無: Paradox and Emptiness

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Abstract

Nothingness is a tantalizing concept. It appears in the thinking of many major philosophers—East and West—where it plays a profound role in their thinking concerning the nature of the world (that is, the beings that constitute it). However, nothingness is implicated in contradiction and paradox right from the start. It is something and, well, nothing. This essay has three themes. The first is the role of nothingness in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. The second is the paradoxical nature of nothingness. The third is a mereological account of the nature of nothingness which does justice to the paradox. Though the themes are distinct, they are interconnected in important ways, as the essay will show.

Keywords: Nothing(ness), śūnyata, Buddhism, Nāgārjuna, Nishida, mereology

無: paradoks in praznina

Izvleček

Nič je mamljiv koncept. Pojavlja se v mišljenju mnogih pomembnih filozofinj ter filozofov – tako Vzhoda kot Zahoda – in sicer igra pomembno vlogo v njihovih razmišljanjih o naravi sveta (torej bitij, ki ga sestavljajo). Vendar je nič že od samega začetka vpet v protislovje in paradoks. Je nekaj in hkrati – nič. Ta esej ima tri teme. Prva je vloga niča v budistični filozofiji *mahāyāna*. Druga je paradoksna narava niča. Tretja tema je mereološki opis narave niča, ki ustrezno prikaže paradoks. Četudi gre za različne teme, so med seboj povezane v pomembnih vidikih, kakor bo razvidno iz eseja.

Ključne besede: nič, *śūnyata*, budizem, Nāgārjuna, Nishida, mereologija

Introduction

Nothingness is a tantalizing concept. It plays a central role in the thought of many philosophers East and West: Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Wang Bi, Dōgen, and Nishida, to name but a few. All of these philosophers take it to play a profound role in the nature of the world—that is, the beings that constitute it. However, nothingness is implicated in contradiction and paradox from the start. It is something and, well, nothing.

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Much might be written about such matters. Here, there is space to discuss only a small part of it. This essay has three interconnected themes. The first is the role of nothingness in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. The second is the paradoxical nature of nothingness. The third is an account of the nature of nothingness which does justice to the paradox.

In the first main part of the essay, I will discuss nothingness as ultimate reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This will lead naturally to a discussion of the paradox of nothingness. That theme is taken up in the second main part of the essay, as is a mereological account of the nature of nothing. In the third part of the essay, I will introduce another mereological notion, everything, which will tie the three themes of the essay together. Since the account of nothingness I will offer puts to the sword a sacred cow of Western philosophy, the Principle of Non-Contradiction, I will interpolate a brief interlude on the Principle before the third part of the essay.[1]

Buddhism and Nothingness

Indian Buddhism

Let us begin with the first theme: Nothingness in Buddhist philosophy.

There are many different schools of Buddhist thought, but in all of them there is an important distinction between conventional reality (*saṃvṛti satya*)[2] and ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*). The exact understanding of the terms varies from school to school; but, roughly, conventional reality is the world with which we are familiar, our *Lebenswelt;* 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.

It will be Mahāyāna Buddhism (or more accurately, Buddhisms), that will be important for our story. This appeared in India around the turn of the Common Era, generated by a new class of sūtras, the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) *Sūtras*. The earliest school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy as such was Madhyamaka, traditionally taken to be founded by Nāgārjuna (fl. 1st or 2nd century CE). In his centrally important text, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) he

1 A version of this paper was given at the conference Does Nothingness Exist? A Cross-Cultural Dialogue, Department of Asian Studies, University of Ljubljana, May 2024. I am grateful to the members of the audience there for their comments, and to two referees of this journal.

