

# Nothingness and the Ground of Reality. Heidegger and Nishida

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## 1 Introduction

Nothingness is a strange object. So is the ground of reality if it has one. In this essay, I will argue that reality does indeed have a ground (in a sense that I will make clear), and that this is, in fact, nothingness.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of this paper I will explain what I mean by nothingness being the ground of reality, and argue for the view. In the rest of the paper, I will look at two philosophers whom I take to be on my side about the matter, Heidegger and Nishida. An interlude along the way provides some background on Zen Buddhism necessary to understand Nishida. An appendix discusses a connection between Heidegger and Zen.

## 2 Nothingness

To the substantial philosophical issue, then.

First, note that the word ‘nothing’ can be used as a quantifier, but it also has a perfectly good use as a noun phrase, meaning *nothingness*. (Hegel and

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<sup>1</sup>I endorsed the view, in effect, in Priest (2014a). See §§11.9, 13.11. Here I want to look more closely at things.

Heidegger wrote about nothing, but said quite different things about *it*.) In what follows, to avoid any confusion, when I wish to use ‘nothing’ as a noun phrase I will boldface it, thus: **nothing**.

**Nothing** is the absence of all things. It is, as it were, what remains after everything has been removed; and by ‘everything’, here, I mean absolutely *everything*, *all* things.

It follows that **nothing** is ineffable. To talk about something requires one to predicate something of it. One can predicate nothing of **nothing** simply because there is nothing there of which to predicate it. One might also put the point this way. To predicate  $P$  of something,  $a$ , requires  $a$  to be an object. (I do not say existent object.) The very syntax  $Pa$  tells you this. But **nothing** is not an object: it is the result of *removing* all objects.

Of course, we are in paradoxical territory here. **Nothing** *is* an object (as well). After all, one can refer to it by the name ‘**nothing**’. Consequently, it is effable, as well. Thus one can say, as I did, that **nothing** is what remains after all objects have been removed. I have discussed the paradoxical territory elsewhere, and I will not go into it further here.<sup>2</sup> It is **nothing** as the ground of reality which will be my concern in what follows.

### 3 The Ground of Reality

Ontological dependence, or as it is often called nowadays, *grounding*, has been the subject of much discussion in the recent literature on analytic metaphysics. In truth, the notion of ontological dependence has always played an important role in metaphysics, East and West.<sup>3</sup> However, the recent literature has forced it and its properties onto centre-stage.

There is much that should be said if the notion—or notions; arguably there is more than one—of ontological dependence is to be sorted out.<sup>4</sup> However, we can ignore most of the details here, though let me make a few comments. Many argue that the notion is not definable in terms of something more basic. If so, so be it. However, I think it is natural to understand dependence—at least in the sense that will be operative here—as follows.  $A$ ’s being the case depends on  $B$ ’s being the case just if (if  $B$  were not be the case  $A$  would not be the case). That is,  $\neg B > \neg A$ , where  $>$  is the counterfactual

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<sup>2</sup>Priest (2014a), §§2.4, 6.13, Priest (2014b), Priest (201+).

<sup>3</sup>See Bliss and Priest (2017).

<sup>4</sup>For some of this, see Bliss and Trogon (2014), and Tahko and Lowe (2015).

conditional.<sup>5</sup> (And since dependence is factual, one had better conjoin  $A$  and  $B$ .)<sup>6</sup>

Now, turning to the subject at hand: some things depend for being what they are on other things. Thus, being the shadow of a tree ( $s$ ) depends for being what it is on the tree ( $t$ ) being a tree. If  $t$  were not a tree,  $s$  would not be the shadow of a tree. The dependence does not go the other way. If  $s$  ceased to be the shadow of a tree (say, if the sun went in),  $t$  would still be a tree.

Similarly, being the set  $s = \{0, 1, 2\}$  depends for being what it is on containing the number 0. If 0 were not a member of  $s$ ,  $s$  would not be  $\{0, 1, 2\}$ . Again, the dependence does not go the other way. If  $s$  were not  $\{0, 1, 2\}$ , 0 could still be a member of it.

Next, some things depend for being what they are on being *distinct* from something else. Thus, being the spouse ( $s$ ) of a person ( $p$ ) depends on  $s$  being distinct from  $p$ . If  $s$  were the same (person) as  $p$ ,  $s$  would not be the spouse of  $p$ . The dependence does not go in the other direction. If  $s$  is not the spouse of  $p$ , it does not follow that  $s$  is  $p$ .

