Nothingness and ineffability

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The present work deals with the contemporary debate about the question of nothingness, especially focusing on Emanuele Severino's solution (1981) to the related aporia. After an overview of the main accounts of nothingness (§1), I argue that they seem to have difficulties to dispel the classic aporia of nothingness (§2). Then I recall the account of nothingness by Emanuele Severino (1981; 2013) and the solution he proposed to the puzzle of nothingness (§3). Despite the criticism against it (§4), I argue that the solution by Severino could still be the most promising if we revamped his account within the question of ineffability and the so-called "apophaticism" (§5). To this end, first I compare Severino's solution with Chien-Hsing Ho's solution (2006) to the so-called paradox of ineffability (§6). Secondly (§7), I underpin Severino's account of nothingness by appealing to the notion of conceptual ineffability by Shaw (2013) and the relation of entailment between an ineffable insight and the effable consequences such an insight might generate, as suggested by Kukla (2005). The outcome is a revamped account of nothingness that could reply to some of the main objections against the solution by Severino (§8), whilst leaving some questions open (§9).

Keywords:
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Part I: an overview of the contemporary debate about nothingness

1. Quantificational, non-quantificational and hybrid accounts of nothingness

From at least the time of Parmenides, 'nothing' (or 'nothingness') was also used as a noun phrase. That gave rise to the so-called "aporia" of nothingness, i.e., the fact that we can *say* and *think* what is absolute *unsayable* and *unthinkable*: the absolute non-being. Plato notoriously tried to solve the Parmenidean puzzle of nothingness, distinguishing between 'nothingness' as absolute non-being (*enantion*) and 'nothingness' as different-being (*heteron*)[1]. After that, Plato's strategy has been assumed the best way to disentangle the phrase 'nothing(ness)' yet Plato probably didn't consider his own strategy a solution; rather, he considered it a way to escape from the puzzling question about nothingness that was implicitly maintained[2]. Indeed, as Severino (1981, 2013) notes, Plato still acknowledges the Parmenidean unsayability or unspeakability and the unthinkability of nothingness as absolute non-being (*enantion*), whereas he (correctly) acknowledges that non-being as difference (*heteron*) can be said and thought because, e.g., the proposition <*x* is not *y*> does not mean that *x* is identical to nothingness. Rather, it means that *x* is different from *y*.

The present work deals with the contemporary debate about the question of nothingness, especially focusing on Emanuele Severino's solution to the related aporia. Indeed, Severino developed a very appealing strategy to treat the phrase 'nothingness' (see in particular Severino 1981, ch. IV): I will show later that his approach to the question of nothingness

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1   See *Sophist* 237b- 258e
2   See Severino (1981), chapter IV.

can still be one of the most promising in the current debate, although some adjustments of Severino's account may be desirable to reply to the main objections against it (see §§6-8).

The starting point of the contemporary debate about nothingness is the well-known Carnap's criticism against Heideggerian use of 'Nothing(ness)'. From this crucial point, at least three main kinds of accounts have arisen. I would call them: quantificational, non-quantificational and hybrid accounts of nothingness, respectively.

Quantificational approach

It consists of treating any occurrence of 'nothing', 'nothingness', 'non-being', and similar phrases, as quantifier phrases. All those phrases *are not* singular terms: we can *fully* replace them with (negative) quantifier phrases with *no loss of meaning*. The now classic example is Carnap's treatment of some Heideggerian sentences. According to Carnap (1932), those sentences where the phrase 'nothingness' (and the like) occurs are not speaking about real philosophical topics because they

> [are] simply based on the mistake of employing the word "nothing" as a noun, because it is customary in ordinary language to use it in this form in order to construct a negative existential statement [...] In a correct language, on the other hand, it is not a particular name, but a certain logical form of the sentence that serves this purpose. (1932, p. 70)

Here, Carnap is reading the well-known passage by Heidegger [1929]

> What is to be investigated is being only and—nothing else; being alone and further—*nothing*; solely being, and beyond being—*nothing. What about this Nothing? . . . Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e. the Negation, exists?* Or is it the other way around? *Does Negation and the Not exist only because the Nothing exists? . . .* We assert: *the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation. . . .* Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing. . .? We know the Nothing. . . . *Anxiety reveals the Nothing. . . .* That for which and because of which we were anxious was 'really'—nothing. Indeed: the Nothing itself—as such—was present. . . . *What about*

this Nothing?—The Nothing itself nothings. (Selected passages from Heidegger's work, quoted by Carnap 1932, p. 69)

Therefore, according to Carnap, a sentence like

(1) The Nothing is outside
should be paraphrased as follows:

(1*) There is nothing (does not exist anything) which is outside
i.e.,

(1**) ¬∃ x .Ou(x) [where Ou is the predicate '*...is outside*']

So, Carnap admits the use of 'nothing' just as a (negative) quantifier phrase, whereas Heidegger seems to use it (also) as a noun phrase[3].
    Besides, the author of *What is Metaphysics?* – as Carnap notes – cannot be defended by stating that he is using that word by introducing a special meaning:

> The first sentence of the quotation at the beginning of this section proves that this interpretation is not possible. The combination of "only" and "nothing else" shows unmistakably that the word "nothing" here has the usual meaning of a logical particle that serves for the formulation of a negative existential statement (Carnap, 1932, p. 71).

Indeed, "being only and *nothing* else" would prove that Heidegger is thinking of the negation of something since "what is investigated" is included in the domain of (all) entities and beyond it *there are no entities at all*: 'nothing' is (at least) implicitly used as a negative quantifier. There is an additional attack by Carnap: even if we admitted 'nothing' as a noun phrase that denotes an object, we could not affirm, as Heidegger seems to do, that Nothing exists without falling into a blatant contradiction, because "the existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition" (1932, p.71), since Heidegger should not assign the property of *being* to the alleged object Nothing, that is, an object beyond the domain

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3   Similarly, 'not' should be used just as logical connective; it cannot be used as a noun.

of all entities, as the German philosopher seems to affirm when he considers it exactly beyond being. Finally, Carnap criticizes the use of the verb 'to nothing' because it is completely invented by Heidegger without any link to a meaningful word.

Non-quantificational approach

Priest (2002, 2014) and Voltolini (2012, 2015) have tried to overcome the critic of Carnap in order to reconsider more deeply Heidegger's thesis, adopting very interesting strategies that I am going to recall.

Priest (2002) argues that 'nothing' can be used not only as a quantifier but also as a substantive.

> 'Nothing' can be used as a substantive. If this is not clear, merely ponder the sentence 'Heidegger and Hegel both talked about nothing, but they made different claims about it'. 'Nothing' cannot be a quantifier here. Or consider the sentence:
>
> (*) God brought the universe into being out of nothing.
>
> This means that God arranged for nothingness to give way to the universe. In (*) 'nothing' cannot be parsed as a quantifier. If we do so, we obtain: For no x did God bring the universe into existence out of x. And whilst no doubt this is true if God brought the universe into existence out of nothing, it is equally true if the universe has existed for all time: if it was not brought into existence at a time, it was not brought into existence *out of* anything. And the eternal existence of the universe is, in part, what (*) is denying. (p. 241)

So, what does the phrase 'nothing' mean when it cannot be reduced to a quantifier phrase like in (1**)? Priest (2002, 2014a; 2014b) offers the follow reply: **nothing**[4] is the absence of all things (absolutely nothing).

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4 Following Priest (2014a, 2014b)'s device, I write 'nothing' in boldface (**nothing**) when I use 'nothing' in order to point out its difference from 'nothing' as quantifier phrase.

Therefore, it is also essentially related to a quantifier since it is *no entity*, *no object* but it cannot be considered *only* a quantifier: *it is an object* that is the absence of all objects. So – Priest concludes – **nothing** is a contradictory object: "it both is and is not an object; it both is and is not something" (2014a, p. 7). Then Priest (2014a) links this topic to non-existent objects and mereology in order to offer an account of **nothing**. Indeed, according to Priest (2014a), there are existent objects and non-existent objects; he assumes that 'to exist' means 'to have the potential to enter into causal interactions' (2014a, p. 146). Since **nothing** is the absence of all things, it is a non-existent object because it could not enter into causal interactions. Mereology offers us a chance to establish what **nothing** is:

> What could nothingness be? An obvious answer is that it is the fusion of the empty set [...]. **Nothing** is what you get when you fuse no things. There is nothing in the empty set, so **nothing** is absolute absence: the absence of all objects, as one would expect. (2014a, p.152)

Certainly, Priest can propose this strategy since **nothing** is nothing, and the "content" of the empty set is exactly no thing at all. The question is whether one can obtain a mereological fusion when one considers the members of the empty set, i.e., no members at all! Priest assumes the following defining characterisation for a mereological fusion: every collection of objects has a mereological fusion if its members are not a disparate bunch[5]. The notion of disparate bunch refers to a bunch in which some members fail to "cohere" with others, as, for example, a bunch composed by the roof of my house, a flower in Central Park and a coin in my pocket. Certainly, it is quite difficult to find a good criterion for distinguishing a disparate bunch from a coherent one; anyway, this problem does not undermine Priest's account because «the members of the empty set are not a disparate collection; it has no members which fail to cohere with others – whatever that means. The members are all as intimately connected as one might wish!» (2014a, p. 152)

Priest's strategy could give us a solution to the puzzles of the empty set. The empty set existentially depends on the object **nothing**. The empty set can be distinguished from any individual because it cannot be con-

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5   See Priest 2014a, pp.152ff.

sidered just memberless: the empty set includes *only* **nothing**, i.e., the fusion of no things. Priest (2014a) argues that the empty fusion is a part of everything (p. 153) so it is also a part of any individual. However, the empty set is different from any individual since it is a set that includes only empty fusion.

According to Voltolini (2015), the well-known Heidegger's sentence

(2) The nothing nothings [*Das Nicht nichtet*]

> may be read in a logically correct way [...]. So, once [...] [«The nothing nothings»] is *appropriately* understood, there is no problem with its logical form. Moreover, it will be claimed that the predicate "nothings" is definitely meaningful. (Voltolini 2015, p. 20).

I am going to focus on the main points of Voltolini's article. First, Voltolini's strategy is represented by the treatment of 'nothing' as a definite description ('the nothing') that should be eliminated by Russellian strategy.[6] To this end, Voltolini introduces the property of *being a thing such that there is no thing that is identical with that thing*, i.e., $\lambda x((\sim\exists y)(y{=}x))$ (2015, p. 23); consequently, 'the nothing' can be taken to mean the same as 'the thing that is identical with no thing' (*viz.* 'the thing such that there exists no thing that is identical with it').

By means of the Russellian elimination of definite descriptions, (2)

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6   Russell's strategy is well known. Consider, for example, a sentence like "the present King of France is bald". According to Russell, it should be spelled out in the following way:
(R1) At least one person is presently King of France;
And
(R2) At most one person is presently King of France
And
(R3) Whoever is presently King of France is bald.
In the case of "(The) nothing nothings", the paraphrase is the following:
(V1) At least one thing is such that there exists no entity that is identical to it
And
(V2) At most one thing is such that there exists no entity that is identical to it
And
(V3) Whatever is such a thing, it nothings

can be paraphrased as:

(2*) $(\exists x)((\sim\exists y)(y=x) \land (\forall z)((\sim\exists y)(y=z) \to (z=x)) \land Nx)$

> where the quantifying purpose served by 'nothing' is given by the *second* existential quantifier - ∃y - in the formalized sentence, the quantifier contained in the predicate by means of which the definite description 'the nothing' is eliminated away. (Voltolini 2015, p. 24)

Secondly, Voltolini argues that the above-mentioned definite description could have a Russellian denotation only if such a denotation was an impossible object (therefore only in an ontology that allows *impossibilia*). According to Voltolini, the thing that is identical to no thing is an impossible entity because only an impossible object could instantiate the property $\lambda x((\sim\exists y)(y=x))$. Indeed, each object is self-identical, but this object cannot be identical to itself because it cannot be identical to anything. However, as an entity, it is at least identical to itself. Therefore,

> one such entity will be something that is made impossible precisely by the fact that it instantiates not only the property of *being identical with nothing*, but also, like any other entity whatsoever, the property of *being identical with something*. (Voltolini 2015, p.24).

