is, some fact or feature is always “left out”, so to speak. Through intellectual and practical discourse, the ‘thingyness’ of the chair is disclosed but still only partially. If we are to include this partial availability with respect to all-things in the world, we can easily consider the profundity of the world.

generation exists and moods persist. From the Nothing, we are 'given' everything, the world is dis-closed to us through the very distance provided by this "nihilitating nothing". Implicit in the given thing(s) is the world of meaning, reference, and significance. A substantial difference between this metaphysical inquiry and traditional metaphysics is the step taken to ground this question of the Nothing, with-in human experience. The questioner and the question become intertwined in this metaphysical discourse. This metaphysics is embedded in an existential supplement, which accounts for Heidegger's claim as being an "original relation" to Da-sein. In others words, this particular metaphysics is one grounded in existence, our experiences of being, so to speak. In this way of thinking that Heidegger directs us through, we come to anew in thought. We are shown that it is possible to intellectualize using other ways outside or 'from where' science or traditional logic remains absent. In thinking the Nothing, we think the world in terms of its absence. That is, the only criteria we have for thinking the Nothing has been thinking about what has already been "given before hand" and working through its complete retreat. Exploring the Nothing has shown us the versatility of thought, and indeed shakes the foundations of our intellectual landscape.³⁰

³⁰In this shaking up of the intellectual landscape, the partial availability of the world, in its withdrawn manner, allows for 'things' to concern us. This metaphysics of 'presence', presents itself as both an underdeveloped endeavor in academic philosophy, and also a transition or new way of thinking metaphysics outside of our previous intellectual traditions.