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WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?
An interpretive translation

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INTRODUCTION

The question “What is metaphysics?” might lead one to expect a general discussion about metaphysics, but we waive that in order to discuss one specific metaphysical question. This is the way, it seems, to let ourselves be transported directly into metaphysics, and the only way to give metaphysics the possibility of properly introducing itself to us.

We carry out this project by first unfolding a metaphysical question, then working it out, and finally answering it.

PART ONE UNFOLDING A METAPHYSICAL QUESTION

As Hegel says, when sound common sense looks at philosophy, it sees “the world turned upside down.” So the peculiar nature of our undertaking demands some preparatory remarks. They come from the twofold character of metaphysical questioning.

THE TWOFOLD CHARACTER OF METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONING

First, each metaphysical question always encompasses the whole problematic of metaphysics and in fact *is* the whole of metaphysics. Secondly, to ask any metaphysical question, the questioner as such must also be present in the question, i.e., must be put in question.

From this we conclude that metaphysical questions must be posed (1) in terms of the whole and (2) always from the essential situation of human existence that asks the question. Right now we are asking about ourselves. Within this community of scholars, teachers, and students, our existence is determined by science. When science becomes our passion, something essential occurs with us in the very grounds of our existence – but what exactly? [104]

THE THREEFOLD STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC QUESTIONING

The fields of science are quite distinct, and their respective methods for investigating objects are fundamentally different. Nowadays the only thing that unites the expanding array of disciplines and gives them some coherence is the technical organization of universities and their departments, along with the practical goals set by each discipline. But even so, the sciences have lost their rootedness in their essential ground.

1. *Relation-to-the-world.* Nonetheless, when we follow the inner trajectory of any given science, we always relate to things. In the view of science, no one field has priority over another – not history over nature or nature over history – nor does any one method for investigating objects take precedence over another. Mathematical knowledge is no more rigorous than philological-historical knowledge. It merely has the character of “exactness,” which is not the same as rigor. To demand exactness from historical studies is to violate the idea of rigor that is specific to the humanities. The *relation-to-the-world* that governs every science *qua* science lets the sciences pursue things and make them, in their whatness and howness, an object of research, definition, and grounding. The ideal of the sciences is to help us achieve an approximation to the essence of all things.

2. *Orientation.* Sciences special relation to things is sustained and guided by a freely chosen *orientation* on the part of human existence. Our pre- and extra-scientific activities are also ways of relating to things, but science is unique insofar as it gives the subject-matter, and it alone, a basic, complete and explicit primacy. This focus on the subject-matter in scientific questioning, defining, and grounding involves a unique and specific submission to whatever-is,

in order that it might appear as what it is. Scientific research and theory are beholden to their objects, and this is the reason why the sciences [105] are able to assume a proper, if limited, role of leadership in the whole of human existence.

3. In-break. The way to fully understand science's special relation-to-the-world, as well as the human orientation that guides it, is to understand what happens along with this orientation and its relation-to-the-world. Human beings – one kind of being among others – “pursue science.” What happens in this “pursuit” is nothing less than the *in-break* of human being into things, with the result that this in-break “breaks open” things as what and how they are. In its own way, the in-break that breaks-open helps things become themselves for the first time.

SCIENCE'S AMBIVALENT RELATION TO THE NO-THING

Taken in its radical unity, this trinity of relation-to-the-world, orientation, and in-break brings to our scientific existence the clarifying simplicity and rigor of human being. Once we explicitly grasp that clarified scientific human being, we have to say:

- Our relation-to-the world relates only to things that exist – and to nothing else.¹
- Every orientation is guided by things – and by nothing besides.
- In the break-in, our research activity confronts things – and nothing more.

It is remarkable that as scientists stake out their own territory, they speak about something else. They investigate only things, and *nothing else*; just things that exist, and *nothing besides*; only things that are, and *nothing more*. What about this “nothing?” Is it just an accident that we speak so naturally in this way? Is it a mere turn of phrase – and nothing else? [106]

Why trouble ourselves about this no-thing? Science rejects it, dismisses it as “just nothing.” However, - by giving up the no-thing in this way, do we not concede the no-thing? Yet how can we talk of “conceding” when in fact we concede no-thing? Maybe all this back-and-forth is just word-play. Science must now reassert its hard-headed seriousness and insist that it deals only with things. Science views the no-thing as nothing, a ghost.

