

Nihilism and Emptiness

The Collapse of Representations and the Question of Nothingness

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In this paper I would like to introduce some of the themes I am investigating as part of a larger monograph. They have to do with current modes of thinking and spiritual conditions in the West and in the globalized world that are permeated by nihilism and its resultant : devaluation of values, with the collapse of representation, and hence the reappearance of the question of nothingness.

When dealing with nihilism, a distinction must be drawn between religious and historical nihilism. Religious nihilism is a universal cultural attitude found in different civilizations. It is a form of nihilism perceived as opposing values that are thought to be unnatural, or as a reaction to a repudiated reality. Spiritual history is a process of adaptation of the system of values, sometimes very slow, sometimes abrupt. In the latter case, nihilistic élites add to the crisis, often in the name of mystic experiences. As Gershom Scholem (1974) has masterly pointed out, religious nihilism has always been present and eager to speed up a time of epochal crisis.

We may point, for example, to a kind of Gnostic nihilism, in which transcendence of the world identifies with a rejection of the world, and whose *überweltlich-gegenweltlich* character stands opposed to the Greek idea of *kosmos* and the Jewish concept of creation. In this regard, Hans

Jonas notes that Gnostic nihilism, unlike the Indian variety, does not show indifference to the world or wallow in the lack of foundations produced by nothingness. Such a nihilist rather considers the world a totally estranged reality, an object of hatred. God is unrelated to the world, an enemy of the world, opposed to worldliness. The Gnostic idea of God is above all nihilistic: God is the nothingness of the world. A Gnostic is a mystic revolutionary who unites nihilism and libertinism in his own person. He refuses common rules in the name of cosmic rules (JONAS 1934, 2: 156).

Parallel to this is a religious nihilism, which develops not by absolutely refusing the world, but by aiming to transcend and deify it through a form of pantheism, reuniting the self and the absolute. We see this in the case of the medieval spiritualism of the Free Spirit movement. The Brethren of movement, active between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is rooted in the world and carried through the clash of social claims and social antagonisms, all of which will in the end be transformed into a kind quietistic pantheism. This movement developed under the influence of the French Victorians, Dominican mystics, authors such as Almarich von Beda and David von Dinant, and texts like the *De divisione naturae* of Scotus Eriugena. If God is everywhere, everything—matter and spirit—is deified and an ideal world appears where the debased reality that we live in is transcended and transformed. Hell is ignorance of the real essence of things, of the sacredness of all parts of the cosmos. The religious nihilism of the Free Spirit aims to turn the interpretation of the world upside down rather than simply reject it out of hand.

Historical nihilism, on the other hand, seems to be a completely and utterly different sort of phenomenon. Given its wide reach, depth, and distinguishing characteristics, it cannot be compared directly to other varieties of religious nihilism that have marked our spiritual history from time to time. Historical nihilism is rather an epochal event signaling the end of a particular metaphysical itinerary. It is also an exclusively European phenomenon, born inside the continental and bent on questioning the established values of Europe. As is well known, this form of nihilism originated in a romantic context where it formed part of the debate initiated by philosophical idealism and indeed may be seen as its inevitable outcome. At least this was the opinion of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi

who, in a letter to Fichte in March 1799, defined idealism as nihilism. According to Jacobi, the autonomous development of reason in idealist thought—that is, its turn to subjectivism—removes the traditional foundations of confidence and opens the way to nihilism. This turn is present in idealism from its outside among the circle of Jena and would be developed further in romantic poetry, which took an ironic, disenchanted attitude towards idealistic creativity. Romantic poets would be the first to hint at the inconsistency of thought in the individual and to begin reflecting on the question of nothingness. No sooner was it perceived than the idea of nothingness spread through romantic sensitivity. We see this, for example, in the antinomy set up between *whole* and *nothing*. When one cannot construct a deeply meaningful world, one plunges into nothingness. Hölderlin and Wackenroder introduced art to the deep dark of nothingness. Romantic poets acted as poetic nihilists, letting art eclipse nature. The cosmos was no longer experienced through the body but was transformed into an image produced by spirituality and opposed to outer corporeality. Fantasy and imagination—typically interior perspectives—became instruments for discarding the creations of the subject. In no time that same subject would discover nothingness as its ground.

