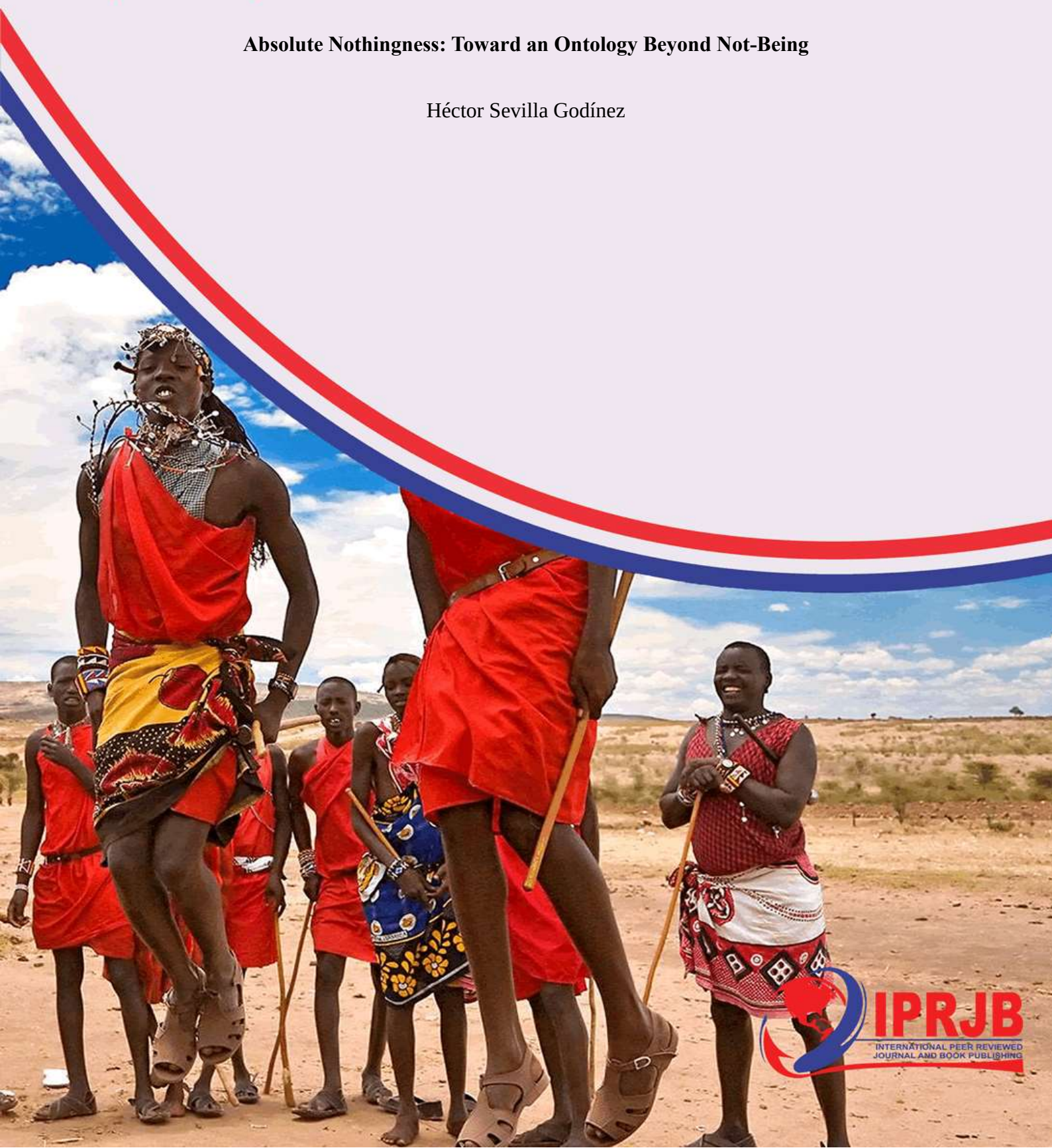


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Absolute Nothingness: Toward an Ontology Beyond Not-Being

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Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to establish that Nothingness and not-being constitute distinct ontological categories despite their frequent conceptual association within the Western philosophical tradition. It proposes an understanding of Nothingness as a prior and non-contingent ontological condition that enables the possibility of being without being reducible to it.

Methodology: The study employs a philosophical and comparative analysis of classical metaphysical sources, particularly Aristotle, together with a critical examination of the modern identification of Nothingness with nihilism. On this basis, it examines the conceptual relations among Nothingness, not-being, contingency, potentiality, and ontological becoming.

Findings: The analysis shows that not-being is contingent upon the existence of beings and functions as their negation, whereas Nothingness can be conceived as an absolute ontological horizon that is neither dependent on being nor reducible to mere negation. This distinction clarifies conceptual ambiguities concerning contingency, potentiality, and ontological becoming and provides an alternative interpretation of Nothingness beyond negative ontology and nihilistic readings.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The article proposes that philosophical approaches to Nothingness should distinguish it more rigorously from not-being and avoid reducing it to nihilism or simple negation. This distinction offers a conceptual framework for further inquiry into the ontological relation between Nothingness and the possibility of being.

