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English 201

Final Paper

## The Nothing That Is

The concept of nothing, and the theories constructed from the concept, is the basis of much debate. The questions surrounding the creation of the world and dichotomies of thought are governed by such a concept of nothingness. These elements of thought are explored in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Examining theories about the concept of nothing in its literary manifestations can help explain otherwise complex questions and concepts relating to the theories surrounding nothingness, and their importance in literary works.

An examination of the origins of the concept of nothing is needed in order to proceed to more complex theories that arise from it. The concept of zero, or nothing, came about in ancient times. While the original developer of such an important concept is no longer known it is assumed that it is a result of the development of number systems. The concept of zero first appears around the seventh or eighth century in India as a part of the Hindu number system. Most early or primitive societies did not recognize the concept of nothing in basic counting. The basis for counting in many early cultures focuses on a concept of one, two, and many. This form of counting leaves much to be developed, but even with the addition of subsequent numerals, much is still lost without a concept of zero. For example, the counter does not have a basis of origination, nor can they create numbers higher than what is presented before them. This leads to a confusing

way of combining numbers into more complex numbers as is displayed by the Roman numeral system. This was one of the better forms of counting before the introduction of zero, yet it leaves much to be desired, because large numbers were created through groupings of smaller numbers. This can still be seen today when roman numerals are used. By creating larger numbers by grouping smaller numbers together things become unnecessarily complex in a short period of time. Due to the spread of commerce across Europe and Asia something needed to be done in order to create a simplified and universal system of numbers. The etymological value of zero begins with the Hindu word for void, sunya. From sunya the Arabs derived their own word cipher, which was then changed into the English equivalent of zero.

The concept of nothing soon enveloped the complex minds of such people as John Donne and Thomas Aquinas. “The best minds were perplexed. Even as late as the 1620’s, John Donne could say from his pulpit: ‘The less anything is the less we know it: how invisible, how unintelligible a thing, then, is this *Nothing!*’” (Kaplan, 99) Such a complex thing as nothingness also helped to revolutionize mathematics. At about the same time as Milton was writing *paradise lost*, calculus was being developed. This helped to shape the way that the creation of the world is seen.

In *Paradise Lost* the creation of the world is portrayed in book seven. The typical approach to the creation of the world is one of ex nihilo, or out of nothing. This came under further examination by such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas who replied, “God could not have created the world out of nothing because the infinite distance between nothing and being couldn’t be crossed, thinking of creation as a change between two terms led to falsely imagining such a gap.” (Kaplan, 98) Nothingness is what the world was created

from, but in the nothingness, there needs to be something. This comes about from the development of calculus. With calculus there was finally a way to examine something while infinitely approaching zero.

St. Augustine used this approach of calculus to explain how the world was created. “He concluded that the earth and the deep, which in the beginning were invisible and lightless and without form, God must have made from almost nothing, *prope nihil*.” (Kaplan, 180) This is remarkable, because it follows the same form of the formation of the earth in *Paradise Lost*. “O world./ Thus God the heaven created, thus the earth,/ Matter unformed and void: darkness profound/ Covered the Abyss: but on the watery calm/ His brooding wings the spirit of God outspread,” (Milton, ln 231-235) Both of these examples show that there had to be something in the void to be created from. This is now explained by particles on a subatomic level, even in nothingness there needs to be something. There was still matter, it was just unformed at the time and still void of function. It is possible that Milton knew of the mathematical advances in calculus because they happened at approximately the same time that he was writing *Paradise Lost*. These advances in math lead to the new way of thinking about the creation of the Earth, and the concept of nothing advanced in its development.

This is important, because it is shown that the advances in the development of math influenced both literature and theological thought processes. There is interrelatedness between the sciences and arts at this point in history as people began to combine the sciences and arts. There is an intertextuality between the concepts found in the math and literature at this time period. The basis for the formation of the earth in *Paradise Lost* is taken from concepts in the sciences and math.

Another way that nothingness or zero functions in *Paradise Lost* is in the form of binary oppositions. Binary oppositions work at the level of cognition in people. This development was first substantiated by Napier in 1916 where every number could be interpreted by either a 1 or a 0. The mathematician Gregor Cantor said “mathematics is freedom.” (Kaplan, 204) With this new advancement of the binary number system everything could be broken down in to the simplest numbers possible. The structuralist Jacques Derrida more fully developed how binary oppositions could be used to interpret human thought, but first we must examine how this came about with Descartes theories.

French philosopher Rene Descartes first came up with the way that binary oppositions govern thought processes. In his famous statement, “cogito ergo sum” I think therefore I am. This was the first distinction between the mind and body by a philosopher. Once the mind and body were separated there could be a further distinction between thoughts and bodily senses. This leads to a distinction of metaphysical notions in Descartes sixth meditation.

“Since I know that anything that I clearly and distinctly understand can be brought about by god just as I understand it, it is sufficient that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing without another in order for me to be certain that one is different from the other, since they can be placed apart at least by God.”

