

## “Nothing” in Function: Heidegger’s Ontological Difference

### Hiçliğin İşlevi: Heidegger’de Ontolojik Fark

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the role and function of Nothing in Heidegger’s understanding of philosophy as metaphysics, contending that Heidegger’s treatment of Being and Nothing are equiprimordial with respect to the ontological difference. That is, the ontological difference concerns not only the difference between beings and Being but also the difference between beings and Nothing. I base my examination on two main moments. First, Nothing is interrogated with respect to the transcendence it enables; featuring the field beyond beings. There, the basic relation between metaphysics, Nothing and Being are explored chiefly by means of Heidegger’s revival of the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” (why-question). Following from the first one, the second part tackles anxiety to its center as the very phenomenon through which Nothing itself comes to the fore. The paper in its culmination argues that the why-question and the Nothing it reminds Dasein of, functions as an existential trigger, and an ontological threshold, respectively for revealing Dasein’s potentiality-for-authenticity and the inherent-transcendence that occupies the open field which signifies the ontological difference.

**Keywords:** Being, Nothing, Metaphysics, Ontological Difference, Anxiety

**ÖZ**

Bu makale, Heidegger’in felsefeyi metafizik olarak kavradığı bir bağlam içinde, Varlık ve Hiçlik anlayışlarının ontolojik fark açısından eş-düzeyde-temel olduğunu ileri sürer. Yani, ontolojik fark yalnızca varolanlar ve Varlık arasındaki farkı değil; varolanlar ile Hiçlik arasındaki farkı da aynı düzeyde imler. Buradaki araştırma temel iki düzlem üzerine kurulmuştur. Öncelikle, Hiçlik, mümkün kıldığı aşkınsallık, yani varolanların ötesine açılabilmeğe üzerinden dikkate alınır. Bu noktada metafizik, Varlık ve Hiçlik arasındaki ilişki Heidegger’in gündeme getirdiği temel soru üzerinden incelenir: “neden Hiçlik yerine varlıklar var?” (neden-sorusu). Bunu takip eden ikinci bölüm, kaygıyı, Hiçliğin kendisini ön plana çıkaran fenomen olarak ele alır. Böylece makalenin temel iddiası, neden-sorusu ve Dasein’a hatırlattığı Hiçliğin, hem Dasein’ın otantiklik-imkanını açan varoluşsal bir tetikleyici hem de ontolojik bir eşik işlevi gördüğü üzerine şekillenir. Bu ontolojik eşik ise, Dasein’ın aşkınsallığını açığa çıkartır; zira ontolojik fark ile vurgulanan açık alan, bu aşkınsallığın ika-met yeridir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Varlık, Hiçlik, Metafizik, Ontolojik Fark, Kaygı

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In his 1964 Lecture *The End of Philosophy and The Task of Thinking*, Heidegger states that philosophy is metaphysics that apprehends beings as whole with respect to Being (1977, s. 374). Here there is a genuine connection – almost an identification – between philosophy and metaphysics. Earlier in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* he states that “the question is, the *Problem of Metaphysics*, and that means – the *Question of Being*” (1997, s. 175). But what is metaphysics, indeed? Heidegger opens this question up at the very beginning of his inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg. As he initially clarifies there, his basic gesture consists of tackling a particular metaphysical problem – “Nothingness” – in order to “be transposed directly into metaphysics” while furnishing metaphysics with the proper opportunity to open itself. (1993a, s. 93).

The ontological difference, simply put, is the difference between beings and the being of beings. In other words, it is the difference between “on one side, all that exists, on the other, the very existence of what exists”. (Nicholson, 1996, s. 357). “What an entity is, (and *that* it is an entity at all) depends on meaning-conditions that make entities as such intelligible” (Käufer, 2005, s. 483). In Heidegger’s words, this intelligibility marks “the basis on which entities are already understood” (2001a, s. 25). Now, for Heidegger, “The Being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity” (2001a, s. 26) yet “Being is always the Being of an entity” (2001a, s. 29) and that *one* entity, which we ourselves are, has ontico-ontological priority over all other entities for only for it (Dasein) that very Being is an issue. The prevalent relation of Dasein to Being is not thematic nor is it a matter of cognition in the first place. Rather, absorbed in its everyday dealings, it tacitly understands something like Being through and by means of the