Nihilism, which got its start in a romantic context, found its complete definition in Nietzsche, who worked out what he called a devaluation of values, an *Entwertung*. Values do not deteriorate over the long run but dissolve immediately, loosened from their foundations quickly and pathologically. No only do they serve no function whatsoever, they lead the way to restlessness and incoherence. When general values no longer exist to focus and coordinate the totality of pressing social needs, they are replaced by a fragmentation of individual, subjective values. Slowly but steadily, traditional civilization decomposes. Nietzsche did not, however, simply identify the framework of this pathology; he radicalized it. Nihilism became a *Gegenbewegung*, a countertendency, and thus lost its purely negative quality. The move towards *Entwertung* (devaluation) shifted to an *Umwertung* (re-foundation). The will to power became the foundation of beings, and nihilism, as the transformation of the truth of beings, became metaphysics. To think about nihilism was to rethink the truth of the epoch in Western history. The will to power—the increase of

individual potential—stood up as the only possible foundation of values. Moreover, this power became tantamount to the being of beings, sweeping them along in the tides of an eternal recurrence with no finality. In its core structure, the will to power was aimless and lacking in cultural construction. In the end, humanity itself was seen to be no more than a mode of this will to power.

For Plato, arguably the first metaphysician, the being of beings resides in an Idea. Variations on Plato's approach would develop with time. Christianity, for instance, was a form of popular Platonism, and other key concepts—such as reason, social instinct, and progress—would in turn be only variations of Christianity. With the devaluation of values the entity remains, but the being disappears. The will to power as foundation—as *Neusetzung*—grounded nihilism as a new metaphysical form. At the same time, it opened up to the possibility of a still more extreme nihilism that would reject the *Neusetzung* because it reject all eternal truths. In this way the *Umwertung* not only pointed the way to replacing old values with new ones, but also to reconsidering the meaning of the *placement* itself (HEIDEGGER 1941).

Consciousness of the relativity of values was a function of their deterioration, revealing another aspect of being, namely, nothingness. Nihilism, even etymologically, connotes a foundational nothingness. Nothingness, which can no more be defined than “being” can, became a cipher of the current cultural landscape whose core products are technique and mass civilization. Nihilism was thus not a mere catastrophic effect; it spelled the emergence of a logic of the disappearance of values. For Nietzsche the collapse of cosmological values meant nothing less than liberation from pseudo-values.

When key concepts—like the existence of an absolute truth, of finality, of a unifying logic linking all phenomena—are questioned, the world does not simply vanish. Only a certain view of the world disappears. People had been seeking a meaning that was not there, an order of their own making devised to support belief in its value. In making Western history, nihilism was an inevitable result. It sealed the depletion of ideas of truth, being, and metaphysics. To Nietzsche the process of decadence began with Socrates and Plato in their idea of the world of values as opposed to the real world, an idea that would later influence Christianity.

But Nietzsche's nihilism was not pessimistic in the sense of a judgment akin to Plato's false values. It is rather a kind of post-pessimism. The *Übermensch* plays freely, fashioning values devoid of ontological foundation. Nietzsche's ideas wrought a divide in the evolution of nihilism, which would take a dramatic turn in the twentieth century. The spiritual history of the twentieth century amounts to the revelation of different modes of nihilism. It is no accident that the great thinkers of the century have confronted its essence one way or the other.

Jaspers considered nihilism a form of sophistry or radical skepticism, the phenomenon of relativizing and questioning whatever thinking holds sway at the moment. For Adorno, nihilism was a degenerate form of idealism, the expression of a totally irrational late-bourgeois society. To Heidegger, it had to do not only with the simple historical problem of the loss of values, but also with the ontological problem of nothingness that comes to the fore when metaphysics has turned into technique. Karl Löwith read nihilism as the restoration of the relationship between human beings and the natural world that had been distorted by Christianity. The human person, as he saw it, is now located biologically in a world devoid of meaning or aim. To Gottfried Benn, nihilism reflected an epoch in which art had taken the place of religion and philosophy as the sole means of safeguarding human specificity. In any event, two main tendencies were to emerge within nihilism: the questioning of every outlook on the world or representation of reality, and the emergence of reflections on nothingness.