Keywords: *Nothingness, Not-Being, Ontology, Nihilism, Aristotle, Contingency*

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INTRODUCTION

The concepts of Nothingness and not-being have frequently been treated as interchangeable throughout the history of Western philosophy. From Parmenides (2009) to contemporary existential thought, both notions have often been understood as expressions of absence or negation, despite their markedly different ontological implications. This conceptual overlap has obscured important distinctions regarding contingency, potentiality, and the conditions that make being itself conceivable.

This conceptual proximity can already be observed in Parmenides, for whom what-is-not cannot constitute a legitimate object of thought or discourse. Aristotle subsequently complicated this position by distinguishing different senses of not-being and relating them to falsity and potentiality, while still treating not-being in relation to being. In modern philosophy, the problem acquires a different formulation: Heidegger explicitly distinguishes Nothingness from mere negation, arguing that the Nothing is prior to the “not” and to negation itself. These traditions differ substantially, but they illustrate the persistent conceptual tension between Nothingness, not-being, and negation that underlies the problem addressed in this article.

This article argues that Nothingness should not be understood as identical with not-being. Rather, not-being presupposes beings whose existence it negates, whereas Nothingness precedes such relational determinations and constitutes a distinct ontological condition. Consequently, Nothingness cannot be reduced either to negation or to nihilism. Instead, it should be interpreted as the horizon that renders both being and not-being intelligible.

The argument develops in three stages. First, the conceptual distinction between Nothingness and not-being is established. Second, Aristotle's account of not-being is critically revisited to clarify its scope and limitations. Finally, the paper distinguishes Nothingness from nihilism, arguing that nihilism represents only one historical interpretation of Nothingness rather than its philosophical essence.

Nothingness in Contemporary Ontological Debate

Few concepts have occupied such a paradoxical place within the history of philosophy as Nothingness. Although it has repeatedly emerged at decisive moments in metaphysics, ontology, existential philosophy, and religious thought, it has seldom been examined as an autonomous ontological category. More frequently, Nothingness has been approached indirectly: as the negation of Being, as the absence of determinate entities, as the horizon disclosed through anxiety, or as the dissolution of metaphysical certainties. Consequently, philosophical reflection has often treated Nothingness through concepts that are adjacent to it, such as non-being, negation, emptiness, privation, or nihilism—rather than through an analysis of its own ontological status.

This tendency has generated a persistent conceptual ambiguity. The terms *Nothingness*, *not-being*, *absence*, and *nihilism* are frequently employed interchangeably, despite referring to distinct philosophical problems. In some traditions, Nothingness designates the simple negation of beings; in others, it functions as the limit of language or knowledge; elsewhere it appears as an existential experience or as a diagnosis of cultural decline. Such plurality has undoubtedly enriched philosophical reflection, yet it has also obscured the possibility that Nothingness may possess an ontological status irreducible to any of these interpretations.

The history of philosophy offers numerous examples of this ambiguity. Parmenides' rejection of non-being established a framework in which Being alone could properly be thought, thereby

conditioning much of subsequent metaphysical inquiry. Aristotle transformed the problem by distinguishing actuality from potentiality and by explaining becoming through the notions of matter, form, and privation. Düring's interpretation of Aristotle is particularly relevant here because it emphasizes the dynamic character of Aristotelian ontology: potentiality and actuality provide the conceptual structure through which change can be understood without requiring Nothingness to function as an independent ontological principle. In this framework, what is not is intelligible in relation to what is or may become, rather than as Absolute Nothingness. Twentieth-century phenomenology would reopen the question from a different perspective by asking whether Nothingness could be understood as more than logical negation or privation (Düring, 2005; Aristotle, 1998).

Among contemporary philosophers, Martin Heidegger restored Nothingness to the center of ontological inquiry by arguing that philosophy reaches one of its decisive moments precisely when it confronts the question of Nothingness. Similarly, Japanese philosophers such as Keiji Nishitani interpreted Nothingness as the horizon within which existence becomes genuinely intelligible, while authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy explored the relation between finitude, absence, and the openness of Being. These contributions have profoundly enriched the contemporary discussion by demonstrating that Nothingness cannot be reduced either to logical contradiction or to metaphysical deficiency (Heidegger, 1998a; Heisig, 2002).

Nevertheless, despite their important differences, these approaches continue to understand Nothingness primarily in relation to Being, whether as its horizon, its counterpart, its disclosure, or its existential experience. The distinction between Absolute Nothingness and not-being has rarely been formulated as an autonomous ontological problem. Consequently, the dependence of not-being upon determinate beings has often remained conceptually indistinguishable from the independence that characterizes Nothingness itself.

The present article argues that this conceptual overlap conceals a fundamental ontological distinction. Whereas not-being necessarily presupposes the existence of determinate beings whose actuality it negates, Absolute Nothingness depends upon no being whatsoever. Not-being is therefore ontologically contingent, while Absolute Nothingness is ontologically independent. Recognizing this distinction modifies not only our understanding of Nothingness but also the concepts of contingency, becoming, intelligibility, and metaphysical grounding.