If science is right, this much is sure: science wants to know nothing about the no-thing. In the final analysis that is the scientifically rigorous conception of the no-thing. We know it only by wanting to know nothing about it.

Science wants to know nothing about the no-thing. Yet it is equally certain that when science tries to express its own essence,² it appeals to the no-thing for help. It makes a claim on what it rejects. What kind of double valence³ is showing up here?

By reflecting on our factual existence – an existence determined by science – we find ourselves caught up in a controversy in which a question has already unfolded. That question merely needs to be directly asked: What about the no-thing?

¹ Some have dismissed the words after the dash as arbitrary and contrived, without realizing that Taine, whom we may take as symbolizing and representing the entire era that is still dominant, explicitly uses that formula to characterize his basic position and intent. (1st ed., 1929.)

² i.e., its positive, disclosive orientation to things. (5th ed., 1949.)

³ The ontological difference. (3rd ed., 1931.)
the no-thing as “being/*Sein*.” (5th ed., 1949.)

PART TWO WORKING OUT THE QUESTION OF THE NO-THING

Working out the question of the no-thing must lead us to the point where either an answer becomes possible or the impossibility of an answer becomes clear. The no-thing has been conceded – in the sense that science, with a [107] studied indifference, dismisses it as “non-being.” Nonetheless, we will try to ask about the no-thing.

AN *INADEQUATE* FORMULATION OF THE QUESTION

“What is the no-thing?” This first approach to the question reveals something odd. This way of asking the question begins by positing the no-thing as something that “is” thus and so. We take the no-thing as a thing, whereas that is exactly what it is different from.⁴ Posing the question in terms of what and how the no-thing *is* changes what we are asking about into its opposite. The question robs itself of its own object. Thus any answer to this question is utterly impossible because it necessarily takes the form: “the no-thing *is* this or that.” Both the question and the answer about the no-thing are inherently absurd.

AN *INADEQUATE* APPROACH THROUGH LOGIC, REASON, AND NEGATIVE ASSERTIONS

Logic seems to defeat the question. We do not even need science’s rejection of the no-thing. The question is already defeated by the principle commonly adduced as the basic rule of thinking – namely, that contradiction must be avoided – along with general “logic.” Since the essence of thought is to always think about *something*, thought would contradict its own essence if it thought about *the no-thing*.

Since we are not allowed to turn the no-thing into an object, our question about the no-thing is already at an end, presuming, of course, that “logic”⁵ is the supreme authority in this question, that discursive reason is the means – and that thinking is the way – to understand the no-thing originally and to decide if it can even be disclosed.

How can we impugn the authority of “logic”? Discursive reason is surely lord and master of the question about the no-thing. We need its help to define the no-thing and pose it as a problem, even if the problem ultimately unravels. The no-thing is the negation of everything that is: [108] it is non-being pure and simple. In saying this, we locate the no-thing within the category of “is-not” and thus within the arena of the negated. According to the dominant and unchallenged doctrine of “logic,” negation is a specific act of discursive reason. So how could we ever dismiss reason when inquiring into the no-thing and into its ability to be questioned?

But are we entirely sure what we are presupposing here? Is it really the case that “is-not,” negatedness, and thus negation, are the category into which the no-thing fits as a specific case of “the negated”? It might be the other way around. Maybe the occurrence of the no-thing does not depend on the “is-not” and the act of negating. Maybe the act of negation and its “is-not” can occur only if the no-thing first occurs. This point has never even been explicitly raised as a question, much less decided.

Heidegger’s thesis. Our own position is that the no-thing is closer to the source⁶ than the act of negation and its “is-not.” If this thesis is correct, then the possibility of negation as an act of reason (and therefore reason itself) is

⁴ The difference [*der Unterschied, die Differenz*]. (5th ed., 1949.)

