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Nothing matters: philosophical and theological varieties of nothingness

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**NOTHING MATTERS: PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL VARIETIES
OF NOTHINGNESS**

by

JASON BLAKEBURN

B.A., Oklahoma City University, 2012
M.T.S., Boston University, 2014

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Approved by

First Reader

Robert Cummings Neville, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Theology

Second Reader

Ray L. Hart, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy of Religion and Theology

“All things that are in time have a ‘Why?’. Ask a man why he eats: ‘For strength’. – ‘Why do you sleep?’ – ‘For the same reason’. And so on with all things that are in time. But if you should ask a good man, ‘Why do you love God?’ – ‘I don’t know – for God’s sake’. – ‘Why do you love truth?’ – ‘For truth’s sake’. – Why do you love righteousness?’ – ‘For righteousness’ sake’. ‘Why do you live?’ – ‘Indeed I don’t know – I like living!’”

- Meister Eckhart

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my loving spouse, Meghan, who has suffused this writing with heartfelt suffering and understanding as I have struggled to bring it forth.

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I have many people to thank in writing this work. I am indebted to the professors of the Wimberly School of Religion, especially John Starkey, and the Philosophy Department at Oklahoma City University for encouraging me to try on new ways of thinking; to Professor Robert Neville; and to Professor Ray Hart, who opened my eyes to nothing. I must also thank my friends and family for their assistance and reassurance.

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JASON LOWRY BLAKEBURN

Boston University School of Theology, 2016

Major Professor: Robert Cummings Neville, Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and
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ABSTRACT

I trace the concept of nothingness in twentieth century philosophical theology from the work Paul Tillich through that of Martin Heidegger and Keiji Nishitani toward Robert Neville and Ray L. Hart all of whom have taken up the challenge of nothingness. As a specific metaphysical concept or category, these philosophers and theologians would undoubtedly disagree on a specific definition of nothingness; however, I argue they would agree on the vague function of nothingness, which is a relief or contrast to being. Tied up with existence contra nothingness are the possibilities of existence or meontic nothingness. At stake in the encounter with or exposure to nothingness is the ability to refund or redeem one's ownmost potential and possibilities. How one responds to the specter of nothingness makes nothing matter (or not) in the way one turns from nothingness back to existence. In other words, the stakes are not merely the metaphysical (non)status of nothingness, but the desire to find meaning and value in human, finite existence in the face of radical contingency and the specter of nihilism.

PREFACE

Nothing matters if anything is to matter at all. But what is nothing and in what sense does it matter? Nothingness is a vague metaphysical category usually described in terms of what it is not namely being. Cast in this apophatic light, nothingness exists (if it can be said to exist at all and which at the very least it can be said) at the boundaries of human language and thought. From the musings of the pre-Socratics, to Plato, the Neo-Platonists, the thinkers within the Christian tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*, and modern philosophical theologians such as Paul Tillich and Robert Neville, to existentialist philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Keiji Nishitani, and death of God theologians such as Ray Hart, nothingness in its various forms has played a pivotal role in the systematic valuing of being and finite existence. As a specific metaphysical concept or category, these philosophers and theologians would no doubt disagree on the definition of nothingness. I argue they do agree on the vague function of nothingness: a relief or contrast to being. One exists on the pain of being nothing at all. In this sense, nothingness plays a crucial role in what Robert Neville has called a finite/infinite contrast. While what exactly each specific form of nothingness is and means may differ, nothingness matters for the contrast. As an integral part of the finite/infinite contrast, nothingness is a viable comparative religious (philosophical-theological) category. It is both vague enough to be used in multiple religious settings and specific enough to add value for individual systems of thought.

In the following, I closely trace a small strand of mid twentieth century Protestant, Western philosophical theologians' historical interpretations of being and nothingness in

order to discover a philology or genealogy of nothingness. Paul Tillich sets the stage for an investigation into nothingness with his ground of being theology and its relation to *ouk on* and *me on*, two variations on nothingness, from the first volume of his systematic theology.¹ Working in the wake of Tillich, Ray Hart and Robert Neville both ask a profound question. Why is there something rather than nothing? Each returns a drastically different answer, but with some familial similarities, namely their indebtedness to Tillich as well as a heterodox appreciation of mystical theology. Neville's work, most recently encapsulated in his three volume philosophical theology, is the product of a lifetime of systematic thought.² Absolute nothingness has been on the periphery of his work, always remaining on the infinite side of Neville's this-world focus on determinateness. Hart's work, which recently came to culmination with the forthcoming publication of *God Being Nothing*, developed an approach to nothingness in dialogue with the German mystic Meister Eckhart's notion of the Godhead, the God beyond God who is everything and nothing.³ Neville and Hart have not worked in a vacuum. They rely on and dialogue with many modern and post-modern philosophers and theologians, many of whom wrestle with the entangled legacy of Martin Heidegger and his interpreters such as Keiji Nishitani. Heidegger famously enlivened the debate over Being, questioning the means by which one knows being at all particularly through

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

² Robert Cummings Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology Volume 1* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

³ Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

his analysis of being and death.⁴ Nishitani brings Zen Buddhism and the notion of *sunyata* into dialogue with Heidegger and Christian mystical theology in his work *Religion and Nothingness*.⁵ Key to Nishitani's endeavor is the status of nothingness in the work of Meister Eckhart.

Given this existentialist bent toward nothingness I am working broadly within the field of philosophy of religion, or what Wesley Wildman calls religious philosophy, specifically in a hermeneutical niche following after Heidegger's analysis of being and death.⁶ In order to extract competing definitions of nothingness, I closely read and then read against several philosophers and theologians. This interpretative and comparative work leads toward the formation of a hypothesis for further refinement. In this sense, I am gesturing toward a possible valuation of nothingness and a refunding of potential for human existence. In many ways, my project is similar to the Comparative Religious Ideas Project, notably their volume on ultimate realities, which sought to balance the broad strokes of defining ultimate reality by the comparative generalists with tradition specific expositions often in tension with one another.⁷ Rather than searching for a vague concept of ultimate reality, I explore the underside of ultimacy: nothingness. This

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

⁵ Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁶ Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry : Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).

⁷ Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, 1st ed., vol. 2, 3 vols., The Comparative Religious Ideas Project (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

process begins with a close reading of each instantiation of nothingness. Finally, I construct a hypothesis of nothingness as a vague concept that when grasped enlivens one's one existence and refunds one's potential to be in this world.

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PAUL TILLICH: *OUK ON* AND *ME ON*

Where to begin an investigation into nothingness? Nothingness is an ancient philosophical concept with roots in most if not all major world religions. To limit my approach or sketch of nothingness into something manageable, it may help to start with a common denominator among the various philosophers and theologians at work in the genealogical tree of nothingness. The few thinkers under my microscope represent one branch or offshoot of nothingness that casts the ontological structure of existence in relief to nothingness. One could easily identify the beginning of this offshoot with Plato's *Sophist*, a hugely influential text on the nature of being and non-being or nothingness. Such a beginning would be too broad. Who has not been influenced by Plato? Another beginning might be Meister Eckhart who radicalized nothingness and God into the Godhead. Eckhart brings to the fore the stakes at risk for nothingness and existence in his search to find an answer for his question: Why does the just man live? Eckhart serves as an important touchstone but lacks systematic clarity in his musings on nothingness. In addition, the ontological categories Eckhart employs while fundamental for the growth of existential philosophy and theology in the twentieth century lack the existentialists' timbre, particularly the anxiety or *angst* of the moderns. Paul Tillich, in contrast, marks the emergence of being and nothingness as foundational concepts for modern life. He dialogues with the existential philosophers and sets the stage for later philosophical theologians to re-interpret nothingness. Volume 1 of Tillich's three part *Systematic Theology* provides a striking springboard for an investigation into nothingness, offering an initial hermeneutic to understand nothingness in two distinct ways: *ouk on* and *me on*:

The mystery of nonbeing demands a dialectical approach. The genius of the Greek language has provided a possibility of distinguishing the dialectical concept of nonbeing from the nondialectical by call the first *me on* and the second *ouk on*. *Ouk on* is the “nothing” which has no relation at all to being; *me on* is the “nothing” which has a dialectical relation to being.⁸

The first thing to note about Tillich’s division of nothingness is the Greek grammatical structure of nothing. Each is the negation of *on* or being. In this sense, a more literal rendering of *ouk on* and *me on* generally is nonbeing. *Ouk* and *Me* emphasize negation differently. *Ouk* is the negation of something factual, contradicting or denying a statement of fact. *Me* negates will or thought, rejecting or deprecating something thought or willed.⁹ John Christopherson characterizes *ouk* and *me* for Tillich as *Nichts* and *Nichtsein* respectively, emphasizing the existential relevance for each.¹⁰ *Ouk* or *Nichts*, German for nothing, has a negative relation to being. *Me* or *Nichtsein*, German for nonbeing, refers to a more expansive and mystical notion of nonbeing. In other words, *ouk* when applied to being is the absolute negation of being or absolute nothingness. It does not exist. It is a negative nothing. *Me* negates being in another sense of nonbeing as the negation of one’s possibility or potential to be. It is a positive or productive nothing.

⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:187–8.

⁹ “Herbert Weir Smyth, A Greek Grammar for Colleges, Part IV: Syntax, NEGATIVE SENTENCES,” accessed November 27, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0007:part=4:chapter=59>.

¹⁰ John Christopherson, “The Concept of Non-Being and Its Role in Paul Tillich’s Thought” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1995), 48.

The second thing to note about Tillich's use of nonbeing is his emphasis upon the dialectical nature of *me on* in contrast to the nondialectical nature of *ouk on*. Tillich's dialectical appropriation of nonbeing drives to the heart of his encounter with nothingness, namely the ontological shock of the possibility of the negation of being. The human is in a unique position in which one can imagine oneself no longer being and simultaneously question what it means to be. By raising the specter of nonbeing, humanity participates in both being and nonbeing. This paradoxical participation in both being and nonbeing is part of the odd ontological structure of nonbeing which does not exist except in the projection of nonbeing out of being and vice versa. If being and nothing are contradictory opposites, no understanding of the world or humanity's own being is possible. If being and nothing are in a dialectical or polar tension, one can grasp the world and humanity's place in it. In this sense, the dialectical nature of being and nothingness allows and resolves the tension of thinking nonbeing. Tillich's invocation of dialectical thinking is a direct reference to Hegel's dialectical logic and an attempt to overthrow ossified concepts of ontology.¹¹ One moves from being through its negation to a final affirmation of the depths of being.¹²

Tillich embeds his renderings of *ouk on* and *me on* as part of his analysis of the human existential situation. This existential situation is one of ontological or metaphysical shock, which Tillich describes with a question: "Why is there something;

¹¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:56.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1:101.

why not nothing?”¹³ Tillich attempts to answer this question with an analysis of being, following in the footsteps of Heidegger and the existentialists with ontology and first philosophy while extending their insights into the realm of theology. He extends the philosophical analysis of being, the questioning of being, into the questioning of God, which is implied in the concept of being, through the concept of finitude.¹⁴ Finitude is the key to unlock Tillich’s analysis of being. Beginning from the uniquely human awareness of a being who participates in Being, one knows that one exists, Tillich presses against the limits of human awareness and existence with finitude, the knowledge that one will die and no longer be. Finitude is the edge of being and nonbeing. It is the site of definitive existence, to be a thing, this thing not that thing, rather than nothing at all. It is also the starting point for *angst* or anxiety, which is the threat of nonbeing inherent in finitude. Latent within the self-awareness of finitude and anxiety is acknowledgement of the contingent nature of one’s existence. This raises a series of unanswerable questions that lead toward nihilism: “He might not be! Then why is he? And why should he continue to be?”¹⁵ The human existential situation is a self-awareness of one’s finitude and eventual death that pushes one toward anxiety. One can answer this anxiety with the courage to be, to be here and now, to be finite. One’s search for the courage to be drives one to the question of God, being-itself, and the unity of being and nonbeing. In other

¹³ Ibid., 1:163.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:166.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1:196.

words, one searches for God to quell the anxiety of being finite, to ground the insecurity of finitude. The existential analysis sends one to the theological analysis.

Nothingness or nonbeing matters for Tillich for the tenor it gives to finite existence. Nonbeing is the limit of finitude – to no longer be a thing but to be nothing; one goes toward one's death; to end. The specter of nothingness at the edge of finite existence provides an existential and emotional anxiety to one's life. How can one live and value one's existence? This is in part the search for ultimate concern, the search for one's being and meaning.¹⁶ In this sense, nothingness is the spur toward ultimate concern.

The existential stakes for nothingness are high. Nothingness matters so that everything might matter. Nothing also matters for Tillich's ontology. Ontologically, nonbeing is the limit of finite existence. One exists as a finite thing in a process of becoming. Once one realizes the limits of finitude, one can begin to understand the broader ontological structure of Being and of nothingness or nonbeing. Several ontological categories undergird Tillich's analysis of finitude and ultimate concern: Finite being or becoming, Being-itself or the depths of being, *Ouk on*, nondialectical or absolute nonbeing, and *Me on*, dialectical nonbeing or possible being.

The starting point for an analysis of being is that being for which being is up for grabs – namely the human who is aware of her own being. Tillich follows Martin Heidegger's footsteps into this initial analysis of being.¹⁷ Tillich's appropriation of

¹⁶ Ibid., 1:14.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:168.

Heidegger's hermeneutical analysis of *Dasein* is a beautiful rendition, passing over the clunkiness of Heidegger's made-up German phrases in order to parse the theological significance of existential ontology. A critical aspect of this initial analysis is the role of reason in humanity's self-understanding of one's own being. Reason or *logos* provides the structure with which to grasp the whole self-world and self-being-nonbeing structure of existence. *Logos* separates being from the possibility of being, which Tillich designates as the *me on*: "Without reason, without the *logos* of being, being would be chaos, that is, it would not be being but only the possibility of it (*me on*). But where there is reason there are a self and a world in interdependence."¹⁸ *Logos* provides a structure and reality to being which would otherwise be chaos or *me on*. This structure of being that *logos* provides is the limit or definition of being a finite thing, to be a specific thing that has a form. *Logos* gives shape to the particular form of being a human, one who understands and questions one's own being. Inherent to the structure of being is the tension between form and dynamics. The human holds form and dynamics together, being something concrete and the possibility of what one might become. This tension of what one is and what one may be is the process of becoming. The specific, definite, or finite being of the human structured by *logos* and bounded by possibility or *me on* exists in the dynamic tension of becoming.

The being of humanity is embedded in the dynamics and possible nonbeing of *me on* and the form of the *logos* of being. In other words, when one asks the question of being – what does it mean to be – one is already enmeshed in being and nonbeing. One

¹⁸ Ibid., 1:172.

finds oneself in a hermeneutic circle where finite being exists on a continuum of being, becoming, and nonbeing. One finds the yes! of finite being in conjunction with the no! of nonbeing. This yes and no process arises out of humanity's querying of being. Tillich describes this process: "The answer is that man, who is this being, must be separated from his being in a way which enables him to look at it as something strange and questionable. And such a separation is actual because man participates not only in being but also nonbeing." Finite being and nonbeing are part of the polar dynamics of Tillich's dialectical approach. Humanity participates in nonbeing as humanity participates in being.

