

II. The Problem of Nothingness

Philosophy 157

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Dualism

- Since ancient philosophy, a distinction has been made between appearance and reality
- Phenomenology overcomes this dualism by considering the phenomenon as the thing itself
- But there remains a dualism of what is present (finite) and its possibilities (infinite)
- What is the being of the phenomenon?

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The Being of the Phenomenon

- Things reveal themselves in the phenomenon
- The being of the phenomenon is the condition under which it is revealed
- So the being of the phenomenon is not revealed in the phenomenon
- Our knowledge of this being surpasses our knowledge of the phenomenon

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Being-in-Itself

- The being of the phenomenon is being-in-itself (*le être-en-sois*)
- It is not created, for then it would have to be for another (God), nor does it create
- It simply is what it is
- It is “opaque,” “solid”

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Being-for-Itself

- The being of the consciousness which is directed at being-in-itself is being-for-itself (*le être-pour-sois*)
- It is not simply what is, but (in a way), it is what is not
- Being-for-itself “nihilates” being, introducing a negativity not found in being-in-itself

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Consciousness

- Consciousness is directed at the phenomenon
- This consciousness is pre-reflective (or “non-thetic”)
- Example: I may count without reflecting on what I am doing, but when asked, I say (reflectively) that I am counting
- But there still must be a consciousness of the activity of counting, which organizes it
- This self-consciousness is “non-positional,” and it is not really distinct from the consciousness aimed at the phenomenon

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Transcendent Being

- Since consciousness is directed at the phenomenon, it transcends itself
- So consciousness must, and depends on, a transcendent being, a being which is not consciousness itself
- This is the “ontological proof”
- Husserl erred by making the *noema* unreal, dependent entirely on perception

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Analysis and Synthesis

- Descartes analyzed the world separate things, body and mind, and tried to unite them in a synthesis
- Husserl did the same with *noesis* and *noema*
- But a concrete unity cannot be achieved in this way
- Heidegger begins with a concrete object, “being-in-the-world”
- What is the meaning of “being-in-the-world?”

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Questioning Being

- The answer is to be found by investigating human conduct
- Many patterns of conduct will be examined
- The leading pattern is that of questioning
- We question being with the expectation of an answer from it (e.g., in scientific experiments)
- Questioning takes place within the context of being-in-the-world

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Negative Answers

- We question being by asking it “yes” or “no?” (as in scientific experiments, or in a search for conduct revealing being-in-the-world)
- These express opposing possibilities
- Non-being is thus a transcendent fact
- It cannot be explained by appeal to subjectivity: “a fiction” implies a negative reply
- There are three negativities in questioning: not knowing the answer in advance, the possibility of non-being, and limitation, which allows truth

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Negation and Judgment

- Negation is typically explained in terms of a judgment of the type “X is not”
- Then being can be left as fully positive, and negation is confined to judging or perhaps a separate, insubstantial, existence
- Does negation depend on judgment, or does judgment depend on negation?

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Non-Being and Expectation

- Non-being appears only in the context of what we expect: I am short of money
- It must first be posited as something possible
- But this does not make negation subjective
- Negation is not tied to judgment, because our expectations are directed at things
- We comprehend non-being prior to judgment
- Destruction depends on our apprehending a being as destructible, a limiting which is a nihilation
- This also appears when we narrow our focus, excluding other beings

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An Example

- I have an appointment with Pierre at the café but am late
- I find that he is not there, based on an intuition of his absence
- This must be understood as involving non-being, not just negative judgment

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Absence

- Being fills the room, but it recedes and becomes a background
- Pierre, in the foreground, is constantly slipping away
- “Pierre’s absence haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground”
- But the absence of Wellington is just a judgment

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Negation as Original

- Judgment cannot account for the refusal of existence that is negation
- Negation tears us free of being; it is an original event, a discovery
- This discovery (Pierre’s absence) is the basis of our judgments
- Nothingness haunts being, within and without us
- Where does nothingness come from?

