

HEIDEGGER'S NOTHING AND THE TRUE NOTHING

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*"[There is] Nothing in all its mysterious
multiplicity of meanings"¹*

1. Introduction

The traditional view of "nothing" is characterized by the statement that "nothing" is no-thing, that is, not anything. However, this statement fails to convey all that is captured by the definition describing "nothing", when "nothing" is defined as *the total absence of existents*. Because of the nature of the description of "nothing" or "nothingness", metaphysicians have had difficulty explaining "nothing" and employing it meaningfully in theory. (The term "nothingness", as used herein, is synonymous with the term "nothing".²) Most resort to defining "nothing" as a type of something (and thus mistakenly attempt to conceive "nothing") rather than in the strict sense that "nothing" will be defined as here.

In this essay I intend to argue that "nothing" cannot be conceived in the traditional sense—in fact, stated rather paradoxically, the way to conceive "nothing" is to *not conceive* it. After explaining my theory of the inconceivability of "nothing" I will examine Heidegger's concept of "nothing" as outlined in "What is Metaphysics?", and in the process of that examination refute Carnap's criticism of Heidegger's "nothing" in "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language"

¹ Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" (op. cit.) in Werner Brock, ed., *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Gateway, 1949), p. 353.

² If nothingness were not interchangeable with nothing and instead was considered to be a property of nothing (as 'somethingness' could be considered a property of 'something') then we would be claiming that nothing has a property and was therefore something.

by showing that Carnap *incorrectly* identified the problems in Heidegger's theory. Once my characterization of the "nothing" has been fully outlined and the legitimacy of the discussion of the "nothing" confirmed, I will go on to discuss Heidegger's concept of the "nothing" of death as employed in *Being and Time* and attempt to reformulate his ideas on "anxiety in the face of nothing" consistent with the idea that "nothingness" is inconceivable. I intend to argue that Heidegger's concept of "nothing" was in reality a concept of something- "Being", or the "lack of entities", and that the anxiety that we feel "in the face of the nothing of death" is in reality anxiety "in the face of the *inconceivability* of the 'nothing' of death", since we feel anxious because we subconsciously know that our conception of "nothing" is in fact a pseudo conception, and that we cannot conceive of the "nothing" of death. In addition, I will argue that, in both "What is Metaphysics" and *Being and Time*, Heidegger employs the term "nothing" in a sense different than my sense, and thus fails to distinguish between "nothing" as "no entity", and "nothing" as defined above. After examining "nothing" in these ways, I will use my modified theory of Heidegger's anxiety "in the face of nothing" —that we have anxiety "in the face of the *inconceivability* of 'nothing'" — to examine Heidegger's theory of authentic existence.

2. The Pseudo Concept of "Nothing"

The proposition 'There is nothing' entails the proposition 'There does not exist space, time, bodies, concepts, minds, properties, numbers, or anything in itself'. Thus, the proposition 'There is nothing' must entail the proposition 'There are no existents', for to have an existent is to have "something". Each proposition, the proposition 'There are no existents' and its sister proposition 'There does not exist space, time, bodies, concepts, minds, properties, numbers, or anything in itself', accurately captures our modal intuition of "nothing". The definition of "nothing", viz. that "nothing" is the total absence of existents —for example, the "nothing or nothingness" from which many Big Bang cosmologists believe our universe was "born"— prevents us from having a concept of "nothing"; primarily because "nothing" has no properties.

To help clarify this discussion, we shall examine the example of the concept of infinity. Infinity has no limit. Thus, our minds cannot conceive of infinity by singling out each member of the infinite series; we

can only hold a general concept of infinity, as represented by (∞) or {1,2,3,...}. Now, the reason why we can hold this general concept of infinity is because infinity has properties. "Nothing" is similar to infinity in that "nothing" does not have a finite number of parts, thus we are not able to conceive of "nothing" by singling out the parts of "nothing". However, since "nothing" has no properties, and since we conceive of a concept through conceiving its properties, *we cannot conceive of "nothing" in a general sense.*

Now, one may question this position by asking: if "nothing" is inconceivable, how can it even be discussed? How can we conceive that it is inconceivable? Doesn't the fact that we can discuss "nothing" prove that we must have a concept of it? Haven't we given "nothing" the property of *being different from all existents*? The answers to these questions lie in the examination of this "property" of our "concept" of "nothing", for the property of "being different from all existents" is a pseudo property; and the propositions describing "nothing" are pseudo propositions.

