

## On What There Is but Doesn't Exist

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I shall examine the question of being and its relationship with the ontological concept of nothing. I first lay down my general approach to the fundamental question, the so-called *Grundfrage*, analysing the notion of Being understood as a totality free from any determination. Then I argue that this temporally determined non-being is not a nothing, but a being contingently absent, that is a being not realized, but possible, so that this being-absent is something, although coincides with nothing.

**Keywords:** Being, Fundamental Question, Nothingness

### 1. *The fundamental question*

Those who have never investigated the abyss of Nothingness do not realize the eminently positive character of the awareness that there is something rather than nothing. Indeed, one of the fundamental problems of philosophy focuses on being, understood as the ultimate foundation, that which is in and of itself, by virtue of which and in which everything exists, a problem that raises another no less pressing problem, which precisely concerns nothing. The question about being expresses the will to go back to something original, primordial, primitive; asking about the foundation raises the overwhelming possibility that there is no being, but nothing. So, we return to the *Grundfrage* with unchanging passion, as if a strong mysterious force were insisting: why is there something rather than nothing?

The questioning of pure being, *puritas essendi*, stable, always itself, outside of time, pure indeterminateness and emptiness, which excludes a beginning and an end, eternal, perfect identity with itself, self-identity that preserves itself and everything that comes from it, free from differences and therefore always the same (*idipsum*), it expresses the desire to go back to something remote, primitive, to that original being that unfolds in its first brightness, which is simply and cannot not be, of which it is permissible to predicate only itself, because being is simply itself (*ipsum esse*); the desire to return to an auroral state in which being reveals itself in its purest authenticity as a foundation, which is in itself and as itself, by virtue of which and in which everything that is subsists; the aspiration to get closer to the meaning and origin of beings in their generality, of the totality, of Allness in its shimmering superabundance.

This Being which is not what is, but is pure Nothingness of what is, not-being what is or being differently from what is, this being which does not know any difference in itself, so that its essence is 'being itself' or 'being' is its essence, this primitive being, which it is not permissible to think that it is not and therefore removed from becoming, because otherwise it would not be, is mere essence. This Being, devoid of any determination or content because of an *unlimited extension* and a *zero intension*, is therefore a pure being which is a *founding-being* and at the same time a *foundational-being*, in turn devoid of foundation because it is original and therefore self-founded. Therefore, it refers to everything we can talk about (including the possible), that is, the entity *quatenus ens est*, independently of any question of existence, so that "quod possibile est, est ens" (Wolff 1735): the possible is not an entity, because it has yet to reach this ontological status, but it is not a non-entity either, because it can become an entity. From ontological point of view, the possible is something that can exist, as it is a potentially real being. The potential therefore does not only indicate being, but also non-being, since what is potentially something is not yet that something. Everything is both actual and possible: actual because many of its aspects have been realized, possible because some of its aspects that have not been realized could be or could not be realized in each condition.

Being, not an entity subject to objective and deterministic rules, but a beyond, a *being-beyond*, a *being-above*, which continually adorns itself with meanings, which shows itself, which performs, but which escapes any definition. The absolutely All which is in the All, but which does not resolve itself into the All. In its diffusion, being is confused with what is, but by observing the entities, e.g. a stone falling from a cliff, a blade of grass making its way through the asphalt, a bird of prey circling in the sky, we return to asking: why does the being of the entity be but at the same time withdraws? Why is what appearing close irremediably far away? Why is what is everywhere present, absent in and of itself?

And this questioning inevitably raises a further question; indeed, the first question, the question *par excellence* of metaphysics: Why being? Why being and not nothing? "Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?" (Heidegger 1981:3). A question, understood in the Plotinian sense, equivalent to asking why, in addition to the non-existent and super-existent One, are there other entities and not anything else different from the One? Vast question, powerful question, mighty question in its repetitive and anguished tenacity: how and why is there everything that is? Where is the foundation of all that is, the original foundation (*Urgrund*) that justifies all that is, even when it is deliberately absent? This is the fundamental question of metaphysics, or rather, the question at the beginning of every metaphysic, of every possible metaphysic, the question of the ultimate foundation and the first cause of what is, because the purpose of metaphysics is to explicitly reveal the true meaning of being. One may argue that this is a poorly formulated and meaningless question, but sadly, it would be more apt to observe that it poses a barrier to what we want to understand. Any

reason to explain why there is *simpliciter* something, or something instead of something else, will require further explanation, so that the reason or any other reason will prove inadequate to explain what is and why something is.

