

# Why Is There Nothing Rather Than Something?

## An Essay in the Comparative Metaphysic of Nonbeing

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**Abstract** This essay in the comparative metaphysic of nothingness begins by pondering why Leibniz thought of the converse question as the preeminent one. In Eastern philosophical thought, like the numeral 'zero' (*śūnya*) that Indian mathematicians first discovered, nothingness as non-being looms large and serves as the first quiver on the imponderables they seem to have encountered (e.g., 'In the beginning was neither non-being nor being: what was there, bottomless deep?' RgVeda X.129). The concept of non-being and its permutations of nothing, negation, nullity, etc., receive more sophisticated treatment in the works of grammarians, ritual hermeneuticians, logicians, and their dialectical adversaries variously across Jaina and Buddhist schools. The present analysis follows the function of negation/the negative copula, *nān*, and *dialetheia* in grammar and logic, then moves onto ontologies of non-existence and extinction and further suggestive tropes that tend to arrest rather than affirm the

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A longer version of this paper was presented at 'Beyond the Possible: in Memoriam of Richard Sylvan' (ARC/Logic Group), July 2011, University of Melbourne; I am grateful to those present for helpful comments. This is a fitting paper also for a special issue on the founding editor of *Sophia* and my mentor Prof. Max Charlesworth, as he taught me Aquinas and much of the Western disquisitions on being and non-being I discuss herein, in the course of preparing study material and teaching courses in Philosophy of Religion in the years that I worked with him; in fact he gave me my first university job! So my *karmic-ruṇas* are immense to this amazingly dedicated and unique master amongst us. See also note 10 below. I also like to thank Anand Vaidya of San Jose State University Comparative Philosophy Group for valuable critical comments to this version. I am also indebted to J. N. Mohanty, J. L. Mehta, Keiji Nishitani, J. L. Shaw, Wilhelm Halbfass, Morny Joy, and the late Bimal K. Matilal and Ninian Smart, for certain inspirations toward developing my thoughts on this metaphysic; I also have fond memories of conversations with Jack (JJC) Smart, especially his reading of Śaṅkara's 'Māyā-Brahmanism' that he aligned to Bradley's Idealism (well not quite so, as we'll see).

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inexorable being-there of something. After a discussion of interests in being (existence), non-being and nothingness in contemporary metaphysics, the article examines Heidegger's extensive treatment of nothingness in his 1929 inaugural Freiburg lecture, 'Was ist Metaphysik?', published later as 'What is Metaphysics?' The essay however distances itself from any pretensions toward a doctrine of Metaphysical Nihilism.

**Keywords** Non-being · Nothingness · Leibniz · Heidegger · Jaina · Buddhist · Nāgārjuna · Mīmāṃsā · Sylvan · Noneism · Nyāya · Matilal

## Part I

*In the beginning, there was Neither Non-Being (asat) nor Being (sat) – R̥gVeda X.129*

*The Big Q, and the Neglected ‘?’*

Leibniz's oft-quoted Question reads ‘...[W]hy is there something rather than nothing, since nothing is easier than something?’ Whatever the merits of the first horn of the question – his principal concern and the only part represented in philosophical literature (cf. Kołakowski 2008, 144) – the flippant inclusion of the second horn has largely gone unnoticed. It is in part this rhetorical dismissal of ‘nothing’—and all that comes under ‘n,’ negation, nothing, non-entity, no-thing, non-existence, nullity, nihility, nihilism—that has led to the neglect of the importance of nothing-ness in philosophy proper, i.e., in the enterprise of philosophy extending from the historically retraced Greco-Hellenistic to Judeo-Christian roots and contemporaneously in analytical fields. This is the scenario, notwithstanding the increasing inclusion and recognition of ‘nothingness’ in Continental and Comparative philosophies, and in certain quarters of theoretical sciences, such as quantum mechanics, and naturalistic or Big Bang cosmologies contra Kalām cosmology. But the reverse question, albeit imitatively in bad faith, that I scandalously pose: ‘Why is there likely Nothing rather than Something?’—echoing Heidegger's finalé, ‘Why are there beings at all, why not rather nothing?’ (Freiburg lecture, 1929) —like the radical thesis of Metaphysical Nihilism—is probably false, because trivially there is always something, or at least as a pervasive human perception that remains *prima facie* unfalsified, even if we feel justified in believing the obverse, as we are oft-times unjustified in believing what is, in fact, true. Hence, for one given to realism (in the Dummett-McDowell re-articulation), it would be difficult to provide truth conditions for an indefeasible deliverance of the cognitive contents of the proposition in question, short of warranted assertability, which is the way of anti-realism. But then the Davidsonian difficulty is also there for understanding (any) reality in terms of truth conditions. The epistemological embarrassment of realism leading to skepticism is however grist to the mill for a Nāgārjunian (whether Buddhist or broadly Indianist). A logical positivist might also retort that the very utterance of nothing/ness is a self-contradiction or too fuzzy (as Carnap charged Heidegger with on the telling passage we return to in Part IV). Although, one may as well note, Nāgārjuna (the second-

century Indian-Buddhist dialectician) would not buy into this retort in his analogous claim that everything, including the claim he is about to pronounce—that *there is only ever emptiness*—(only just, though not quite, in parity with the Liar’s Paradox about all Cretans) is not self-defeating: this utterance too therefore is empty, as is the retort. Hence, the self-erasing expression: emptiness is of emptiness too! We are for most part held ransom to our concepts grounded in practices that constitute reality—reality of things—for us. Realism is no better for it. Thus, neither realism nor antirealism would be adequately suited to clinch the knowledge of Nothing were such to be the case, for that state would be prior to language and mind (being or not-being independent of the mind is not the issue). How things are, as Leibniz would concur, is distinct from how we investigate them: the principle of ‘verification or falsification transcendence’—votes vis-à-vis pebbles. So why did Leibniz presume the unassailability of ‘something’ in his stock-taking question? Could the source of knowledge be some kind of Heideggerian disclosedness (*Erscholossenschaft*)? But that might be an even more embarrassing route for the non-metaphysicians among us. Nonetheless, this does not make our question philosophically *uninteresting*. Quite the contrary, particularly when we confront *this* ‘Big Negative Q’ in the cross-cultural currents as well.

Instructively, even though the Buddhists believed that the idea of self as *ātman* (mistranslated often as ‘soul’) of [pre-Hindu] Brāhmanism, as a permanently abiding entity, enduring presence, hence being, is a false belief to which there is no corresponding reality—being a conceptual-social construct, or as Hume would have put it, *constituted by our habits and practices*—and this imaginary in fact produces harmful effects—such as, ego, selfish desires, cravings, suffering, etc.—it did not stop them from engaging in speculations as to what the Brāhmanical idea of self and various permutations of their own counter-doctrine of non-self might look like. ‘*In virtue of what counterfactual is the former doctrine false?*’ might just pass the test, and you have the answer. I submit, there is no such clear non-trivial answer to the question I have paused contra Leibniz—‘Why is there likely Nothing?’—in the traditions I will draw from at least, for the quandary is perhaps on a par with Kant’s imponderables, namely, ‘God,’ ‘Freedom,’ and ‘Immortality;’ being neither an *a priori* truth nor so warranted by empirical or epistemological investigations. One might look toward a metaphysical or conceptual argument nevertheless.

However, as will be clearer, I don’t intend nothing/ness to be an entirely free-standing category in all respects and cases—that would be risking Metaphysical Nihilism (*Vernichtung*); rather I see its connection with thinking on ‘zero’—the mother of all natural numbers, cardinal numerals and decimal (positive and negative) integers that Indian mathematicians (and possibly Chinese also around the same time<sup>1</sup>) are said to have first discovered and for which they used the same term ‘*śūnya*’ as the Buddhists later called their insight into void/emptiness : *śūnya/śūnyatā*. The Sanskrit symbol also registers the function of pure negation—as cognate to the negative copula,

<sup>1</sup> D.P. Chattopadhyaya (2006, 190) cites Jacob Needham as saying that the symbol of zero (0) was well established in India and Indo-China (via Buddhism) during the seventh to ninth century CE; while many principles of numerations were known in ancient Mesopotamia, the sexagesimal place-value order was mixed up with other principles for values below 60. The place value in China was decimal, not sexagesimal. The decimal place value was extensively used in the mathematics developed by Āryabhaṭṭa (b. 476CE), the author of *Āryabhaṭṭīya*; p.190.