⁵ That is, logic in the usual sense, what people take to be logic. (1st ed., 1929.)

dependent in some way on the no-thing. In that case reason would have no decision-power over the no-thing. In the final analysis the alleged “absurdity” of both the question and answer about the no-thing may be simply due to the blind willfulness of our self-vaunting reason.⁷

A renewed attempt fails. If we refuse to be deterred by the formal impossibility of asking about the no-thing, and persist instead in asking the question, we still have to satisfy the basic minimum requirement for raising any question. If we are to question the no-thing, it must first be given. We have to be able to encounter it.

Where should we look for the no-thing? How will we find it? Surely to find something, we have to already know in a general way that [109] it is there. Ordinarily we can search for something only by anticipating the presence of what we are looking for. In the current instance we are looking for the no-thing. Can there ever be a search without an anticipation, a search that would end in pure discovery?

Whatever we make of the no-thing, we do know it – if only as that which we constantly mention in everyday talk. With no hesitation we can even give a “definition” of this very obvious and ordinary “nothing” that runs unnoticed through our talk: “*What we call ‘nothing’ is the utter negation of everything that is.*” This characterization of “nothing” apparently indicates the only way to encounter it. (1) The totality of things that exist must be already given beforehand, (2) so that it can be subjected to a direct act of negation, (3) so that “nothing” may show up.

This relation between negation and the no-thing is very dubious; but even putting that aside, how are we finite beings supposed to make all-that-is, in its totality, accessible both in itself and for us? We can of course (1) think up all-that-is in an “idea,” then (2) mentally negate what we have imagined, and then (3) “think” of it as negated. This procedure yields the formal concept of an imagined nothing, but never the no-thing itself.

What is more, the no-thing is “nothing”; and since “nothing” represents total indistinguishability from anything, there can be no distinction between an imagined “nothing” and a “real” nothing. The so-called “real” nothing would be only the disguised (but still absurd) concept of a nothing that “is.”

Conclusion. For the last time, then, the objections raised by reason have put an end to our search. From now on we will be able to demonstrate the legitimacy of this search only by way of a *basic experience* of the no-thing. [110]

AN INADEQUATE APPROACH THROUGH ORDINARY MOODS (BOREDOM, LOVE)

Two things are equally certain: (1) everything-that-is can never be grasped in itself; and (2) the things among which we find ourselves situated *always appear in the unity of a whole*. In the final analysis there is an essential difference between grasping *all-that-is* in itself and finding ourselves situated among things within a meaning-giving whole. The first is impossible in principle, the second always happens in our existence.

Experiencing the meaning-giving whole through boredom. In our everyday preoccupations we do seem to cling to this or that particular thing and to get lost in this or that region of things. But no matter how fragmented our everyday existence may seem to be, it always deals with things within the unity of a meaning-giving whole, even if only vaguely. In fact it is precisely when we are not preoccupied with things and with ourselves that this meaning-giving whole overtakes us – for example, in genuine boredom. Genuine boredom has not yet come upon us if we are merely bored with this book or that movie, with this job or that idle moment. Genuine boredom occurs when *one’s whole world of meaning is boring*. Then abysmal boredom, like a muffling fog, drifts where it will in the depths of

⁶ In the order of origination. (5th ed., 1949.)

⁷ Blind willfulness: the *certitudo* of the *ego cogito*, subjectivity. (5th ed., 1949.)

our human being, sucking everything and everyone, and ourselves along with them, into a numbing sameness. This kind of boredom reveals things in terms of their meaning-giving whole.

Such a revelation of the meaning-giving context can also occur with the joy we feel in the presence of someone we love – not just the presence of the person, but the presence of that person's *being*.

When we are thoroughly wrapped up in these moods – in which the world of meaning just “is” a certain way for us – we feel ourselves attuned to things in terms of their *meaning-giving whole*. Each mood has its own way of revealing the whole of things; and such revealing is not just *any* event but rather is the basic way in which human existence occurs. What we call a mood is not a transient add-on to thinking and willing, it is not just what motivates and drives those acts, and it is not merely some condition we “have to put up with.” [111]

Such moods reveal the meaning-giving whole but conceal the no-thing. However, just when such moods confront us with things in terms of their meaning-giving whole, they also conceal from us *the no-thing* we are seeking. Now we are more convinced than ever that we cannot encounter the no-thing by merely negating all the things that our moods give us in the unity of their meaning-giving whole. Rather, an original encounter with the no-thing occurs only in a mood whose essence consists in showing us – the no-thing.