Appealing to impossible objects induces Voltolini to review his treatment of 'nothing' to reply to the objection according to which 'nothing' could not have a denotation since there is no object that could instantiate the property $\lambda x((\sim\exists y)(y=x))$. To this end, he uses a sort of Meinongian strategy (2015, p.29 ff). Let us consider, for example, an impossible object as a square-non-square. It is a thing such that *it is a square and it is a non-square* rather than a thing such that it is a square and it is not a square. Following this strategy, 'nothing' as a definite description should denote *a thing that is both identical with something and not-(identical with something)*, rather than a thing according to which there is no thing that is identical to it and there is something that is identical to it. Since the property of *being not-(identical with something)* is the property of *being not identical to each thing*, i.e., $\lambda x((\forall y)(y\neq x))$, we should read (2) as follows:

(2**) $(\exists x)((\forall y)(y\neq x) \land (\forall z)((\forall y)(y\neq z) \to (z=x)) \land Nx)$

Since this thing is at the same time non identical to everything but it is identical to something, it is an impossible object…and this thing "nothing" (*nichtet*)! According to Voltolini (2015, p. 35), a good way to read the predicate "nothings" (*nichtet*) is the following: '*x* is such that every *y* is not identical to it'; therefore:

(2***) $(\exists x)((\forall y)(y{\neq}x) \wedge (\forall z)((\forall y)(y{\neq}z) \rightarrow (z{=}x)) \wedge (\forall y)(y{\neq}x))$

So, the controversial sentence "The nothing nothings" could be simply interpreted in this way: the thing such that everything is not identical to it (i.e., the nothing) is such that each thing is not identical to it (i.e., it *nothings*). As Voltolini notes, this reading of Heidegger's sentence seems very trivial; however, he also proposes considering it in a more interesting way: «insofar as the thing that is non-identical with everything is no *possible* thing, it evaporates from the only reality that counts—the subdomain of *possibilia* — it nullifies itself» (Voltolini 2015, p. 36).

Hybrid approach

The aim of this section is to recall two accounts of nothingness that I think we can name "hybrid". Indeed, they combine a quantificational with a non-quantificational approach, although starting from two different backgrounds. The first has been developed by Oliver and Smiley in their 2013 work; the second comes from Lewis (1986) and Van Inwagen (1996). To be sure, there would be a third hybrid account of nothingness, that by Severino (1981), but I will introduce it in a dedicated section (see §3).

Oliver and Smiley (2013) offer another alternative to Carnap's strategy. They propose to distinguish (the use of) 'nothing' as a quantifier from (the use of) 'nothing' as a singular term. 'Nothing' as a singular term – they say – is an *empty* term, i.e., a term that fails to refer to anything. To this end, they introduce the empty term 'zilch', a term such that

> [it] is empty as a matter of logical necessity. Any logically unsatisfiable condition will do to define it via description. […] With an eye on formalization, we opt for 'the non self-identical thing' $[x : x{\neq}x]$ (2013, p. 602).

Since everything is self-identical, 'zilch' does not denote anything, not even an impossible object. One should note that the self-identity of 'zilch' does not contradict the non-self-identity of the non-self-identical thing that 'zilch' denotes. The ancient puzzle of nothing(ness) can be solved by stating that the empty term that denotes the non-self-identical thing is identical to itself without undermining the non-self-identity of the denoted thing (and I would point out that a proposition like <'zilch' denotes the non-self-identical thing> simply means that 'zilch' does not denote anything, i.e., it is an empty term).

Oliver-Smiley's account seems to be a hybrid approach to nothingness because on one hand it provides non-quantificational treatment of the phrases 'nothing' or 'nothingness': these can be read as the singular empty term 'zilch'; but on the other hand, what 'zilch' denotes is no entity at all: 'zilch' does not pick up any object at all and this fact needs to be exactly treated by means of a quantificational approach *a la* Carnap.

Let's now pass to the possible worlds' strategy to account for nothingness. Possible worlds are primarily used to account for modality.

> Philosophers typically recognize four central and interrelated *cases* of modality: possibility (can, might, may, could); impossibility (cannot, could not, must not); necessity (must, has to be, could not be otherwise); and contingency (maybe and maybe not; might have been and might not have been, could have been otherwise). (Divers 2002, p. 3)

Through the possible worlds-approach, one can understand claims about possibility, impossibility, necessity and contingency as:

(P) It is possible that A if and only if there is a (possible) world in which A is true
(I)   It is impossible that A if and only if there is no (possible) world in which A is true
(N) It is necessary that A if and only if A is true in every (possible) world
(C) It is contingent that A if and only if A is true/false in the actual world but there is some other possible world where it is false/true.

For the sake of this brief overview, I assume the following general definition of a possible world: an entity w is a world if and only if w represents a maximal consistent situation according to which things could be.

The metaphysical question about possible worlds deals with the question about what the possible worlds are. Generally, there are three conceptions of a possible world: *concretism*, *abstractionism* and *combinatorialism*[7].

Concretism is mainly based on Lewis' strong modal realism. According to Lewis (1986), a possible world is a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things: «An individual x is a world *if and only if* any parts of x are spatiotemporally related to each other, and anything spatiotemporally related to any part of x is itself a part of x» (See Divers, 2002, p. 46). Therefore, a world is a *concrete* object, i.e., – broadly speaking – a physical object, composed by – say – physical parts[8].

According to abstractionism, worlds are maximal consistent ways according to which things could be, i.e., they are total consistent situations, or they represent total consistent situations. Unlike concretism, the abstractionist's world is an abstract entity. Menzel (2016) usefully summarizes the basic intuitions of this approach as follows:

> [Situations] are *states* or *conditions*, of varying detail and complexity, that a concrete world could be in — they are *ways* that things, as a whole, could be. […] Roughly speaking, then, a possible world for an abstractionist is the *limit* of such a "process" of consistently extending and adding detail to some initial state of the world; it is a *total* way things could be, a consistent state of the world that settles every possibility; a consistent state to which no further detail could be added without rendering it inconsistent (2016, §2.2)

Finally, combinatorialism is a term referring to those accounts of possible world according to which a world is just the "re-combination, or re-arrangements, of certain metaphysical simples" (Menzel 2016), where these simples are: simple individuals, i.e., individuals that lack proper parts; and simple properties, i.e., properties that do not have other properties as constituents[9].

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7   I use the same terminology as Menzel (2016). As Menzel notes, there are also other accounts of possible world that deserve to be considered.
8   The distinction between abstract and concrete objects is surely controversial in metaphysics. Lewis (1986) does not consider the distinction useful; anyway, he offers a very useful recap of the main strategies for accounting for abstractness and concreteness such that none of them allow us to conceive his world as an abstract object.
9   See Divers (2002), pp. 175-176 for a deeper understanding.

Using possible worlds' approach to the question of nothingness, the terms 'nothing' or 'nothingness' have been considered singular terms that refer to an empty possible world. As far as I know, this account was initially developed by Lewis (1986), then by Van Inwagen (1996), although they are inclined to reject the existence of such an empty world. An empty possible world is a world at which there are no objects at all. According to the account of possible world one assumes, the idea of an empty possible world substantially changes. For example, if one assumes a "Lewisian" account of possible world, an empty world is not possible at all, because any possible world is the sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things[10]. It is more plausible that an empty possible world can be admitted in the ontology of those who assume an abstractionist or a combinatorial account of possible worlds, although there might be relevant issues also in that cases (see Coggins, 2010; Simionato, 2017). Besides, according to the account of abstract/concrete objects one assumes, the "scenario" of empty possible world substantially changes. Usually, those who deal with the empty possible world refer to a world with no *concrete* objects, because they think that there are abstract objects (e.g., numbers) in all possible worlds. The topic about the different approaches to the idea of empty possible world is beyond the scope of this paper (see Coggins 2010; Goldschmidt 2013; Simionato 2017 for more details). Also, the link between the account of nothingness as empty possible world and the so-called metaphysical nihilism (i.e. the thesis according to which there could have been nothing) is out of the scope of this work (again, see Coggins, 2010; Goldschmidt, 2013; Simionato, 2017 for more details)[11]. For the sake of the brief overview about the accounts of nothingness within the philosophical "market", I just need to recall some main tenets of the empty possible world.

10 «If a world is a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things, that makes no provision for an absolutely empty world. A world is not like a bottle that might hold no beer. The world *is* the totality of things it contains. […] There can be nothing much: just some homogeneous unoccupied spacetime, or maybe only one single point of it. But nothing much is still something, and there isn't any world where there's nothing at all» (Lewis, 1986, p. 73).
11 Besides, the most relevant argument for the existence of an empty possible world is the so-called subtraction argument by Baldwin (1996) and its alternative versions (e.g., by Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2013).

Let us assume that the naïve idea (or pre-theoretical intuition) of nothingness is the absolute absence of all objects or the global absence. We can consider that absence simply as the maximal (all-encompassing) consistent *situation* according to which there are no objects at all. Since a *maximal consistent situation according to which things could be* is – broadly speaking – represented by a (possible) world, the maximal consistent situation according to which there are no objects at all is what is represented by what is called *empty world*, i.e. a world that represents the absence of all objects (namely the *global* absence). So, nothingness is an entity – i.e. a possible world – that *represents*[12] the absence of all objects. Therefore, when 'nothingness' is not used as a negative quantifier phrase, we can use 'nothingness' for referring to the absence of everything (the maximal consistent situation of the global absence), but only if we are aware that at the same time we are referring to the *entity* according to which there are no objects at all, i.e. we are referring at the same time to the empty possible world.

The account of nothingness as empty possible world is hybrid because it combines a non-quantificational with a quantificational approach to the phrases 'nothingness' or 'nothing'. Indeed, on one hand, 'empty possible world' refers to something, i.e., the empty possible *world*: an (abstract) entity that represents the global absence; on the other hand, such a global absence can be fully paraphrased by a quantifier phrase (*a la* Carnap), since the situation represented by the *empty* world is exactly the situation according to which *there is no* objects at all. Not by chance, some philosophers, like Efird and Stoneham, have "translated" the "emptiness" of the possible world through a quantificational approach[13].

2. The puzzle of nothingness seems to remain

The aim of this section is to show why the hitherto proposed accounts of nothingness do not seem able to dispel the puzzle of nothingness.

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12 I ask the reader to assume a "representative" account of possible worlds, rather than a "concretist" account.

13 See for example Efird and Stoneham (2005): $\exists w \forall x \neg E!xw$ (where E!xw means 'x exists at world w' and x range over concrete objects).

Carnap's strategy to paraphrase 'nothingness' was challenged by Severino (1981). Severino assumes that the phrase 'nothingness' cannot always be reduced to a quantifier phrase, *contra* Carnap. As he writes:

> […] Carnap non tiene distinta, nella proposizione <¬(∃x) . x è al di fuori di>, la situazione logica in cui la variabile x assume un numero limitato di valori positivi (sì che ciò rispetto a cui x è 'al di fuori', 'oltre', è una dimensione limitata del positivo), dalla situazione logica in cui […] x può assumere *tutti* i valori positivi (sì che ciò rispetto a cui x è 'al di fuori' è la stessa totalità del positivo). È appunto in questo secondo caso che il nulla (l'al di fuori dell'intero) *si manifesta*: appunto in quanto nella proposizione: <¬(∃x) . x è al di fuori della totalità del positivo> è manifesto il significato: 'al di fuori della totalità del positivo'. (1981, p. 228)[14]

In other words, when we try to paraphrase 'nothing' by means of Carnap's strategy, if we admit that the domain of our discourse can be absolutely unrestricted, then the strategy does not work, since – according to Severino – we are constrained to quantify over a putative thing that is beyond the all-inclusive domain of all things. It is clear, then, that this criticism against Carnap's treatment of nothingness assumes the possibility of unrestricted quantification[15].