What is the being of nonbeing? In what sense does nonbeing participate in being? Remember Tillich's distinction between *ouk on* and *me on*. *Ouk on* has no participation in being. It is an absolute nonbeing or nothingness. It is a nondialectical nonbeing. *Me on* in contrast is the dialectical nonbeing that participates in being. Tillich likens *me on* to the chaos of potential being as well as the potential to no longer be. *Me on* is the nay saying of finite being. Dialectical nonbeing bounds finite being, driving one toward anxiety and the search for ultimate concern and being itself. At stake in the encounter with dialectical nonbeing is the death of oneself.¹⁹ Eventually this finite thing will die – will end and no longer be. Yet, something remains. That something that remains is being or being itself but is no longer one's specific, finite being. Being has the power to resist nonbeing. Being-itself is no longer a specific being but has transcended finite being and nonbeing. Being-itself is God or the ground of being.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1:197.

What is the payoff of nonbeing for Tillich? Why does meontic nonbeing matter for humanity and why does oukontic nonbeing matter for God? It has to do with creativity. God has absolute creativity, creating something out of absolute nothing or *ouk on*. Human creativity, working from humanity's finitude, works out of the possibility of meontic nonbeing. Tillich sketches some initial thoughts on human creativity and the possibilities of meontic nonbeing for it, but moves quickly to the question of God and God's creativity. What matters for Tillich the theologian is God, the ground of being, which is the source of ultimate concern. On the human side of being, i.e. finitude, one is stuck between the poles of freedom and destiny as well as the finite split between essence and existence. The being of God empowers the finite being of humanity to resist nonbeing. There is no separation of essence and existence for God, who creates the world out of nothing – *creatio ex nihilo*. God creates out of nothing, i.e. not out of a dualistic competing power. It may be better to say that God creates out of absolute nothingness or from nothing, i.e. God creates without recourse to another source beyond God. God creates out of the ground of being, i.e. out of God's self, giving to God's creatures the power to be. Tillich describes creaturliness, saying: "It [creaturliness] carries in itself the power of being, and this power of being is its participation in being-itself, in the creative ground of being."²⁰ This creative power of God is rooted in the nature of God as being-itself and the unity of essence and existence as well as the unity of potentiality and actuality. God's creativity is absolute thus God is symbolically the Living God, combining both potency and form. Acknowledging the symbolic nature of

²⁰ Ibid., 1:253.

God's ontological structure is crucial, asserts Tillich, to prevent one from wrongly attributing an ontological structure of becoming to God. Becoming implies nothingness and would diminish being-itself and the divinity of God. But symbolically understood God, being-itself, encompasses both potency and form. The balance of dynamics within God is managed by the symbol of Spirit, which is the unity of the ontological elements.²¹ The Spirit combines both the power of God, the abyssal potency of the Godhead, with the structure of the logos, the form of God. In this sense, God is continually creating or actualizing God's self. The divine life is absolute creativity which stands out of absolute, oukotic, nonbeing. In contrast, humanity participates to a degree in the divine creativity, actualizing some of humanity's potentiality to be but also limited by humanity's finitude. Human life is finite creativity, attempting to actualize oneself out of one's existence though humanity's existence is often estranged from its essence. Human creativity stands out, exists, out of both the divine creativity and meontic nonbeing. Human creativity and courage are grounded in the creativity and being of God. The challenge for the theologian is to bring together limited human creativity and freedom into participation with the divine creativity and freedom of God.²²

Tillich offers an existentially charged rendering of the question of being. Why is there something rather than nothing especially when this something is so often characterized by anxiety and estrangement? The stakes of nothingness for Tillich are

²¹ Ibid., 1:249.

²² This is the task of volume 2. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

nothing other than creativity, the potential or power to be. For God, this is the power of being-itself. It is rooted in the potency of the Godhead and formed by the structure of the Logos and actualized in the Spirit. God creates out of absolutely nothing (*ouk on*), which is to say that God creates using nothing other than the resources of God's self. Human creativity is rooted in the divine creativity, notably in the potential of meontic nonbeing, which is unactualized potentiality. Human potential is enlivened in its anxiety by its encounter and recognition of meontic nonbeing, one's ownmost potential of nonbeing, one's being toward death. The tragedy of humanity is the story of the Fall and humanity's estrangement of its existence from its essence. Too often humanity does not actualize, live up to, its own potential. Yet this tragedy is countered by the possibility of courage and the new being of Christ.

ROBERT NEVILLE: FINITE/INFINITE CONTRAST

Robert Neville has recently published his three part systematic philosophical theology, a culmination of a long and storied career.²³ The structure mirrors that of Tillich's systematic theology, an influence felt throughout the work. This is not to say that Neville simply updates Tillich or merely follows in Tillich's footsteps. Many of Tillich's driving questions and ideas similarly motivate Neville, notably the endeavor to understand ultimate concern through religious symbols and an existentially fueled search for an answer to the question of being. Why is there something rather than nothing? If Tillich characterized religion as a search for being-itself through primarily Christian symbols, Neville extends the scope of religion to the search for ultimacy that includes all religions. While Neville develops many of his theological goals in conjunction with Tillich, his philosophical oeuvre extends far afield of Tillich from Alfred North Whitehead's philosophical cosmology to a focus on determinateness from Duns Scotus all of which is grounded in a realistic pragmatic form of inquiry in dialogue with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Neville combines these many and disparate influences into a single, unifying hypothesis and definition of religion, which phrased succinctly is human engagement with ultimacy.²⁴ In order to ground his theories of human engagement with ultimacy Neville produces a metaphysical hypothesis that describes ultimate reality. This world is the product of a spontaneous ontological act of creativity that creates out of absolute nothingness. One result of this hypothesis is a focus on the

²³ Neville, *Ultimates*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

determinate world, i.e. this world in which human beings live and die. The sheer making of the ontological act of creativity introduces novelty into existence. Things are. There are new things. Things are valuable, including human beings. In other words, the hypothesis of an ontological act of creativity enables Neville to make value-full interpretations of the world. This world is valuable in stark contrast to nothingness.

Neville's argument for the ontological act of creativity is his answer to the question of being.²⁵ Why is there something rather than nothing? Or as Neville says: "What does it mean to be, and why and how are there beings rather than nothing at all?"²⁶ Neville's particular insight into the question of being is his approach. He grounds his answer not in ontology but in philosophical cosmology, developing a cosmological description of determinateness from which to return to ontology. Working from the context of determinate beings, Neville dialectically approaches the question of being from the problem of the one and the many. What is the nature of being such that individual beings participate in being but are not being-itself? Three aspects compile together into Neville's definition of being. Being is one for the many. In this sense, being is a context of mutual relevance that allows individual determinate things to be related without the context needing a higher mutual field to relate itself to the determinate things.²⁷ Being is univocal. In other words, being has a unitary sense of meaning.²⁸

²⁵ In some ways this is Neville's answer to Heidegger for it is Heidegger that asks the question of being so poignantly. Yet to claim that Neville is directly responding to Heidegger would be inaccurate. While being is a live question for Neville, it has little of the existential anxiety of Heidegger.

²⁶ Neville, *Ultimates*, 169.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

Being is indeterminate. If being is determinate, a thing, it cannot be the one for the many since it would need a higher context to mitigate the difference between itself and other things.²⁹ Being understood as the one for the many is the indeterminate ontological context of mutual relevance.

The indeterminate ontological context of mutual relevance is the ontological act of creativity, a move which Neville uses to ensure the indeterminateness of the ontological context of mutual relevance. One can only approach indeterminateness from the perspective of determinate existence, from things. Determinate things, working off of Duns Scotus' notion of haecceity or thisness, are harmonies of essential and conditional components. Determinate existence and its harmonies are crucial for the interpretation of value identity.³⁰ The ontological context of mutual relevance provides the unity for the differing essential and component harmonies of determinate things. The challenge is to characterize the indeterminateness of the ontological context of mutual relevance. Enter the ontological act of creativity, which is itself not determinate but the beginning of determinate harmonies. Neville says: "The act is not something determinate over and above the things created. Rather, it is a sheer making, the terminus of which is the world of determinate things together with just the kinds of connections, unities, and separations

²⁸ Ibid., 184.

²⁹ Ibid., 189.

³⁰ Value-identity is an integral aspect of Neville's analysis of determinateness, *ibid.*, 207; See also, Robert Cummings Neville, *Recovery of the Measure: Interpretation and Nature*, vol. 2, 3 vols., Axiology of Thinking (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

that they have.”³¹ In other words, Neville develops a new doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: the ontological act of creativity, which is a sheer making or arising of the context of mutual relevance of determinate existence. It is the breaking forth of something entirely new out of absolute nothingness. The act creates the determinate harmonies required by essential and conditional components to be in terms of their determinacy while the act itself is the entire mutual field. In this sense, it is the power of being-itself as it is indeterminately for the many beings which participate in being.

The import of the ontological act of creativity and absolute nothingness depends on the entrance of true novelty. Neville highlights the novelty of the act: “For the ontological act, there was nothing there before. Everything is new. This is the mark of the transition from complete indetermination, or nothing, to whatever determination exists in the world.”³² This introduction of novelty is an argument for the existential value of determinate existence as well as its radical contingency. Individual beings actually add something new to Being. In other words, determinate things are not privative being in contrast to Neo-Platonic notions of being. The world is not some accident or less than existence that simply returns to the fullness of being. Rather, existence matters and adds value to being-itself. Human existence also matters for the sake of human creativity and the restructuring and valuing of harmonies.³³ The

³¹ Neville, *Ultimates*, 214.

³² *Ibid.*, 217.

³³ *Ibid.*

ontological act of creativity adds true novelty to the system, on the ontological and human scales, and eventually allows Neville to interpret the cosmos as value-full.

What of nothingness for Neville? The first place to look is the absolute nothingness that would prevail without the ontological act of creativity. This absolute nothingness is an *ouk ontic* nothingness that serves to highlight the arbitrariness of the act of creativity. Neville says: “The nothingness is the source of the ontological creative act, not in the sense of being the resource, the potential, but in the sense of being the starting point, the condition that would obtain without the act.”³⁴ To say that the act creates out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*, does not mean the act draws its potential to be out of nothingness or out of the depths of its power to be. There is no abyssal power of nothingness or within the act itself in contrast to the symbolic language of potency for Tillich within the divine life of the Godhead.³⁵ The act is only intelligible from the standpoint of determinate existence apart from which there is no act. Similarly, absolute nothingness also depends on its limited intelligibility from the standpoint of determinate existence and intelligibility. Absolute nothingness is the counterfactual to determinate existence.

The second place to look for nothingness is the finite/infinite contrast, which is a complimentary method of looking toward ultimacy alongside the ontological act of

³⁴ Ibid., 261.

³⁵ Neville does employ the language of depth and abyss from Tillich and the history of apophatic mysticism of which Neville is an indelible link, but the placement of depth and abyss are different for Neville. Rather than depth and abyss being internal to the Godhead as it is for much of the mystical tradition, Neville looks to the depth structures of the world. Neville finds depth on the finite side of the finite/infinite contrast.

creativity. The finite/infinite contrast is one way to symbolically categorize the manner in which contrasted elements hang together.³⁶ The finite side of the contrast refers to whatever finite or determinate thing is considered to be ultimate in a system of religious meaning. It must be something finite about which definitive statements can be made. The infinite side gestures toward the indeterminate that would 'be' without the world-defining finite side. In this manner, the contrast allows for a symbolic reference point at the edge of intelligibility or to mark the boundary point of indeterminacy and determinacy. The ontological act of creativity so far as it is construed as an act falls on the finite side of the contrast while the absolute nothingness that would exist were it not for the act falls on the infinite side.³⁷ At its simplest, the finite/infinite contrast functions as a schema for the radical contingency of this world that stands out of nothingness. It is a spotlight on the importance of the determinate and finite world. The finite/infinite contrast throws itself in relief, standing out of the background of nothingness.³⁸

The third place to find nothingness for Neville is in the existential feeling of the counterfactual and the symbol of the mystical abyss. Mystical language has long been apophatic in its attempts to describe the ultimate whether it is God for Pseudo-Dionysius, the Godhead beyond God for Meister Eckhart, the Not-Other for Nicholas of Cusa, the Abgrund for Jacob Boehme, or the Ground of Being for Tillich, as well as the various

³⁶ Neville, *Ultimates*, 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ Michael Proffitt, ed. "Relief, n.3," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), n.d., accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161918>.

symbols for many non-Christian mystical traditions.³⁹ The mystical path uses a determinate symbol to refer to the indeterminate from the perspective of the radical contingency of this world. The challenge for these mystical symbols is how to accurately and adequately engage the ontological act of creativity, i.e. to convey an existential feeling of the radical contingency of determinate existence. This is the feeling of the counterfactual of what would pertain if the act never happened – its shock. This is the feeling of nothingness. Neville describes this feeling of nothingness as an embrace of the abyssal quality of the arbitrariness of life: “The arbitrariness, not of what is created but of the fact of creation itself, is meaningful only in a finite/infinite contrast with nothingness, albeit a counter-factual nothingness. Therefore, the feeling of the contrast involves the feeling of non-being as well as being.”⁴⁰ One exists on the pain of being nothing at all. Embracing the radical contingency of one’s existence entails embracing one’s life in the face of one’s death. The foundation of the feeling of the counterfactual is the weight of the absolute nothingness, which is the counterfactual of determinate existence. Yet the feeling gives rise to a feeling of nonbeing, which Neville offers as another series of contrasts, “the razor-sharp and infinitely dense contrast between being and non-being, life and death, joy and terror.”⁴¹ Might this feeling of non-being be a kind of meontic nothingness?

³⁹ Neville, *Ultimates*, 309.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 312.

Meontic nothingness does not seem to be a deciding factor for Neville in contrast to Tillich. Neville might object to meontic nothingness on two levels. First, meontic nothingness for Tillich presents possibility as a part of finite existence, the not yet of the power to be that is directly tied with the potency and the chaos of the Godhead. Possibility is an integral part of Neville's analysis of determinate existence, but his mechanism for possibility contrasts with Tillich's. Determinate existence for Neville primarily entails existing in relation to other things – this not that – in contrast to existing out of nothingness. Second, related to the differing mechanisms of possibility and potency, Neville's analysis of temporality and eternity follows a radically different trajectory than Tillich or Heidegger, both of who are preoccupied with death. Neville's cosmology focuses on harmony and value not death. It is the positive creation of real things rather than the anxiety of being nothing at all. This difference is perhaps best seen in Neville's movement from a feeling of nonbeing to a feeling of bliss, which transcends the contrast between life and death.⁴² The feeling of nonbeing is not a complete symbol for Neville unless it moves one from the mere shock of radical contingency to the positive embrace of this world. But is there room to push Neville to have a sort of meontic nothingness? Insofar as one incorporates the finite/infinite contrast into the depths of one's being, one holds both the finite power to be and its counterfactual, absolute nothingness, together. The appropriation of this sort of symbolic engagement is meontic.

⁴² Ibid.

For Neville ultimate reality, best understood as the ontological act of creativity, grounds a cosmos full of value. Everything that is real, that exists, is a harmony of essential and conditional components in contrast to the absolute nothingness that would pertain without the act. The act is the creation of something entirely new without relation or dependence on anything that came before. This newness adds to the valuation and meaningfulness of determinate existence. The finite/infinite contrast is crucial to understanding the emergence of novelty, which came out of absolute nothingness or absolutely nothing. The finite/infinite contrast functions as a point of reference for ultimacy. It throws together the specter of absolute nothingness out of which one stands in existence. The existential feeling of nothingness can be understood as a meontic appropriation of finite, determinate existence in conjunction with absolute nothingness and one's death.

RAY HART: MEONTOLOGY

Ray Hart in his forthcoming *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony* develops a meontology, radicalizing the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* to say that God creates out of the nothingness of Godself, i.e. out of the nihility of the Godhead.⁴³ He takes the language of abyss and *grund* and the workings of the divine life seen in Tillich to a radical, mystical conclusion following after the work of Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, and Thomas J. J. Altizer. Hart's primary thesis is that God creates out of the *nihil*. Secondarily, God creates Godself out of the nothingness that is internal to the Godhead. Metaphysically, Hart's discussion begins with Leibniz's response to the ontological question. Why is there something rather than nothing? Leibniz answers with the principle of sufficient reason. There is nothing without a ground. Hart, taking a tactic from Heidegger (though Heidegger perhaps does not go far enough with his own tactic of challenging the dominance of the language of Being), removes the ground and preeminence from Being. God is not merely the ground of being or being itself. Rather, Godhead is a groundless ground for determinate God, being, and nonbeing. Existence is standing out of nothing: Leibniz's is amazed that there is anything at all rather than nothing. The being which stands out of nothing also goes toward nothing, which is the specter of death overhanging all being. The nihil becomes preeminent for the indeterminate Godhead. But does that lead to nihilism? God fits into this mixture, so Hart claims, as God the determinate Creator-Redeemer who is the necessary but not

⁴³ Ray L. Hart, *God Being Nothing: Toward a Theogony*, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming). I have been working with a draft of the text and do not have the accurate page numbers from the forthcoming print.

sufficient condition for there being something rather than nothing. Yet, this God Creator-Redeemer is “something of a metaphysical scandal.”⁴⁴ In contrast, the Godhead, the abyss or ungrund that Hart adapts from Schelling and others in the Christian mystic tradition, is sufficient more than necessary in an alternative sort of metaphysical grounding of groundlessness in the determination process or meontologically. Hart claims that creation is both externally related to God and Godhead as well as internally, though not in the same sense as God is related internally to Godhead. Theologically adding depth to the description of God and Godhead, Hart draws upon Boehme’s notion of turba, or a cosmic turbulence, which traces the indeterminacy that becomes determinate in God the Creator as well as the inner turbulence of the human soul. Hart characterizes the abyss of Godhead as indeterminate desire and turbidity, which results (though temporal language like ‘results’ is misleading) in a restless fermentation that is internal to Godhead, a longing itself which moves from nothing to something and to nothing again, in the theogony of Godhead toward determinacy which is much like Boehme’s ‘mother of Being and Nothing’ and enfolds the totality of binary opposites of determinate and indeterminate into the abyss of Godhead. In other words, Godhead is not merely indeterminate, an inert ineffableness or vast and empty nothingness like some caricatures of the vacuum of space. Godhead is not merely the infinite side of Neville’s finite/infinite contrast nor is Godhead simply absolute nothing. Rather, Godhead is a nihil that is full of potency – the potency to do otherwise or the potency of what is not established determinately yet. It is a radicalization of Tillich’s language of abyss. In this

⁴⁴ Ibid.

sense, the language and movement of Nicholas of Cusa's not-Other God is helpful, suggesting the limitless potential of the Godhead to be other than. Godhead is a restless nihilism, a groundless meontic nothingness.

The potency of Godhead extends to the *metaxic* space between indeterminate Godhead and determinate God, which is the mixed space of both the advent and recusal of God from and back to Godhead. Godhead becomes determinate in two distinct ways as Creator and as Redeemer. God the Creator is linear, setting the finite world into being, *creatio ab origine*. God the Redeemer comes into play with the re-creation, i.e. redemption, of the created world, *creatio continua*. Hart succinctly states, "God the Redeemer is God freshly determinately taking account of what happens with and to His little ones."⁴⁵ God the Redeemer does so in advent and recusal, responding with new potency to the travails of humanity. God the Redeemer does not meddle in the world, nor does God the Creator. Rather, it is the absence of God that makes the metaphorical space for hope and redemption, the divine living and dying of God, the advent and recusal of God in order to replenish determinate God from indeterminate Godhead. It is a recuperation of indeterminacy for God's reckoning redemptively with the freedom of the universe's staying-out of God. Godhead has not abandoned God and God has not abandoned creation toward the second not.

The determination process that has guided Hart's discussion of indeterminate Godhead and determinate God the Creator and God the Redeemer is itself a dynamic unfolding, a groundless ground in the middle between indeterminacy and determinacy.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Hart likens this process to Boehme's use of *Abgrund* and Plato's use of *chora* or what Hart calls "the abgrundlich nondeterminate."⁴⁶ It is a necessary ground and sufficient groundless, in Hart's terms, in order to make sense of Godhead, God, and their internal intermediations. God Being Nothing in which God is both being and nothing and the dynamic middle between the two occurs here in this choric abyss of the Abgrund in which God/Godhead is not Being and not Nothing, yet shelters determinate becoming nondeterminately.

Humanity is also meontically configured. Hart moves from theogony to anthropogony, the story of the birth of humanity. Anthropogony is the rendering of the individual human, the soul, out of the fragility of its two nots, construed through three scenes of the individual person's life: between the two nots, the consequent and impending; between factual actuality and essence or potency; and one's renewal or redemption. In other words, Hart seeks to build a theological anthropology out of the framework of nothingness, Godhead, and God. Hart considers the turbidity, (un)becoming, and metaxic or mixed nature of the Godhead and God to be mirrored in creation. This mirroring is fundamental for valuing finite existence. Hart says: "But whether the nonbeing from which I come is the same as the not-being toward which I go is an inescapably stunning question of which the meaning of my temporal-temporary existence hangs, since if they are the same my existence itself seems to count only for

⁴⁶ Ibid.

nought.”⁴⁷ What does the becoming and unbecoming of each human individual mean for one’s self?

Crucially, Hart explicitly names the first not, the original nothing out of which one stands, as a ‘nontemporal before-not’ and the second not, the one towards which I go, as a ‘temporal after-not.’⁴⁸ Finite human existence in time matters for the second not. Human existence does not exhaust the potential of human essence. How a person lives matters as well and not merely that one did exist. Hart says: “My human life, as the unity of determinations over which I preside as the created elan of determinability, properly begins with the temporal funding, regrouping of *my* not: not God, not anyone or anything else in the cosmos, in short, my ownmost *ad quem*, my ownmost toward.”⁴⁹ Human existence matters, one’s ownmost existence, and one has the potential to become something other than what is on mere existence. One way to access this fund of potency is for the religious person to be reborn, a second birth, which Hart describes:

The religious are they who center their redemptive being in the re-litigation of the two pools of the not and in the invocative-evocative inversions between the ‘already’ indicative facticity of existence and the potencies of the temporally funded and imperative not-yet. This involves nothing less than dying to the life which makes us merely other than (and thus negates) the first nought, the life which affirms itself merely as existing non-nought; and it involves nothing more than birth (commonly called rebirth) to a new life that is the negation of an existence correlated with an ungrounded second nought. There is a first and a second coming

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

to be, as there is a first nought to come from and a second nought to come toward.⁵⁰

This process of rebirth, the second birth with which one negates the first not and by so doing, accesses the potency of the nihil in order to refund one's potential to reform the second nothingness toward which one goes. In other words, one dies and lives again. As hinted throughout the text, the intellect qua imagination is the energy by which this renewal and redemption comes to fruition via a Christology informed by Meister Eckhart's notion of the *logos*. Human creatures creatively re-imagine the world and affect God, Godhead, and the second nothing toward which they go. God self-generates God's self out of the indeterminate, groundless abyssal potency of Godhead in which the interplay between one and many, Ungrund and Abgrund, and indeterminacy and nondeterminacy are equiprimordial. It is from this potency of the Godhead that the actualization of determinate things spring, both determinate God Creator/Redeemer and creation. The abyss of the Godhead holds mutually contradicting potencies of determinate ways of being, namely being and nothingness, the one and the many, freedom and necessity, and principle and principal. Critically, Hart contends that each determinate thing is "the actualized determinate coincidence of opposing potencies; presiding over each is the *logos* of Heraclitus, as it is Logos of the gospels: Jesus on the Cross."⁵¹ In other words, finite creation exists externally, stands out of, the God the Creator who in turn stands out of the internal interplay of the turbid and chaotic Godhead

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

with all of its potency. This presiding notion, the logos, is rooted both in the Christian tradition, notably Eckhart's use of the Latin *verbum*, and in western metaphysics, notably in the search for non-circular first principles and the later Heideggerian search for Being, which manifests or reveals itself rather than being proved. This Eckhartian turn to the word, both *verbum* (word) and *verum* (truth), entails that the intellect is other than being, i.e. the intellect is nonbeing. In fact, for Eckhart and Hart, it is nonbeing, the intellect that can be thought and not being as Parmenides thought. If this is the case that Eckhart takes the opening of the Gospel of John seriously, then in the beginning, *in principio*, was the logos, the word, and the word as God – not being. Hart says: "God the Father-Creator is the principal, the 'by-which-it-is' (*quo est*) of anything that temporally is, and Eckhart never tires of saying that the first thing God creates is being; but God the Logos, principle, the 'what-it-is' (*quod est*) of anything temporally created as it virtually is."⁵² God the Creator creates all temporal creation, all determinate and finite things in the universe, and is the principal agent of its creation, as it is in terms of being or mere existence. God the Logos creates temporal creation as it is virtually in terms of its essence and intellect, as it progresses imperatively toward its second nothingness. These two modal categories of temporal creation, being and intellect, pave the way for Hart's Christological rendering of humanity's second birth and God the Redeemer's second coming in relation to the nothingness toward which they go.

Even though the Eckhartian *verbum* remains indistinct in its application from Godhead to God to the individual, Hart does speak to the becoming and unbecoming at

⁵² Ibid.

work in the individual's existence as well as its source of potency, which functions much like the refunding of potency for God out of Godhead. Hart says: "Ours is always a crisis of e-mergence-y. In this respect as in all others the human person traces what infuses and suffuses all determinate modalities of being, God not excepted, namely the indeterminate *turba* of indeterminate Godhead (the sacred, the holy)." ⁵³ One stands out of nothing, the first emergence, and goes toward nothing, all the time continually surprised by one's own becoming and the re-creating and rendering of what one will be in one's becoming and unbecoming. In this sense, one is, like God, situated in a metaxic space of chora between the nots. It is in going toward the second not that one stumbles upon different modes of being. One is not merely existing, indicative being or that one is, but also the infinitive, the to be, and the imperative of essence and potential, what one will be.

Much of the language so far has described the process of going toward the second not as one of becoming, but the process of unbecoming is as important if not more so as one goes toward the second not for Hart. It is only through unbecoming 'that I am' does one create the metaphorical space to be other, to be reborn toward the second not. In this sense, unbecoming comes to bear on one's imperative being whereas becoming relates more to one's indicative being. Much like Creator God unbecomes into the nothingness of the Godhead and is so refreshed with potency to become the Redeemer God, humanity unbecomes in order to refund one's potency, to be redeemed. It is a willing toward the nothingness that one will become such that one becomes nothing and is reborn. One is individuated as one that is determinately existent, standing out of the first not. One's

⁵³ Ibid.

individuality is manifest when one embraces the second not, when the self/soul/spirit becomes one's own. That is, one turns inward to realize what one becomes and unbecomes toward the second not. Hart draws upon Kierkegaard to emphasize this movement of realizing, becoming actual, through the incitement of human freedom. One disposes oneself freely but one is also disposed, limited by necessity in the metaxic thrownness of dispositions of one's own da-sein. Hart clarifies: "To unbecome determinately what she is becoming and has become determinately is to will another negation, a negation of the self in favor of the ecstatic I, and to *live* that negation, to live oneself as nothing, a self-annihilating nothing."⁵⁴ This losing of the self brings one into the renewal of the potency of oneself so that one unbecomes "bearing only one's ownmost deliberate determinateness into the second not (and that as one's gift to the potency of its indeterminacy)." This work of unbecoming is a ritual sacrifice, a willing and desiring to become nothing. One becomes and unbecomes, willing to be nothing so that in one's self-recusal one finds, or simply is found, the potency to be otherwise. Hart strives to work out a Christology that brings the turbic movement of Godhead to God Creator back to Godhead then to God Redeemer into the province of humanity. Just as the potential possibilities of God Creator have ossified, so too does human possibility. The challenge is to refund human potentiality – to find redemption in the movement of the Godhead. Driving this search for redemption is Hart's desire to value human and all determinate and finite existence. Determinate existence is bound by two nots or nothings. The first not is the nothing from whence one comes, the creation out of nothing

⁵⁴ Ibid.

or the original creation. Existence stands out of an oukontic or absolute nothing. The second not is the nothing towards which one goes. This is the nothingness of one's death. One's existence goes toward a meontic nothingness, one's ownmost possibility. In order for human life to have value and meaning, the two nots must be different. If the two nots are the same, as they are for Eckhart and similar Neo-Platonists, finite life stands out of and returns to God or Godhead with no appreciable difference made to God. In other words, finite existence has no effect or meaning if it is merely a return. If the second not is different, finite existence matters. Hart's meontology and theognoy, study of meontic nothingness and retelling of the birth of God, takes seriously the *nihil* of *creatio ex nihilo* as Hart casts the lives of Godhead, God, and creation in contrast to the bounds and potency of nothingness.

KEIJI NISHITANI: NOTHINGNESS AND EMPTINESS

Keiji Nishitani in his seminal *Religion and Nothingness* uses the language of *sunyata* or emptiness in conjunction with nothingness to bring his interpretation of Zen Buddhism into dialogue with Meister Eckhart and Martin Heidegger. He seeks to challenge modern existential nihilism, countering that everything is in fact nothing or empty, devoid of metaphysical commitments, so that one focuses on this world presently at hand. The stakes are similar to those of Tillich, Neville, and Hart. Nishitani wants to value this world in the face of nihility or “that which renders meaningless the meaning of life.”⁵⁵ Nihility becomes problematic when it impinges one’s ability to find value or meaning in one’s life, such as illness or death. Nihility is also closely related questions of existence, which are more personal versions of the question of being. Nishitani asks: “Why have I been alive? Where did I come from and where am I going? A void appears here that nothing in the world can fill; a gaping abyss opens at the very ground upon which one stands. In the face of this abyss, not one of all the things that made up the stuff of life until then is of any use.”⁵⁶ One exists on the pain of being nothing at all. The recognition, what Nishitani calls realizing the real or appropriation, of this fundamental abyss of nihility at the base of existence is the starting place of religion and the first step toward valuing one’s life.⁵⁷ Nihility, or the recognition of the nothingness at the base of existence, is the spur toward realizing or appropriating reality. The challenge for

⁵⁵ Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Nishitani is to tease out a definition of nothingness: an absolute nothingness as opposed to relative nothingness that allows for a groundless ground rather than simple nihilism.

Nishitani describes broadly three Western ways of thinking about nothingness. First is the Christian tradition, using the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* to describe the manner in which God, “who transcends the nihility that forms the ground of the entities he creates,” is the fullness of being (the typical Neo-Platonic tradition). Second is what Nishitani terms “atheistic existentialism,” which replaces God with nihility (e.g. Nietzsche and Sartre). Third is Eckhart’s radical nothingness of the Godhead, which Nishitani thinks “must still be more profound than the nihility that contemporary existentialism has put in place of God.”⁵⁸ Nishitani indicates that Eckhart’s absolute nothingness is indeed a more radical rendering of the nothingness of the Godhead than that offered by the Neo-Platonics. Additionally, the absolute nothingness of the Godhead differs from the nihility of atheistic existentialism in the manner in which the Godhead takes the role of nihility, the self standing out of the godhead, but also negates being.⁵⁹ Absolute nothingness results when all modes of being are transcended into the ineffableness of the Godhead.⁶⁰ The individual soul becomes one with the Godhead, entering into the ‘desert of the godhead,’ and losing all ground of the individual self into a type of field of nihility or the ‘bottomless ground’ of the godhead and out of which the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 61–2.

soul finds life.⁶¹ This entry is kenotic, a self-outpouring or emptying. Nishitani further describes the nature of the pure oneness of the Godhead as pointing “to the sheer nonobjective character of this oneness” and an ‘absolute oneness.’⁶² In this manner, Eckhart’s absolute nothingness is a negative absolute nothingness in contradistinction to the Neo-Platonics or the atheistic existentialists. Furthermore, absolute nothingness functions only in contrast to being, much like Neville’s finite/infinite contrast. There is no thing as nothingness other than the nothing that stands behind the existence of a person. There is no ‘is’ to the nothingness that is there.⁶³ One lives out of a field of absolute nothingness, a sort of existential conversion, or what one might term an ultimate concern. Nishitani describes the tension within absolute nothingness as “absolute nothingness-*sive*-being, being-*sive*-nothingness.”⁶⁴

Nishitani’s absolute nothingness, like Neville’s, is the counter-factual of existence, but Nishitani’s absolute nothingness also incorporates emptiness. Absolute nothing is just that a no-thing and empty. Nishitani names this turn of absolute nothingness as “the field of *sūnyatā* or emptiness.”⁶⁵ He further describes it as “an *absolute emptiness*, emptied even of the representation of emptiness. And for that reason,

⁶¹ Ibid., 62.

⁶² Ibid., 63.

⁶³ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 121.

it is at bottom one with being, even as being is at bottom one with emptiness.”⁶⁶ In this manner, the field of *sūnyatā* functions like the ontological context of mutual relevance, holding all things in relation but being empty of any specific thing.⁶⁷ Crucially, Nishitani seeks to limit what one might call the reality of the field of *sūnyatā*, though this is a fraught task given the competing manner in which Neville and Nishitani use ‘reality.’ Nishitani with this focus of emptiness is explicitly rejecting a Kantian distinction between *phenomena* and *noumenal*. The supersensory world is not more real than the world before one of pure fact.⁶⁸ The field of *sūnyatā* is there but only insofar as it makes sense of reality, accounting for the way things are in terms of their suchness, what Nishitani calls “the *elemental* mode of being,”⁶⁹ and functions as the Zen Great Affirmation.⁷⁰ In addition, Nishitani argues that the field of *sūnyatā* is a way to account for the problem of the one and many without making the same pitfalls as Plotinus and others in the Western tradition much in the same manner as Neville.⁷¹ He argues that traditional systems of philosophy discussed a unified One only in the sense of non-differentiation, but this merely reduces all things to the one.⁷² In contrast, if one starts from nothing, then

⁶⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁷ Nishitani will later name this dynamic of emptiness as circuminsessional interpenetration. See *ibid.*, 148–150.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 138.

⁷¹ Ibid., 144.

⁷² Ibid.

multiplicity and differentiation can have meaning.⁷³ In this sense, Nishitani attempts to preserve the same meaning for creation that Neville does with his emphasis on novelty. The multiplicity and differentiation are in fact additions to absolute nothingness.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER: BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH

There is so much one could say about Martin Heidegger and the question of being. At his simplest, Heidegger's description of being-toward-death in his seminal *Being and Time* offers a way, a model, in which to categorize the existentially charged renderings of nothingness in Tillich, Neville, Hart, and Nishitani.⁷⁴ Nothingness goads one toward valuing this world. The specter of nothingness haunts descriptions of being, pushing from the underside against the power to be. One must wrestle with question of being and the possibility – nay, the inevitability – of one's death.

In order to understand the importance of the End and Death for Heidegger, one must first understand how he arrives here. From where does the analysis of the End originate? Asking this question keeps one in line with the hermeneutical structure of the text, the circling or spiraling around a point on the horizon, which is both an end goal and a starting point. Heidegger has asked the forgotten question of Being, which already presupposes some understanding of Being. Dasein, the focus of his investigation, is the being for whom Being matters, the being which knows being and yet does not know being, i.e. the forgetfulness of being. Additionally, he has located the analysis of Dasein in terms of existence. Heidegger says: "The *essence* of Dasein lies in its existence,"

⁷³ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

which works out to an understanding of Dasein as a potentiality-for-being.⁷⁵ Heidegger described phenomenologically in Division 1 the structure of Dasein, its everydayness and the phenomenon of care, particularly the primordial aspects of the structure of Dasein. At the beginning of Division 2, Heidegger questions, if only rhetorically, the possibility of his primordial analysis. Heidegger says:

But have we not at the very outset of our Interpretation renounced the possibility of bringing Dasein into view as a whole? Everydayness is precisely the Being which is ‘between’ birth and death. And if existence is definitive for Dasein’s Being and if its essence is constituted in part by potentiality-for-Being, then, as long as Dasein exists, it must in each case, as such a potentiality, *not yet be* something. Any entity whose Essence is made up of existence, is essentially opposed to the possibility of our getting it in our grasp as an entity which is a whole. Not only has the hermeneutical Situation hitherto given us no assurance of ‘having’ the whole entity: one may even question whether ontological Interpretation of Dasein will not founder on the kind of Being which belongs to the very entity we have taken as our theme.⁷⁶

In the fore-having and fore-sight of the primordial analysis, one must also have in sight the whole.⁷⁷ Yet, the whole is problematic for Heidegger in view of the analysis of Dasein in terms of essence and existence notably in the way existence defies unity. It is this exact impossibility of the possibility of Dasein’s existence, Dasein’s end, to which Heidegger will turn. The way to make sense of the whole of Dasein’s existence is to extend the analysis to death. Dasein as Being-in-the-world is also a *Being towards death* [*Sein zum Tode*]. Heidegger says, “The existential structure of such a Being proves to be

⁷⁵ Ibid., §9 SZ 42 and §45 SZ 231.

⁷⁶ Ibid., §45 SZ 233.

⁷⁷ Ibid., §45 SZ 232.

the ontologically constitutive state of Dasein's potentiality-for-Being-a-whole."⁷⁸ In this sense, an analysis of the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein allows one to complete the whole analysis of Dasein and the struggle to authentically be in the phenomenon of care. In other words, the specter of one's death, i.e. that one might be nothing, challenges one to search for the meaning of one's own being. The meontic realization of one's eventual death throws one toward a decision point – to value one's existence or not.

How exactly does a notion of Death, the End, enable one to analyze the whole? This is the overarching goal of Chapter 1 of Division 2, as Heidegger names it: "Dasein's Possibility of Being-a-whole and Being-Towards-Death." Part of Heidegger's answer lies in the circular manner in which he defines the essence of Dasein through the existence of Dasein.⁷⁹ Heidegger says regarding the existence of Dasein:

"Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence – in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already. Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself."⁸⁰

Even in the early portions of *Being and Time*, Heidegger is prefiguring his analysis of Dasein. Note here the manner in which Heidegger defines existence as possibility and grounds the question of existence in the process of existing. What is the essence of existence? What is the being of beings? What does it mean to be? These questions, for

⁷⁸ Ibid., §45 SZ 234.

⁷⁹ Ibid., SZ 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Heidegger, are only answerable by one that exists, the Dasein, in contrast to Parmenides, Aristotle, and Aquinas all of whom asked the same question about the essence of existence. The key for Heidegger is to understand the existence of Dasein as possibility [*Möglichkeit*]. Heidegger says: “It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is *constantly something still to be settled* [*eine ständige Unabgeschlossenheit*]. Such a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one’s potentiality-for-Being.”⁸¹ In this sense, Dasein as possibility is unfinished and is only finished when there is nothing left that is outstanding. But at the point at which there is nothing left outstanding, Dasein no longer is. Dasein ceases to exist when it runs out of possibilities. Heidegger says: “As long as Dasein *is* as an entity, it has never reached its ‘wholeness.’ But if it gains such ‘wholeness’, this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the-world. In such a case, it can never again be experienced *as an entity*.”⁸² In other words, Dasein as a particular being runs up against the limits of its own existence and ceases to be a particular being. Death is the end of the possibility for the particular being of Dasein and the way to speak of the wholeness of Dasein’s existence. But the death of Dasein makes it impossible for Dasein to experience the wholeness of its own existence. How then can Dasein ever experience the possibility of wholeness? Dasein potentially does so through the structure of care and the existential structure of Dasein, namely its own thrownmost possibility.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid., SZ 236.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., SZ 237 and 181.