2 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.

endorses the two kinds of reality explicitly:

> The Dharma teachings of the Buddha rest on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth.
>
> Who do not understand the distinction between the two truths, they do not understand reality in accordance with the profound teachings of the Buddha. (MMK XXIV: 8, 9)[3]

According to the MMK, 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 the tradition that arose from the MMK, the epithet "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*) is also used (somewhat confusingly) for ultimate reality. Exactly what this is, is more contentious—though it is clear that it is ineffable. Concepts do not apply to ultimate reality:

> Not to be obtained by means of another, free [from intrinsic nature], not populated by hypostatization, devoid of falsifying conceptualization, not having many separate meanings—this is the nature of reality. (MMK XVIII: 9)

Indeed, concepts construct conventional reality: conventional objects are formed by imposing a conceptual grid on the ultimate. In endorsing the ineffable nature of ultimate reality, Nāgārjuna was just following claims made in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* themselves, such as the following from the *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*:

> [The Buddha said]: Subhūti, words cannot explain the real nature of the cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method. (Price and Wong 1990, 51)

Notwithstanding this, Madhyamaka makes a somewhat puzzling claim about ultimate reality. Indeed, this is often taken to be one of the most central of the Madhyamaka claims: ultimate reality is itself empty (just as empty as the objects of conventional reality)—as this is sometimes called, "the emptiness of emptiness". Here is Nāgārjuna:

> Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness. That [emptiness] is a dependent concept. Just that is the middle path. (MMK XXIV: 18)

3 Translations from the MMK are from Siderits and Katsura (2013). Interpolations (in square brackets) in these and other quotations are those of the translators.

Ultimate reality, that is emptiness, is dependent for its nature on other things just as much as the things in conventional reality. I will return to that matter at the end of the essay.

For the moment, just note that there is already paradox in the wings here. To say that ultimate reality is ineffable, that concepts do not apply to it, and then to talk about it, saying for example, that it is empty, obviously applies concepts to it. Hence it is effable and ineffable. A number of subsequent Indo-Tibetan Buddhists wrestled with this contradiction, but we need not go into that matter here.

Daoism

When Buddhism (Mahāyāna) went into China, it met the native philosophy of Daoism, which was to have a major impact on the development of the Chinese Buddhism(s). One of the two major texts of Daoism is the *Dao De Jing* (道德經, DDJ), attributed to a character named Laozi 老子, who is said to have lived in the 6–5th centuries BCE. However, the text we have now is much later, and is almost certainly a collection of thoughts of a variety of old masters (老子). It is an elusive text, and its sayings can be interpreted in different ways. However, an important interpretation, and the one which was to be important in the development of Chinese Buddhism, was given by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE). According to this, behind the myriad things of our phenomenal world, there is an ineffable principle, *Dao* (道), which gives rise to them.

Thus, the famous first verse of the DDJ says:

> The *Dao* that can be described in language is not the constant *Dao*; the name that can be given it is not the constant name. (Translations from Lynn 1999, 51)

Wang's commentary then says:

> The *Dao* that can be rendered in language and the name [*ming*] that can be given it point to a thing/matter [*shi*] or reproduce a form [*xing*], neither of which is it in its constancy [*chang*]. This is why it can neither be rendered in language nor given a name. (Ibid.)

The verse then continues:

> Nameless it is the origin of the myriad things; named it is the mother of the myriad things. (Ibid.)

Wang's commentary (I note the Chinese characters being translated):

> Anything that exists [有] originates in nothingness [無], thus, before it has forms and when it is still nameless, it serves as the origin of the myriad things, and once it has forms and is named, it grows them, rears them, ensures them their proper shapes, and matures them as their mother. In other words, *Dao*, by being itself formless and nameless, originates and brings the myriad things to completion. They are originated and completed in this way yet do not know how it happens. This is the mystery beyond mystery. (Ibid.)

Since *Dao* is ineffable, Wang describes it as nothingness (無, Chin: *wu*; Jap: *mu*), as opposed to the beings (有, Chin: *you*; Jap: *yu*) which are its manifestations.

Note that we have the same paradox here as in Madhyamaka. *Dao* is both ineffable and, since we can talk about it, effable. (And nowhere does Wang resile from the obvious contradiction.)

