

## The centrality of *the nothing* in our understanding of being

Heidegger's concept of *the nothing* is central to his lecture titled "What is Metaphysics?".

Heidegger raises the question "how is it with the nothing?" and posits that an accurate characterization of *the nothing* is central to our understanding of human existence and metaphysics as a whole. His preliminary characterization of *the nothing* as "the complete negation of the totality of beings" points us in the right direction, according to Heidegger, as it provides "an indication of the direction from which the nothing can come to meet us" (WIM, 98). However, this conception does not hold up to deeper scrutiny, and fails to capture the experience of encountering *the nothing*. This is because the act of *negation* is one of intellect and formal logic, which deals with existence and beings: "thinking is always essentially thinking about something" (WIM, 98). This would make *the nothing* into an object, a being, which it is not. The inadequacy of this first definition and the corresponding limitations of the intellect induces Heidegger to take a phenomenological approach to the question "how is it with nothing?".

Heidegger carries this phenomenological approach to the question of *the nothing* through the lens of the 'mood of anxiety' in the section "The Response to the Question" from his lecture. But why anxiety? Ordinary moods, Heidegger suggests, reveal being — they can help us identify and analyze beings, but they do not make us confront *the nothing*. In fact, they often "conceal" *the nothing* (WIM, 100). However, there are certain "fundamental moods", such as anxiety, that do bring us face to face with *nothingness*: "the nothing reveals itself in anxiety" (WIM, 102). This essay will explore the landscape of *the nothing* that emerges from this phenomenological approach, grounded in the experience of anxiety, by investigating his use of visual imagery, juxtaposition, and neologisms. We will end with comments on how this

conception of *the nothing* justifies his vexing and bold claim that “without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood, and no freedom”.

The first difficulty with this passage is that Heidegger constantly warns us against misinterpreting or misunderstanding the experience of *the nothing* that he describes. He begins the section with the assertion that his endeavor “demands that we expressly hold at a distance those designations of the nothing that do not result from (the claims of anxiety)” (WIM, 102). He seems to acknowledge the difficulty of his project — that the phenomenological description of *the nothing* needs to be carried out carefully, precisely and delicately. This demand is expressly carried out by his equal emphasis on 1. what he designates to be the experience of *the nothing* and 2. common mistakes we might make while interpreting *the nothing* that arises from the mood of anxiety.

Heidegger claims that *the nothing* does not “manifest in our malaise quite apart from beings as a whole”, but is instead encountered “at one with beings as a whole”. This addresses the misconception the reader may have that *the nothing* emerges separate from the *beings* during the mood of anxiety. Instead, *the nothing* makes itself known “with beings” and “in beings” painting a much tighter relationship between *being* and *nothingness*. This distinction also warns us from reverting to the error of the first definition of *the nothing* by viewing *the nothing* as the negation, or the mere absence of *being*. Further in the passage, he draws another contrast with the claim that “the nothing itself does not attract; it is essentially repelling”. This assertion is much more puzzling and needs further treatment.

By saying that *the nothing* is “essentially repelling,” Heidegger means that *nothingness* is not something that draws us in like an attractive force. Instead, it pushes us away; it resists being grasped or made into an object of thought. We can make further sense of this by drawing a

parallel with the distinction he makes between fear and anxiety earlier in the lecture. He writes that we become afraid of something “in the face of this or that particular being” (WIM, 100). Unlike fear, which is directed at something specific, anxiety has an “indeterminate” source and target (WIM, 101). Anxiety reveals *the nothing* because it strips away our usual reference points and makes us aware of the sheer *being* of things. Thus, *the nothing* does not attract us in the way that fear does, but instead repels definition or target as anxiety does.

In both these examples, the juxtaposition in the characterization of *the nothing* — ‘apart from beings’ vs ‘at one with beings’ and ‘repelling’ vs ‘attracting’ helps the reader grasp the nuanced way in which Heidegger conceives of *the nothing* — an experience that is disclosed through anxiety, intimately intertwined with beings themselves.