Nothingness has been marginalized and ostracized in the Western ontological landscape. In the Western intellectual tradition and the forms that express it, nothingness has appeared as a continuous source of logical difficulties. For instance, when a concept is, by definition, the representation of an object, we have to ask how we can speak at all of a concept of nothingness. If we could, nothingness would be an entity, a something—which is obviously a contradiction in terms. A concept can be thought; nothingness cannot. Played on the instruments of Western tradition, nothingness has come to be a disturbing presence. (Note the contradiction implied in considering “nothingness” a “presence.”) At the same time, a resolute metaphysical option for being lies at the root of Western thought, there is. Parmenides states apodeictically that

being *is*, and can only *be*, while nothingness *is not*, and can only *not be*. Nothingness does not and must not exist (*Physis*, II7.2 as cited by Simplicius). Nothingness is radically expelled and excluded from reality, which is grounded in being and continuity. Moreover, Parmenides' unambiguous stance excludes all multiplicity and becoming.

Even if this absolute rigour was to be mitigated, the main lines of Parmenides' view ended up affecting the development of Western metaphysics. Parmenides seemed to keep his distance from the world of tragedy. Greek tragedy expressed, in the first place, the ambiguity of human existence, caught in between the longing for life and the inevitability of death and annihilation. Parmenides avoided this ambivalence by setting out to locate the truth of things against an eternal and unchanging horizon. If there is something beyond being, it is other than being and therefore does not exist. By denying nothingness, he denies contradiction and mystery. Parmenides substituted a tragic meontology, based on the ambiguity of events, with a metaphysics of being that bans every dualism. Being cannot perish because it was never born. It is whole, unique, motionless, and endless. Nothing that has existence can lose it.

The contrast within the world of tragedy was in some sense reclaimed by the sophists. Ambiguity and duplicity were once again detected in being. But it was Plato who, in *The Sophist*, acknowledged the possibility of non-being, drawing distinction between relative and absolute nothingness, between opposition and otherness. He declared that the affirmation of non-being does not affirm an opposite to being but only something different from being (*The Sophist*, 258D–E). This implied the possibility of erring, since it is always possible to think differently about things, including being. With Plato we have not so much the start of a history of nothingness in Western thought as of a history of the functionality of nothingness within logic and philosophy. Parmenides worked out a radical monism, opposing truth to opinion. Sophism elaborated an identically radical relativism in which tragedy replaced the idea of truth with the idea of events.

These three opinions are irreconcilable and Plato rejected all of them. Indeed, he kept his distance from tragedy in order to question the sophists and, to some extent, Parmenides as well. In reply to the sophist he declared that a fallacy “is,” that as non-being it participates in being.

In this way he both affirmed the being of non-being and opposed Parmenides. To carry out the transition from sophism to dialectics he had to surrender Parmenides' principle. From Plato's perspective, however, non-being was subordinate to being, a kind of shadow or dark side of being. The philosopher's task was to declare what *is* as true and reject what *is not* as false.

Western thought developed, thus, from the idea that the philosopher's task is to dispel darkness and eliminate nothingness. This ontological perspective would bring it eventually to nihilism and witness the reemergence of a repressed nothingness. Here it is not possible to review this process in detail, only to suggest some of the speculative turns that restored a marginalized nothingness to philosophical attention. In the main, these shifts are connected with some form of mysticism, perhaps because the mystics show a greater freedom and open-mindedness.

Plotinus placed the *archē*, the One, beyond being. In fact, he held that nothing could be said about the One, just as nothing can be said about nothingness, the only predicate that converges with the One. The One is beyond existence and being, otherwise it could not create existence or being. This is what makes it nothingness, abyssal origin of being. The One is nothingness, or better still, it is the nothingness of things that are. It is the condition of being free of all determination. Participating in the One, reality is free from all bonds, including its ties to the principle of reason, and hence reverts to pure being itself. The nothingness of the beginning and the end—that is, the nothingness of the condition in which liberated reality is absorbed back into its origin—is something of which nothing can be predicated. No subject and no object exist in this place, only ecstasy and light. At the same time, Plotinus outlined a twofold meontology: nothingness is an attribute of the One, but also an attribute of matter. The human being can be absorbed back into the light of the One, but can also plunge into the annihilating nothingness of matter. Therefore, there is a supreme nothingness and at the same time an inferior low nothingness that annihilates and disfigures. Divine nothingness is symmetrically opposed to the nothingness of matter. This double nature of nothingness was to open the door to daring speculations in Western mystical philosophy.

