

NOTHINGNESS OR NOT-SOMETHINGNESS: A PARADOX

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2024.5127>

ABSTRACT

I have nothing. I do not have something. At first glance, these two sentences imply a lack; in colloquial speech, depending on the situation, the meanings of the two sentences may also be similar. However, the idea of nothing and something is an important subtlety that must be explained. What does the concept of nothing mean? And, does such a concept exist? Is nothing the opposite of something? These seemingly ontological, philosophical, and metaphysical questions are at the heart of everything we do, read, and say in life. To understand the idea of nothingness in a more nuanced perspective for readers and interlocutors, there is great value in unpacking these questions further. Thus, the objective of this research is to understand the idea of nothingness and what is not stated in a more nuanced perspective.

What is nothing? What is something? A Complex Paradox and Duality

Even a definition of nothing is insufficiently clear though it will serve as a good starting point for this discussion. Merriam Webster (2023) defined the word nothing as: “something that does not exist, the absence of all magnitude or quantity; someone or something of no or slight value or size” (entries 1 and 2). Such a definition may seem sufficiently clear at first glance, but such is not the case. In fact, within the definition is the confusion—the word something.

If nothing means no thing [sic] then the idea of a thing is important as it signifies an object. To talk about an object and the lack of it simultaneously implies a sort of cognitive dissonance which has been discussed in various contexts (Priest, 2017, 2019; Rae, 2016) but bears an additional discussion.

Varzi (2023) described cutting out a paper fish and then throwing the cut-out away; people were then asked what they saw. The answer was that people saw a fish. According to the author, a person cannot see the hole that is present in the paper. According to the author, a hole may be described as the absence of something (Varzi, 2023) but it is not absent of all things. And, the absence is an object in itself. The idea of trying to see simultaneously what is and is not present results in cognitive dissonance and a paradox. Varzi (2023) asked whether people are able to perceive an absence versus perceive something that is absent. Based on the research, Varzi discovered that perceiving something not present is easier than perceiving an absence.

The idea of nothingness can be a perplexing and perhaps paradoxical concept (Priest, 2019). Priest (2017, 2019) was clear that the concept of nothingness poses logical problems for anyone trying to understand it because of its ineffable nature. To try to explain an ineffable concept with words and logical ideas causes a cognitive dissonance. Not only can nothing not be easily described, but human beings have not experienced it (Wenning, 2023) in such a way that would

allow them subsequently to talk about it. Implied in the idea of nothingness is what Wenning (2023) described as nonbeing. To talk about the concepts of being and nonbeing is ineffable as human beings cannot understand experientially the concept of nonbeing. Additionally, the idea of nothingness is not always revealed to the reader. Important implications and literary and oral subtext may be missing. Though Zolghadr (2019) questioned whether the idea of nothingness existed or was merely the absence of something, it would seem clear that a more reasonable explanation of nothingness implies a complement of two elements. One could not exist without the other.

Pereira (2018) implied a duality between somethingness and nothingness in that nothing is part of everything and the sum of no things. The meanings of something and nothing then “[depend] on the existence of being” (Rae, 2016, p. 260). Meaning is contingent and hinges on what is and simultaneously what is not. One can only be understood by and through the other. The absence of something is still something (Horvath, 2012), not nothing. In short, though one may talk about the “the being of nothingness” (Rae, 2016, p. 251), it may be easier to understand the idea of nothing as the sum of some things and as an object itself (Godínez, 2017). Such an explanation may offer an understanding as to why people cannot see the hole and a fish in the study by Varzi (2023).

Based on the aforementioned discussion, though, if a slightly different perspective about nothingness is taken—one where nothingness does not equate to emptiness or something ineffable (Priest, 2017), but simply and perhaps more easily to a lacking requiring a different examination—then the resultant perspective changes may allow a researcher, analyst, or student to ask different questions pertaining more directly to a literary work: What is lacking and why is there a lacking? And, what does that non-statement signify? The objective is perhaps still the same—to gain a deeper, more nuanced, three-dimensional understanding of the issue in question. There is value now, to turn attention to the field of literature and explore lacking.

A Lack in Various Fields of Study

Broadly speaking, one may view the idea of a lack (Walsh, 1998) in a number of fields—philosophy, physics, music, and literature to name only a few. Here are three brief examples of the paradoxical concept of being and lacking in philosophy, physics, and music. A discussion of literature will be had in the subsequent section. The philosopher Merleau-Ponty, in 1964, stated:

Quand je dis donc que tout visible est invisible, que la perception est imperception, que la conscience a un punctum caecum, que voir c’est toujours voir plus qu’on ne voit, – il ne faut pas le comprendre dans le sens d’une contradiction – Il ne faut pas se figurer que j’ajoute au visible parfaitement défini comme en Soi un non-visible (qui ne serait qu’absence objective) (c’est-à-dire présence objective ailleurs, dans un ailleurs en soi) – Il faut comprendre que c’est la visibilité même qui comporte une non-visibilité. (p. 300)

Such ideas demonstrate not only a dichotomy between what is and what is not visible but, as Cauquelin (2006), a philosopher and artist, how “[le vide] est présent avec et en même temps que toute parole prononcée, que toute énonciation quelle qu’elle soit, car il est la condition de cette énonciation même” (p. 30). One element is inextricably part of and connected with the other.