Similarly, being a hill ( $h$ ) depends for being what it is on being distinct from its surrounding plane ( $p$ ). If  $h$  were the same (height) as  $p$ , it would not be a hill. Again, the dependence does not go the other way. If  $h$  is not a hill, it does not follow that it is  $p$ . It might be a ravine.

Now, *being something*, can be said in many ways. However, there is a most fundamental one, namely being an object. It is fundamental, in that being anything at all presupposes being an object. Something cannot have

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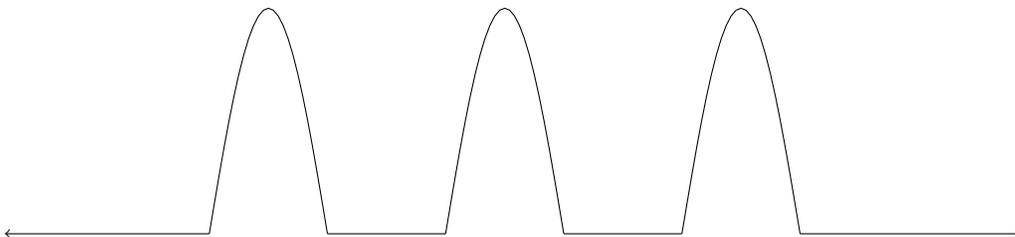
<sup>5</sup>How to understand such conditionals is somewhat moot. But see Priest (2008), ch. 5, and Priest (2018a).

<sup>6</sup>There are some standard objections to a counterfactual analysis of dependence. This is not the place to discuss them in detail, but let me just note the following. It is often claimed that counterfactual conditionals with necessarily false antecedents are vacuously true, so the analysis does not give the right results. However, it is perfectly straightforward to give an analysis of such counterfactuals according to which this is not the case. (See Berto, French, Priest, and Ripley (2018). See, further, Wigglesworth (2013), and (2015), from whom I take the idea that one may use impossible worlds in an analysis of ontological dependence.) Next, it may be claimed that counterfactuals have the wrong structural properties. Dependence is transitive and anti-reflexive. Counterfactual conditionals are not transitive but are reflexive. The properties of dependence are contentious, but if one subscribes to those cited, one can take the counterfactual to be merely a sufficient condition for dependence; a necessary and sufficient condition is being in the transitive closure of the counterfactual relation. And one can make dependence anti-reflexive simply by defining it as  $(\neg B > \neg A) \wedge \neg(\neg A > \neg B)$ .

*any* property unless it is an object. Let us consider this most fundamental sense of being something.

Something ( $g$ ) being an object depends on its being distinct from **nothing**. If  $g$  were the same (in ontological status) as **nothing**, it would not be an object, since **nothing** is not an object. The dependence does not go the other way. If  $g$  were not an object, it would not follow that it is identical with **nothing**. There may non-objects other than **nothing**.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, one may say that what it is to be an object is to “stand out” against the background of nothingness, in just the way that a hill is what it is because it stands out against the background of the surrounding plain. Recall that *exist* comes etymologically from the Latin *ex* (out) *sistere* (made to stand), and so means literally something like *made to stand out*.<sup>8</sup> One could picture it thus:



The peaks might represent hills standing out against the surrounding ground; or they might represent objects standing out against the background of **nothing**.

Hence, **nothing** is the ground of reality, in the sense that it is the ground of every object, reality being composed of objects. One should recall, however, that we are in a dialetheic situation. **Nothing** *is* an object; so **nothing** being an object depends on its not being **nothing**. Indeed **nothing**  $\neq$  **nothing**.

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<sup>7</sup>Thus, see Priest (2014a), esp. Part 1. As Priest (2014a), p. 180 notes, though, there is a different dependence in the other direction. For something to be **nothing** depends on its not being  $g$ : if it were  $g$ , it would be an object, and so not **nothing**.

<sup>8</sup>True, I do not take being an object to be the same as being existent an object; but many people do.

## 4 Heidegger

So much for **nothing** being the ground of reality, in the sense of being the ground of each being. Let us now turn to two philosophers who have been here before us. The first is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).

In 1927 Heidegger published *Sein und Zeit*. At the beginning of this he asks: what is being; that is, what is it to be?<sup>9</sup> And immediately he tells us (giving no reason) that, whatever it is, it is not a being. (There is an ‘ontological difference’ between being and beings.) The question is not answered in *Sein und Zeit*. We are told that to answer it, we must first understand the kind of thing that can ask the question: *Dasein*, people. The book gets no further than addressing that question. The *Seinsfrage* was, however, to drive Heidegger’s philosophical inquiries for the rest of his life.

