

The Limits of Thought

The Boundary of Thought

Are there limits to thought? One might mean many things by this question; but, in one sense, to think about something is to conceptualise it, characterize it, or describe it in some way. That is what I will take it to mean in what follows.

So are there limits to what can be thought, in this sense? There are, of course, things about which we have not thought. One cannot give examples of such; for as soon as one does so, one has described the things in question in some way. But take any historical generation—say, for example, Medieval Europe. A medieval monk could not have thought of a black hole, a covid virus, or the internet. They just did not have the conceptual apparatus. It would be hubris to suppose that we are in a situation different from our predecessors.

Are there things we will *never* think of? Probably: the cosmos (let alone the world of mathematics) is a large and indefinitely complex place, and the human race is very finite—whatever its final demise will be.

But are there things we *cannot* think of—things which transcend any possible characterisation?

There is a rich vein—maybe an artery—in philosophy, East and West, which essays an analysis of the limits of thought, and comes to the conclusion that there are things of this kind. Here is not the place to go into the history, but let me give a few examples.

The famous opening verse of the *Dao De Jing*, 道德經 (4th c. BCE?) tells us that behind the phenomenal world which we experience, there is an ineffable principle, *dao*, 道, which generates the phenomena. True, the text does not give arguments for its ineffability, but the Neo-Daoist commentator Wang Bi, 王弼 (226-249), does. *Dao* cannot be anything one can describe. If it were one such thing, it could not be any other such thing.

About the same time as Wang Bi, Mahāyāna Buddhism was taking shape on the other side of the Himalayas. According to this, reality is twofold: there is the conventional reality, *saṃvṛti satya*, of our phenomenal world; and “behind” this, there is an ultimate reality, *paramārtha satya*, or how things are “from their own side”. This ultimate reality is ineffable. Indeed, our concepts function to *construct* conventional reality. Anything that can be described is, *ipso facto*, conventional, not ultimate.

About 1500 years later, and a few miles to the West, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was playing with a similar idea. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781 and 1787) he tells us that phenomena are a product of the overlay provided by our categories and spatio-temporal concepts on our raw experiences. But there must be something which generates these experiences, noumena. One cannot hold anything to be true of these, since to say anything of the form 'x is (or is not) such and such' applies the categories. The criteria of application of all these are temporal, and noumena are not in time.

Just over 100 years later, in 1927, another famous German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), published his first major work, *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), announcing the philosophical project which would occupy him for the rest of his life. The question—the *Seinsfrage*—was 'what is being—what is it that makes beings be?' And being, he tells us immediately, is not itself a being. To say anything about it is to treat it as a being. So one can say nothing about being.

According to all these analyses, then, there are things which transcend our conceptual ability to describe. Of course, the analyses that produce this result are highly sophisticated and theoretical; and one might well reject them (especially in virtue of what we are about to see). However, many smart philosophers have endorsed one or another of these analyses.

Some much simpler considerations also suggest that there are ineffable things. Consider nothing. The word 'nothing' is, in fact, ambiguous. It can be a quantifier (like 'some', 'all'). Quantifier words do not refer: they are used to say whether there are or are not things of some kind or other. So, if I ask someone a question, and they are silent, I might say 'She said nothing'. As logicians might put it: for no x did she say x .

But 'nothing' can be a noun-phrase—meaning *nothingness*. Suppose I say: 'Heidegger wrote some very interesting things about nothing'. I would probably not mean: for no x did Heidegger write some very interesting things about x '. I would mean that he wrote some very interesting things about nothingness. Or suppose I say: 'Hegel and Heidegger wrote about nothing, and said different things about it'. The 'it', here, is an anaphoric pronoun referring back to the object referred to by the noun 'nothing'.

Many jokes can be made by punning on such ambiguity—as when Lewis Carroll's Alice in *Through the Looking Glass* meets the White King, who asks her whether she can see anyone coming down the road. Alice replies that she can see no one; and the King complements her on her eyesight, saying that he has trouble seeing even real people. But the ambiguity can also cause much confusion. To avoid this, when I use the word as a noun phrase in what follows, I will boldface it, thus: **nothing**. Without boldfacing, it is the quantifier.

Now, **nothing** is a thing: you can think about it (you are now); wonder what on Earth it could be (maybe you are now); ask your favourite philosopher about it (maybe you will do). But you can't say anything about it. There is literally nothing there to say anything about! **Nothing** is what remains when you take everything away, so to speak. There is nothing left of which to predicate anything. Heidegger made the point clearly when he said in his essay 'What is Metaphysics' (*Was ist Metaphysik*) of 1929:

What is **nothing**? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit **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 **nothing**—asking what, and how it, **nothing**, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

(For reasons of his own, which need not detain us here, Heidegger identifies being and **nothing**.) So **nothing** is ineffable. There is little sophisticated theorization here—not much more than simple common sense.

So are there limits to thought? Are there things which transcend any concepts we have to say something true (or false) of them? It seems that the answer is 'yes'.

Going Beyond Them

Can one go beyond these limits, and talk about such things? Obviously not—just because they *are* beyond the limit. But don't the philosophers in question (myself included) talk about (and so conceptualise) them? Aye, there's the rub—as Shakespeare has Hamlet say. We face a naked contradiction.