Priest's account of nothingness also challenges Carnap's way of paraphrasing 'nothing', but his strategy needs to admit in our ontology contradictory objects. That is not a problem for a dialetheist as Priest, of course. However, even if we admitted contradictory objects and dialetheias in our philosophy, there would still be relevant issues in the pe-

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14 «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 < ~ (∃ x). x is outside the totality of the positive> the meaning 'outside the totality of the positive' manifests itself » (see p. 26 above).

15 For an overview about unrestricted quantification, see e.g. Rayo-Uzquiano, 2006 and Florio, 2014. About the (possible) link between absolutely unrestricted quantification and the question of nothingness, see Simionato, 2014 and Costantini, 2019.

culiar case of nothingness, as Ho (2016) points out[16]. In a nutshell, if nothingness is *absolutely* unthinkable and unspeakable, then we cannot describe it in any way because it *defies any* determination or description. I shall return to this point in Part II. For now, I just need to point out that nothingness seems to be "beyond" – as to say – the domain of contradictory entities and non-contradictory entities: it *absolutely is not*. For similar reason, we should not even say that nothingness is an impossible entity or a non-existent object. Although one extends her ontology to include "zany" entities in it (impossible objects, contradictory objects, non-existent objects, etc.), then one is not picking up the "real" or "authentic" nothingness because the latter is different from *any* item of our (extended) ontology: nothingness is «al di fuori della totalità del positivo» (*viz.* beyond the all-inclusive domain of unrestrictedly everything), as Severino noticed. The same issue seems to affect Voltolini's account. Oliver and Smiley seem to be closer to the idea of such an absolute nothingness when they acknowledge that it is nothing at all, «whether existent or subsistent, real or imaginary, concrete or abstract, possible or impossible» (2013, p. 602). But their account seems to propose again the same issue of Carnap's strategy. Indeed, the main difference between Carnap's paraphrase and Oliver-Smiley's account is that the former *completely* paraphrase 'nothing' or 'nothingness' via a negative quantifier phrase, whereas the latter holds the singular term 'nothing' as an empty term ('zilch': see above) that does not denote anything at all, since it is *empty*. Again, Severino's challenge can be restored: how can we account for the absence of absolutely everything that the empty term 'zilch' (implicitly) refers to[17]? Compared to Carnap's strategy, the further step of Oliver-Smiley's account is the possibility to use 'nothing' as a singular term and so the possibility to discern 'nothing' as singular term from 'nothing' as negative

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16 «A contradiction is as determinate as a tautology. Correspondingly, to claim that reality is contradictory is to predicate of reality a determinate, though contradictory, structure describable in words or logical symbols. Yet, what if reality is indescribable and, somewhat like an amorphous lump, empty of any determinate structure? Perhaps, the idea of a contradictory reality fits better with a logically possible world, but not the concrete world of lived experience» (Ho, 2016, p. 77, emphasis added). We will see in §6 that Ho is speaking about something that is ineffable in general, including the case of nothingness.

17 I say that 'zilch' *indirectly* refers to the absence of absolutely everything because it denotes the non self-identical thing, i.e., it does *not* denote *anything* at all.

quantifier phrase, but the "emptiness" of the empty term 'zilch' is still there and no account has been provided for it[18].

Finally, let us consider the empty possible world account of nothingness. An *absolutely* empty world risks to be a self-contradictory entity. Indeed, if we say that a possible world is an entity (e.g., an abstract object) that represents the maximal consistent situation according to which there are *no entities at all*, then we are entitled to count the empty *world* among those entities that there are not. Heil (2013) effectively summarizes this objection against the possibility of an empty world. According to Heil, an empty world is neither possible nor impossible: *it is not a world at all*:

> [...] an empty world is not a world with nothing in it. It is nothing at all. The 'empty' world is not a world that would cease to be empty were something *added* to it. The empty world is not a shell, a container with nothing inside it. The empty world is not an *it*. [...]. Nothingness, conceived of as the 'empty' world, is not one option, one world among others; it is not an option at all. The only possibilities are something. (2013, p. 173)

So, Heil's criticism could be spelled out by means of the following argument:

(H1) Nothingness is the absence of everything
(H2) Any possible world is – broadly speaking – a thing
Therefore
(H3) If one identified nothingness with the empty world, then one would identify the absolute absence of everything with something, i.e., one would fall in contradiction.

I am not sure that an empty possible world is a self-contradictory item. Neither I am sure that speaking about an empty possible world lead us to fall in contradiction. Although this question is out of the scope of the present work, I would like to recall a few brief comments on that[19].

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18 Furthermore, as Casati-Fujikawa, 2015 note, «[Oliver and Smiley] don't give any argument for this referential-failure: they seem just to assume that 'nothing' as a singular term and 'zilch' are empty terms» (p. 256).

19 I would address the reader to Coggins (2010), Goldschmidt (2013) and Simionato (2017) to explore this issue. I would also point out that I have provided a reading

First, we could try to avoid the contradictory outcome by distinguishing the empty world *as world*, i.e., a *representational device*, from the empty world *as empty*, i.e., the absence of all things. Indeed, we can discern what represents a situation from what is represented. Yet, one could still object that the absence of *all* things should be understood as *unrestrictedly global*. Therefore, what such a representational device would represent is the absence of absolutely everything, *including the empty world*[20]. Again, that's seems to be a contradictory result.

Second, we could employ the difference between what is for a world to be *actual existing* and what is for a world to be *actualized*. In a – broadly speaking – actualist realism conception of possible worlds (see Divers, 2002, p. 169 ff.) each possible world actually exists, but «among the many possible worlds that actually exist, one possible world is distinguished from the others by being (absolutely) actualized» (Divers, 2002, p. 169). Therefore, if the absolutely empty world *was actualized*, then there would be neither concrete objects, nor abstract objects, *included the world itself*. The empty world *as a world* would not exist at all *if it was actualized*. Maybe this distinction allows us to speak about an empty possible world without falling in contradiction, but I leave aside this question in this work.

3. The twofold structure of nothingness according to Severino

To understand Severino (1981)'s account of nothingness it is useful starting from how he recalls the classical *aporia* (or puzzle) of nothingness in Severino (2013):

> Parmenide porta alla luce l'assoluta nullità del nulla (*me eon*, 'non essente'). Proprio perché essa è tale, il nulla non può essere *qualcosa* di «conoscibile» e di «esprimibile» (fr.2). Infatti si può conoscere ed esprimere solo qualcosa che è, ossia un essente, mentre il nulla, as-

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of Severino's account of nothingness by means of the empty possible world account in Simionato (2013, 2016, 2017).

20 We can rephrase this objection in terms of *facts*, as Mark Jago did (in a personal communication): «[…] the absence of everything would be a fact, that there is nothing. But that fact would be something that exists, contradicting itself. So, necessarily, there can't be absolutely nothing».

solutamente, non è un essente. E *tuttavia*, proprio nell'atto in cui si affermano questi caratteri del nulla, il nulla si presenta come qualcosa di conoscibile ed esprimibile. (2013, p. 106)[21].

More systematically, Severino (1981) proposes two ways to present the above-mentioned aporia based on the use of 'nothingness' as a noun phrase:

(i)   Nothingness is posited (or thought) as what *is not anything*; but since it is *posited*, it somehow *is something*.
(ii) Nothingness is the opposite of *what it is*; but since it is absolutely nothingness, it is not even the opposite of *what it is*.

Another way to spell out aporia could be the following:

(1) Everything that exists is positive [assumed]
(2) Nothingness is not positive [assumed]
(3) For all *x*, if *x* appears, then *x* is positive [assumed]
(4) Nothingness appears (for example, it appears as what is beyond the totality of positive)

Therefore

(5) Nothingness is positive [by (3), (4)]
(6) Nothingness is not positive, and nothingness is positive [by conjunction of (2) and (5)]

Could we avoid the contradictory result by rejecting (2)? That would mean affirming that nothingness is positive so that we would be constrained to reject our intuition about the *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the idea that nothingness is the absence of everything, so the absence of all positive determinations. Nor could we state that nothingness is positive by

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21 «Parmenides brings to light the absolute nullity of nothingness (*me eon*, "non-existent"). Precisely because it is such, nothingness cannot be *something* "knowable" and "expressible" (fr. 2). Indeed, one can know and express only what is, which is to say an existent, whereas nothingness, in absolute terms, is not an existent. *However*, in the very act whereby these characteristics of nothingness are affirmed, nothingness presents itself as something knowable and expressible» (see p. 33 above).

means of the idea of *nihil negativum*; namely, a self-contradictory object: there are no contradictory positive determinations in Severino's ontology (see 1981, ch. 3). Nor could we reject (3) since it would be counterintuitive. Indeed, appearance (*apparenza, erscheinung*) and positivity are two strictly related notions: what appears is *present* and it would be very hard to affirm that what is present is not somehow positive (*positum*).

The solution by Severino is an account of nothingness that is based on the following premise:

> ogni significato (ogni contenuto pensabile, cioè ogni ente, qualsisia il modo in cui esso si costituisce) è una sintesi semantica tra la positività del significare e il contenuto determinato del positivo significare; o, che è il medesimo, tra l'essere formale e la determinazione di questa formalità […] – dove l'essere formale è appunto la positività della significanza della determinazione (1981, p. 213)[22].

According to Severino, 'meaning' (*significato*), 'entity' and 'positivity' or 'positive (being)' *convertuntur*. Besides, for any entity or meaning, we can distinguish *the fact that it is an entity or a positive determination* from *the content of that determination*. Broadly speaking, we can state that for any entity, we can distinguish its *existence* from its *essence*. We should also note that in Severino, the existence of any entity is logically equivalent to its self-identity so that: for all x, x exists if and only if x is self-identical. As Berto (2013) recalls,

> What Severino calls in his works existence or being *simpliciter*, or existence "in a transcendental sense", corresponds to self-identity: the being of existence unrestrictedly shared by all things at all times just is their being themselves, that is, their being something, or their being what they are (and not something else).
> Things that for the Meinongian lack being and/or existence […] exist in the Severinian sense. […] When Severino says that x has being or exists "in a transcendental sense", the Meinongian says that x is an object, something, a thing. (p. 154)

22 «Every meaning (every thinkable content, which is to say every entity, however it may constitute itself) is a semantic synthesis between the positivity of meaningfulness and the determinate content of positive meaningfulness; or – which amounts to the same thing – between formal being and the determination of this formality […] where formal being is precisely the positivity of the meaningfulness of the determination» (See p.14 above).

The self-identity (namely, the existence) of any entity and what it essentially is[23] cannot be *separated* although they can be *discerned*. For example, the noun 'table' refers to the fact[24] that the table is/exists/is self-identical and – at the same time – to the table as determination. The self-identity or existence of anything is the formal concept of being ("*essere formale*"), whereas any entity is a determination of being.[25] I recalled before that existence and essence – or self-identity as such and any particular determination – cannot be separated; Severino spells out this principle by stating that existence and essence are a "synthesis", i.e., a structure of two conceptual aspects such that one can be discerned from the other but cannot be separated. By following Hegel's use of 'moment' (*das Moment*), Severino also spells out the above-mentioned structure as a two-*moments* structure[26].

With this essential background in mind, let us consider the notion of nothingness. According to Severino, since nothingness somehow appears in our thought (for example, as what is beyond the all-inclusive totality), it is positive, it exists, it is self-identical. Yet, its essence, what is a determination, is the negation of unrestrictedly everything, the total absence of all entities. Therefore, the positivity of nothingness contradicts what nothingness really is and, *vice versa*, the negation of all entities contradicts the existence (or self-identity) of such a negation because that negation is an entity itself, as well as the outcome of that negation. In other words, if the negation of unrestrictedly everything succeeds in negating *every*thing, then such an absolute negation needs to be *self-refuting*[27]. To

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23 According to Severino, there is no distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties or between contingent and essential properties. See, e.g., Severino (1980).

