

<http://doi.org/10.21555/top.v700.2761>

# The Counterintuitive Logic of the Nothing and the Gift of Nihilism: A Reading of Heidegger

## La lógica contraintuitiva de la nada y el don del nihilismo: una lectura de Heidegger

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Recibido: 01 - 02 - 2023.

Aceptado: 20 - 05 - 2023.

Publicado en línea: 14 - 08 - 2024.

Cómo citar este artículo: Becker Lorca, M. S. (2024). The Counterintuitive Logic of the Nothing and the Gift of Nihilism: A Reading of Heidegger. *Tópicos (México)*, 70, 221-249. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.21555/top.v700.2761>.



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### Abstract

This paper presents an interpretation of nihilism based on the logic of nothingness. In the first part, I explore the mode of manifestation of nothingness, arguing that it resides at the core of the negative mode in which the Being of beings reveals itself: its withdrawal is precisely its mode of giving itself to us. To examine this obscure mode of disclosure, I distinguish between two different meanings of nothingness: nothingness as the total other of beings and Being as nothing. Following the latter and the negative and counterintuitive logic that it implies, in the second part, I offer an interpretation of nihilism. If in the age of nihilism “there is nothing to Being itself” —as Heidegger claimed— one may argue—with Heidegger—that this “denial itself had to become the highest and most austere revealing of Being.” This interpretation of nihilism may contradict Heidegger’s own often reactionary views on modernity.

*Keywords:* Martin Heidegger; nothing; *nihil negativum*; Being as nothing; nihilism

### Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una interpretación del nihilismo basada en la lógica de la nada. En la primera parte, se explora el modo de manifestación de la nada argumentando que este determina el modo negativo en el que se revela el ser de los entes: su retirada es precisamente el modo de darse. Para examinar este oscuro modo de revelación, se distingue entre dos significados de la nada: la nada como lo totalmente otro de los entes y el ser como nada. Siguiendo este último significado y la lógica negativa y contraintuitiva que implica, en la segunda parte se ofrece una interpretación del nihilismo. Si en la época del nihilismo “no hay nada para el ser mismo” —como sostenía Heidegger— se puede argumentar —con Heidegger— que esta “negación misma habría de convertirse en la más alta y más austera revelación del ser”. Esta interpretación del nihilismo parece contradecir las opiniones a menudo reaccionarias del propio Heidegger sobre la modernidad.

*Palabras clave:* Martin Heidegger; nada; *nihil negativum*; ser como nada; nihilismo

In this paper, I explore what I call the counterintuitive logic of the nothing as it appears in some of Heidegger's texts and offer an interpretation of nihilism from the point of view of this logic that may contradict Heidegger's own often reactionary views on modernity.

Nihilism is no longer something of the past. After long periods of confinement due to the pandemic, anxiety, confusion, and boredom have spread as fast as the virus. Many had no choice but listening to nihilism's silent whisper: everything may be in vain. If, in Nietzsche's 1885 world, "nihilism stands at the door," for us in 2024, it has crossed it. Nihilism—the "uncanniest of all guests" (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 9)—is now with us.

I approach nihilism from the point of view of the question of Being—a question that was brought back to philosophy by Heidegger, not without polemics, a century ago. I argue for an ontological revelatory possibility in nihilism, which usually lingers latent and hidden within the ambiguous meaning of the nothing. In order to acquire this point of view in which the ontological revelatory possibility of nihilism can be appreciated, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the nothing—the *nihil* that seems to define nihilism. The plausibility of this argument rests upon the success of accessing the nothing. In other words, the sense of this "revelation" occurring in nihilism presupposes the success of having experienced and interpreted accordingly the nothing's original disclosure.

In the first part of this paper, I offer an interpretation of the nothing by distinguishing two of its different meanings. On the one hand, there is the nothing as being's totally other (absolute nothing or *nihil negativum*), which, I claim, has an ontological revelatory function: in contrast to the sense of nothing experienced in anxiety, the fact *that* there are beings—and, precisely, not nothing—comes to the fore letting beings lose their taken-for-grantedness. On the other hand, there is the nothing as the proper name of Being, i.e., Being *as* nothing. Since, from the perspective of beings, Being is experienced as nothing, it is consistent to say that Being and the nothing are the same.

While the first meaning of the nothing secures our access to the disclosure of the meaning of the Being of beings, the second meaning elucidates the inverted and counterintuitive logic of Being that resides at the core of the sweep of anxiety and at the negative mode of revelation in

general. Both meanings must be carefully articulated in order to disclose what I argue to be the gift of nihilism: the possibility of the highest and most austere revealing of Being. Within the limits of this paper, I briefly study the first meaning of the nothing (leaving its full discussion for another work), and then focus more at length on the second meaning that functions as a hinge for the argument on nihilism developed on the second part.

In the second part, I argue that from the point of view gained in our study of Being as nothing we can clarify some counterintuitive logic, recurrent in Heidegger's work, of something that gives by not giving. More specifically, I demonstrate why, according to the logic of the nothing, in the age of nihilism where "there is nothing to Being itself" (Heidegger, 1991b, p. 201) it is plausible to suppose—with Heidegger—that this "denial itself had to become the highest and most austere revealing of Being" (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 154). This insight, however, may contradict Heidegger's own often reactionary views on modernity, a point I make in conclusion.

## 1. The phenomenology of the nothing<sup>1</sup>

It is the ambiguity of the concept of the nothing that makes it so difficult to address. This is to say: that to which the nothing refers may change relative to the context of its use. My strategy—as mentioned above—is to distinguish two different meanings that should not be confused. I begin by briefly introducing the notion of nothing as the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Heidegger, the possibility of conceiving the meaning of nothing depends on whether the nothing gives itself beforehand (1998e, p. 86). Thus, before taking the nothing as a concept and thinking it according to the rules of logic, one must first secure one's access to it. Consequently, rather than developing a logic—or even a dialectic—of the nothing, this paper first engages in a *phenomenology of the nothing* (arguing that such a thing is in fact possible). After having described phenomenologically how the nothing shows itself in anxiety (and its possible ontological function) (section 1.1.), then, in the rest of the paper, I freely use the notion of "logic." By referring to the "logic of the nothing" I am not implying to move beyond phenomenology, but rather I am describing the "logic" involved in how the *nothing* shows itself in a counterintuitive mode. While in the first section the task of asking (meaningfully) the question of the nothing requires questioning *logic*—in that it privileges beings (see Heidegger, 1998e, p. 85)—the rest of the paper tries to draw the "logical" consequences of experiencing Being *as* nothing.

opposite of beings as I read in Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?" (1.1). I then explore how the opposition of nothing and beings implies the sameness of Being and the nothing, i.e. Being as nothing (1.2).

### 1.1. Beings as what is radically other—with respect to Nothing (*nihil negativum*)

According to Heidegger, when the oscillation of anxiety reaches its entire span, the nihilation (i.e., the action of the nothing and its essence) may reveal to us, for the first time, what it means to be: "The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings Da-sein for the first time before beings as such" (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 90). Granting for a while this strange idea of an acting nothing, I ask: how does this revelation happen? Let us place ourselves in the oscillation of anxiety. Beings no longer speak to us; their singularity slips away, and they fall—and we do so as well with them—into what seems to be the abyss of nothing. A sense of indifference occurs, which does not make things disappear. Rather, in their very slipping away, things turn toward us. In this turning, the most usual and familiar fact of their presence becomes totally strange.

But—and here is the crux of the issue—together with this strangeness comes an insight: the nothing is not; there *are* beings and, precisely, not nothing. *The anxious experience of the nothing cancels out the nothing of the experience.* When anxiety oscillates in its whole span and "we release ourselves into the nothing" (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 96), then anxiety itself refutes the nothing. The sinking and the abyss are precisely *not nothing*. Everything becomes an instance of not nothing. The seemingly empty and indeterminate expression "being" acquires its concealed meaning: not nothing.<sup>2</sup> The strangeness becomes ontological; the concealed

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<sup>2</sup> From the point of view of Hegel's *Logic* (1969, p. 82), this idea sounds misleading: the emptiness and indetermination of the word "being" cannot be overcome by nothingness or its negation (not nothing) because nothingness is as empty and indeterminate as being. Indeed, for Hegel (1969, pp. 82 & 109), the first opposition between being and nothing is mediated by this second moment, in which one recognizes their sameness (due to their empty and indeterminate content), and thus fueling the dialectic movement towards *becoming* and *determinate being*. And yet, it seems to me that what complicates the confrontation between Heidegger and Hegel is that each one discusses the meaning of Being and nothing at different "levels." At the level of the absolute

meaning of Being is manifested in the refutation of the nothing: beings appear in “their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other—with respect to nothing” (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 90).<sup>3</sup>

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knowledge, achieved by consciousness after a long struggle described in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then developed in his *Logic*, the meaning of Being and nothing is straightforwardly clear: they are logical and abstract concepts still lacking reality and determination. For Heidegger, in contrast, what is at stake is precisely the question of the meaning of Being that the experience of the nothing may help to illuminate: Being and nothing are not empty concepts to be thought, but events to be experienced. Since Heidegger asks for a “fundamental experience of the nothing” (1998e, p. 87), it seems more likely that the Hegelian equivalent for Heidegger’s experiences of Being and nothing may be found as moments of consciousness’s *experience* described in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and not as the abstract concepts at the beginning of his *Logic*. Be that as it may, in Heidegger’s oeuvre he engages Hegel many times. Specially regarding negativity and the nothing, see Heidegger (1993), Biemel (1992), Dahlstrom (2011) and de la Maza (2021, pp. 135-151). For overviews of the different moments of Heidegger’s engagement with Hegel and the hermeneutical difficulties of this confrontation, see, among others, Janicaud (1999), Lindberg (2013), and de la Maza (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Often the ontological role of the nothing is not even noticed in the vast secondary literature on Heidegger, and when it is noticed, it is not always accepted. In *Reduction and Givenness*, the French phenomenologist and Christian thinker Jean-Luc Marion discusses the revelatory function of the nothing in Heidegger explicitly, just to dismiss it because of the essential ambiguity of the nothing that makes it fail to reveal Being as such: “The entrance of the Nothing into phenomenality is in no way sufficient for the manifestation of the ‘phenomenon of Being,’ since the Nothing itself still remains equivocal” (1998, p. 176). In another text, Marion attacks the referential capacity of the nothing: Nothingness “says nothing other than nothing. Nothingness does not mean anything; nor does it refer to anything, nor show anything—and being less than anything else. Nothingness opens no way to being, but proves a dead end or—which amounts to the same thing—refers to itself only” (1996, p. 188). According to Marion, Heidegger reduces nothingness by force to Being, as if “Heidegger himself was tempted to turn away from nothingness as soon as possible, as if he had been afraid of facing it too long” (1996, p. 185). Sadly, due to constraints of space, I cannot discuss Marion’s own non-ontological or theological version of the nothing. My effort in describing the movement within anxiety and the focus on the negative mode of disclosure, however, is my way of defending the “referential” capacity of the meaning of the nothing. Of course, the nothing is not, but precisely the meaning of this “not” can “refer” to the thatness of beings.

Here I am using the notion of nothing as *nihil negativum*<sup>4</sup>—i.e., the absolute and radical nothing, which Heidegger often dismisses.<sup>5</sup> Most of the times he writes explicitly about the nothing, he tries to separate his own version of the nothing from the nothing as *nihil negativum*. Thus, he usually accompanies his use of the nothing with some clarification that he is not referring to a “total nothing” (i.e., *nihil negativum*). For instance, in the context of *Being and Time*, he writes:

[...] that in the face of which anxiety is anxious is nothing ready-to-hand within-the-world. But this “nothing ready-to-hand,” which only our everyday circumspective discourse understands, is not totally nothing [*totales Nichts*]. The “nothing” of readiness-to-hand is grounded in the most primordial “something” — in the *world* (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 231–232).

Although Heidegger may dismiss the *nihil negativum*, he implicitly uses it during the most crucial moments of his writings. For instance, the nothing as *nihil negativum* appears in the guiding question of metaphysics: why are there beings at all instead of nothing? In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger, commenting on its scope, writes: “The domain of this question is limited only by what simply is not and never is: by Nothing. All that is not Nothing comes into the question, and in the end even Nothing itself—not, as it were, because it is something, a being, for after all we are talking about it, but because it ‘is’ Nothing” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 2).

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<sup>4</sup> On the *nihil negativum* (in comparison to *nihil privativum*, *ens rationis*, and *ens imaginarium*) and a general classification of different kinds of nothings understood as *non-objects* of experience, see Kant (*KrV* B 347–349).

<sup>5</sup> Frequently, the secondary literature joins Heidegger in this dismissive attitude. For instance, Thomson (2021) writes: “For Heidegger, ‘the nothing’ does not designate brute non-being; what he calls ‘the nothing itself’ is not nothing at all. [...] Such a null or nugatory nothingness would have no force or effect, whereas the phenomenon Heidegger calls ‘the nothing’ actively *does something*: ‘the nothing itself noths or nihilates’ (*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*)” (p. 520). In contrast, I argue that, depending on the context, one must distinguish two meanings of the nothing; if one fails to do so, one loses both its revelatory function (as *nihil negativum*) and the counterintuitive logic of Being’s disclosure when it is identified with the nothing (Being as nothing).

I argue that it is the nothing as *nihil negativum* that strikes us when we let the sweep of our suspense in anxiety take its full course. The nothing can never be, and yet we keep its signification or meaning within us. We know what it would mean if nothing at all had ever existed. It is this impossible meaning that somehow dwells in us that functions as a contrast to illuminate the heretofore concealed meaning of beings.

The *nihil negativum* casts its shadow over beings. With respect to nothing, the fact of existence has finally lost its taken-for-grantedness. Things are uncanny not regarding what they are, or how they work, but rather regarding *that* they are. Their thatness has lost its familiarity, and something from the uncanniness of thatness also permeates the *what* and *how* of things. The anxiety of realizing that this groundless existence could have been nothing turns into wonder when we realize that nonetheless things are—and, precisely, not nothing.

We may have thought that the nothing was producing the sinking into indifference which we feel at the moment of nihilation. And yet, it is the opposite. Rather than the nothing, it is Being as such (the insight into thatness) that insinuates itself in nihilation, which shatters our world of clear and distinct significance. From our point of view, however, Being as such is felt as nothing.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2. Being as nothing

While Heidegger wrote his lecture “What is Metaphysics?” (1928), he also wrote the treatise *On the Essence of Ground*. In the preface to the third edition (1949) of this treatise, Heidegger writes:

The nothing is the “not” of beings, and is thus being [Sein], experienced from the perspective of beings. The ontological difference is the “not” between beings

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<sup>6</sup> While the ontological difference is usually understood as the difference between beings and Being, the problem is that most of the time we don’t know what each of these terms mean. We can pretend to understand this difference and take it as a mere logical distinction between species and its genre, or between elements and its set, or between that which is grounded and its ground. But in these logical representations, the leap into the ontological has not happened. In order to understand the ontological difference, we must encounter the difference between beings and the nothing. The latter reveals the former difference: beings are that which is radically other with respect to nothing. By holding on to this insight, the ontological difference starts to dawn.



and being. Yet just as being, as the “not” in relation to beings, is by no means a nothing in the sense of a *nihil negativum*, so too the difference, as the “not” between beings and being, is in no way merely the figment of a distinction made by our understanding (*ens rationis*) (Heidegger, 1998b, p. 97).

So far, we have studied the nothing as the radically other of beings. But, since the Being of beings is not a being among others, Being as such is also the radically other of beings. From the point of view of beings, Being is a not-being, i.e., it is a no-thing. Being as such is experienced from our perspective as a “not” that occurs in our world. Being can be defined as the “not” in relation to beings. Therefore, the nothing and Being—both as the “not” of beings—seem to be the same.<sup>7</sup>

To avoid misunderstandings, we must carefully separate the meaning of the *nihil negativum* from the nothing as Being. As we saw in the first section, the *nihil negativum* grants us access to the meaning of the Being of beings. In contrast to the sense of nothing experienced in anxiety, the fact *that* there are beings and precisely not nothing comes to the fore letting beings lose their taken-for-grantedness. Consequently, I started with the first meaning of nothing in order to secure this interpretation of the sense of Being as this mysterious thatness. But now we must give another step by asking about the nature of this “thatness.”

There is a temptation to replace the simplicity and almost absurdity of the “thatness” of beings with another meaning of Being, one that would be more glorious or godlike. One must restrain from this substitution and instead ask about the kind of being to which this ontological “thatness” may refer. It is to this question that the second meaning of the nothing answers. Since Being as such (the mysterious thatness) is not a being among others—i.e., it is a “not” in relation to beings—it is properly experienced by us as a nothing. Any predicate other than nothing would lead to a confusion of the Being of beings (their thatness) with a being. The thatness of the computer, the table, or the thoughts involved in writing or reading this passage is different from the computer, the table, the reading, and the writing. The sense of the nothing as Being points precisely to this difference, and is, I argue,

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<sup>7</sup> About the sameness of Being and nothing, see Heidegger (1998a, p. 168; 1998e, pp. 94-95; 2003a p. 58; 2012b, p. 80).

essential to elucidating the negative mode of revelation that is common in Heidegger's oeuvre. In short, since Being is like nothing, it reveals itself precisely as absence.

Before I engage with this inverted logic of the nothing, let me first examine the "not" that is at the core of every being. In the 1937-1938 lecture course *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, Heidegger qualifies the notion of the "not":

If we speak of need as that which makes needful the highest form of necessity, we are not referring to misery and lack. Nevertheless, we are thinking of a *not* [*ein Nicht*], a negative [*ein Nichthaftes*]. But we know little enough of the negative and the "no" ["*Nein*"], for example in forms of refusal, deferment, and failure. Yet all that is not nothingness [*nichts Nichtiges*] but is at most (if not something higher still) its opposite. It never enters the field of view of our calculating reason that a no and a not may arise out of a surplus [*Übermaß*] or abundance [*Überflusses*], may be the highest gift, and as this not and no may infinitely, i.e., essentially, surpass every ordinary yes. And that is all to the good. For reason would "explain" it according to the principles of logic, whereby both affirmation and denial exist, but the yes has the priority since it posits and thus acknowledges something present at hand [*Vorliegendes*]. What is present [*Anwesende*] and at hand [*Vorhandene*] counts as a being [*Seiende*]. Therefore it is difficult for us, wherever we encounter something apparently "negative," not only to see in it the "positive" but also to conceive something more original, transcending that distinction (Heidegger, 1994, p, 132).

Firstly, there seems to be a difference between a "not" that originates in misery and lack, and another "not" that originates in surplus or abundance. Rejecting the notion of *nihil negativum*, Heidegger affirms that this latter "not" is something higher than—or at least opposite to—nothingness. In this "not" we are encountering Being as nothing. The ontological difference is both the condition of possibility of the referential context of significance (the world) and the cause of the fissure that leads to the collapse of meaning and significance. In the latter case,

the collapse is not due to some imperfection or lack, but rather it is due to the excess of the Being of beings that makes beings—when confronted with their thatness—indefinable. The world with all its meaning, significance, projects, and assignments is unable to keep beings at bay when insight into their thatness becomes conspicuous. The excess of the Being of beings creates the “space” to be filled in by significance and meaning, and yet the same excess makes the filling of the “space” impossible. But how do we discern whether the “not” comes from lack or surplus? Is there some clue to its origin at the level of our experiencing the “not”? Especially when the “not” inflicts on us so much pain—when it embodies a “refusal, deferment, and failure”—what does it mean that this painful “not” comes from an excess rather than a lack?

Secondly, when we limit our approach to beings (as logic does), affirmations have priority with respect to negations because they affirm beings that are present-at-hand. However, when we start with beings but—through anxiety—we reach the insight into the Being of beings, the priority of affirmations is challenged. Indeed, it is the “not” amid the ontic positivity of beings present-at-hand that provides access to the ontological thatness. However, as in the tradition of negative theology, we cannot stay at the level of the denial. That would mean that we stopped merely at the deficient mode within the ontic level—i.e., at the level of the negation of beings. According to Heidegger, the aim is to “conceive something more original, transcending that distinction.” Although Being as such cannot be limited to affirmations and negations, from our point of view as beings—the only point available to us—Being is experienced as “not.” Thus, we have to traverse the night of the “not,” but without staying there, and what is equally important, without turning the “not” into something. In other words, we must avoid the danger of reifying or hypostatizing the “not,” turning the “not” into another name for a supreme being.

Thirdly, the “not” can be experienced in different forms: for example, as “refusal, deferment, and failure.” According to Heidegger, negations are one form of the “not” among others, and in turn, the “not” is one form—among others—of the nihilation of the nothing.<sup>8</sup> The nihilative compartments are “forces in which Dasein bears its thrownness without

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<sup>8</sup> There are many other forms of nihilation that are common guests in our life. In “What is Metaphysics?” Heidegger mentions a few: unyielding antagonism, stinging rebuke, galling failure, merciless prohibition, and bitter

mastering it" (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 93). If the nothing is at the level of Being—i.e., Being as nothing—the nihilation of the nothing is primordial and cannot be overcome. In other words, since Dasein is defined by its thrownness, that it cannot master, these nihilative compartments are essential to Dasein and not accidental occurrences that are caused by some specific constellation of circumstances at some moment in the history of Being.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, it seems that we are condemned to be visited constantly by antagonism, rebuke, failure, prohibition, and privation. In other words, all our ontic efforts to escape them are going to fail, because existence itself exists as the nihilation of the nothing. Now, it seems feasible that when we acknowledge that the pain and suffering are not due to our lack, we can avoid a second and third layer of suffering.<sup>10</sup> And yet, is it enough to recognize the excess of Being as the source of the "not" to soothe the pain?

Let me come back to the logic of the nothing and the claim that this logic resides at the core of the negative mode of how the Being of beings

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privation (see Heidegger, 1998e, pp. 92-93). Of course, I cannot forget to mention the most famous of all: death.

<sup>9</sup> In section 2, I survey Heidegger's interpretations of modern nihilism. Its negative tone is often assumed to be part of his narrative of decay in the history of Being. But by acknowledging that these nihilative compartments are essential to existence (and for the revelation of existence), the view on modern nihilism might change. Rather than signaling a moment of decay in the history of Being, it would denote—despite its negativity, or precisely because of it—a privileged site for the disclosure of Being.

<sup>10</sup> Following Nietzsche's description of the ascetic ideal (i.e., that we prefer to negate life rather than to endure suffering without any reason), one can observe three levels of suffering. There is a first "original" suffering (suffering itself), i.e., the pain of being a finite animal. The ascetic ideal, however, does not offer an answer to suffering itself, but rather comes to fill the vacuum of a second (derivative) suffering: that of not knowing why we suffer—a suffering of suffering. "The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far—and the ascetic ideal offered man meaning!" (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 162). The ascetic ideal interprets the first suffering in order to fill the void of the lack of *why* of the second suffering. But, paradoxically, the interpretation offered by the ascetic ideal adds a third "fresh suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, more life-destructive suffering: it placed all suffering under the perspective of *guilt*" (p. 162). The will is saved from the void of meaninglessness, but the cost is high. It seems that this ascetic "medicine" has too many side effects.

reveals itself. Taking seriously the idea of Being *as* nothing,<sup>11</sup> I argue, first, that from the point of view of our common sense, the logic of the nothing is totally upside-down: by not knowing it, we know it. The nothing “is” when it is not.<sup>12</sup> We are “being held out into the nothing” (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 91) when the nothing remains hidden. Thus, amid beings, when there is nothing of the nothing, the nothing is precisely there. The nothing is inconspicuously operative when it is covered up by beings. It “is” when there is not.

Thus, when there are only beings left, precisely there the nothing is smoothly given to us. To negate the nothing—as when science, according to Heidegger’s interpretation, “wishes to know nothing of the nothing” (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 84)—is a mode of “affirming” it. In short, expressed in a “logical” and yet counterintuitive way: when the nothing is not appearing, it appears. Conversely, every discourse or explicit affirmation of it reifies and makes it into an “idol”, thus turning the nothing into precisely what is not, namely, a being. The nothing is not when it “is.” In short, if the nothing appears, it is not appearing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth study of Heidegger’s Being as nothing, see Peng (1998).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Marion acknowledges this paradox of the nothing, but, interestingly, he relates it to the divine: “This paradox—to deny nothingness means to recognize nothingness—ought not to be dismissed. We ought to face it [...] Nothingness looks like a strange counterpart of God: both take advantage of an ontological argument. God is supposed to exist merely in consequence of the perfection of his essence, and nothingness claims to be thanks to the absolute imperfection of its essence. In both cases we are compelled to admit an item as given simply because we think of it [...] Exactly as God, to achieve existence, only needs to be possible, nothingness only needs to be impossible (as it is) to claim a quasi-existence” (Marion, 1996, pp. 183-184).

<sup>13</sup> While the interplay between appearance and absence (or better, absence as a mode of appearance) in what I am calling here the “counterintuitive logic of nothing” may resemble some versions of the dialectical movement, the problem with dialectics arises, from a Heideggerian point of view, when one assumes both its *necessity* and its fulfillment in *absolute knowledge*. Thus, the major difference between what I am referring to as “counterintuitive logic of nothing” and dialectics does not reside in the dialectical movement as such, but rather in the assumption that through this movement one could obtain absolute knowledge. According to Dahlstrom (2011), despite the relevance of Hegel’s notion of negativity, “Heidegger contends that Hegel fails to put negativity itself in question [...]. As a result, what goes by the name of ‘negativity’ in Hegel’s

Someone may ask: do you know what the nothing means? I know nothing about the nothing, one may answer. In this answer, the nothing is precisely giving itself. In the “no,” the “not,” the nothing lets itself be heard even though we do not pay attention to it. And in this *not* paying attention, again, the nothing is known by us.

Second, I claim that when Being is understood as nothing (from the point of view of beings), it means that Being discloses itself according to the logic of the nothing. Accordingly, I argue that the different instances of the “negative” logic, so common in Heidegger’s oeuvre,<sup>14</sup> display the logic of the nothing. Or, better, this mode of revelation is logical because Being is properly understood as nothing. Their negative form of manifestation is an effect of the ontological difference. Since the fact of the existence of beings (their thatness) is not itself a being among beings, this fact comes to the fore following the logic of the nothing.

Since Being is like nothing from our point of view, the withdrawal of Being is its mode of giving itself to us. Being hides itself so that beings can be. Since Being is not a being among others, it cannot conspicuously appear next to other beings, but rather it is always already “appearing” as nothing—i.e., in the mode of inconspicuousness, unobtrusiveness, and non-obstinacy. When the knowledge about the Being of beings remains covered up by the multitude of beings, then Being is preserved: it gives itself and lets beings be despite—or maybe thanks to—this covering up.

So far, in this second subsection, I have offered an interpretation of Being as nothing, and I have speculated about its inverted logic of revelation. In the second part of this paper, I want to prove the

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thinking has, Heidegger charges, already ‘sacrificed’ (*darangegeben*) everything negative [...] and ‘swallowed’ it up in positivity from the outset” (p. 525). Since Hegel’s notion of negativity is not negative enough, it can finally be subsumed within the differentiated unity of the absolute (knowledge). According to Heidegger, while the fact that Dasein is “held out into the nothing” makes the “why” question and the search for *knowledge* possible, it also makes *absolute* knowledge impossible.

<sup>14</sup> We find in Heidegger’s work, for instance, “luminosity” (the absence of darkness) becoming “dark emptiness” (Heidegger, 1994, p. 169), the lack of need turning into a need (Heidegger, 1994, p. 169), the abandonment (withdrawal, self-concealment) of beings by Being as the essence of Being (Heidegger, 1994, p. 169; 2012b, p. 92), or anxiety, when things sink and recede but they simultaneously turn toward us (Heidegger, 1998e, p. 88). I gather these cases under the notion of a *negative logic of disclosure*.

plausibility of this interpretation by using some of Heidegger's texts on nihilism as an example of this negative logic of disclosure.

## 2. Being as nothing: the uncanny gift of nihilism

Here, I will apply the claims I put forward in the first section about Being as nothing to Heidegger's account of nihilism as the essence of modernity.<sup>15</sup> Although Heidegger is famous for his critical and reactionary views on modernity, the study of the "negative" revelation and its ground in the logic of the nothing has equipped us to offer a different answer to the question "How does the modern world look from the point of view of the negative logic of disclosure?" In modernity, when everybody is enchanted and fascinated about what beings are and how they function, when "there is nothing to Being" (Heidegger, 1991b, p. 201), the insight about the ontological thatness is covered up. Yet, I argue that, according to the negative logic of disclosure, since this thatness is like nothing, at this precise moment of oblivion, Being (as ontological thatness) is preserved and giving itself to us.

The logic of the nothing is slippery. Everything comes down to grasping this one turning that is at the core of Being as nothing: from "there is nothing to Being" to "Being as nothing." Is it just wordplay or some abstract formula that is difficult to understand? Neither. We don't need to be too smart to understand this turning, but we do have to experience it when attuned by the right mood. Attuned by Being as nothing, we must come to terms with the ambiguous—but logical—conclusion that, since Being is like nothing, modern times, when there is nothing for Being, seem to be the epoch of the highest possible revelation of Being. I oppose the common interpretation of nihilism—as the essence of modernity—as something negative to be overcome: regarding its ontological revelatory capacity, nihilism cannot and should not be overcome.

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout Heidegger's oeuvre, he described the essence of modernity as machination, nihilism, and modern technology. In this paper, I just focus on nihilism. On Heidegger, Nietzsche, and nihilism, see Pippin (2015), Hemming, Costea & Amiridis (2011), Carman (2022) and (with a special focus on the nothing) Ávila (2007), among others.



## 2.1. The recovery of nihilism

So far, we know—since, from our point of view, Being is not a being among others, i.e., is like nothing—that every manifestation of Being that I can point out as “this” or “that” is an “idol”. Second, Being follows the inverted logic of the revelation of the nothing: not appearing, it appears; every attempt to negate it is already its affirmation (because every negation already betrays the nihilation of the nothing). According to this negative mode of disclosure, when we focus only on beings and the Being of beings becomes irrelevant, that is precisely when the highest disclosure of Being becomes possible. Let us now examine Heidegger’s account of nihilism considering this logic.

According to Heidegger, we must distinguish carefully between a phenomenon’s manifestation and its essence—and avoid both failing to show how seemingly different phenomena belong essentially together and confusing the manifestation with the essence of the phenomenon. Regarding nihilism, Heidegger writes: “the essence of nihilism is nothing nihilistic [*das Wesen des Nihilismus nichts Nihilistische... ist*]” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 296).

Recall Nietzsche’s definition of nihilism. According to Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, nihilism means: “That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 9).<sup>16</sup> The highest values, through an act of self-overcoming (*Selbstaufhebung*), contain within themselves their own destruction (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 161). Accordingly, for Heidegger, at the surface

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<sup>16</sup> According to Nietzsche, the notion of nihilism refers both to its cause and to its symptoms or consequences. Nihilism’s symptoms are commonly mistaken for its cause. While the sense of meaninglessness, decadence, pessimism, depression, and disenchantment are nihilism’s symptoms, its cause, according to Nietzsche, is the previous positing of a transcendent, suprasensory, metaphysical world from which the sensory world gains its meaning. God, or any of God’s surrogates—i.e., “the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number” (Heidegger, 1977b, p. 65)—are names for the suprasensory world, or more precisely, are names for the fundamental structuring of the world through the difference between the sensory and the suprasensory. Nietzsche’s notion of the death of God marks the failure of the suprasensory world to support and determine this world. Once the suprasensory world loses its power, our world is experienced as valueless.



level, nihilism is “that historical process whereby the dominance of the ‘transcendent’ becomes null and void, so that all being loses its worth and meaning” (Heidegger, 1991a, p. 4). A nihilist is someone who embraces or suffers the sense that everything is in vain, and that there are no more ultimate goals to follow or die for.

In his analysis of nihilism, Heidegger starts at the level of nihilism’s manifestation and then traces it back to its essence. Though nihilism manifests itself as a historical process in which all previous goals and values are undermined, understanding this loss in terms of a crisis of values is, according to Heidegger, part of the problem—it is a nihilistic mode of studying nihilism, so it cannot reveal its essence. To reduce Being to value is already nihilistic. Thus, for Heidegger, Nietzsche’s account of nihilism at the level of values fails to question nihilism in its essence. The belief that the devaluation of values can be answered by a willful revaluation of them<sup>17</sup> is merely a symptom of the nihilistic reduction of Being to the will to power. Heidegger writes:

The will to power is that will which wills *itself*. As this will and within the orders established by it there appears, prefigured early on and prevailing in many different ways, that which, represented from the perspective of beings, surpasses [übersteigt] such beings and within such surpassing [Überstieg] in turn has an effect on beings, whether as the ground of beings, or as their causation. (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 312).

What Nietzsche misses, according to Heidegger, is that the *will* of the will to power is nothing human; it surpasses the level of beings. In short, the will names a specific truth of Being. The will that just wills

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<sup>17</sup> A willful revaluation of all values is Nietzsche’s own attempt to overcome nihilism (what he called “accomplished nihilism”). According to him, if we criticize the faith in the transcendent and uncover its all-too-human nature, then there is no longer any necessity for devaluating the world. There is no longer a standard of comparison in relation to which our own actual world appears deficient. When reality is experienced as a fable without any transcendent world to police it, the accomplished nihilist can create new values, like an artist. Recognizing that a piece of art is a fiction does not rob it of its value. Instead, the creative process embraces the bare immanent origin of these new values as part of an endless creative play.

itself, creating, destroying, and constantly surpassing every limitation for the sake of its endless growth—i.e., the will in which “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx & Engels, 2011, p. 68)—is simply how the Being of beings is interpreted in modern times.

For Heidegger, the will to will that grounds nihilistic disenchantment is ultimately grounded on the oblivion of Being: “The essence of nihilism, which finds its ultimate consummation in the domination of the will to will, resides in the oblivion of being” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 319). The oblivion of Being, in turn, comes from the abandonment of beings by Being itself. Thus, the essence of nihilism is the abandonment by Being. When Heidegger translates Nietzsche’s account of nihilism (at the level of values) into an event in the history of Being, he finds the perspective from which to dismiss Nietzsche’s willful revaluation of all values as part of and not the solution for nihilism. For Heidegger, we can change the source of valuation—e.g., from a divine transcendent to an artistic immanent source—but the problem remains because the will to will and its valuation have not been challenged. And yet, it is still not clear what we gain by defining the abandonment of Being as the essence of nihilism. Let us continue with Heidegger’s narrative.

In 1955, Heidegger thought that modern people were living in an age entirely permeated by nihilism, i.e., the age of the consummation of nihilism: “Nihilism is consummated [*vollendet*] when it has seized all subsisting resources and appears wherever nothing can assert itself as an exception anymore, insofar as such nihilism has become our normal condition” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 297). The time in which nihilism becomes the normal condition inaugurates the final phase of nihilism: “Yet the consummation of nihilism is not already its end. With the consummation of nihilism there first *begins* the final phase of nihilism” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 297). Nihilism becomes inconspicuous when it becomes our normal condition. The problem is not merely that we cannot assert an exception to it, but also that when we believe ourselves to be asserting an exception, we are really sustaining its rule. This renders the overcoming of nihilism problematic.

When nihilism has become our normal condition, so that there is nothing outside nihilism, our task cannot be to overcome it, but rather to turn towards its essence. According to Heidegger, “the overcoming of nihilism demands a turning in [*Einkehr*] into its essence, a turning in whereby the desire to overcome becomes untenable” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 320). Instead of overcoming (*Überwindung*) nihilism, Heidegger refers

to the turning in into its essence in terms of a recovery (*Verwindung*)<sup>18</sup> of its essence: “Wherein does the overcoming of nihilism then consist? In the recovery [*Verwindung*] of metaphysics” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 313). But this recovery is far from being easy, since, unsurprisingly, “nihilism has the tendency to dissemble [*verstellen*] its own essence and thereby to withdraw from the all-decisive encounter and confrontation with it” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 307).

So how do we turn towards the essence of nihilism? First, we must stop trying to willfully overcome nihilism, since any such attempt makes the will to will stronger. Second, we must avoid fleeing the sense of lack of goals by creating cultural surrogates for lost transcendence. Embracing the absence of goals and ceasing to try to escape the angst may lead to an openness that allows us to turn towards nihilism’s essence. For Heidegger, the greatest nihilism resides in

[...] the unwillingness to acknowledge the lack of goals [*die Ziel-losigkeit*]. And so one suddenly “has goals” once again, even if merely what can possibly serve as a *means* for the erection and pursuit of goals is itself elevated into a goal: the people, for example. Therefore precisely where one believes one again has goals, where one is again “fortunate,” where one proceeds to making equally available to all “people” the “cultural assets” (movies and trips to the beach) that were closed off to “most”—precisely here, in this noisy intoxication with “lived experience,” resides the greatest nihilism, the deliberate turning of a blind eye to human goallessness, the “ready to wear” avoidance of any goal-

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<sup>18</sup> The ambiguity of *Verwindung* becomes evident in its very different translations. Andrew J. Mitchell translates it as “conversion”: “Thereby technology is not humanly overcome [*überwunden*], much to the contrary, the essence of technology is converted [*verwunden*] into its still-concealed truth” (Heidegger, 2012a, p. 65). William McNeill translates it as “recovery”: “Wherein does the overcoming of nihilism then consist? In the recovery [*Verwindung*] of metaphysics” (Heidegger, 1998c, p. 313). Joan Stambaugh translates it as “incorporation”: “the overcoming of metaphysics occurs as the incorporation (*Verwindung*) of Being” (Heidegger, 2003b, p. 85). Jean-Luc Marion (2003, p. 186, n. 38) emphasizes how it derives from *verwinden*, which indicates a turning over or change of direction.

setting decision, the dread of all decisive domains and of their opening. The dread of *beyng* [*die Angst vor dem Seyn*] was never as great as it is today. Proof: the gigantic arrangements aimed at out-screaming this dread (Heidegger, 2012b, p. 109).

Since anxiety, as already seen in the first part, has ontological revelatory power, what does it mean that anxiety is so great today? I argue that the anxious avoidance of Being is precisely that which lets Being come to the fore.

Acknowledging the ambiguity of Heidegger's "valuation" of nihilism presented above, I build my argument for a "positive" reading of nihilism on Heidegger's logic of the nothing, which I described in the first part. This should not be surprising: as its name declares, nihilism has to do with the *nihil* (nothing).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Most of the works on Heidegger and nihilism affirm, as I did above, that since nihilism cannot be overcome, what is left is to turn nihilism into its essence. Less often, however, some authors make a "positive" reading of Heidegger's interpretation of nihilism, that is, one that does not only affirm the impossibility of its overcoming (which would amount to waiting for a new god to come), but also one that gestures towards that which would be lost in its overcoming (i.e., the sense of Being as nothing). For instance, Gianni Vattimo embraces nihilism as the only chance for our times and offers a "positive" reading of it, upon which I would like to comment here. Vattimo starts "An Apology for Nihilism" (1988) with Heidegger's insight that, in nihilism, Being is annihilated insofar as it is transformed into value—i.e., Being is placed under the power of the subject as value. Not any type of value, though, but specifically exchange value: "Nihilism is the consumption of use-value in exchange-value" (p. 22). Since the accomplished nihilist "has understood that nihilism is his or her sole opportunity" (p. 19), rather than nostalgically mourn and try to reappropriate use-value and defend a zone free of the permutability of exchange-value (as do, according to Vattimo, Marxists, existentialists, and phenomenologists), the accomplished nihilist embraces the dissolution of Being in "the indefinite transformations of universal equivalence" (p. 22). According to Vattimo, the consumption of Being in exchange-value transforms the "real" world into a fable, in which everything is given as a narration. All metaphysical nostalgia for something "more authentic" or proper fades away in a world seen as a fable. In the weakening of reality, the accomplished nihilist embraces the new unlimited possibilities that the weakness of Being has opened. Although I concur with Vattimo that all is given as a narration and that Being—thanks to nihilism—cannot be understood anymore as the ground or foundation for beings, I argue

## 2.2. Nihilism and the nothing

Heidegger writes: “The essence of nihilism is the history in which there is nothing to Being itself” (1991b, p. 201). From the point of view of Being as nothing, we may understand why Being’s abandonment is precisely the mode in which Being reveals itself. In nihilism, we “negate” Being (so that we just deal with beings), but since Being is like nothing, by negating it we are bringing it to the fore in its most “fitting” mode, namely, as nothing. Beyond any of the names that Being has received in the course of history—such as *aletheia* (*apeiron*, logic, *hen*, *arche*), *physis*, *ousia*, *idea* (*agathon*), *energeia*, *hypokeimenon*, *hyparchein*, *subiectum*, *actualitas*, *certitudo*, *vis*, objectivity, freedom, will (as absolute knowledge), will to love, will to power, action and organization, will to will, machination (Heidegger, 2003c, pp. 65-66)—the nothing is the one name that best preserves Being’s otherness with respect to beings. Since Being is like nothing (from the point of view of beings), we can understand why its refusal and denial is its gift to us.<sup>20</sup>

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that the “fact” of givenness (the thatness) of every narration cannot be confused with a narration. This does not mean, however, that the ontological *thatness* may be the name for a new foundation for beings nor that it implies a “more authentic” narrative. Indeed, it is in the encounter with this mysterious thatness that we are awaked to the fables that we like to tell ourselves. Moreover, I consider that the main difference between our two “positive” readings of nihilism resides at the *level* of the discourse. My reading on Heidegger focuses on the ontological revelatory possibilities of nihilism that the experience of nothing in anxiety may disclose. The epistemological and ethical consequences of this disclosure are beyond the scope of this paper. Vattimo, in contrast, focuses precisely on the consequences—the unlimited possibilities—that the weakness of Being has opened.

<sup>20</sup> In the secondary literature, it is common to suggest a turning point in Heidegger’s thinking happening in the 1930s (related to, but not necessarily the same as, the one that he refers to as *die Kehre*). For instance, according to Carman (2022, p. 105), in the late 1930s, between volume I and II of his *Nietzsche*, Heidegger changes his assessment on Nietzsche and metaphysics, becoming more critical. One can also trace changes during this decade in Heidegger’s account of the nothing. According to Ávila (2007), one can define three different moments in Heidegger’s thinking on the nothing: before the 1930s, associated to moods; later, related to the specific question of Being; finally, around the late 1930s and the 1940s and ‘50s, linked to the problem of nihilism. In light of this

As one of the consequences of this interpretation, we may consider that, in nihilism, not only is “some” disclosure of Being possible, but also that this disclosure is the “highest.” This claim is confirmed in Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture” (1938), where he suggests that the denial of Being is—paradoxically—its *highest* and more *austere* revelation, and where he makes an explicit reference to the nothing:

But suppose that denial itself had to become the highest and most austere revealing of Being? What then? Understood from out of metaphysics (i.e., out of the question of Being, in the form What is it to be?), the concealed essence of Being, denial, unveils itself first of all as absolutely not-having-being, as Nothing. But Nothing as that Nothing which pertains to the having-of-being is the keenest opponent of mere negating. Nothing is never nothing; it is just as little a something, in the sense of an object [*Gegenstand*]; it is Being itself, whose truth will be given over to man when he has overcome himself as subject, and that means when he no longer represents that which is as object [*Objekt*] (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 154).

On this account, the absolute abandonment or denial of Being is not just one form among others of Being’s revelation, but rather this denial “had to become” (*werden mußte*) the highest (*höchste*) and most austere (*härteste*) revealing of Being. In other words, in nihilism—i.e., where Being unveils itself as nothing—the highest and most austere revelation of Being is possible. What this highest and most austere revelation of Being may mean is still an open question. More specifically, what happens with beings when Being is disclosed at its highest? Does the highest revelation of Being yield care for beings? The ethical dimension of this highest and most austere revealing of Being, however, is beyond the limited scope of this paper.

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fact, my strategy of applying Heidegger’s reflections on the nothing developed in the late 1920s to the problem of nihilism seems, from an exegetical point of view, to be problematic because it does not acknowledge these hermeneutical changes happening during the 1930s. Yet, I argue that, although exegetically dubious, this strategy may reveal (ontological) possibilities concerning nihilism that most of the time—due to its negative connotations—remain ignored.

With my emphasis on the *highest* revelation, I am not necessarily subscribing to Heidegger's history of Being, nor I am necessarily committing myself to what Derrida (1978, pp. 279-280) called the metaphysics of presence, essentially binary and hierarchical. My intention is not to correct Heidegger's narrative by showing that it is in modernity—rather than in the ancient Greek beginning of philosophy—where Being gives itself without surrogates or idols. Instead, I just want to underline the tension between Heidegger's reactionary views on modernity, on the one hand, and the "logical" conclusions of interpreting Being as nothing (with its negative mode of revelation), on the other. To put it differently, I use Heidegger's language of the "highest" in order both to attack the common bleak view of modernity and to confirm my own interpretation of the inverted logic of Being's revelation (which I logically developed in the first part, and which now gets its confirmation in Heidegger's texts about modernity).<sup>21</sup>

Why does Heidegger use a hypothetical expression, asking his readers to *suppose* the denial as the highest revealing of Being? Is there something preventing Being's highest disclosure from happening in nihilism? It seems that while Being, in its denial, is showing itself to us, we—modern and contemporary people—fail to see Being's disclosure in this denial. In other words, the problem is that, in nihilism, the meaning of the nothing (and denial) is not clear. Indeed, Heidegger defines nihilism as "the essential nonthinking of the essence of the nothing" (Heidegger, 1991a, p. 22). Hence, it seems that, in order to unleash this inverted mode of revelation, Being needs our own availability or readiness to engage with the nothing. Heidegger's own writings create the hermeneutical ground that favors this readiness and prevents the misunderstanding of the experience of the nothing as mere negation or simple "not-having-being." We must confront this denial from the perspective of Being as nothing. After our study of the nothing in the first part, we are prepared to see Being's revelation in this "denial".