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this study was presented in the “Participants’ Conference” of “Summer Symposium in Contemporary Philosophy: Philosophy of Events” organized by The University of Bonn International Centre for Philosophy NRW in Bonn, Germany, on June 30 – July 1, 2018.

relation of involvement it has with these dealings. The world of involvements where Dasein finds itself is already meaningfully attached. In other words, Dasein always comports entities *as* entities that partake in the relational totality. In this regard, Heidegger contends, the question of Being is to be interrogated through making Dasein transparent in its Being (2001a, s. 27). Likewise, he asserts that “*fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can take their rise, must be sought in the *existential analytic* of Dasein” (2001a, s. 34). In this regard, Oren Magid proposes that, in *Being and Time* Heidegger starts with a distinctly ontological matter regarding the question of Being, yet with the analytic of Dasein, Heidegger is also already in “*existential territory*” (2016, s. 440) in the traditional sense of existentialist philosophy. Schufreider also advances that, given that *Being and Time*’s aim is to “reawaken the question of being, its strategy is to revitalize our sense of being existentially” (2013, s. 311). Thus, understood broadly, Heidegger’s ontological and existential projects belong together in *Being and Time*.

As indicated in the beginning of the paper, Heidegger pursues the question of Nothing [*das Nichts*] with regard to the question of “what is metaphysics?” Why is the question about metaphysics bound up with the question about Nothing? To begin with, for Heidegger, Nothing is not a simple ‘not’ of beings. Rather, he asserts that Nothing is more original than the ‘not’ and negation (1993a, s. 97). Science, Heidegger argues, relates to beings in a certain way, “and only to them” where it altogether declines Nothing since it is a non-entity (1993a, s. 109) and “that which is absolutely no entity (i.e. being) can only present itself as the nothing” (1976, as cited in Käufer, 2005, s. 488).

In this regard, Richard Polt contends that Heidegger’s usage of “nothing” is tactical rather than strategical that carries out various functions within his philosophical stance in diverse contexts. (2001b, s. 67-68). The term ‘metaphysics’ derives from the Greek *meta ta physika* and gets interpreted throughout the history of philosophy as “going beyond”

or “extending” physics, i.e., nature as such. Beyond-physics means beyond-beings at the same time. So, in the realm of metaphysics, the ontological difference is already presupposed, yet Heidegger condemns traditional metaphysics because it predominantly bypasses the ontological difference. However, for Heidegger, the basic gesture of going-beyond is only possible when Dasein “holds itself out into the nothing”, i.e., transcends itself (1993a, s.103). Through and by means of this holding, an encounter with beings first becomes possible.

The question about Nothing that Heidegger handles in *What is Metaphysics* is regenerated later in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Heidegger, in this book, starts with asking the genuine question: “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing” (2014, s.1) and this brings him to what he calls a prior question: “How does it stand with Being?” (2014, s. 36). But before moving to this prior question, the opening question that he indicates as the “why-question” should be brought to the fore more accurately. For Heidegger, this why-question is the broadest, the deepest and the most originary question whose domain is limited by Nothing. It is the broadest since it comprises all that is, and even Nothing itself is included since it is Nothing. The question is the deepest for it seeks the ground for the interrogation of what is, in relation to why it is the way it is. Finally, it is the most originary for it regards “beings as such and as a whole” regardless of any particulars (Heidegger, 2014, s. 2-4).

For Heidegger, what is asked in the why question “rebounds upon the questioning itself, for the questioning stands against beings as a whole, but does not after all wrest itself free from them” (2014, s. 5). This point, I assume, is one of the hints that enables to render Nothing as the counterpart of Being in the ontological difference: Nothing stands against beings yet is bounded to them in a certain way.