24 Here, I use 'fact' broadly speaking, with no commitment to any account of facts.

25 «Il termine 'essere' indica un sintesi […] tra il significato 'essere' (essere formale) e i significati costituiti appunto dalle determinazioni che, appunto, sono» (Severino 1981, p. 144).» [«The term 'being' refer to a synthesis [...] between the meaning 'being' (the formal concept of being) and all the meanings. Indeed, these are the determinations that *are* (beings)» (translated by M. Simionato)].

26 It is useful to recall the Hegelian use of 'moment' ('*das Moment*'). A moment is not an instant of time but a (conceptual) aspect of a (semantic) structure that *cannot be separated* from the structure itself or from the other aspects of it; yet such an aspect *can be distinguished* from the structure or from the other aspects of it.

27 We will find again this figure in §6 when I rephrase the aporia of nothingness in terms of the paradox of ineffability.

solve the puzzle of nothingness, Severino appeals to the two-moments structure of nothingness, that is – formally – the same structure that we use to think about something[28]:

(Nothingness-$_P$) The moment of positivity, i.e, the self-identity or existence of nothingness[29]

(Nothingness-$_N$) The moment of the negation of unrestrictedly everything, resulting in the absence of all entities (or the global absence)[30]

Severino also refers to (Nothingness-$_N$) by using a phrase such as 'the content of the positive meaning of nothingness' or 'the absolute negativity that is the content of the positive moment'. (I have some doubts about what kind of relation there could be between Nothingness-$_P$ and Nothingness-$_N$ if the latter is the *content* of the former: what is the nature of this relation? I will consider this topic later[31]). According to Severino, (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_N$) is an inconsistent pairing: since what is absent (or negated) is unrestrictedly *every*thing, (Nothingness-$_P$) is in contradiction with (Nothingness-$_N$) because (Nothingness-$_P$) counts among the entities (or positive determinations, things, objects, etc) *negated by* (Nothingness-$_N$)[32].

Anyway, Severino argues that the contradictory two-moments structure is exactly the device for solving the aporia of nothingness:

28 How can nothingness fulfil the same structure of something? That seems to be a puzzle in itself since we should not use a formal structure for something in order to understand the absolute nothingness. However, the solution to this puzzle will be clear as well as the solution of any puzzle of nothingness (at least according to Severino's proposal).
29 Severino usually calls this moment: «il positivo significare del nulla» or «il momento positivo del nulla». Kneipe also translates: «the positive meaningfulness [of nothing]».
30 Severino usually calls this moment: «il nulla-momento». Kneipe also translates as «nothingness-as-moment».
31 See §7
32 I recalled before that according to Severino, 'meaning', 'determination' and 'entity' are synonymous. Since, for example, 'entity' ranges over absolutely everything, also the negation 'not' is – broadly speaking – an entity. We can find a similar situation in Priest (2014b): "anything we can think about is an object, a unity, a single thing" (p. 15). If we replace 'object'/'unity'/'single thing' with 'entity'/'meaning'/'determination', then we get a similar result.

[…] allorché si afferma che la posizione del non essere attesta l'essere del non essere, non si può intendere di affermare che 'nulla' significhi, in quanto tale, 'essere'; ma che il nulla, che è significante come nulla, è. […]. E, dall'altro lato, questo 'essere' del nulla non è significante come 'non essere'; ma, essendo significante come essere, è essere del nulla (che è significante come nulla). La contraddizione del *non-essere-che-è*, non è dunque *interna* al significato 'nulla' (o al significato 'essere' che è l'essere del nulla); ma è tra il significato 'nulla' e l'essere, o la positività di questo significato. La positività del significare è cioè in contraddizione con lo stesso contenuto del significare, che è appunto significante come l'assoluta negatività. (1981, p. 213)[33].

Therefore, Severino makes a distinction between the "external" contradiction between the two moments of nothingness and the (putative) "internal" contradiction of each moment: the first contradiction holds, whereas the second contradictions do not. In other words, the presence of (Nothingness-$_P$) in the meaning 'nothingness' contradicts the presence of (Nothingness-$_N$) because (Nothingness-$_P$) expresses the existence of an entity (since *any* positivity is an entity) and (Nothingness-$_N$) expresses the negation of any existence, including (Nothingness-$_P$). In contrast, the "internal" contradictions do not hold because the two moments are not singularly (self)-contradictory entities: (Nothingness-$_N$) is itself and it is not (Nothingness-$_P$), as well as (Nothingness-$_P$) is itself and it is not (Nothingness-$_N$). The puzzle of nothingness would be an unsolvable aporia if we didn't consider its two moments. Instead – according to Severino – nothingness is and is not a positive determination at the same time but *in different respects*: nothingness is a positive determination *as* (Nothing-

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33 «[…] when we affirm that the positing of not-being attests to the being of not-being, we cannot be seeking to affirm that "nothing", as such, means "being"; but, rather, that "nothing", which is meaningful as nothing, is. The presenting itself of nothing does not attest to the fact that "nothing" means "being"; but that "nothing", meaningful as nothing, is. And, on the other hand, this "being" of nothing is not meaningful as "not-being"; but, being meaningful as being, is the being of nothing (which is meaningful as nothing). 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» (See p. 14 above)

ness-$_P$), whereas nothingness is not a positive determination *as* (Nothingness-$_N$). The two-moments structure of nothingness is surely self-contradictory in Severino's ontology; yet – as I recalled – the contradiction "externally" holds between the two moments and it does not "internally" occur in each moment: «I due lati o momenti di questa autocontraddittorietà (il negativo e il positivo) sono incontraddittori: il nulla è nulla e il positivo è positivo» (1981, p. 217)[34].

The difference between the meaning 'nothingness' and other meanings is granted by the fact that the two-moments structure of the other meanings does not imply a contradiction between the two moments (nor – certainly – an "internal" contradiction in each moment). Indeed, a positive determination, as – say – a table, does not imply a contradiction between its positivity (the fact that the table exists) and its essence.

At this point, the reader can understand why I included Severino's account of nothingness amongst the "hybrid" accounts. Indeed, Severino seems to use 'nothingness' as *both* a singular term that denotes something, i.e., (Nothingness-$_P$); *and* a negative quantifier phrase, the negation of unrestrictedly all things, i.e., (Nothingness-$_N$).

Given the two-moments structure of nothingness, (i) and (ii) are not controversial anymore because they should be read as follows:

(iii) Nothingness is posited (or thought) in virtue of (Nothingness-$_P$); that determination is the absolute negation of everything in virtue of (Nothingness-$_N$). Nothingness holds as the opposite of being in virtue of (Nothingness-$_P$); nothingness is truly what absolutely is not in virtue of (Nothingness-$_N$).

To this end, Severino notes that the two moments are not two entities that were previously separated and then somehow "joined" in order to form the meaning 'nothingness'. Rather, they are originally joined so that they cannot be thought as separated, although we can discern them by considering them different ("Hegelian") moments[35]. Yet one could ob-

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34 «The two sides or moments of the self-contradictory structure of nothingness (the positive moment and the negative moment) are internally consistent in themselves: nothingness is nothingness and the positive determination of nothingness is the positive determination of nothingness» (Translated by M. Simionato).

35 Although Severino inherits the notion of moment by Hegel's philosophy, he does not approach the question of nothingness as Hegel does: see Severino (1981), chapter IV.

ject that one of the two moments, namely (Nothingness-$_N$), could not be an entity, a positive determination, otherwise the aporia of nothingness surely would appear again (see §4).

Finally, Severino's strategy allows us to solve the aporia spelled out by means of (1) – (6). Indeed, by means of the two-moments structure, we can rephrase premise (2) and (4) in terms of (2*) and (4*), without ruling out our intuition of nothingness as absolutely negative: nothingness is positive and so it appears in virtue of (Nothingness-$_P$), whereas it is absolutely negative in virtue of (Nothingness-$_N$):

(1)   Everything that exists is positive [assumed]
(2*) (Nothingness-$_N$) is not positive [assumed]
(3)   For all x, if x appears, then x is positive [assumed]
(4*) (Nothingness-$_P$) appears (for example, it appears as what is beyond the totality of positive)

Therefore

(5*) (Nothingness-$_P$) is positive [by (3), (4*)]
(6*) (Nothingness-$_N$) is not positive and (Nothingness-$_P$) is positive [by conjunction of (2*) and (5*)]

where the conclusion is no longer a contradiction.

Severino (1981) examines a fundamental objection to his strategy: since (Nothingness-$_N$) is the absolute negation of unrestrictedly everything, how can it be a ("Hegelian") moment? Indeed, a moment is broadly speaking an entity, it is an aspect of a semantic structure, it is somehow a determination. In other words, (Nothingness-$_N$) as the absence of all entities is afflicted by the same contradiction in Priest's **nothing** (see §1) because it is and it is not something; but – unlike Priest – Severino does not admit contradictory objects in his own ontology therefore he cannot count (Nothingness-$_N$) among entities. Severino's reply is based on the fact that the two moments cannot be separated, as I pointed out before. To this end, Severino uses an abstract/concrete distinction that we can call – following Lewis' (1986) phrase – "the way of abstraction". To be more precise, Severino's way is based on Hegel's and the Italian Neoidealists' distinction between abstract and concrete. As Lewis (1986) notes, according to the Way of Abstraction, "abstract entities are abstractions

from concrete entities. They result from somehow subtracting specificity, so that an incomplete description of the original concrete entity would be a complete description of the abstraction" (pp. 84–85). If we apply this schema to the Hegelian use of "moment", we get the following: each moment of a (semantic) structure is an abstraction from the concrete entity to which they belong (certainly, we should not read 'concrete' and 'abstract' as we usually do; for example, by means of a spatiotemporally or causal account of concreteness). Besides – I suppose –concreteness and abstractness are features of our thoughts and not just simple features of the objects we think about. In this way, we are *concretely* thinking of a moment of a structure only if we are thinking of it *as related to the other moment of its own structure (and to the structure itself)*. In the case of nothingness, (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_N$) are two abstractions of the concrete structure since each is an incomplete description of nothingness, for the latter is a positive determination, namely (Nothingness-$_P$), that is the absence of every determination, namely (Nothingness-$_N$).

Given that, we have two options: either thinking of each moment as related to its own structure and to the other moment; or thinking of each moment as separated from the other one and from the structure itself. Severino calls the first way of thinking: *concrete thought of the abstract moment* («pensiero concreto dell'astratto»); the second way is called: *abstract thought of the abstract moment* («pensiero astratto dell'astratto»)[36]. According to Severino, if we employ such a distinction, we can avoid the above-mentioned objection:

> È chiaro che anche in questo caso l'aporia sorge perché il nulla-momento è astrattamente concepito come irrelato al suo essere, al suo positivo significare. In quanto la distinzione dei momenti viene intesa come la loro astratta separazione, certamente il nulla, come negatività assoluta, non può nemmeno valere come momento di una concretezza semantica. Si dovrà dunque dire che l'assoluta negatività può distinguersi dal suo positivo significare, e valere come momento semantico, proprio in quanto la stessa positività di questo valere come momento è l'altro momento […] e cioè […] appartiene alla struttura dello stesso positivo significare dell'assoluto negativo, col quale significare il negativo deve essere tenuto in re-

36 Kneipe also translates «concrete concept of the abstract» and «abstract concept of the abstract», respectively.

lazione affinché il concetto concreto non divenga concetto astratto dell'astratto. (Severino 1981, pp. 221-22)[37]

In other words, we are not really quantifying over (Nothingness-$_N$); we just need to quantify over (Nothingness-$_P$). The positivity of (Nothingness-$_N$), its being somehow an entity, is in fact the positivity of (Nothingness-$_P$) as we expected. The aporia would arise if one considered (Nothingness-$_N$) without relating it to (Nothingness-$_P$); in this way, the positivity of (Nothingness-$_N$) would be puzzling because we should quantify over (Nothingness-$_N$) *before* thinking about it as a positive determination. Instead, we quantify *just* over (Nothingness-$_P$): any positivity one attributes to (Nothingness-$_N$) is *de facto* the positivity of (Nothingness-$_P$). So (Nothingness-$_N$) – one of the abstract moments of nothingness – can be intentioned either by means of an abstract thought («pensiero astratto dell'astratto») or by means of a concrete thought («pensiero concreto dell'astratto»). In the first case, the aporia appears again and it produces a *regressus* or *progressus in indefinitum* (since (Nothingness-$_N$) should be treated as a two-moments structure – say: (Nothingness-$_{N'}$) and (Nothingness-$_{P'}$); but (Nothingness-$_{N'}$) would be aporetic as well as (Nothingness-$_N$); therefore, one should introduce another two-moments structure, *et sic in infinitum*). In the second case, the aporia does not appear at all since we can quantify over (Nothingness-$_P$) in order to refer to (Nothingness-$_N$), given that the latter is not separated by the former.