This question may be fruitless, but is still necessary, and can be answered with blunt certainty: because being cannot not be, and that's that! In fact, we ought to carefully consider the question formulated by Leibniz: "Pourquoi y a-t-il quelque chose plutôt que rien?" (Leibniz 1714). But if there is something, by the great principle (the principle of sufficient reason), there must be a reason why it is. In other words, it is not a question of verifying whether there really could be Nothingness instead of what exists, but of asserting that what is arises together with its foundation. It is evident that in Leibniz's formulation, the question has a rhetorical character, because the hypothesis of Nothingness is completely foreign to the Leibnizian system. However, Leibniz not only proposes Nothingness as an alternative to being, but even underlines that it corresponds more closely to the criteria of simplicity and cheapness: "Car le rien est plus simple et plus facile que quelque chose". So, we should ask why God preferred being to Nothingness, since Nothingness is simpler and easier than something. Nonetheless, this consideration is not sufficient to focus on the alternative between being and Nothingness. When God decided that something was, one must explain why being is "so and not otherwise". The question posed by Leibniz therefore turns out to concern the necessity of the foundation, not that of the real possibility of Nothingness.

## 2. *Parmenides again*

But reflecting on the opposition between being and Nothingness, we inevitably return to Parmenides, the first to explicitly elaborate the concept of Nothingness as absolute non-being, which is therefore "unthinkable" and "inexpressible". For the philosopher of Elea, the opposition "ἔστιν"/"οὐκ ἔστιν" (DK B 2, 3-5) is central, where the second term is understood essentially as "is nothing". He also reveals the absolute nullity of Nothingness (τὸ μὴ ἔδν); by virtue of this Nothingness, nothing cannot be anything knowable and expressible. This elementary assertion "being is, non-being is not" contains the great secret: it is only possible to know something that is, that is being, while it is not possible to know Nothingness because Nothingness absolutely cannot be. Parmenides says that being is and cannot not be and that non-being is not and cannot be. This assertion not only indicates a property, albeit a fundamental one of being, but establishes its meaning: being is that which opposes Nothingness, thus prefiguring the central theme of metaphysics. The opposition between being (understood as what is) and Nothingness (understood as what is not) maintains its ambiguous character: being is the opposite of Nothingness, but clearly this opposition presupposes that being is, because if being were not, it would be Nothingness and not the opposite of anything.

Being opposes Nothingness; but it is evident that it can only oppose because it is and when it is; because if it is not, it is Nothingness and does not oppose anything. Thus, Aristotle affirms in the *De Interpretatione* (19a 23-27):

Now that which is must needs be when it is, and that which is not must needs not be when it is not. Yet it cannot be said without qualification that all existence and non-existence is the outcome of necessity. For there is a difference between saying that that which is, when it is, must needs be, and simply saying that all that is must needs be, and similarly in the case of that which is not.

In this perspective, Parmenides's words can only reveal their ambiguity: being is, but when it is; non-being is not, but when it is not. We must be able to distinguish between the necessity that being is when it is and the unconditional necessity that being is, between the need that non-being is not, when it is not, and the unconditional necessity that non-being is not.

The goddess who guides Parmenides in a kind of initiatory revelation indicates two paths of research:

Come now, I will tell thee - and do thou hearken to my saying and carry it away - the only two ways of search that can be thought of. The first, namely, that it is, and that it is impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction, for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that it is not (οὐκ ἔστιν), and that something must needs not be (χρεών ἐστι μὴ εἶναι), - that, I tell thee, is a wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is not - that is impossible - nor utter it (DK, B2).

But what is the subject of “is”? It is being, from which the classic expression “being is, not being is not” (οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι): οὐκ ἔστι, however, assumes in this case a modal value of possibility or reality: that which is not, or is not given that it is not, is not possible. But what “is” and not given that “it is not”? What is the subject of the expression ἔστι, “is”? Whatever it is, a variable x, any anything. In any case, it is a question of ἐὸν, of what is and cannot not be. Of something that as an entity, is, we must always say that it is, and it is not legitimate to say that it is not. An entity is something that is, not something it is not, although this may appear to be a mere tautology: “It needs must be that what can be thought and spoken of is (τ’ ἐὸν ἔμμεναι); for it is possible for it to be (ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι), and it is not possible for, what is nothing to be (μηδὲν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν)” (DK B6, 1-2).