In 1928, *Sein und Zeit* won Heidegger the chair of philosophy at the University of Freiburg, which had just become vacant due to the retirement of his teacher, Edmund Husserl. And in 1929 Heidegger gave his inaugural lecture, ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’. The lecture is a discussion on *Das Nichts*. This is often translated into English as *the nothing*. This is just a poor translation. German puts a definite article before abstract nouns, where English (mostly) does not. A better translation is simply *nothing* (used as a noun phrase)—**nothing**.

And what does Heidegger say about **nothing**? First he tells us what it is (agreeing with how I have explained it):<sup>10</sup>

[T]he nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings.

That is, **nothing** is what remains after all objects are removed.

He also notes that **nothing** is ineffable, for the same reasons that I noted (pp. 98-99):

What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing

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<sup>9</sup>Note that, for Heidegger, *to be*, does not mean *to exist*. It just means *to be an object*. Thus, ‘everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being one way or another’. (Stambaugh (1996), p. 5.) And ‘when we say something ‘is’ and ‘is *such and so*’, then that something is, in such an utterance, represented as an entity. (Fried and Polt (2000), p. 93.)

<sup>10</sup>Krell (1977), p. 100. In quotations from Heidegger in this section, page number refer to this unless otherwise noted.

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.

Accordingly, every answer to this question is impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing “is” this and that. With regard to the nothing question and answer alike are inherently absurd.

This, of course, thrusts us straight into the paradox of ineffability that I noted.

However, of more importance for the present is what Heidegger says about the relationship between **nothing** and objects. He says (p. 105):

The nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. 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 their essential unfoldings as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs.

In other words, **nothing** provides a “space in which objects appear”. That is, standing out against it is what makes it possible for something to be an object.

Heidegger also thinks that one can experience **nothing** in a mood he calls ‘anxiety’. I will return to that matter in the appendix to this paper. For the present, we need merely note the following, where he makes the same point again (p. 105):

In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: they are beings—and not nothing. But this ‘and not nothing’ we add in our talk is not some kind of appended clarification. Rather it makes possible in advance the revelation of beings in general. The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings Dasein for the first time before beings as such.

For Heidegger, then, **nothing** is the ground of all objects, that is, of reality.

Why does he hold this view? He does not explain at length; but an answer is provided by his view concerning the relationship between being and **nothing**. He says (p. 110):

“Pure Being and pure Nothing are the same.” This proposition of Hegel’s (*Science of Logic*, vol. I, *Werke* III, 74) is correct. Being and the nothing do belong together, not because both—from the point of view of the Hegelean concept of thought—agree in their indeterminacy and immediacy, but rather because Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing.

In other words, he thinks that being and **nothing** are the same.<sup>11</sup> But Heidegger holds that being is what makes beings be. Thus, when asking the *Seinsfrage* at the beginning of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger says:<sup>12</sup>

What is *asked about* in the question to be elaborated is being, that which determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings have always been understood, no matter how they are discussed.

Being is what determines beings as beings. If being were not, no being would be a being. So something’s being a being depends on being. And if being is **nothing**, the same goes for **nothing**.

Indeed, commenting on the paradox of ineffability of being, Heidegger says:<sup>13</sup>

If we painstakingly attend to the language in which we articulate what the principle of reason [*Satz vom Grund*] says as a principle of being, then it becomes clear we speak of being in an odd manner that is, in truth, inadmissible. We say: being and ground/reason [*Grund*] ‘are’ the same. Being ‘is’ the abyss [*Abgrund*]. When we say something ‘is’ and ‘is such and so: then that something is, in such an utterance, represented as a being. Only a being ‘is’; the ‘is’ itself—being—‘is’ not.

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<sup>11</sup>This is an aspect of Heidegger’s view with which I do not concur. (See Priest (2014), §4.6.) However, this is of no relevance here.

<sup>12</sup>Stambaugh (1996), pp. 4 f. Italics original.

<sup>13</sup>Lilly (1991), p. 51f.

Here, Heidegger clearly states that being is the ground (*Grund*) of objects. And since being is **nothing**, it is equally an abyss (*Abgrund*), over which, one might say, objects “hover”.

Heidegger’s views on **nothing** being the ground of reality are, then, in agreement with those I explained and defended in the first part of this essay.

## 5 Interlude on Zen

In the next section we will turn to the second of the philosophers I wish to discuss, Nishida. It is virtually impossible to understand his thinking, however, unless one knows the Buddhist, and specifically Zen, philosophical tradition on which he is drawing. So in this section I want to provide the appropriate background.<sup>14</sup> I will say slightly more than is necessary to understand Nishida on the matter to hand because it will become relevant when I talk of Heidegger and Zen in the appendix to this essay.