Anyway, it is not clear which kind of relation holds between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) if (Nothingness-$_N$) does not exist at all; Severino would reply that such a question presupposes a mistaken sepa-

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37 «It is clear that in this case too the aporia emerges because nothingness-as-moment is abstractly conceived as unrelated to its being, to its positive meaningfulness. Insofar as the distinction between the different moments is understood as their abstract separation, nothingness, as absolute negativity, certainly cannot rank as a moment of semantic concreteness. It must thus be stated that absolute negativity can be distinguished from its positive meaningfulness, and rank as semantic moment, precisely insofar as the very positivity of its ranking as a moment is the other moment […] in other words […] it belongs to the structure of this positive meaningfulness of the absolute negative; and the negative must be held in relation to this meaningfulness, so that the concrete concept will not become the abstract concept of the abstract» (See p. 20 above).

ration between the two moments as well as any aporia of nothingness. Yet I am not fully convinced of that reply. Severino's solution seems to be afflicted by a vicious circularity: in order to avoid the aporia of (Nothingness-$_N$), he assumes the two-moments structure of nothingness, where (Nothingness-$_N$) is already "at work". Besides, it is not clear what the belonging of (Nothingness-$_N$) to (Nothingness-$_P$) («the other moment belongs to the same structure one needs to use to understand the positivity of the absolute nothingness») means. I am going to deal with these issues in the next sections.

4. Standard criticism about Severino's account of nothingness

The account of nothingness by Severino (1981) and his solution of the relevant aporia have been criticized by several Italian scholars (see below for some references)[38]. In this section I propose a four-part classification of those criticism and objections, notwithstanding my proposal does not claim to exhaust the riches and complexity of each particular objection. Furthermore, the philosophical lexicon I am going to use to introduce those objections is consistent with the lexicon I use throughout this work, but the Italian scholars might have used different phrases. Although these differences might generate misunderstanding – and I am the only one responsible for that – I hope my four-part classification can shed light on the common-ground shared by the objections against Severino's approach to the question of nothingness.

Objection from indiscernibility

(OI) There is no way of discerning (Nothingness-$_N$) from (Nothingness-$_P$).

As far as I know, this is the most frequent objection against Severino's account of nothingness in the philosophical "market" (see for example

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38 I think it is very difficult to criticize Severino's account of nothingness without undermining his solution of the related aporia, and *viceversa*. Therefore, I assume that an objection against his solution counts as an objection against his account of nothingness, and *viceversa*.

Bacchin 1984; Sasso 1987; Sasso 2011; Donà 2008; Visentin 2011; Simionato 2011). Intuitively, the two moments of nothingness seem to have precisely the *same* conceptual content: the absence of all things. Therefore – the objection continues – we cannot hold that there are *two* moments. So, Severino's twofold account of nothingness fails. In reply to (OI), I think Severino would say that one can secure the discernibility between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) based on the discernibility between *essence* and *existence* (see above). Such a distinction (which is not a separation - as we have seen) works for any entity or determination: we can always distinguish the fact that x (transcendentally) exists, i.e., the fact that x is self-identical (see above), from the fact that x is *that* particular determination, e.g., a table. In the case of nothingness, we can still distinguish between its essence and its existence. Indeed, the essence of nothingness is the global absence, i.e., *what* nothingness *is*, its "identity" – as to say; the existence of nothingness is the fact that nothingness is *self-identical*, i.e., nothingness is itself *and it is not another thing* (for example, nothingness is the global absence and it is not a table). It is important to note that Severino includes a *plurality* of (Nothingness-$_P$) in his ontology (he speaks about «la ricchezza del positivo significare del nulla»[39]) because the essence of whatever non self-identical determination is the same as (Nothingness-$_N$). So, nothingness is one and many in different respects: a round-square item and a white-non-white item are two *different* positive determinations, but their content is the *same* absolute nothingness. However, the reader should note that such a plurality of (Nothingness-$_P$) does not account for the difference of (Nothingness-$_P$) from (Nothingness-$_N$). The fact that there are many (Nothingness-$_P$) does not show how (Nothingness-$_P$) can be different from (Nothingness-$_N$). Indeed, Severino would not reply to (OI) by appealing to the difference among those entities or positive determinations we recognize as (Nothingness-$_P$). He would reply that (Nothingness-$_P$) can be distinguished from (Nothingness-$_N$) *as well as* the existence of any entity can be distinguished from its own essence. Yet, the objection could continue by saying that Severino's reply begs the question: his reply assumes that the discernibility between (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_N$) can be *understand* as a distinction between existence and essence, whereas the objec-

39 «The myriad aspects of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness» (translated by M. Simionato). See for example Severino (2011, 2013).

tion wonder if that discernibility (between (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_P$)) *obtains at all.*

Objection from internal contradiction

(OC) (Nothingness-$_N$) is self-contradictory.

According to this criticism - (see for example: Bacchin 1984; Sasso 1987; Sasso 2011; Donà 2008; Visentin 2011; Simionato 2011) - (Nothingness-$_N$) is a self-contradictory item[40] because it is the global absence of unrestrictedly all things *and – at the same time –* it is some*thing* because it is exactly the absence of unrestrictedly all things. So – the objection concludes – (Nothingness-$_N$) is *internally* contradictory, *contra* what Severino affirms (see above), and the aporia of nothingness comes back in terms of the aporia of (Nothingness-$_N$). Severino (1981) is clearly aware of the objection (OC), as I recalled in §3, where I also recalled how Severino replied: he uses the *distinction* between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) to hold that *any* objectification[41] of (Nothingness-$_N$) should be ascribed to (Nothingness-$_P$). As I noticed before, we *quantify over* (Nothingness-$_P$), preserving (Nothingness-$_N$) from any objectification. However, I think Severino's reply is not enough to remove the objection (OC). Indeed, his reply is based on the possibility to discern (Nothingness-$_N$) from (Nothingness-$_P$), but we have seen that such a discernibility is exposed to the objection (OI).

The objection of internal contradiction can also be rephrased as follows:

(OC*) Nothingness is a self-contradictory fully real entity

In this case, what is at issue is the twofold structure of nothingness, rather than one of its moments. This objection is based on the fact that Severino uses a Hegelian approach (or what Lewis would call "the way of abstraction") – see above. As Visentin (2011) showed, given that Severino's ac-

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40 I use 'item' to refer to whatever determination, entity, object, meaning, concept, etc.
41 I use 'objectification' to mean the act of treating an item as an entity (i.e., an object broadly construed).

count of nothingness is a self-contradictory two-moments structure and given that such a structure is *concrete* (whereas their moments are both abstract),[42] nothingness turns out to be a contradictory object of reality for, somehow, concreteness and reality *convertuntur*[43]. Yet, such a conclusion should not find a place in Severino's ontology for he does not admit any contradictory entity or impossible entity[44]. Of course, Severino would reply that (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) are not "internally" self-contradictory since the contradiction of nothingness just "externally" holds between the two non-contradictory moments. Yet, the *whole* two-moments structure of nothingness is self-contradictory, as Severino affirms; and such a structure is *concrete*, therefore it is *fully real* as a determination (it is not the object of an incomplete description)[45].

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42 He uses 'abstract' and 'concrete' in the same way I recalled in §3.

43 «Si tratta insomma di approfondire la concreta struttura di questo porre [cioè del porre l'autocontraddizione del nulla, author's note] (che, proprio in quanto concretata, tuttavia, non può essere, come invece ritiene possa essere Severino, autocontraddittoria). Pertanto, se la domanda di partenza fosse quella che consiste nel chiedersi che cosa realmente (concretamente) pensa chi si contraddice, essa dovrebbe essere interpretata nel senso non di attribuire una realtà alla contraddizione o al pensiero che si contraddice, ma in quello di chiedere a che cosa effettivamente corrisponda quella posizione, posto che essa non può corrispondere a ciò cui sembra corrispondere, ovvero ad un contraddirsi reale: se il pensiero si contraddicesse realmente, [...], visto che il pensiero è una realtà, la realtà sarebbe autocontraddittoria (almeno in quella sua individuazione che è rappresentata dal pensiero che si contraddice)» (Visentin 2011, p. 321). As far as I know, there is no English translation of Visentin (2011). I have translated the above excerpt as follows: «So, we should better understand the concrete structure of affirming [that nothingness is self-contradictory] (if this structure is concrete, then it can not be self-contradictory, unlike what is claimed by Severino). Therefore, if the original question was a matter of identifying what the object of a contradictory thought is, then such a question should be meant as a question of correspondence between our contradictory thought and the contradictory *concrete* [i.e., real] thing our thought refers to, rather than a question of whether that very contradictory thought is concrete or not. We should assume that a contradictory thought can not correspond to what it seems to correspond, i.e, a real self-contradictory thought. Indeed, if our thought was really [i.e., concretely] self-contradictory [...], then reality would be self-contradictory (at least the chunk of reality that consists in that self-contradictory thought), inasmuch our thoughts are real [i.e., concrete] entities» [emphasis added].

44 See, for example, Severino (1981, 1982).

45 Severino affirms that the concrete self-contradictory two-moments structure of nothingness exists (namely, it is something, it is a determination, it is a meaning,

Objection from relation

(OR) The (putative) relation between (Nothingness-P) and (Nothingness-N) cannot hold because one of the two *relata*, i.e. (Nothingness-N), does not (transcendentally) exist at all.

According to this objection (see for example Sasso 1987; Stella 2014; Stella-Ianulardo 2018), if (Nothingness-$_N$) is the (result of the) negation of unrestrictedly everything, i.e., the absence of all entities (or the global absence), then (Nothingness-$_N$) cannot be anything at all. Therefore, it cannot even be the moment of nothingness which (Nothingness-$_P$) is related to. I think that this objection is substantially reducible to the objection (OC): the reason why (Nothingness-$_N$) cannot count as a *relatum* is the fact that (Nothingness-$_N$) is internally contradictory, i.e., self-contradictory, whereas Severino can hold (Nothingness-$_N$) as a *relatum* because he treats (Nothingness-$_N$) as internally consistent (*viz.* self-identical). However, I think there is still something puzzling to be said about the relation between the two moments of nothingness. I mean the *nature* or *kind* of such a relation. Severino usually speaks about this relation in terms of – let me say – *content-container* relation: (Nothingness-$_N$) would be the content of (Nothingness-$_P$)[46]. Although a metaphorical residual is unavoidable within any language, it seems to me that the content-container kind of relation is quite obscure to account for the peculiar relation between the two moments of nothingness, also due to the issues about the (Nothingness-$_N$) moment that I have already recalled. What does it mean that (Nothingness-$_N$) is *the content of* (Nothingness-$_P$)? So, I would add the following objection[47]:

and so on) only as negated by the Law of Non-contradiction (as he writes in Severino 1981, chapter IV). However, that is not a solution because Severino himself affirms that the Law of Non-contradiction must negate the concrete structure of nothingness. And, in order to negate it, such a structure must be somehow a determination, so the aporia appears again.

46 See, e.g., Severino 2013, p. 110: «[il] secondo momento [viz. il nulla-momento], ossia [...] [il] significato 'nulla' che è il contenuto di quel positivo significare» [«the second moment [*viz.* nothingness-as-moment], i.e., the meaning 'nothingness' that is the content of the related positive meaningfulness» (translated by M. Simionato).

47 The objection I am going to consider occurs in Simionato (2016), but I suppose it also occurs in other works by other authors.