Meantime, the question of a being beyond the being of God and

beyond the names of being, led to the identification of God with nothingness. This line of thought was worked out in Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, and Angelus Silesius, reaching to the late Schelling. As Gershom SCHOLEM (1956) has pointed out, the formula *creatio ex nihilo* coincides with that of the creation from God (*creatio ex Deo*) where God himself is the abyss of nothingness from which the world derives. The gnosticism of Philo of Alexandria and Basilides drew on the neo-Platonic concept of divine nothingness, which it later fell to broaden and revise. Finally, it was thanks to Pseudo-Dionysius that this tradition came to penetrate the theological thought of Western Christianity. Partly because of his mistaken identification with a member of the Areopagus referred to in the Acts of the Apostles (17: 22), Pseudo-Dionysius enjoyed the authority to introduce arguments into the theological debate that would otherwise have been difficult to accept. In his treatise on *The Divine Names* he maintained that supra-substantial divinity does not exist in the ordinary sense of existence, but is the cause of universal existence without itself existing, which is what makes it superior to all other substances. These matters were arranged systematically in the *De divisione naturae* of Scotus Eriugena. There God is seen to descend into his abyssal depth—the nothingness of *creatio ex nihilo*—to create himself and all things out of his divine wisdom. Scotus considered nothingness the supra-essential core of divinity. Although this teaching would later be declared heretical, it continued to provide a starting point for speculation and to influence mystics and philosophers, all the way up to Meister Eckhart and the *Grunt* mystics.

The mystic tradition that traces its beginnings to Eckhart took over a range of previous ideas about the nothingness of the Godhead from Ismailian gnosticisism and Jewish cabbalistic thinking, from Bachja ibn Pakuda, Jehuda Halevi, Abraham ibn Daud, and above all Maimonides. Eckhart represented the culmination of Western speculation on nothingness up to that time. It is no accident that his ideas became one of the privileged topics for comparative analysis among the philosophers of the Kyoto School, since they show such unique correspondence to Eastern ideas of emptiness. Ueda Shizuteru divides Eckhart's thought into two main themes: the birth of God in the soul and the breakthrough to *Gottheit*. The first of these developed along the lines of a strictly

Trinitarian model, while his treatment notion of *Gotttheit* recapitulated all those elements—neo-Platonism, gnosticicism, Jewish mystics—that seem to depart from the Catholic doctrine (UEDA 1965). Together the two themes form a single and coherent mystical system. God fathers his only-begotten son in the soul of each individual, setting the soul off on its journey to reunion with the Father. By abandoning oneself and the world, one comes to the Word in silence where all separation and alienation are dissolved in an *oblatio alteritatis*. The soul, the very image of God, arrives at its origin, but in the end is no more than a representation of God, a concept trying to give form to something that, by definition, is neither definable nor capable of representation. Hence the soul must continue its journey until it comes to the essence of God, the apophatic *Gotttheit*, the pure Nothingness from which divinity itself originates. Thus the soul reaches God, breaks through God to the *Gotttheit* beyond God, and then reverts to the created world with its revelation of a God empty in essence.

The mystic tradition stemming from Eckhart stands at the zenith of Western speculation on nothingness, despite the difficulty the Western world has had with accepting it. It became marginalized and repressed, if not outright condemned as heretical in favor of the traditional attachment to the principle of being until, in the end, it collapsed into nihilism and the dramatic re-emergence of nothingness. As more attention has been paid to speculative traditions with a different and more positive attitude towards emptiness, analogies began to take shape. Raimon Panikkar has observed with great astuteness a relationship between post-Hindu Buddhism and post-Christian nihilism, both of which seem to move within the same horizon: the crisis of redundancy in religion and the focus on nothingness as a major concern (PANIKKAR 1992, 5). This becomes even more evident when we turn to Mādhyamika thought.