East Asian Buddhism

The similarity between the Indian Buddhist ultimate/conventional distinction and the Daoist 有/無 distinction is clear enough. (In both cases the former is ineffable and, in some sense, the ultimate reality the latter.) And in the development of the distinctively Chinese forms of Buddhism, the two distinctions become identified (see Priest 2018, 7.2.). In texts of Chinese Buddhism one finds ultimate reality referred to as both 空 (Chin: *kong*; Jap: *ku*, emptiness) and 無, depending on whether it is its emptiness or its ineffability that is at issue.

For example, Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) was a major thinker in the Chinese *Sanlun* (Three Treaties, 三論) School—a Chinese version of Madhyamaka. He constructs a sophisticated hierarchy of levels of the conventional and the ultimate, each of which is transcended by a more profound level (see Priest 2018, ch. 7). At the first level, he says, ordinary people take conventional reality at face value. Wise people know that it is empty. Then:

> Next comes the second stage, which explains that both being [有] and nonbeing [無] belong to worldly truth, whereas non-duality (neither being nor non-being) belongs to absolute truth. It shows that being and non-being are two extremes, being the one and non-being the other. From these to permanence and impermanence, and the cycle of life-and death and Nirvana these are both two extremes. Because the absolute [truth of non-being] and the worldly [truth of being] and the cycle of

> life-and-death and Nirvana are both two extremes, they therefore constitute worldly truth, and because neither-the-absolute-nor-the-worldly, and neither-the-cycle-of-life-and-death-nor-Nirvana are the Middle Path without duality, they constitute the highest truth. (Chan 1963, 360)

There are several more levels, but we need not pursue the matter. Jizang's use of 無 to refer to ultimate reality is clear.

Note, moreover, that Jizang is grappling with the paradoxical thought that something both is and is not. True, that contradiction is to be transcended, but only by introducing others at subsequent levels. In fact, the contradiction that something both is and is not, is a version of the ineffability paradox we have already noted. For one can speak of something if and only if it *is* something (an object).

That the ultimate both is and is not comes out particularly clearly in the thought of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) (see Maraldo 2019). Nishida rarely mentioned Buddhism explicitly, but his whole thought is steeped in the thinking of Zen, a form of which he practiced. The relevant part of his thought here is his theory of *basho*. Each object is in one or more *basho* 場所 (place, topos). The *basho* provides a framework for discourse about the object. Each *basho* is not an object within itself, and so is a nothingness with respect to that *basho*, a relative nothingness (*sōtai mu* 相対無). Each *basho* is nested within other *basho*—all except one, which therefore provides the framework for the whole system. This is absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無). *Zettai mu* is Nishida's take on ultimate reality or, what is the same for him (and Zen), enlightened consciousness.

Zettai mu is paradoxical: it both is and is not (an object). *Zettai mu* is no thing/being/object. It is not an object since it is the "negation" of beings. Nishida says:

> We can first of all simply distinguish between the nothing that negates a certain thing, that is, relative nothing, and the nothing that negates all being, that is, absolute nothing. (Krummel and Nagamoto 2012, 72)

However, it is an object, since we can think and talk about it. As he says:

> Nothing [however] is also an object of thinking. It becomes a being by adding some kind of determination to it. In the sense that the species is included in the genus, being is implaced in nothing. Needless to say, [even] to think of it as nothing is to think of it as an already determined being. (Ibid., 85)

As Nishida recognizes explicitly, the paradox of nothing being and not being an object is intrinsically related to the paradox of being effable and ineffable.

The Paradox of Nothing

Let us turn to the second theme of the essay. We have seen that nothingness is embroiled in paradox: the paradox of being and not being an object. Let us consider this paradox more closely.

A Little Clarification

And let us start with a bit of clarification. The word "nothing" (and similar 'no-' words) can play two roles in English.[4] First, it can be what logicians call a *quantifier*, like *something*, *everything*. These are not nouns, and do not refer to anything: their function is quite different. Quantifier phrases are used to say that something/nothing/everything satisfies some condition or other. Thus, if I ask someone a question, and then report "she said nothing", my remark means that she remained silent. As logicians might put it: for no *x*, did she say *x*.