(OR*) There is no account of the relation between (Nothingness-N) and (Nothingness-P)

To be sure, Severino might reply that he has already provided an account of that relation. Indeed, the relation between the two moments of nothingness is some kind of an instantiation of the essence-existence distinction that we can apply to any determination (see §3). However, this account doesn't seem right to nothingness because it needs to assume that there is a *distinction* between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$), turning out to be exposed to the objection (OI). Neither the "way of abstraction" seems to be a good way to account for the relation between the two moments of nothingness. Indeed, the fact that (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) are two abstract moments (or two incomplete descriptions) of the concrete structure of nothingness does not shed light on the kind of relation between *the two* moments. At most, the relation between a concrete meaning and its own abstractions (its own incomplete description) can shed light on the kind of the relations between: (i) (Nothingness-$_N$) and the concrete structure of nothingness; and (ii) (Nothingness-$_P$) and the concrete structure of nothingness. But there isn't enough light on the kind of relation that holds between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_N$)[48].

Objection from the difference between discerning and separating

We have seen (§3) that the difference between *discerning* (or *distinguishing*) two items and *separating* two items is fundamental in Severino's approach to the question of nothingness, as well as in his solution of the related aporia (and in other key places of his works). Specifically, (Nothingness-$_N$) can be discerned/distinguished from (Nothingness-$_P$) (and *viceversa*), but they cannot be separated. Some philosophers (see for ex-

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48 Neither we can appeal to a denoting relation, since the denoted item is nothing at all. Even if we appealed to a denoting relation, we should treat (Nothingness-P) as an empty term, something like Oliver-Smiley's 'Zilch'. That is not a promising way because the treatment of nothingness as an empty term is not able to solve the aporia of nothingness: see §2.

ample Bacchin 1984; Tarca 2001; Tarca 2013) point out that Severino does not explain the difference between *discerning* and *separating*:

(OD) There is no explanation about the difference between discerning and separating

Although it is clear that two separated items are also discernible, it is not likewise clear how two discernible items can be acknowledged as such if they are not somehow separated.

Despite all these objections against Severino's approach to nothingness, I think his account is still more promising than those we can find in the philosophical "market"[49]. In the second part of this work, I shall propose a way to rephrase Severino's account of nothingness that might solve some of these objections. Quite surprisingly, a refresh of Severino's account might come exactly from the approach that Severino (1981, chapter IV) definitively rejected: the so-called "apophaticism".

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49 In fact, his account does not have to reject the Law of non-contradiction; it does not have to admit impossible or non-existent or contradictory objects; and it provides an explanation for the intuitive idea of nothingness as the global absence.

Part II. From the twofold structure of nothingness to the twofold structure of the "apophatic" nothingness

5. The "apophatic" nothingness

Severino clearly highlights that the aporia of nothingness is the aporia of the *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the outcome of the *absolute* negation of *unrestrictedly* everything. Therefore, who wants really speaking about nothingness would miss the target if one spoke in terms of a "mystic" entity, or something that one could not conceptually grasp in any way, or something that defied any expression, and so on. Indeed, if the notion of *nihil absolutum* is construed by negating *unrestrictedly* everything, then the domain of such a negation includes *any* entity, no matter how different, strange and immensely distant: «Heidegger – like Schopenhauer before him, and later Sartre and others – inappropriately employs the word "nothing" to describe *a certain* dimension of the positive which, certainly, *is not* a certain other dimension, but is not the *nihil absolutum*» (Severino 1981, p. 228, translated by S. Kneipe, see p.26 above). Let us call the nothingness that is not the *nihil absolutum*, because it is a certain other positive determination: 'apophatic nothingness'. In other words, if we assume (like Severino seems to do) that <*x* exists> (in a transcendental sense: being a thing, a positive determination) and <*x* is self-identical> are logically equivalent (see above §3), then the positivity of the apophatic nothingness makes it *something*, rather than absolutely nothing. Of course, one could rise the same objection against the *nihil absolutum*, but Severino would reply that it is exactly the aporia of nothingness he dispels by means of his two-moments structure of nothingness. Yet, the objector might continue by asking why we should prefer the *nihil absolutum* instead of the apophatic nothingness. Again, the reply has already appeared: within the *content* of the apophatic nothingness there still is a certain positivity, whereas the *nihil absolutum* is the absence of unrestrictedly all positivity. Although both the apophatic nothingness and the *nihil absolutum* are positive determinations, the content of the latter is (Nothingness-$_N$), whilst the content of the former is something («a certain dimension of the positive»). Furthermore, whilst the structure of the *nihil*

absolutum is (externally) contradictory[50] because the content of it *contradicts* the positivity of it ((Nothingness-$_N$) contradicts (Nothingness-$_P$)), within the structure of the apophatic nothingness does not occur a similar contradiction because the content of the apophatic nothingness is a certain positive entity (an example might be God conceived as infinitely distant).

The idea of apophatic nothingness pervades the history of philosophy alongside the idea of the *nihil absolutum* (see Givone 1995). Probably, its theoretical roots are in Plato's idea of «Good beyond being» («epekeina tēs ousias», *Republic* VI, 509b8–10), and consequently in the Neoplatonic tradition. Although the apophaticism established itself within a theological context, its use of notions such as *ineffability*, *inexpressibility*, *unsayability*, *unspeakability*, *unthinkability*, and the like, makes the apophatic approach suitable for the question of nothingness in so far as the *nihil absolutum* is precisely inexpressible, unsayable, unthinkable, etc. *par excellence*, since (at least) Parmenides' poem[51]. Furthermore, the idea of nothingness as *apophatic* nothingness seems to be afflicted by the same aporia of nothingness as *nihil absolutum*, precisely because they both are conceived as *ineffable*:

> Mystics and mystically minded philosophers have often claimed that God, the Godhead, nirvana, the Dao or some other object of

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50 About the difference between the external and internal contradiction of nothingness, see §3.

51 For example, we can consider Gab (2020)'s definition of apophaticism: «Apophaticism is the claim that *we can neither grasp God in conceptual thought nor express him in language: God is inconceivable and ineffable.* He transcends our cognitive capacities and our concepts cannot be meaningfully applied to him. This is more than just believing that there are a lot of things we don't know about God – you can admit that you don't know a lot of things about God, and still believe that these things are in principle conceivable; you just happen to not know them. Apophatics believe, rather, that since God transcends our epistemic capabilities, we are unable to even conceive or understand certain facts about him. *We don't know, because we don't understand what it is we don't know.* Apophaticism has a long tradition which extends well back into antiquity and encompasses a multitude of Western and Eastern thinkers (not all of them theists). Among others, Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius held apophatic positions, as well as Cusanus, Maimonides, Al-Arabi, Nagarjuna, Laozi, or Zhuangzi» (2020, p.191, emphasis added). One might replace 'God' with 'nothingness' to recognize that there is a common ground.

mystical experience is ineffable, that it cannot be described or put into words. This claim is so deeply connected to virtually all kinds of mysticism that William James declared ineffability to be the first of four essential properties of mystical experience. But there is a problem about the statement that God or any other object of mystical experience is ineffable: how can I meaningfully say about something that it is ineffable? For if it were ineffable, I could not say anything about it, not even that it is ineffable. And vice versa, if I can say about it that it is ineffable, there is at least one thing I can say about it – namely, that it is ineffable – and then it cannot be ineffable. It seems as if any proposition of the form 'X is ineffable' (I shall call this the ineffability thesis) is paradoxical. […] we ought to find a way to resolve this paradox. Is it possible to say that something is ineffable without contradicting oneself? Or is any such utterance analytically false, simply because of the meaning of the term 'ineffable'? (Gab 2017, p. 289)

Not for chance, some philosophers, e.g., Ho (2006), acknowledge that the paradox of ineffability deals with the idea of the absolute nothingness, as well as God or other ideas (see. 2006, pp. 410-411). It seems quite plausible to affirm that nothingness is ineffable. Therefore, it seems likewise plausible to say that nothingness is undermined by the paradox of ineffability. Indeed, as Severino highlights, «It is precisely because 'nothing[ness]' means 'the absence of all meaning' [author's note: the absence of all things or entities] that Parmenides affirms the *unknowability* and *inexpressibility* of nothingness» (Severino 2013, translated by S.Kneipe, see pp. 33-34 above, emphasis added). In the next section I will briefly recall the paradox of ineffability and the solution that Ho has proposed in his works (2006; 2016). The move from the aporia of nothingness to the paradox of ineffability allows me to adjust Severino's account of nothingness. That means revamping the apophatic way that Severino rejected, by leveraging the fact that both the apophatic nothingness and the *nihil absolutum* share the same ineffability. Hence, following this line of thought, the apophatic nothingness is not merely «a certain other positive» – as Severino would say. Rather, the apophatic nothingness is the absolute nothingness *conceived as ineffable*.

At this point, it is crucial to understand which sense of ineffability I will use in the rest of this work (unless otherwise indicated). Intuitively, we can say that something is ineffable if it defies any expression in a lan-

guage or it cannot be grasped by any concept. That is a general definition that needs to be fine-tuned. First, we need to distinguish between what is *essentially* or *in principle* ineffable from what is merely *in practice* ineffable (see Bennet-Hunter 2014, part I.1). A similar distinction occurs within Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffability, which I appeal to:

> *A concept or a proposition is ineffable in [a language] L* if there is no expression of *L* which expresses that concept or proposition. Naturally, I am not offering this definition as a way of clarifying the expression relation – the relation which holds, say, between a given word and the concept it expresses. Rather, I am taking that notion for granted in giving the definition, and grant that in appealing to this intuitive notion my definition may inherit some unclear applications. This is acceptable for my purposes as long as we can pick out some clear cases of expressive limitation. […] *A conceptual ineffability in L* is the ineffability of a concept in *L* (2013, pp. 65-67)

I will adopt the same approach of Shaw, i.e., taking the notion of expression for granted, since the question of what expression is would be out of the scope of my paper. Shaw (2013) continues:

> Call any interpreted language *L* an extension of a language L* if it has at least the conceptual resources of *L*: any concept *c* expressible in *L* is also expressible in *L**. Then the following definitions track an important sense in which an ineffability can be avoided.
> An ineffability in *L* is *removable* if it is absent from an extension of *L*.
> An ineffability in *L* is *essential* if it is present in all extensions of *L* (2013, p. 67)

In the light of these distinctions, I assume that the ineffability of the absolute nothingness is an *essential* ineffability. Indeed, if the ineffability of the *nihil absolutum* was *removable*, then one would not deal with the *nihil absolutum*, but with something that has a positive content that someone might express by means of a more expressive language or a more powerful conceptual apparatus[52].

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52 However, the fact that the absolute nothingness is an essential ineffability, rather than a removable ineffability, is not an undisputed fact: see §9.

6. From the aporia of nothingness to the paradox of ineffability: the solution by Ho

Saying or thinking that something is ineffable, i.e., unsayable or unthinkable, seems to generate a paradox – at least *prima facie*. The paradox of ineffability can be spelled out as follows:

> P1: X is unspeakable.
> P2: The statement «X is unspeakable» is true. (From P1)
> P3: X is speakable by the predicate word 'unspeakable' (From P2)
> P4: The statement «X is unspeakable» is not true. (From P3)
>
> Therefore, the statement «X is unspeakable» is both true and not true. (From P2 and P4)
> (Ho, 2016, p. 69)

If we replace 'X' with 'nothingness', we have something very similar to the aporia of nothingness (besides, I think we can reshape a similar argument in terms of unthinkability or inexpressibility).

The aim of this section is to recall Ho (2006)'s solution to the paradox of ineffability[53] to show some relevant similarities with Severino's solution to the aporia of nothingness. (As far as I know, Ho developed his own solution without knowing Severino's work – and *viceversa*. That makes the matter more interesting, I guess).

First, Ho assumes that the relation between a predicate and an object can occur in two ways: the relation of *saying* and the relation of *imposition*. Given a word w, a concept c expressed by w, and an object o which the concept c is applied to, the relation of saying holds between the word w and the concept c; the relation of imposition holds between the concept c and the object o[54]. This is what happens in ordinary cases, when the object o is "accessible" to our conceptual apparatus. But if one says

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53 The solution by Ho consists in a development of some thesis by the fifth-century Indian grammarian-philosopher Bhart hari (see Ho, 2006).