THE PROPER APPROACH: EXPERIENCING THE NO-THING THROUGH DREAD

Do we ever have such a mood that brings us face-to-face with the no-thing? Yes, this can and does occur – although rarely and only for a fleeting moment – in the basic mood of dread.

Dread contrasted with fear. By “dread” we do not mean the quite common experience of anxiety, ultimately reducible to fear, which can overcome us so easily. Dread is fundamentally different from fear. What we have fear *of* is always a specific thing that threatens us in a specific way. Moreover, such fear *of* . . . is always fear *for* something specific. Because fear *of* and fear *for* are defined by specific objects, whenever we experience fear we are seized and held by some *thing* that affects us. In trying to save ourselves from that particular thing, we become unsure of our relation to other things and lose our bearings in the meaning-giving whole.

Dread never lets such confusion occur. On the contrary, dread is suffused with a peculiar kind of calm. Yes, dread is dread *of*, but not of this or that thing. And dread *of* is always dread *for*, but again, not for a specific thing. What we have dread *of* and *for* is indeterminate – not because *we* are unable to define it, but because it itself cannot be defined. This may be illustrated by a familiar experience:

The meaning-giving whole recedes, and the no-thing is revealed. During dread we say “It feels so strange!” What is the “it”? and “who” feels it? We cannot say what brings on that strange feeling. It just is that way for “someone.” All things, and we along with them, sink into indifference⁸ [112] – but not in the sense of disappearing. Rather, as things recede, they turn toward us. It is the receding of the meaning-giving context of things that presses in on us and oppresses us. Without the meaning-giving context there is *no hold on things*. As things slip away, what remains and overwhelms us is precisely this “*no* . . .” Dread reveals the no-thing.

Dread reveals our existence. We hang suspended in dread. More precisely, it is dread that leaves us hanging, insofar as it makes the meaning-giving whole of things slip away. This implies that we ourselves – we who are⁹ – also slip away from ourselves right there in the midst of things. Ultimately, then, the world becomes strange not for “you” or

⁸ Whatever exists no longer speaks to us. (5th ed., 1949.) [Cf. Augustine and the vision at Ostia, *Confessions* IX, 10.]

⁹ But not human being *qua* human being. (5th ed., 1949)

“me” but for our very way of being.¹⁰ That is, in the unnerving state of “left-hanging-with-nothing-to-hold-on-to,” all that remains is our pure existence.

Dread strikes us dumb. As the unified meaning-giving whole of things slips away and the no-thing crowds in on us, all utterance of “is” falls silent in the face of it. Amidst the strangeness of dread we often try to shatter the empty stillness with mindless chatter, but that only proves the presence of the no-thing.

Later, when dread has dissolved, we ourselves offer first-hand testimony that dread reveals the no-thing. In the clear vision that holds a fresh memory of the experience, we find ourselves obliged to say that what we had dreaded of and for was . . . nothing, really. And that is exactly right. The no-thing itself – as such – was there.

With this basic mood of dread we have reached the very occurrence of human existence, within which the no-thing is revealed and from out of which we must raise the question of the no-thing.

What about this no-thing? [113]

PART THREE ANSWERING THE QUESTION

We now have the one essential answer we need for our purposes – provided we take care to keep the question of the no-thing truly alive. This demand that we transform ourselves into our very essence (dread effects this transformation in us) so that we can grasp the no-thing that shows up in dread exactly *as* it shows up. It also demands that we expressly avoid all characterizations of the no-thing that do not come from a corresponding experience it.

WHAT THE NO-THING IS NOT.

Not a thing. The no-thing shows up in dread, but not as something-that-is and certainly not as an object. Dread is not at all a grasp of the no-thing. The no-thing does show up in and through dread, but not as detached from or “next to” the things that we meet in all their strangeness. We said, rather, that during dread we encounter the no-thing as *at one with* things. What does it mean to say the no-thing is “at one with” the whole of things?