But "nothing" can be a noun too. Thus, if one says (truly) that Heidegger wrote about nothing, one does not mean that for no *x* did he write about *x* (which would certainly be false!); one means that he wrote about the thing nothingness. One might say (again truly) that Heidegger and Hegel wrote about nothing, but said quite different things about *it*.

The ambiguity between quantifier and noun is the source of many good jokes and puns. Thus, in *Through the Looking Glass*, the White King asks Alice if she can see a messenger coming down the road. When Alice says that she can see nobody, the King complements her on her eyesight: he can only see real people. Alice is using "nobody" as a quantifier. The King takes her to be using it as a noun. The ambiguity can be a source not only of humour, but of much confusion; so to avoid this in what follows, when I use the word "nothing" as a noun, I will italicize it, thus: *nothing*. Without the italics it is the quantifier.

The next thing that needs to be clarified is this. We are talking about whether *nothing* is something or nothing—that is, whether it is a thing, an object, or not. But what does it mean to say that something is an object, some thing? To say that

4 It is worth noting that in Classical Chinese and Japanese the character 無 also has multiple grammatical roles. It can certainly be a noun, but it can also be an adjective, a whole sentence, and maybe other parts of speech.

x is some thing is to say that, for some *y*, *x* is *y*. We might argue about what the "is" means here—the word is ambiguous both syntactically and semantically in English—but the simplest understanding is that it is the "is" of identity (as in 2 + 2 is 4). So to say that *x* is something is to say that for some *y*, *x* = *y*.

A Closer Look at the Paradox

Given these matters of clarification, we can now look at our paradox more closely. It is constituted by two contradictory statements, to the effect that *nothing* is both something and nothing. That is:

- *nothing* is something: for some *y*, *nothing* = *y*
- *nothing* is nothing (i.e., not something): it is not the case that for some *y*, *nothing* = *y*

The first statement seems unremarkable. It is a simple fact of logic that for any *x*, *x* = *x*. So for some *y*, *x* = *y*, namely *x* itself. If you want an extra argument, here is one. If you are thinking about the Eiffel Tower, you are thinking about something. If you are thinking about Sherlock Holmes, you are thinking about something (though it may not exist). Your thoughts are not contentless, and those objects are their contents. But you can think about *nothing*—you are now. So *nothing* is something. It is the content of the thought you are having.

What is Nothing?

The exact ground for the other limb of the paradox is less obvious. To see what it is, we need to get clearer about what, exactly, *nothing* is. This brings us to the third theme of our essay. What exactly is *nothing*?

Nothing is, so to speak, what remains after everything is removed. That's fine, but somewhat metaphorical. We can do better than this with the help of mereology—the theory of parts and wholes.

Lots of things (in fact, most things) have parts. Countries have states, provinces, or counties; symphonies have movements; I have a head, feet, hands, etc. Moreover, if you take the parts of something and meld them together, you get the thing in question. Logicians call the result a *mereological fusion* or *sum*. Thus, the mereological fusion of my parts is me; the mereological fusion of the four movements of Beethoven's 9th Symphony is the Symphony itself.

Now, take any bunch of objects and remove the objects, one by one. When you have removed the last one, nothing remains. So the fusion of the remaining things is the fusion of no things. And that is exactly what *nothing* would seem to be. Hence, we may take *nothing* to be the fusion of no things, that is, the fusion of the things in the empty set, ∅.[5] The empty fusion is not a standard part of orthodox mereology, but one may formulate the theory in such a way that there is an empty fusion. I shall not pursue such technicalities here.

