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Martin Heidegger's Metaphysical Question of the Nothing (*das Nichts*) and Edith Stein's Commentary

Jose Conrado A. Estafia
Dean of Studies
Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary
Tagbilaran City, Bohol
joseconrado2003@yahoo.com

Abstract

Heidegger's philosophy is a departure from Western metaphysics. In Heidegger's analysis, the *nothing* is a manifestation of the fundamental situation of Dasein. Heidegger claims that the nothing is revealed in anxiety. This is explicated in his lecture "What is Metaphysics?" Edith Stein however goes farther: the question of the nothing (*das Nichts*) leads us to the question of the eternal foundation of finite being. This is the suggestion of Edith Stein in her commentary to the 1929 inaugural lecture of Martin Heidegger at Freiburg University. Accordingly, the manifestation of the nothing in our own being only gives us a hint to a being beyond our finite being. Thus, Heidegger's question has contributed a solid foundation for Stein's own inquiry into the eternal being.

Keywords: *metaphysics, nothing, anxiety, eternal being.*

In 1929, Heidegger delivered his famous inaugural lecture (*Antrittsvorlesung*) "What is Metaphysics?" at Freiburg University. The title itself suggests an expectation that the audience would be hearing about metaphysics. Instead, it was a discussion about a particular metaphysical question. For Heidegger this is the right means (*die rechte Möglichkeit*) to

introduce metaphysics itself.¹ This metaphysical question is on the nothing (*das Nichts*). “Whereby,” he remarks, “the questing controversy in the breaking occurs is being itself – and beyond that, nothing.”² The question has become a metaphysical one – “a question into which one is necessarily drawn if one decides to dispense with the well-known system of logical defences,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it.³ Heidegger’s investigation leads him to ask this fundamental question of metaphysics: “Why is there being at all and rather not nothing?” (*Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?*).⁴

¹ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82. German original: “Was ist Metaphysik?” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2013), 103. One can also check a booklet containing this lecture from the same publisher (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007). The latter also contains Heidegger’s introduction to this lecture (Einleitung zu >Was ist Metaphysik?<, 1949). In *Wegmarken*, this introduction is on page 365. In this paper the English translations of Heidegger’s texts are mainly documented, though at times there is the need to present the original German texts for further clarifications. Whenever the German texts appeared enclosed in a parenthesis, that means that I am doing my own translations. At times a fuller original German texts would appear also in the footnotes. I already find the English translations enough, but it is always good to return to the original. This procedure of reading and documenting both the original and the translations will deepen our understanding of Heidegger’s texts. We are also doing this with Edith Stein’s texts.

² „Womit die forschende Auseinandersetzung im Einbruch geschieht, ist das Seiende selbst – und darüber hinaus nichts“ (Heidegger, “Was ist Metaphysik?” in *Wegmarken*, 105; henceforth cited only as in *Wegmarken*). Hans-Georg Gadamer says that the said lecture inquires into a being which is not a “what,” a *ti*; hence, it cannot be the “Being” that is thought of in metaphysics (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Heidegger’s Ways*, trans. John W. Stanley [Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994], 47).

³ Gadamer, *Heidegger’s Ways*, 46.

⁴ Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”, 96. Henceforth cited as WM? (in *Wegmarken*, 122). In a 1937 foreword to this inaugural lecture, Heidegger clarifies that the key question (*Leitfrage*) of metaphysics is the question of being of beings (*Sein des Seienden*); but this is not yet the fundamental question (*Grundfrage*). In asking about the being of beings, one is not yet asking about being itself (*Sein selbst*) and its truth (*seiner Wahrheit*). We can ignore, falsify, or even forget the basic question of being and its full development, Heidegger continues, but if we are forceful in carrying out this task and fulfill its purpose, the question will shine through and give fire to the shaping of things (*die Gestaltung aller Dinge*). Indeed, the fundamental question “is historical, that is, it is based on our past and future historical existence” (Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* [Complete Edition], Vol. 14: *I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte*

Heidegger claims that science determines our existence.⁵ And so again he asks: “What about this nothing? Is it a coincidence that we speak entirely of one’s accord (*von selbst*)? Is it just a way of talking - and nothing else?”⁶ The present paper is primarily an exposition of Martin Heidegger’s metaphysical question of the nothing (*das Nichts*).

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* frames the question of the *nothing* (*das Nichts*). For Heidegger *die Angst* (anxiety) and *das Nichts* are closely connected. The inaugural lecture, therefore, has given us a first insight into the design of the problems appearing in the background of *Being and Time*.⁷

Schriften 1910-1976. Zur Sache des Denkens [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2007], 141).

⁵ Cf. Heidegger, *WM?*, 82. He clarifies that such determination is common in the experience of researchers, teachers, and students.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 84. I will quote here also the German original text: “Wie steht es um dieses Nichts? Ist es Zufall, daß wir ganz von selbst so sprechen? Ist es nur so eine Art zu reden – und sonst nichts?” (in *Wegmarken*, 105). I think we have to distinguish here *nichts* (nothing as pronoun) and *das Nichts* (nothing as noun). The German *das Nichts* can also be translated into English as nothingness, since the latter is a noun. The pronoun *nichts* cannot therefore be translated as nothingness, since the former is a pronoun in German. However in English nothing can be both a pronoun and a noun, hence in this paper we are using the words nothing and nothingness interchangeably.