54 Commenting this account of predication, Gab (2020) proposes the following example: «If [...] I say that chocolate is tasty, I (1) *say* that the concept of tastiness applies to chocolate and (2) thereby *impose* the property of being tasty on the piece of chocolate I am talking about. In ordinary cases like these, according to Ho, the sentence expresses that chocolate is tasty» (2020, p. 297, emphasis added).

that an object *o* is ineffable (*viz. o* defies any expression and conceptual grasp), then the relation of imposition does not truly hold because the word *w* ('ineffable') that expresses the concept *c* (the concept of ineffability) cannot be *imposed* on the ineffable object *o* in so far as the object *o* defies any expression.

The second step of Ho's solution consists in introducing the notion of *superimposition*:

> The notion of superimposition comes to our aid when the semantic object of a word stands *apart* from its referent. In Bhart hari the notion means that a word correlated conceptual item (as the semantic object of a word) is intentionally placed (as the object meant as such) upon the thing (as the object to be meant) that one intends to refer to by the word concerned. Given the intentional, but not actual, closeness between this conceptual item and the thing, we may say that the item *presents* the thing as such and such; for example, unsayability *presents* the thing in question as unsayable. *The superimposition has the function of revealing, as it indirectly makes known the thing such that one knows the latter to be, say, ineffable. But it simultaneously performs the function of concealing, for it covers up the real form of the thing.* So, we need to negate what is imposed, taking it as just an imposition, whereas some dim, residual apprehension of the thing survives the negation. The point, then, is that *the imposition and its negation must go hand in hand: they are but two phases of the same event*. In the use of the word "unsayable" we become aware of the unsayable through the imposition on it of unsayability and the negation of this imposition. Without the imposition nothing about the unsayable would be intimated; without the negation the unsayable would erroneously become sayable. With the imposition the unsayability "of" the unsayable is comprehended; with the negation the unsayable is not taken as bearing such unsayability as meant by the word. This, let's say, *imposition-cum-negation* method is involved in the functioning of indication as construed here (2006, p. 415, some emphasis added).

The ineffable thing is sayable in so far as we *superimpose* the concept of unsayability on the ineffable object, but such an act does not make that object sayable, because the word 'unsayable', expressing the concept of unsayability, does not express what the ineffable object is. Rather, that word *says* only the unsayability of the ineffable object. That means that the superimposition «simultaneously performs the function of conceal-

ing» the ineffable object, precisely because what we are speaking about is not the ineffable object itself, but the unsayability of it:

> Significantly, this unsayability is not an intrinsic feature or property of X [i.e., the ineffable object]. It is only provisionally conceived and does not really inhere in X. Yet, by being superimposed on X, it makes known that X is unsayable. (2016, p. 74).

Since the unsayability is not an intrinsic property of the ineffable object, then we need at the same time negate it. Saying that the ineffable object is unsayable allows us to acknowledge that there is such an object, although we are not experiencing it by words or concepts. So, how we are experiencing it? Below the last step of Ho's solution:

> Can we say the unsayable? The answer is yes if by "say" we actually mean "indicate" or some other nondescriptive expressive mode. This, however, simply affirms that one can non-contradictorily gesture toward the ineffable. Indicatively or otherwise, the ineffable in itself remains beyond the reach of words (2006, p. 421).

As Gab (2020) notices about Ho's solution, «the ineffable God cannot be said, but can only be indicated» (p. 298). The same can be stated about another ineffable object, like the absolute nothingness (and Ho exactly accepts this extension: see 2006, p. 416). Ho can affirm this thesis because he assumes that there are expressive modes that do not need the use of words (or concepts), such as – exactly – *indication* or *gesturing toward*. The indication construed as an expressive device is to be understood as an *indirect mode of expression*. That means that we don't experience the ineffable "face to face". That's why the (super)imposition is at the same time a negation (*imposition-cum-negation*): the words and concepts we employ to speak about the ineffable are not properly and directly describing the ineffable, so they need to be negated. But at the same time those words and concepts are the *indirect* way to acknowledge the ineffable:

> As far as I can tell, when an Eastern ineffabilist asserts that a certain item X is ineffable, he or she is mostly denying any conformity between words and X, but not X' s indirect expressibility too. […] The words used are provisional, indirectly expressive, and to be negated if one takes them to represent the unspeakable as it is (Ho 2016, p. 73).

We can compare Ho's solution to the paradox of ineffability with Severino's solution to the aporia of nothingness, assuming that nothingness is the ineffable *par excellence* (as I noticed before). First, we can recognize a similarity between the *imposition-cum-negation* method by Ho and the twofold-structure of nothingness developed by Severino. The (*super*)*imposition* allows us to have some awareness of the (ineffable) *nihil absolutum*, as well as the "moment" (Nothingness-$_P$) allows us to have some awareness of the absolute nothingness; the *negation* of that (super)imposition preserves us from making the ineffable something effable, as well as the "moment" (Nothingness-$_N$) preserves us from making nothingness an entity. Second, the imposition-cum-negation seems to be a contradictory act, as well as Severino's two-moments structure of nothingness is a contradictory structure. Using Ho's method, one (super)imposes the concept of unsayability (expressed by the word 'unsayable') on the ineffable, but simultaneously one revokes it, by negating such an imposition. Indeed, the imposition allows us to acknowledge that we cannot say anything about the ineffable, whilst the negation of that imposition prevents us from *describing* the ineffable: the ineffable *in itself* is neither unsayable, nor unthinkable because we cannot say *anything* about it (the unsayability is not a feature or an intrinsic property of the ineffable in itself: see above). Yet, the contradictory act, represented by the imposition-cum-negation, is not self-refuting: the imposition is the imposition, the negation of the imposition is the negation of the imposition[55]. Similarly, according to Severino's approach, there is a contradiction between the moment (Nothingness-$_P$) and the moment (Nothingness-$_N$), but this contradiction does not undermine the *internal consistency* of each moment: (Nothingness-$_P$) is (Nothingness-$_P$), (Nothingness-$_N$) is (Nothingness-$_N$). Furthermore, just like in Ho's approach the ineffable *in itself* is not even unsayable (or unspeakable, unthinkable, etc.), in Severino's approach the *nullity* of nothingness, i.e., (Nothingness-$_N$), is not even nothingness or "empty" or "non-being" (see Severino, 2011b).

55 «[...] The ineffability thesis [...] when properly understood as I believe is the case with at least some ineffabilists, implies no self-contradiction. According to the thesis, some transcendental reality or experience cannot be expressed as it truly is by words. Our discussion reveals that the formulation of the thesis or any reference to the ineffable can be made consistently through the expressive mode of indication construed as involving the imposition-cum-negation method» (Ho, 2016, p. 421).

Both the imposition-cum-negation method employed by Ho, and the two-moments structure used by Severino allow us to speak about nothingness avoiding the aporetic outcome. But the account developed by Ho focuses on *indirect expressibility*. To be sure, also the two-moments structure of nothingness proposed by Severino seems to include a sort of indirect expressibility, insofar as *any* feature or property of nothingness – its nullity, its ineffability, its unspeakability and unthinkability, etc. – belong to the positive moment (Nothingness-$_P$). Therefore, we may say that we cannot *directly* express the concept of nothingness as (Nothingness-$_N$), but we can only *indirectly* express it *by means* of (Nothingness-$_P$). According to Severino, this situation is not a limit of our conceptual apparatus. Rather, it is precisely what we need to expect, since (Nothingness-$_N$) is not isolated or separated from (Nothingness-$_P$). However, the fact that Severino seems to admit the possibility of an indirect expressibility of nothingness does not imply that he would acknowledge the *indication* (or *gesture toward*) as a right way to refer to nothingness. So, even if Severino's account of nothingness represented an indirect expressibility mode, that account would not give rise to those kinds of expression which Ho deals with (*indication* or *gesture toward*).

7. The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness

In the previous sections (§§5-6) I supposed that the aporia of nothingness and the account by Severino (1981) might be rephrased within the "apophaticism", therefore in terms of ineffability. In doing so, in §6 I pointed out a relevant affinity between the method of *imposition-cum-negation* by Ho and the twofold account of nothingness by Severino. Ho's account opens up modes of indirect expressibility of nothingness such as indication or gesture toward (or other non-conceptual and non-linguistic kinds of expression), whilst Severino's account does not appeal to those modes.[56] Yet, Severino also seems to appeal to a form of indirect expressibility: the nullity of nothingness, i.e. (Nothingness-$_N$), cannot be directly expressed, because any time we try to express the nullity of noth-

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56 As far as I know, Severino does not appeal to modes of expression such as gesturing or other *non-conceptual* devices in his philosophical arguments, but he surely opens his arguments up to *non-linguistic* dimension (see Severino, 1992).

ingness, we directly refer to (Nothingness-$_p$). Therefore, both accounts seem to include the idea that nothingness as such (the nullity of nothingness) can be *only indirectly expressed.* As things stand, what is at stake is the fact that Severino does not account for the *indirect* relation between our capabilities of expression and the nullity of nothingness because he does not appeal to those non-conceptual or non-linguistic mode, such as indication or gesture toward, which Ho deals with. However, I think we can underpin Severino's account without appealing to non-conceptual or non-linguistic modes of expression. In doing so, I am going to leverage a suggestion proposed by Kukla (2005) within the question of ineffability.

The explicit assumption of Kukla's approach to the notion of ineffability is a «broadly Tarskian perspective» (2005, p. 10):

> [...] a language [is] [...] an abstract system of syntactic and semantic rules that delimits a class C of sentences that are either true or false, and I assume that the semantic rules of the language associate a truth-condition X to each sentence S in C such that S is true in the language if and only if the condition X is satisfied. For example, the truth-condition for "Snow is white" in English is snow's being white. [...] A state of affairs *X is ineffable in language L if X fails to be a truth-condition for any sentence of L* (2005, pp. 10-11, emphasis added).

Kukla's suggestion is very simple, but effective: hw supposes that there might be an *entailment* relation between the mystic insight of an *ineffable* fact and some *effable* consequences of such an insight[57]:

> Does it make any sense to talk about the effable consequences of an ineffable insight? At least with respect to the lower and weaker grades of ineffability, it surely does. Consider the lowest grade of ineffability: inexpressibility in a given language. It's clearly possible to take a language L, remove from it all sorts of expressive devices until we get a fragment of L – call it L' — such that there are propositions

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57 To be fair, Kukla speaks about the ineffability *of the insight* experienced by the mystic (see 2005, p.108, e.g., «ineffable mystic insight»); but he also classifies ineffabilities in terms of facts (see 2005, p. 23 ff.). However, what matters for the sake of my argument is the general idea (based on Kukla's suggestion) that an ineffable notion might entail effable consequences, as I am going to show.

in *L* which are (1) not expressible in *L'*, but which (2) have consequences that are expressible in *L'*. Here's a concrete example: let *L'* be obtained from *L* by excizing all ways of negating sentences, and let (PvQ)&-P be a sentence of *L*. This sentence is ineffable in *L'*, but it has consequences (e.g., Q) that may very well be expressible in *L'*. Of course, this rationale depends on there being a more expressive language in which the ineffable fact can be stated. (2005, pp. 109-110)

So, I would assume the following principle:

(E) An ineffable fact (in a given language) might entail some effable consequences (in the same language)

where the effable consequences may range over concepts, propositions, and so on; and the entailment relation should be intended not like a mere material conditional, but rather as the general idea of a consequence, broadly construed. Indeed, regardless the example in the Kukla's quote above (if (PvQ)&-P, then *Q* in *L*), he also seems to use 'entailment' in a wider sense[58]. Furthermore, for the sake of this paper, I assume that (E) can be used independently of the acknowledgment of the ineffable fact as the content of a (putative) *mystic* insight[59].