The proposal developed here is not intended as a historical reconstruction of the concept of Nothingness, nor does it attribute the category of Absolute Nothingness developed in this article to Aristotle or to any other historical author. Rather, it constitutes a systematic ontological analysis that enters into dialogue with classical metaphysics, phenomenology, and contemporary ontology while preserving the conceptual and historical differences among these traditions. Aristotle's account of potentiality, Heidegger's recovery of the ontological question, and philosophical reflections associated with nihilism are therefore considered not as historical antecedents of the present thesis or as authorities that determine the argument, but as interlocutors against which its conceptual specificity can be established.

Accordingly, the central objective of this article is not merely to distinguish two concepts but to demonstrate that Absolute Nothingness and not-being belong to different ontological orders. This distinction allows Nothingness to be understood neither as negation nor as destruction, but as the non-contingent ontological condition that renders both Being and not-being intelligible. In doing so, the analysis proposes an ontology of Absolute Nothingness whose

implications extend beyond metaphysics toward broader questions concerning contingency, freedom, and the intelligibility of reality itself.

The following sections therefore develop a systematic ontology of Absolute Nothingness rather than another historical interpretation of nihilism or negative ontology.

Nothingness and Not-Being: An Ontological Distinction

The distinction between Nothingness and not-being constitutes the central claim of this article. Although both notions have frequently been treated as synonymous throughout the Western philosophical tradition, they refer to fundamentally different ontological realities. The argument defended here is that not-being is necessarily contingent upon being, whereas Nothingness is not. Consequently, Nothingness cannot be understood as the mere negation of beings but must instead be conceived as the ontological condition that makes both being and not-being possible.

The historical roots of the conceptual confusion may be traced back to Parmenides (2009), whose identification of Nothingness with not-being profoundly influenced subsequent metaphysical reflection, including that of Plato and Aristotle. The present proposal departs from this tradition by maintaining that Nothingness is ontologically prior to Being. Rather than functioning as its negation, Nothingness constitutes the horizon within which Being becomes possible (Aristotle, 1984).

Under this perspective, not-being should be understood as the negation of a determinate mode of being. It is never an autonomous ontological category but always presupposes the existence of that which it negates. Every instance of not-being therefore remains inseparable from a corresponding being whose actuality it denies. Whether the modification concerns substance, quality, quantity, or place, not-being arises only through its relation to an existing being. Its contingency derives precisely from this dependence.

Nothingness operates differently. It neither negates Being nor derives from it. Rather, it precedes every determination of being and thereby grounds the possibility of ontological transformation. Consequently, although Nothingness and not-being enter into a dialectical relation, they cannot be identified with one another. The latter presupposes an existing being; the former does not.

The distinction may be clarified at a structural rather than empirical level. Consider a determinate possibility, *P*, and its negation, *not-P*. The latter is intelligible only insofar as *P* is first posited as a possible determination; *not-P* therefore remains logically and ontologically dependent upon that which it negates. Absolute Nothingness, by contrast, cannot be represented as *not-P*, because doing so would already presuppose a determinate term whose negation is being asserted. Nor should it be conceived as an empty space awaiting beings, since space itself would already constitute a determination. Absolute Nothingness designates instead the absence of every determinate ontological content and, for that reason, cannot depend upon any particular being or its negation.

This structural distinction also prevents epistemic conceivability from being confused with ontological independence. The fact that human thought approaches Nothingness through negation does not entail that Nothingness is ontologically produced by the act of negating. Not-being requires a determinate term to which the negation applies; Absolute Nothingness, as conceived here, does not. Not-being is therefore relative and contingent upon determinate being, whereas Absolute Nothingness is proposed as non-relational and non-contingent. The

former belongs to the order of determinate ontological possibilities; the latter names the ontological horizon prior to any such determination.

Ontological Dependence and Ontological Independence

The distinction proposed here may be formulated more rigorously through the concept of ontological dependence. Ontological dependence should not be understood as causal dependence or temporal succession but as the relation through which one reality derives its intelligibility from another. A concept is ontologically dependent when it cannot be conceived independently of that to which it refers.

Under this criterion, not-being is necessarily dependent. Every instance of not-being presupposes a determinate being whose actuality it negates. One cannot meaningfully speak of the not-being of a being that has never existed, because negation always requires something susceptible of being negated. Consequently, not-being possesses no autonomous ontological status. Its intelligibility is entirely relational.

Absolute Nothingness exhibits the opposite condition. Nothingness does not derive its meaning from beings, nor does it presuppose their existence in order to be conceived. Although human thought ordinarily approaches Nothingness through its relation to beings, such epistemological dependence should not be confused with ontological dependence. Our knowledge of Nothingness may arise from reflection upon beings, yet Nothingness itself remains independent of every determinate being.

This distinction also clarifies why Nothingness cannot be regarded as merely the highest degree of negation. Negation remains logically and ontologically secondary because it presupposes something already given. Absolute Nothingness, by contrast, belongs to an ontological level prior to every possible relation of affirmation and negation. It neither affirms nor denies; it grounds the possibility that affirmation and negation may themselves become intelligible.