⁷ Cf. Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, 139. The Freiburger philosopher of religion Bernhard Welte, who is a student of Heidegger, comments: „Beide Begriffe gehören unlösbar zusammen und man darf nicht von dem einen reden, ohne über den anderen aufs Ernsteste nachzudenken. Man darf nicht von der Angst reden, ohne den zugehörigen Begriff des Nichts ins Auge zu fassen“ (Martin Heidegger and Bernhard Welte, *Briefe und Begegnungen* [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2003], 54). Paraphrasing it in English, it says: Anxiety and nothingness are inextricably linked and one cannot talk any of the two without seriously thinking of the other. One cannot speak of anxiety without considerably associating it with the concept of nothing. See also § 40 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) for a further reading on the “basic state-of-mind of anxiety as a distinctive way in which Dasein is disclosed (*Die Grundbefindlichkeit der Angst als eine ausgezeichnete Erschlossenheit des Daseins*)” [Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 228-235]; German: *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 184-191]. Later in our presentation we shall dwell on anxiety as it reveals the *nothing*.

However, our presentation of Heidegger's thought on this topic demands a discussion of Edith Stein's commentary. Stein has written a notable commentary on the lecture of Heidegger. She writes, "[a]nd thus the question in which the being of the human being expresses itself changes from 'why is there being at all, and not rather nothing?', to the question of the eternal foundation of finite being."⁸ I believe that Stein's criticism has been neglected.⁹ The Filipino readers of Heidegger, in these pages, will then have a glimpse of Stein's valuable intervention. Hence our first consideration may now turn.

⁸ Edith Stein, "Martin Heidegger's Existential Philosophy," trans. Mette Lebeck in *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, Issue 4, 2007, 93 (one can read this online at http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/1005/1/Mette_MPP_issue_4_2007.pdf). German original: 'Martin Heideggers Existentialphilosophie', in Edith Stein, *Endliches und Ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe (ESGA), 11/12 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder GmbH, 2006), 'Anhang', 495-499; English translation of the whole book: *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2002). Here is the original German text of Stein: „Und so wandelt sich die Frage: ‚Warum ist überhaupt Seiendes und nicht vielmehr Nichts?‘, die Frage, in der sich das Sein des Menschen selbst ausspricht, in die Frage nach dem ewigen Grunde des endlichen Seins“ ('Martin Heideggers Existentialphilosophie', in Edith Stein, *Endliches und Ewiges Sein*, 499. The English edition of Stein's book does not contain this commentary on Heidegger's Existence Philosophy. Henceforth the German text cited as MHE and for the English translation of Mette Lebeck as MHEP.

⁹ I am of the opinion that Stein's criticism has been neglected. Rafal Kazimier Wilk notes that a study of Heidegger's conception of the human being must also consider Stein's criticism (see Rafal Kazimier Wilk, "On Human Being: A Dispute Between Edith Stein and Martin Heidegger," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* [September 22, 2007]. FindArticles.com.30 June, 2009. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7048/is_4_10/ai_n28460111/). See also Antonio Calcagno, "Die Fülle oder das Nichts? Edith Stein and Martin Heidegger on the Question of Being," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. LXXV, no. 2 (Spring, 2000): 269-285. Calcagno later published a book titled, *The Philosophy of Edith Stein* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2007). There is also an article focusing on Stein's critique of Heidegger's claim in *Being and Time* that authentic death is experienced alone (see Ken Casey, "Do We Die Alone? Edith Stein's Critique of Heidegger" in *Intersubjectivity, Humanity, Being*, eds. Mette Lebeck and John Haydn Gurmin [Bern: Peter Lang, 2015], 335-370). One can also read Jordan T. Varberg's article, "Stein's Critique of Heidegger. On Dasein's Orientation to Fullness," in *Edith Stein Herausforderung heutiger Anthropologie: Akten der Internationalen Konferenz 23.-25. Oktober 2015 in Wien und Heiligenkreuz*, (Hg.) Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz/Mette Lebeck (Heiligenkreuz im Wienerwald: Be&Be-Verlag, 2017), 245-254.

HEIDEGGER'S ON NOTHING¹⁰

1. *The Question of the Nothing*

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, which contains the 1935 lecture of Heidegger, the question of the inaugural lecture reappears: “Why are there essents rather than nothing?”¹¹ In his discussion, *nothing* is not ordinary.¹² As he asserts:

Clearly it is no ordinary question. “Why are there essents, why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?” – obviously this is the first of all questions, though not in a chronological sense. Individuals and peoples ask a good many questions in the course of their historical passage through time. They examine, explore, and test a good many things before they run into the question “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” Many men never encounter this question, if by encounter we mean not merely to hear and read about it as an interrogative formulation but to ask the question, that is, to bring it about, to raise it, to feel its inevitability.¹³

¹⁰ This part is actually a revision of my earlier paper titled, “Heidegger on the Nothing (*das Nichts*),” *Kinaadman* (Holy Name University, Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines: March 2006).

¹¹ M. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Yale University Press, 1959), 1.

¹² We shall initially say that Heidegger’s nothing is not similar to its common or dictionary definition, which speaks of nothing as no particular being or existence. It is not a particular thing, act or event but the opposite to a thing or something. Mr. Webster understands nothing as a state of non-existence (See Nothing, Nothingness, *The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* [Naples, Florida: Trident Press International, 1999 ed.]). Like Mr. Webster, we ordinarily equate nothingness with non-existence. Nothing is commonly said as an opposite of something. What is nothingness? It is quite silly in ordinary language to speak of it as something. We define nothing as “a void, emptiness, oblivion, nought, nil and possibly zilch” (“The Theory and Concept of Nothingness,” [http:// www. aambury. freeseve. co. uk/NOTHIN~1.HTM](http://www.aambury.freeseve.co.uk/NOTHIN~1.HTM)). But what does Heidegger mean? This we will see more.