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Being and Non-Being

- It is tempting to regard being and non-being as complementary components of the real, like light and darkness
- They would then be abstractions which would have to be united synthetically
- Hegel treated them this way
- Pure being and pure nothing are both empty, completely general, abstractions

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Being and Essence

- For Hegel, essence is the foundation of being
- Essence is said to be the concrete, of which being is an abstraction
- But being is the condition of all structures, and hence of all essences
- Moreover, if being is completely abstract, it bears no trace of essence
- The implicit conclusion is that being signifies existence, rather than essence

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Being is Prior to Non-Being

- Non-being is the contradiction of being
- Logically, non-being is subsequent to being, as its denial, which involves “an irreducible mental act”
- But denying being is only denying that being is “this or that,” not that it is
- “Negation can not touch the nucleus of the being of Being, which is absolute plenitude and entire positivity”

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Can Something Come from Nothing?

- Temporally, being is prior to nothing
- Nothing is always a denial of something, and so is the denial of being as a whole
- If we tried to think of nothing before being, we would therefore fail: it would be totally indeterminate
- The same holds if being were to disappear
- Nothingness has only a borrowed existence

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Heidegger's Conception of Nothingness

- Being and nothing are in tension with each other, producing the real
- Being is not treated as a universal
- The correlate of being, nothing, is not in the province of the understanding
- Human attitudes, especially *Angst*, make possible an encounter with nothingness

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Transcendence of Being

- In *Angst*, beings as a whole slip away
- This allows us to understand them as beings, and not nothing
- By "holding out into the nothing," *Dasein* transcends being
- Human reality emerges from non-being
- The world is suspended in nothingness

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Criticisms of Heidegger

- Heidegger is correct that human reality emerges from non-being
- But how does emergence from non-being account for nihilating refusal?
- Not through transcendence: non-being is required for transcendence, a negating activity
- Nothingness relative to the world as a whole does not properly explain concrete negations

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Concrete Negations

- Simple, radical negations deny any being (x does not exist, etc.)
- They might be explained as contributing a piece of a universal nothingness
- But some beings contain non-being (e.g., distance)
- There is emptiness separating points A and B
- Negation cements the unity of the two in one *Gestalt* (figure)
- Universal nothingness does not explain absence, change, otherness, repulsion, regret: *négatités*

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The Origin of Nothingness

- Nothingness must inhabit the heart of being "like a worm" to account for *négatités*
- But it cannot be produced by being, which a "full positivity"
- Nor can it be produced by itself by "nihilation," because it *is not*
- So there has to be a being which brings nothing to being
- The nothingness which it brings must be its own

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The Nihilating Being

- For a questioning being, there is always the possibility of a “yes” or a “no” answer
- This possibility requires dissociation from the causality of being
- Questioning requires independence from the causal order
- This is a nihilation of himself, in order to make a space for what causally cannot be
- Man is such a being who causes nothingness to arise in being

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Explaining *Négatités*

- All transcendent realities are so only in relation to human reality
- They originate from a human act, expectation, or project
- They are at the basis of Heideggerian instrumentalities
- What is the being of man, such that nothingness comes to being through him?

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Freedom

- Man cannot annihilate being, but only modify his relation to being
- In so doing, man can put himself out of reach of the being
- “It cannot act on him, for he has retired *beyond a nothingness*”
- The Stoics and Descartes called this freedom

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Existence and Essence

- With non-human beings, essence precedes existence
- Human freedom precedes essence
- Freedom and human reality are inseparable
- Humans can detach themselves from reality (Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger)
- They can “secrete nothingness” to create a distance even from their past

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Consciousness of Freedom

- We are conscious of freedom in anguish
- Freedom is in question for itself in anguish
- Kierkegaard understood that anguish is directed at one’s self
- Sartre: throwing myself over the cliff
- Heidegger understood that anguish is apprehension of nothingness
- The two views can be combined

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Anguish in the Face of the Future

- I can overcome fear by substituting my own possibilities for those that might cause harm
- But I recognize that my possibilities are not determined: I might cause the harm myself
- I am conscious of being my own future
- The self I am depends on the self I am not yet
- Anguish can be quelled by indecision, which calls for decision (I pull myself back from the brink)

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Anguish in the Face of the Past

- A gambler has resolved to stop gambling, but is pulled toward it at the gambling table
- He realizes the inefficacy of his resolution
- Determinism is ruptured by nothingness
- The resolution must be freely re-made
- The gambler is in the grips of anguish, because he at once is and is not the resolution that he made in the past

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Motives

- There is a gap between motives and action
- This gap is a nothing
- The ineffectiveness of motives makes freedom possible, not *vice-versa*
- We cannot describe the nothing (it is not), but it is made-to-be by the human being relating to himself
- Motives are only appearances for consciousness, which posits them