As a central phase in the development of Buddhism, Mādhyamika goes beyond the Ābhidharmika system of thought with its radical plurality and theory of the elements (*dharmā-vāda*). It marks a transition from a kind of empiricism to a dialectical critique. In its doctrine of the *śkhandā* and the unbroken succession of dharmas (*kṣaṇika-vāda*), the Ābhidharmika system rejects the idea of an unchanging and identical soul. Existence is taken to be a flux of instant—and therefore impermanent—realities.

Even desiring to conceive the universal is unreasonable because it is *vikalpa*, an illusory construction of thought. Ābhidharmika set itself up in opposition to the *ātma-vāda* tradition, which conceived of reality as endowed with substance, but in so doing it fell into an unself-critical and antinomic stance. As a result, Mādhyamika may be considered a fuller flowering of early Buddhism. Structured around the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, it appears in the literary texts of the *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras, where the empiricism and dogmatism of previous Buddhism have been replaced with a form of absolutism that rejects all speculative theories. Negation, or *śūnyatā*, takes the place of the doctrine of impermanence. The main theme of these sūtras and its accompanying literature is that there is no change, no origin, no end. The real is neither one, nor many, neither *ātman*, nor *anātman*. All these are so much speculation born of ignorance. The real is absolutely devoid (*śūnyā*) of such conceptual constructions. It transcends thought and can be seized only by non-dual knowledge or *prajñā*. *Śūnyatā* is not simply one more concept among others; it is the absence of all concepts.

The heart of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature was systematized by Nāgārjuna (150 AD) and his followers, Ārya Deva (180 AD) and Candrakīrti (early sixth century), the main figure of the Prāsaṅgika school. The defining trait of this systematization is the refusal of all viewpoints through a *reductio ad absurdum* (*prasaṅgāpādānam*). The self-contradictory character of each view is shown, without offering an alternative to it. *Prasaṅga* is simple confutation. There is no effort to oppose a false view with a true one. To *prasaṅga*, all visions are false and produced by ignorance; they are no more than projections of the ego. Viewpoints (*āvaraṇa*) only conceal reality; they possess those who hold them. Mādhyamika, in contrast, seeks to cut through them to the *śūnyatā* that underlines their vacuous nature. Nothing in reality exists by itself but only in relation to other entities, which in turn depend upon still other entities, and so on without end. There is no self without conditions and no conditions without the self. There is no whole aside from its parts and no parts aside from the whole. Things that derive their self from mutual dependence are themselves empty, not real. Categories are conceptual devices aimed at relativizing the real and as such are falsifications of reality (*saṃvṛti*). Analytic logic distorts reality. The absolute, however,

is beyond distinctions. The problem of substance is dealt with in the fifth chapter of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamādhyamikakārikāḥ*, where it is argued that substance cannot be thought as devoid of attributes and therefore cannot precede attributes. On the other hand, attributes have no meaning without substance. Rather, substance and attributes support one another in a relational—and therefore empty—nature. They are mere accidental conditions that bring about the appearance of the phenomenon. Similarly, no object can be perceived apart from its cause and no cause apart from its object. There is no God apart from the universe and no universe apart from God. There is neither truth nor fallacy. There are only transient phenomena.

If reality is relative and incomprehensible, is there an absolute? To Nāgārjuna, the absolute is no less inaccessible and unthinkable than the rest of reality. If it could be thought, it would fall into the category of what can be reified through thought and would cause to be absolute. At the conventional level, language can be used as an instrument, but it cannot be used to access the inaccessible. This theme is masterly expressed in a well-known passage from the *Vajracchedikasūtra* that reads:

He who has entered on the path of the Bodhisattva should thus frame his thought: all beings must be delivered by me in the perfect world of Nirvana; and yet after I have thus delivered these beings, no beings have been delivered. And why? Because, Oh Subhūti, if a Bodhisattva had any idea of beings, he could not be called a Bodhisattva. (MÜLLER 1990, 132)