(*nañ*, ‘*na*’, ‘*niḥ*’, or ‘*a*’, as in *nāsti*, *niṣkāma*, *akārya*)—in Jaina, Buddhist, and later Nyāya logic, as well as in certain ontologies of non-existence and extinction, and frays into suggestive or at best speculative tropes that tend to arrest rather than affirm the inexorable *being-there* (*da-sein*), indefeasibly, of something/being.

Here, for heuristic purposes, I could well draw on the Converse Barcan formula (BFC): *if something x is such that it is possible that x does not exist, then it is possible that something x does not exist*  $\Box\forall x\neg Fx\rightarrow\forall x\neg\Box Fx$ . At least the antecedent is plausibly true, and for the consequent one could appeal to possible worlds, or the Routley-Meinongian metaphysics of hyper-real non-existents via the *Noneism* thesis (Priest 2005). Tim Williamson (1998) derives the following (modified) conclusion by first pointing out the falsity of a crucial premise in BFC, which goes as follows, but does not fully refute the overall argument:

- If there exists an X that is possibly an F, then it is possible that there exists something that is an F;  $\forall x\neg\Box Fx\rightarrow\Box\forall x\neg Fx$ .
- If there is something that could have been such-and-such, then there could have been something that was such-and-such.
- (1) It is not possible that there exists an X that does not exist. (2) There does not exist an X that possibly does not exist. (modus tollens) (3) Everything that exists necessarily exists. (restating 2) (4) Everything that exists exists in every possible world. (restating 3)
- is false; it is only true if it seems: 1') It is not possible that there exists an X that does not *possibly* exist. Wittgenstein, though he died issueless, has a possible non-existent child in some possible world; conversely, the river Inn is such that if no part of the earth's surface had ever been covered by water, nothing would have been it, so something is such that possibly nothing is it; the Inn could have been nothing in the sense that it might not have existed, as a non-existent *possibilia*.
- Also, in 3, ‘contingency’ is mistaken for ‘necessarily’; everything that exist today, here & now, necessarily exists; but may not have two years ago, or in the future. How does it follow if I say, *I exist*. that *it is not possible that I do not exist*. (2,3)?
- And I would add: Richard stamped his existence when he changed his name to ‘Sylvan’; but neither Routley nor Sylvan exists necessarily now, nor in the future; except as a non-existent avatar of Routley-Sylvan in all possible worlds, *noneistly* (Sylvan 1980).

I might also want to bolster some insights from similar debates in compositional nihilism (the view that denies ‘table’ exists apart from the simples that are arranged table-wise<sup>2</sup>) fraying into indeterministic counterfactuals (e.g., in quantum mechanics, chancy probabilistic decision theories) wherein the universe we observe is thought possibly to come out of a pre-physical, lawless singularity (at  $10^{-42}$  sec.) and reflects an indifferent, un-designed, grandly purposeless (except for local ends, mostly of survival) existence. Even though the improbability is higher than the probability (1 to zero) that the universe with random matter around and some meta-laws actually came about, i.e., creation actually happened, the universe appears to have emerged by way of ‘natural selection, the blind, inconspicuous automatic process which Darwin

<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion, see David Grimes (2010): <http://forums.philosophyforums.com/threads/compositional-nihilism-41359.html>

discovered,' with 'no purpose in mind' and without sufficient reason to impute a causal Agency outside of the process.<sup>3</sup> This is of course from the over-stewed Dawkins-Dennett rhetoric, but it has some heuristic value for my argument here, because it echoes some possibilities within ancient Vedic cosmologies and quantum mechanics informed by the uncertainty principle, etc., as illustrated in the Smith-Craig-Oppy debate (Bilimoria 2011<sup>4</sup>).

Thinking about Nothing has its own charms and challenges, as do the traditions that have bothered to engage with this im/probability in the many permutations and nuances that have inflected this terrain: cashed in terms, such as of non-existence, non-existent, non-being, negation, nihility, *ex nihilo*, and even certain ways of talking about contingency, fictionalism, etc. Here, from the West, I would include Aquinas because he, albeit momentarily (in his third 'proof' toward the cosmogenic necessity), pondered on the radical contingency of the created universe and therefore its likely non-existence at some time in the remote past or in the future (Charlesworth 1970a; Kenny 1969, 66), as did Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their Continental cohorts from very different angles. So did the eighth-century doyen of Indian philosophy, Śāṅkara, while seriously considering the Nāgārjunian question of why the process of 'superimposition' (*adhyāsa*) of the imaginary (the illusions, *mithyā*, our world is made of) could not occur on an 'empty' (*śūnya*, non-abiding, universally self-negating) substrate (Bilimoria 1997). They all moved on because of the stark threat of nihilism: nonetheless, none have found it that easy, or 'easier,' to *think* nothingness, unless of course one takes 'something' as a given and for granted—then tautologically all that one needs to ask is 'what can we say of x?' 'What *is* it for something to be?' But suppose—as Descartes in the West and Śāṅkara, again, and Nāgārjuna to Vasubandhu in India entertained—we encounter through a thought experiment that 'something x' might only be there by virtue of some grand deception, which itself is a figment of another grander deception, inter-dependently (*pratītyatva*), as in a fictitious rumor, and so on and so forth. Would it not behoove us to chafe that 'something x' all the way, beyond the very last turtle, into the abyss of an inexplicable nothingness even as it—shadows of 'something x'—recedes into oblivion and its existence, much less *self-existence*, can no longer be assured; indeed, also all inferences to its *necessity* begin to sound hollow [as Aquinas stared into, but only for a frightful moment, before turning his gaze back upon the altar (Charlesworth 1970b); as did also Śāṅkara, whose gaze turned on the elusive *Concept*—of which no greater or smaller could be thought—he named, again, 'Brahman,' before taking voluntary enlightenment in the Himalayan peaks at age 36]. At best it might lend us a presupposition forced upon a shaky recognition of the utter contingency, even more radically, an-nihilism (*not-ing*), of 'something x,' since it was not there really to begin with except as a figment in some fanciful imaginary, or supposed logical necessity, against the grain of that of which no smaller could be conceived. Why is there such a rush to 'save appearances' (Bilimoria 1995; van Fraassen 1980) and to rescue radical contingency from slipping away from perceived

<sup>3</sup> See, R. Dawkins (1988) p. 5; Dawkins elaborates: 'The basic idea of *The Blind Watchmaker* is that we don't need to postulate a designer in order to understand *life, or anything else in the universe*' (147; italics added); really his 'basic idea' is nothing more than just shameless assertion.

<sup>4</sup> This debate will be treated of in more detail in a subsequent paper; the 2011 paper merely gives an outline.

reality with no possibility of its return? Here the law of causation (efficient, material, *samutva*) and the appeal to sufficiency of reason, which make us press the question of its origination, look like they are breaking apart into ‘laws of casualty,’ play of *māyā*—in Śāṅkara’s words ‘*tuccha iva*’—‘a trifle husky, as it were’ (or in the Sartrean sense of contingency; elsewhere: casual chance, infinitesimal probabilities, or some in-authentic victim of non-originate construction, fictionalism, hence im/probability).

But what, then, is nothing? Is it the mere absence of something whose presence is in doubt as in common understanding, or ‘absence’ of that as missing in the locus where it should or might have been, as in Nyāya-Prābhākaran epistemology of *anupalabdhi* (turned into *abhāva*)? ‘*Abhāva*,’ however, to Kumārila (of the Mīmāṃsā school) meant the *sui generis pratiyogin* or counterpositive mark that each and everything taken to exist comes, as it were, stamped with, i.e., its own absolute negation, *niḥsvabhāva*, which inheres as an indelible signature, a subreptive *potentia* until actualized, e.g., in *dhvaṃsa*, destruction, or *mṛtyu*, death (Bilimoria 2008a, 55). My contention here is that the erstwhile Leibnizian question cannot be thought about at the expense of or outside of the challenges and range of possibilities that nothingness opens up or might provide: it is a *sine qua non* of the centrally taken question, as Heidegger rightly pointed out in alerting us to one of the major mistakes of Western civilization: its obsession with the ‘metaphysics of presence’: the notion that something is always present. To think nothing/ness is then not an indulgence in vain, nor is it really any easier than the thinking about some-thing. Thus, it is a challenge worthy of philosophical consideration. It invites itself, or ought—just as death and the astonishing loss of a loved one—to be engaged or indulged in precisely because it is philosophically challenging, and not easy at that.

Patrick Hutchings (2009) has skillfully and with dexterous wit argued in his review of Leszek Kołakowski that the grand Leibnizian Q: ‘Why is there Something rather than Nothing?’ may be a trifle overdetermined and may have been intended to portend the enquiry in a particular direction: not unlike the submotivation of the so-named Ontological Argument, which Hutchings christens as the tautological argument (480). One might even suspect that it is a throw-away question. So why not begin with the counternegative (*nāstitva-pratiyogin*)?

Well, that is how it would appear from certain other horizons and the multi-perspectives the present disquisition draws upon: not just this particular question or its unique enframement, but rather along with it also the history of ideas and preoccupations with the haunting specter of ‘being/Being/self-existence’—what has become fashionable to call ‘onto-theology’ after Kant, for whom it was the attempted, though in the end flawed, ‘way of trying to apprehend God by way of being: as the *highest* being, the *original* being, and the *being* of all being’ (Hart 2004: 54). The Enlightenment threw out God (the consequent), but not the antecedent (being)—until Heidegger set to ravage its pretensions, but himself became preoccupied with establishing a metaphysics of *being* as the universal ground of all temporal being (a question I return to later). This of course notwithstanding—though a Kyoto School philosopher may take some solace from it—the occasional nausea that the quizzical second term wondered about in the converse (*subultan*) question would arouse as the only alternative if radical contingency and im/probable chance work their way to the end (or the beginning, and in between other mortalities),

more markedly in non-analytical strains (the anti-logocentric rhetorics of Nietzsche, early Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida; Hegel and Schopenhauer lured by the self-sublating N-factor in Eastern thought) (Bilimoria 2008b; 2010). The alternative attitude that I wish to press for here begins with a subversion of the grand Leibnizian Q. With a little indulgence in and from classical Indian (and *en passant* Chinese thought), I wish to demonstrate that this indeed is the first quiver in their (Eastern) cosmological enquiry. The foregoing in turn set the framing intuition of metaphysics in Indian philosophical thinking and determined the many developments and trajectories that would witness the emergence of, on the otherwise complacent poly-panentheistic<sup>5</sup> Brāhmanic altar, a ritual epistemology of negation and absence (Mīmāṃsā); in the forest-ashrams, the disturbing doctrine of *māyā*: universal illusionism supplemented with *neti neti* ‘not this, not that’ (*via negativa*, from Upaniṣads to Śāṅkara); and, on the sylvan side, the Jaina logic of *syādvāda* (seven-step of relativized ‘maybe-maybe-nots’) *anekāntavāda* (distributive truth) of naked gymnosophists; in the Nalanda Universities, the Navya-nyāya logico-linguistic doctrine of *nañvāda* (serial negations) (Matilal 1968; 1981, 1998); and last but not least, the damning Buddhist critique of substantial self-existence (*svabhāva*), intrinsicality of essences, denial of the self, deities and deistic god. All that seemed left after the sacrificial smoke whispered into empty space is the two-truths doctrine corresponding to Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) and ‘inter-co-dependent origination of conventional reality’: [*samvṛti-pratītya-samutpāda* variously interpreted]. This in turn is checked by the Four-cornered Logic (*catuṣkoṭi*) that the doyen of Nothingness in Indian philosophy, Nāgārjuna, so devastatingly used in deconstructing pretenses to Absoluteness of any kind, so it would seem, once and for all (Inada 1970; Garfield 1995). The more Daoist among Chinese thinkers perhaps anticipating the Buddhist alternative led themselves to accept the critical adage ‘all being (*you*) is born of non-being (*wu*),’ and the advice ‘therefore let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety’ added further strings of nothingness to the already extended conjunctive disjunctions: *+being-and-non-being-and-non-being-and-being+* (Lao 1963, Chap. 40). (For all a Daoist would care, as with 11th-dimensional Super-Strings, the additions on both ends could regress as if in Cantorian parallelism *ad infinitum*) (Chen 1969). The huge price, for trading in Buridan’s [Mongolian] ass, paid though was a rather grievous one: Daoism survived mostly underground, especially into the modern era; Buddhism was driven out of India and gained its strength elsewhere in Asia, later in Europe too; although comparable post-secular *a/theologies* with rebounded Heideggerian anxieties, Sartrean angsts, continue to list strong following in the wohalls of postmodernism, in the likes of Caputo, Hart, and Mark C. Taylor (2007) et al. I shall return to Heidegger and the Postmodern in Part IV.

<sup>5</sup> On Indian Panentheism, and possibilities of Nothingness within that framing theology, see Bilimoria and Stansell (2010), ‘Suturing the Body Corporate (Divine and Human) in the Brāhmanic Traditions,’ Special Issue on Panentheism and Panpsychism, *Sophia*, (Springer) vol 49 No 2, pp 237–259.

## Part II

### Being *sans* Non-Being of the Classical West Over the Rest

From the afore-outlined perspective, a suspicion begins to gnaw at the heart of Western philosophies' preoccupation, at least since Father Parmenides shattered into perplexity the familiar understanding of what 'is' and 'is not,' with the thesis that only being is, that non-being is not, and that there is no becoming and change (Halbfass 1992,1). The question over which the battle is fought is verily the question of *being*: what is; i.e. existent, quiddity or what it means to be something simple, identifiable, and available for objective discovery and control. 'Plato initiated the move toward—what Heidegger called a "productionist metaphysics"—by transforming the question of Being into beingness: a transcendent or permanently present form (*eidos*) that makes things possible' (Hicks 2003). 'Aristotle expanded this productionist attitude by arguing that for something "to be" meant [it] to be the effect of some cause, and "causing" meant to work upon something, to effect it, to make it' (ibid). And so Aristotle invents a science that investigates being as being, and what belongs to it according to its nature. This first philosophy comes to be known as ontology, the science of being in general, and metaphysics, the science of the universal being. 'Aristotle's phrase,' however, '*on hēi on*,' 'being as being,' is as suggestive as it is ambiguous, and his ontology is deeply aporetic' (Heidegger [1929] 1993, 2–3; Doolan 2012; Hart 2004, 55). The concept of being is marked with shakiness, and there is elusiveness of its supposed part-whole 'compositional unity,' universality, differences within, between *per accidens*, *per se*, *ens/esse* versus *ousia* (*L. essentia*), and *per potentia*. Since it has no predicables that would encompass all of the above 'properties' and markers, and is neither a concept nor a genus, being qua 'existence' remains indefinable. By the time of Plotinus and neo-platonism, being and nonbeing are transcended in the mystical experience of the One (*to hen*); the theistic philosophies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam forge a relationship between metaphysics and theology in their quest for the '*highest being*.' Passing through refinements in Latin and Arabic languages, especially in the distinction hedged between essence and existence, the integration is complete with Thomas Aquinas' "*analogia entis*" of divine and dependent beings on the one hand and his two-fold correlation of the finite entities with 'universal being' (*esse commune*) and the divine 'subsistent being' (*esse subsistens*) on the other (Heidegger 1996, 4). In other words, as Heidegger notes: 'In medieval times, God became identified with the Being of entities and was depicted—on the Aristotelian principle that beings are inexorably linked with cause—as an all-powerful causal agent who planned, calculated, and produced 'the relatively stable and independent presence' of entities' (ibid). Heidegger continues: 'In *Metaphysics*, Avicenna (ibn Sīnā, 980–1037) sums up the plague of being infecting this period rather perspicuously:

Existence becomes a problem when the possibility of non-existence is taken seriously. But contingency, or the possibility of non-existence, was not regarded as an ultimate fact by the Greek thinkers...It was in the context of a theistic philosophy, a doctrine of creation, among the Jewish, Christian and Mohammedan thinkers of the Middle Ages, that the question of contingency, and



therefore, of existence became acute...The discussion of existence, then, emerges from an earlier condition of thought in which the existence of things is taken for granted and the problem of being is the problem of what really is as opposed to merely apparent, or what is permanent as opposed to what is transitory.’ (ibid, 5)

Although a sweeping generalization, the equivocation over existence, in various permutations and pairing of *essentia* with *ens/esse*, *quidditas* with *actus essentiae*, ‘real’ and ‘apparent,’ is patent. In its further development with Wolff, it is noted that *being* (‘ens’) is defined as what is possible, that is, compatible with existence: *quod possibile est, ens est*. Existence itself is a mere supplement to the essential possibilities, a ‘*complementum possibilitatis*.’ But why would it not occur to these contemplatives in togas and priestly frocks that non-being is the state they identify as ‘*complementum possibilitatis*’ and only that the supplement ‘existence’ has not yet been added to it; in that sense it is metaphysically *noneist*, a bare *possibilia*.

Nevertheless, being survives and is developed further in Eckhart, Wolff, and Descartes, who at least grounded being to ‘what can be presented to the cognizing subject as indubitable’: the spiritual substance René deemed to be the *mind* over the entitive body, the super-being, God, over the mechanical world. With Kant, the tight hold on being begins to loosen and lag—consider the elusiveness of thing-in-itself (a limiting concept at best, or perhaps a pointer to the ‘unknown’) as he shifts focus to the analysis of pure understanding; conditions for the possibility of knowing *sans* Cartesian certitude rather than trying to prove what exists, even as he shatters the spurious predication of existence to essence (‘God’s essence is to exist’), for ‘Being’ is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something that could be added to the concept of a thing (Phillips 2006:154). The Cartesian turn to certainty with Kant’s quest for pure knowing spurs phenomenology, which by the time of Husserl calls for *epoché*, bracketing out all ontological assumptions and metaphysical commitments in the more or less intentional and later hermeneutical account of understanding.

Think of the short step from Husserl’s phenomenology to Heidegger’s ideal of *Dasein* (humanly *be-ing* there) making its own authentic existence as a supplement (*complementum*) out of the remnant *possibilitatis* suggested in Greek philosophy and after. Here being—“to be”—recalls, retrospectively, and portends, prospectively, its own noneist stasis in the thrownness-onto-death, the great leveler of all actualizations. So ‘what is there?’ (“to be”) for Heidegger becomes: ‘What would its absence (non-abiding presence) be like (“to be not”)?’

Quine, on the other end, characteristic of the analytical mood, chose to deal with the question: ‘What is there?’ differently. It can be answered, he said, in a word, to wit: ‘Everything.’ (Borges (2000) goes a bit further: ‘Everything and Nothing.’) But what is existent is ultimately defined as ‘the value of a bound variable,’ i.e., as an existential commitment in given bodies of discourse that provide by semantic quantification a meaning to what we and others say—one, some, all. But the standard Quinean ontology also has us accept the existence of abstract objects – of mathematics (numbers, functions, sets, etc) – hence the Quinean ontological method leads to a form of, at best Platonist nominalism, at worse, fictionalism; indispensable to realism? (Price 2009, 349; D’Amato 2013). To be, for Wittgenstein, on the other hand, appears as a word with ‘odd jobs’ and deceptive functional analogies with ‘full verbs’

that have misled philosophers into false depths. There is some relief in contemporary metaphysics where there is an attempt to pin down what *really exists*, as it grounds existence in theorizing on fundamentals, simples, nominals, and compositional nihilism, but by and large turns on cashing out ontological commitments in sentences describing the world; the existents are given in semantics, or in Armstrong's words, 'the real existents are the *truthmakers* for the true sentences of English' (1997: 2010) (even if there are no great giants in India, and it is the case that except in California giants/Giants are never worshipped—i.e., true just in virtue of counterexamples, false-makers, not existing (Lewis 1999: 204), Bigelow's modification notwithstanding). Not too dissimilar was the Nyāya project of developing a semantically saturated theory in which ontology is relegated to a second-order reference, while the semantically relevant elements are given prominence, so that, e.g., properties have pleonastic abstract function (Ganeri 2008: 108) indicated by '-tva,' or -ta -ness, -hood, which stand in place of simple predication on primitive nominals. Thus, the sentence 'the pot has black handle' is reparsed as 'black-handleness located in the pot' (or 'pot qualified by black-handlehood'); 'the tree exists' might well read as 'existence-hood possessed by the tree;' likewise, 'the dog is missing' as 'absent-ness of the dog;' 'God does not exist' as 'existence-hood [ $\diamond\exists xFx$ ] is lacking in the concept "God."'

### Part III

#### *The Ancient Indian Existential Quiddity*

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know. (Concluding verse in R̥gVeda X.129)

It is not that terms for being/to be and their supplements have been conspicuously absent in Indian thought. We have *as/asti* equivalent to Latin *est* (English *is*, etc.), and *bhū/ bhavati*, *sat*, *satya*, *sattva*, *sattā*, *sambhava*, and so on, and correlate terms for essence as well, *tattva*, *guṇa*. But by and large these trump the abstraction over ontological commitment of any serious kind. As in the epics, there was no belief in language being the mirror of nature or reality; the same language could be prevalent in a dream world as well, in numerous possible [modal] worlds, arbitrary conceptual schemes, or in the nebulous world of the gods (indeed Sanskrit was thought be language of the gods), as also in artificial or 'plastic' language, such as in aesthetics. However, in the first-order language, the term that appears most preeminently is the negative contraposition of the above existentials, mainly, *asat*, *abhāva* (non-being, not-to-be, absence). Thus, here I must bring in the time-honored hymnal verse, which I believe is largely responsible for wrecking many a major schism and confusion within the three millennia career of philosophy in India: think of Brāhmaṇism, Śrāmaṇism (Stoics), Ājīvakas (Sophists), Jainism, Buddhism, the various schools of classical Indian philosophy (including Cārvaka, hedonist-materialist), redolent of what Hegel called negativistic-conceptualism (not entirely correct) or nihilism in Nietzschean reading of Buddhism (Bilimoria 2008b), to the contemporary revivalist interest in paraconsistent logic modeled in part on Buddhist-Jaina-Nyāya logic (Garfield &

Priest 2003). We may also make mention of their contributions to mathematics, astronomy, and, more recently, Sanskrit serving as a link-language, especially with its loan digit of zero and null sets, in a variety of computational binary languages used widely in software developments in Silicon Valley and in India.<sup>6</sup>

Going back to around 1500 BC, the R̥gVedic sage ponders: ‘In the beginning, there was Neither Non-Being (*asat*) Nor Being (*sat*), neither night nor day...what was there, bottomless deep?’ (X.129). As in Manichean thinking, where a certain amount of mythos and poetic license is built into such truth-pondering hymn, ‘In the beginning’ (“In the Beginning was the beginning... *ever so*”: *yuge prathame purvye yuge asataḥ sadajāyata*) makes an oblique reference to whenever it, the unmanifest (*ajāyataikam yathāpūrvamavyakta*), the manifest cosmos (*br̥hatividadhat, viśvasṛṣṭi*), might have, or might not have, begun, or worse, even ever have been, for what can possibly come out of the ‘bottomless deep,’ *ex nihilo*—the infinitesimal continuum of empty space-time? This marks the radicality of contingency at its best. There is no suggestion of the necessity of being, ‘to be’. True to its letter, that would be one insightful rendering of *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Even time (*kāla*) and space (*antarikṣa, dyaus, ākāśa*), heat (*tejas, retas, tapaḥ*), and the law, truth (*ṛta, satya, dharma*) governing the order, like the gods, sun and the moon (*sūryacandramasau pṛthivī divam jajāna akalpayat*) the highest witness-bearing God (*asyādhyakṣaḥ sākṣisarvajñānadhātā*) in heaven too, came after it all began—again, if at all—the sages are not quite sure, but hope in the heavens—as the rock-group Talking Heads sing, ‘the space wherein nothing happens’—that the universe did happen and will continue, otherwise what will ensure their own survival and an hereafter following their impending mortality at the hands of the dark god Yama: the annihilator of all that is being? Total annihilation is though always the threat, as Heidegger’s thrownness-into the abyss of death (*mḥtyaveḥ*) also portends.

*life of love*

*death of love*

*life in death*<sup>7</sup>

Why is there this fear of being becoming non-being, rather than it be-ing endlessly, timelessly around or at least moving into becoming (x,y,z..the contingent/transient/chancy world)? (cf. Kakol 2009). Alternatively, why not combine the triadic trinity of being/nothing/becoming in the *highest being*, the transcendent, arguably as in Śaṅkara’s Brahman—which Hegel fearfully noticed as being redolent of trifling ‘Nature,’ or ‘God-in-Nothingness,’ despite his own idea of *Weltgeist*—and Heidegger’s grand vision of *Being-in-Time*? Precisely because the spectre of *asat*, non-being as non-existence (some are happy to render as Nothingness), loomed rather large on the Indic horizon; and note also that logically the hymnal verse begins with a

<sup>6</sup> Quite a few of the ‘start-ups’ were initiated by expatriate Indian trained IT engineers. Could it be that the Indian mind has grown used to thinking in multiple terms of null spaces and multiplications that involve zeros more than any other digit? (Bilimoria 2012)

<sup>7</sup> P. Bilimoria (2011) ‘Grief and Mourning: for Renuka’, lecture for Existential Society, Melbourne, September 2011, updated pdf at [www.pbilimo.com](http://www.pbilimo.com); also under slightly different title in (2012a) *Passion, Death & Spirituality, The Philosophy of Robert C Solomon*, Kathleen Higgins and David Sherman (eds), Sophia Series, Springer, p. 172

double-marked ‘N-factor (bi-negation): Neither/nor’ (not, as in Kierkegaard, Either/or), a logical quiver that the Jaina and Buddhist philosophers developed with great skill into reasoning (*naya*) based on sevenfold-aspect predication (*saptabharigi*) along with *syādvāda* (fuzzily ‘maybe-maybe-not-ism’) and four-cornered bi-negation dialectics, respectively—a sort of radical negative metaphysics. ‘Neither this nor that’ into: ‘neither is nor is-not’:  $\neg(p \vee \neg p)$ ; this, using Nāgārjuna’s stock example, translates as ‘something, say, self neither is nor is it not;’ ‘i.e. neither of both disjunctive conjuncts; is there *ever* a self?’ in the earlier Mīmāṃsā version with denial of the positive and negative conjunct (*prasajya-pratiṣedha-paryudāsa*) as well, it can be formalized as:  $\neg(M \wedge \neg M) \vee \neg(M \vee \neg M)$ . Puzzling. Indeed, how can one assert something is not and then disown what you just denied? And there is no retraction either to the originary position; double negation and conjuncts thereto do not collapse disjunctively (a sort of ontological nihilism with the possibility of transcendence as its underbelly; [Matilal 1968; J L Shaw correspondence]). Take his second example: your existing now is caused by itself ( $p$ ), it is caused by other ( $\neg p$ ); both by itself and other ( $p \wedge \neg p$ ); neither by itself or other ( $\neg p \vee \neg \neg p$ ), nor is it that you are not caused ( $p \vee \neg p$ )  $\wedge$  ( $p \vee \neg \neg p$ ) does anything where-*ever* arise? (So none of the above!)

To be sure, debate has raged ever since as to whether the intent here, particularly in the fourth premise, the neither/nor formulation, was to reject the law of non-contradiction (violation of the basic Aristotelian prerequisite for logical thinking) or simply bypassing it and setting aside instead the excluded middle and leaving it fallow as a still-born paradox. It may not worry our Priest either way as it did not worry the Vedic and Buddhist priests for it was their way of acknowledging and recognizing the persistence and work, one might say, of Nothingness in ontological and cosmological realities. The ontological commitments in their truth-making neither supervened on semantic consistency nor on anything given as such in perception or bodily sensations. Such am-bi-valences led European philologists and philosophers, such as Max Müller and Herder and Hegel, closer to our millennium, to adjudge these to be musings or at worse babblings of an infantilizing culture whose sense of logic is no better than that of a desperate robber risking breaking into a house and setting off the alarm by the same stroke, or Nietzsche’s madman coming down from the mountains with a lit lantern in broad daylight purportedly looking for God. It also worried Karl Jaspers, who would not go as far as to say, as did Nietzsche, that this is nihilistic but, in so far as all differentiations rather than a decision being taken between opposites as in Parmenides, this negative logic that culminates in Nāgārjuna’s deconstructive dialectic ‘prepares the way, not for a positive insight developed in logical terms, but for a silence filled with another source. Here all reasoning annuls itself’ (Jaspers 1962; 1969). These were ‘illogical times.’ Jaspers is wrong as he does not see or appreciate that Nāgārjuna is appealing to the same logic of *reductio ad absurdum* that Indian logicians, the Jainas especially, before him had been using against Brāhmaṇical thinking that moved away from the Ṛgvedic doubts (Bosley 2003).

Wilhelm Halbfass (German-American philologist who taught at Penn in the US until his premature death in 1999) remarks that ‘Ṛgveda X.72 and a variety of other sources (e.g. Atharvaveda X.2.28; *BrhUp* II.1-2) up to and beyond *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (ChUp III, 19) teach that nonbeing (*asataḥ, nāsadīya*), ‘was’ in the beginning and that *sat* (being) arose from nonbeing. The reference to ChUp is

apposite here as the verse in question that Halbfass (1992) invokes a little earlier reads as follows:

In the beginning, my dear, this world was just Being (*sat*), one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say, ‘In the beginning this world was just Nonbeing (*a-sat*), one only, without a second: from that Nonbeing Being was produced’ [Rveda X.72]. But verily, my dear, whence could this be? ... How from Nonbeing could Being be produced. On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second.

This is not representative of Vedic [and Brāhmaṇa] thought; yet it acknowledges there were prior views according to which nonbeing was the origin of ‘this world.’ This theory not only precedes the Upaniṣadic doctrine, ‘but constitutes its indispensable background and counterpart.’ As Halbfass goes on to note, ‘this elusive and discarded cosmogony from nonbeing is of great significance for the beginnings of Indian thought about being. In a sense, it is more fundamental than the “theory of being”...’ (ibid: 26). Nevertheless, it is arguable whether the theory of the origin from *asat* (notably Rgveda X.72) should be interpreted as a creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) and that the binary of *sat* / *asat* should be taken as ‘existence’ and ‘non-existence’ in an abstract sense. It might be an anachronism to credit the Vedic authors with an abstract notion of existence (and non-existence). Abstraction is not the point. Cosmogony is a story of how the universe came into existence, or into its present state of being, out of what, what irreducible substrate or remainder thereof. It answers the same sort of question that was asked by the Pre-Socratics, such as Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes (ibid, 28).

Moving on, coupling the Vedic insight with the peculiar theory of causality adopted in Indian philosophy, *satkāryavāda*, according to which the effect pre-exists in the cause, then in a sense the Chāndogya suspicion is right; how can being come out of nonbeing if it is not already in its cause (presuming that there is no interventionist God standing outside of the configuration as in the Biblical cosmogony)? The Chāndogya rejection of Vedic cosmogony from ‘nonbeing’ as *creatio ex nihilo* would go through, or alternatively the *satkāryavāda* theory itself would have to be rejected, as it was in some later schools, and the debate was reduced to disagreement concerning the semantics of *sat* and *asat*. Even Śaṅkara, as we noted earlier, entertains the possibility of illusion being projected onto “nonbeing” (*śūnyatā*) in deference to the prevalent Buddhist view (notably the noetic-presentification of Yogacāra-Cittamātra-Vijñānavāda), but then quickly retracts, arguing that it is improbable that such a process of superimposition/transference could go through in the absence of a concrete substrate, and this process (*asadiva*, BSB II.1.17), short of naming it as Brahman, the ‘highest being’ (that stands at some distance from any involvement with the contingencies of the world hence *akartṛtva*), he calls inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*), some mystery, not an Absolute primordial given as such; in Upaniṣadic adage:

*yato vāco nivartante aprāpya manansā saḥa*: the mind with speech turns back unable to break through [on to the other side].’ (In a lesser prosaic tell-tale, one cannot but help recall: ‘Hanumān, off to swallow the sun and all that lies beyond that giver of universal light (*agni, tejas, diva, tirohita*), traversing through

curving space and what he found to be unending time, not eternity, reaches a cul-de-sac in his singular-*iti* pursuit; of which he is then not sure whether it is the beginning or the end-point of all that he beholds receding behind him. That *bindu*-blib seemed smaller than the 420<sup>th</sup> [*chār-soo-bis*] part of the hair-end on Rāvaṇa's balding ten-headed scalps: to keep going in the seemingly infinite abyss of emptiness into which the universe is said to expand (*ekārṇavata*), or return back to the securer pristinely best forrest by Ayodhyā – that is the question that overcame him. He turned back, alas!'. (Dialogue with Ramubhai Gandhi, IICbar, Delhi, Feb 2007).

We have not been able to make much of this curious trope, save to suggest that perhaps there is an acknowledgement of the continuity of nonbeing—in the Chāndogya sense of unevolved, undifferentiated non-being—within the process and the illusion itself: the fictional appearance of the world.

Consider the parallel hymn where the creation of the universe is attributed to a grand sacrificial process (*haviḥ, devānām Puruḥamedha, ṛigX.90.16*): sacrifice sacrificed sacrifice to itself, and out of this sacrifice arose gods (*astau devāḥ*); the gods in turn sacrificed the great being (*puruṣa*, the would-be progenitor), and out of this arose the four quarters of the universe. Here there is no suggestion of a pre-existent substantial substrate in a simple nominal form; for sacrifice is an abstracted episodic act—at best a verb form (*kriyā*)—which it performs upon itself and no other. The gods (*devatās*) emerge effervescently from the mantra-suffused smoke, and they too have to carry out a further sacrificial act for the cosmic progeny to arise. In a much later apocryphal hymn a four-headed god, Brahmā, the cosmic architect or demiurge-to-be, singularly finds himself in what could be described as his first moment of animated breath, seated on a lotus flower, with a certain self-reflexivity, wondering whereforth have 'I,' the strangeness of being, arisen from, by what necessity, for all he beholds around him is a wide, unending open placeless space (*ākāśa/dik*), extending infinitely in all directions, possibly looping into a curve had he a whiff of *qua* GTR (General Theory of Relativity). He thence decides to sink down the lotus stem perchance he could discover the truth-clincher of his own origin, in a 'heard word' (*śruti*) even if authorless; he travels through dark inanimate anti-matter, hollow grids, Ayer's NDE-tunnel, gurgling waters, and ends up being confronted with an idea, a concept, a whispering trope, that emanates from within his inquisitive mind, only to tell him that he, Brahmā, is a figment of the imagination of the mind in which this idea is lodged. Try as much as he would, the intellect (*mahat-buddhi*) he tries to climb up as well recedes into intersecting spiral web of further memes-like ideas, with much chattering logic holding them together, but beyond that he ends up nowhere in particular. He is just an idea, a sublime phantasm. All this, he finally declares, must be the work of nonbeing. One is reminded here of Borges' (2000) ingenious character, tormented by his own emptiness and lack of soul-identity, finally hears God's answer to his Q: 'Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.'<sup>8</sup> ('I'm everything, even as I'm nothing', Sāyaṇa.)

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges (2000) *Labyrinths* (Penguin Books), trans. J.E. Irby (I am thankful to Amelia Barili from UC Berkeley for drawing my attention to this forgotten exquisite storyline!)

It is little wonder that the term for being ‘*sat*’ is often nuanced, in derivative combinations, to yield ‘truth’ as in *satya*, reality (Gandhi’s *satyāgraha*: ‘truth-force’, ‘reality-maker’), and truth-marker, *satyavṛtti*, implying that *being* in and of itself has no particular prerogative and that indeed ‘being’ and ‘nonbeing’ both presuppose a more fundamental Abgrund, or a comprehensive horizon (Halbfass p 32), even when the originary One (*tadekam*) per Ṛgvedic hymn X.129 is said to be beyond *being and nonbeing*. But the transcendence, even if we take this to be the neuter Brahman of the later Upaniṣads, would not be properly described as the disappearance of all distinctions in an undifferentiated primeval substance, or Nature, even the God-in-Nothingness as Hegel took it to be (Bilimoria 2010); rather the transcendence is of a higher abstract conceptual order (which of course the West following Hegel denies to the Hindus).

So much for Vedic thought on non-being. Now let me move slightly to the scholastic interpreters of Vedic praxis based on the aforementioned cosmogony giving way to a cosmology – of the Mīmāṃsakas, and how they applied the insights toward an ontology of non-existence as well as an epistemology of negation and absence. They posited basically four kinds of non-existence:

1. *prāgabhāva*: prior negation (e.g., the negation of curd in milk, by its theory of *asaikārya*: effect is not prior to its cause); antecedent non-existence
2. *dhvaṃsa*: the negation of milk in the curd; posterior non-existence
3. *anyonyābhāva*: mutual and relational negation: the horse is not a cow, and vice versa; Ram is not Laxman; the horse is not white; Ram is not honest
4. *atyantābhāva*: absolute negation: hare’s horn; or the skin below its head is not hard (it can’t ever be so), God. (Bilimoria 2008a)

For each instantiation of being (something x is the case), there are four possible negations and combined multiplication of these ascribable to it.

Crudely, this parallels to or is echoed in the Jaina seven-fold predication (*saptabhaṅgi*), which reads (Matilal 1981, modified):

A thing *is* existent—from a certain point of view.

It is *non-existent*—from another point of view.

It is *both* existent and non-existent *in turn*—from a third point of view.

It is *indescribable* (that is, both an existent and non-existent simultaneously) — from a fourth point of view.

It *is* existent and *indescribable*—from a fifth point of view

It *is non-existent* and *indescribable*—from a sixth point of view.

It is *both* existent and *non-existent* and *indescribable*—from a seventh point of view.

What is going on here in terms of logic or the paraconsistent approach? Priest and Routley back in 1983/1989<sup>9</sup> were among the first in the analytical tradition to notice parallels between Jaina logic and modern discursive logic, arguing that the Jaina perspectivism is predicated on the rejection of the law of contradiction (Flügel 2012). Though Ganeri (2001), following Bimal Matilal (our common

<sup>9</sup> I was in personal correspondence with Richard Routley (later Sylvan) during that seminal period even as he ventured out into non-Western, particularly Jaina logic. Correspondence in Sylvan Archives (Griffin and Priest).

mentor), disagrees and avers instead that *saptabhangi* is based on an extension of discursive logic via modalized many-valued truth-tables, and hence Jaina logic ‘does not involve any radical departure from classical logic. The underlying logic *within* each standpoint is classical, and it is further assumed that each standpoint or participant is internally consistent.’ Others have argued that Jaina logic is context-sensitive and a quasi-functional system. I, on the other hand, would like to defend the *dialetheia* (two-way truth) thesis (via Hyde and Priest 2000), inherent in the Jaina logic on historical grounds, not on the formal reconstruction that Ganeri provides, precisely since neither the Mīmāṃsā nor the Buddhist showed any remorse or embarrassment at admitting that some statement can be both true and false in a context where not everything is accepted or some things stand negated. The fuss over the Ṛgvedic verse as we saw and various permutations of *abhāva* as complete absence and negation, the coeval happening of being and non-being in the same context, go toward demonstrating that hunch. I do not wish to be distracted by the question around paraconsistent vs. classical logic as such, as I am more interested in tracing the extensive career of negation that gives us some insight into thinking on nothingness.