But perhaps the most striking feature of this passage is the plethora of visual imagery that Heidegger employs to describe the experience of *the nothing*. As opposed to an attempt from analytic philosophy to investigate *the nothing* through a series of abstractions, analogies, and heavy use of logic, Heidegger describes the experience of *the nothing* almost poetically. He writes “in anxiety there occurs a shrinking back before ... that is surely not any sort of flight but rather a kind of bewildered calm”. The “shrinking back” reads like visual imagery, but it is devoid of an object. We are left with the questions: What is shrinking back? Back to where? Instead of a vivid image of, say, a balloon shrinking, we are left to imagine the internal world of our perceptions shrinking. We could perhaps imagine the interpretations and categorizations of the beings in our view fading away, receding. But this “shrinking back” is punctuated by a “calm”. This is antithetical to our colloquial understanding of anxiety -- we typically associate anxiety with turbulence and agitation. So what exactly is Heidegger trying to describe then? He qualifies the calmness of this experience of anxiety with the word “bewildered”, offering the addition of perplexity, confusion, and lack of clarity to this

experience. This interplay between movement and obscurity in Heidegger's imagery deepens our understanding of the nothing—not as mere absence, but as a force that unsettles our familiar grasp of beings, making them appear in a new light.

Heidegger makes further use of visual imagery in the passage to clarify his notion of *the nothing*. While speaking about the “essentially repelling” nature of *the nothing*, he writes that it is “a parting gesture towards beings that are submerging as a whole” (WIM, 103). The phrase “parting gesture” has further connotations of receding, or drawing away of the objects in our experience. However, this isn't drawing away in the sense of “annihilation” or “disappearance” — *the nothing* shouldn't be misconstrued as the negation or absence of beings. Instead, it is a drawing away of the interpretations and external designations we assign to objects that are “submerging”, or becoming obscure. This point is emphasized in the next paragraph when Heidegger says that the repelling “discloses these beings in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other —with respect to the nothing” (WIM, 103). Heidegger is describing how the experience of anxiety disrupts our normal way of being in the world. Instead of seeing things as familiar and meaningful, we see them in their *strangeness*—as if they don't quite belong. This is not just an ordinary feeling of alienation; it reveals something distinct about the nature of beings: that their usual familiarity depends on our relationship with them, and when that relationship is shaken as in anxiety, beings appear in a new, unsettling way. Importantly, beings are not just *other* in relation to *us*, but in relation to *the nothing*. When we experience *the nothing* through anxiety, beings don't simply disappear. Instead, they stand out more starkly than before, but as something alien.

For Heidegger, the retraction, withdrawal, and obscuring of beings constitute the essence of the nothing—a process he calls “nihilation” (WIM, 103). This neologism gives *the nothing* an active, verb-like quality, distinguishing it from mere negation or annihilation. He writes, “The

nihilation will not submit to calculation in terms of annihilation and negation. The nothing itself nihilates” (WIM, 103). Heidegger introduces this term because existing concepts like negation fail to capture the way in which *the nothing* operates. Nihilation is not simply the absence or destruction of beings; rather, it is the process through which their usual significance withdraws, allowing their strangeness to come to the forefront. The etymological root of *nihilation* lies in the Latin *nihilare* or *nihilō*, meaning "to reduce to nothing," but Heidegger reinterprets it to emphasize the transformation of objects in our perception—a shift in how beings appear when *the nothing* is revealed through anxiety.

But up to this point, it isn't clear why this painstaking characterization of *the nothing* that emerges from this phenomenological description is of interest to Heidegger, or why it might relate to existentialism. Heidegger begins the explanation of this by writing that “the essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings Da-sein for the first time before beings as such”. It is precisely the process of *nihilation* that allows us to understand the nature of *being* in its raw, unadorned form. All other attempts fail to interpret or characterize *being* in its essence. But we may ask further, why should we worry about the essence of *being*? After all, we only encounter particular beings that we must interpret in our everyday existence. To this, he responds “(w)ithout the original revelation of the nothing, (there is) no selfhood, and no freedom” (WIM, 103).

How does the “revelation of the nothing” yield selfhood and freedom?

Freedom, for Heidegger, is the freedom to define our own being and the way we interpret the world. If everything had a fixed, determined meaning, we would be bound to a predefined way of existence. But because nothingness reveals that the essence of beings is *nothing* (so to speak), that meaning is not given in advance, we are free to shape and interpret beings in our own way. He says that the recognition of the emptiness of beings helps us “liberate ourselves

from those idols everyone has and which they are wont to go cringing” (WIM, 110). Our disclosure to *nothingness* is what allows us to break free from rigid structures and recognize that our way of being is not predetermined.

In tracing Heidegger’s phenomenological account of *the nothing*, we have seen how the mood of anxiety plays a crucial role in revealing it—not as a mere negation or absence, but as an active process (*nihilation*) that unsettles our ordinary way of relating to the world.

Through his use of visual imagery, juxtaposition, and neologisms, Heidegger carefully constructs an account of *the nothing* that resists misinterpretation, emphasizing its role in disclosing beings in their raw, unadorned form.

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Sources:

- 1) (WIM) Heidegger, Martin. "What Is Metaphysics?" *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell