

# NOTHINGNESS

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## Nothingness

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy (Existentialism, Ontology, Metaphysics), Psychology

### 1. Core Definition

Nothingness, fundamentally, refers to the state of non-being, the absence of everything, or the philosophical void. In its broadest sense, it addresses the metaphysical question of existence itself--the negation of all entities, qualities, and relationships. It is the antithesis of **Being**. Within the specialized context of modern philosophy, particularly **existentialism**, Nothingness (*das Nichts*) is not merely a logical negation but a dynamic force or experience that structures human consciousness and the realization of freedom. The existential definition postulates that nothing inherent or divine is observed to structure human existence; consequently, the meaninglessness that arises from this lack of inherent structure is thought to be the primary cause of deep-seated fear, angst, or torment in the human psyche. This experience of the void is what distinguishes human consciousness, allowing for the potential of subjective meaning-making and radical freedom, yet simultaneously imposing the burden of absolute responsibility upon the individual.

Unlike the mathematical concept of zero, which is a quantified placeholder, philosophical Nothingness resists definition because defining it risks reifying it--treating it as if it were a positive entity that exists. Historically, thinkers have struggled to articulate what Nothingness *\*is\**, often resorting to describing what it *\*is not\**. It is the complete absence of phenomena, the state prior to creation, or the ultimate destination of destruction. The psychological gravity of Nothingness stems from its intimate connection to **mortality** and the finitude of human life. If everything eventually ceases to be, then the individual life, too, is ultimately destined for non-existence, fueling the existential dread that philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger identified as crucial to authentic living.

This concept forces a confrontation with the fundamental contingency of existence. If existence is contingent--if things might not have been--then the possibility of non-existence, Nothingness, looms perpetually. This confrontation serves as the bedrock for many psychological defenses and cultural mechanisms designed to obscure or minimize the reality of the void, ranging from religious belief systems providing eternal meaning to the pursuit of transient material distractions. The academic utility of the term lies in its ability to illuminate areas where structure, meaning, or presence is expected but found lacking, compelling deeper inquiry into the foundations of reality and consciousness.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The philosophical engagement with Nothingness traces back to ancient Greek thought, most

notably with **Parmenides** (c. 5th century BCE), who famously argued that non-being, or Nothingness, is logically impossible to conceive, speak of, or perceive. For Parmenides, only what *\*is\** can be thought; therefore, thinking about what *\*is not\** is inherently fallacious. This early resistance to the reality of Nothingness established a long-standing tension in Western metaphysics between **Being** and non-Being. Later, Plato partially reconciled this issue by distinguishing between absolute Nothingness (the void of non-existence) and relative non-being (the difference between forms or the lack of presence in a specific instance), allowing for negation without affirming an absolute void.

During the medieval period, the concept shifted slightly, framed often by theological doctrines, particularly the idea of **creation *\*ex nihilo\**** (creation out of nothing). This theological framing accepted Nothingness as the state preceding God's creation, reinforcing the omnipotence of a creator who could generate existence from absolute non-existence. This view maintained the understanding of Nothingness as a passive, absolute void, though it placed the concept firmly within the realm of theological explanation rather than strictly ontological inquiry. Simultaneously, Eastern philosophical traditions, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, developed the concept of **??nyat?** (emptiness), which, while often translated as "nothingness," refers specifically to the lack of inherent, permanent self-nature (*svabhava*) in all phenomena, rather than an absolute void, leading to a complex and nuanced understanding distinct from the Western emphasis on dread.

The modern re-emergence and radicalization of Nothingness occurred primarily in the 19th and 20th centuries through the work of figures like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and centrally, the existentialists. Kierkegaard introduced the psychological dimensions of **dread** related to freedom and possibility. Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God" effectively removed the ultimate guarantor of meaning, ushering in a philosophical epoch where human existence was confronted directly with its foundational groundlessness--the nihilistic implication that existence itself may be meaningless. This philosophical climate set the stage for Heidegger and Sartre to transform Nothingness from a mere logical absence into an active, subjective experience intrinsic to consciousness.

### 3. Key Characteristics (The Existential View)

In existentialism, Nothingness is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived reality that defines human existence (*\*Dasein\**). Martin Heidegger, in *\*Being and Time\**, argued that the human ability to pose the question of Being itself requires a prior understanding of Nothingness. Nothingness is revealed through the experience of **Anxiety** or **Angst**, which is not directed at any specific object but is rather the confrontation with the possibility of the world and the self dissolving into the inexplicable void. This experience of the void is crucial because it highlights the fundamental contingency of existence.

Jean-Paul Sartre further developed this concept in *\*Being and Nothingness\**, establishing a dichotomy between **Being-in-itself** (the inert, fully determined world of objects) and **Being-for-itself** (human consciousness). Sartre defined consciousness as a "noughting" (a process of negation), arguing that consciousness inserts Nothingness into the world by its very nature. When we judge something to be absent (e.g., "The coffee shop is not open"), consciousness actively negates a possibility, thereby creating a lack. This ability to negate--to stand back from the determined world--is the source of **absolute freedom**. Because consciousness is always oriented toward what it is not yet, or what it lacks, it is fundamentally defined by Nothingness.

The central characteristics of Nothingness in the existential framework include:

**The Source of Freedom:** Since the individual is not pre-defined by an essence (existence precedes essence), the human being is a continual project of self-creation, suspended over a void of possibilities. This lack of pre-determination is Nothingness operating within the self.

**The Ground of Anxiety:** The realization that one is fundamentally responsible for creating one's own values and meanings, without external justification, induces **existential dread**. This torment is caused by the awareness that any subjective structure built can dissolve back into meaninglessness.

**The Basis for Transcendence:** Nothingness allows consciousness to transcend its current situation by projecting possibilities into the future. It enables the 'For-itself' to constantly step away from its present reality (the 'In-itself').

#### 4. Nothingness in Philosophy (Metaphysics and Ontology)

In metaphysical discourse, Nothingness poses one of the most persistent and vexing questions: the cosmological question, often phrased as: "Why is there **something** rather than nothing?" This question highlights the extraordinary nature of existence itself, suggesting that non-existence is, perhaps, the most logical or default state. Philosophers engaging in ontology--the study of being--must account for the concept of non-being, whether they dismiss it as an illusion or incorporate it as a fundamental feature of reality.

One crucial distinction within ontology is the differentiation between **absolute Nothingness** and **relative Nothingness** (or negation). Relative Nothingness refers to the absence of a specific thing in a specific place (e.g., the absence of light in a dark room), which is a form of non-being dependent on the context of Being. Absolute Nothingness, conversely, is the total and complete absence of *\*all\** things, including space, time, concepts, and consciousness. Many analytic philosophers argue that absolute Nothingness is a concept devoid of referent, potentially making the question "Why something rather than nothing?" unanswerable or even improperly formed, as the terms themselves rely on existing linguistic structures.

Despite these logical challenges, the concept serves as a boundary condition for thought experiments and cosmological theories. It forces inquiry into the necessary conditions for any universe to exist and whether existence requires external causation or if it is inherently self-generating. The persistence of the concept across millennia demonstrates its profound significance, not as a concrete entity, but as the conceptual foil against which all existence is measured, understood, and valued.

## 5. Nothingness in Psychology and Existentialism

The source content highlights the psycho-emotional impact of Nothingness, specifically linking the meaninglessness derived from the lack of inherent structure to **fear or torment**. This psychological reality forms the core of **existential psychology**, founded by thinkers like Rollo May and Irvin Yalom. Existential psychology identifies four primary ultimate concerns of human existence, one of which is the inevitability of death, which is the ultimate manifestation of Nothingness for the individual.

When an individual confronts the realization that life has no objective, external purpose, they experience what is often termed an **existential crisis**. The crisis is characterized by the profound anxiety arising from freedom and the absence of pre-ordained values. The individual is forced into the terrifying position of being the sole architect of their life's meaning. The fear associated with Nothingness--the knowledge that all endeavors, achievements, and relationships will eventually dissipate--leads to various defensive strategies, such as engaging in compulsive activity, adopting rigid dogmas (as seen in the provided example where Diana reverts her beliefs of nothingness and attends church), or pursuing escapist pleasures to avoid confronting the void.

The therapeutic goal within existential psychology is not to eliminate this fear, which is deemed an appropriate response to the human condition, but rather to help the individual face the Nothingness and utilize the awareness of finitude as a catalyst for living a more authentic, engaged, and responsible life. Accepting Nothingness is interpreted as accepting one's radical freedom and the responsibility to create subjective, temporary meaning, rather than relying on comforting, but ultimately inauthentic, illusions of permanence or externally guaranteed purpose.

## 6. Significance and Impact

The concept of Nothingness has exerted a profound influence across disciplines, extending far beyond abstract metaphysics. In literature, figures like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, and Albert Camus explored the absurdity and groundlessness that Nothingness introduces into the human condition, defining the literary movement of **absurdism**. The impact on theology is evident in apophatic theology, which attempts to describe God by what he is \*not\*, acknowledging the limitation of human language and concepts when faced with the absolute (or the ground of all

Being).

In cultural theory, the rise of the concept paralleled the decline of monolithic religious and societal structures in the Western world, providing a framework for understanding modern **nihilism**--the belief that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. While nihilism often carries negative connotations (leading to despair or moral collapse), the philosophical embrace of Nothingness by existentialists was intended to be a constructive step toward authenticity, urging individuals to construct meaning *\*despite\** the void, rather than succumbing to it.

Ultimately, Nothingness functions as a critical philosophical tool because it tests the limits of conceptualization and highlights the fragility and preciousness of existence. It is the necessary background against which Being takes on definition, value, and urgency, shaping perspectives on ethics, freedom, and the nature of subjective reality.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of Nothingness, particularly in its absolute form, faces significant logical and semantic challenges. A core criticism, rooted in the analytic tradition, is that "Nothingness" is not a meaningful concept because it cannot have an existence or a property. Critics argue that talking about Nothingness attempts to treat it as a 'something,' thereby committing a logical fallacy of reification. According to this view, the question "What is Nothingness?" is ill-formed, as the term only functions as a logical operator of negation (i.e., 'Not this' or 'Not that'), rather than referring to a substance or state.

Furthermore, the existential interpretation, particularly the Heideggerian claim that Nothingness is revealed through anxiety, has been criticized for being overly dramatic or anthropocentric. Critics suggest that while anxiety is a valid psychological state, attributing it to a direct encounter with a metaphysical void may project human psychological concerns onto the structure of reality itself, failing to account for anxiety derived from psychological trauma, social alienation, or neurological factors.

Finally, there is a critique concerning **nihilistic pessimism**. While existentialists sought to move beyond nihilism by embracing freedom, critics argue that the foundational premise--that existence is inherently meaningless and grounded in Nothingness--is psychologically unsustainable for the broader population, often leading to despair, passivity, or an inability to sustain moral action without recourse to objective values. This debate centers on whether the confrontation with Nothingness is fundamentally liberating or paralyzing for the ordinary human being.

## Further Reading

[Nothingness \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Das Nichts (Nichts in German Philosophy)

Existential Crisis (Wikipedia)

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