

## Heidegger's What is Metaphysics?

Heidegger's 1929 inaugural address at Freiburg University begins by posing the question 'what is metaphysics?' only to then immediately declare that it will 'forgo' a discussion about metaphysics in order to better answer the question. Rather than a discussion about metaphysics in general of the kind you might expect, the method Heidegger chooses is instead to take up a particular metaphysical question, for in doing so we will "*let ourselves be transposed directly into metaphysics*", giving it "*the proper occasion to introduce itself.*" (82)

If we take up a particular metaphysical question, we will get to metaphysics itself because every metaphysical question permeates metaphysics as a whole: "*every metaphysical question always encompasses the whole range of metaphysical problems. Each question is itself always the whole.*" (82) His plan is to unfold the enquiry by using a discussion of science as a method by which to reach the question of the nothing, elaborate on this question and provide a response to it.

### Part 1 - The unfolding of a metaphysical inquiry – using science to open up the question of nothing

Heidegger brings science into play in order to unfold the specific metaphysical question he has in mind, noting that "*our existence - in the community of researchers, teachers and students – is determined by science.*" (82) Science does not simply determine our lives in an academic sense however, but has progressively affected our lives more and more in very real ways on a daily basis, be it the advent of the internet, the cars we drive, medical care we have access to, etc., science can be said to determine our existences in a number of ways. Whatever the results of science and whatever scientific discipline, though, Heidegger notes that they all have in common the fact that "*they adopt a stance towards beings themselves.*" (83) Science seeks truth about the world and in doing so must adopt a stance towards beings in the world. This all may sound rather obvious, and perhaps it is, but what is crucial for Heidegger here is what science does not ever do. In science, "*what should be examined are beings only [...], and beyond that – nothing.*" (84) In rigorously focussing its enquiry totally and completely onto the realm of beings that are in Being, science ignores the question of what is beyond beings themselves – nothing, or non-being. "*Science wishes to know nothing of the nothing.*" (84) It is with this that he states the particular metaphysical question the rest of the enquiry will take up: "*what about this nothing?*" or "*how is it with the nothing?*" (84)

### Part 2 - The elaboration of the question – ascertaining whether questioning the nothing is possible and re-arriving at the question via anxiety

In this section, Heidegger begins by discussing perhaps the most immediately obvious issue in the very asking of this question: in talking about nothing, we cannot help but turn it into a thing, "*we posit it as a being.*" (85) Heidegger preliminarily defines the nothing as "*the negation of the totality of beings,*" (85) but even this definition makes the nothing into a positive entity, as though it is this or that, but since the nothing is nothing, it makes no sense to talk of it in this way.

"*according to the reigning and never-challenged doctrine of "logic," negation is a specific act of the intellect.*" (85) We make plentiful use of negation in everyday language. Heidegger wonders whether the nothing can only arise because of negation, or whether it is the other way round. This is an open possibility, so "*if we do not let ourselves be misled by the formal impossibility of the question of the nothing, if we pose the question in spite of this, then we must at least satisfy what remains the basic demand for the possible advancing of every question. If the nothing itself is to be questioned as we have been questioning it, then it must be given beforehand. We must be able to encounter it.*" (86)

If the nothing “*is the complete negation of the totality of beings,*” (86) then we must be able to experience the totality of beings, followed by the totality of beings being negated. How do we experience the negation of the totality of beings?

Heidegger grants that we can never really 'experience' the totality of Being as such (how can we when we have access to so little of it?) or grasp it all at once, and since we are in being there is no way we can experience the negation or annihilation of the totality of beings because that would include the negati. However, he argues, the totality of being makes itself known to us through the phenomenon of 'being attuned' to the world or 'mood'. In our everyday Dasein, we are always in some mood or another, and this mood colours our experience of the world, disclosing it to us in various ways. When I'm bored, I 'am' in my totality, bored and the world is disclosed to me thus. This defines my experience of the world for that time: being, as a whole, comes across as boring to me. Conversely, when I am in ecstasy, existence appears miraculous and joyful. Moods are a fundamental and essential part of what it means to be the kind of beings that we are. However, in the case of all of our moods (apart from one, as we shall see), they direct themselves towards beings and Being. The world and the beings in front of me appear differently to me depending on the mood I am in. The nothing does not make itself manifest in any of our moods except one.