¹³ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1.

Science, with all its vastness, only deals with something. It accepts nothing of the *nothing*. For how can the nothing be tested or verified? We need not trouble about the nothing. "Science," observes Heidegger, "wishes to know nothing of the nothing."¹⁴ Science, in expressing its own proper essence, never calls upon the nothing for help.¹⁵ In the midst of this "controversy" the question begins to unfold and must be formulated explicitly: "How is it with nothing?"¹⁶ Such kind of inquiry may presuppose something. Thus we "posit the nothing in advance as something that 'is' such and such; we posit it as a being."¹⁷ Our assumption is that nothing is something this or that.¹⁸ Hence Heidegger proceeds by saying that, with regard to the nothing, "question and answer alike are inherently absurd."¹⁹

The nothing cannot be an object of thinking. When we think, we are thinking of something; and that to think of the nothing is contrary to the essence of thinking, Heidegger argues.²⁰ Intellect and logic cannot be our basis in inquiring into the nothing. One has to break their dominance in order to pose

¹⁴ Heidegger, WM?, 84. As Richard Polt comments, "Heidegger starts by emphasizing science's 'submission to beings themselves'. Good chemists, economists or historians all have this in common: they want to know what is the case, what is true and only that. They are devoted to beings alone – and nothing else" (R. Polt, Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* [Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999], 123).

¹⁵ Heidegger, WM?, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* It is for Heidegger controversial when what determines our lives is science.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* Here Heidegger challenges the authority of logic. He asks, "How can the intellect hope to decide about the nothing? Does the ostensible absurdity of question and answer with respect to the nothing in the end rest solely in a blind conceit of the far-ranging intellect?" (*Ibid.*, 86). If we recall what logic is all about, basically, it concerns really with objects. It may be described generally "as a mental manipulation of objects. This mental manipulation of objects is sound only so long as it is achieved according to the demands of the relations that accrue to objects as known and that order them one to another" (See William A. Wallace, OP, *The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians* [New York: Alba House, 1977], 13).

the question of being and nothingness.²¹ Heidegger even maintains that science's avoidance of the nothing is an avowal of the intellect's incapacity regarding the matter. For him science gives us the key to the "metaphysical question of nothingness."²² Reinhard May notes that the Nothing [*das Nichts*] "runs significantly [*wegweisend*] through Heidegger's work like a red thread, and ultimately distinguishes itself from everything else that has been thought and said in Western philosophy about the topic of Nothing."²³ Heidegger's discussion on the nothing already differs from what has been previously thought of in Western philosophy. In his exposition, Heidegger is showing us a rough review of how ancient and Christian metaphysics dealt with this problem. We will later turn to this consideration.

2. A Complete Negation of the Totality of Beings

Addressing the issue on logic, Heidegger asks, "But are we allowed to tamper with the rule of 'logic'? Is not intellect the taskmaster in this question of the nothing?"²⁴ Thinking involves negations or contradictions. So much so that the problem on the nothing means a negation of something, for "negation is a specific act of the intellect."²⁵ Yet Heidegger strongly claims that the nothing is more original when compared to the "not" and to the "negation."²⁶

²¹ See also Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 10. Science teaches us about the nothing (Heidegger, WM?, 85). In Heidegger's lecture "What is Metaphysics?" the phrase "and with nothing else" was mentioned six times in "different variations" in order to bring us to conclusion "that when the scientist tries to say what he is up to, he inevitably speaks of something else, namely the Nothing" (Philipse, 10). Therefore, when we speak of science, this metaphysical question cannot be avoided (*Ibid.*).

²³ Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. with complementary essay by Graham Parkes (New York: Routledge, 1996), 21. May argues that we can possibly show East Asian influences to Heidegger's question on the nothing. For fuller discussion of May's argument see especially chapter 3 of his work on pages 21-34.

²⁴ Heidegger, WM?, 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 86.

How do we seek out the nothing? If there are no objects before us how can this search be possible? “Is there ultimately such a thing as a search without that anticipation, a search to which pure discovery belongs?” Heidegger wonders.²⁷ He believes that:

Whatever we may make of it, we are acquainted with the nothing, if only as a word we rattle off everyday. For this common nothing that glides so inconspicuously through our chatter, blanched with the anemic pallor of the obvious, we can without hesitation furnish even a “definition”: The nothing is the complete negation of the totality of being.²⁸

And yet we are finite, how can we have access to the totality of beings?²⁹ How is it with the nothing? The question seems to make no sense. It becomes obscure – a puzzlement. But for Heidegger it is a question “each of us is grazed at least once, perhaps more than once, by the hidden power of this question, even if he is not aware of what is happening to him.”³⁰

The nothing as the “complete negation of the totality of being,” is possible only in our Dasein.³¹ As Heidegger puts it poetically:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1. Heidegger affirms that such possibility of the whole of beings “happen all the time in our Dasein” (Heidegger, WM?, 87). He adds that “no matter how fragmented our everyday existence may appear to be, however, it always deals with beings in a unity of the ‘whole,’ if only in a shadowy way” (Ibid.).

³¹ Ibid. Heidegger declares, “When Dasein exists, world-entry has simultaneously also already happened with it, and it has happened in such a way that extant things entering there in principle undergo *nothing*. They remain so completely untouched that it is on account of world entry that Dasein can, on its part, approach, encounter, and touch them. But if what enters world undergoes nothing in the occurrence of world-entry is then the world itself nothing? In fact the world is nothing – if ‘nothing’ means: not a being in the sense of something extant; also ‘nothing’ in the sense of no-thing, not one of the beings Dasein itself as such transcends; but Dasein transcends itself as well. The world: a nothing, no being – and yet something; nothing of beings – but being. Thus the world is not nothing in the sense of *nihil*

The question looms in moments of great despair, when things tend to lose all their weight and all meaning becomes obscured. Perhaps it will strike but once like a muffled bell that rings into our life and gradually dies away. It is present in moments of rejoicing, when all the things around us are transfigured and seem to be there for the first time, as if it might be easier to think they are not than to understand that they are and are as they are. The question is upon us in boredom, when they are equally removed from despair and joy, and everything about us seems so hopelessly commonplace that we no longer care whether anything is or is not – and with this the question “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” is evoked in a particular form.³²

With the above attunement, beings are manifested as a whole. We find beings as a whole unveiling in many ways, but this unveiling is not just incidental, but “is also the fundamental occurrence of our Da-sein.”³³ Heidegger believes that:

[I]f this question is asked and if the act of questioning is really carried out, the content and the object of the question react

negativum” (Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992], 195). “In existing,” says Mariana Ortega, “Dasein has already, so to speak, ‘stepped beyond,’ and already dwells in the world. The reason for this is that Dasein transcends objects, things in the world, and, in so doing, uncovers an equipmental whole, a range of functional relations or what Heidegger refers to as ‘significance’ (*Bedeutsamkeit*)” (Mariana Ortega, “Dasein comes After the Epistemic Subject, But Who is Dasein?” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XL, no. 1 (March 2000): 55). The experience of nothingness may be likened to our experience of darkness, silence. As Rudolf Allers in his article, “On darkness, Silence, and the Nought,” comments, “In darkness and in silence we apparently become aware of ‘nothing’” (Rudolf Allers, “On Darkness, Silence, and the Nought,” *The Thomist*, vol. IX/4 (October, 1946): 515). We often say one “sees nothing” or “hears nothing.” Such instance brings us a kind of an experience. Allers observes that to see “nothing” is to immerse oneself in complete darkness. Hence, one has a positive experience of it (Ibid., 517). The experience of nothingness is evident in our sense of sight and hearing, continues Allers. This experience, I believe, is too common for us.

³² Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1-2.

³³ Heidegger, *WM?*, 87.

inevitably on the act of questioning. Accordingly this questioning is not just any occurrence but a privileged happening that we call an event.³⁴

3. Anxiety Revealing the Nothing

“Die Angst offenbart das Nichts” (Anxiety or dread reveals the nothing).³⁵ To put it more clearly, in anxiety one is left suspended, because “being as a whole” (*das Seiende im Ganzen*) slips away. This is the reason why in dread one becomes speechless and what is surging forward is nothingness. Every utterance ‘is’ (*jedes >Ist<-Sagen*), henceforth, becomes silent in the face of nothingness.³⁶ It is as if we are floating. Dread makes us feel uncanny (*unheimlich*). In our experience of anxiety and of nihilation, a sense of being as a whole then appears. This is a kind of transcendence making it possible “to

³⁴ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 5. For Heidegger the question “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” is not a play of words. This “privileged question ‘why’ has its ground in a leap through which man thrusts away all the previous security whether real or imagined, of his life,” Heidegger asserts (*Ibid.*, 5-6). This is philosophy for Heidegger. Thus for him “to philosophize is to ask ‘Why are there essents rather than nothing?’ Really to ask the question signifies: a daring attempt to fathom this unfathomable question by disclosing what it summons us to ask, to push our questioning to the very end. Where such attempt occur there is philosophy” (*Ibid.*, 7-8).

³⁵ Heidegger, in *Wegmarken*, 112. Another translator would put it: “Dread reveals the no-thing” (See Thomas Sheehan’s interpretive translation of Heidegger’s lecture “Was ist Metaphysik?”, <http://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/1929-WHAT-IS-METAPHYSICS-2013-NOV.pdf>, p. 7) <accessed Nov. 20, 2015>).

³⁶ Heidegger, WM?, 89; in *Wegmarken*, 112. Anxiety or dread is not similar to fear, which can easily be overcome. Fear always has a specific object, like a fear of this or that. We experience fear because something affects us or seizes us. Saving ourselves from this particular thing we fear would make us become uncertain of how we relate with others. Fear makes us lose our bearings in beings as a whole. This is not the case with dread or anxiety. Here one is “suffused with a peculiar kind of calm.” It is of course a dread *of* but not of this or that. It is a dread *for* but not for a specific thing. Dread therefore is indeterminate, not that we cannot define it, but in itself it cannot be defined (Also see Sheehan’s interpretive translation of Heidegger’s lecture “Was ist Metaphysik?”, 7). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that “Dasein as Being-in-the-world is ‘fearful’ [“furchtsam”] (see § 30).

relate to particular entities, including ourselves.”³⁷ Heidegger defines Da-sein as “being held out into the nothing.”³⁸ Dasein transcends “beings as a whole,” he asserts.³⁹ Henceforth, there must be an original manifestation of nothing in order for Dasein to have “self-hood and freedom.”⁴⁰

This is the reason why logic can never be of help in the original revelation of the truth of our existence. Heidegger’s declaration that logic is not primarily important for philosophy means that logic merely deals with the “surface phenomena of meaning – theoretical propositions.”⁴¹ The nothing is no object or any being at all.⁴² With nothing the manifestation of beings as such is possible.⁴³ Heidegger believes that “in the being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs.”⁴⁴ With this original nihilation of the nothing, Dasein is brought “for the first time before beings as such.”⁴⁵

³⁷ Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 126.

