

Nothingness in Philosophical and Theological Optics

Virgil Guralivu

*PhD (c), University of Bucharest, Romania,
The Roman - Catholic Faculty of Theology, Theology and Religious Studies
vili_guralivu@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT: The problem of nothingness is not a new one, but one can say that it is as old in philosophy and theology as the existential problem. With the existential questioning as an opposite twinning, the idea of nothingness was born, although it did not enjoy the same attention as the first one, nor did it enjoy the same development of ideas. In the following, the idea of nothingness from a philosophical perspective will be approached very briefly, then a combined one, after which it will be a theological approach from a "separate" perspective.

KEYWORDS: nothingness, infinite, created, uncreated, ineffable, nothing worthwhile

Philosophical perspective

The first problem that arises in the subject in the question is the very definition of nothingness. This raised serious problems for both philosophy and religious thinking. If one succeeds in defining nothingness, to some extent one succeeds in substantiating it and implicitly in "materializing" it, which would make it easy to study. Or, this is precisely one of the most difficult problems of nothingness. It is no coincidence that nothingness enters the philosophical discourse, usually in multiple and diverse ways. We are dealing with nothing as undetermined (in Anaximander), with nothing thought as a counterpoint to being (in Plato's Sophist), as absolute, as transcendent, as foreign, and these are just some of its images. Potentially, however, nothingness can take infinite forms because it is, in turn, infinitely undetermined (Kirk, Raven 1971, 117). For this reason, nothingness, as an intentional object of philosophical interrogation, is outlined in the first phase negatively, as something completely indeterminate - this is also the first "historical" image taken from nothing in the early epoch of Greek philosophy when philosophy was looking for its way. The Greek word *Apeiron*, used by Anaximander in its fragment, indicates exactly this "undetermined something" from which any possible determination, delimitation or order is born (Rotaru 2005, 79-80).

We owe the premise of bringing nothing to the limits of ontology to Parmenides, the philosopher who offered in the poem *On Nature* "The oldest testimony of philosophy that with the path of being one must *meditate on the path of nothingness*, for turning one's back on nothing and stating that obviously nothing exists, is a disregard for the question of being" (Heidegger 1985, 119).

Nothingness was avoided in Greek thinking, obstinately interested in what presence represents through the verb "to be". The Platonic tradition, in which the idea (*idea*) also refers etymologically to the "form" (*eidos*), to the "aspect", to the reality that is first of all visible, palpable, audible and only then intelligible. Plato shaped his world by his thinking, refusing its limitlessness and indeterminacy, by marginalizing nothing, when in fact, it was their very shadow (Aristotle, *apud* Stobaios, 18).

For the use of Moraru (2021), "nothingness is a stable phenomenon, and does not present itself to our consciousness as independent, but it is defined precisely by its instability, by its perpetual mobility, by its capacity to work relentlessly in its otherness. In other words, nothing is constituted as "in itself", but is, by its indeterminacy, even the "without- the- self", which requires a different type of targeting than other existences precisely because it is not, properly- said, an existence."

Damascius (2006, 69), one of the most careful thinkers of nothingness, speaks of an "unspoken consciousness" of nothingness, a form of indiscriminate acknowledgement through the feeling in which this phenomenon is taken over by philosophical consciousness. Thus, it is observed that the specific intentionality of targeting this phenomenon in its image, of nothingness as nothing, is impossible to grasp in concept and goes beyond the possibilities of traditional philosophy. In this sense, one can speak of a "feeling of nothingness". In such a situation, the definition must remain ineffective for it to not falsify anything.

As "something indeterminate", it is caught in only one category, only in the category of substance or, if we were to consider Aristotelian terminology, in the category of *ousia*. Such a categorical attachment to substantiality is the necessary condition for our phenomenon to be addressed by interrogation, and at the same time, we are dealing with the first meaning of nothingness - that of completely indeterminate *ousia*. Under this hypostasis, it has not yet become existing, but it is not non-existent either (Vladuțescu 2001, 510). Nothingness once entered into categorically by way of substance, continues to be defined, to be delimited in the sense of the Greek aphorisms. Conceived in this way, the definition is nothing but the "horizontalization" of nothing, the delimitation of a horizon of its determinations that corresponds to its "substantial" indeterminacy. Because it has to do with a determination that must keep the proximate gender of the indeterminate door, the form that the delimitation of nothingness takes in a categorical context is the apophatic one (Vladuțescu 2001, 173).

