In the history of Western philosophy, the notion of nothingness or non-being has been excluded from the core of its thematic reflections since the very beginning by Parmenides. In his famous poem commonly known as “The Way of Truth”, Parmenides, the first philosopher of being, judges that it is impossible to think of nothingness or non-being, since it is contradictory in terms to say that “that which is is not”. Considered as synonym of error or falsity, the term nothingness or non-being should not be retained in rational discourse. Parmenides’ position-taking has exercised a prolonged influence in the history of Western philosophy and is still visible in the contemporary Western philosophical scene. One of the famous examples is Rudolf Carnap, leader of Logical Positivism, who, in his article “Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language”, mocks Heidegger’s thematic rehabilitation of the concept of nothingness in the latter’s 1929 inaugural lecture on “What is Metaphysics?”. Even Husserl himself, whose phenomenological approach is diametrically opposed to that of Carnap’s positivism, seems to have adopted a similar position. While recognizing in the 1907 lectures on Thing and Space that “all in all, the world—in its existence and in what it is—is an irrational fact”, Husserl judged nonetheless that “naturally, it is self-evident that there cannot be nothing”. Husserl ruled out without giving any further explication the need or the significance to ponder on nothingness or non-being: the latter is not the source of wonder to the father of phenomenology.

However, Plato, the greatest disciple of Parmenides, has already surreptitiously reintroduced reflections on nothingness or non-being in philosophical discourse. This is done through the conversation on the meaningfulness of the talk of “what-is-not” between the young Theaetetus and the Stranger in the later part of the dialogue Sophist. It is the Stranger who argues, explicitly against Parmenides, that “what-is-not” can be intelligible and exist as some form of being. By introducing nothingness or non-being into the understanding of being, Plato, through the mouth of the Stranger, shows that he is not a naive thinker of identity. As the first thinker of dialectic, Plato is aware of the difference between being and nothingness, both epistemologically and ontologically speaking. But since the very notion of nothingness is introduced by someone who has the status of a stranger, this brings about at the same time the relation with alterity. Thanks to this anonymous Other, Plato comes to the awareness of nothingness. Here the ethical dimension of the question of nothingness comes forth: the openness to the question of nothingness owes to the vision of the Other who brings in a perspective from elsewhere. Thus, if philosophy is thaumazein—wonder—in front of all that is, i.e., in front of beings, the question
of nothingness opens the dimension that is hidden by beings and is beyond beings. Beyond the question of beings thought within epistemological and ontological terms, there is the ethical dimension unveiled by the questioning in the direction of nothingness.

Plato’s brief excursion into the discussion of nothingness in *Sophist* shows that nothingness can be thought and spoken of in different ways: the logical-epistemological, the ontological, and the ethical. The logical-epistemological way is closely related to the linguistic medium in which the thought on nothingness and non-being is expressed in the form “S is P” (subject copula predicate). To assert at the same time that something is its contrary is logically contradictory. But can we have the experience of something in itself prior to ascribing to it any divisible properties? Eastern philosophers, who do not necessarily express their thoughts in the linguistic form “S is P”, have also different modes of experience of nothingness. For example, in the classical Chinese language, it is not necessary to affirm existence by a copula. Daoism, Buddhism and the Kyoto School are well-known representatives of Asian schools of thought which theorize different ways of expressing the experience of nothingness. That is why meontology, the philosophical study of nothingness or non-being, is underdeveloped in the Western tradition, while it flourishes in Asian philosophies since antiquity to modernity from India and China to Korea and Japan.7 In his lecture “What is Metaphysics?”, Heidegger draws our attention to a mode of experience of nothingness that, beyond the ontic level, is not expressible in the form “S is P” in which “S” stands for an individual thing. Heidegger is thus the first phenomenological philosopher to have rehabilitated the thematization of nothingness by recognizing the possibility of experience of nothingness, to be followed by Sartre.

**Heidegger’s rehabilitation of nothing**

Though Heidegger’s lecture on “What is Metaphysics?” proceeds by unfolding a certain way of metaphysical inquiry and attempting a response to it, the author of *Being and Time* declared in the 1949 “Introduction” to the reedition of the lecture that “Nothing is the unique theme of the lecture”.8 Heidegger undertakes from the very beginning of the lecture the deconstruction with respect to two traditional ways of inquiry into the problem of nothing: the scientific way and the formal-logical way.

The lecture begins as if it has anticipated the refutation by the positivistic scientific position. To a scientist, it is impossible to inquire into nothing understood as “that which is not”, as science has its object of inquiry only on beings. By fixing her eyes of inquiry onto beings, a scientist does not know where she can encounter nothing in order to begin her inquiry. It is thus the metaphysician in the Heideggerian sense who shows the scientist the way: a scientist is unable to encounter nothing except by the complete negation of the totality of beings. But this, in turn, requires that the totality of beings is given beforehand such that it can be negated, and “in this negation nothing itself would then be manifest”.9 The givenness of the totality of beings is not only the pre-requisite of metaphysical questioning, it is also the foundation of any scientific inquiry. Thus, Heidegger has shown that metaphysical inquiry into the question of nothing is the basis for any scientific inquiry.

Heidegger then proceeds to the deconstruction of the formal-logical way. The formal-logical thinker argues that our conception of nothing comes from the negation of the totality of beings. But this act of negation is enacted on the representation in our mind of the totality of beings. What such an act of negation aims at is merely the formal concept of nothing represented in our imagination, but never the nothing itself. This formal concept of nothing will remain indeterminate and indistinct with respect to its content to which nothing corresponds, and the talk about it has no validity. This formal concept of nothing will gain its validity only when it bases itself
on experiential encounter with nothing. Again, the formal-logical way of inquiry into nothing presupposes the fundamental experience of nothing itself. 10

After the deconstructive unfolding of the two deficient modes of inquiry into nothing, Heidegger proceeds to undertake a phenomenological description and analysis of the experience of nothing. Already in Being and Time, Heidegger sketches out briefly a discussion of nothing on the way to the thematization of the experience of dread (Angst). In the experience of uncanniness that takes upon us in our awareness of our being-thrown into the world, we are assaulted by dread, which, different from fear, is objectless. In dread, “the Dasein finds itself face to face with the ‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence” 11. In the uncanniness of dread, the Dasein is even being “thrown in the ‘nothing’”. 12 The being-thrown of the Dasein shows that it lacks any foundation in itself. Its incapacity to provide any foundation for itself is constitutive of its ontological character of being-thrown. That is to say, the being-thrown of Dasein into nothing reveals that there is a certain nullity in the very foundation of Dasein as lacking foundation. And this nullity in foundation as lacking of foundation is ultimately “the being-thrown into death” of Dasein. 13 In short, the being-thrown into nothing unveils the ontological character of the specific ontical existence, which is the Dasein as being-toward-death.

In “What is Metaphysics?”, Heidegger pushes the analysis further to show the entire ontological bearing of nothing and the ontological difference between beings and the Being of beings. Here, nothing is unveiled through the experience of dread in which the totality of beings retreats out of our hold. Originary dread can assail us at any time. We are entirely passive before dread. Thus, nothing is experienced through a certain kind of attunement (Stimmung) or affectivity and not by way of conceptual comprehension. Precisely in dread there is nothing to grasp. Thus, the experience of dread is incomprehensible to a pure intellectualist mind.14 To try to understand nothing as a consequence of negation is to understand nothing as a result of an active intellectualist act. This is precisely not the case. Heidegger explains: “The ‘not’ does not originate through negation; rather, negation is grounded in the ‘not’ that springs from the nihilation of the nothing”. 15

The unveiling of nothing is brought about by the retreat of the totality of beings. It has nothing to do with any specific being, not even God as the supreme being (summun ens) or the uncreated being—the creator (ens increatum).16 Rather, “the nothing does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings but unveils itself as belonging to the being of beings.”17 Thus nothing and being belong together, yet they are not the same. There is the possibility of the manifest of being of beings “only in the transcendence of a Dasein that is held out into the nothing.”18 Again, the transcendence of Dasein is not an intellectualist act, but an ontological character: its ontological character of being held out or thrown into the nothing is the origin of the movement of transcendence of Dasein. The transcendence of Dasein is not grounded from the Dasein itself, but from the “nihilation [Nichtung or nichten] of the nothing”. 19

By showing that nothing belongs to the Being of beings and not any specific being, Heidegger brings into view the thought of ontological difference between beings and the Being of beings, though the very expression of “ontological difference” (“ontologische Differenz”) is introduced only in the treatise “On the Essence of Ground” (“Vom Wesen des Grundes”) written at the same time as the lecture “What is Metaphysics?”. 20

Humanization of nothingness in Sartre21

The two modes of thematization of nothing by Heidegger in Being and Time and in “What is Metaphysics?” witness the transition from the ontological characterization of Dasein to the
Nothingness

thinking of ontological difference. In a certain way it already marks Heidegger’s turn away from the phenomenological anthropology still dominant in *Being and Time* to the thought of Being in his later works. However, we can still ask the following question: if the key to the manifestation of ontological difference resides in the movement of nihilation rooted in the being-thrown of Dasein, should we not inquire further into the relation between the movement of nihilation and the mode of existence specific to Dasein? If nothing as the movement of nihilation is unveiled only in the experience of dread of the Dasein, is nothing not grounded also in the specific mode of existence of Dasein, which is itself the movement of nihilation? Dasein, which nihilates itself in order to transcend itself toward others and toward the world, is precisely the mode of existence unique to the human being as subject. It is entirely different from all other modes of beings of things in the world as object. Sartre borrows the Hegelian terms of “for-itself” and “in-itself” to name these two modes of being as subject and being as object respectively. While Heidegger is reluctant to equate Dasein with the human subject, Sartre never hesitates to translate Dasein as “human reality”, following the first French translator of Heidegger’s work, Henry Corbin. Sartre simply declares: “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world.”

Sartre’s humanization of nothingness (néant) serves not only to make the phenomenological distinction between the two modes of being—the in-itself/object and the for-itself/subject, but also to explicate the condition of possibility of the appearance of the in-itself as mode of being of things or intra-mundane beings. Against Heidegger, who abandons the language of consciousness in *Being and Time*, Sartre retains the term consciousness to describe the for-itself. Since it is only as appearing to consciousness as the for-itself that all in-itself appears as phenomenon, the for-itself is no more a phenomenon, but the transphenomenal condition of possibility of phenomenon, or simply the “transphenomenality of being”. “Consciousness is not a mode of particular knowledge which may be called an inner meaning or self-knowledge; it is the transphenomenal dimension of being in the subject.” How does consciousness as the for-itself emerge amid the in-itself such that the in-itself can appear as phenomenon? This is the task of phenomenological ontology in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*.

It is in undertaking this task that Sartre carries out very rich and original phenomenological descriptions of consciousness as nothingness or the for-itself, these two terms being interchangeable in *Being and Nothingness*. Following Heidegger, Sartre also understands nothingness as act of nihilation (néantisation). It is by this act of nihilation that consciousness is a being which can return to itself and to reflect on itself, thus establishing a relation to itself as ipseity. But at the same time, consciousness is also a being that establishes an internal distance with itself, that digs a fissure with itself. In other words, consciousness is a being with internal difference and contains elements of alterity inherent in itself. By equating consciousness with nothingness, Sartre wants to highlight the aspects of spontaneity, non-substantiality, and non-positivity of the for-itself as subject.

Already in his earlier article on “Transcendence of Ego”, Sartre, starting from the Husserlian doctrine of intentionality of consciousness, arrived at the conclusion that the mode of being of consciousness is nothingness. Since consciousness is necessarily consciousness of something, it must relate itself to a certain “thing” in order to exist. In other words, in daily life, consciousness exists in a pre-reflective manner by relating to things in the world in conformity with its ontological character as being-in-the-world. Even in its reflective mode of being as a self-reflective consciousness, consciousness is never deprived of the object it is conscious of; this object is precisely consciousness itself in its pre-reflective mode. This pre-reflective mode of consciousness is often designated as the “ego” by philosophers, including Husserl. Against Husserl, Sartre points out that this “ego”, being the object of reflective grasping of consciousness, is the intentional object of the reflective consciousness. This “ego” has the same status as a transcendent
being in the manner of a thing in the world, and not a being living in the immanence of a consciousness. For this reason, consciousness does not exist in the form of a “thing” nor as a “being”; it is rather something non-substantial, transparent, trans-lucid: it is a no-thing. In other words, consciousness is nothingness. The “ego” is merely the object constituted by the reflective consciousness, but not consciousness itself. Consciousness is impersonal. By understanding consciousness as nothingness, Sartre proposes a “non-egological” conception of consciousness against Husserl’s doctrine of transcendental consciousness as transcendental egology in *Ideas I* and *Cartesian Meditations.*

In *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre argues that our language use shows that we have experience of nothingness, and thus nothingness is some kind of being, but in a different modality. In our language use, there are affirmations and negations. Even when we express affirmation, it already implies negation: “A is B” implies that “A is not ~B.” Yet the possibility of negation in language use resides precisely in that we have originary experience of nothingness. Sartre explains this by his famous example of the experience of the absence of a close friend. When one day he enters a coffee shop which is the habitual meeting place with his friend Pierre, he finds that Pierre is not there. To say that “Pierre is not there” is not merely to express a logical possibility as the negative statement of the expression “Pierre is there”. This is because the linguistic meaning of both of these two logical statements has nothing to do with the fact that Pierre is present or absent. It even has nothing to do with whether there exists really someone called Pierre. To say that “Pierre is not there” is to point out the absence of a person, which is nothingness with ontological implication. When the author of this sentence enters the coffee shop, he sees that all the settings of shop are there as usual, and the waiter is also serving other clients as usual. The only thing unusual is that his friend Pierre, whom he is expecting to see, is absent: he is not there. The absence or lack of Pierre is nothingness in the ontological sense. This shows that nothingness is not merely the negation of the logical possibility that Pierre is in the coffee shop, but that it is an object to be given in intuitive experience. The absence of Pierre as object of experience is unveiled in the experience of the non-fulfillment of the expectation of Pierre. For this reason, nothingness is “an original and irreducible event.” By using the example of the event of the absence of a close friend to illustrate that nothingness is given in intuitive experience, Sartre helps us to understand the situation in which the presence of something reminds us of the absence of somebody: for example, the presence of a relic shows the disappearance or even the death of someone. The kind of intuitive experience of non-presence and absence is the experience of nothingness. It is a common but important part of human experience. The tradition of Western philosophy, by paying attention merely to beings or to Being, is unable to understand the intuitive experience of nothingness.

In fact, in the Conclusion of his earlier book on *The Imaginary* published in 1940, Sartre has already shown, through the discussion of the ontological status of image, that nothingness is a mode of being different from a natural thing or reality. In distinction to perceptual objects, image is used to indicate or to express things that do not exist in reality, that are things belonging to the order of irreality. Through the act of nihilation, our imagination or imaginary consciousness represent things absent by means of imagery. The usage of image is an eminent example of the inhabitation of nothingness in our mental life.