³⁸ Heidegger, WM?, 91.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cf. Polt, *Heidegger*, 126. Heidegger, according to Daniel O. Dahlstrom, even considers formal logic “not really formal at all since it springs from a region of objects that has already been determined and a corresponding manner of comprehension” (Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Method: Philosophical concepts as Formal Indications,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 47 [June 1994]: 784).

⁴² Heidegger, WM?, 91.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90. We have discussed the ordinary understanding of the word “nothing” (see footnote 12). Commonly speaking, “nothing” would mean an opposite of something. Granting that it is just due to the poverty of the human language that we limit the word “nothing” to this kind of meaning, but still, who can argue that? Ask the man in the street, he would tell you that the nothing is none at all. But Heidegger is trying to go beyond the ordinary in order not to be “disburdened by the ‘they’.” Dasein must always be careful not to allow the “they” to retain and enhance “its stubborn dominion” (See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 165). Why are there beings rather than nothing? This is illogical for Rudolf Carnap (see footnote 64 below). But why are we trapped always in logic? Is there nothing else beyond logic? Can existence be so bounded only by logic that there can be no more frontiers beyond it? Life is most often illogical. Paradoxical! Contradictory! When what is at stake is the question of existence, logic always comes short. Heidegger is trying to prove that “philosophy can never be measured by the standard of the idea of science” (Heidegger, WM?, 96). Why are there beings alone? How

It must be noted that Heidegger speaks of the process of nihilation as revealed in the experience of the nothing. Nevertheless, he interprets the nothing not with nihilism as has been understood since Nietzsche.⁴⁶ Heidegger's aim is rather to overcome nihilism.⁴⁷

Heidegger claims, "Original anxiety can awaken in Dasein at any moment."⁴⁸ Polt gives an example of this phenomenon. He says, "...teenage Angst, clichéd though it may be, is a real phenomenon: young adults often experience a crisis of foundations, in which the established interpretation of Being-in-the-world becomes unstable and unsatisfying. According to Heidegger, this experience is always possible for Dasein."⁴⁹ Dasein can experience anxiety even in ordinary events. Heidegger adds, "Its sway is as thoroughgoing as its possible occasionings are trivial. It is always ready, though it only seldom springs, and we are snatched away and left hanging."⁵⁰ Polt makes an analogy between great works of art coming from troubled artists and those fresh illuminations coming from nothing.⁵¹ Indeed, anxiety reveals nothingness.

about the nothing? And this is philosophy for Heidegger. Philosophy is not just logic. It is more than that. As Heidegger puts it, "Philosophy gets under way only by a peculiar insertion of our own existence into the fundamental possibilities of Dasein as a whole" (Ibid.). And lastly, borrowing the words of Dahlstrom, "The uphill task that Heidegger sets for himself is obvious. He must be able to kick away the very ladder ('worldly' or 'theoretical' assertions, 'objectifying' concepts, and so on) on which he is forced to make his climb" (Dahlstrom, "Heidegger's Method," 788).

⁴⁶ May, *Hidden Sources*, 24.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Reversing the "question of Being" also focuses on the "question of Nothing." The "meaning of Being" has been forgotten and to inquire into it is also to ask about the nothing. Thus the question on the nothing is not similar to nihilism (Ibid., 22). Hence, in the *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, Heidegger even writes, "Directed toward the other beginning, nihilism must be grasped more fundamentally as the essential consequence of the abandonment of being" (Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly [Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999], 96).

⁴⁸ Heidegger, WM?, 93.

⁴⁹ Polt, *Heidegger*, 124.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, WM?, 93.

⁵¹ Polt, *Heidegger*, 124.

4. *The Question of Nothingness as Metaphysical*

In his book, *What is a Thing?*, Heidegger claims that science has been transformed only through centuries of discussing basic concepts and principles of thought, directed solely to things and to what is at all.⁵² Again we marvel: Why are there beings rather than nothing? The nothing has a role to play in Being.⁵³ Being can only find meaning if we put “limits to its meaning, a boundary where Being verges on meaninglessness.”⁵⁴ Therefore, Heidegger concludes:

Our inquiry concerning the nothing is to bring us face to face with metaphysics itself...

Metaphysics is inquiry beyond or over beings that aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp.

In the question concerning the nothing such an inquiry beyond or over beings, beings as a whole, takes place. It proves thereby to be a “metaphysical” question.⁵⁵

The question of nothingness is indeed a metaphysical one. The original Greek word *μετὰ τὰ φυσικά*, translated into English as “metaphysics”, is an inquiry beyond (*μετά* or *trans*) things or beings that exist as such. Its goal is to recover them as such and as a whole for our understanding. This inquiry does

⁵² Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton, Jr., and Vera Deutsch, with an analysis by Eugene T. Gendlin (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, LTD., 1967), 65. Dahlstrom comments that the center of Heidegger’s criticism of the Western philosophical tradition “is his charge that it has repeatedly ‘passed over’ the world as a phenomenon in favor of nature, conceived as a collection of substances or things present” (Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Method,” 776). According to Heidegger, Dahlstrom continues, the dominant conception concerning metaphysics is that it is “loosely understood as the tendency to regard things as being only insofar as they are in some sense present and thus potentially available and accessible to human concerns” (Ibid.).

⁵³ Polt, *Heidegger*, 124.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 124-125.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, *WM?*, 93-94; in *Wegmarken*, 118-119. “Beings,” remarks Polt, “can now have more meaning than they did in the hackneyed, dull interpretations of everyday life. Being itself is now open to creative transformation” (Polt, *Heidegger*, 124).

not only encompass the whole of metaphysics, but also it always includes the questioning *Dasein* (*das fragende Dasein*).⁵⁶

5. A Rough Recollection of the History of Metaphysics

Heidegger asks: “To what extent does the question of nothingness penetrate and encompass the whole of metaphysics?”⁵⁷ To explain further, Heidegger makes a rough recollection of the history of metaphysics.

Ancient metaphysics views nothing as *ex nihilo nihil fit* (“from nothing comes nothing”), though Heidegger submits that the statement can have several meanings. It conceives nothing as non-being, i.e., unformed matter that cannot itself adhere into a formed being and thus can present as an *eidos* (*εἶδος*). Being is a “self-formative entity” (*das sich bildende Gebilde*), which displays itself as such in a “form” (*im Bilde*), meaning, one can see something. However, for Heidegger, the origin (*Ursprung*), law (*Recht*), the limits of this notion of being (*Seinsauffassung*) are sparsely discussed the way it discusses nothingness itself.⁵⁸

In Christian metaphysics, the truth of the statement *ex nihilo nihil fit* is denied and the meaning of nothingness is now understood in the sense of the “complete absence of beings apart from God” (*im Sinne der völligen Abwesenheit des außergöttlichen Seienden*).⁵⁹ Hence the Latin phrase: *ex nihilo fit – ens creatum*: “Out of nothing comes all created things.” Nothingness then has become the opposite concept (*der Gegenbegriff*) to real beings (*zum eigentlichen Seienden*), to *summum ens* (highest substance), to God as creator

⁵⁶ Heidegger, in *Wegmarken*, 119.

⁵⁷ “Inwiefern durchgreift und umspannt die Frage nach dem Nichts das Ganze der Metaphysik?” (Ibid., translation mine).

⁵⁸ Ibid. I am here translating the German text liberally.

⁵⁹ Ibid.; in *Pathmarks*, 94.

(*ens increatum*).⁶⁰ Also here the interpretation of nothingness indicates the basic notion of beings (*Auch hier zeigt die Auslegung des Nichts die Grundauffassung des Seienden an.*). The metaphysical consideration of beings (*die metaphysische Erörterung des Seienden*) follows the same level as the question of nothingness. In Heidegger's assessment, the questions of being and nothingness both remain uncompleted (or left unasked) in ancient and Christian metaphysics. If God creates out of nothing, then he must be able to relate to nothing. However, for God to be Absolute, he must exclude all nothingness, which for Heidegger, the Christian Dogmatics are no longer bothered of this difficulty.⁶¹ Here, Heidegger points out that nothingness has been conceived as the opposite of real beings – a negation. But if we make nothingness somehow a problem, then this opposite relationship (*dieses Gegenverhältnis*) between being and nothingness yields not only a clearer determination (*eine deutlichere Bestimmung*) but also it awakens the authentic metaphysical inquiry into the being of things.⁶²

But is Heidegger correct? This lecture, "What is Metaphysics?" has provoked harsh oppositions from the Anglo-American philosophers.⁶³ We also know that the Austrian Rudolf Carnap has denounced Heidegger in his essay, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ The opposite of *ens increatum* is *ens creatum* (created thing or substance).

⁶¹ Heidegger, in *Wegmarken*, 119.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 120. For my interpretations of the original German text, I am also guided by Thomas Sheenan's interpretive translation of Heidegger's lecture "What is Metaphysics?" (<http://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/1929-WHAT-IS-METAPHYSICS-2013-NOV.pdf>).

⁶³ Polt, *Heidegger*, 122.

⁶⁴ For the details of this criticism see Rudolf Carnap, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," trans. Arthur Pap, in *Logical Positivism*, ed. Alfred Jules Ayer (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 60-81. Polt writes, "For Carnap and other logical positivists, philosophy should clarify the rules of coherent, meaningful discourse. Meaningful discourse is scientific; it expresses objective facts in unambiguous propositions. Philosophy, then, is a system of propositions about systems of propositions in general. In other words, philosophy is logic, theory of theory... When we use the tools of logic to clean the Augean stables of philosophy, babble such as *das Nichts selbst nichtet* will be the first to go." With this

However, it is not the intention of this paper to dwell on the above mentioned criticisms. We now proceed to Stein's notable criticism of Heidegger's understanding of nothingness, to which our last consideration may now turn.

Edith Stein's Critical Commentary

In her review of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), Stein admits that the book is more influential than any other in the last ten years of Contemporary Philosophy.⁶⁵ In her preface to *Finite and Eternal Being*, she writes a word on the relationship of this book to Heidegger's philosophy of existence and remembers their common interest in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl that led her to a personal encounter with Heidegger. Though the sudden change of her course in life has brought an interruption to this contact with Heidegger's thoughts⁶⁶

criticism of Carnap which was then popular in the Anglophone world, the philosophy of Heidegger was reputed to be "the worst sort of verbal trickery, a woolly-headed and dangerously confused concoction that did not deserve the name 'philosophy' at all, and certainly was not worth reading" (Polt, *Heidegger*, 122). Carnap (1891-1970) is a member of the Vienna Circle (*der Wiener Kreis*). For an introduction to this philosophical circle which was founded in Vienna in 1924 by Moritz Schlick (philosopher), Hans Hahn (mathematician), and Otto Neurath (social reformer), see Karl Sigmund, *Sie nannten sich Der Wiener Kreis* (Wiesbaden: Springer Spektrum, 2015).

