

## Preface

Many philosophers are afraid of nothing. I do not mean that they are fearless. Nothingness is a notion that teeters on the brink of paradox, and philosophers avoid it, for fear of falling in.

Some philosophers have even gone as far as declaring any discussion of the notion meaningless, since ‘nothing’ is not a noun phrase. Thus, referring to Heidegger’s *What is Metaphysics?*, Carnap says:<sup>1</sup>

The construction of ... [the sentence ‘We seek the Nothing!'] is simply based on the mistake of employing the word ‘nothing’ as a noun, because it is customary in ordinary language to use it in this form in order to construct a negative existential statement... In a correct language, on the other hand, it is not a particular *name*, but a certain *logical form* of the sentence that serves this purpose.

Now, it is true that ‘nothing’ — and similar ‘no-’ words, such as ‘nowhere’ and ‘nobody’ — are often used as quantifiers. Thus, if I say:

[1] I read nothing of interest in the papers today.

the word is used in exactly this way. [1] means:

[2] For no  $x$  is it the case that I read  $x$  in the papers today, and  $x$  is of interest.

But ‘nothing’ also has a perfectly legitimate use as a noun phrase. A standard claim in Christianity (and more generally the Abrahamic religions) concerns creation *ex nihilo*, that:

[3] God created the world out of nothing.

This most certainly does not mean:

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<sup>1</sup> Carnap (1959), p. 70.

[4] For no  $x$  did God create the world out of  $x$ .

which would be true if God did not create the world at all. What [4] means is that first there was nothing(ness) and then—bang!—there was the world. Similarly, we might say:

[5] Hegel and Heidegger wrote about nothing, but they made very different claims about *it*.

The ‘it’ refers back to the *thing* which Heidegger and Hegel both wrote about.

The fact that ‘nothing’ is ambiguous of course makes it an easy subject for humour. Thus, in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, when Alice meets the White King, he asks her:<sup>2</sup>

“Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see . . . [the Messengers].”

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!”

Alice is using the word as a quantifier. The King interprets it as a noun phrase. Nor is it just in fiction that such puns are to be found. The article by Peter Heath on nothing in the *Edwards Encyclopedia of Philosophy*<sup>3</sup> is an erudite piece as well as extremely amusing.

But nothing(ness) is, in fact, no mere matter for jokes: it is a very serious philosophical matter. Many important philosophers—and not just Christians—have taken it to play a central role in their understanding of reality. Together with being, it kick-starts the development of Hegel’s categories in his *Logic*; in *What is*

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<sup>2</sup> The exchange occurs at the start of Ch. 7. There are so many editions of the work, it is pointless citing any particular one of them.

<sup>3</sup> Heath (1979).

*Metaphysics?* it turns out to be the same thing as Heidegger's *Grundbegriff*, being; it is at the centre of human freedom for Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>4</sup>

Nothing is, however, a deeply puzzling thing. Heidegger puts his finger on the matter when he says in *What is Metaphysics?*:<sup>5</sup>

What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that 'is' such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what, and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

Nothing is something: you can think about it, ask what it is, and so on. But it is, well, no thing: it is the absence of all things. How can it be both? Philosophers have struggled to make sense of this since (at least) Plato, when he wrested with non-being in the *Sophist*.

To say that there is, as yet, no clear understanding of these matters would be something of an understatement. Simionato's book is a bold new look at the topic. Using the notion of a possible world and its contemporary developments in philosophical logic—machinery that was hardly available to any of the historical philosophers I have mentioned—he provides an intriguing analysis of nothing, its nature, applications, and the puzzles that surround it. His analysis of nothing is not one with which I agree.<sup>6</sup> However, that philosophers disagree with each other is hardly news, and this is certainly not the place to argue about our differences. There is much in the book that I do agree with; and Simionato and I agree on the most important thing: that we have, here, a significant, even profound, philosophical topic of engagement. And whether or not his central analysis is right, Simionato's book delivers a welcome deepening of our understanding of nothing—and that is most certainly *not* a quantifier phrase!

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<sup>4</sup> For what it's worth, it also plays a pivotal role in the analysis of reality I give in *One* (Priest (2014a)).

<sup>5</sup>Krell (1997), p. 102 f.

<sup>6</sup>My own analysis can be found in Priest (2014b).

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*References*

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