The exception is in anxiety, which is, according to the Macquarrie/Robinson translation of BT, is a state-of-mind, translated from *befindlichkeit*. As we saw last week, this may not be the best translation. A 'state of mind' in English is usually understood as a temporary psychological state, and though anxiety could potentially be considered this, what Heidegger has in mind is something more fundamental. Stambaugh translates *befindlichkeit* as 'attunement', whereas Kisiel renders it 'disposedness', which as the Stanford Encyclopaedia explains, is “the a priori transcendental condition for the phenomenon of mood” we just highlighted. Disposedness, or attunement, is our capacity to find ourselves in the world in a certain way, to be able to be disposed to it in various ways. Moods are these ways of being disposed to the world.

Heidegger draws heavily here on his writing on anxiety two years prior in *Being and Time*, specifically the idea that “*that in the face of which one is anxious is completely indefinite. [...] Anxiety does not know what that in the face of which it is anxious is.*” (BT 231) Whereas all of our other states-of-mind, or moods, are directed towards, or 'about', beings, anxiety does not direct itself towards anything, and is completely indefinite as to what it is anxious about. This is, however, proper existential anxiety and not simply “*quite common anxiousness, ultimately reducible to fearfulness.*” (88) He contrasts anxiety with fear to illustrate this point. In fear, we are always fearful of something, someone, or something that may happen. Something is disclosed to us as being worthy of fear. Our fear is always directed towards something, directed towards some entity or possibility within the world. This is not the case in anxiety, whose “*indeterminateness [...] concerning [that with] which we become anxious is no mere lack of determination but rather the essential possibility for determining it.*” (88)

What happens in anxiety, Heidegger argues, is that “*all things and we ourselves sink into indifference.*” (88) Beings recede away, retreating from us, temporarily losing their significance and meaning for us: “*we can get no hold on things. In the slipping away of beings this “no hold on things” comes over us and remains.*” (88) Our worlds and the things in them are usually the totality of significance for us, but in anxiety this significance is lost and we are (to use Heidegger's phrase) 'left hanging' because beings have slipped away from us.

What does this entail for his enquiry into the nothing? In anxiety, “*in the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to, pure Da-sein is all that is there.*” (89) In anxiety, beings slip away from us such that we cannot latch on to any of them. Thus, in anxiety, there is just our Dasein, our existence, in the midst of Being. Being is made manifest to us

through anxiety because beings slip away from us, thus making us aware that these things are in being and not nothing. Thus, the nothing makes itself known.

### Part 3 - The response to the question – the status of the nothing, its relation to metaphysics

Heidegger clarifies that saying 'the nothing makes itself known' or 'manifests itself' or 'is revealed' does not mean that the nothing is revealed as an object, even as a being, and that anxiety, though it is the mode in which the nothing is revealed to us, is *“no kind of grasping of the nothing.”* (89) So in what sense, then, is it revealed to us? It has to do, Heidegger suggests, with the 'slipping away' of beings present in anxiety. When beings slip away in true anxiety and *“become superfluous”* (90), they are not annihilated or negated but nihilated: *“this wholly repelling gesture towards beings [...], which is the action of the nothing [...], is the essence of the nothing: nihilation.”* (90) Beings, in anxiety, are affected by the nothing, nihilated by it, made to mean, or are 'nothing' for us. The nothing, therefore, is not a product of the negative faculties of our language because it *“rises to meet us already before that.”* (90) The nothing is prior to and makes possible negation - *“the nothing is the origin of negation, and not vice versa.”* (92)

Why is this the case? Heidegger answers: *“how could negation produce the “not” from itself when it can negate only if something negatable is already granted to it? But how could the negatable and what is to be negated be viewed as something susceptible to the “not” unless all thinking as such has already caught sight of the “not”?”* (92) Negation, it seems, always needs to already have the 'not' in order to negate. It therefore cannot be its origin. When we are in the fundamental mode of anxiety, beings slip away as a whole and are made to mean nothing for us. This is how we first become aware that they are beings, and *not* nothing. This is where the 'not' of negation originates, or as Heidegger writes: *“negation is grounded in the “not” that springs from the nihilation of the nothing.”* (92)

Heidegger admits that *“we are so finite that we cannot even bring ourselves originally before the nothing of our own decision and will.”* (93) We may not be able to properly bring ourselves before the nothing as such, but it does make itself manifest to us and it does affect our being in the mode of anxiety: we are, to use Heidegger's phrase, *“held out into the nothing”* and this being held out into the nothing constitutes our *“surpassing of beings as a whole”* and *“transcendence.”* (93) It is with this that Heidegger explains how our questioning of the nothing is *“to bring us face to face with metaphysics itself.”* (93)

Metaphysics, broadly speaking, as traditionally understood, is a branch of philosophical enquiry that aims to step beyond or over scientific enquiry and the world in order to provide us with a complete account of it. Heidegger sees questioning the nothing by means of anxiety to be metaphysical. He phrases it so: *“metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings that aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp. In the question concerning the nothing such an inquiry beyond or over beings, beings as a whole, takes place. It proves thereby to be a “metaphysical” question.”* (93-94) When we ask about the nothing, we are asking about that which is beyond beings themselves and are therefore doing metaphysics.