Let us start with Indian Buddhism. In all schools of Buddhism—of which there are many—there is a standard distinction between conventional reality (*saṃvṛti satya*) and ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*).<sup>15</sup> How each term of this pair is understood varies from school to school; but, roughly, conventional reality is the world with which we are familiar, our *Lebeswelt*; whilst ultimate reality is the world as it is understood by, or appears to, one who is enlightened. Naturally, the latter is, in some sense, more profound or accurate. Indeed, the Sanskrit *saṃvṛti* means ‘conventional’; but it also means *concealing* or *obscuring*. Conventional reality occludes the ultimate, blocking the path to enlightenment.

The Buddhism that went into China, and thence Japan, was Mahāyāna Buddhism. So let us focus on the Mahāyāna account in more detail. The earliest Mahāyāna school of Buddhism was Madhyamaka, traditionally taken to be founded by Nāgārjuna (fl. 1st or 2nd c CE). According to this, the objects of conventional reality are empty (*śūnya*). What this means is that each thing is dependent for being what it is on other things, notably, its parts, its causes (and maybe effects), and our concepts. In Madhyamaka, ultimate

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<sup>14</sup>For a longer account of the following, see Priest (2014c), and Priest (2018b), esp. chs. 4, 7, and 9.

<sup>15</sup>The Sanskrit word *satya* can mean both *truth* and *reality*. The former is the more usual translation; but in many contexts, including the present one, the latter is more appropriate.

reality is often referred to by the epithet emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Exactly what this is, is more contentious—though it is clear that it, too, is empty; but Nāgārjuna himself appears to suggest that it is ineffable. Ultimate reality is ‘without distinction... and free from conceptual construction’.<sup>16</sup> Since to describe is to apply concepts, it cannot be described.

The other, and later, school of Indian Mahāyāna is Yogācāra, traditionally taken to be founded by the half-brothers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (fl. 4th of 5th c CE). Yogācāra is standardly interpreted as a form of idealism. Thus, in Yogācāra, objects of conventional reality are empty, as for Madhyamaka; but they have no external reality: they are all “in the mind”.

Yogācāra philosophy backs up this view with a sophisticated analysis of consciousness. At the most superficial level, there is ordinary thinking. In particular, it is intentional. That is, it comprises thoughts that are directed towards objects (as in, I am seeing/feeling/thinking of a tree). The objects may appear to be outside the mind, though, in fact, they are not. There is a deeper level of consciousness, however: the storehouse consciousness (*ālaya vijñāna*). In some ways, this is like the unconscious in modern Western thought. In particular, it is the goings on in this which produce what happens at the higher levels, and in particular the (illusory) objects of intentional states. It is therefore the ultimate reality of such objects. This reality is just as ineffable as it is in Madhyamaka. (Concepts deliver only conventional reality.) In particular, there are no distinctions present in the *ālaya*: no *thises* rather than *thats*. Most notably, the duality between subject and object, characteristic of the higher levels of consciousness, is itself absent. The *ālaya* itself is pure, though pre-enlightenment its form is impure, poisoned by ‘karmic seeds’—the traces of previous actions.

When Buddhism goes into China, it meets the native philosophy of Daoism. And a particular interpretation of this was to have a significant impact on the development of Chinese Buddhism. According to this, behind the flux of our experienced world—the myriad things—there is a principle, *dao* (道) of which these are the manifestations. The *dao*, generating all objects, is not itself an object. Hence it is ineffable. As the opening verses of the *Daodejing* put it, ‘the dao that can be talked about is not the true dao’.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore common to see it described as **nothing** (無, Chin: *wu*; Jap. *mu*) as opposed

<sup>16</sup>As the dedicatory verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* put it. (Garfield (1995), p. 2.)

<sup>17</sup>Kwok, Palmer, and Ramsay (1993).

to the beings (有, *you*) which are its manifestations.

The similarity between the Indian Buddhist conventional/ultimate distinction and the Daoist 無/有 distinction is clear enough. And in the development of the distinctively Chinese forms of Buddhism, the two distinctions are identified. In texts of Chinese Buddhism one finds ultimate reality referred to as both 空 (Chin: *kong*, Jap: *kū*, emptiness) and 無, depending on whether it is its emptiness or its ineffability that is at issue.

Moreover, with a bit of help from certain *tathāgatagarbha* (如来藏, womb of Buddhahood) sūtras (which we need not go into here), the notion of the *ālaya* undergoes a striking development. It becomes one's Buddha nature (佛性, Chin: *foxing*). That is, it is the part of a person which is already enlightened. This enlightenment is cloaked by its impurity. Put bluntly, people are already enlightened: they just don't realise it.

