

Representing Nothing(ness)

An interpretation of Severino's aporia of nothing*

FEDERICO PERELDA

Ca' Foscari University of Venice
federico.perelda@live.it

Carnap famously held the view that the only sensible interpretation of the word 'nothing' is as a negative existential quantifier. This view, virtually unquestioned for most of the Twentieth Century, has been taken to make hash of the millennial debate on the notion of nothingness. More recently, the view has been challenged on various grounds. Is 'nothing' ever a name? Referring to what? A predicative expression? A description? In this article I retrace Severino's considerations on this issue, illustrating how and why the notion of nothing is indeed peculiarly paradoxical.

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Nothing, Nothingness, Metaphysics, Severino, Paradox

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The concept of nothing, of non-being, has played a fundamental role in western philosophical thought since the very beginning with Parmenides. I do not propose to retrace the stages of this history; I rather limit myself to recalling that in recent times (with respect to Parmenides) Carnap argued that the concept of nothing (as well as all the other concepts of traditional metaphysics), should be banned, as they are nothing but the result of logical-linguistic misunderstandings: *nothing* is not a noun, a singular term, but only a quantifier. *I have said nothing* means that I have been silent, not that I have spoken of nothing. *Nothing* is the negation of the existential and universal quantifiers. This thesis is certainly not new; the logical-linguistic investigations of medieval philosophers had already amply highlighted this meaning of the term ‘nothing’ [cf. Ritter et al. 1984, entry ‘Nichts’]. Among them, it is worth recalling the acute considerations of Anselm of Chanterbury in the ‘Monologion’ (chap. 8 and 19) and in ‘The Fall of the Devil’ (chap. 10). Be that as it may, saying that *being* and *nothing* are quantifiers and not names can certainly help to prevent linguistic misunderstandings; but in itself it does not exclude these notions from the philosophical discourse, because it is also necessary to specify what quantifiers are. Carnap (1929, p. 74) seems to follow Frege in believing that *being* (and correspondingly *nothing*) mean second-level properties: they are properties of concepts, indicating whether their extension is empty or not (Frege 1892a, c, 1884). For Frege, and for Carnap, put crudely, to say that there are dromedaries means to affirm that the concept of dromedary has the property that its extension is not empty.

Carnap’s theses have enjoyed great consideration within analytic philosophy; however, in the most recent debate, a few years after the so-called ‘metaphysical turn’ of analytic thought, they have been downsized. That is: it is true that in many cases *nothing*, *nought* are quantifiers (like *something*, *everyone*, *many*, etc.), as happens in phrases such as: *I have seen nothing*, *I*

have done nothing, I want nothing, etc. However, there seem to be cases, to which I will return shortly, in which the word *nothing* has a meaning other than the merely quantificational, syncategorematic one (whatever it may be). For example, Priest (2014, 2019), Voltolini (2012), Simons (2020), Costantini (2020) have criticized Carnap's position, in some cases rehabilitating the reviled Heidegger from Carnap's attacks. Now, when *nothing* is not a quantifier, what is it? Is it a noun? Is it a predicative term? Maybe both? A definite description? Furthermore, given that there are multiple meanings of *nothing*, are they perhaps united by something, as well as by the linguistic expression? Is there perhaps an analogical connection between the meanings of *nothing*, just as there is one between the meanings of *being*, according to Aristotle?

Just to outline a taxonomy, also proposed by others (Voltolini, Costantini in this volume), the following can be said. If *nothingness* is a name, then either it is an empty name (Oliver-Smiley, 2013; Voltolini, 2015), or it denotes something, and in the latter case it denotes something either consistent (Jaquette, 2013, 2015) or inconsistent (Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017). Alternatively, *nothing* is a predicative expression, as in Heidegger's cryptic proposition: The nothing *noths*. Or it is a definite description: *that which noths, that is to say the entity that is not an entity, the entity different from each entity*.

