

# The Nothingness of (the) Nothing

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In recent years, in the analytic philosophical community various people have focused their attention again on (the) Nothing, in order to say that, *pace* Carnap (1932/1959) and *pro* Heidegger (1929/1977), there are occurrences of the corresponding phrase “(the) Nothing” in which it works as a singular term, not as a quantified expression (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa 2015, 2019, Costantini 2020, Jacquette 2013, 2015, Oliver-Smiley 2013, Priest 2014a,b, Simionato 2017, Voltolini 2015). First of all, I will stress again that, *if* those occurrences are referentially successful, as most of the previous people proposes, they denote an object that is paradoxical. For it is inconsistent because of its contradictory behavior with respect to a certain universal first-order property, what I call the *genuine* existential property, i.e., Russell’s (1903) *being*. After reviewing and assessing such proposals, I will moreover try to show why the antecedent of the above conditional is false. In a nutshell, there cannot, even *impossibly*, be such a thing as (the) Nothing, not because this would make the overall totality of beings contradictory as well (by both including and not including (the) Nothing), but because (as Twardowski 1892/1977 somehow intuited) it would prevent that totality from being determined *at all* and (*pace* Costantini 2020) *once for all*. Finally, therefore, the only things that there legitimately are à propos of (the) Nothing are significant propositions, depending on the fact that the phrase “(the) Nothing” yields a contextually meaningful contribution to them *qua* Russellean definite description, even though it does not denote at all. Possibly, this position is similar to what Severino (1957, 2013) maintained on this subject.

**Keywords:**

**Nothing, *possibilia*, *impossibilia*, totality of beings, contradictory meaning**

## Introduction

In recent years, against the received view popularized by Carnap (1932/1959), various people have proposed that the phrase “(the) Nothing” may be used not only as a quantifier expression, but also as a (contextually meaningful) singular term (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Costantini, 2020; Jacquette, 2013, 2015; Oliver-Smiley, 2013; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017; Voltolini, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, not all occurrences of such phrase can be successfully paraphrased in quantifying terms. To stick to a case originally pointed out by Heidegger himself (1984, p. 3), if one truly says:

(1) Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about (the) Nothing

one can hardly read it as the false:

(1Q) There is nothing both Hegel and Heidegger thought about

that clearly has a different meaning<sup>2</sup>.

- 1 In order to dispense with this ambiguity, Oliver-Smiley (2013) coin the new term “zilch” and take it as an empty singular term that, if it denoted anything, it would denote the Nothing.
- 2 For this example, cf. Priest (2014a, p. 150). I take this example to be more convincing as other close examples, e.g., “the absence of all beings is (the) Nothing” and “God created the World out of (the) Nothing” (Priest 2014a, b). For such examples may be open to suitable paraphrases, e.g. “the absence of all beings is the fact that there is nothing” and “there is no thing and no time  $t'$  earlier than  $t$  out of which God creates the World at  $t$ ”. Since this latter sentence entails, just as the paraphrased one, “God created the World at some time”, its value as a paraphrase sounds to me better than the one Kroon (2018) proposes and justly reproaches because of the ambiguity between a monadic and a relational sense of “to create”, i.e., “God created the World and there is nothing out of which God created the World”. For further criticisms about the ‘reificationist’ reading of the ‘God’ sentence, cf. Sgaravatti-Spoloare (2018).

I refer to the phrase “(the) Nothing” not only because it is the literal translation of the German “das Nichts” used by Carnap’s polemical focus, i.e. Heidegger (1929/1977), but also in order not to take stand, for the time being, on whether, so used, that phrase counts as a proper name (“Nothing”) or as a, possibly nominal, definite description (“the Nothing”). For the majority of such people, in that use the phrase is also referentially successful, in that it denotes an, admittedly zany, item. In this paper, first, I want to assess such proposals in order to see their pros and their cons. Second, I want to put forward an argument that purportedly shows that one is not ontologically committed to the Nothing in its best metaphysical account; namely, *qua* inconsistent paradoxical item. As a result, third, I will defend the idea that in the relevant use, “(the) Nothing” is a merely contextually meaningful singular term, notably, a Russellian definite description, which does not denote anything, not even an inconsistent paradoxical item. Finally, I will try to see whether my account is similar to the one that Severino (1957, 2013) defended.