Which brings us at last to Zen (禪, Chin: *Chan*).<sup>18</sup> Zen is one of the distinctly Chinese forms of Buddhism. In all forms of Buddhism, experiencing ultimate reality through meditative practices, and hence getting rid of the unhappy consequences of misunderstanding the nature of reality, is of great importance; but it is absolutely central to Zen. This is achieved in the experience of *satori* (悟, Chin: *wu*), a direct experience which, due to the nature of 無 cannot be described. For the same reason, enlightening people cannot be done by teaching with words. There must be a 'direct transmission'. All the teacher can do is help the student to have the experience. Meditation is important in this, and Zen developed a number of distinctive forms of meditation. But it also developed many other techniques such as *kōan* (公案, Chin: *gong an*) practice and shock tactics, which we need not go into here. The training can be long and disciplined, but according to many schools of Chan, the experience of *satori*, when it comes, is sudden and dramatic. If the appropriate preparation has been made, it can be triggered by a blow, or by something mundane, such as the sound of a tile falling, or the sight of the rising moon.

Does Zen Buddhism take ultimate reality, 無, to be the ground of reality? Yes, though one has to be slightly careful here. Objects of conventional reality depend on ultimate reality for their being. In all Mahāyāna Buddhisms, Zen included, the objects of conventional reality are conceptual constructions. If there were no ultimate reality for us to apply concepts to, there could be no conventional objects. The objects of reality therefore depend

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<sup>18</sup>For more on Chan, see Hershock (2019).

on ultimate reality. However, it would be wrong to suppose that ultimate reality is an ultimate ground, that is, a groundless ground. For, following Nāgārjuna, ultimate reality is as empty as everything else. Hence, it depends on something. What this is might be a somewhat debatable point; but the natural answer, at least in Chinese Buddhism, is that it depends on the objects of conventional reality. One cannot have the manifestations of something without the thing of which these are manifestations. But conversely, one cannot have something whose nature it is to manifest itself in a certain way without those manifestations. Given this, the dependence between ultimate reality and conventional reality is reciprocal. So the relation of ontological dependence is not anti-symmetric.<sup>19</sup>

## 6 Nishida

With this background we can now turn to the second of the philosophers who hold **nothing** to be the ground of reality. This is Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945). Nishida was the founder of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, and arguably the most influential Japanese philosopher of the 20th Century.<sup>20</sup>

Nishida is a difficult philosopher: he was constantly reworking his ideas because of his dissatisfaction with them. Roughly speaking, his thought falls into three phases. In the first of these, he was concerned with an analysis of pure experience. In the second, he developed his theory of *basho* (場所). In the third he turned his thought to the socio-political consequences of his metaphysical views. It is the second of these periods which will concern us.

Nishida's style of expression is also not easy to follow. He does not present his ideas systematically. His thought appears to jump around, and it is not at all clear how (or whether) all the pieces fit together. For that reason, I am not sure that I have entirely understood Nishida's theory of *basho*.<sup>21</sup> It is probably more complex than I shall describe. However, I think I have it roughly right, and as to what he says about **nothing** I'm pretty sure that I

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<sup>19</sup>For further discussions of ontological dependence in a Buddhist context, see Priest (2018c).

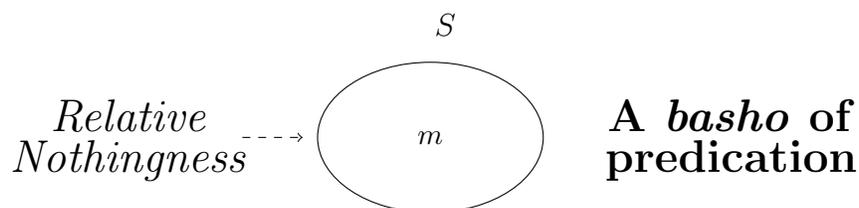
<sup>20</sup>For a general account of Nishida and his thought, see Maraldo (2015). For the Kyoto School, see Davis (2019).