Here the subject is τὸ ἐὸν; and ἔστι εἶναι does not mean “being is”, but once again “it is given to be”. When we read “nothing is not” one should not think of an entification of nothing as if “nothing is not”. The term μηδὲν in the function of subject means nothing, no entity: no entity, as entity, is not.

In the *Sophist* (237 b7 ff.) Plato dwelled on this question, posing the problem of τὸ μὴ ὄν, “what is not”: τὸ μὴ ὄν evidently does not refer to what is, nor to what is indicated by τί, by something, since 'something' always refers to a thing that is. In fact, when we say, “there is something in the pot”, 'something' stands for

something that is. In other words, saying or thinking something is saying or thinking something that is. However, the statement “what is not, is” cannot be treated in exclusively rational terms: “For this shall never be proved, that the things that are not are (εἶναι μὴ ἔόντα)” (DK B7, 1).

In this case, μὴ ἔόντα, the things that are not, appears in place of the previous τὸ μὴ ἔόν. Non-being is not an abstract concept, but a possible state of things, of things that are not: “It is the same thing that can be thought and for the sake of which the thought exists; for you cannot find thought without something that is (τὸ ἔόν), to which it is betrothed” (DK B8, 34-37).

Something becomes the object of our thought when it is: the being of something is expressed precisely in the linguistic form “is”. But then what does the Parmenidean ἔόν refer to? It probably referred to the phenomenal world, to things that are. Parmenides, an ancient sage, wonders about questioning the origin of the phenomenal world from a cosmological perspective. The answer he provides, however, is formulated on a logical-rational level, not on an empirical one: everything that is cannot have been preceded by a condition in which there was nothing: “And, if it came from nothing, what need could have made it arise later rather than sooner?” (DK B8, 9-10).

How can we imagine a “nothing” if all that we can represent is something in any case? *Ex nihilo nihil fit*. These are obviously *a priori* arguments, from which an explicit formulation of the ontological problem does not clearly emerge. Parmenides turns his gaze to the phenomenal world and notes that it is inhabited only by things that are and that happen continuously in a world saturated with being. Therefore, he assumes that being, in its generality, is one and continuous since the things that are constitute a totality without any kind of interruption.

As we have said Plato is the first Greek philosopher to open the door of the ontological problem to resolve the pressing question of non-being. The Parmenidean interdict stands out in the Platonic dialogue: it is not possible to say or think what is not. In fact, thinking about what it is not, or talking about it, generates incurable aporias, which the Stranger of Elea grasps with stringent logic: to say only “what is not” implies the attribution of a quantitative determination to this “nullity”, a number (singular), which can only be attributed to something that is. But if non-being remains enveloped in a mute fog, being, that which is, also remains shadowy:

Stranger: Now we have not discussed all those who treat accurately of being and not-being; however, let this suffice. But we must turn our eyes to those whose doctrines are less precise, that we may know from all sources that it is no easier to define the nature of being (τὸ ὄν) than that of not-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν) (*Soph.* 245e-246a).

Plato does not recognize a clear awareness of the ontological problem in his predecessors, in first place Parmenides: “Stranger: It seems to me that Parmenides and all who ever undertook a critical definition of the number and nature of realities have talked to us rather carelessly” (*Soph.* 242c).

Plato sets out to understand what the being attributed to things consists of, or the meaning of expressions that, in various forms and to different degrees, denote being:

Theaetetus: What do you mean? Or, obviously, do you mean that we must first investigate the term “being,” and see what those who use it think it signifies? Stranger: You have caught my meaning at once, Theaetetus. For I certainly do mean that this is the best method for us to use, by questioning them directly, as if they were present in person; so here goes: Come now, all you who say that hot and cold or any two such principles are the universe, what is this that you attribute to both of them when you say that both and each are? What are we to understand by this “being” (εἶναι) of yours? Is this a third principle besides those two others, and shall we suppose that the universe is three, and not two any longer, according to your doctrine? For surely when you call one only of the two “being” you do not mean that both of them equally are; for in both cases, they would pretty certainly be one and not two. Theaetetus: True. Stranger: Well, then, do you wish to call both of them together being? Theaetetus: Perhaps. Stranger: But, friends, we will say, even in that way you would very clearly be saying that the two are one. Theaetetus: You are perfectly right. Stranger: Then since we are in perplexity, do you tell us plainly what you wish to designate when you say “being” (ὄν). For it is clear that you have known this all along, whereas we formerly thought we knew, but are now perplexed. So first give us this information, that we may not think we understand what you say, when the exact opposite is the case (*Soph.* 243d-244a).