The difference may therefore be summarized as follows: not-being is relational because it always refers to a determinate being; Absolute Nothingness is absolute because it refers to nothing beyond itself. This asymmetry constitutes the fundamental ontological distinction upon which the entire argument of the present article rests.

The term *Absolute* must not, however, be understood here in the theological or apophatic sense. Absolute Nothingness is not conceived as a transcendent reality, a hidden divine ground, or an ineffable entity whose nature exceeds affirmative language. Unlike the Absolute of negative theology, it possesses no attributes, intentionality, agency, consciousness, or sacred character. The term *Absolute* indicates only ontological independence: Nothingness does not require a determinate being, a prior affirmation, or an act of negation in order to be what it is. Its absoluteness is therefore strictly ontological rather than theological, and no identification between Nothingness and God is implied by the argument developed here.

Accordingly, every being possesses a determinate mode of existence and, simultaneously, a corresponding possibility of not-being. This possibility does not arise independently but emerges from the very contingency of finite existence. Nothingness enables this possibility without becoming identical with it. In other words, Nothingness makes possible the transition between actuality and potentiality, whereas not-being merely expresses the contingent negation of a particular actuality.

The distinction can therefore be formulated more precisely. Being requires beings in order to manifest itself, whereas not-being requires beings in order to negate them. Nothingness alone

requires neither. It neither depends upon beings nor exists merely in opposition to them. Instead, it constitutes an ontological dimension whose intelligibility is independent of every determinate entity. For this reason, Nothingness cannot be reduced to not-being, nor can it be understood as simply another category within being itself.

Ontological Priority rather than Temporal Priority

The preceding discussion raises an inevitable question. If Nothingness is prior to Being, in what sense should such priority be understood? The argument developed here does not defend a chronological succession in which Nothingness once existed before Being. Rather, it proposes an ontological priority. Nothingness is prior because Being depends upon it for its intelligibility, whereas Nothingness does not depend upon Being.

This distinction becomes clearer when considering the concept of not-being itself. The negation of not-being simply returns us to Being, since not-being possesses meaning only through its relation to determinate beings. Nothingness, however, cannot itself be negated. To speak of the "Nothingness of Nothingness" would be meaningless, because Nothingness is not a determinate entity susceptible to further negation. It constitutes the absolute horizon within which every possible ontological determination becomes conceivable.

From this perspective, what has previously been described as relative nothingness refers not to Nothingness itself but to those unrealized possibilities through which beings become capable of transformation. The transition from potentiality to actuality therefore does not represent the emergence of Being from Nothingness. Rather, it expresses the transformation of one determinate mode of being into another. Nothingness does not produce beings; it makes their becoming possible without itself undergoing modification.

Consequently, Nothingness should never be interpreted as an efficient cause. Nothingness neither acts intentionally nor generates beings. Its role is ontological rather than causal. It constitutes the condition that renders contingency and transformation intelligible without itself participating in either process.

Ontological grounding must therefore be distinguished from epistemic intelligibility. To say that Nothingness grounds the possibility of Being does not mean that it actively produces, sustains, or determines beings, nor that it functions as an explanatory principle through which the human mind comes to know them. Its grounding function is structural rather than efficient: insofar as Absolute Nothingness is independent of every determinate being, no particular mode of Being is ontologically necessary. Nothingness thus "enables" Being only in the sense that it leaves every determinate actuality contingent rather than necessary. The relation is therefore not one of causal production but of ontological possibility: Nothingness does not make beings occur; it indicates the absence of any ontological necessity requiring a particular being, or Being in any particular form, to exist.

This clarification also avoids a common metaphysical misunderstanding. The present proposal does not maintain that Being originated from Nothingness at a particular moment. Such a claim would immediately invite the question of how Being could emerge from absolute Nothingness. Instead, the argument defended here is that Nothingness and Being must be understood as permanently related, although asymmetrically. Being is contingent upon Nothingness, whereas Nothingness is entirely independent of Being.

For this reason, the search for an absolute temporal beginning proves philosophically misleading. Every attempt to identify a first moment presupposes temporal categories that

already belong to the domain of Being. Nothingness itself cannot be situated within temporal succession because temporality presupposes beings capable of change. To ask what preceded Nothingness therefore misunderstands the ontological status of Nothingness itself.

Scientific cosmologies including evolutionary theory and Big Bang cosmology describe transformations occurring within the domain of Being. They account for changes in matter, energy, or physical reality, but they do not concern Nothingness itself. Whatever changes necessarily belongs to Being, since change presupposes actuality, potentiality, and temporal succession. Nothingness, by contrast, neither changes nor becomes. Were it capable of change, it would already participate in Being and would therefore cease to be Nothingness.

The priority of Nothingness may therefore be formulated with greater precision. It is not the first event within reality but the ontological condition that precedes every event precisely because it remains outside every process of becoming. Being may manifest itself historically; Nothingness does not. Being may change; Nothingness cannot. Consequently, Nothingness precedes Being only in the sense that every determinate mode of being presupposes the ontological possibility that Nothingness alone provides.