<sup>21</sup>And for the same reason, I shall generally not quote Nishida. Pellucid explanations are not Nishida's forte. The picture has to be rather painfully put together from what he says in many places.

have it exactly right.<sup>22</sup>

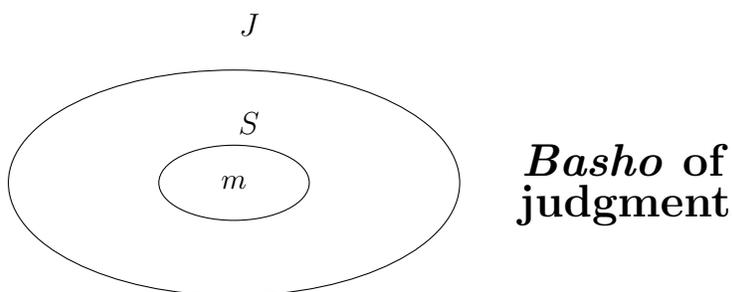
Let us start with the notion of *basho*. One might translate this as *place* or *topos*. A *basho* could be a physical place, but in general it is much more abstract than this, as we will see. The *basho* are also arranged in a hierarchy. **Nothing**, it will turn out, is the most fundamental of these. We will get there in due course, but let us start simply.

Consider a physical object, such as the moon,  $m$ . This satisfies the condition *is a sphere*,  $S$ . This, or at least its extension, is a *basho* of  $m$  in which  $m$  finds itself. We may depict matters thus:



This *basho*, and each of the *basho* we shall meet till further notice, is a *relative nothingness*, (相对無, *sōtai mu*). It is a nothingness because it is not itself present in the *basho*. However, this nothingness is relative to that *basho*, because it can occur in other *basho*.

In particular, that the moon is a sphere is a judgment,  $Sm$ . Hence this *basho* finds itself in a larger *basho*: the *basho* of judgment, thus:

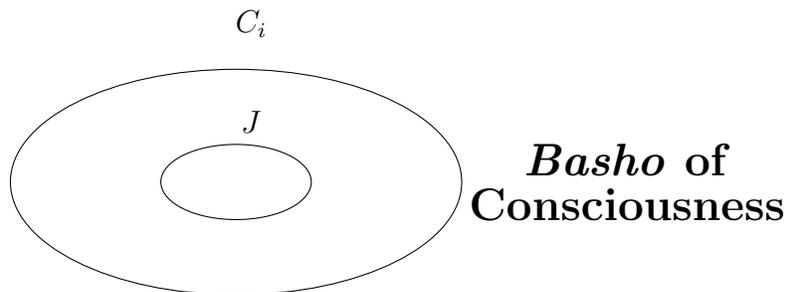


Note that the *baso* are cumulative. Everything in the first is in the second, but the second contains things not in the first, not only other judgments, but  $S$  itself.

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<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of the intricacies of Nishiada's account, see Warago (2005).

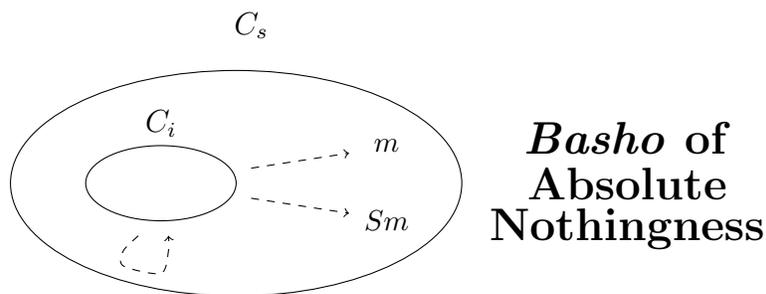
To appreciate the next level, we need to understand something of Nishida's views on consciousness. He distinguishes two kinds: *consciousness that is conscious of* and *consciousness that is conscious*. We might call the first of these *intentional consciousness*, and the second *consciousness simpliciter*. The next level of *basho* is that of intentional consciousness. Let us write this as  $C_i$ .  $C_i$  maybe depicted as follows (I leave out the contents of  $J$  to avoid clutter):



The contents of this *basho* are the things we would standardly think of as the contents of consciousness. This includes judgments,  $J$ , but it will also include other mental states, such as desires, emotions, etc.

I note that in English, the word 'judgment' is ambiguous. It can mean an act ('her judgment was made very fast') or a content ('her judgement was true'). Arguably, the confusion caused by this ambiguity bedevilled Western philosophy until it was cleared up by Frege and Husserl. It is clear from the way that  $J$  is formed, that this contains judgments in the sense of contents. The *basho* of consciousness has them as mental states of activities. Does this imply a confusion on the part of Nishida? Yes, I'm afraid that it does.