Here, then, is the formulation of the problem, the nature of which is first semantic: in fact, we ask ourselves about the meaning of expressions such as “to be”, “is”, “who is” with evident ontological implications. Therefore, if what is something differs from what is thought of as non-existent by virtue of its logical non-contradiction, that is, according to its disposition to be thought and represented, absolute Nothingness (*nihil negativum*) is defined as negation, as contradictory: it would be impossible to represent, and unthinkable, which implies contradiction, set  $A$  and not- $A$ . In other words, no subject belongs to contradictory predicates, or the subject is nothing, that is, it is not.  $0 = A + \text{non-}A$ . This absolutely first proposition is called the principle of contradiction (see Baumgarten 2013, §7).

As soon as it is argued that being is not nothing, nothing is ipso facto ontologized as included in a proposition in which the subject (nothing) is being predicated, so that it dissolves as nothing to become being. There is evidently talk of *nihil absolutum* (τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν), of which Plato speaks in the *Republic*, the Kantian *nihil*

*negativum* (*das Unmögliche*). Being is being and being is not non-being (principle of non-contradiction): being is and non-being is not. Non-being ( $\mu\eta\ \epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ ), nothing ( $\mu\eta\delta\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ ), is certainly not relative non-being, the other ( $\acute{\epsilon}\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\nu$ ), the different, but it is what there is beyond being, what is contrary, against being ( $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha\nu\tau\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ ). However, it happens that to deny nothing, it becomes necessary to recognize it as an entity: therefore, we end up ontologizing what is not: then what we intend to deny is no longer nothing. Thus, the intimate aporia of Nothingness takes shape. Plato shows that he is fully aware of it in the Sophist, where he tries to overcome non-being, through admission of being, defining nothing as “otherness”:

Stranger: Why, my dear fellow, don't you see, by the very arguments we have used, that not-being ( $\tau\omicron\ \mu\eta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ ) reduces him who would refute it to such difficulties ( $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$ ) that when he attempts to refute it, he is forced to contradict himself? (*Soph.*, 238d 5-8).

Thus, conducting the famous “patricide” of the master behind the mask of the Stranger of Elea, he sets the distinction between absolute Nothingness and relative Nothingness: “When we say the 'non-entity' we do not say something contrary to the entity, but only something different, which precisely for this reason possesses” in a stable way “the nature of being” (*Soph.*, 258 c). Nonetheless, clarifying the sense of non-being, understood as something other than being, to save the multiplicity from Parmenides's dismissal of it, leaves unresolved the paradox of not being, understood as the opposite of being. What is not ( $\tau\omicron\ \mu\eta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ ) cannot refer to something that is, nor to something that may or may not be. It is contradictory to predicate the being of non-being and at the same time conceive non-being as a predicating subject.

### 3. *The eclipse of Being*

What does “is” mean in the assertion: “Being is”, except that being “is not nothing”? “Is” means “not nothing”, “against nothing”, “absence of nothing”, “victory over nothing”. The idea of Nothingness, even if vague and indefinite, awakens anguish; consideration of the ultimate issues of these questions makes the head spin. We can reflect on Nothingness as the totality of what is not, but which could possibly be, as annihilation of all that is but might not be, considering the claim to reduce it to a simple logical negation to be excessive. We can entificate it to make its thinkability possible, re-thematizing “the abyss of absolute Nothingness” as a preliminary problem of philosophy and metaphysics: it means ultimately returning to reflect on being in its generality, pure without determinations, primitive concept, the beginning of every possible metaphysic, understood as Aristotelian knowledge of the first principles and the causes.