Absolute and Relative Nothingness

The distinction between Nothingness and not-being may now be further clarified by introducing a second conceptual distinction, namely that between Absolute Nothingness and relative nothingness. These should not be understood as two species of Nothingness but as two distinct ontological levels. Absolute Nothingness designates the non-contingent ontological horizon that precedes every determination of Being. Relative nothingness, by contrast, refers to those unrealized possibilities that remain intrinsically related to determinate beings and their potential transformations.

This distinction allows the ambiguity surrounding not-being to be resolved. Every instance of not-being presupposes a determinate being whose actuality it negates. Relative nothingness therefore belongs to the sphere of contingency, since it designates possibilities that remain dependent upon existing beings. Absolute Nothingness, however, is entirely independent of such relations. It neither presupposes beings nor derives its intelligibility from their negation.

Relative nothingness, by contrast, refers to those unrealized possibilities that remain intrinsically related to determinate beings and their potential transformations. It must not, however, be identified with Aristotelian potentiality. Potentiality describes the capacity of a determinate being to become actual in a particular way and therefore remains internal to the ontological structure of that being. Relative nothingness, as the term is used here, designates more broadly the non-actuality of determinations that remain dependent upon determinate beings. Aristotelian potentiality may thus constitute one mode through which relative nothingness becomes intelligible, but the two concepts are not equivalent. The decisive criterion is ontological dependence: whatever is not actual but remains possible only in relation to a determinate being belongs to the relative level, whereas Absolute Nothingness presupposes neither actuality, potentiality, nor any determinate being whatsoever.

Every finite being consequently possesses multiple forms of not-being corresponding to its various determinations. A substance, a quality, a quantity, or a spatial position may all be negated because each represents only one possible determination among others. Nothingness, however, precedes all these determinations equally. It is therefore not one possibility among many but the ontological horizon within which every possible determination becomes conceivable.

This distinction also clarifies an important consequence. Nothingness itself has no corresponding not-being. Every determinate being admits its negation because it is contingent. Absolute Nothingness does not, precisely because it is not contingent. It neither becomes nor ceases to be. Consequently, it cannot be negated without presupposing the very ontological framework whose possibility it already grounds.

For this reason, Nothingness should not be understood as a negative principle. It is not opposed to Being in the manner that not-being is opposed to determinate beings. Rather, Nothingness stands outside the dialectic of affirmation and negation altogether. Shakespeare's celebrated dilemma *to be or not to be* expresses the opposition between being and not-being, but it does not address the ontological distinction defended here. Nothingness belongs to an entirely different order.

Absolute Nothingness therefore possesses a unique philosophical status. It cannot be conceived as another form of Being, nor as its contrary, but only as the ontological condition that precedes every contingent determination. Being depends upon Nothingness for its intelligibility; Nothingness depends upon nothing.

The distinction established thus far provides the conceptual framework necessary for reassessing Aristotle's treatment of not-being. Once not-being is recognized as ontologically dependent, Aristotle's account of potentiality and privation may be reconsidered from a different perspective.

Aristotle and the Ontological Limits of Not-Being

Aristotle provides one of the most sophisticated accounts of not-being within classical metaphysics. His distinction between actuality and potentiality allows change to be understood without accepting that being could emerge from absolute non-existence. As he states, "nothing comes to be from what is not," thereby rejecting the possibility that absolute non-being could function as the source of generation (Aristotle, 1984).

This principle remains fundamentally persuasive. The present proposal likewise rejects the idea that determinate beings arise directly from not-being. However, Aristotle's analysis leaves unresolved a further ontological question: what makes potentiality itself possible? Whereas Aristotle explains the transition from potentiality to actuality, the present argument seeks to explain the ontological condition that allows potentiality to exist at all.

Aristotle (1984) distinguishes several meanings of not-being. It may refer to categorical negation, false predication, or that which exists only potentially. This last meaning is especially significant because it establishes a relation between not-being and potentiality. Yet potentiality itself always remains dependent upon determinate beings capable of becoming otherwise. Consequently, Aristotle's not-being remains ontologically contingent.

The present proposal accepts this analysis while extending it. If not-being exists only in relation to determinate beings, then it cannot be identified with Absolute Nothingness. Not-being belongs to the sphere of finite entities; Nothingness does not. The former presupposes beings whose actuality it negates; the latter precedes every possible determination of being (Düring, 2005).

Aristotle's doctrine of matter, privation, and form further illustrates this distinction. Privation explains change because it presupposes an underlying substance capable of receiving a new determination. Absolute Nothingness, however, cannot be understood as privation. Privation

always presupposes something deprived, whereas Nothingness presupposes nothing whatsoever. The two notions therefore occupy different ontological levels (Aristotle, 1984).

Aristotelian prime matter must also be distinguished from Absolute Nothingness. Although prime matter represents the limiting case of indeterminacy within Aristotle's account of material change, it is not Nothingness: it remains a principle of Being insofar as it functions as the underlying substrate capable of receiving form. Its indeterminacy therefore does not imply ontological independence from Being but, on the contrary, presupposes the structure of potentiality through which material substances become otherwise. Absolute Nothingness, as conceived here, possesses neither matter nor form, neither actuality nor potentiality, and cannot function as a substrate of transformation. Prime matter remains within the ontological order of Being; Absolute Nothingness designates the condition that is irreducible to that order (Aristotle, 1984).