Not only activities of artistic creation are enacted through imagination and imagery, but cognitive activities too. For example, the usage of imagery and imagination is necessary in historical knowledge to provide or project a historical scene of the past that is no more present. Modern scientific cognition, in particular mathematical operation, depends basically on the usage of signs and symbols. These latter deploy in the space of imagination and image consciousness, and thus actively invite the visit of nothingness in our mental space.
Sartre’s understanding of consciousness as nothingness develops Husserl’s doctrine of intentionality of consciousness into a philosophy of difference. Since consciousness is an intentional being that necessarily relates itself to something other than itself, this implies that this intentional being is not a self-identical being, but a being that can draw a line of separation with itself and establish an internal distance and internal difference with itself. It is this movement of internal distance and internal difference that renders possible that consciousness can turn back onto itself to become self-consciousness. In other words, with this internal distance and internal difference, consciousness can transform itself from the pre-reflective state to the reflective state. The character of reflexivity of consciousness marks its specificity as for-itself in distinction to a thing as in-itself. To Sartre, it is precisely the reflective character of consciousness that renders possible its presence to itself in spite of the fact that it is projected to the world in the midst of things. Sartre says: “Actually presence to always implies duality …. If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself. Presence is an immediate deterioration of coincidence, for it supposes separation”. Consciousness as a being that separates with itself and cannot be coincided with itself is a heterogeneous being. Thus, consciousness is not a positive and substantial being like a thing; consciousness is nothingness. Sartre has very a clear explication on the ontological significance of consciousness as nothingness:

The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist at a distance from itself as a presence to itself, and this empty distance which being carries in its being is Nothingness. Thus in order for a self to exist, it is necessary that the unity of this being include its own nothingness as the nihilation of identity.

Consciousness as nothingness that is constantly separated with itself and can never be in complete coincidence with itself: this ontological character of consciousness shows that it is a being of lack. It is precisely owning to the fact that consciousness is a being of lack that consciousness is a being of desire. Being a being of desire and a being of lack, consciousness projects what it desires as valuable in order to fill up what is insufficient and lacked in its being. Thus, it is only as consciousness of desire which desires the filling up of what it lacks in itself that consciousness becomes consciousness of value. This is a consciousness that aims at the realization of the fulfillment of the insufficiency arising out of its being of lack. Thus, Sartre’s phenomenological-ontological explication of the consciousness as a being of lack and being of desire is not a psychological doctrine of desire, but a theory of the ontological foundation of a phenomenology of value. It is an important tentative to construct a theory of value from the phenomenological approach after Max Scheler. Thus, Sartre’s humanization of nothingness has also the merit of bringing into view, beyond the ontological dimension, the ethical dimension of consciousness as nothingness, on the basis of which is built the mature philosophical work of Lévinas.

Notes

2. There were still efforts to think of non-being at the margin of the history of being in the West. Cf. the excellent documentary work done under the direction of Laurent and Romano 2006, 563.
3. Carnap 1959; in particular, 69.
4. Hua XVI, 289/250.
5. Hua XVI, 288/249.
7. For a contemporary assessment of the great varieties of meontology in Asian philosophy, see Liu and Berger 2014.
12 Heidegger 1927, 277; Heidegger 1962, 322.
13 Heidegger 1927, 308; Heidegger 1962, 356.
16 Heidegger 1978, 118; Heidegger 1998, 94.
17 Heidegger 1978, 118–119; Heidegger 1978, 94.

21 The expression “humanization of nothingness” is inspired by Vincent Descombes who uses the term “l’humanisation du néant” to capture Alexandre Kojève’s anthropological reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Descombes 1979, 21; Descombes 1980, 9. Descombes discusses Sartre’s notion of nothingness only in the appendix to the chapter on Kojève, betraying his somewhat biased judgment that the author of *Being and Nothingness* is merely a marginal figure in the contemporary French philosophical scene.

22 Sartre 1943, 59; Sartre 2003, 48.
23 Sartre 1943, 16; Sartre 2003, 6.
24 Sartre 1943, 17; Sartre 2003, 7.
26 Sartre 1965, 74; Sartre 2004a, 43. However, James Mensch has drawn our attention to the fact that Husserl in the manuscripts recognized that the egolocal life of an individual is constituted passively in internal time consciousness. This points toward the phenomenological study of the pre-egological life of consciousness. This position draws Husserl nearer to Sartre. See Mensch 1996, 108.

27 Sartre 1943, 45; Sartre 2003, 35.
28 Sartre 1940, 229–239; Sartre 2004b, 180–188.
29 Sartre 1943, 115; Sartre 2003, 101.
30 Sartre 1943, 116; Sartre 2003 , 102.

References