Various devices are formulated for talking about negation and non-existents in terms of exclusions, prohibitions, mutual negations, and sentential and implicative negations. While largely used in the injunctive ritual and contemplative contexts, they have their logical counterpart also, as well as a robust epistemological theory all their own, and an ontological commitment that the Nyāya theory had bracketed out; since this material is already published I refer the reader to that source (Bilimoria 2008a, b).

When neither an existent (*bhāva*) nor a non-existent (*abhāva*) remains before the mind, then since there is no other possibility (having no objects as such), it becomes pacified.

Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (‘A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life’), IX, 34.

## Part IV

### *Back to Heidegger*

And that brings me back to Heidegger – the last of the metaphysicians, at least in the Continental philosophy tradition. We begin with a quote (that Carnap also used, albeit in a different translation, suggesting this was an example of a ‘pseudo-sentence’ where logic had been sent on holiday):

What should be examined are beings only, and besides that—nothing; beings alone, and further—nothing; solely beings, and beyond that—nothing. What about this nothing?...Is the nothing given only because the ‘not’, i.e., negation, is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the ‘not’ given only because the nothing is given?...We assert that the nothing is more original than the ‘not’ and negation... Where shall we seek the nothing? Where will we find the nothing?...we do know the nothing...Anxiety reveals the nothing...that in the face of which and for which we were anxious was ‘really’—nothing. Indeed: the nothing itself—as such—was there... How is it with the nothing?...The nothing itself nihilates. (Heidegger 1993: 95–6)



In his illuminating short inaugural essay titled ‘*Was ist Metaphysik?*’ in 1929 (two years later than *Being & Time*, 1927) that appears alongside his essays on Hölderlin, and given to Stefan Schimanski of the ‘Manchester Guardian,’ who visited the master in his retreat in the Black Forrest in 1946 and 1947 (and the first work to be translated and issued in English<sup>10</sup>), Heidegger complains that science only examines beings, and nothing further; it rejects ‘nothing’ read as ‘not-ing,’ ‘nullity’ (*das Nicht*), as a ‘phantasm’ (1993: 95–96). In logic, on the other hand, nothing is the occurrence when ‘not’ or negatedness is given; while Heidegger likes to think the converse: negation (*Verneinung*) and ‘not’ (*nicht*) are given only because nothing is given (very much as Kumārila we saw earlier, in the Indian tradition, was thinking). So he asserts, ‘nothing is more original than the ‘not’ and negation’ (ibid, 97), and a little later: ‘Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom’ (103). He then moves straight into an enquiry into nothing or, better, Nothingness; but in this quest for Nothingness, as he puts it, there is similar ‘going beyond’ what-is, conceived as what-is-in-totality (106). He begins by suggesting that since ancient times the subject of Nothing has been expressed in the highly ambiguous proposition ‘*ex nihilo nihil fit*—from nothing, nothing comes to be’ (107). Even though the proposition never made Nothing the real problem, it brought out from the prevailing notions about Nothing, the over-riding fundamental concept of what-is, i.e., beings. Nothing was quickly forgotten and the question of being—Aristotle’s study of being of being—or better, in what ways is something *some thing* and what might be its relation to nothing?—took over the focus. Still it presupposes there was a concept lurking beneath that of Nothing. And what was that? He explains thus: ‘classical [ancient] metaphysics conceives Nothing as signifying Not-being (*Nichtseiendes*), that is to say, unformed matter that is powerless to form itself into ‘being’ and cannot therefore present an appearance. What has ‘being’ is the self-creating product (*Gebilde*) that presents itself as such an image (*Bild*), i.e., something seen, or being of time: ‘being extant.’ The origin, law, and limits of this ontological concept are discussed as little as Nothing itself’. (An aside, German Indologists working on the R̥gvedic verse discussed earlier, rendered ‘*asat*’ in German in exactly the term Heidegger adverts to here for Not-being, No-thing).

Christian dogma, he proceeds to tell us, on the other hand, denies the truth of the proposition *ex nihilo nihil fit* and gives a twist to the meaning of Nothing, so that it now comes to mean the absolute absence of all ‘being’ outside God: *ex nihilo fit—ens creatum*: the created being is made out of nothing. ‘Nothing’ is now the conceptual opposite of what truly and authentically ‘is;’ it becomes the *summum ens*, God as *en in-creatum*. Here, too, the interpretation of Nothing points to the fundamental concept of what-is. In both cases the questions concerning Being (*Sein*) and Nothing as such remain unasked. Hence, we need not be worried by the difficulty that if God creates ‘out of nothing’ he above all must be able to relate himself to Nothing. But if God is

<sup>10</sup> ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’, inaugural lecture to the Freiburg University faculties, July 24, 1929, in the University Auditorium (succeeding his teacher, Husserl). I have used translation in places from the earlier one included by R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick in *Existence and Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949, re-issued 1979), but mainly from D.F. Krell, ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in *Basic Writings*, revised edn., San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993. Heidegger meets Stefan Schimanski, June 1946, and again a year later. On their meeting see Schimanski’s essay, ‘On Meeting a Philosopher,’ *Partisan Review* 15, 1948, 506–09. The Sheehan translation (2001) was cited.

God he cannot know Nothing, assuming that the ‘Absolute’ excludes itself from all nullity. Not wishing to lose sight of the work of Being, Heidegger’s own reformulation of the old proposition ‘*ex nihilo nihil fit*’ runs thus: ‘*ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit*: every being, so far as it is a being, is made out of nothing. Only in the Nothingness of *Da-Sein* can what-is-in totality...come to itself.’

Now this particular observation might strike biblical scholars and Christian philosophers of religion as being willfully controversial and unfair. I cannot presume to pronounce on its merits or otherwise, but what I see in Heidegger’s excavation is something of significance to my overall argument: that thinking about Nothing has been rather thin, and it is not as easy as Leibniz assumed given the kinds of coding that occur frequently in literary and cultural productions across East and West, and indeed there is more to be got out of Nothing than hitherto supposed. Contrary to general perception, Heidegger’s ontology is not one of Nothingness as such; he is not a nihilist, far from it (he distances himself from a ‘Philosophy of Nothing’ in the Postscript); rather, Being as *Da-Sein* remains very much the subject and project of metaphysics, and of theology too if you like. There is something sobering in his suggestion that only because ‘Nothing is revealed in the very basis of our *Dasein* is it possible for the utter strangeness’—the dread, the angst, the anxiety, the boredom, the facticity of thrownness in the face of *my* death (it is always *my death*) — ‘of what-is’ to dawn on us. ‘The outermost possibility of death is the way of being of *Dasein* in which it is *purely and simply thrown back upon itself*’ (Kisiel 1995: 336; Heidegger, 1966: 235–6). ‘Only when the strangeness of what-is forces itself upon us does it awaken and invite our wonder. Only because of wonder, that is to say, the revelation of Nothing, does the ‘Why?’ spring to our lips. [‘Why are there beings at all, why not rather nothing?’ (1929 endline)]. Only because this ‘Why?’ is possible as such can we seek for reasons and proofs in a definite way. Only because we can ask and prove are we fated to become enquirers in this life. The enquiry into Nothing puts us, the enquirers, ourselves in question. It is a metaphysical one’ (379).