In physics, the idea of a vacuum is valuable to this discussion. The utter absence is what gives rise to a vacuum yet one is connected to the other and cannot exist without the other—yin and yang, so to speak. Nothingness is relative to somethingness as Čapek wrote in 2021. A Soviet physicist, Isaak Pomeranchuk, one stated: “The vacuum is filled with the most profound physical content” (Okun, 1996, p. 67). This idea is not new as Bradley (1922) stated a similar concept when discussing the idea of negative and affirmative: “For, in order to deny, you must have the suggestion of an affirmative relation” (p. 114). Working from these ideas, Moghri (2022) commented that “If one imagines or assigns a property to a thing, that thing cannot be an absence of every concrete thing; it is rather a concrete thing” (Moghri, 2022, p. 81). Simply stated then, in the context of a vacuum, to talk about the absence requires objectifying it thereby resulting in a paradoxical cognitive dissonance.

Similarly, in music, in the early-to-mid 20th century, tonality gave way to dodecaphony and twelve-tone serialism developed and used by Schoenberg and Webern. To listeners of that time, the lack of tonality might have been jarring, but there is value in understanding that within dodecaphony, a sense of logic and order are present. To look at dodecaphony as missing tonality would be incorrect and incomplete as it has its own sense of logic and order, comparable to the aforementioned discussion of a vacuum. Thus, one must look at dodecaphony (and a vacuum) through a different and equally valuable alternate perspective.

Toward a Required Need for Understanding

There is value, now, to turn attention to the field of literature. In literature, the idea of an absence broadly can take two different forms but the goal is the same—to understand what is not explicitly stated. In text, such gaps or lacunae (Walsh, 1998) may be explicit (as in the use of an ellipsis), or implicit in the text. But regardless of how the information is or is not presented, what is not explicitly stated is equally as important as what is stated. Marguerite Duras, a famous 20th century French writer summed up the idea of a lacking by stating “C’est par le manque qu’on dit la chose” (Beaujour & Mascolo, 1981). Not only does a lack of something exist, but through it, the silence or omission becomes the context for the rest of the text or conversation. Much the same way that nothing and something form a yin-yang, so too do what is stated and what is not stated for a unity. In effect, Anne Cauquelin agreed with Duras when she stated that “[Le vide] est présent avec et en même temps que toute parole prononcée, que toute énonciation quelle qu’elle soit, car il est la condition de cette énonciation même” (Cauquelin, 2006, p. 30).

To achieve such an understanding of this dichotomy, we need to engage in a broader analysis and not focus exclusively on the written (or spoken) word to discover a hidden significance or meaning (Clancier, 1973). Clancier explained that “l’image joue sur deux sens: le manifest et le latent” (p. 9). Thus, given the two senses on which an image or text plays, it stands to reason that each element in a conversation or in a literary work must be viewed from more than one perspective for full or at least deeper comprehension to gain a clearer understanding of behaviors and psychological states of the person or persons involved in the discussion or dialogue. Without the discovery of that hiddenness, the reader or interlocutor cannot discover the subtext and only has a one-dimensional, minimal understanding of what is taking place; additionally, misunderstanding and ambiguity may very well ensue.

At this point, a person might logically ask: How might a reader or interlocutor discover these unstated ideas, feelings, or beliefs? Such a question, though important, has been clearly though not necessarily answered by Le Galliot in 1977 regarding readers of literature. Speakers would need to do similar things; however, because of the real-time temporality of an oral conversation, such a comparable real-time analysis may be limited. In his work, Le Galliot stated:

Echapper au blocage imposé par le sens manifeste et la linéarité de l'histoire ou de l'intrigue. Jouer avec l'oeuvre, la faire jouer sur et avec elle-même. Relire, lire dans tous les sens, aller à contre-courant, s'attarder aux silences, se rendre sensible à certaines reprises, redites, répétitions, aux absences aussi, considérer sans idée préconçue tel détail aussi bien que tel ensemble, pour revenir peut-être au mouvement le plus apparent [. . . .] (pp. 7-8)

Though the Le Galliot work is nearly 50 years old, the information is still highly relevant if scholars, learners, writers, and all human beings want to free themselves from the rigid linearity of the written text. Additionally, such commentary will be valuable in the next section when a discussion of textual extracts can present various meanings.

A Different and more Complete Understanding (of Nothingness)

The reader is asked to consider this short dialogue in light of what is present and what is not present. The reader is requested to consider these questions: Why did the wife respond as she did? What might explain that response? What was the husband thinking when he uttered his statement and why?

Husband: That dress make you look fat and frumpy.

Wife: Hmmm.

The absence of words on the part of female conveys a particular meaning that is no doubt clearly understood by the reader. One might interpret the woman's response in various ways: (a) a lack of desire at that moment to engage in an argument, (b) a desire not to hear the negative comment, or perhaps (c) an inability to know how to express the feeling of hurt or being upset. The idea of not wanting or knowing how to express her feelings adds a perspective to the dialogue that may not be initially evident or understood. If her statement comes from a place of not feeling safe versus not knowing how to express her desires, the resultant implications would and could have vastly different meanings and effects on the reader.