This brings us to the final and most fundamental level of *basho*, which is the level of consciousness *simpliciter*. Let us write this as  $C_s$ . This is as follows:



This basho has  $C_i$  as part of its contents. One may think of this as the *subject* of intentional states. The dotted arrows go to the *objects* of such states. These can be judgements such as  $Sm$  or objects such as  $m$ . Strictly speaking, these are within  $C_i$  itself, but I have moved them outside in the diagram to avoid clutter and make subject/object duality clearer. Note that one of the object poles of the subject/object distinction is the subject itself. In fact, Nishida, thinks that any intentional state involves awareness of the subject itself. Does the fact that all other objects of intentional states are within consciousness itself imply a sort of idealism? Yes, I think it does. This is partly a result of running together judgments as acts and judgments as contents.<sup>23</sup> But it is also in line with the Yogācāra idealism that fed into Zen.

The *basho*  $C_s$  is that of absolute nothingness, (絶対無, *zettai mu*). It is a nothingness like all the other *basho*, since it does not occur within the *basho*. But it is absolute because there is no greater *basho* for it to occur within. It is, as Nishida sometimes puts it, a predicate which can never be a subject. The contents of the *basho* have a subject/object duality, but the *basho* itself does not. Indeed, *zettai* means something like *free from duality*. One may think here of the *ālaya*, and the Buddha nature into which this morphed in Chinese Buddhism.

And finally, *zettai mu* is what till now I have called **nothing**. It is what remains, as it were, after all objects—indeed, all objects including the special object which is the subject of intentional states—have been removed. It is also ineffable. If one could predicate anything of it, it would perforce be in a larger *basho*, because of the way that predication works, as we saw right at the start.

Moreover, *zettai mu* is the ground of all objects. It is what objects appear *within*, and so what determines objects as objects. Without a place for them to be located, there could be no objects at all. Nishida puts it thus:<sup>24</sup>

[T]he ultimate universal has the sense of being the noematic plane of the self-consciousness of absolute nothingness. Our entire life is reflected here. In this way, objective determination receives its deepest, most profound foundation.

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<sup>23</sup>And could be avoided by having different *basho* for things in the world and their mental representations.

<sup>24</sup>Warago (2005), p. 199.

And again:<sup>25</sup>

When the self-consciousness of absolute nothingness determines itself, its noematic plane is the topos of the final universal that determines all that exists, and in its noetic direction we find the flow of infinite life.

For Nishida, too, then, **nothing** is the ground of all reality.

## 7 Conclusion

In the first part of the paper I argued that **nothing** is indeed the ground of reality, in the sense that **nothing** is what objects “stand out against”. Without it, there could be no objects, just as there could be no hills if there were not surrounding plane.

In the later parts of the paper we have looked at two important philosophers who subscribe to this view—though each puts a distinctive spin on it in terms of larger projects—being in Heidegger’s case, and consciousness in Nishida’s.

As I have indicated, and as both Heidegger and Nishida were aware, this matter ties into further issues concerning ineffability and paradox. However, these will have to wait for another occasion.

## 8 Appendix on Heidegger and Zen

In this appendix, I want to take up the matter of the similarity between Heidegger and Nishida’s views on **nothing**. The similarity is indeed striking. For both, **nothing** plays an important role in their thinking; for both, **nothing** is ineffable; and for both, **nothing** is, in the sense we have seen, the space in which objects appear, the ground of reality. Perhaps the similarity is not surprising. It is of course well known for the same idea to occur to different people independently.

However, the confluence of views is made even closer, given Heidegger’s views on the phenomenology of the experience of *das Nichts*, compared with the Zen experience of 無. If one knows something of Zen thought, it is impossible to read Heidegger’s essay ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’ without being struck

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<sup>25</sup>Warago (2005), p. 207.

by the similarities, which appear to come from nowhere. Let us examine the matter.

Heidegger says that in a mood he calls *anxiety* one come face to face with **nothing**.<sup>26</sup>

Does such an attunement, in which man is brought before the nothing itself, occur in human existence?

This can and does occur, although rarely enough and only for a moment, in the mood of anxiety.

Compare: in Buddhism our *Lebenswelt* is that of conventional reality, though **nothing** can be experienced in moments of *satori*. Next (p. 102):

But just when moods of this sort [GP: which have an object] bring us face to face with beings as a whole they conceal us from the nothing we are seeking.

Recall that one meaning of *samvṛti* is *concealing* or *obscuring*.

In both Zen and Heidegger's thought, **nothing** is experienced when the objects of conventional reality drop away, and we are left face to face with their background. Thus Heidegger (p. 104):

This nothing reveals itself in Anxiety—but not as a being... [T]he nothing makes itself known with beings and in beings expressly as a slipping away of the whole.