Not annihilation. In dread, things within the meaning-giving whole become superfluous. But how? Things are not annihilated by dread so that “nothing is left over.” That cannot happen because dread is utterly powerless before the whole of things. Rather, the no-thing appears *with and in* the things that are slipping away as a whole. In dread, therefore, there is no annihilation of all-that-is.

Not negation. But neither do we perform a mental negation of things as a whole in order to arrive at the no-thing for the first time. Performing a thematic act of negation during dread is out of the question; but even apart from that, [114] any such negation would always arrive too late to produce the no-thing – because we have already met up with

¹⁰ Literally: “for some ‘one.’”

¹¹That is, was revealed: disclosure and mood. (5th ed., 1949.)

¹³Disclosure. (5th ed., 1949.)

¹⁴Strangeness and unhiddenness. (5th ed., 1949.)

the no-thing beforehand. As we said, we already encounter the no-thing as “one with” the whole of the things that are slipping away.

WHAT THE NO-THING DOES.

It pushes our existence back to things. In dread we “draw back from” This is not flight, but the calmness of wonder. This movement “back from” is initiated by the no-thing. The no-thing does not draw us into itself; rather, its nature is to push us back. In pushing us back away from itself, it directs us to the receding things that it lets slip out of meaning. This business of pushing us back and directing us toward the things that are slipping away¹⁶ is how the no-thing presses in upon our existence during dread: this is the *essence* of the no-thing, the way it *acts*. The no-thing is not the annihilation of things, and it does not come from an act of negation. Annihilation and negation cannot account for the action of the no-thing. The no-thing itself propels us into meaning.¹⁷

It discloses that things are meaningful. The action of the no-thing is no ordinary event. It pushes us back and directs us toward the things that are slipping out of meaning, and in so doing it discloses these things in their full and heretofore hidden strangeness as the radically other, i.e., as other than the no-thing. In the clear night of the no-thing experienced in dread, there occurs the original revelation of the meaningfulness of things: the fact that things *are meaningful* and are not the no-thing. But this “and-are-not-the-no-thing” is not some later clarification. It comes first; it is what makes possible¹⁸ all disclosure of things as meaningful. In its essence the no-thing as pushing us back stands at the origin and consists in letting us encounter¹⁹ for the first time things insofar as they are meaningful.

It is responsible for transcendence, selfhood, and freedom. Human human being can approach and gain meaningful access to things only on the basis of the original revelation of the no-thing. [115] The essence of human being is to relate meaningfully to things (both those it is and those it is not), but it can do so only if we are always already *returning from* the revealed no-thing. Human being means:²⁰ being held out into the no-thing.

Held out into the no-thing,²¹ human being is always already beyond things as a whole. Such being-beyond-things we call “transcendence.” If in our essence we were not transcendence – i.e., held out into the no-thing, as we have put it – we could never relate to things,²² not even to ourselves. Without the original revelation of the no-thing, there is no selfhood and no freedom.²³

¹⁶ Pushing-back: [from] things as just for-themselves. Directing-to: into the *meaning* of things. (5th ed., 1949.)

¹⁷ That is: occurs as the action-of-the-the-no-thing; holds forth; the no-thing grants. (5th ed., 1949.)

¹⁸ That is, it what lets meaning come about. (5th ed., 1949.)

¹⁹ Properly speaking, it lets human being encounter the *being* of things, i.e., the difference. (5th ed., 1949.)

²⁰ (1) It means other things as well, not just that; and (2) it does not follow that “the no-thing is all there is,” but the exact opposite: now we can appropriate and understand things that exist. Being and finitude. (1st ed., 1929.)

²¹ Who does this in an original way? (5th ed., 1949.)

²² Because being and the no-thing are the same. (5th ed., 1949.)

²³ Freedom and truth are treated in the lecture “On the Essence of Truth.” (5th ed., 1949.)

Summary. With this we have reached the answer to our question about the no-thing. The no-thing is not an object or anything that is. The no-thing does not show up either for itself or alongside things as if it were an add-on. Rather, the no-thing makes possible the appearance of meaningful things, as such, for²⁴ human being. The no-thing is not just the opposite of things; it is essential to their very emergence.²⁵ The repelling action of the no-thing takes place in the very meaningfulness of things.