The *Dao De Jing* says a lot about *dao*. Mahāyāna Buddhists tell us much about the ultimate. Kant describes the role and importance of noumena (including the biggest noumenon of all, God). Even to ask the *Seinsfrage* (what is being?)—let alone answer it—talks of being. And I talked about **nothing** to explain what I was talking about.

Indeed, the situation is worse than this. That the things in question are ineffable is no arbitrary whim. It is the result of careful reasoning explaining why they are so. Clearly, one cannot explain why these things are ineffable without talking about them.

Such is all too obvious. What is one to make of the contradictory situation? Some philosophers did not seem troubled by it. Thus, no Chinese commentators on the *Dao De Jing* showed discomfort with the matter, as far as I know. Neither did early Mahāyāna Buddhists. Other philosophers certainly felt discomfort. Later Mahāyāna Buddhists—especially after the Principle

of Non-Contradiction became orthodox—tried to get out of the problem by drawing various distinctions. In the second edition of the *Critique*, Kant completely rewrote the sections dealing with the problem, trying to avoid it by drawing an appropriate distinction. And Heidegger struggled with the problem for the next 50 years, trying to find various ways to say (or at least show) the unsayable. But all such devices were of dubious merits.

An honest and straightforward response, however, is that we simply accept that the limits of thought are dialethic. In his *Logic*, Hegel puts the point as follows:

... great stress is laid on the limitations of thought, of reason, and so on, and it is asserted that the limitation cannot be transcended. To make such an assertion is to be unaware that the very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended.

We might say that at the boundary between what can be said and what cannot be said are things such that they are both. Boundaries are themselves somewhat paradoxical objects, since they both join and separate their two sides. The boundary between what can be said and what cannot instantiates this paradox.

Nothing as the Ground of Language

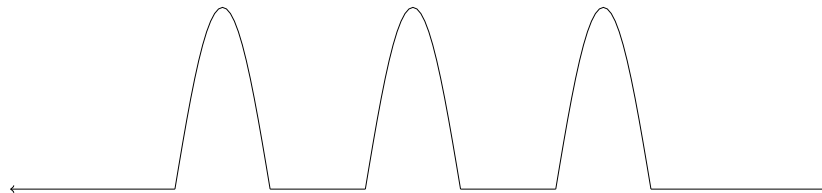
So far, so good, but let us investigate matters further. As is clear to a little thought, the example of **nothing** that I have used appears to be rather different from the other cases I mentioned. In each of those cases, the contradictory things in question were things that “lie beneath” the objects of our world—or at least our grasp thereof—and in some sense ground them. Our phenomenal world is a manifestation of *dao*. Conventional reality is delivered by placing a conceptual grid over ultimate reality. Phenomena are obtained by the imposition of our categories and spatio-temporal concepts on what is given to us by noumena. And being is what makes beings be. In some sense, then, the objects of our world, phenomenological or otherwise, ontologically depend, in some sense, on these ineffable entities. By contrast, **nothing** has no obvious connection to the rest of our world.

But it does. To see why, let us consider the notion of ontological dependence in a little more detail. Some things depend for being what they are on other things. Thus suppose we have the shadow, *s*, of a tree, *t*. *s* depends for being what it is on *t*. Had *t* not been a tree, *s* would not have been the shadow of a tree. Similarly, suppose we have a molecule, *m*, of water. This depends on its containing an atom of oxygen, *a*. Had *a* been an atom of something else (such as nitrogen), *m* would not have been a molecule of water.

Now, sometimes such dependence is negative. So suppose we have a person, p , who has a spouse, s . s being the spouse of p depends on being a *different* person from p . Had s been p , s could not have been the spouse of p . Similarly, suppose that we have a hill, h . This can be a hill only because it is distinct from the surrounding plane, p . Had h been the same elevation as p , it would not have been a hill. That is, h depends on the plane for being a hill.

Now, what does it take for something, x , to be an object, a thing? If x had been the same as **nothing**, it would have been nothing (no thing). So x depends for being what it is, an object, on being distinct from nothing. Hence, objects depend ontologically on **nothing** for their being.

To illustrate, consider the following diagram:



The humps could depict hills rising from a surrounding plane (the baseline); or they could illustrate objects standing out against the background of nothingness (the baseline).

In fact, Heidegger has been here before us. As he puts it (in his own distinctive language) in ‘What is Metaphysics?’:

Nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. **Nothing** comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence **nothing** makes possible the openedness of beings as such. **Nothing** does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their essential unfoldings as such.

Nothing, then, *does* belong in the same category as the other mooted ineffable objects I mentioned. It lies beneath the objects of our world. Moreover, to talk is to talk of objects. To say that x is such and such is to treat it as an object, so that one can predicate something of it. Something’s being an object depends on **nothing**. **Nothing**, then, is a precondition of the very

possibility of language. As I have put it elsewhere, ‘at the heart of language lies what language cannot express’.¹

In Sum

Let us take stock. What we have seen is that there is a boundary between what is effable and what is ineffable. And as Wittgenstein avers in his introduction to the *Tractatus*:

in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

A boundary between what can be thought/described and what cannot, implies that one can think the unthinkable

Moreover, we have seen exactly what this paradoxical effable/ineffable object is—or at least, one of them: **nothing**. We have also seen that what it is to be an object, and indeed, what it is possible to talk of at all, depends on **nothing**.

At the ground of reality, and our ability to talk of it, lies paradox.

¹G. Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 223. See also G. Priest, *One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 13.