The architecture of this paper is the following. In Section 1, I assess the ontologically committal positions on the Nothing, while showing why the best of such positions make one ontologically commit to an inconsistent paradoxical item. In Section 2, I try to show why such a commitment fails. In Section 3, I compare my own treatment of “(the) Nothing” as a contextually meaningful yet non-denoting singular term with Severino’s understanding of it.

## 1. “(The) Nothing” As a (Contextually Meaningful) Denoting Singular Term

Those who think that “(the) Nothing” has a use in which it works as a (contextually meaningful) singular term are primarily divided in two main camps: those who take that in that use, the phrase denotes an item (e.g. Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Costantini, 2020; Jacqueline, 2013, 2015; Priest, 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017) and those who take that in that use, the phrase counts as an empty singular term (e.g. Oliver-Smilely, 2013; Voltolini, 2015). The first camp further divides into two subgroups: those who think that the phrase denotes a consistent entity (Jacquette, 2013, 2015) and those who think, in the wake of Heidegger, that the phrase denotes an inconsistent item (Casati-Fujikawa, 2015, 2019; Priest 2014a, b; Simionato, 2017).

As Casati-Fujikawa (2019) already underline, the first option is rather implausible. In Jacqueline's (2013) account, the Nothing is a Meinongian non-existent object that has as its only constitutive property, in Meinong's (1972) and Parsons' (1980) terms of a property that constitute the object's core, the property of *being N*. In its turn, *being N* is spelled out as "being nothing other than itself", or more extensively, "being the only intendable object whose intensional identity involves nothing beyond its self-identity" (2013, p. 110). Even if one buys the disputable distinction between constitutive and extraconstitutive properties, it is unclear to me why the above object should be the Nothing. Having *nothing* but one constitutive property, in particular the property of self-identity, does not single out the Nothing among other such more plausible candidates of Meinongian non-existent objects that have just one constitutive property. For example, consider the Meinongian non-existent object that has as its only constitutive property the (second-order) property of *having no properties*<sup>3</sup>. In my opinion, this object is closer to our intuitive pretheoretical idea of the Nothing. For on the one hand, it has the extraconstitutive second-order property of *having a property*: this latter property is the second-order property of *having no properties* it constitutively has. Yet on the other hand, it also fails to have that extraconstitutive property. For failing to have that extraconstitutive property accounts for the idea that such an object has no properties, since it instead has as a constitutive property, the second-order property of *having no properties*<sup>4</sup>.

Clearly enough, the above reflections point out that our intuitive pretheoretical idea of the Nothing conceives it as an inconsistent item, since the Meinongian object that has the constitutive property of *having no properties* both has and fails to have the extraconstitutive property of *having a property*. This idea is espoused by the other subcamp. Yet one may go even further and defend the claim that the Nothing is not only an in-

3 This object is closer to, but does not coincide with, Parsons' *null object* (1980, p. 19), i.e., the object that has no constitutive property at all. For this object does have a constitutive property; namely, the (second-order) property of *having no property*.

4 As regards intuitions, things would fare no better if *being N* were equated, as Jacqueline (2015, p. 211) does, with "the property of not existing and having only whatever extra-ontic (constitutive) properties are properties of every possibly intended (existent or nonexistent) object of thought". For further problems with this proposal, cf. Casati-Fujikawa (2019, pp. 3743-5).

consistent object, like, say, the round square and the wooden cannon made of steel (this example comes from Twardowski 1892/1977), but also a *paradoxical* object, since it both possesses and fail to possess a *universal* first-order property; namely, a property that *all* entities in the overall ontological domain have. So, for Priest, the Nothing is, in a Heideggerian vein, both something, i.e., an object, and fails to be so (2014a), or analogously, is both self-identical and fails to be so (2014b). Both *being something* and *being self-identical* are universal first-order properties<sup>5</sup>.

The first account – being something and not being such – seems to me worse than the second – being self-identical and not being such. For holding that the Nothing is something depends on an intentionality thesis (IT: Jacquette, 2015) that, *pace* Priest, has in itself a mere phenomenological and not an ontological import. According to IT, *as it seems* to any subject, any thought is about an intentional object (*intentionale*), i.e., for any thought there is an *intentionale*, independently of whether it exists<sup>6</sup>. Now by itself, this phenomenological thesis does not ontologically commit one to *intentionalia*. For in itself, an *intentionale* is just a *schematic* object; namely, something that, *qua* object of thought, has no metaphysical nature (Crane, 2001, 2013). If it has such a nature, an *intentionale* has it only independently of its being thought (ib.). As a result, in order for one to be ontologically committed to an *intentionale*, one must be independently committed to the objects that have the same metaphysical nature as that *intentionale* has outside phenomenology (Voltolini, 2013)<sup>7</sup>. For example, one may think about Graham Priest. *Qua* object of thought, Priest is an *intentionale* just as any other. Yet independently of its being thought of,