AN OBJECTION AND A RESPONSE

The objection. We must finally address a hesitation we have been harboring for some time now. If human existence can relate meaningfully to things – it can exist at all – only by being held out into the no-thing, and if the no-thing is originally disclosed only in dread, then it seems we would have to constantly hover in this dread in order to exist at all. But on the contrary, we admitted that such original dread is rare. [116] More importantly, all of us do exist and do relate to things (both those we are and those we not) without this experience of dread. So dread appears to be an arbitrary invention, and the no-thing associated with it seems to be only a fantasy.

Dread is rare due to our absorption in things. But what does it mean to say that real dread happens only in rare moments? This simply means that the no-thing in its basic nature is mostly disguised because in a quite specific way we are completely lost in things. The more our preoccupations turn us toward things, the less we let them slip out of meaning, the more easily we turn away from the no-thing, and the more likely we are to fall into superficial, “public” ways of existing.

Nonetheless, our constant if ambivalent estrangement from the no-thing does accord with the essential sense of the no-thing, at least within certain limits. The repelling action of the no-thing consists in directing us to things,²⁶ and it does this constantly, whether or not our everyday knowledge is actually aware of the occurrence.

The no-thing makes negation possible. The act of negation is the most compelling witness we have of the fact that the no-thing is always and everywhere revealed in our existence, albeit in a disguised way. Negation no doubt belongs to the essence of human thinking, and it gives expression to a negativity by saying “is-not.” However, this “is-not” by which we enact differences or contrasts within the given, is not produced by the act of negation itself and then, as it were, inserted between things. Negation cannot generate the “not” from out of itself, because in order to negate something, the act of negation first requires that something negate-able be presented to it. But to see that something is negate-able, i.e., susceptible of a “not,” our thinking must already see such “not-ness” beforehand. But we cannot see this “not-ness” unless its origin (i.e., the repelling action of the no-thing, and thus the no-thing itself) first emerges from hiddenness. The act of negation does not generate the “not” but is grounded *in* the “not,” [117] and the “not” in turn is generated by the action of the no-thing.²⁷ What is more, the act of negation is only *one* way of relating to and being already grounded in the action of the no-thing.

²⁴ But not “caused by.” (5th ed., 1949.)

²⁵ Taking “*Wesen*” in a verbal sense, as in “*das Wesen des Seins*,” “the emergence of being.” (5th ed., 1949.)

²⁶ because it directs us to the *being* of things. (5th ed., 1949.)

²⁷ As analogously with assertions, so too with acts of negation: the negation arrives too late and is understood too extrinsically. (1st ed., 1929.)

We have now demonstrated the main features of our earlier thesis, that the no-thing is the origin of negation rather than vice versa. If we have broken discursive reason's power over the question about the no-thing and about being, then we have also decided the fate of the dominance of "logic"²⁸ within philosophy. The very idea of "logic" dissolves in the vortex of a more original inquiry.

Negation is not the most original experience of the no-thing. Whether expressed or implied, the act of negation does permeate all our thinking in so many ways, and yet it is not the best evidence of the revelation of this no-thing that is essential to our existing at all. Negation should not be seen as the only (much less the primary) activity in which human being relates to and is shaken by the repelling action of the no-thing. Cruel hostility and the sting of hatred go deeper than the formalities of mental negations. Painful denial and ruthless refusal are very much closer to the no-thing, and bitter privation is a greater burden of the no-thing. These more original possibilities of relating to the no-thing – powerful ways in which human being puts up with but never masters its thrownness – are not sub-sets of the genus "negation." However, that does not prevent them from expressing themselves in the "not" and "negation." In fact they first reveal the depth and breadth of negation.

Dread is there but dormant. Existence is thus saturated with its relation to the no-thing – evidence that the no-thing is always, if obscurely, revealed, even though dread is required to disclose it in a basic way. But this also implies that real dread is mostly suppressed in our existence. Dread is there, but dormant. Its breathing ever stirs within our existence, [118] not very much in the nervous, hardly at all in the yeas and nays of the busy bourgeoisie. It is most astir in the reserved, and most surely in the existence of those of us who take the basic risk of spending ourselves on the essential so as to preserve the greatness of the openness that we are.