One of the things related to syntax is highlighted in the verb "to be" and cannot have the same meaning when it refers to existences, categories and nothingness. In addition to the two functions of this verb - the copulative and the existential - a third function must be highlighted, namely the metaphorical one. A parallel could be drawn between how the word metaphor is used and how Blaga (2011, 358) defines man as a "metaphorical animal" in terms of his relation to mystery. Here language can be metaphorical only as long as it tries to express the nothingness; man is metaphorical only in so far as he tries to infiltrate with the thought of mystery which is nothing but a hypostasis of nothingness.

A philosophical-religious perspective

No matter how much one tries to delimit the concept of nothingness approached by philosophy and religious beliefs, the approach would not have a great deal of success, since the man himself is a religious being and addressed the problem of its existence or lack in terms of his beliefs. This is one of the reasons why philosophical thinking has sometimes intertwined with religious thought. Therefore, we find opinions that include both aspects of interpretation and whose origin is influenced, as it appears from the works of several philosophers.

As a result, philosophical interrogation is a "second step" of research because it is preceded by an effective intuition of nothingness. It is an answer to an original effect that opens the possibility of the question and whose importance has been noticed since the beginning of philosophy by all great thinkers. The ancient Greeks such as Plato, Theaithetos, Aristotle, defined this effect as "amazement"; with Descartes, doubt enters the scene as an effect, which opens the horizon of philosophy (Decartes 2004, 265); in Heidegger (2003, 250), this role is played by anxiety and so on. In Thomas Aquinas (2009, 8), "natural reason must serve the faith, just as the natural inclination of the will is subject to love." If the works of these thinkers are carefully observed, one can always find the presence of nothing in strict connection with the original effect which gives rise to the philosophical interrogation. Therefore, it can be concluded that such an effect is determined, at least in part, by the cultural context. Otherwise, one could not know why amazement was essential for the ancients, while anguish is essential for contemporary philosophers and doubt for those below the sign of modernity. Therefore, the fundamental structure of human affectivity must be taken into account, starting from which all these affections are constituted as ways of opening

the horizon of affective interrogation. As can be seen, this affective openness is pre-logical and pre-categorical.

Although some consider Heidegger to remain one of the purest expressions of the Greek tradition of thought, it can be seen in his writings that *nothing* reminds the hermeneutic of an important Kabbalistic concept, called *ain sof* (the non-existent, the great nothing). Explained by *the Zohar* as a definition of unconscious transcendence, of pre-creation reality, the nothingness of Kabbalah is "something formless and like something." The Christian Kabbalah told him when *infinitus*, as a memory of Eriugena (*infinitus incomprehensibilisque abyssus*), when we were *gentem* (without a living being). (Eriugena, 18). Nothingness by Heidegger seems a bivalent concept, in which both the being of the Greeks and the non-being of Judaism are mirrored as two facets of the same mystery. Hence the conclusion of the whole Heideggerian phenomenology: "being and nothingness constitute a whole" (Heidegger 1999, 114).

The further humanity moved away from *khaos*, the more *ain sof* has mastered man's thinking with a questioning know to the Jewish tradition: which is "nothing from which God made all things" (*2 Maccabees 7:28*) (May 1978, 39).

Von Rosenroth synthesizes the cosmogony of Kabbalah, concluding that all other lights have gradually descended (*in graduales descensus Luminum ad prima illa Luce infinita que Aen-Sof dicitur*), forming the material and spiritual world, as two facets of the same mystery. We are talking about the same von Rosenroth whom Leibniz said with admiration that he was "perhaps the most learned man in all of Europe in terms of knowing the most hidden teachings of the Jew" (Knorr von Rosenroth 1677, 195). It was normal from the perspective of Jewish philosophers and connoisseurs of these philosophies regarding origins so that the spiritual aspect of creation out of nothing would be captured. Not only the material world is created from nothing, according to *the Bible*, but also the spiritual world. God is the creator of the material world, but He is also the creator of the spiritual world. Moreover, on an ontological basis can be rethought the other "sciences of the spirit" which, by their very object, are connected with nothing because the spirit is, after all, only a hypostasis of the ineffable entered the realm of consciousness.