(Rozemond, 3)

This is how Descartes finalizes his thought processes. The mind and body are separable and can exist independently without each other. This is important to the development of how binary oppositions influence thought processes. This dualism is the conceptual division of the world into categories. This can be as simple as black/white, right/wrong,

etc... These dichotomies appear in everyday thought, and dictate the way we interpret our world.

This leads to problems with superiority issues as Derrida later found out. “The breaking of the world into categories takes place far below the upper strata of thought; in fact, dualism is just as much a perceptual division of the world into categories as it is a conceptual division. In other words, human perception is by nature a dualistic phenomenon.” ( Hofstadter, 251) There is a sense that being a 1 is better than being a 0 when considering a binary opposition. This lead Derrida to develop deconstructionism which put an emphasis upon deconstructing, or reversing the meanings of a text being interpreted. What Derrida found is that both oppositions work on a level where they are intertwined, because without the one, the other would have little to no meaning.

“To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable, but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it- that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning.” (Culler, 126)

Through deconstruction, hierarchical dualisms are brought down a level to where they are given a different meaning than found in the dualistic fashion.

These binary oppositions appear in Paradise Lost in the dualistic nature of the characters of Satan/ God, and Adam/ Eve. While the oppositionary forces between Satan and God the father may seem simple to explain, there is more then the war in heaven to separate them, they are also intrinsically linked together. For our purposes, one can label God the father as a 1, and Satan as a 0. This is not to say though that God is

automatically better than Satan in any way, because they are invariably linked together due to the nature of their relationship, could there be a Satan without a God? Without delving into such metaphysical issues, God created Satan so no, they are intrinsically linked together. God opposes Satan, and Satan opposes God, but they are both necessary in order to complete the relationship between each other.

Both God the father and Satan are similar in many ways. They both have a desire to rule, as Satan says it is “Better to reign in hell, than serve in Heav’n,” (Milton, book 1 ln 263) and God is the ruler of heaven. God has an army of angels and heavenly host at his disposal, Satan has an army of fallen angels to do his bidding. Both of these characters are great rhetoricians, and use their rhetoric in order to get what they want from others. They are also dissimilar in several ways, Satan is governed by his own envy of God, while God is immutable, and Satan has fallen and has suffered. While they have their main differences and similarities, their relationship is one that is determinable upon the other. God cannot function without his opposition Satan, and Satan would have no reason to be envious and rebel without his opposition of God the father. In order to function as the characters we know them as, they need each other. This is one of the main points of binary oppositions; they cannot function without the other. This codependency is necessary to create the characters as we know them to be.

This codependency as seen between Satan and God is also true of the characters of Adam and Eve. Both are dependant upon each other, Eve is created from Adam, because Adam cannot live without a companion. Together they form a natural essence in *Paradise Lost*. They do have their differences though. Eve tends to be the more eloquent speaker of the two, and Adam is rasher in his decisions than Eve, but together when they

speech, they literally form poetry. An example of Eve's speech can be found in lines 641 to 649 in book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. This is Eve's sweet speech which is a modified sonnet of fourteen lines iambic pentameter. Eve also has a modified sonnet at the end of book 12 to conclude the text. Adam on the other hand is not eloquent when he speaks; there is no rhyme scheme to be seen. He is rash in his conclusions of Eve, and the world. Adam can only speak well when he combines with Eve in speech. With the presence of Adam and Eve speaking together, Adam takes on a more refined way of speaking, even speaking in verse with Eve on several occasions.

Their speech is not the only example of their dualistic nature. When Eve decides to eat the fruit and fall from the grace of God, Adam is given the choice to follow her or to dismiss her from Paradise. Adam can not live without Eve, she is his companion, and was taken and formed from his own flesh. He chooses to fall along with her and they must leave Paradise together. This shows the relationship between Adam and Eve is one of natural dualistic qualities. They are their own entities, yet they need each other in order to be the whole characters present in Milton's work.

The presence of the theories built off of the concept of nothingness found in *Paradise Lost* is staggering. The formation of thought of the creation of the earth is dictated on the basis of calculus and its use of zero as ever infinitely approaching nothing lead to the modern development of the thought that the world was created out of not quite nothing. The dichotomies of characters are also a major development in the use of binary oppositional theory. Without the advancement of the concept of nothingness the richness of *Paradise Lost* would be lost. Future theories stemming from the concept of nothingness were developed in literature later on such as the theory of nihilism which is

predominating in eighteenth century literature. Nihilism is the basis of much literature and character development in later works. Without a concept of nothingness nihilism would not have come about in theory, and future literary works would be lacking. Following nihilism, existentialism comes about in the nineteenth century as another philosophical theory in literature based off of the concept of nothing. Literature would not be the same were it not for the development of mathematics, and future philosophical theories based off of a concept of nothing.

Through this examination of the concept of nothing it has become clear how Milton was influenced by the creation of calculus at the time of his writing, and how modern thought processes dictate the way we view and categorize characters through a theory of binary oppositions. The concept of nothing has brought about many different theories surrounding the nature of nothingness, including for example nihilism, which is so pervasive, is eighteenth-century literature. This is a vast concept that should not be dismissed lightly as an absence, but instead should be embraced as an enriching theory with many derivations governing the many levels of life itself.



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