Being is the denial of nothing. By virtue of the  $\phi\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\delta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma$ , being is being and not nothing, so that it is not possible that being is nothing. Denying nothing, being entificates it, but entificated nothing is not something: it is, however, an entity and no longer nothing. Precisely in affirming that entificated nothing is being

and not nothing, it is revealed that nothing is an entity, and it appears clear that entification does not have a negating but an affirming character. And so, the nothing, too, becomes an entity, the nothing which is not only the opposite of being, but appears as an *aliquid* whose presence becomes co-essential to being. Each entity in fact opposes its own essence to Nothingness, understood as an irreducible possibility that it is not. Nothing disturbs us, it worries us, not as non-being, but as an eventual possibility inherent in every entity.

However, it is reasonable to observe that what is determines with its presence the conditions of thinkability of nothing, since nothing is coessential to being. It therefore follows that while the essence of being can be defined conceptually the essence of the nothing, understood as non-essence, can only be thought of in relation to Being: nothing is what is not. It will be said that the term “nothing” is meaningless as it does not refer to any entity in the phenomenal world; nothing means precisely lack of any meaning, in the sense that it does not refer to phenomenal anything and as a term is meaningless. In fact, “nothing”, understood as a denoting concept opposed to being, is a denoting concept that denotes nothing. “Nothing” evidently does not refer to anything denoted, i.e. “nothing” does not denote anything. In other words, the concept denoting “nothing” does not refer to any entity. So far, we have dealt with nothing from the logical and linguistic points of view. Now we must ask whether we can downgrade the problem of nothing to a pseudo-problem on a strictly logical-propositional plane, confusing *ratio loquendi* with *ratio essendi* and therefore binding what is and what is not to the properties of ordinary language and our conceptual system?

#### 4. *Is a non-Universe possible?*

The concept of nothing – especially but not only in ordinary language – is sometimes associated with the concept of emptiness: saying that this page is empty is to say that nothing has been written on it, or saying that a bottle is empty means that it contains nothing, and so forth, although it is worth specifying that in these examples “nothing” occurs as an indefinite pronoun and not as a noun (nothing). In a world saturated with things, facts and excesses, refractory to essentiality and lack, it is truly singular that philosophy has given up reflecting on the only concept close to that of nothing, which moreover has ontological consistency: that of emptiness. Denied by Parmenides and the Eleates, for whom it coincided with non-being, in the ancient Pythagorean tradition and for the atomists, the void not only exists, but is also the ontological principle of entities; dialectically connected with the concept of full, for the atomists the concept of void indicates the infinite space between the atoms, the void in which they move, the condition for atomic motion to occur (DK 67 A 1).

Most of the universe consists of empty space, which still contains matter: about two thousand billion galaxies, each with two to four hundred billion stars. If the distribution of matter in the universe is not homogeneous, it nevertheless tends to gather on a wide range of scales under the action of gravity. Galaxies tend to

come together in groups and clusters, which in turn aggregate to form superclusters, which bind to each other with filaments and walls of galaxies. But is it possible to imagine a null universe, a void universe, a universe in a condition of absolutely nothing, a *non-universe*? This is possible if we use so-called *free logic*, a logical language without the assumption that every singular term is denoting. A term is said to denote if it refers to an existing object or individual; a term like “Pegasus” or “the current king of France” is not denoting. In the language of predicates, every term is denoting. So, given a property  $p$  and a letter  $t$  which represents a singular term, it is possible to deduce logically from the predicative statement “the property  $p$  holds for the term  $t$ ”, the proposition “there exists an  $x$  such that the property  $p$  holds for  $x$ ”. This is not valid in free logic. In fact, by introducing a non-denoting term such as “Pegasus”, it is not possible to deduce from “Pegasus is a winged horse” the proposition “there exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  is a winged horse”. Free logic systems have adequate semantics: the simplest approach is to refer to a universe of discourse which includes, in addition to a set of “existing” individuals on whom we quantify, also a set of “possible individuals” but not existing, who are used for the interpretation of non-denoting terms. A *non-Universe* would therefore seem logically possible: by analogy with the empty or null set of set theory, that is, a set that does not contain any element and can be defined *intensionally* by any assertion that is not verified by any element (for example,  $\emptyset$  {knives without handle whose blade has been lost}), but which is still considered something. By the term *non-Universe*, I am not referring to an *aliquid*, but to a possible universe that does not imply space-time and does not contain any kind of entity, i.e. one of the ways reality could occur: a reality that is absolutely empty, but that could possibly be something.