Why does this model of being-toward-death matter? In the grasping or appropriation of the meontic character of one's finite being, there exists the potential to refund one's potency to be in the world or at the very least a clearing or opportunity to value this world. In this sense, the structure or movement of being-towards-death functions like the feeling of the finite/infinite contrast, throwing one toward the radical contingency of this world alongside absolute nothingness. The meontic character of nothingness, the mixed and chaotic realization of nothingness on the edge of determinate being, enlivens one to the possibilities inherent in one's (thr)ownmost potential to be.

NOTHINGNESS: A HYPOTHESIS

Nothingness matters for Tillich, Neville, Hart, Heidegger, Nishitani, and Eckhart. The terms they use to describe nothingness vary among them, but each brings it to the fore. Why does nothingness matter, if at all, for these thinkers? On one level, nothingness matters because it matters to their dialogue partners. This is a family tree effect. Each new growth builds upon the previous one: the heterodox valuing of nothingness to make sense of being. On another level, nothingness matters for the manner in which it enlivens being. The something of finite existence stands out of the emptiness of absolute nothingness. Tied up with existence *contra* nothingness are the possibilities of existence or meontic nothingness. At stake in the encounter with or exposure to nothingness is the ability to refund or redeem one's ownmost potential and possibilities. How one responds to the specter of nothingness makes nothing matter or not in the way one turns from nothingness back to existence. In other words, the stakes are not merely the metaphysical (non)status of nothingness, but the desire to find meaning and value in human, finite existence in the face of radical contingency and the challenge of nihilism.

Each of the theologians and philosophers discussed in this text begin their analysis of nothingness from the side of somethingness, i.e. they begin as existent, particular, determinate, finite beings whose Being matters for each of them. This is their shared existential framework, a structure crystalized in Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death. What does it mean to be? In asking what it means to be, they also ask what does it mean to no longer be. What does it mean to die, to end? In more personal

terms, one can ask what does my life mean both here now and when I die? Does my life have significant value and meaning?

There is something surprising about the sheer fact of existence. One finds oneself to be alive. One also attempts to fill one's life with meaning and value from the simplest of physical pleasures, such as the satisfaction of a good meal, to shared social values such as human rights or the beauty of music. Yet there are many cases in which one's search for meaning and value is disrupted whether by one's own failures, natural events, or the actions of others. One can see this tension between the fact of existence and the disrupted search for its meaning in the work of Meister Eckhart. In his series of German sermons, Eckhart, relays the responses of a righteous man who explains why he values certain things.⁸⁴ He values sleeping and eating because they give him strength. He loves God, truth, and righteousness not for any special benefit but because they are worth loving for their own sakes. God is worth valuing for God's sake. Life, in contrast, is valued because he likes living. How can one like living when life is filled with so much suffering and pain? In Heidegger's terms, this is the challenge of living authentically in the world. For Tillich, it is the anxiety that pushes against one's courage to be. It is the specter of nihilism.

Life stands out of the *nihil* in two ways: *ouk on* and *me on*. *Ouk on*, or absolute nothingness, is a non-dialectical nothingness that is utterly devoid of reference. It is the radically other or infinite side of Neville's finite-infinite contrast. The sole way to

⁸⁴ "Sermon 26," Maurice O'Connell Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, vol. 1 (London: Element Books, 1979), 98.

gesture toward it is in contrast to being from the perspective of a finite being who exists. In this sense, *ouk on* or absolute nothingness, defines the boundaries of Being as a relief or contrast. Being is value-full in contrast to the emptiness of absolute nothingness. Being stands out of absolute nothingness – being-*sive*-nothingness. Finite beings, however, participate in both being and nothingness. Finite beings come from nothing and go toward nothing. They are born. They all eventually die. This mixing of being and nothingness is dialectical nonbeing, the *me on*. Hart distinguishes two the nothings that bound finite existence. The first nothing out of which one exists is absolute nothing, the *ouk on*. One's being stands out of absolute nothingness. One's being goes toward a meontic nothingness as one's ownmost possibility. In this sense, the *me on* incorporates being, nothingness, and possibility. The recognition of this meontic structure, of being-towards-death, allows one an opportunity to respond. In the unsettledness of one's becoming as one goes toward the second not of existence, one must search for new potencies and possibilities for the manner in which one lives in the world. One must unbecome toward the second nothing to refund one's potencies and possibilities for living now.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Jason Lowry Blakeburn (b. 1990)

90 Stratton Lane, Clinton, OK 73601

jasonbl@bu.edu

Research Interests

- Philosophy and Religion
- Continental Philosophy of Religion
- Philosophical Hermeneutics
- Pragmatism
- Twentieth Century Philosophical Theology
- Death of God Thought
- Nihilism

Education

Master of Sacred Theology, 2016 (expected)

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA

Thesis: Nothing Matters: Philosophical and Theological Varieties of Nothingness
Expected

Master of Theological Studies, magna cum laude, 2014

Boston University School of Theology, Boston, MA

Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Religion and Philosophy, summa cum laude, 2012

Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City, OK

With an emphasis in Biblical Studies and minors in Ethics, Rhetoric, and German,

Semester Abroad, 2011

Alpine Universität Klagenfurt, Klagenfurt, Austria

Conference Presentations

“‘Is God Dead?’ Fifty Years after the Infamous Easter Issue of Time, 1966.”
Panel presentation at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion,
San Antonio, TX, 2016.

Secondness and the Stranger: The Pragmatic Phenomenology of Charles S. Peirce
as an Alternative Approach to the Stranger for Richard Kearney’s Diacritical
Hermeneutics. Paper presented at the Paul Ricoeur and the Future of the Humanities
International Conference at the University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands 2013

The Argument to the Self from the Other in Levinas’ ‘Totality and Infinity’ and
Barth’s ‘Epistle to the Romans’. Paper presented at the Southwest Commission on
Religious Studies, Dallas, TX, 2012.

Confusion over Method: A Discussion of Socratic Dialectic, Sophistic Eristic, and
Their Shared Concept of Antilogic in Plato’s Apology and Aristophanes’ Clouds. Paper
presented to the Federation Rhetoric Symposium, Texas Women’s University, 2010.

Awards and Scholarships

- Dean’s Fellow, Boston University School of Theology
- Letzeiser Gold Medal, Oklahoma City University (highest G.P.A. of
graduating class)
- Outstanding Senior Award in Philosophy, Oklahoma City University
- Outstanding Man of the Wimberly School of Religion, Oklahoma City
University
- Robert L. Jones Senior Paper Award, Wimberly School of Religion,
Oklahoma City University
- Theta Alpha Kappa Graduate Fellowship Award
- Oikos Scholar, Oklahoma City University
- Bishop Scholar’s Award, Oklahoma City University
- Eagle Scout, Boy Scouts of America Troop 361, Clinton, OK

Academic Service

Sailing Operations Graduate Assistant for the Physical Education, Recreation and
Dance Department at Boston University Fitness and Recreation Center, 2014-2016.

Non-Mdiv Representative, Academic Policies, Procedures, and Fellowships Committee, Boston University School of Theology – assisted with review of the Masters level curriculum, 2012-2014.

Languages

- English – native speaker
- German – intermediate,
- Koine Greek - intermediate

Memberships & Affiliations

- Member, American Academy of Religion
- Member and Level 1 Instructor, US Sailing
- Vice President, MTS Student Association, Boston University School of Theology (former)
- LGI, WSI, and LGIT, American Red Cross
- Theta Alpha Kappa, Religion Honor Society
- The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi
- Phi Eta Sigma, Freshman Honor Society