- 5 It is precisely because the Nothing is such, or, in analogous formulation, is both identical with something and fails to be so, that Oliver-Smiley (2013) and Voltolini (2015) respectively take “(the) Nothing” to have no denotation. More on this later.
- 6 Priest would rebut that for him, the somethingness of the Nothing only depends from particularly generalizing from sentences like (1) (personal communication). Yet it seems to me that such a particular generalization and IT stand together. If it is only phenomenologically the case that for any thought there is an *intentionale*, independently of whether it exists, then it is also only phenomenologically the case that there is something – i.e., (the) Nothing – both Hegel and Heidegger thought about, and *vice versa*.
- 7 For Crane (2001, 2013), these are just all existent *intentionalia*. Yet he admits not also that, however spelled out in first-order terms, *existence* is not a metaphysically relevant property, but also that nonexistent *intentionalia* have different metaphysical natures.

Priest is metaphysically a *concretum*; namely, an object that may have causal powers (for this definition of *concreteness*, cf. Cocchiarella, 1982 and Priest himself, 2016). Now, one is ontologically committed to *concreta*. Hence, one is ontologically committed to Priest as well. Now, apply this reasoning to the Nothing. *Phenomenologically* speaking, one may well think of the Nothing. This is what (1) above testifies. Yet in itself, this does not mean that the Nothing is something; namely, something that is allowed in the overall *ontological* domain. For in order for it to be so allowed, one must prove that one is ontologically committed to an item that has the paradoxical nature that both is and is not something. But this must be independently proved.

Granted, Priest may reply by saying that being a paradoxical object in the above sense – being something and failing to be so – does not qualify the metaphysical nature of the Nothing. For its nature instead consists in its being the absence of all beings (see also Simionato, 2017), what was there before that God created the World. Moreover, this nature may be further spelled out in mereological terms. As he (2014a, b) says, the Nothing is the fusion of no thing, the sum that has nothing as its parts.

First of all, I wonder whether conceiving the Nothing as a mereological sum satisfies our intuitive conception of it. For it is unclear to me whether when we pretheoretically think of the Nothing, we take it to be an entity of such a kind<sup>8</sup>. More problematically, moreover, a sum of no parts is hard to swallow. For a mereological sum is an entity whose being, in some way or other, depends on its parts: in order for a sum to be, its parts (whether existent or not)<sup>9</sup> must be as well. Yet if there are no parts, it is unclear how their sum can be there as well.

Priest might respond by saying that this is not particularly problematic. For one is also ontologically committed to the empty set, i.e., the set that has no members, although it cannot be there as well, since a set also depends on its members.

Yet at most this response shows that the Nothing is nothing, but then again, one must show what makes it the case that the Nothing is also something, since the above thesis IT does not prove it.

8 Similar doubts arise towards Casati-Fujikawa's (2019) idea of the Nothing as the complement of the totality of all beings. This idea raises a further problem, as we will see later.

9 For this specification, cf. Casati-Fujikawa (2019).

Perhaps a better move is to say that there is no real distinction between the first and the second account. For we are just looking for a universal first-order property that the Nothing simultaneously has and fails to have, and all the above descriptions – being something, being an object, being self-identical, being identical with something – are just *conceptually different* characterizations of *one and the same* universal first-order property. However one conceives it<sup>10</sup>, this is the property that, perhaps trivially, all members of the overall ontological domain possess: what originally Russell (1903) labeled *being*<sup>11</sup>, in order to distinguish it from *existence*, i.e., a property that only some entities in that ontological domain possess (Voltolini 2018). Let me call this universal first-order property the *genuine* existential property.

But if this is the case, namely, if the Nothing simultaneously has and fails to have that very universal first-order property, then a further problem arises. As we will see in the next Section, this problem prevents “(the) Nothing” from being a successfully referential term, even from being a term that refers to an inconsistent paradoxical item.