This distinction becomes particularly evident when Aristotle acknowledges that certain realities may simultaneously be said both "to be" and "not to be" according to different respects. Such statements concern determinate beings undergoing change. They do not concern Nothingness itself, which neither changes nor participates in the dialectic between actuality and potentiality.

Consequently, Aristotle successfully explains becoming within Being but not the ontological condition that renders becoming possible. Matter, form, and privation account for transformation among finite beings. They do not account for the ontological horizon within which such transformations become intelligible. It is precisely this horizon that the present article identifies as Absolute Nothingness.

Nothingness therefore does not function as a fourth element added to Aristotle's metaphysical scheme, nor as an efficient cause operating alongside matter and form. Rather, it constitutes the ontological condition that allows privation, potentiality, and becoming to possess intelligibility in the first place. Change occurs within Being; its possibility ultimately presupposes Nothingness without being produced by it.

Ontological Priority and Metaphysical Ground

One of the principal consequences of distinguishing Absolute Nothingness from not-being concerns the notion of ontological priority. If not-being is contingent upon determinate beings whereas Absolute Nothingness is not, then the relation between Nothingness and Being cannot be understood as one of temporal succession but of metaphysical grounding. The priority defended throughout this article therefore belongs to the order of intelligibility rather than to the order of chronological events.

This distinction is decisive because philosophical discussions concerning the origin of Being have frequently assumed that priority necessarily implies temporal precedence. Such an assumption immediately gives rise to an insoluble question: *if Nothingness preceded Being, how did Being emerge from Nothingness?* The present proposal rejects the premise underlying this question. Absolute Nothingness is not conceived as an earlier stage of reality but as the ontological condition that makes reality itself intelligible. Asking what existed "before" Nothingness therefore presupposes temporal categories that already belong to the domain of Being.

Consequently, Absolute Nothingness should not be interpreted as an efficient cause. It neither produces beings nor initiates cosmological processes. Causality itself presupposes determinate entities capable of entering relations of production, transformation, or interaction. Nothingness

precedes causality because it precedes every determinate ontological relation. It is therefore more accurately understood as the ground of possibility rather than as the cause of existence.

The distinction between causality and ontological grounding also clarifies the status of contingency. Every finite being is contingent because it could be otherwise. Likewise, every instance of not-being depends upon a corresponding being whose actuality it negates. Absolute Nothingness alone remains independent of such reciprocal determinations. Its independence does not consist in isolation but in the absence of ontological dependence upon any determinate entity. For this reason, contingency belongs exclusively to the sphere of beings and not to Nothingness itself.

This proposal also modifies the traditional understanding of metaphysical foundation. Classical metaphysics has often sought an ultimate being capable of grounding every other being. Whether conceived as substance, first cause, pure act, or necessary being, such foundations remain articulated within the horizon of Being itself. The ontology proposed here suggests a different possibility. Rather than seeking the ultimate foundation among beings, it identifies the non-contingent condition that renders every determination of Being intelligible. Absolute Nothingness therefore does not compete with Being as a superior entity; it grounds the intelligibility of Being without itself becoming another being.

Such grounding should not be confused with logical dependence. In formal logic, the validity of a conclusion depends upon its derivability from premises according to specified rules of inference; this relation concerns propositions and their formal connections rather than the ontological status of what exists. Ontological grounding, as understood here, concerns instead the conditions under which determinate Being and its possible negation can obtain at all. Nor is Absolute Nothingness proposed as a merely epistemic or transcendental condition imposed by the structure of human cognition: its priority is claimed at the level of reality itself, independently of the conceptual operations through which it is apprehended. Absolute Nothingness is therefore neither an abstract logical principle nor a linguistic or cognitive framework, but an ontological condition irreducible to conceptual analysis alone. It is precisely because Nothingness precedes the distinction between affirmation and negation that it can ground their ontological possibility without belonging to either.

From this perspective, Being and not-being cease to appear as the two ultimate categories of ontology. Both become intelligible only through their common dependence upon Absolute Nothingness. The traditional opposition between Being and not-being therefore represents a secondary ontological distinction whose possibility presupposes a more fundamental level of reality. Absolute Nothingness occupies this more fundamental level, not because it is another being, but because it remains independent of every determinate ontological relation.

The distinction defended here consequently transforms the philosophical meaning of ontology itself. Ontology should not be understood exclusively as the study of Being but also as the inquiry into the non-contingent condition that renders Being intelligible. Absolute Nothingness is therefore neither an exception to ontology nor its negation. Rather, it constitutes the deepest horizon from which ontological inquiry itself becomes possible.

Absolute Nothingness beyond Nihilism

One of the most persistent misunderstandings surrounding Nothingness consists in its identification with nihilism. Although both concepts share a common linguistic association with "nothing," they refer to profoundly different philosophical problems. Nihilism represents one historical interpretation of Nothingness, whereas Nothingness itself cannot be reduced to

any particular philosophical doctrine concerning meaninglessness, pessimism, or the collapse of values.