Once the idea of the wife is at least hypothesized and potentially understood, then the newly uncovered understanding adds a valuable three-dimensionality (Chametzky, 2023) to the dialogue for the reader then might wonder why the husband stated what he did, and why he was perhaps not sensitive to his partner's needs. Was he trying to be honest without being malicious? Or, was there an intended air of hurtfulness? Maybe the subtext is that regardless of how she looks, he loves her and felt he did not need to state the love explicitly? Because of his own unknowing, perhaps the husband did not realize that his wife would feel hurt from the truth.

Any of these potential thoughts is possible. The reader needs to view the text extract from different perspectives, as Le Galliot (1977) mentioned, to understand the meaning of the text and to understand more clearly what was not stated. Such a psychoanalytic perspective is valuable not only in literature but in life where, sometimes, we human beings do not always state things explicitly. And, such implicitness, can potentially cause, as in the aforementioned text, great tension between interlocutors. The two communicators need to understand these implicit ideas and what they mean in the context of the conversation.

Here are two additional examples where though words are expressed, there is most clearly a different underlying meaning evident:

Student: <an end-of-course evaluation email> Professor, I found your writing in class unclear and you didn't answer my questions. You were hyper-critical of my work and took off points arbitrarily. You were one of the worst professors I've ever had.

Professor: <email response> Thank you for your . . . comments.

Here is a different and completely plausible discussion that might take place between two students:

Student 1: How's the prof in that class?

Student 2: The prof is <pause> fine.

One might presume that in the first case, the professor is trying to be professional rather than insulting or malicious. Or, perhaps the professor, like the wife in the previous example, does not want to engage with the learner. Conceivably, a simple and straightforward response will end the discussion. And, given that the course has now completed, there may be no value for the professor to justify his or her actions and grades in the course.

For Student 2, the pause is what is telling for the learner does not want to state explicitly what is thought. Additionally, the word "fine" is rather non-descript but combined with a pause might indicate some displeasure on an interpersonal level. Perhaps Student 2 wants to be polite and not use a more vulgar term. Perhaps, too, the student wants implicitly to state that the professor was OK but just not to his or her liking. Such a subtle distinction, made evident if the interaction were done orally, would possibly be clearer because of any facial expressions.

In both examples, while several inferences may be made, the reader does not have the full context, tone, and backstories to the thoughts and beliefs to understand more clearly why potentially valuable information is missing. Yet, there is great value to understand what are the professor and Student 2 are not stating for it is only through the omission that something is stated as Marguerite Duras had once stated: "c'est par le manque qu'on dit des choses" (Harvey & Ince, 2001, p. 120).

Cei Santos (2013) referenced a 19th century Brazilian writer, Machado de Assis, in which the Brazilian author wrote in one work "the voluptuousness of nothingness awaits you" (p. 13). In the 21st century, colloquially, the term voluptuousness has a sexual connotation that may not be appropriate when discussing nothingness. However, given the vast, broad nature of nothingness

in which many different elements can and do exist, one might use the term rubenesque or of ample proportions (void of any sexual connotation) to account for the many possibilities for what may lie within that which is not stated.

In the three aforementioned situations, the dialogues are multi-layered and rubenesque in how those few lines of text may be interpreted. And though a number of possibilities were offered, many more suggestions exist if one were to look at the lacking through cultural or ethnographic perspectives (Khaydarova, 2021). There is, as Chametzky (2023) described, “a type of auto-stereograph, a two-dimensional image into which a viewer could see a heretofore hidden 3-dimensional picture (Koning & Steffen, 2022)” (p. 114). Without further reflection and analysis, though, the hidden image could not become present (Chametzky, 2023). Though the author wrote the words on the page, the depth of the characters, their backstories, and their dialogue cannot and must not be ignored. The same is true for two interlocutors or a reader of literature. The comments from Duras and Cauquelin now take on increased significance as each person in the conversation (or the reader) tries to understand what was and was not stated and why.

CONCLUSION

The ideas of existing and non-existing, being and nonbeing (Wenning, 2023), or nothingness and somethingness have existed and continue to exist in the world forming a sort of yin-yang where one cannot exist without the other. To talk about one—regardless of the context—requires a discussion of the other. Based on the aforementioned discussion, then perhaps a new way of looking at lacking needs to happen. When readers and interlocutors peel away layers of (oral and/or written) communication, what results is a deeper sense of awareness. Thus, perhaps nothingness may be viewed differently, not only as a dichotomy but as a fluid state or sense “of awareness” (Alcaraz-Sánchez et al., 2022, para. 1). We readers and communicators must be cognizant of the multidimensionality of nothingness and its fluidity. With this more nuanced understanding we can perhaps understand more clearly why something was said or not said.

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Acknowledgements: I would like to offer very special thanks to KKB and JL who offered personal interpretations concerning the various dialogues presented in this research.