⁶⁵ See Stein, MHE, 445; MHEP, 57.

⁶⁶ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, xxxi (*Enliches und ewiges Sein*, 6-7). A brief remark on Stein's encounter with Heidegger is here in order. Stein first met Heidegger during an evening with the large circle of Husserl. She was already in Freiburg at that time to have an oral examination of her dissertation. We know that Husserl was suddenly transferred from Göttingen to Freiburg to replace Heinrich Rickert as chair of the philosophical department. The surprise appointment was really good for Husserl, because it freed him from the embarrassing position (*aus den peinlichen Lage*) for many years in the philosophical faculty of Göttingen. Since Husserl was Stein's doctoral supervisor, she had to go also to Freiburg to defend her dissertation there. Heidegger, on the other hand, was yet to be habilitated during this time, and Husserl took him over from his predecessor. During this evening with Husserl's circle, Stein was impressed with Heidegger. She liked him very well. While there was nothing philosophical in the discussion, Heidegger, as she observed, was silent and detached; but as soon as a philosophical question emerged, he was full of life (see Stein, ESGA 1: *Aus dem Leben*

In 1931, Stein wrote a thesis which would allow her to qualify as a lecturer at the University of Freiburg. This work, which is her attempt to interpret phenomenologically the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, is *Potency and Act* (*Potenz und Akt*).⁶⁷ This serves as a background of her claim that Heidegger's lecture, "What is Metaphysics" is not that intriguing (*verblüffend*).⁶⁸ The reason here is that the claim on nothingness was already taken up in the investigation of the understanding of being of the horizon, which makes being accessible to 'Dasein'.⁶⁹ However, for Stein, the new arguments of Heidegger in this lecture

einer jüdischen Familie und weiter autobiographische Beiträge [Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder GmbH, 2010], 317, 339). Shortly after the publication of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, she reads it and acknowledges that she was deeply impressed by it, but without having evaluated it objectively due to time considerations. Stein confesses that even though her encounter with this work of Heidegger can date many years back, "certain reminiscences" are to be found in her present study.

⁶⁷ Stein, *Potency and Act: Studies Toward a Philosophy of Being*, trans. Walter Redmond (Washington D.C., ICS Publications, 2009), 3-4; German original: *Potenz und Akt: Studien zu einer Philosophie des Seins* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005), 5. In the foreword of this work, Stein mentions Heidegger: The way the author poses questions in this work and some of her attempts to solve them may suggest that it is a critical response to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In fact, the personal circumstances of her life in recent years have yet to allow her such an – explicit – concern. She did, however, work through *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) soon after it was published 1927, and the strong impression the book made on her may linger in the present work.

⁶⁸ Mette Lebeck has translated this German word into English as "surprising". I rather prefer the word "intriguing" or perhaps "perplexing" or "stunning", though "surprising" is also valid (See MHEP, 90; MHP, 495). The lecture indeed made a stunning impact on the audience. As Heinrich Petzet puts it, "When I left the auditorium, I was speechless. For a brief moment I felt as if I had a glimpse into the ground and foundation of the world. In my inner being something was touched that had been asleep for a long time. Heidegger awakened it with his question, 'Why are there beings instead of nothing?'" (Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929-1976*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly, intro. Parvis Emad [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993], 12-13). "It was as if a tremendous streak of lightning split apart the dark sky that had hung over the allegory of the cave," as Petzet further observes (*Ibid.*, 12). But for Stein, it was not really astonishing or intriguing.

⁶⁹ "..., weil ja dort bereits in der Untersuchung des Seinsverständnisses der ‚Horizont‘, der dem ‚Dasein‘ das Seiende zugänglich macht, als ‚Nichts‘ in Anspruch genommen wurde" (MHE, 495).

is worth pursuing since the meaning of nothingness still remains quite obscure.⁷⁰

Heidegger's lecture is obviously addressed to people who have no training in the subject. It is rather intended to inspire than to teach. Hence, it lacks the "rigor of a scientific treatise," Stein concludes.⁷¹ It is only like a flash of floodlight (*Schlaglichter*) striking here and there, leaving the listener with no serene clarity (*keine ruhige Klarheit*). One can get nothing concrete from it. The lecture sounds mythological, that is, it almost speaks of nothingness as if it is a person "whose long suppressed rights must be vindicated." It reminds us of "nothing that once upon a time was everything."⁷² Stein claims that the lecture consists of "obscure phrases" and that to dwell on them is a fruitless endeavor.

In order to reach clarity on this subject, Stein brings us to an interpretation of the sentence *ex nihilo nihil fit*. If nothingness is unformed matter, then it follows that Heidegger's statement that everything formed was formed out of unformed matter makes no sense. The distinction is not simply between being and nonbeing, which is in some sense, for Stein, "is", that is, a possible being. It is from this material out of which all is formed. From which

⁷⁰ „Da indessen der Sinn des Nichts noch recht dunkel blieb, lohnt es sich, den neuen Gedankengängen, die ihm gewidmet sind, nachzugehen“ (Ibid; MHEP, 90). I am simply paraphrasing the original text. Just allow me to paraphrase into English whenever we are directly using the original German texts. I will just provide the original text in the footnote for verification. For English readers a documentation of Mette Lebeck's translation is also given.

⁷¹ Stein, "Martin Heidegger's Existential Philosophy," 92 (Again, henceforth cited as MHEP and for the original German text we cite it as MHE). Polt also claims that this lecture is only meant to challenge the audience to philosophize but not to offer a clear doctrine. Its powerful exploration of anxiety and its relation to nothingness is obviously following the arguments of *Being and Time*. The lecture's aim is to open new questions and to provoke new ideas (Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 121).