I note that it is not at all obvious that every collection of objects has a fusion. Thus, consider the set containing: New Zealand, Donald Trump, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. If these things have a fusion, it is an object with parts of radically different kinds, and spread over space and time. Hence many people hold that for a bunch of objects to have a fusion, they cannot be disparate in this way: they must "cohere" in some sense. It is not clear how, exactly, to understand this notion of coherence. However, this point has no relevance to the empty fusion. Since the empty set has no members, it has no members that fail to cohere with each other! (As logicians might say: all the members of ∅ cohere with each other because there aren't any.)

Given all this, we now know exactly what *nothing* is: the fusion of no things. Moreover, we have established the second limb of our paradox: that *nothing* is nothing. *Nothing* is the fusion of no things. You can fuse no things together as many times as you like; you will never get anything! The conclusion can be proved rigourously in the appropriate paraconsistent mereology. I spare you the details.[6]

What we have now seen is that the claim that *nothing* is something is genuinely paradoxical. That is, *nothing* is a contradictory object, both something and nothing. In particular, don't make the mistake of supposing that it is a "mere nothing". It is nothing *and* something. Moreover it can function in certain ways because it is something, as we shall see in due course.

Interlude: The Principle of Non-Contradiction

I have now addressed the third theme of the essay: providing an account of the nature of *nothing*—and one that establishes its contradictory nature. However, this contradictory status warrants a few words on the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC).

5 Note that this fusion is quite distinct from the empty set itself. The fusion of no things is not a set; the empty set obviously is a set. In general, mereology is a much more general metaphysical theory than set theory. It is about all objects; sets are just one kind of object.

6 They can be found in Priest (2014a) and Priest (2014b, 6.13).

In Western philosophy the PNC was set into orthodoxy by Aristotle. Aristotle's arguments were, frankly, pretty terrible, as most modern scholars now agree. (They are either tortured and opaque, or establish—if anything—something else.)[7] Moreover, the history of Western philosophy since Aristotle has not been very successful in producing better arguments.

If one asks a modern logician why one should suppose the PNC to be true, they are likely to appeal to a principle of inference called *Explosion*—or, to give it its Medieval name, *ex contradictione quodlibet sequitur*: from a contradiction everything follows. According to this, given any contradiction, say that Canberra is in Australia and not in Australia, one can legitimately conclude anything. (It is called Explosion because, according to it, contradictory information explodes, delivering everything.) Clearly, many such conclusions, such as that $1 + 1 = 73$, that you are a frog, and that Donald Trump is Julius Caesar, are crazy. So you can't accept a contradiction, or you would have to accept these.

Since there need be absolutely no connection between the premise of an inference by Explosion and such arbitrary consequences, it may come as a surprise to those who have never studied modern logic to learn that the validity of the inference is now endorsed by many—maybe most—logicians (though this has not generally been the case in the history of Western logic). The reason, briefly, is that an inference is valid if it is impossible for the premise to be true and the conclusion false. The PNC tells us that it is impossible for a contradiction to be true. So it is impossible for a contradiction to be true *and* an arbitrary conclusion to be false. As such, the inference has no counter-examples. It is vacuously valid, as logicians say.

Given this, the ground for the validity of this inference falls if the PNC does. And it is precisely the PNC which is challenged by our paradox about *nothing* (and, incidentally, many other things). To reject the truth of the paradox because of this principle would therefore be to beg the question. Indeed, there are now many well-worked out accounts of validity according to which Explosion is *not* a valid inference. These are called *paraconsistent logics*, and this is not the place to go into them.[8]

So much for Western philosophy. Matters in the Eastern philosophical traditions are quite different. There have certainly been defenders of the PNC in the East, such as the Indian Nyāya school and certain Mohist philosophers; but there has been no uniform orthodoxy on the matter, and many philosophers appear to have been content simply to accept certain contradictions.