The biblical perspective on nothing

In this segment, there is no analysis of absolute nothingness, as defined by some philosophers, but rather a new untapped vision of the proposed *value of nothingness*. The Bible brings into question, in addition to the pre-existing nothingness of matter and spirit, a value of nothingness that does not pose an ontological problem, but rather a value one. To support this view of nothingness, brief hermeneutics of a biblical text that the prophet Isaiah writes in his book is needed: "*Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not enough for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing*" (The Holy Bible, Isaiah 40:15-17).

"Nothing", which we find in Hebrew, has two forms: *nyia*,,,,,,.....and *nyia*. The word appears predominantly in the book of Isaiah, in places that are in the immediate vicinity of the analyzed text, and only once in Haggai 2,3 and Isaiah 40,23; 41,12-24 (Brown, Driver, Briggs 2003, 156).

In order to make understanding the idea that God wants to convey, the word "nothing" will have to be equated with its mathematical value, i.e zero. Nothing means nothing and is worth... nothing. As specified above, including in philosophical- mathematical analyzes, nothing can be balanced with anything other than 0.

If we consider the countless verses that speak of God and if we give a mathematical value to these statements, God is infinite in all His attributes and has infinite value. The translators of the GBV Bible, 2001, also do this of mathematical valorization, where in verse

17 of Isaiah 40 they make the following annotation: "Less than zero (nothing)." Translators of *The Vulgate Bible* translates verse 16 as follows: " *As before all nations are as if they were not, so are they before Him.* " In other words, all nations can be considered nothing, zero, or non-existent in the eyes of God. The translators of the Catholic Bible in Iasi reinforce this idea when, in the verse from the prophet Malachi, they add the following: " The text seems to allude to nothing that is a man (according Genesis. 3:19; Job 10:19) and therefore to the ease with which God can reduce man to nothing (according Genesis 18:27).

The prophet Isaiah in the first two verses uses four physical analogies, operating with known, comparable notions, precisely to facilitate the understanding of the relationship between God and man or all people in general.

The bucket that Isaiah writes about is translated as a pail, an object made of wood and used to remove drinking water from wells. What did a single drop of water in a pail mean? Nothing, absolutely nothing, because a drop of water put in a wooden pail, if it is dry, is absorbed and disappears or become useless. Dust and scales are the second series of comparisons to suggest the value of all people. For the scales of Isaiah's day, how efficient would it have been, how much could a speck of dust have influenced? Nothing! This is the value of humanity in general, in the eyes of God.

For God, creation or parts of creation, such as the islands known to man, weighed no more than a speck of dust, suggestive of the infinity of God in all possible respects: value, power, wisdom, knowledge, love, kindness and so on. In Psalm 104:1, it says " *Lord my God, You are boundless and very great!*" This is just one of the many verses that mention God's infinity.

All these are comparisons that do not exclude the existence of creation or creatures but only lead to a value comparison between God and man, or God and material creation, including the spiritual one. Only in the third verse do we work with abstract notions, giving up analogies in the material world. It could be concluded that verse 17 is the sum of the previous verses.

The argument that these comparisons are used to highlight the value, and not the very existence of people, lies in the two verbs used, namely "value", not overriding the one used previously, "I am " verse that highlights the existence. The problem of *worthlessness* from a biblical perspective is different from that of nothingness from a philosophical one, especially if one considers absolute nothingness.

Mathematically, if a fraction has the infinite denominator and the numerator close to zero, it tends closer to zero and is neglected, as if it did not exist in that equation. Even if the fraction has the infinite denominator and the numerator is ten billion- approximately how many people have always existed- the numerator will still tend to zero. If we add to the number of ten billion angels, whose number is not known, the counter also tends to zero. It is well known that angels are a little higher than humans. The only one that is infinite in all is just God; all that is created cannot be compared to the Creator, and any evaluation is unreasonable. If it were physically equivalent - although God is an infinite spirit, totally immaterial and incomprehensible- all of humanity would be like a speck of dust placed next to the whole enormous universe. Man- made of nothing can claim, before his Creator, to be nothing but nothing.