## 2. The Totality Problem

Let me start from the fact that possessing a property (or satisfying a predicate, if one wants to put thing in nominalist terms) is the condition for fixing the extension of a set. Trivially, for example, the set of Italians is the set of the all and only individuals that are Italian. Thus, this condition also works for adequately restricting the scope of a quantifier. In order to truly saying e.g.:

(2) Everyone gesticulates

one must restrict the scope of the universal quantifier to the set of the Italians. Yet this condition not only works for domain *restriction*, but also for domain *determination*. The set of absolutely all entities yields the overall ontological domain, the totality of all beings, whose extension is given

10 A further characterization is Williamson’s (2002) *existence in a logical sense*.

11 Pace Priest (2014a, p. 150), who erroneously conflates *being* with *subsistence*, i.e., the non-universal property of *non-spatiotemporal existence*.

by the possession of the universal first-order property I talked about at the end of the previous Section, the genuine existential property<sup>12</sup>.

Suppose, however, that there were an item that simultaneously possessed and failed to possess this property. If this were the case, it would be impossible to determine the totality of all beings, the overall ontological domain. For the property in question would simultaneously be both universal (for it includes the Nothing among its possessors) and non-universal (for it fails to include it).

First, this problem is stronger than the problem that a certain domain of entities is simultaneously both the overall ontological domain (for the Nothing belongs to it) and fails to be such (for the Nothing does not belong to it), or in other terms, that it both is and is not the totality of all beings<sup>13</sup>. For this would simply show that such a domain has a contradictory feature. But here the problem is that such a domain cannot even be determined. Rather than a contradictory domain, there cannot even be such a domain at all.

Second, this problem arises only with respect to the special totality of all beings that is the overall ontological domain. For in itself, as regards an ordinary totality, there is no problem as regards the fact that the relevant condition fixing it is both satisfied and not satisfied by a certain entity. For that totality is subordinated to a larger totality that includes both its members and the members of its complement. Thus, it may well be the case that, by both satisfying and not satisfying that condition, an entity both belongs to that totality and does not belong to it, i.e., belongs to its complement. For it does belong to that superordinate larger totality. For example, the ordinal of all ordinals may both be and fail to be an ordinal, thereby belonging both to the set of ordinals and not belonging to it, thereby also belonging to its complement<sup>14</sup>. For the totality of ordinals is subordinated to the larger totality of numbers, to which the ordinal of all ordinals anyway belongs. Yet once one focuses on the totality of all beings, there is by definition no larger totality to which this totality is subordinated, so

12 The overall ontological domain is absolutely narrower or larger, depending on whether the genuine existential property is equated or not with a substantial existential property. Cf. Voltolini, 2018.

13 Cf. Casati-Fujikawa, 2019, p. 3758.

14 I owe this example to Graham Priest. Of course, more mundane examples may be conceived: transsexuals both are and are not women, insofar as they are all human beings.



that an item may both belong to this totality and fail to belong to it, i.e., belong also to its complement, thereby belonging to that larger totality<sup>15</sup>.

In this vein, the problem refers to the problem Twardowski (1892/1977, pp. 19-20) raised. In order for the complement of a set to be successfully conceived, one must have a superordinate concept under which both the members of that set and the members of that set's complement fall. For example, Greeks (i.e., individuals falling under the concept of being Greek) and non-Greeks (i.e., individuals falling under the opposite concept of being non-Greek) are both human beings (i.e., individuals falling under the superordinate concept of being a human being). Yet one cannot have a superordinate concept under which both the somethings, i.e., the inhabitants of the overall ontological domain of beings, the totality of all beings, and the non-somethings fall. For that concept would be both superordinate to the somethings and coordinated with it, something again. Hence, the overall ontological domain could not be determined.

At this point, one may think that the determination problem I raised may be circumvented by postulating an indefinite plurality of totalities of all beings, each of which is larger than the previous one insofar as it includes the Nothing the previous totality excluded, yet it excludes a further fine-grained Nothing, so that in the end one comes up with an indefinite series of Nothings as well (Costantini, 2020).

The solution is ingenious, for it simultaneously removes the weaker problem of ascribing to the overall ontological domain a contradictory feature and the stronger problem of that very domain being unable to be determined. For at each step of the procedure, we have a Nothing that is not a something of a certain domain, yet it is a something of a larger domain that has another more fine-grained Nothing out of it. Yet another problem arises; namely, we fail to have properties that are able to respectively determine the progressive domains. The first alleged totality is provisionally the totality of all beings. But so is the second alleged larger totality, and so on *ad infinitum*. Yet, how can one select all such totalities? Indeed, how can the first universal first-order property be distinct from the second similar property if not in an *ad hoc* manner – to be the property of *being except all*

15 As a result, the Nothing cannot be satisfactorily conceived even as the impossible complement of the totality of all beings, as Casati-Fujikawa (2019) maintain. For since that totality cannot be determined, also the impossible complement of that totality cannot be determined.