7 See Priest (2006, ch. 1).

8 For more details of paraconsistency, see Priest, Tanaka, and Weber (2022).

At least for its first 1,000 years, Buddhist philosophy in India was sympathetic to dialetheism (the view that some contradictions are true). Indeed, there is a principle of logic/metaphysics which goes back to the earliest days of Buddhism, and which played a highly significant role in the development of Buddhist philosophy for at least the next 1,000 years: the *catuṣkoṭi* (four points). According to this, any statement made can be *true*, *false*, *both*, or *neither*. The third *koṭi* (*both*) explicitly allows for the possibility of true contradictions.[9]

The PNC becomes more orthodox in later Indo-Tibetan Buddhist thought. But by that time, Buddhist thought had gone into China (and thence Japan), where it met Daoism. There is no tradition of challenging the PNC in Daoism, as far as I know. For example, as I noted, Wang Bi does not demur from the obvious contradiction in his thought. There are no endorsements of the PNC in Daoist texts, as far as I know— certainly no tradition of endorsing it. There is, in fact, a major strand of dialetheic thinking in East Asian Buddhist thought, though this is not the place to go into the details. Nishida himself is heir to this.[10]

Everything and Nothing

I have now done justice (I hope) to the three themes of this essay. However, in this final section, I want to introduce another mereological notion: everything. This will draw the three themes of the essay together.

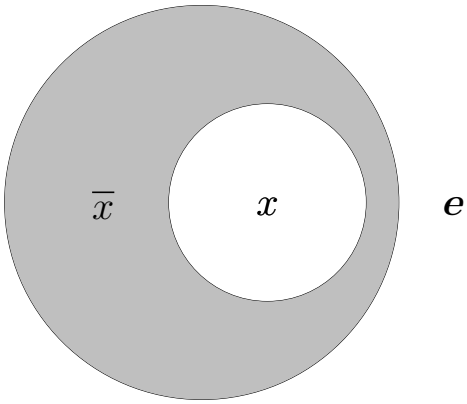
Everything and Absences

Like "no-" words, "every-" words are ambiguous. They can be quantifiers. If someone goes shopping, when they come home we might say "He put everything in the fridge". We mean: for every item (that was purchased) he put it in the fridge. But it can also be a noun phrase. If someone gets lost in a crowd at a demonstration, we might say "She found herself in the middle of everyone". We do not mean: "For every person (at the demonstration), she found herself in the middle of him/her". "Everyone" here is a noun, referring to the crowd; and she was in the middle of *it*. In what follows, I will italicize "everything" when it is a noun, thus: *everything*. Without italicizing, it is the quantifier: every thing. (In what follow, I will often use *n* for *nothing* and *e* for *everything*.)

9 For a full discussion, see Priest (2018).

10 On all this, see Deguchi at al. (2021).

Unlike *nothing*, *everything* is, in fact, a standard object in orthodox mereology. And just as *nothing* is the fusion of no things, *everything* is the fusion of every thing. Given this understanding of *everything*, it is easy to define the mereological complement of an object. Two objects *overlap* if they have a part in common. Thus, as mereological objects, the words "ape" and "ant" overlap because they both have "a" as a part. The mereological *complement* of an object is the fusion of all things that do not overlap it (assuming there is one). Thus, the mereological complement of me is the object with parts which include: Donald Trump, Germany, the Sun, etc.[11] If we write the complement of an object x as $\overline{x}$, we can illustrate it thus:

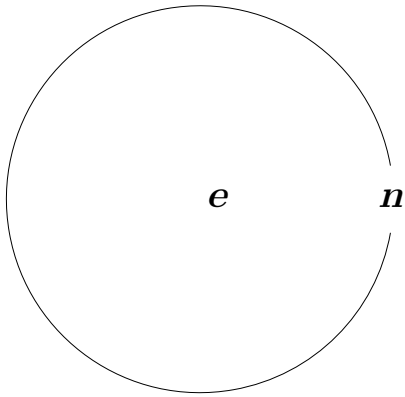


Note that the circles are not sets, but mereological wholes. Inside the circles are their parts: e is everything, and $\overline{x}$ is the complement of x. We might think of the complement x as its absence.[12] Obviously, $\overline{x}$ itself has a complement, namely, x. That is, $\overline{\overline{x}} = x$. So complementation toggles back and forth between an object and its complement.