The distinction proposed throughout this article requires separating an ontological concept from an existential or cultural diagnosis. Whereas nihilism seeks to interpret the consequences of the disappearance of absolute foundations, Nothingness designates the ontological condition that precedes every possible foundation. Consequently, nihilism presupposes Nothingness without exhausting its philosophical significance.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant because the Western tradition has frequently identified negativity with absence, destruction, or deprivation. Such associations have encouraged the interpretation of Nothingness as a fundamentally negative reality. However, the conception defended here rejects this interpretation. Nothingness is not the negation of Being but the ontological horizon that renders Being itself intelligible.

Heidegger (1998a) recognized that every genuine philosophy must confront Nothingness directly. As he observes, the decisive test of philosophical thinking lies in its capacity to experience “the neighborhood of Nothing”. Yet Heidegger's formulation should not be understood as an invitation to nihilism. Rather, it points toward the necessity of confronting the ontological question concealed beneath ordinary metaphysical categories.

The concept of Absolute Nothingness¹ proposed here nevertheless differs from Heidegger's *Nichts*. In Heidegger, Nothing is disclosed through the fundamental mood of anxiety (*Angst*), in which beings as a whole recede and Dasein encounters the Nothing. The present argument does not make such disclosure constitutive of Nothingness itself. Although human consciousness may encounter or conceptualize Nothingness through particular existential experiences, Absolute Nothingness does not depend upon Dasein, anxiety, or any other mode of human disclosure for its ontological status. It designates an independent ontological horizon antecedent not temporally but ontologically to human consciousness and to every determinate being. In this respect, the present concept intersects with Heidegger's refusal to reduce Nothingness to logical negation while departing from the phenomenological conditions through which the Nothing becomes manifest in his analysis (Heidegger, 1998a).

The historical development of nihilism illustrates the plurality of meanings that have been attributed to the concept. From Hegel's reflections on negativity to Nietzsche's diagnosis of the crisis of Western values, nihilism has never constituted a single philosophical position. Rather, it has designated diverse attempts to understand the consequences of the disappearance of ultimate certainties. Consequently, identifying Nothingness with nihilism reduces an ontological category to one of its historical interpretations (Volpi, 2005).

The present proposal therefore distinguishes clearly between the two notions. Nihilism constitutes one possible response to Nothingness; it is not Nothingness itself. Indeed, Nothingness may equally become the condition for philosophical openness, creativity, and

¹ The expression *Absolute Nothingness* inevitably recalls the Kyoto School, particularly Nishida Kitarō (1987) and Nishitani Keiji (1982), whose philosophies developed distinctive accounts of absolute nothingness in dialogue with Buddhist thought and Western philosophy. The term is used differently in the present article. It does not designate Nishida's *zettai mu*, nor is it intended as a reconstruction of the Buddhist or Kyoto School conception of emptiness or nothingness. Here, *Absolute Nothingness* functions as a systematic ontological category defined by its non-contingency and independence from determinate Being. The conceptual framework of this article is therefore primarily ontological rather than comparative or religious, although its possible relation to Kyoto School philosophy remains a legitimate subject for further investigation.

human transformation. Far from expressing despair, Absolute Nothingness reveals the contingency of every finite determination and thereby makes possible new forms of understanding.

Several points nevertheless establish a dialogue between the conception defended here and certain nihilistic traditions. Both reject the existence of fixed, universal foundations that can determine human existence once and for all. Both acknowledge the contingency of meaning and the historical fragility of human constructions. Yet their conclusions differ profoundly. Whereas nihilism often culminates in the dissolution of meaning, Absolute Nothingness opens the possibility of continually reconstructing meaning without transforming any construction into an absolute principle.

For this reason, Nothingness should not be regarded as a source of resignation but as the ontological condition of human freedom. The absence of immutable foundations does not condemn existence to absurdity; rather, it liberates human beings from the illusion that a single metaphysical perspective could exhaust reality. As Volpi (2005) argues, contemporary thought no longer possesses a privileged standpoint capable of speaking on behalf of every other perspective. The present proposal radicalizes this insight by grounding such plurality in Absolute Nothingness rather than in historical relativism alone.

Human existence therefore does not culminate in Nothingness as an annihilating end but continually unfolds within the ontological openness that Nothingness makes possible. Nothingness neither abolishes meaning nor prescribes it. It simply renders possible the permanent reconstruction of human existence within the horizon of contingency.

Philosophical Implications

The distinction proposed throughout this article extends beyond a purely conceptual clarification. If Absolute Nothingness is ontologically independent whereas not-being remains dependent upon determinate beings, then several traditional assumptions of Western metaphysics require reconsideration. The implications concern not only ontology itself but also the concepts of contingency, freedom, becoming, and philosophical anthropology.

First, the proposed distinction modifies the understanding of contingency. Classical metaphysics generally attributes contingency to beings insofar as they might either exist or fail to exist. The present proposal retains this characterization while adding a further level of analysis. Beings are contingent not merely because they may cease to exist but because every determinate mode of being presupposes an ontological horizon that does not itself depend upon any determination. Contingency therefore belongs exclusively to beings, whereas Absolute Nothingness remains non-contingent.