It is worth noting that if the word *nothing* has only a quantificational meaning, then the word *being* also has it. This corresponds to the position of the Neopositivists, reaffirmed by Quine's statement, often cited as a slogan, according to which «to be is to be the value of a bound variable» (Quine, 1961, p. 15); which means that when we affirm that there is a certain something, we are affirming, more or less explicitly, that something in the domain of quantification has a certain characteristic. We are saying that some object has a certain property, not that something exists in an *absolute* sense. That is, when we say $\exists x Fx$ we say that at least one object of the domain has the characteristic F, that is, it is the case that an x is F, which corresponds to the existence not of an object, but of a certain state of affairs, of a truth-maker. Conversely, it should be noted that, even if it is no longer the case that that certain x is F, that x may very well continue to exist – unless the characteristic in question is substantial, essential; but the distinction between accidental and substantial characters is not recognized and expressed by the usual first-order logic, used when translating the utterances of everyday or philosophical language into a logically formalized language. In a certain sense, an existential statement resembles an

answer to a question, addressed to a certain number of people, such as: has anyone parked the car in front of the door? If someone answered *yes*, we could say that someone among us parked the car in front of the door, but we would not be talking about his existence in an absolute sense. And if no one answers, this does not mean that no one exists, but only that none of those present have parked the car in front of the door. If anything, a state of affairs, not an object of the domain of quantification, would not exist.

In fact, in order to capture the existence of entities in the absolute sense, a characteristic is used that should concern them *qua* entities: self-identity. For this reason, Russell and Whitehead use expressions such as $(x) x = x$, $\exists x x = x$ in the *Principia*. “In *Principia Mathematica*, the totality of things is defined as the class of all those *x*’s which are such that $x = x$ ” (Russell, 1959, p. 86). Now, although it is very reasonable that every existing or even possible object is at least identical to itself, one could object that existence is one thing, being self-identical is another. Apparently, Wittgenstein had a lot of resistance to identifying the two. He seems to affirm that pure existence is not expressible: the objects (of the domain) neither exist nor do not exist; they are, as it were, beyond existence, which instead concerns states of affairs, facts. Russell reports it, immediately after the passage quoted, narrating the anecdote that Wittgenstein in a conversation agreed to say that there are three spots of color on a sheet, but he denied that this would entail that there are three things.

There seem to be different notions of *nothing*. Kant (KrV A 292; 1998, p. 383) distinguishes four, on the basis of the German scholasticism (cf. Ritter et al. [1984], Col. 823-4). Or, perhaps, there are, so to speak, different procedures by which one arrives at the notion of nothing. Different senses, for the same concept (though as according to Frege *nothing* is a second-level concept, like that of *being*). On the one hand, there is *nothingness* as the absence of everything. One can imagine having a domain with a certain number of entities, and removing them, cancelling them, one after the other, until none is left. Nought is thus the absence of all things. One would be tempted to say that it is the empty class, but this does not seem fully correct, because the empty class, despite its emptiness, *is* something. Better to say that it is the emptiness of the empty class (see Dubois, 2013). Others have proposed to define it as a possible empty world (Simionato, 2017). Bergson (1911, ch. IV, p. 296 ff., in part. p. 304) offers a clear example of this notion of nothing. He affirms that *nothing* is understood as the «annihilation of all things» (p. 324), noting that in this way nothing is an even

richer concept than that of being (p. 311, 322), since it includes a reference to all (suppressed) things. In any case, it is for him a contradictory concept (ib. 324). Now, nothingness, understood as cancellation, corresponds to deprivation, lack. So, despite Bergson calling it *absolute naught* (p. 308), or *absolute nothing* (p. 321), it is more correctly the *nihil privativum*, the same to which, according to creationist theology, things before creation correspond (s. Ritter et al. [1984], col. 815 and *passim*). The tradition of Scholasticism (Aquinas, Scotus, etc.) distinguished the *privative* nothing, that is what the created things “were” before they were created (or after the world has been annihilated; that is the nothingness of possible things, when they are not yet, or no longer, actual), from the *negative* nothing, also called the *prohibitum, omnino nihil* (s. Ritter et al. [1984], col. 816), that in which the impossible, contradictory things consist. This distinction between *negative* nothing and *privative* nothing runs up from the medieval scholasticism to the German one of Baumgarten and Wolff, and underlies the Kantian distinctions mentioned above (Ritter et al. [1984], col. 815).