Mādhyamika is not a *Weltanschauung* but the end of all world-views. Its aim is to deconceptualize the mind. Removing views (*dṛṣṭi*) and their incrustations, the mind is free and able to grasp reality through *prajñāpāramitā*. Such a mind rejects the logic of opposites and oppositions. It is *advaya*, non-dual knowledge. According to the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, *śūnyatā* cannot be understood as the foundation of reality, let alone hypostatized or transformed into a metaphysical principle, since this would usher in a dualistic perspective. The role of *śūnyatā* in these texts not only annihilates the phenomenal self, it also annihilates emptiness itself. One of the eighteen forms of emptiness enumerated is *śūnyatā-śūnyatā*, the emptiness of emptiness. It represents

the annihilation of emptiness itself, which verges on aporia if taken in traditional Western modes of thought. Emptiness cannot be a “something” and even less so can it be a metaphysical entity. Emptiness must be annihilated, which is why it gives rise to entities that will themselves be annihilated. Nor can emptiness be thought of as a space, a place where phenomenal presences are given and taken away.

In Mādhyamika, emptiness is not a foundation for being but belongs to the same context as being. It is naturally placed at the centre of reality in an *advaya* or non-dual perspective. Contrast this with Western thought which has tended to develop by setting up polarities in a confrontational logic: spirit–matter, true–false, subject–object, and so on. Even at the epistemological level subjects are opposed to objects. It naturally tends to reduce reality to an object, to matter that can be manipulated. The being–nothingness opposition develops along similar lines.

Nothingness is a logical abstraction providing a negative definition of being that, per force, ends up being shunted aside or diminished by the centrality of being. Either that, or it becomes marginalized as a supreme nothingness, as a divine abyss, or as the inferior nothingness of degraded matter. The result is what Leszek Kolakowski has described as *metaphysical horror* (1988). Both the highest and the lowest forms of nothingness are indescribable, and indeed the distinction between them becomes inexpressible to the point of complete negation. Nothingness is the name given to the ephemeral world ruled by time. Nothingness is also the name given to the absolute, that which can rescue us from transience—one nothingness saving another from its nothingness.

This complementarity is reflected in the breakdown of language and its representations, which brings us to the other defining characteristic of nihilism: *Entwertung*, the devaluation of values and of narrations that have legitimated civilization. The representations that serve as ethical and ideological foundations lose their power spontaneously as the logical consequence of the journey of thought to its term. They become pathologically empty and impossible to replace. Usually we witness the collapse of collective representations, but individual representations, our personal modes of relating to the world, are not immune from the collapse. As unavoidable as this process may be, it is not without the positive effect of clearing away incrustations from our habits of thought. Nietz-

sche's declaration "God is dead!" does not imply the end of the absolute and truth, but the end of *representations* of the truth that have held sway over Western civilization. Such representations have often served to support those in control and to construct "symbolic bunkers" where self-enclosed identities are nurtured. The clash of civilizations has its origins here and is therefore disempowered by the crisis of representation and narrative.

I believe there is a kind of isomorphism between nihilistic *Entwertung* and *prasaṅga* in Mādhyamika. The Prāsaṅgika were consciously looking to deconstruct conceptualizations and to liberate the mind from views occluding reality. In contrast, *Entwertung* is a spontaneous collapse of collective narratives. There is an enormous cultural and temporal distance between the two. Mādhyamika shows a consciousness and radicalism unknown to nihilism, yet both seem headed in the same direction. A rediscovery of apophatism seems to emerge in the nihilistic context as well. The crisis of narratives and worldviews necessarily helps clear away conceptual attachments to focus attention on the reality of the self and the indescribable absolute. It is a kind of generalized mysticism. At the same time, the crisis undermines the ideological basis of the polarizations on which self-enclosed identities are based. Despite all appearances, I believe we are moving toward the decline of polar logic and closer to a perspective of widespread interaction. I would claim that it is time to reconsider, in all earnestness, the East–West polarity itself. Edward SAID (1978) has shown up the ideological artificiality of this way of thinking. It remains for us to adopt a more open and receptive attitude, critical of our partial, Western modes of thought. The more speculative heritages this process can penetrate, the more global it can become and the more it can serve the needs of the present world. In this, the century-old contributions of the Kyoto School are obviously crucial.

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