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Immanence and Transcendence

- The nothing which is a condition for human freedom is “transcendence in immanence”
- It is immanent in the sense of being subjective, apprehended as *mine*
- It is transcendence in the sense that points beyond the present situation, to a self that does not exist now but exists in the past or the future

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Anguish and Essence

- There is no “me” which takes on different states of consciousness
- The essence of man is determined by his history: “all that human reality apprehends in itself as *having been*”
- Nothingness separates us from our essence
- Anguish reveals this separation

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The Exigencies of Action

- If anxiousness manifests freedom, and freedom is the permanent structure of human reality, why is it exceptional?
- The possibility of interrupting my actions is cut off by the exigencies of carrying them through
- Non-reflective actions tend to crystallize into “a transcendent, relatively independent form”
- This is overcome only when we recognize that the permanent possibility of not carrying them through is what makes them possible

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Values

- Values are demands on our behavior
- The being of value is based on its exigency
- Freedom makes value exist as value
- Nothing justifies the adoption of values
- This creates anguish
- Also creating anguish is that every disclosure of values “puts them in question”

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Everyday Morality

- Everyday morality precludes ethical anguish
- The world presses itself on me immediately, and my freedom is secondary
- Bourgeois “respectability” does not come from contemplation of values, but is a given pattern of behavior
- “Values are sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass”

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Myself as Project

- Values are an amalgamation of the small things I do and “must” do in acting
- Concrete objects and activities act as “guard rails against anguish”
- When these come into question, the project that constitutes my being is put into doubt
- The consciousness of my freedom nihilates the “guard rails”
- There are then no longer any justifications or excuses for what I am

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Summary

“Anguish then is the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself. . . . It appears at the moment that I disengage myself from the world where I had been engaged In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself.” (*Essays in Existentialism*, 136-7)

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Flight

- The standard reaction to anguish is to flee it
- We flee anguish by taking refuge in psychological determinism
- This determinism is the basis of all excuses
- It tries to fill in the nothingness between past, present and future
- This is done by giving actions a kind of inertia
- In flight, I treat myself as a being-in-itself

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Consciousness of Freedom

- We intuit our freedom, and our flight from it is reflective
- So flight does not undermine the evidence of freedom
- Even “scientific” determinism is only given as an explanatory hypothesis, while acknowledging an immediate consciousness of freedom
- So we can try to overcome anguish by judging this consciousness to be an illusion

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Distraction

- We cannot overcome anguish by a judgment
- We attempt this through distraction
- We judge the possibility which is the completion of my project as a thing
- All other “possibilities” are treated as merely conceivable, belonging to someone else, and so they are not of interest to me

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The Flight to Essence

- Flight may be directed toward the past
- My essence is what I have been, and in flight I can identify it with what I am
- But I deny that my essence is itself determined, “implying my action as a circle implies its properties”
- So I say an act is free just in case it reflects my essence—I am like a little God—but an other
- Bergson disguises our anguish this way: the act flows from me like children from a father

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The Futility of Flight

- In order to hide anguish, we must already be acquainted with the fact that we have it
- Anguish, the intentional aim of anguish, the flight from anguish are all given in one consciousness
- So fleeing anguish is only a mode of being conscious of it
- “Thus anguish, properly speaking, can be neither hidden nor avoided”

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Bad Faith

- To flee anguish, we must be anguish
- In flight, anguish is nihilated
- I “decenter myself” by being and not being anguish
- The nihilation nihilates itself
- This attitude is bad faith
- In covering up nothingness, bad faith presupposes the nothingness it suppresses

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Ekstases

- ‘*Ekstasis*’ is from the Greek, meaning standing out from
- Consciousness is thrown into being-in-itself
- Consciousness is thrown into non-being
- To question being is not to be being-in-itself
- Non-being is the condition of transcendence
- So the problem of nothingness must be confronted

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Fundamental Nothingness

- We began with apprehension of the *négalités*
- These are explained by the nihilating activity of consciousness
- This in turn is explained by the nothingness of consciousness
- What must consciousness be to allow this?

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Bad Faith and Consciousness

- The key to understanding the nothingness of consciousness is bad faith
- Bad faith is a being-in-order-not-to-be
- It is instantaneous, unlike the transcendences of past and future
- How can we understand the nothingness of consciousness through bad faith?

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