Another conception of nothingness seems to arise, not by subtracting or by deleting things, but by considering their totality. This is Nothing(ness) construed as that which is outside of Being, as other than anything that exists. Let’s try to follow this second (or third) sense of nothing. Being is the totality of what (there) is. This definition seems to be circular, because the verb *to be* occurs both in the *definiendum* and in the *definiens: to be... is*. This difficulty could be solved by specifying that the second occurrence of the verb *to be* (‘the totality of what *is*’) is predicative, so that the *definiens* indicates the totality of what is subject to predication; which leads back to the idea that *to be* is to be the value of a bound variable. In this way, being is the totality of the unrestricted domain of quantification, the broader domain of the variable. However, there is a lively debate on whether there is an unrestricted domain of quantification, known as the question of absolute generality (see Rayo, & Uzquiano 2006). Already Aristotle, while calling his philosophy first the science of being qua being, denied that being is a genus. There are many skeptical arguments, in the contemporary debate, against the possibility of absolute general quantification (they have been identified in the following: 1) indefinite extensibility, 2) the All-in-one principle, 3) the argument from reconceptualization 4) the argument from semantic indeterminacy, 5) The argument from sortal restriction; see. Rayo & Uzquiano 2006a). Overall, they can be divided, put crudley, into two groups: one kind of argument is grounded on considerations of indefinite extensibility and the open-ended character

of mathematical concepts and structures; the other is based on the relativity of ontology to a conceptual framework. Clearly, the discussion I am about to develop assumes that none of these skeptical arguments against the notion of totality is decisive.

Now, nothingness, in the sense introduced above, is non-being, conceived as that which is outside of being. But there is nothing that is outside of being. The nothingness, therefore, does not exist, that is, there is nothing that is nothing. All this is somewhat convoluted; yet does it make the concept of nothing even paradoxical? It does not seem paradoxical, any more than the concept of chimera seems to be. In fact, there is not even anything that is a chimera (in concrete reality), although the concept of chimera certainly exists. Why, then, would it be paradoxical to say that 'nothing is not', when it would not be paradoxical to say that the chimera does not exist? The concepts of nothing and of chimera exist, even though nothing fall under them (their extension is empty). To face the paradox of nothing it is necessary to carry out some reflection, especially one wants to arrive at a general answer that can be valid independently of specific positions in ontology or in the philosophy of language.

A first answer applies to positions such as Meinong's: nothingness is at least an object of thought, so it is an object. Furthermore, in order to say that something does not exist (concretely), it is necessary to allow that it is something, what one is talking about. Therefore nothingness is something; not just the concept of nothing, but nothing itself. Priest, Casati-Fujikawa and others follow this path. Given the contradictory results they arrive at, which imply adherence to dialetheism, one can also draw the opposite conclusion, namely that all this is one more reason not to be Meinongian.

Another answer, Severino's answer, is centred in a general premise: entities are determinate, that is their identity implies mutual difference. Being, in other words, is not the indeterminate being of which Parmenides speaks or of which Hegel speaks at the beginning of his *Science of logic* («*Being, pure being* – without further determination. In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly») [Hegel 2010, p. 59]). Absolute monism is untenable (which is precisely what Hegel argues with the first triad). Rather, being is determinate; that is, what exists are entities distinct from each other.