This dread born of risk is not the opposite of joy, or even of quiet activity and calm enjoyment. It transcends such oppositions and lives in secret communion with the serene and gentle yearnings of creativity.

Real dread can awaken in us at any moment; no exceptional event is needed to rouse it. Its power is as deep as its possible occasions are unexceptional. It is always on the verge of springing forth but seldom does. But when it does, it seizes us and leaves us hanging.

Because we are held out into the no-thing by this hidden dread, each of us holds open a place for the no-thing. We are so finite that our own wills and decisions cannot effect an original encounter with the no-thing. Being finite is so profoundly embedded in our existence that even our freedom cannot control the abyss of our own finitude. Our being held out into the no-thing by this hidden dread *is* our surpassing of the totality of things. It is transcendence.

THE NO-THING AND METAPHYSICS

Our question about the no-thing is supposed to bring us face-to-face with metaphysics itself. The word "metaphysics" comes from the Greek *μετὰ τὰ φυσικά*. This curious title was eventually used to designate an inquiry that goes *μετά* or *trans*, i.e., "beyond" things that exist as such. Metaphysics means questioning beyond things so as to regain them, as such and in the unity of the whole, for understanding.

The question about the no-thing is one place where [119] this "going beyond things as such and in the unity of the whole" takes place. Hence it is a "metaphysical" question. We said at the beginning that such questioning has a double character: every metaphysical question (1) encompasses the whole of metaphysics and (2) always includes in its question the very person who asks the question.

To what degree does the question about the no-thing pervade and encompass metaphysics as a whole?

²⁸ By "logic" I mean the *traditional* interpretation of thought. (1st ed., 1929.)

Encompassing the meaning-giving context of metaphysics

“Nothing” in Greek metaphysics. Antiquity’s view of nothing is expressed in the thesis *ex nihilo nihil fit*, “From nothing comes nothing,” a sentence that of course can have many meanings. This thesis expresses what was the dominant conception of things in terms of the then current view of nothing – even though the problem of nothing never gets explicitly posed when this thesis is discussed. Ancient metaphysics conceived nothing as non-being, i.e., unformed matter that cannot shape itself into a formed being and thus offer an appearance (εἶδος). In this view, whatever exists is a “self-forming formed” which shows itself as itself in a “form,” i.e., something that can be seen. Ancient metaphysics never discusses the origins, legitimacy, or limits of this notion of being, any more than it discusses what the no-thing is.

The no-thing in Christian metaphysics. Christian theology, on the other hand, denies the truth of the thesis *ex nihilo nihil fit* and changes the meaning of “nothing.” It now means the complete absence of things other than God. Hence, *ex nihilo fit – ens creatum*: “Out of that complete absence come all created things.” Here “nothing” is conceived as the opposite of real things. “The no-thing” thus becomes the *summum ens*, God as *ens increatum*. Here again then dominant conception of things is expressed in terms of the then current interpretation of nothing. But the metaphysical discussion of things remains on the same level as the question about the no-thing – that is, in both ancient and Christian metaphysics the question of being and the question of the no-thing as such go unasked. Thus no one seems troubled by the problem that if God creates *out of* nothing, he must be able to relate *to* nothing. But if God is God, and if the “Absolute” excludes all nothingness, God cannot know this “nothing.” [120]

The no-thing and being. This rough historical review shows that “nothing” is conceived as the opposite – the negation – of whatever really exists. But if we manage to make the no-thing a problem, we give this opposition a clearer definition and awaken authentic metaphysical inquiry into the being of things. The no-thing ceases to be the vague opposite of things; instead, it is seen to belong to the very being of meaningful things.

“Pure being and pure nothing are therefore the same.” This thesis of Hegel’s (*Science of Logic*, vol. I, *Werke* III, 78) is quite right. Being and the no-thing do belong together, but not because they are equally indeterminate and immediate, as in Hegel’s notion of thinking, but rather because being itself is essentially finite and shows up only in the human being’s transcendence, its being held out into the no-thing.