To be sure, Heidegger never gives up on the quest for the ‘ground possibilities of being as a whole’ (while Nishitani takes Nothingness as the ‘home ground,’ Heidegger remains committed to the mereological whole-part discourse: that bit is the Greek in him). For him Nothing is not merely the nugatory that equates with the non-existent (*das Wesenlose*); ‘rather,’ he preaches, ‘we should experience in Nothing the vastness of that which gives every being the warrant to be’ (385). Hence, what is instructive is his exhortation that rather than ‘a leap of faith’ the task of ‘letting oneself go into the abyss of Nothing’ is more important, that is to say, ‘freeing oneself from idols as all have and to which we are wont to go cringing’ and lastly, letting this ‘suspense’—‘morbid mood, dread’ (383) range where it will, so that it may continually swing back again to the ground question of metaphysics, which is wrested from Nothing itself (and he ends with this): ‘Why is there any Being at all—why not far rather Nothing?’ Wrested from Nothing, Heidegger brings back concepts of sacrifice as gifting and thanking, feeling empathy for the other (*Sorge/care*), disburdening calculative and utilitarian thinking, and all the promises of techno-scientific culture, even obedience to the ‘voice of being,’ alongside imagination, the work of art, poetical flights into the holy, and so forth.

In this abyss, which is only representationally poised in opposition to Being, Heidegger finds the *Abgrund* of freedom: it is the groundless ground that is indistinguishable from nothing and from which all determinations emerge. Hegel had already explained the peculiar

relationship between nothingness and freedom in these words: ‘In this highest form of explication nothingness would be freedom. But this highest form is negativity insofar as it inwardly depends itself to its highest intensity; and in this way it is itself affirmation—indeed absolute affirmation’ (Taylor 2007: 117). Negativity is affirmative insofar as it is the condition of creative emergence of everything that exists.

It is a theme—this latter—that postmodernist philosophers have taken up and as it were run the full gauntlet on, and I wish to get to this in drawing the essay to a close. ‘Perfect nothingness... shadows... neither light nor absence of light: origin of that which has no origin, groundless ground, abyss, freedom, imagination, creativity. For Nietzsche, the plenitude of this void is the nonplace of the birth of tragedy; for Derrida it is *la différance* worked into the non-metaphysical deconstructive theology of *absence*.’ Mark C Taylor more recently commenting on these tropes compares Kant’s schemata of productive imagination (in the work of poetry, art, etc.) to God creating freely *ex nihilo*. The power of imagination ‘reveals’ the concealment—the as-yet-unearthed—at the heart of subjectivity. It is precisely in the moments of radical temporality when the subject encounters deep within its own absence that nothingness haunts subjectivity; the *deus absconditus* of Kierkegaard, Luther, Calvin, and possibly Don Scotus, becomes *subiectus absconditus*; only in the next inspired moment does self-reflexivity arise, and the ‘something’ presented to consciousness is given representation or expression. The German Romanticists, such as Schlegel, had identified the springing of this agency within subjectivity variously with the ‘breath,’ ‘Will,’ Being, *ousia*, *logos*, *telos*, ideas, even Reason (with Hegel) of Spirit (*Geist*), and the Holy Ghost: ‘Every good human being is progressively becoming God.’ In short, the premise is that belief in nothing/nothingness in this radical sense of the temporality of subjectivity that is the driving force towards its self-reflexivity is not in-and-of-itself nihilistic; rather, it opens the floodgates of light towards transcendence (even Nietzsche would be cited as conceding to this premise). ‘After God—is art; after art—life; Three-in-one—One-in-three’—as Taylor sketches this interloping trinity. But what does ‘after’ mean in this locution as indeed in the title of his recent, rather controversial book, *After God*<sup>11</sup> (taking a hint from MacIntyres *After Virtue*)? This is his iteration:

God is not the ground of being that forms the foundation of all beings but the figure constructed to hide the originary abyss from which everything

<sup>11</sup> In the discussion that ensues Heidegger has taken the adage ‘*ex nihilo nihil fit*’ rather too literally and hence finds a certain ambiguity in it. As Prof. John Bishop (of Auckland University) pointed out to me (after an APRA plenary presentation of the larger version, 2010, in Melbourne), there are many different and variant interpretations of ‘*ex nihilo nihil fit*,’ and not all scholars or theologians draw the implications that Heidegger does; some may find ‘Nothing’ here quite compatible with God’s nature, and so a positive rather than a negative reading might be apposite. Hence something—at least conceivably capable—*does* come out of nothing. And this may resonate with the Hindu cosmogenic accounts discussed under Part III. I am grateful to John Bishop and Patrick Hutchings for their comments on this section of the discussion. Though it could equally be ‘After Gods’ in deference to now recognized transcendental pluralism in cross-cultural philosophy of religion, the re-kindled interests in Pantheism (Spinoza; Michael Levine; Forrest), Panpsychism (Schopenhauer; Freya Matthews), Panentheism (Plato[?] via Dirk Baltzly; Hegel; de Chardin; Phil Clayton). More recently, Mark Johnston’s (2009) plea for rationally reconsidering some version of poly-heno-theisms, rather than saving the historically late monotheistic deity of Western origin; and subverting Heidegger’s adage: ‘Too late for the gods, too early for God’: *kasmai devāya haviṣā vidhema* – to which God shall we offer our sacrifice: of West/North or East/South? [echoing R̥gveda X.82.6]. Some of these alternatives are examined in Special Issue on Panentheism and Panpsychism, *Sophia* Volume 49 Number 2, 24 March 2011.

emerges and to which all returns. While this abyss is no thing, it is not nothing – neither being nor nonbeing [Taylor’s exact replication of Ṛgveda and Śāntideva], it is the anticipatory wake of the unfigurible that disfigures every figure as if from within. Far from simply destructive, disfiguring [I read *kronos*] is the condition of the possibility of creative emergence. Even when expected, emergence is surprising—[as the consciousness out of singularity is for Dave Chalmers]—without surprise, there is no novelty; without novelty, there is no creativity; without creativity, there is no life [animation]’.

For my purposes, what I take away from all this is the preparedness to take the possibility of nothingness as a ground, or the lurking empty space, tunneling vacuum, or where God intervenes or plays out her Will, energetic Desire (*tejasvikāma, mahimānah*), whatever, which is quite an admission: whether the ultimate cause is traced to an intelligent mind, causeless cause, or an infinite regress of endless internal triggers, disinterested Desire, integers of zeros, old universes, or turtles all the way down...is not the moot point; for all such possibilities seem to have been entertained and dare I say anticipated in the early insights and cosmological developments that occurred in the debates between the Vedic-Upaniṣadic bards and the śrāmaṇic doubters. There is not much that is crudely or naively pre-scientific here; metaphysical it might be, even trifle speculative and mythical, but it is also challengingly troubling, or so for any sensitive, worrying philosophical mind.

Radical Nothingness ought not to be feared: it may have therapeutic value in the hallowed Wittgenstenian-Yogacārin sense (an antidote for excessive linguistic conceptualism); it may prove to be the timely yet fairest watchdog on the excesses of the Technoscience culture (to which Heidegger similarly drew attention), as well on fundamentalisms of all varieties, the return of religion to the public sphere (despite the Enlightenment’s decree), secularism re-seeking the sacred enchantments, as in the hands of Žižek, and on other attachments to Absolutes, perhaps also to being/Being, and an acute partner in inter-faith, intra-deist and inter-faithless conversation of the Four Horsemandkind. Meanwhile, on with my frustrated attempt to complete fabricating a machine that creates Nothingness, or work it up at least as the transcendental concept of which no smaller can be conceived. Wouldn’t that do?

The Dao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Dao;  
 The name that can be named is not the eternal name...  
 Therefore let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety,  
 And let there always be being so we may see their outcome.  
 The two are the same,  
 But after they are produced, they have different names  
 They both may be called deep and profound..  
 Deeper and more profound...

*Tao-te Ching* by Lao-tzu, trans by Wing-Tsit Chan (Tao = Dao)

Revised in Venus Bay  
 Dec. 21, 2012 (missed Mayan *pralaya*)

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