Now, it could be said that *otherness* is a propositional function, *x is different from y*, which is saturated by things, and which gives rise to true

propositions when the variables take on different values; es. *the table is not the chair*. However, in addition to being different, things share some characteristics. There are tables and chairs. The set of tables includes the tables and excludes chairs and everything else; but in turn it is a subset of a larger genus: pieces of furniture, which excludes other things, and so on. Each grouping of entities includes one or more things and excludes others. The point is: what happens when one considers the universal grouping, the set of all things, taken together for the fact that, despite their differences, they are things, entities? How is this grouping determinate? Of course, it is internally determinate, in the sense that it contains the most diverse things. But is it externally determinate? Every entity is defined negatively, if it is accepted that *omnis determinatio negatio est*, that every determination is also a negation. And therefore also the totality of things is defined negatively with respect to its other. But if the totality includes everything, there is nothing else besides it.

The totality of all things, the being, contains everything: nothing is outside it. In this regard it may be useful to recall what Russell (1918, p. 502-3) said about the existence of general facts and the universal quantifier, namely that the notion of *all* is more than a simple list of atomic facts. Similarly, once the members of the domain of quantification throughout the universe are individually listed (or chronicled, as Russell said), it must be added that they are *all*, that is, there is nothing else. Nothing else in absolute, that is, there is nothing in the most absolute way, which is not included in that whole. This delineates the further notion of nothing. This argument can be considered Severino's answer to Carnap's thesis that *nothing* is a quantifier. Severino partially agrees, but replies (I am adapting his argument) that when we say that there is nothing that exceeds the unrestricted domain of quantification, we make use of the notion, of the predicate *exceeding the unrestricted domain of quantification*, which seems to delineate the complementary class to that of the whole. Of course, it is said that that predicate is not satisfied by anything, that is, that the complementary class is empty. But the class and the relative predicate that characterizes it exist, and they express precisely the notion of nothing, of nothingness.

The aporia of nothingness is not caused by mere verbal suggestion. Suppose that instead of saying "Beyond, outside being there is nothing", we were to say "There is no positive that lies outside the totality of the positive"; or, in symbols: " $\neg (\exists x). x$ is outside the to-

tality of the positive” (where variable x can assume any positive value). What would still remain to be clarified is the meaning of that “outside the totality of the positive” which is precisely nothing, and whose presence gives rise to the aporia. [...] [I]n the logical proposition “ $\neg (\exists x). x$ is outside...”, Carnap does not distinguish the logical situation in which variable x assumes a limited number of positive values (whereby that with respect to which x is “outside”, “beyond”, is a limited dimension of the positive), from the logical situation in which – as mentioned above – x can assume *all* positive values (whereby that with respect to which x is “outside” is the very totality of the positive). It is precisely in this latter case that nothingness (what is outside the whole) *manifests itself*, insofar as in the proposition “ $\neg (\exists x). x$ is outside the totality of the positive” the meaning “outside the totality of the positive” manifests itself. (Severino 1958, here § 13, c; here, p. 26)

With this argument, Severino introduces the non-quantificational, non-synchategorematic notion of nothing. In this case, *outside the totality of the positive* describes an entity that is not an entity, that is, something contradictory, as Carnap himself points out to be the case, if nothingness were not a quantifier (Carnap, 1932, p. 71).

The two previously distinct senses of nothing (such as the absence of everything vs. what is different from every being) therefore converge in the basic meaning: non-being, absolute nothingness. In both cases the “absolute deprivation of being” (in this volume, p. 13, note 2) refers to the totality: “in both meanings of the term ‘null’, the position of the null implies the position of the totality of the positive” (ib., p. 23 note 3). The nothingness, however it is indicated – as *nihil privativum* or as the other from being, or even as what tradition indicated as the *nihil negativum*, that is the impossible – is in any case the total absence of anything. This is a paradoxical concept for Severino. Why?