Quine found that a very easy proof of truth and falsity would apply in such a universe: all existential propositions (there is an  $x$  such that ...) are automatically false, while all universal propositions (for each  $x$  ...) are automatically true (cf. Quine 1970). For example, “for every  $x$ ,  $x$  is brown” is true in a universe without objects, because it is certain that there are no objects that are not brown. The assumption that nothing exists then does not seem to generate contradictions, so that from a logical point of view there could be nothing:  $(x) \neg (x = x)$ . The non-universe is simple, because it does not contain entities or properties with causal relationships between them and its degree of entropy is zero. According to the second principle of thermodynamics, we can affirm in a non-rigorous but explanatory form, that when a system passes from a state of ordered equilibrium to a disordered state, its entropy increases. So, if a system – whatever it is, from a glass of wine to a possible world – can exist in  $N$  different states, its maximum entropy is equivalent to  $\log(N)$ . Since the non-universe knows a single possible state and is therefore not subject to state variations, its maximum entropy is  $\log(1) = 0$ . Thus, we can consider the non-universe, which contains nothing, the simplest and most orderly reality with the best entropy profile. All that remains to understand is why nothing prevailed over being.

According to some theories, there are few states *N* that are natural or privileged and do not need explanation, while all other states are to be explained as deviations from *N* due to the action of forces *F* that cause movement away from the natural state. Such theories, which can be defined as “inegalitarian” (see Nozick 1981:121-126), divide states into two classes: those requiring explanation and those neither needing nor admitting explanation. They are suitable for answering questions like “Why is there *X* instead of *Y*?” There could be a non-*N* state rather than an *N* state due to the forces *F* that acted to move the system away from *N*. And if there is an *N* state, this is because there were no unbalanced forces acting to move the system away from *N*. It would be possible to imagine that Nothingness as a natural state, arose from a very powerful force capable of destroying the structure of the universe and then annihilating itself. This hypothesis finds its cosmological counterpart in the theory called the Big Rip, according to which the universe, arising with the Big Bang, is expanding outwards with increasing acceleration due to an unknown form of energy, the so-called dark energy, which is estimated to occupy 70 percent of the universe. The expansion of the universe progressively reduces the density of dark matter and visible matter, whereas the dark energy (that repels matter) remains almost constant and unchanged. It follows that dark energy will gradually become the dominant force (over gravity, electric, nuclear forces, etc.), first causing stars to move away from galaxies, then planets away from stars. The universe is thus reduced to a series of elementary particles isolated from each other and unable to interact. The final state is a rarefying gas of photons, leptons and perhaps protons.

But if the natural state were a fullness of existence, which however tends to degrade because of the action of special forces? After all, it would be completely legitimate to consider the possibility the matter evolves to more rarefied form of energy and existence, until it reaches Nothingness. In such a case, there would be something rather than nothing, because this is not (yet or perhaps) the best of all possible worlds. In truth, we are unable to establish what the natural state is, and we do not know if there is a fundamental natural state, assuming that the right fundamental theory has non egalitarian structure. However, when we formulate questions of the form “why *X* rather than *Y*?”, we assume that *Y* is a natural state that requires no explanation, while deviations from *Y* must be explained by the introduction of special causal factors; otherwise (i.e. if we no longer consider nothing a natural state), the question as it was posed would make no sense. Therefore, we should not ask “why is there something rather than nothing”, but “why does something exist rather than not?” (see Nozick 1981: 127).

### 5. *Nothingness, Void, and Absence*

The concept of Nothingness – especially but not only in ordinary language – is often associated with the concept of emptiness. In a world saturated with things, facts, excesses, refractory to essence, to lack, it is truly

singular that Western philosophy has given up reflecting on the only concept close to, although not comparable to, that of Nothingness. The vacuum was denied by Parmenides and the Eleatics, for whom it coincided with non-being, as that in which nothing is. In the ancient Pythagorean tradition and by the atomists it was the ontological principle of entities consisting of infinite space (i.e. indeterminate) in which atoms move freely, interact and form macroscopic objects. In modern quantum field theory, the vacuum acquires particular importance. It defines the state of quantum vacuum as the one with minimum energy (i.e. a state that does not necessarily have zero energy), in which there are particles (produced by random fluctuations of the vacuum state) that can interact with the surrounding virtual entities.