Conclusion. Granted that the question of being-as-such is the overarching question of metaphysics, the question of the no-thing encompasses the meaning-giving context of metaphysics. The question of the no-thing also pervades the whole of metaphysics insofar as it forces us to confront the problem of the origin of negation – that is, to finally decide whether the domination of metaphysics by “logic”²⁹ is legitimate.

Putting the questioner in question

The no-thing is responsible for meaning. The ancient thesis *ex nihilo nihil fit* now takes on a quite different meaning [in Heidegger’s thinking], one that touches on the problem of being itself. It now becomes *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit*, “From the no-thing comes all that is insofar as it *meaningful*.” Things as a whole, in keeping with their ownmost possibility (i.e., finitely) become the *meaningful* things that they are for us only within the no-thing of human existence. To what extent, then, does the question about the no-thing, as a metaphysical question, encompass even us, the ones who ask the question?

²⁹ I always mean traditional logic and its *logos* understood as the origin of categories. (1st ed., 1929.)

The no-thing puts the scientific questioner in question. Earlier we characterized our current existence as one that is determined essentially by science. But if our science-determined existence is included in the question [121] about the no-thing, it has been put in question *by* this very question.

Our scientific way of existing gets its single-minded focus and rigor from the distinctive way it relates to things and to them alone. Science would like to dismiss the no-thing with a superior gesture. But our inquiry into the no-thing has shown that this scientific way of existing is possible only if it is already held out into the no-thing. Scientific existence understands itself as it is only if it does not surrender the no-thing. The alleged superiority of hard-headed science becomes ridiculous if science refuses to take the no-thing seriously. Science cannot take things themselves as objects of investigation without the no-thing being already manifest. Only by existing on the basis of metaphysics can science renew and fulfill its essential task, which is not to amass and classify bits of knowledge but to disclose, in ever fresh ways, the whole realm of disclosure regarding both nature and history.

From the no-thing to science. Only because the no-thing is already manifest in the depths of our existence can we be overwhelmed by the utter strangeness of things that exist. Only when the strangeness of things presses in upon us does it awaken and arouse wonder. Only on the basis of wonder – i.e., the revelation of the no-thing – does the question “Why?” arise. Only because the “why” as such is possible can we demand and give reasons for things in a definite way. Only because we are able to demand and give reasons, can our existence be possibly destined for scientific research.

Thus the question of the no-thing puts us, the questioners, into question. It is a metaphysical question.

CONCLUSION

Summary. We can relate to whatever-is only if we are held out into the no-thing. This going-beyond-things occurs in the very essence of human being. But such going-beyond is metaphysics itself. This entails that metaphysics belongs to the “nature of human being.” It is neither a specialization [122] within academic philosophy nor a field of fanciful ideas. Metaphysics is the most basic happening within human existence – in fact it is human existence itself. Because the truth of metaphysics dwells in this groundless ground, its closest neighbor is the ever-present possibility of profound error. Thus the rigor of science, as strong as it is, never equals the seriousness of metaphysics, and philosophy can never be measured by the standard of the scientific ideal.

If we have really participated in this unfolding of the question of the no-thing, we have neither brought metaphysics to ourselves from the outside nor “transported” ourselves into it as if for the first time. We cannot transport ourselves into metaphysics because we are always already there insofar as we exist. *Phaedrus*, 279a9-b1: φύσει γάρ, ὃ φίλε, ἔνεστί τις φιλοσοφία τῆ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου διανοία. “Insofar as human beings exist, philosophizing is already somehow going on.”

Philosophy (as we call it) simply means enacting the metaphysics in which philosophy comes to itself and to its explicit tasks.³⁰ Philosophy begins only when our own existence undertakes a personal commitment to the basic possibilities of human being as a whole. What matters most in this commitment is that we first open the space for things in their meaning-giving context; then liberate ourselves *for* the no-thing, i.e., free ourselves from the idols that each of us clings to and goes cringing to; and finally, as we are left hanging in the no-thing, that we let ourselves be swept back into that basic question of metaphysics, the question that the no-thing itself imposes on us:

Why are there meaningful things at all rather than the no-thing?

³⁰ This is meant in two senses: the “essence” of metaphysics, and its own history as formation[s] of being. Both are included under the later rubric of “getting over [metaphysics].” (1st ed. of *Wegmarken*, 1967.)