Nothing is at least a concept. But what is its quiddity? The absence of everything. If we call *content* (of thought) what is thought or understood, and which constitutes the quiddity of a concept, then the content of the nothingness is the absence of any content. Severino faces the paradox in these terms:

the meaning “nothingness” is self-contradictory, which is to say a contradiction, it is being meaningful as a contradiction: the very contradiction whereby the positivity of this meaningfulness is con-

tradicted by the absolute negativity of the meaningful content. (§ 6, in this volume pp. 14-5)

The problem also arises when we use the more technical notion of *intension*, understood as a function that associates possible worlds with extensions of linguistic expressions (nouns, predicates, sentences). For instance, the intension of the predicate 'red' associates that predicate with a certain class of things in the actual world, but with another class, differing in extension from, in another possible world where, for instance, fire extinguishers are green rather than red and grass is red rather than green. The question is: what is the intension of nothing? In the case of *nothing* the problem is that a world in which nothing exists is not a world, neither possible nor actual. The function, then, has no argument and therefore cannot even have a range. This is true regardless of the specific conception of what possible worlds are. If one is a realist, à la Lewis, obviously there is no empty world: a world without entities is not a world. Conversely, if one believes that a possible world is a coherent and maximal conjunction of propositions, it might seem, at first glance, that the possible empty world exists: it is the world that consists of the maximal conjunction of all negative existential propositions. But they must really all be, and therefore among them there will also be that proposition which states that all these propositions do not exist. Yet, the proposition that affirms that there are no propositions is paradoxical, since it negates its own semantic conditions. Therefore, that world, being a contradictory world, is not a possible world at all. Of course, one could apply the distinction between what is true *in* a world and *at* a world, and argue that the possible empty world is describable from the point of view of the current, non-empty world, avoiding the paradox. And yet, what would the situation be like if that possible empty world were actualized? The same paradox can also be seen in another, in another, semantic way, so to speak: the concept of nothing would be satisfied if nothing existed, and therefore it would be satisfied if that very same concept did not exist either.

This precisely leads us to think that there is a contradiction between nothingness being a concept and nothingness having no quiddity. Severino understands this contradiction as existing between two moments or aspects of that meaning. Some explanation is needed. For him, each entity is made up of two moments: formal being, that is, the fact of being, and the specificity of what it is. (see Severino, in this volume, p. 14, § 6). This conception has been assimilated to the distinction between essence and ex-

istence (Simionato, in this volume). In my opinion, it is better understood if we consider what for Severino is the great innovation in ontology after Parmenides, that is, the doctrine of Plato's Sophist of the being of non-being. For this reason, I now make a brief excursus in which I expose Severino's reconstruction of that passage. With Parmenides' conception of being, it is impossible to say that this computer is or exists, since the meaning 'computer' is not synonymous with the meaning 'being'. If it is not synonymous, then 'computer', whatever it means, means something other than 'being', and therefore means what is not being, that is 'non-being'. It follows that to say that *the computer is* means that *non-being is*, which is a contradiction. Plato, with the well-known patricide, notes that although 'computer' does not mean 'being', it does not mean the opposite of 'being' either. So, if the contents, the meanings 'computer' and 'being' are different but not opposit, their synthesis is not contradictory. And therefore we can affirm the being of the computer, that is, that the computer is or exists. This synthesis is the constitution of every determination, of every entity whether abstract or concrete, it doesn't matter: the synthesis between the general and abstract meaning of 'being', and the specific meaning of the thing considered: 'computer', 'home', etc.

Plato therefore manages to show that "being" must no longer be understood as pure Parmenidean being [...] but as the synthesis between pure being and determinations. For Parmenides, only pure being is; Plato shows that [...] every determination (that is, everything "different" from pure being) is; "Being" therefore means what is, that is, any determination-which-is. [...] [T]he problem of establishing that which is identical in the totality of all things (the problem that arises together with philosophy [i.e. the thought of the totality of beings]) reaches [...] its definitive solution. What is identical in every "thing" is precisely its being a determination-which-is; where both the "determination", both its "being" and their synthesis are the intelligible content of the conceptual thought with which philosophy addresses the Whole. From Plato onwards the entity is precisely this synthesis between the something and its being. (Severino 1984, pp. 96-7)

If nothingness is a concept (whose genesis is at least twofold: as the absence of everything, or as the otherness with respect to everything), it is a determination-that-is. There is no doubt that it is; but what it is, its quiddity, is precisely the absence of any determination: pure nothingness. The paradox

of nothing consists in the contradiction between the fact that the meaning “nothingness”, just like any other meaning, is something, exists, and its specific meaning, that is the quiddity of being the absence of any meaning.