Having shown that the question of the nothing is essentially metaphysical, Heidegger asks exactly how far this question has resonated throughout the history of metaphysics and gives a *“cursory historical recollection”* (94) of it. Metaphysics has never made the nothing *“a problem in its own right”* (94) and for a long time has expressed its consideration of the nothing in the phrase 'from nothing, nothing comes to be' – *ex nihilo nihil fit*. However, *“the respective views of the nothing nevertheless express the guiding fundamental conception of beings.”* (94)

*“Ancient metaphysics conceives the nothing in the sense of nonbeing”* (94)

Whereas,

*“Christian dogma denies the truth of the proposition ex nihilo nihil fit and thereby bestows on the nothing a transformed significance, the sense of the complete absence of beings apart from God. [...] no one is bothered by the difficulty that if God creates out of nothing precisely he must be able to comport himself to the nothing. But if God is God, he cannot know the nothing, assuming that the “absolute” excludes all nothingness.” (94)*

The history of the nothing in metaphysics is one of the idea of the negation of that which most properly is – Being. But given what Heidegger has already said about the nothing in this lecture, this cannot be true. He illustrates this with a quote from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which reads *“Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same.” (94)* The nothing makes itself known to us in anxiety by affecting beings themselves through its action of nihilation. It is therefore not the negation of beings but a part of Being: as Heidegger phrases it, it *“unveils itself as belonging to the being of beings.” (94)*

As a part of our existence, we are held out into the nothing where it makes itself manifest to us. It is only then that we see beings for what they are and we can adopt a stance towards them – we realise that they *are beings, and not nothing*. It is only because of this that we can adopt a stance towards beings themselves. If science adopts a stance towards beings, which Heidegger says it does and possesses a *“simplicity and aptness” (95)* in doing so, then it must only be able to do so on the basis of the nothing. This is because the nothing is what originally reveals beings to us *as beings*, in the fundamental mode of anxiety. The nothing is what makes us aware that they are beings and not nothing. Therefore, *“only if science exists on the basis of metaphysics can it fulfil in ever-renewed ways its essential task, which is [...] to disclose in ever-renewed fashion the entire expanse of truth in nature and history.” (95)* If science is to disclose the entire truth about beings, then it must operate based on an understanding of the nothing because the nothing is the very thing that allows even an understanding of beings as beings and not nothing. Furthermore, since every metaphysical question encompasses metaphysics as a whole and the nothing is a metaphysical question, science must exist on the basis of metaphysics.

Heidegger concludes the lecture by extending even further the function of the nothing. Not only is it the condition for negation, nihilation and our even knowing that beings are in existence and not nothing, it is the condition for wonder. *“Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder.” (95)* The nothing made manifest in anxiety is the condition for us to be able to articulate what Heidegger calls the most fundamental question: why are there beings at all, and not rather nothing? It is thus the condition for, and a part of, metaphysics. Human beings are by their very nature held out into the nothing, which is to go beyond beings, but as Heidegger says toward the end of the lecture, *“this going beyond is metaphysics itself.” (96)*

What is metaphysics then, for Heidegger? It is the *“fundamental occurrence in our Dasein” (96)*, an unavoidable consequence of being the kind of beings that we are, a going beyond beings made possible on the basis of the nothing, which makes itself known to us in anxiety through the nihilation of beings. Any existential encounter with the nothing which produces metaphysics is therefore fundamentally prior to and a condition for scientific thought, since the fundamental ‘why-question’ of metaphysics is initially occasioned by it. In light of all this, it is apparent, Heidegger tells us, that any science wanting to disclose the complete truth about beings must at some point have to investigate the origin of its capacity to take a stance towards said beings, and such an investigation would have to include a confrontation with the nothing, of which science currently

wants to know nothing of. Science must therefore exist on the basis of metaphysics. It is only because in our essence we are held out into the nothing as it affects our experience of beings in anxiety, that we are able to transcend beings and thus do metaphysics. The nothing overwhelms us significantly enough that not only we first of all realise that beings are in existence, but are moved to wonder why they are instead of not. Metaphysics is this going beyond that happens in our essential encounter with the nothing. Although Heidegger initially informs us that we were to let ourselves be transposed directly into metaphysics, he instead shows that this is actually not possible because as long as human beings exist, philosophy and metaphysics occur also - "*we are always already within*" (96) metaphysics.