⁷² I am following here the translation found in Stein's endnote 36 of the second chapter of *Finite and Eternal Being*, 557. I find it better than Lebeck's translation because it really sounds mythological, although that of Lebeck is more faithful to the original ("One is brought to remember ‚Nothingness, the nothingness that at first was everything‘" <Man wird erinnert an das ‚Nichts, das Nichts, das einstmals Alles war‘", see MHEP, p. 92; MHE, 498).

nothing can come has no possible being also. It is in a word “absolutely nothing.”

How do we then understand the phrase: *ex nihilo fit ens creatum*? For Stein, *nihil* does mean the matter to be formed. For Heidegger what is intended by Dogmatics is that “nothingness” is the “absence of all extra-divine beings.” Stein leaves this question open whether what nothingness means is really brought out this way. In any case when we say that nothing can come from nothingness is understood this way as “from” some matter preexisting already. “Nothing,” Stein goes, “is ‘taken from’ it.” Creation, therefore, would mean that every creature, including its being, comes from the Creator. This means that in creating, no other being has conditioned the Creator, because there is in fact no other beings outside him. She further asks: “What about the difficulty that God must relate to nothingness in order to create from nothing?” She replies that we should concede that “God must know of nothingness in order to create something.” But such knowledge does not mean in an absolute sense, since all knowledge, including nothingness, is positive. “God knows nothingness,” Stein opines, “as the opposite of himself, i.e., as the opposite of being itself.” The idea of nothingness is presupposed for Creation, “as everything finite is ‘something and not everything’, a meaning whose being includes nonbeing.”

It is true, and Stein agrees with Heidegger, that Christian Dogmatics questions neither being nor nothingness, in so far that Dogmatics as such does not at all ask, but instead teaches. This attitude does not mean that it no longer concerned itself with being and nothingness. When speaking of being, they speak of God. In several connections, they speak of nothingness in relation to Creation and to being as a creature whose being includes a nonbeing. We can therefore conclude that “being and nothingness” belong together, but not in the sense that being is essentially finite, but because, in its most authentic and original sense, nothingness is the opposite of being, and because “all finite

being falls between this most authentic being and nothingness.” Stein concludes that as “we are ‘so finite... that we... cannot bring ourselves face to face with nothingness through our own decision and will’, the manifestation of nothing in our own being indicates that breakthrough from this our finite, non-existing being to infinite, pure, eternal being.” “And thus the question in which the being of the human being expresses itself changes from ‘*why is there being at all, and not rather nothing?*’, to the *question of the eternal foundation of finite being.*” There is for Stein a being sustaining our own being. It is our support and ground. “In my own being, then,” Stein continues, “I encounter another kind of being that is not mine but that is the support and ground of my own unsupported and groundless being.”⁷³

Thus the investigation of Stein moves from Heidegger’s question of nothing to the question of the eternal foundation of a finite being. Nevertheless, it is valid to say that Heidegger has laid down a solid ground for Stein’s future considerations.

Heidegger’s lecture on metaphysics is actually a specific discussion about metaphysics and of the particular question, “How is it with nothing?” So what is then Heidegger’s idea of nothing? We have seen that this discussion about the nothing is already a departure from what has been previously seen in Western metaphysics. Heidegger points out that nothingness has been conceived as the opposite of real beings. But if we make nothingness somehow a problem, then this opposite relationship between being and nothingness yields not only a clearer determination but also it awakens the authentic metaphysical inquiry into the being of things. The nothing then is the complete negation of the totality of beings. With nothing, beings as a whole would manifest. This manifestation is the fundamental occurrence of our Dasein. In my understanding, and in the context of Heidegger’s philosophy, the nothing is

⁷³ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 58.

revealed in anxiety, which leaves one suspended because beings as a whole slip away. Why are there beings rather than nothing?

The nothing has a role to play in Being. In our inquiry then concerning the nothing we come face to face with metaphysics itself. Paradoxically, the question of nothingness is a metaphysical one. Precisely why this investigation of Heidegger has only laid down a solid foundation for Stein. In her criticism, Stein concludes that being finite we cannot bring ourselves face to face with nothingness through our own decision and will. The manifestation of the nothing in our own being only points out to a being beyond our finite and non-existing being, that is, it points out to the infinite, pure, and eternal being. In a paper delivered during a conference on Edith Stein in Austria, Jordan T. Varberg has this to say: “Therefore, found within Heidegger’s own analysis is this connection to fullness, to the eternal; nevertheless, it was not he, but rather Stein, who would draw out the implications.”⁷⁴

In fairness to Heidegger, his analysis never stopped with the question of the nothing, instead he brought it to the question of ground in a 1929 treatise but written in 1928 called, “On the Essence of Ground.”⁷⁵ But still we suggest that we can possibly go beyond Heidegger’s investigation of the question of the nothing to the question of the eternal foundation of finite being. Stein’s commentary, therefore, has to fill the gap left by Heidegger’s philosophy; it is no longer Dasein’s orientation to nothing but to fullness.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Jordan T. Varberg, “Stein’s Critique of Heidegger. On Dasein’s Orientation to Fullness,” in *Edith Steins Herausforderung heutiger Anthropologie*, 254.

⁷⁵ Heidegger, “On the Essence of Ground,” in *Pathmarks*, 97-135 (“Vom Wesen des Grundes,” in *Wegmarken*, 123-175).

⁷⁶ See further Varberg’s article.

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