If this plea were put in a mathematical equation, it would help to understand more clearly the idea of *nothing of value*. The Bible makes several kinds of comparisons: between good people and bad people; between the material world and the human soul that bears the image of God; between angels and humans and others. Each time the value ratio between these parts will be small or slightly higher. However, every time God is included in the equation, every time all people, any creature, are considered nothing. This idea is not supported by anyone, but by God's greatest people of all time. The first to support it is the great prophet, Moses. When the people rebel against him and Aaron, he declares, " *Who are*

*we, that you should complain against us? The Lord has heard your complaint against Him, for we are nothing: your complaint is not against us, but against the Lord" (Exodus 16: 7b-8b). The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: "So neither he who plants nor waters is anything but God who makes it grow." (1 Corinthians 3:7). The Corinthians created parties within the church, making comparisons between themselves as a group, but also between the spiritual leaders they "chose". The apostle's message is that the work, as a background, is not of one of the apostles, but God. Because God appears in this context, in which the believers in Corinth, the apostle's Paul, Apollo and Peter, are put together, he declares himself and the other apostles as nothing. The same idea is supported by the apostle, when again after a while he has to defend his cause before the same church in Corinth. This time the context and the equation remind us of Christ (conform 2 Corinthians 12: 9-11). And here he writes, "At least I am nothing." The same rule applies, because Christ is the infinite God. Then all the apostle Paul reiterates in the *Epistle to the Galatians*, to those who thought themselves valuable that they were but "nothing" (Galatians 6:3). This time, the apostle Paul, compared to any theologian of the time, cannot be suspected of ignorance and superficial words.*

Conclusion

If philosophical systems of all times have approached the issue of nothingness, trying to define it, religious systems have not ruled out approaching this subject either. The current article (discourse) has tried to highlight another type of nothingness, namely the value of nothing, which the authors of the Bible have emphasized throughout it. This idea has its support even in mathematical reasoning, but it has profound theological consequences: the fact that an infinite God, of absolute satiety, chooses to intervene in the salvation of humanity, demonstrates how infinite is His love for man whose value is zero.

References

- ***, *The Holy Bible*. 1984. NIV. New York: International Bible Society.
- ***, *Bible*. 2001. GBV. Dillenburg, Bucharest.
- ***, *Vulgata Bible*. 2005. Isaiah's prophecy, Blaj, 1760-1761, Bucharest: Romanian Academy Publishing House.
- ***, *Bible NTR*. 2007. International Bible Society.
- ***, *Catholic Bible*. 2013. *Mal.* 3:21, Iași.
- Aristotel, *apud Stobaios, Eclogae physicae*, I.
- Brown F., S Driver, C. Briggs. 2003. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing Inc.
- Blaga. L. 2011. *Triology of culture*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Damascius. 2006. *About the first principles: aporias and solutions*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Descartes, R. 2004. *Rules of mind guidance. Meditations on the first philosophy*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Heidegger M. 1999. *Introducere în metafizică (Introduction to metaphysics)*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Heidegger, M. 2003. *Being and time*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
- Heidegger, M. 2006. *Was ist Metaphysik?* Leipzig: Ed. Klostermann.
- Kirk, G.S. and J.E. Raven.1971. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, Gerhard. 1978. *Schöpfung aus dem Nichts*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Rosenroth, von Knorr. 1677. *Kabbala denudata seu Doctrina Hebraeorum transcendentalis et metaphysica atque theologica...*, tom. I, 2. Sulzbaci: Typis A. Lichtenthalerj.
- Toma din Aquino. 2009. *Summa Theologica. I*. Iași: Polirom.
- Moraru, C-F. 2021. *Aesthetic Categories and Experience Nonjudicative*. Available online at http://www.institutuldefilosofie.ro/e107_files/downloads/Studii%20de%20teoria%20categoriilor/vol.%209/Cornel-Florin%20MORARU,%20Categoriile%20estetice%20si%20experienta%20nonjudicativa.pdf.
- Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe. 2005. *Istoria filosofiei, de la începuturi până la Renaștere [The history of philosophy from the beginning until the Renaissance]*. Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press.
- Vladuțescu, G. 2001. *An encyclopedia of Greek philosophy*. Bucharest: Paideia.