In ordinary language, the notion of *emptiness* is frequently used, associating it with that of Nothingness: we say that this page is empty to say that nothing has been written on the page or that this bottle is empty to say that this bottle contains nothing or that this room is empty to say that there is nothing in the room, etc. If I talk about an empty space, for example a room in which there is nothing, the presupposed positive condition is that of the things I could expect to find in the room: a table, a sofa, a *trumeau*. Upon entering the room, I notice that these objects I expected to find are not there. The 'not' refers to objects that I assumed were present in the room when I entered it. I can therefore assert that there is nothing in the room, where the negation refers to all the objects that I supposed to find in that room. But in similar cases "nothing" occurs as an indefinite pronoun that performs the function of quantifier and not as a noun (Nothingness). In fact, the way in which we use the word 'nothing' daily generally has this character, while a necessary condition for asserting the theme of the priority of nothing over negation is certainly the fact that the word 'nothing' is used absolutely. If the priority of negation is held firm, the word 'nothing' is used according to implied conditions of relativity. But metaphysics does not intend to deal with this Nothingness, but with the Nothingness which denies the totality of what is, the totality of things that are. And precisely because it is opposed to this totality, nothing itself is an absolute, total, unconditional concept.

The *vacuum*, however, in general terms is not nothing, but a physical field in which forces act that would not exist without it. Therefore, emptiness can be considered the condition of possibility of any material form and at the same time the very characteristic of all material forms, which are "empty" because they do not have their own nature, being co-produced by multiple processes and correlated to every other entity. However, emptiness is not something like a self-consistent material form independent of each of the material forms that it makes possible: "Emptiness is then the same as Nothingness, that reality that we try to think of as the Other with respect to all that which can be present and absent." But here nothing is certainly not to be interpreted in a nihilistic sense, because it refers to the void which in any case represents the condition of possibility of everything. But then how is it given and what is Nothingness? This is a fatal question, which presupposes that

we are talking about something that is, although in this case the object of discussion is completely different; a question that in its posing annihilates its own object, or perhaps it is the object that alienates itself from itself; and therefore, both the question and the answer reveal their inconsistency. Are we thus forced to admit that Nothingness arises only by virtue of negation, of the “not”? Can we exclude a priori that negation and “not” occur precisely because of nothing?

The reflection on Nothingness, on the nullity of existence is often preceded by observation of an absence, of something or someone that is not there or no longer exists. However, these are shreds, fragments of nothing, of a relative nothing that is not absolute, which have infiltrated the whole, but remain surrounded and crushed by the being of what is. Yet this being common to all entities, which we presuppose in every form of our thinking, saying, acting, is other than what is. It moves away, it disappears, it is elusive: the being of what is “being-far”, so that what is, despite its apparent stability, oscillates between being and non-being. According to common sense, it is “being-present” (*ad-esse*), whereas nothing is “being-absent” (*ab-esse*) or rather absence of determination and thus altogether the same as what pure being is (see Hegel 1831:59). So, this being tends to vanish and therefore overlap with nothing: being approaches and retreats like wave motion and grants space to the absent (*abs-ens*) *par excellence*, to nothing.

Invited daily to be at his banquet, sumptuous in the richness of its setting, we realize in fact that there is no trace of the splendid host, because before us, like images reflected in a mirror, there are only the multiple determinations of which the being is indeed predicated, but which remain irremediably outside that hidden and remote being, which is the empty totality of the determinations of the multiplicity. This temporally determined non-being, however, is not a nothing, but is an *absent*, a being that is distant, but always being and not nothing. Yet it is precisely this being, which is alone and nothing other than being in its full ontological difference with respect to what is, that takes on the appearance of Nothingness.

But the looming of Nothingness understood as the negation of being as being, as that of which it is not permitted to say that it “is”, sweeps away any consolatory ambitions and pushes us to the edge of the abyss where we experience the vertigo of non-being. It so happens that on a midsummer night, alone in the naked silence under the celestial vault and assailed by anguish, we are astonished to apprehend our finitude while being seems to dissolve into the darkness. We seek to express our inexpressible dismay, trying to break the chains of language, but we end up pronouncing a few miserable words. However, our stammering does not foil the task of metaphysics, which continues its endeavour to say something about the meaning of being, even if this saying adds nothing to our knowledge. Here the thought of Nothingness, as an expression of the will to conceive the inconceivable constituted by an absolute, aporetic, illogical, absurd negative, draws the dark

background against which all beings shine, πάντα τὰ ὄντα, before which, as Aristotle states at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, human beings pervaded by wonder have begun to philosophize.

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