Does e itself have a complement? The natural thought is that it does, namely n—which makes e the complement of n, reciprocally. This is exactly what one would expect, since n is the absence of all things. We might depict the relationship between e and n like this:

11 If one wants to avoid an appeal to such strange objects, it might make sense to restrict the complement to, say, the domain of people.

12 See Priest (Forthcoming).



It's a little tricky to represent the relationship diagrammatically, since *n*, being an object and not an object, is both inside and outside the circle. Perhaps the best one can do is put it on the boundary, as I have done. (Almost by definition, a boundary is a contradictory object—both separating and joining its flanks.)

In fact, with the appropriate mereology, one can prove that $n = \bar{e}$. (Again, I skip the details of the formal proof.) This gives us an alternative (but equivalent) definition of *nothing*. It also gives us another argument that *nothing* is not an object. All objects are part of *e*, and so inside the circle; which *n* is not—and is.

The Emptiness of Emptiness

Armed with these tools, let us now return to the topic of emptiness. We saw that in Mahāyāna Buddhism ultimate reality, 無, which we have learned to call *nothing*, is empty. That is, it depends for being what it is on something else. But what can that be? It cannot depend on its parts. If it had parts, they would be objects, and *nothing* is the absence of all objects. It cannot be concepts, since it is ineffable, so no concepts apply to it. And it cannot be causes and effects, because such things pertain to conventional reality.

The standard answer is that 無 depends on conventional reality—有, as Daoism and Jizang put it. In fact, the two depend on each other. (Ultimate and conventional reality are sometimes likened to two sides of one and the same coin.) Our mereological machinery shows exactly how. Ultimate reality, 無, is *n*. Conventional reality, 有, is *e* (the totality of all objects). But *e* and *n* are mutually dependent.[13]

13 In contemporary accounts of grounding, it is standard to assume that ontological dependence is anti-symmetric. (That is, if *x* depends on *y* then *y* does not depend on *x*). This is clearly not the

To see this, consider first the north and south poles of a magnet.[14] The north pole of a magnet could not be a north pole unless there were a corresponding south pole. If there were no south pole, there could be no north pole—and vice versa of course. In other words each depends for being what it is on having the other as its polar opposite.

But *n* and *e* are also polar opposites. Quite generally, an object and its absence require each other. An object is a mereological whole. It is that whole because it is bounded in a certain way. It could not be what it is unless it were thus bounded. The bound is provided by its complement; that is, its absence. Complementing a complement takes you back to where you started. So an object and its complement/absence are *mutually* determining. Thus it is with *e* and *n*: *n* is what it is by being the complement of *e*; and *e* is what it is by being the complement of *n*. So each depends on the other.

That is, 無 and 有 depend on each other: both are empty. In particular, emptiness is empty, as the central principle of Madhyamaka has it.

Conclusion

This brings our discussions of *nothing*, that is, 無, to a conclusion. We have seen that the notion plays a central role in one major philosophical tradition. (Its role in others is a topic for another occasion.) We have seen that *nothing* is a paradoxical notion, both something and nothing; and I have provided a mereological account of *nothing* which both explains what it is, and proves that the paradox is veridical. That is, *nothing* is a truly contradictory object. Finally we looked at the object which is the polar opposite of *nothing*: *everything*. This, we saw, ties the three themes of the essay together.

In Shakespeare's play of the same name, Macbeth, shocked by his encounter with the witches, takes heart by supposing that it is all in his imagination, and reassures himself, saying "Nothing is but what is not" (Act 1, Scene 3, lines 141–42). Given his fate, he might also have said "What is not, also is".

case in the dependence relation at play here. However, the assumption, though often endorsed, is highly contestable, as we are about to see. For discussion, Bliss and Priest (2018), and the essays in Part 1 of that volume.

14 See Priest (2014b, 11.8).

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