I would like to use a philosophical simile. For Descartes the ideas of our mind are “like pictures or images” (*Meditations on First Philosophy, Third Meditation*): they represent something, which may or may not exist in the external world. Then, a painting has, so to speak, two components: the material component of which it is made, that is the canvas, the pigment, etc., and what is represented by the material support. Descartes calls the first component the *formal reality* of an idea, and the second its *objective reality* (in the sense that it is the object of thinking). As regards the first aspect, all ideas are equal: they are affections of thought. In the metaphor, all the paintings are similar: they consist of canvas and pigment. Conversely, ideas differ in their objective reality, in what they represent; and this also applies to paintings. That said, we can imagine a painting that faithfully portrays a landscape or a person; or we can imagine a fantasy painting or a very abstract painting. In any case, it represents something. But what would a representation look like representing nothing? Or, what should a painter paint if he were asked to represent not a landscape or a person, real or fictional, it doesn’t matter, but the nothingness itself? It should certainly be a painting, that is, there would be the material support; but whatever semblance it had, it would be, as it is something, different from nothing, because this is the absence of everything.

For Severino there is a contradiction between the two aspects that make up the meaning ‘nothing’: between its representational nature, that is, having a quiddity, and the absence of any content, of any quiddity. Severino calls the fact that nothingness is something the moment of positive meaningfulness; and he calls the absence of content the nothingness moment. This contradiction is, according to Severino, an external contradiction between the two aspects:

The contradiction of not-being-that-is, therefore, is not internal to the meaning “nothing” (or to the meaning “being”, which is the being of nothing); but lies between the meaning “nothing” and being, or the positivity of this meaning. The positivity of meaningfulness, in other words, is in contradiction with the very content of the meaningfulness, which is precisely meaningful as absolute negativity. (§ 5, in this volume p. 14)

Then there are further complications or paradoxes that according to Severino arise when a moment of meaning ‘nothing’ is considered independently of the other. However, I leave out these paradoxical aspects, not because they are not interesting in themselves, but because they are solvable contradictions, precisely by relating the two moments to each other. The point is: but what is the relationship between these two moments, exactly? Simionato (in this volume) proposes the image of the relationship between container and content. He is probably right in believing that that relationship is not entirely clear, since, on the one hand, the contradiction is said to be external and therefore between terms that seem to be independent from each other; but, on the other hand, it is repeatedly said by Severino that the two terms are inseparable, so that their relationship seems to be anything but external.

A fundamental point is that for Severino the contradiction of nothing is inevitable: precisely when one has rightly understood what nothing is (and one must understand it by understanding the notion of being), one has also understood that it is a contradiction. Does this mean that there are contradictory objects? No, it means that it is inevitable to contradict oneself, for Severino, that is, that the nothingness is a contradictory concept. But even that of a square circle is! So, what difference is there between the contradiction that takes place when we affirm that something is a square and circular, and therefore the predicate “squared circle” is delineated, and the contradiction that takes place with the concept of nothing? In my opinion, the difference is that the concept of a squared circle, or of any other contradiction, is in any case deriving from a logical conjunction, and therefore from a complex notion. Conversely, the contradiction that takes place with the notion of nothingness arises with a simple notion, with a single concept.

Conclusion

The question of nothing has troubled philosophers for millennia. When an issue is so thorny and long-lasting, one can think either that at the base there is a deeply rooted error, difficult or impossible to amend (as is the case of metaphysics according to Kant), or that there is a profound underlying question. Carnap was of the first opinion, arguing that the concept of nothing has no philosophical value. Severino, on the other hand – cu-

riously anticipating some orientations of contemporary analytical metaphysics – considered it a fundamental concept of ontology, recognizing however its essentially paradoxical nature.

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