*Nothings* vs. to be the property of *being except all minus one Nothing*, and so on?

In the end, therefore, it seems that it is better not to have at one's disposal an inconsistent paradoxical object (or an indefinite list of them), but to dispense with it at all. Or in other words, it is better to take "(the) Nothing" in its use as a singular term to be a non-denoting expression. As I said, this is the position that both Oliver-Smiley (2013) and Voltolini (2015) defend.

### 3. "(The) Nothing" As a Merely Contextually Meaningful Singular Term

In defending the idea that "(the) Nothing" counts as an empty singular term, one may take it either as an empty genuine singular term or as a denotationless merely apparent singular term that is explained away by the appropriate paraphrase of the sentence in which it occurs, *qua* definite description *à la* Russell. Since when one utters sentences like (1) above one is under the impression that one has uttered something meaningful, the first strategy is notoriously hard. For it is hard to provide a convincing account according to which the above sentence is meaningful if genuine singular terms are expressions that exhaust their meaning in their referents, i.e., in the entities they stand for, as Millian sustainers of direct reference theories traditionally hold. If a genuine singular term is empty and having meaning for that term is exhausted by its having a certain referent, it is hard to see how can it be meaningful<sup>16</sup>.

Granted, there are notorious ways in which sustainers of direct reference theories may circumvent this problem, by suitably weakening their adherence to Millianism<sup>17</sup>. Yet since a simpler alternative is at one's dispos-

16 The main proposals in the direct reference camp have notorious problems. Metalinguistic accounts *à la* Donnellan (1974) or fictionalist accounts *à la* Walton (1990) and Everett (2013) hardly give convincing truthconditional accounts of sentences like (1). 'Gappist' accounts *à la* Braun (1993) or presuppositionalist accounts *à la* Sainsbury (2009) fail to provide a convincing account of the truthconditional difference between (1) and the intuitively true "Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about Santa Claus" or between (1) and the intuitively false "Both Hegel and Heidegger thought about Harry Potter". For more on this, cf. Kroon-Voltolini, 2018.

al, i.e., to take “(the) Nothing” as a Russellean denotationless definite description, thereby removing the brackets that in it surround the definite article, better to stick to it. Voltolini (2015) proposes that sentences containing the phrase “(the) Nothing” in its use as a singular term, i.e., sentences of the form “(the) Nothing is  $F$ ”, must be read as sentences containing the definite description “the thing that is identical with nothing”, or more explicitly “the thing that is such that it is not the case that something is identical with it”,<sup>18</sup> so as to count as sentences of the kind “the thing that is identical with nothing  $F$ s”. This description is moreover to be understood *à la* Russell, by being contextually defined as Russell recommends, i.e. by suitably paraphrasing the sentences containing it in terms of sentences merely containing quantifying and predicative expressions, e.g., sentences of the kind “there is only one thing that is identical with nothing, and this thing  $F$ s”. Now, since the sentence in question is such that the existence condition it states is unsatisfied, for as I said in the previous Section there is no inconsistent paradoxical object that is both identical with nothing and fails to be such, that sentence is meaningful but typically false. Notable exceptions are sentences like (1), which are both meaningful and true. For there the description takes narrow scope, thereby failing to claim any ontological commitment to any item whatsoever. So read, (1) indeed amounts to the true:

(1R) Both Hegel and Heidegger thought that there is only one thing that is identical with nothing<sup>19</sup>.

17 One way of doing this is by splitting the overall meaningfulness of an empty singular term from its direct truthconditional contribution, e.g. by taking proper names as a sort of indexicals, having a linguistic meaning over and above their contextual reference. Cf. Voltolini, 2014.

18 Likewise, Oliver-Smiley say that “zilch” must be defined “via description – the thing that is nothing, the non-existent thing, the thing that is  $F$  and not  $F$ ; they are all logically equivalent” (2013, p. 602).