Second, this ontology offers a different understanding of becoming. Becoming should not be interpreted as the emergence of Being from Nothingness but as the continual actualization of possibilities within Being itself. Absolute Nothingness neither intervenes in, directs, nor produces this process. Its relation to becoming is strictly one of ontological conditionality: as an unconditioned precondition, it designates the ontological space within which no determinate mode of Being is necessary in itself. Change therefore occurs entirely within Being, while Absolute Nothingness marks the absence of an ultimate ontological necessity fixing beings in one determinate configuration. In this sense, Nothingness does not cause becoming but constitutes the non-contingent condition under which becoming is ontologically possible.

Third, the distinction bears directly upon the philosophical conception of freedom. If reality is not grounded upon immutable determinations but upon an ontological condition that itself remains free from every finite determination, then human freedom cannot be understood merely as the exercise of individual choice. Freedom emerges instead from the openness that characterizes reality at its deepest ontological level. Human beings do not create this openness; they participate in it. The possibility of novelty, creativity, and historical transformation presupposes precisely such openness.

This perspective also modifies philosophical anthropology. Human existence is frequently interpreted through essentialist conceptions that assume predetermined purposes or fixed metaphysical identities. The ontology proposed here suggests the opposite. Human existence unfolds within an ontological horizon that does not impose a unique finality. Meaning therefore cannot be discovered as though it already existed independently of human existence; rather, it is continually constituted within the contingent horizon made possible by Absolute Nothingness.

Such a conclusion should not be confused with relativism. The absence of an absolute metaphysical foundation for particular meanings does not imply that every interpretation possesses equal validity. Instead, it indicates that every finite construction remains historically situated and ontologically contingent. Absolute Nothingness does not abolish truth; it prevents any historical truth from identifying itself with absolute reality.

The same clarification applies to ethics, although the transition from ontology to ethics requires an additional premise. Absolute Nothingness does not itself prescribe values, duties, or forms of conduct; no normative conclusion follows directly from its ontological status. The ethical implication arises only when this ontology is considered together with human finitude and responsibility: because human beings must act and make judgments without occupying an absolute standpoint, their ethical constructions remain open to critical revision and accountability toward others. This does not entail moral paralysis or imply that all norms are equally valid. On the contrary, the absence of an ontologically privileged ethical order increases the responsibility to justify moral judgments through their consequences, coherence, and responsiveness to concrete human beings. Absolute Nothingness therefore neither commands tolerance nor prevents dogmatism by itself; it establishes no moral prescription at all. Non-dogmatic ethics emerges from the human response to finitude and contingency, not from an intentional or causal agency attributed to Nothingness.

Finally, the ontology defended here also redefines the task of philosophy itself. Philosophy is not limited to describing beings or analyzing concepts. Its deepest vocation consists in questioning the ontological conditions that render beings intelligible in the first place. To think Absolute Nothingness is therefore not to abandon ontology but to radicalize it by extending philosophical inquiry beyond the traditional opposition between Being and not-being.

For this reason, the distinction proposed in this article should not be understood merely as a conceptual refinement. It constitutes a different way of approaching metaphysical inquiry itself. Once Absolute Nothingness is recognized as ontologically independent, the study of Being acquires a broader horizon within which contingency, intelligibility, and human freedom may be reconsidered without reducing Nothingness either to negation or to nihilism.

Conclusion

The distinction defended throughout this article has sought to demonstrate that Nothingness and not-being designate fundamentally different ontological realities. Whereas not-being necessarily depends upon determinate beings whose actuality it negates, Absolute Nothingness is ontologically independent. It neither derives its intelligibility from beings nor functions as their negation. Rather, it constitutes the ontological condition that renders both Being and not-being possible.

This distinction also clarifies an ambiguity that has accompanied Western metaphysics since its earliest formulations. By identifying Nothingness with not-being, much of the philosophical tradition reduced Nothingness to a merely negative category. The present proposal argues instead that Nothingness precedes this dialectic altogether. Its priority is not temporal but ontological: Nothingness is not "before" Being in the sequence of events but prior in the order of intelligibility upon which every determinate being ultimately depends.

From this perspective, Aristotle's account of potentiality and privation successfully explains becoming within Being, yet it does not fully account for the ontological condition that makes becoming itself possible. Likewise, nihilism represents only one historical interpretation of Nothingness rather than its philosophical essence. Neither the metaphysics of not-being nor the existential diagnosis of nihilism exhausts the meaning of Absolute Nothingness.

The ontology proposed here therefore understands Nothingness neither as absence nor as destruction, but as the non-contingent horizon that grounds contingency itself. Absolute Nothingness makes possible the plurality of beings without belonging to their dialectic, and it grounds the intelligibility of change without itself becoming subject to change.

Consequently, the philosophical significance of Nothingness extends beyond negative ontology. Once distinguished from not-being and from nihilism, Absolute Nothingness emerges as the ontological condition of possibility for Being, contingency, and human freedom. It is not what remains when beings disappear, but that which has always made their emergence, transformation, and intelligibility possible.

To think Nothingness is therefore not to think what opposes Being, but to think the ontological condition that renders Being and not-being intelligible. In this sense, Absolute Nothingness is not the limit of ontology but its deepest beginning.

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