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<sup>21</sup> Since the language of "highest" often leads to the mystification of all-too-human hierarchies, according to my interpretation, the insight into the thatness of beings questions these attempts to create "ontological" gradings. Moreover, in itself, the insight into the thatness of beings should not be considered high or low. While beings can be high or low, the fact that beings are is neither high nor low.



### 3. Conclusion

Let me conclude this paper and this short review of nihilism and the nothing by addressing how Heidegger changed his view on the possibility of overcoming nihilism, and how this change correlates with some of his political views. During the 1930s, Heidegger supported the idea of overcoming nihilism. One of Heidegger's reasons for supporting National Socialism during this period involved his hope for overcoming nihilism and tempering the effects of technology.<sup>22</sup> The war seems to

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, in a passage of Heidegger's lecture on Schelling (*Schelling: Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit 1809*), given in 1936 and included in the *Gesamtausgabe 42*, but withheld from the version published in 1971 (Heidegger, 1985), Heidegger mentions Mussolini and Hitler with approval as examples of different countermovements (*Gegenbewegungen*) to nihilism: "It is in any case well known that the two men who have initiated—in different ways—from outside of the political organization of the nation, e.g., from the people, counter-movements in Europe, that both Mussolini and Hitler were essentially determined by Nietzsche in various respects, and this without the actual metaphysical realm of Nietzsche's thinking directly coming into effect [*zur Geltung käme*]" (Heidegger, 1988, pp. 40-41; my translation). According to the Italian philosopher Franco Volpi (2012, p. 109), Heidegger's decision to deepen his understanding of nihilism could have been triggered by political and ideological struggles with members of the Nazi party, especially with Ernst Kriek, who in 1934 wrote about Heidegger: "The worldview's fundamental tone of Heidegger's doctrine [*Lehre*] is determined by the concepts of care and anxiety, both of which aim at nothingness [*Nichts*]. The meaning of this philosophy is pronounced atheism and metaphysical nihilism, as it was otherwise predominantly represented by Jewish writers in our country, thus it is a ferment of decomposition and dissolution [*Zersetzung und Auflösung*] for the German people" (Kriek, cited in Guido Schneeberger, 1962, p. 225; my translation). This accusation that his own philosophy represents metaphysical nihilism may have been one reason for Heidegger's long engagement with Nietzsche, in which he ended up acknowledging the identity of nihilism and metaphysics, and thus changing his view on the possibility of overcoming nihilism (see Volpi, 2012, p. 109). Still, in the late 1930s, in Heidegger's *Contributions to Philosophy*, while he clearly supports the idea of overcoming nihilism, he identifies the role of his philosophy not as overcoming nihilism but, rather, as preparing for a future overcoming of nihilism when the last god comes: "The preparation for overcoming nihilism is paved by the basic experience that the human being, as the one who grounds



have taught him, however, that the supposedly noble task of overcoming nihilism had a “dark side.” Thomas Sheehan writes:

In the 1930s Heidegger had hoped National Socialism would provide economic, social, and political solutions to the problem of planetary nihilism (and he implies that his own philosophy might have served as the ideological superstructure of such changes). By the 1950s, however, it would appear he was convinced that a more profound understanding of the *essence* of nihilism invalidated such naïve hopes for a remedy (1999, p. 284).

Even during the final years of the war, when he was immersed in his second deep study of Nietzsche (1944-1946), Heidegger seems to have already rejected the possibility of overcoming nihilism:

If we heed the essence of nihilism as an essence of the history of Being itself, then the plan to overcome nihilism becomes superfluous [...]. Instead of such overcoming, only one thing is necessary, namely, that thinking, encouraged by Being itself, simply think to encounter Being in its default as such. Such thinking to encounter rests primarily on the recognition that Being itself withdraws, but that as this withdrawal Being is precisely the relationship that claims the essence of man, as the abode of its (Being’s) advent (Heidegger, 1991b, p. 225).

Since often nihilism is considered bad and its overcoming good, we may be not surprised that Heidegger’s alignment with National Socialism was, if not motivated by, then at least formulated with the explicit goal of overcoming nihilism. However, when he distanced himself from National Socialism,<sup>23</sup> he seems to also have realized the impossibility of overcoming nihilism. The rejection of overcoming

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Da-sein, is *needed* by the godhood of the other god. What is most inescapable and most difficult in this overcoming is the *knowledge* of nihilism” (2012b, p. 110).

<sup>23</sup> While Heidegger took some distance from the “actual” party after his resignation from the University of Freiburg’s rectorship in 1934, a different issue is whether he also dismissed Nazism conceptually. About this second issue,

nihilism is correlated with his idiosyncratic understanding of the abandonment of Being. As I showed, Being's counterintuitive refusal that gives itself, and the withdrawal of Being that claims the essence of man, depend on Heidegger's interpretation of Being as nothing (in which, since the nothing is essential to Being, one cannot overcome the former without eclipsing the latter).

Thus, contrary to common opinion, what seduced Heidegger to get involved with Nazi ideology was not his obscure thinking about the nothing but, rather, his departing from it. It was when he thought that the nothing of nihilism could be overcome that the most outrageous idols emerged. The most simplistic antisemitic clichés suddenly became, by Heidegger's hand, cosmic ontological forces fighting for the destiny of the world. My goal has been to invert the common critique of Heidegger, one that has been voiced since the late twenties, which states that Heidegger was a nihilist and his philosophy one of nothing (Heidegger, 1998d, p. 232).<sup>24</sup> In fact, during the 1930s, the opposite seems to be true. Forgetting about the nothing—about the insight that Being is like nothing—led him to believe himself to be channeling Being, which made him either blind to the evil happening around him or heartless about it. He transformed a philosophy attuned by the nothing of anxiety into a “heroic” thinking ready to sacrifice other people in the name of the fate of Being. On the contrary, when we are attuned by the nothing of anxiety, what sacrifice could the absurd and wonderful fact *that* things are—instead of there being nothing—ask for?

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there is plenty of evidence that Heidegger kept some (ontological) version of Nazism close to his heart until his death.

<sup>24</sup> While the content of this critique resembles the one put forward by Ernst Kriek (see *supra*, note 22), nowadays, the accusation of being a “philosophy of nothing” is used to explain Heidegger's alignment with National Socialism, and not—as with Kriek—to reveal his philosophy's similarity to Jewish thought, which would prevent that alignment.

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