Now, I would rephrase (E) in the light of Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffable concepts (see §5). Therefore,

(E*) An ineffable concept (in a given language) might entail some effable consequences (in the same language)[60]

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58 See, e.g., 2005, p. 109, emphasis added: «On this account, the mystic's monism, her optimism, and her view that eternity is timeless are all *entailed* by her ineffable insight».

59 However, I would invite the reader to see Mattiazzi (2016) about possible link between Severino's works and mysticism (broadly speaking).

60 The notion of entailment occurring in (*E**), as well as in (*E*) and in the rest of this work (e.g., in (*E***)), should be read in a wider sense than the material conditional, as I underlined before. I would say that the consequence relation among concepts might be read in a loose way, as well as A.W. Moore (1997, pp. 15-16) does (although in another context): «All I require is that there should be some non-trivial notion of consequence […], for instance something that depends on a notion of supervenience».

Assuming that nothingness is an ineffable concept in our language, then we can affirm that (Nothingness-$_N$) or the nullity of nothingness might entail some effable consequences in that language. Finally, I would propose to count (Nothingness-$_P$) among the consequences of the ineffable (Nothingness-$_N$). Therefore, given a language, we can claim that

(E**) The *ineffable* moment (Nothingness-$_N$) entails the *effable* moment (Nothingness-$_P$)

where the moments are exactly the two moments that belong to the twofold concept of nothingness (i.e., the twofold structure of nothingness as in Severino's approach)[61].

To sum up, my proposal mainly based on two tenets: (i) assuming Shaw (2013)'s account of ineffable concept (see §5), nothingness as such (the nullity of nothingness) is an ineffable conceptual moment; (ii) assuming Kukla (2005)'s suggestion, the *ineffable* moment of the concept of nothingness entails the *effable* moment of the concept of nothingness[62]. These assumptions allow us to underpin the account of nothingness by Severino. Indeed, adjusted with these assumptions, the twofold account of nothingness by Severino might be able to answer some, if not all, of the objections I recalled in §4, without appealing to non-conceptual indirect modes of expression (such as *indication* or *gesturing toward*). Let us call 'the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness' the account of nothingness composed by:

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61 In (E**) the modal verb ('might') has been taken away. One could object it is not allowed to move from <it is possible that *p*> to <*p*>. However, I think we can overlook this issue. So much so that Kukla (2005)'s suggestion, represented by (E), is applied to historical facts of our *actual world,* e.g., some effable consequences coming from (putative) mystic insights of our world (see, e.g., 2005, p. 109).

62 I have already combined Kukla (2005)'s suggestion and the account of ineffable concept by Shaw (2013) in Simionato (2021) to propose a "modest" primitivist theory of truth, where the concept of truth is ineffable, whilst the so-called correspondence relation is the effable consequence of that ineffable concept of truth. Indeed, the question of nothingness and the question of truth might be closely related (they definitely are within Severino's ontology). Therefore, it is no coincidence that a similar account might be developed for both the concept of nothingness and the concept of truth.

- the *ineffable* conceptual moment (Nothingness-$_N$)
- the *effable* conceptual moment (Nothingness-$_P$)
- the relation of *entailment* that holds between them[63].

8. The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness and the objections against Severino's account of nothingness

Let's come back to the objection about relation (see §4):

(OR*) There is no account of the relation between (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$)

I think that the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness can respond to the objection (OR*). Indeed, it provides an account of the relation between the two moments insofar as they are involved in an *entailment relation*: (Nothingness-$_P$) is entailed by (Nothingness-$_N$), i.e., (Nothingness-$_P$) is a *consequence* of (Nothingness-$_N$).

The twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness could also address the objection of indiscernibility:

(OI) There is no way of discerning (Nothingness-$_N$) from (Nothingness-$_P$).

Now, through the "improved" account of nothingness, each moment has a *distinctive feature* with respect to the other moment: (Nothingness-$_N$) is *ineffable*, whilst (Nothingness-$_P$) is *effable* (in the same given language). So, within the same language, we can *express* the «myriad aspects of the positive meaningfulness of nothingness»[64] because these aspects

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63 Recalling the threefold classification of the account of nothingness (see §1), I would say that the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness is a hybrid account of nothingness as well as the original account by Severino (1981). Indeed, what makes these accounts hybrid is the use of 'nothingness' as *both* a singular term that denotes something, i.e., (Nothingness-P); *and* a negative quantifier phrase, the negation of unrestrictedly all things, i.e., (Nothingness-N).

64 «La ricchezza del positivo significare del nulla» (translated by M.Simionato; see for example Severino, 2011a; 2013)

are effable in that language; but they are different from the nullity of nothingness insofar as this nullity is ineffable in that language.

Once we get the discernibility of the two moments of (the apophatic) nothingness, I think we might reply to the objection of internal contradiction

(OC) (Nothingness-$_N$) is self-contradictory

by restating Severino's strategy (see §3), according to which we can affirm that both (Nothingness-$_N$) and (Nothingness-$_P$) are *internally* consistent, whilst the contradiction *externally* holds between the two moments. As I noticed in §4, using the original account of nothingness by Severino, this kind of reply would be undermined by the indiscernibility of the two moments. But now that we can appeal to the discernibility of the two moments in terms of ineffability/effability, we can reintroduce Severino's solution to that objection. Furthermore, if the objection (OR) is substantially reducible to objection (OC) – as I argued in §4 –, then the reply to (OC) might be a reply to (OR) as well.

Let's now pass to the fourth kind of objection (see §4):

(OD) There is no explanation about the difference between *discerning* and *separating*

The twofold structure of apophatic nothingness can provide such an explanation. It is *in virtue of the entailment relation* between the ineffable moment and the effable moment of nothingness that we cannot separate one moment from the other moment. (Nothingness-$_P$) cannot be separated from (Nothingness-$_N$) because the former is the (effable) *consequence* of the latter. Therefore, in reply to (OD), we can say that the sense of the separability of (Nothingness-$_P$) from (Nothingness-$_N$) – or vice versa - *is different* from the sense of discernibility of the two moments because the separability ranges over an entailment relation, whilst the discernibility ranges over an ineffable or an effable concept. Recalling the objection (OD), the issue was to understand how two discernible items can be acknowledged as such if they are not somehow separated. Now we have a reply: the two items at stake are discernible because one is *ineffable* and the other is *effable*; at the same time, the two items cannot be separated because they are *related*, precisely occurring in a relation of entailment.

To sum up, when compared to the original twofold account of nothingness by Severino (see §3), the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness (see §7) seems more suitable to reply to: objections about relation (in the version (OR*)); objection about indiscernibility; and objection about the difference between *discerning* and *separating*. The objection about internal contradiction in the version (OC) and the objection about relation in the version (OR) can be handled by the original strategy that Severino proposed in his work (1981) as long as one assumes the validity of the replies that the apophatic account of nothingness provides to the other kinds of objections. Instead, the question remains open about the objection (OC*), as I am going to show in the next section (together with some other unsolved issues).

9. Some unsolved issues

To understand the issues concerning the objection:

(OC*) Nothingness is a self-contradictory *fully real* entity,

we need to compare again the *imposition-cum-negation* strategy by Ho to the account of nothingness by Severino. As we have seen previously, according to Ho, the imposition and its negation are «two phases of the same event» (2006, p.415). In §6 I pointed out a similarity between the "internal" consistency of both imposition *as such* and its negation *as such* and the "internal" consistency of both (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_N$), respectively. What is unclear is whether an "external" contradiction holds between the phase of imposition and the phase of negation. Indeed, within Severino's account, an "external" contradiction holds between (Nothingness-$_P$) and (Nothingness-$_N$) and that is exactly why the objection (OC*) occurs (see §4). If a similar "external" contradiction held between imposition and its negation, then the apophatic nothingness would be undermined by the objection (OC*)[65]. However, within

65 We cannot even count the apophatic nothingness among putative "contradictory" or "impossible" items: as I noticed before – following a Ho's suggestion –, if nothingness is absolutely unthinkable and unspeakable, i.e., *ineffable*, then we cannot describe it in any way because it defies *any* determination or description at all.

the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness that I proposed in §7, the two moments of nothingness occur in a relation of entailment: the ineffable (Nothingness-$_N$) entails the effable (Nothingness-$_P$). Therefore, *prima facie*, there is no contradiction within the whole structure of the apophatic nothingness. Rather, there is a consequence relation. Yet, I would leave the question open of whether this entailment relation between an ineffable item and an effable item leads to a contradiction.

Another open question concerns the separability/inseparability of the two moments of nothingness. In the previous section, I argued that the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness allows us to explain why the effable (Nothingness-$_P$) cannot be separated from the ineffable (Nothingness-$_N$). However, I am not sure that the twofold structure is able to explain the converse, i.e., why the ineffable (Nothingness-$_N$) cannot be separated from (Nothingness-$_P$). Indeed, since (Nothingness-$_N$) is not a consequence of another conceptual moment, one might keep it isolated. Again, I would leave this question open.

Let us now consider the ineffability from Kukla (2005)'s standpoint to better understand his suggestion that the (mystic) insight of an *ineffable* fact might entail some *effable* consequences. As we have seen, this suggestion plays an important role in my development of the twofold structure of apophatic nothingness. In this regard, I would point out that Kukla recognizes five «grades of ineffability» according to five different orders of a given language, based on five different "modal" notions - as to say. Indeed, Kukla accounts for (five) different ways of understanding the possibility/impossibility of expressing something in language (see 2005, pp. 23 ff., some emphasis added)[66]:

1) **Weak ineffability**: A fact is *weakly ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in one or more of the languages which some human beings actually speak, or have spoken, or will speak;

2) **Human ineffability**: A fact is *humanly ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in any language that it's *nomologically possible* for

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66 In what follows, Kukla uses the notion of fact as *obtaining state of affairs* (see 2005, pp. 10-11).

human beings to use, regardless of whether that language is ever actually spoken by human beings;

3) **Nomological ineffability**: A fact is *nomologically ineffable* if there is no sentence for it in any language that any *nomologically possible being* can use;

4) **Weak logical ineffability**: A fact is weakly logically ineffable if it can't be expressed in any language that can be used by *any logically possible being*, regardless of whether there are sentences for it in some logically possible languages;

5) **Logical ineffability (*tout court*)**: A fact is *logically ineffable* (*tout court*) if there is no sentence for it in *any logically possible language*.

As one can see, they are ordered by the lowest to the highest level of ineffability, and – as highlighted by Kukla – «each grade of ineffability entails all the lower grades» (2005, p.81), but not *viceversa*.

Assuming this taxonomy, what about the apophatic nothingness, i.e., the absolute nothingness conceived as ineffable? What is at stake is the grade of ineffability of the nullity of nothingness. If one assumes that Kukla's taxonomy can be applied to ineffable *concepts*, then one might wonder which grade of ineffability fits with the conceptual moment (Nothingness-$_N$). *Prima facie*, I think Severino would choose the 5th grade: logical ineffability *tout court*. Be that as it may, for the sake of this paper, I just need to point out that in Kukla's intention, the possible entailment between an ineffable notion (broadly speaking) and its effable consequences does not work in the case of the 4th and the 5th grades of ineffability[67]. Therefore, we have at least two options, if we maintain the twofold structure of the apophatic nothingness, including the entailment relation between the two moments of nothingness. The first consists in extending the above-mentioned entailment to logical ineffability, main-

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67 «The rationale won't work for the highest grade of ineffability—inexpressibility in all logically possible languages. I concede that, for all I know, the idea of there being effable consequences of truths that *are* ineffable in this very strong sense may be incoherent. In fact, I concede that the idea of logical ineffability itself may be incoherent.» (2005, p.110).

taining that the nullity of nothingness is *logically* ineffable. Furthermore, this option would be more aligned to the idea of nothingness as *essential* ineffability (see §5). The second option consists in maintaining the limit posed by Kukla, reshaping the nullity of nothingness in terms of *nomological or human or weak* ineffability. However, this option would lead us to come round to the idea of nothingness as *essential* ineffability. Maybe we should reshape the nullity of nothingness in terms of *removable* ineffability. The question is still open, at least in my view.

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