A pseudo property is that which has the form of a property but cannot be exemplified. For example, an analogous non-exemplifiable "property" would be the "property" of a round square. The "concept" we have of "nothing" is that it is what would possess the property "being different than all existents". However, since "nothing" cannot possess properties (because then it would become something), our traditional concept of "nothing" is in reality a pseudo concept which expresses the pseudo property of "being different than all existents". By its very nature, "nothing" cannot be exemplified in any way and cannot exemplify anything; we can merely recognize the theory that defines the nature of "nothing".

We can have a general pseudo conception of the "nothing" as "being different than all existents". Thus, we can use this general pseudo conception which fails to conceive "nothing" to discuss "after a fashion", and recognize, the inconceivability of "nothing".

In a certain sense, the truest way of dealing with "nothing" occurs when it is not within the realm of our thoughts or considerations; when we are not attempting to conceive of the concept of "nothingness" and are thus not creating an artificial "picture" of nothing. By being unconscious of "nothing" we are thus doing full justice to "nothing". Paradoxically, we might say that the only true "consciousness" of "nothing" is to be unconscious of "nothing". When doing "full justice to 'nothing'" we must concentrate on entities and Being; otherwise we

would be attempting to be conscious of that which has the pseudo property of "being different than all existents"; which is self-contradictory, since to be conscious of that which is being different than all existents is to create an existent, i.e., that which has a property. Unless we can change the method by which the way the human mind conceives and attempt to conceive without the use of properties (an issue that is far too complex and difficult for me to deal with appropriately in this essay), we cannot literally talk about "nothing"; we can only talk about the pseudo concept of being different than all existents in a literal sense. In recognizing that the pseudo concept is not a concept of "nothing", but that it nonetheless conforms to our modal intuition of "nothing", we are recognizing the inconceivability of "nothing".

3. *An Examination of Carnap and Heidegger*

In Carnap's essay "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language", he claims Heidegger's use of the term "nothing" in "What is Metaphysics" is nonsensical when examined using symbolic logic. Carnap claims Heidegger employs the term "nothing" as a noun to name an entity, thus committing a logical error in syntax. However, Carnap fails to realize that Heidegger intends to use "nothing" as a noun to name Being, and thus Heidegger's use of the term "nothing" creates nonsensical statements only if we accept Carnap's misinterpretation of Heidegger. It is clear that Carnap believes that Heidegger's mistake was to introduce "nothing" as "...a name or a description of an entity...".³ However, this is *not* Heidegger's intention. Heidegger uses "nothing" to name Being, which is *not* an entity. Carnap wrongly assumes that Heidegger's definition of "nothing" as no entities is the same as his own characterization ' $\sim(\exists x)$ ', which is clearly not the case. Carnap accepts Heidegger's incomplete definition of "nothing" (thinking it is the same as his own, more extensive definition) and so misses the real problem—Heidegger's use of "nothing" to represent "Being"—not the absence of Being and entities. Heidegger's definition of "nothing" as no entities allows the phenomenon of Being to function as his "nothing". In fact, Heidegger's Being *is* the "nothing", as shown by his statement: "This, the

³ Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language", in A.J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), p. 71.

purely 'Other' than everything that 'is', is that-which-is-not (*das Nicht-Seiende*). Yet this 'Nothing' functions as Being...to experience in Nothing the vastness of that which gives every being the warrant to be. That is Being itself."⁴

Because of Carnap's incorrect assumption, he argues that Heidegger uses the term "nothing" in an illogical and nonsensical manner. Carnap did not understand that when Heidegger used "nothing" as the subject of the sentence that Heidegger could have simply used "Being" or alternatively "...that which makes the revelation of what-is as such possible for our human existence,"⁵ in place of the word "nothing"; Heidegger basically equated the term "Being" with the term "nothing". Carnap himself states that his refutation would not be valid if Heidegger was using "nothing" to represent a "something": "...we might be led to conjecture that perhaps the word 'nothing' has in Heidegger's treatise a meaning entirely different from the customary one... If such were the case, then the mentioned logical errors...would not be committed."⁶

However, though we can argue that Heidegger's sentences are thus not nonsensical, there is still a problem with Heidegger's characterization of "nothing" in "What is Metaphysics" that has not been resolved. Here, Heidegger is attempting to define "nothing" as the lack of entities - which, for Heidegger, means "nothing" is equated with Being. In order to pose his question "What about Nothing?"⁷, Heidegger discusses "nothing", but defines "nothing" as an ontological "something" and thus creates seemingly nonsensical sentences. Because of his identification of something as "nothing", and because he doesn't *realize* he has identified something as "nothing", Heidegger is forced to reject traditional logic and methods of reasoning in order to pursue his argument.