Anxiety, then, is not an intentional state, directed towards some object or other. Indeed, not only is it objects which slip away, but the subject too (p. 103):

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—we men who are in being—in the midst of beings slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though ‘you’ or ‘I’ feel ill at ease; rather, it is this way for some ‘one’. In this unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to, pure Dasein is all that is still there.

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<sup>26</sup>Krell (1977), p. 102. Page references to Heidegger in this section are to this text.

In other words, the subject/object duality disappears—as in Zen—and all there is just a “something happening”. Heidegger calls it *Dasein*. A Zen Buddhist might call it Buddha nature.

Moreover, our awareness of **nothing** is, in a certain sense, always present (pp. 106 f.):

But now a suspicion we have been suppressing too long must find expression. If *Dasein* can relate itself to beings only by holding itself out into the nothing and can exist only thus, and if the nothing is disclosed only in anxiety; then must we not hover in anxiety constantly in order to be able to exist at all? And have we not ourselves confessed that the original anxiety is rare? But above all else, we all do exist and relate ourselves to beings which we may or may not be—without this anxiety. Is this not an arbitrary invention and the nothing attributed to it a flight of fancy?

Yet what does it mean that this original anxiety occurs only in rare moments? Nothing else than that the nothing is at first and for the most part distorted with respect to its originality. How, then? In this way: we originally lose ourselves altogether among beings in a certain way. The more we turn ourselves towards beings in our preoccupations the less we let beings slip away as such and the more we turn away from the nothing. Just as surely do we hasten into the public superficies of existence.

And yet this constant if ambiguous turning away from the nothing accords, within certain limits, with the most proper significance of the nothing. In its nihilation the nothing directs us precisely towards beings. The nothing nihilates incessantly without our really knowing this occurrence in the manner of everyday knowledge.

In other words (p. 108):

This implies that the original anxiety of existence is usually repressed. Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through *Dasein*, only slightly in those who are jittery, imperceptibly in the ‘Oh, yes’ and most assuredly in those who are basically daring. But those daring ones are sustained by that

on which they expand themselves—in order to thus preserve a final greatness of existence.

That is, in Buddhist terms, we are already enlightened, though this is hidden from us.

Moreover, when ‘the daring’ do experience **nothing** this may happen quite suddenly and unexpectedly (p. 108):

Original anxiety can awaken in existence at any moment. It needs no unusual event to rouse it. Its sway is as thoroughgoing as its possible occasions are trivial. It is always ready, though it only seldom springs, and we are snatched away and left hanging.

Or in Buddhist terms, *satori* can be sudden, and triggered by quite mundane events.

There remains the point that Heidegger calls this mood in question ‘anxiety’, which implies an unpleasant experience—which one would not associate with an experience which is supposed to lead to liberation. But things are not so straightforward. From the Heideggerian side, he says things about the experience which are hardly unpleasant. Anxiety is not to be confused with fear (p. 102, Heidegger’s ellipses):

Much to the contrary, a peculiar calm pervades it. Anxiety is indeed anxiety in the face of..., but not in the face of this or that thing.

And again (p. 108):

The anxiety of those who are daring cannot be opposed to joy or even the comfort of tranquilized bustle. It stands—outside all such opposition—in secret alliance with the cheerfulness and gentleness of creative longing.

On the other hand, Heidegger’s use of the word ‘anxiety’ is not capricious (p. 103):

In anxiety, we say ‘one feels ill at ease’... The receding of beings that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us... We can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings only this “no hold on things” comes over us and remains.

No doubt the slipping away of the familiar world can be a disconcerting experience.

But one should also note, from the side of Zen, that some Zen thinkers have referred to the initial state of awakening as the *Great Death*. The term was coined by Zhaozhou (Jap: Jōshu),<sup>27</sup> and taken up by Dōgen, and Hakuin. According to some accounts, the Great Death is likened by Hakuin to leaping from a high cliff into a void. Jumping off a cliff can certainly be an anxiety-generating experience—at least until one realises that there is not ground to hit.

The similarities between Heidegger and Zen on the phenomenology of the experience of **nothing** are, then, manifest and clear. Of course, this, again could just be coincidence. But this is not so plausible if there is another explanation; and one is suggested by the following. Tanabe Hajime was assistant professor to Nishida. Indeed, he became Nishida’s successor in his chair of philosophy at Kyoto University. Tanabe, in fact, studied with Heidegger in the early 1920s.<sup>28</sup> It is very plausible that Heidegger learned of the Zen ideas from him, and applied them to his own ideas concerning being.

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<sup>27</sup>Cleary and Cleary (2005), Case 41.

<sup>28</sup>See Davis (2019), §3.1, and Heisig (2001), p. 108.

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