19 For a similar treatment, see Sgaravatti-Spoladore (2018, p. 133fn.1). This true paraphrase strengthens the idea I defended before that (1) is one of the best examples in which “(the) Nothing” is used as a singular term. Incidentally, note that I does not propose this kind of *de dicto* reading for *any* sentence of the same grammatical form as (1), but only for those sentences of that form whose phenomenological content does not match their real content, since one is not ontologically committed to the *intentionalia* they involve (see Section 1). Priest (2021) would certainly reply that this account does not explain the fact that other sentences involving “(the) Nothing” are

Now, it is quite possible that this account aligns with that originally provided by Severino (1957/2021, 2013/2021). According to Severino:

(3) The meaning ‘nothing’ is a self-contradictory meaning, which is to say a contradiction (1957/2021, p. 35).

In (3), the subject term expresses a self-contradictory meaning – I take that this amounts to what Severino calls the first moment of the Nothing (2013/2021, p. 35), aka “the positive meaningfulness” of the Nothing. In turn, what the predicate predicates of that meaning is what testifies to the nothingness of the Nothing, since there is no such thing; namely, the element of self-contradictoriness – I take that this amounts to what Severino calls the second moment of the Nothing (ib.), aka “the absolute nothingness and meaninglessness” of the Nothing. As a result, (3) states a certain propositional contradiction, which as such well figures in the overall ontological domain – it states that a certain contradiction is, in Severino’s own terms (ibid.)<sup>20</sup>. As stating a proposition *about a meaning*, (3) provides the true counterpart of what would be false if it were expressed not in semantical but in purportedly ontological terms, by taking the Nothing as what is other than being (ib, p. 33):

(4) What is other than being, i.e., the being that is other than being, is self-contradictory.

(4) contains a definite description “the being that is other than being” very similar to Voltolini’s (2015) original description, “the thing that is identical with nothing”. Moreover, it is meaningful in its predicating the

true, yet that are such that the description cannot be given narrow scope, such as e.g. “(the) Nothing is (the) Nothing”. Dead right, for this is a consequence of the Russellian account of denotationless definite descriptions. To be sure, if one wanted to give to “(the) Nothing is (the) Nothing” a true reading, one should read the relevant predicate “being identical with nothing” as involving an *internal*, not an external, predication of the property it expresses, along the lines of Castañeda (1989). But then the description would denote a Meinongian object that is a correlate of the set whose only member is that property. Cf. Voltolini, 2006. Yet this object would no longer be the inconsistent paradoxical object a defender of the Nothing looks for.

20 Unlike other propositions, this propositional contradiction necessarily subsists. As Severino puts thusly: “*it is the meaning nothing which is a contradiction – a necessary contradiction*” (2013/2021, p. 36).

self-contradictoriness of the thing that simultaneously is both a being and not a being. Yet since the description is denotationless for there is no such a thing, (4) is false. Just as the Heideggerian:

(5) The Nothing nothings

is in Voltolini's (2015) reconstruction.

Note however that, on behalf of Severino's himself, this semantical interpretation of Severino's position takes what he says *à propos* of meaning in non-Severinian terms. For it takes the meaning (3) talks about as the *semantic content* of the expression "nothing" in it, not as what "the meaning 'nothing'" stands for in it, as Severino instead does in a sort of directly referential mood *à la* early Russell (1903). For if this were the case, then in (3) "the meaning 'nothing'" would refer to *a sui generis* item, say the absence of any significance, in order to predicate of this very item its being self-contradictory, for the absence of any significance *is* anyway significant. But this would amount to take that item as an object that is not an object, precisely as the sort of paradoxical impossible object that Priest (and Heidegger himself before him) is looking for. Doubtlessly, this result would lead Severino towards a direction he wanted to avoid.

## Conclusions

Let me sum up. It is correct to say that there is a use in which the phrase "(the) Nothing" works as a contextually meaningful singular term rather than as a quantifying expression. Yet in that use that phrase counts as a denotationless Russellean definite description. For it cannot denote what it would plausibly denote if it could denote anything; namely, a paradoxical object, i.e., an item that is inconsistent since it would simultaneously have and fail to have the universal first-order property, i.e., the genuine existential property of *being*. Possibly, in holding that the only thing that there is *à propos* of the Nothing is a certain contradictory meaning of the corresponding linguistic expression, Severino would have agreed with these claims<sup>21</sup>.

21 I am very much to indebted to Franz Berto, Fred Kroon, Federico Perelda, Matteo Plebani and Graham Priest for their comments on this paper and the nice discussions had with them on this subject.

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