Being is a phenomenon in the ontological sense, just as entities are phenomena in the ontic sense. Had Heidegger not attempted to conceptualize "nothing" as a phenomenon (as the ontological something of Being), and instead realized that "nothing" can have no properties, he would have understood that he was discussing a "something".

⁴ Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" (op. cit.), p. 353.

⁵ Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?", p. 340.

⁶ Carnap, *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷ Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?", p. 337.

4. *An Examination of Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity and the "Nothing" of Death*

The "nothing" that Heidegger refers to in *Being and Time* seems to be different from the "nothing" he refers to in "What is Metaphysics". In "What is Metaphysics", Heidegger equates "nothing" with the phenomenon of Being, while in *Being and Time*, he talks of the "nothing of death", and seems to be relating the "nothing" to a possibility of Being (which is a mode of Being). In *Being and Time*, he states that "Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case."⁸ One experiences the state-of-mind of anxiety when one is authentically Being-towards-death.⁹ This anxiety is the result of Dasein finding "...itself face to face with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of its existence."¹⁰ The anxiety that Dasein feels is the result of the disclosure of the possibility of death. Anticipation of the possibility of death makes us anxious as we are forced to come "face to face" with the "nothing" of the impossibility of our existence: the "nothing" of our death. So for Heidegger the mode of Being of anxiety comes from our authentic understanding of the possibility of the "nothing" of death.¹¹

For Heidegger, Being-towards-death *authentically* is characterized as Being towards a possibility¹² towards the possibility of death. He argues that being towards the possibility of one's own death authentically does not mean that one "broods" over the possibility of dying at such-and-such a time, nor does it mean visualizing possible "death scenes", such as one having one's head chopped off, etc. According to Heidegger, Being-towards-death authentically entails anticipating death, but in a non-specific sense. The "when" of the moment when Dasein will cease to exist must remain indefinite but always possible.

For Heidegger, Dasein must "understand" the possibility of its death in an authentic manner; "...by determining those characteristics which must belong to an anticipatory disclosure so that it [authentic existence] can become the pure understanding of that ownmost possibility [death]

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. Macquarrie & Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 294.

⁹ Ibid, p. 310.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 305.

which is non-relational and not to be outstripped..."¹³ Dasein understands through projecting possibilities and through disclosure. Dasein must be towards the possibility of its own death in order for Dasein to have its ownmost potentiality for Being disclosed to it. Thus, for Heidegger, an understanding of and an authentic attitude towards death is necessary for a completely authentic existence.

Although Heidegger's logic seems plausible, one must raise the question of how we are to understand death when it is clear that, apart from the definition that it is a cessation of all physiological functions, we have no idea exactly *what* death (by "death" I mean the point in public now-time where dying ends and actual death occurs) entails. Heidegger seems to think we can understand death by understanding his concept of the "nothing" of death. But Heidegger's "nothing of death" in *Being and Time* is really "something": "We have indicated that death is an existential phenomenon."¹⁴ An existential phenomenon is a mode of Being, so when Heidegger identifies death as a potentiality of authentic Being, and then goes on to identify it as a mode of Being, he is defining death as an ontological "something". Whether or not Heidegger's "nothing" is Being, a mode of Being, or death, the "nothing" as characterized by Heidegger each time is in reality something. Each "nothing" of Heidegger's has properties, thus it must be something. But how can one legitimately argue that death is a phenomenon for Dasein to understand? A phenomenon is not only "something", but is also an *appearance*. How can death be an appearance if that to whom it appears (Dasein) is not alive? The phenomenon or appearance of death cannot be death itself. Thus, how are we to have an authentic understanding of death, so that we can come "face to face" with death authentically?

Must we not argue that the only rational thing to assume is that "nothing" as I have defined "nothing" above (not Heidegger's "nothing") is all that is really identifiable in death? And can we not argue that in reality our authentic anxiety arises not from coming face to face with the "nothing" of death, but that it arises from coming face to face with the inconceivability of the "nothing" of death? Therefore, for us to authentically understand death, shouldn't we understand the inconceivability of the nothing of death, rather than attempt to create an artificial "con-

¹³ Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 284.

ceivable nothing" which in reality is a "something" or a phenomenon of death?

In order for us to think of the inconceivability of the "nothing" of death, we must think of the pseudo property of "nothing" and recognize that it is a pseudo property and that the "nothing" of death does not have this property or any other property. But for us to truly understand the inconceivability of "nothing", we must *not attempt to conceive* "nothing". Does this mean we must live from day to day, lost in the falling of Dasein in order to truly understand the "nothing" of death? No. We must instead conceive only entities and Being and recognize the inconceivability of the "nothing" of death in our authentic anticipation of death. Only then can we exist authentically.¹⁵

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