Heidegger is precise in his utterance that beings themselves may remain indifferent in the face of why-question: whether or not it is posed

does not make any difference in the realm of beings. However, *if* the question is asked and pursued genuinely, it opens itself as a realm which he calls “happening” [*Geschehnis*] (Heidegger, 2014, 6). By means of and through this happening, Dasein is both the interrogator while taking part in what is being interrogated which amounts to making itself transparent in its very Being. This happening is at the same time what Heidegger calls an “originary leap [*Ur-sprung*]” that “attains itself as ground by leaping an originary leap” (2014, s. 7). Only by means of this originary leap is Being disclosed and only by means of it does Dasein partake in the happening of this disclosure. Here, Heidegger’s treatment of Being and Nothing on the same ground begins to show itself, albeit implicitly. However, most of the remarks that Heidegger makes concerning the prior question - how does Nothing stand with Being - are much more explicit. In this sense, Heidegger points out that from its inception onwards, the question about Nothing has been “side by side” with the question about Being (2014, s. 27) and he also stresses that *Nothing* belongs to Being (2014, s. 93). Furthermore, as Käufer forwards, because asking the question of nothing is a leap from beings to the Being of these beings it marks a leap from science to metaphysics (2005, s. 488).

Then, what is that *Being* that is disclosed in the *happening*? At this point, Heidegger calls forth the Greek notion *phusis*.<sup>2</sup> He initially contends that contrary to the prominent view which is based on the Latinized translation - and thereby understanding - of the Greek experience, *phusis* does not signify nature; what is natural, for the Greeks (2014, s. 15). Rather, it is a notion that should be understood again in the sense of happening: it is *phusis* that discloses itself once and through all the *happenings* as follows: “what emerges from itself”, “the unfolding that opens itself up”, “the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding”, and “holding itself and persisting in appearance” (2014, s.14-15). Thus, what confront

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<sup>2</sup> This specific term is either used as “phusis” or “physis” in the relevant literature. I adhere to Heidegger’s usage as “phusis.”

us here is not anything *present* but one which resists every kind of such definition that would *objectify* it. However, this originary dimension of Greek understanding was obscured by later metaphysical understandings of Being whose main grasp and focus was not on Being but beings (Schoenbohm, 2001b, s.145). *Phusis*, then, “is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time” (Heidegger, 2014, s.16). As an event, “*phusis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable” (Heidegger, 2014, s.16). Moreover, for Heidegger, what we *hear* through the infinitive “to be” today does not carry the connotations it once carried in Greek world. According to the Greeks, Being has three aspects which belong together, and that are: living, emerging and abiding. From all these original vivid words, what remains is “to be” as an abstraction (2014, s. 77-79).

Heidegger also examines the four *distinctions* that have been prevalent not only throughout the history of Western philosophy, but also spread around all knowing and doing, albeit not always explicitly. These distinctions are made between “Being and Becoming”, “Being and Seeming”, “Being and Thinking” and “Being and Ought” (Heidegger, 2014, s. 103-104). Through analyzing these notions to the inception, what Heidegger comes up with will be the very belonging of becoming, seeming, thinking and ought to Being itself.

First, Heidegger refers to Parmenides who put forward Being in contrast to becoming. Likewise, he then refers to Heraclitus who is supposed to be known with his saying that “all is flux”. After that, Heidegger states that Heraclitus indeed says the same thing as Parmenides yet we think of these two great thinkers in great opposition since we think of becoming according to the conceptions “of a nineteenth-century Darwinist” (2014, s. 107). However, thinking back to the understanding of Being as *phusis*, Heidegger maintains, will retrieve the belonging of becoming to Being.

The second distinction Heidegger discusses is on Being and seeming. Here again, what Heidegger brings to the fore is the original belonging-togetherness of Being and seeming. Then he clarifies that only on the basis of this original belonging together do Being and seeming are “disjoined”. Going back to the Greek word *phainesthai* (“lighting-up, self-showing, appearing”), Heidegger parallelizes this notion and *phusis* which is emerging as well as appearing in light: “The roots *phu-* and *pha-* name the same thing. *Phuein*, the emerging that reposes in itself, is *phainesthai*, lighting-up, self-showing, appearing” (2014, s. 110). At this point one must pay heed to what kind of seeming is at matter here and not confuse it “mere appearance.” For Heidegger, *mere* appearance is only a derivative from the original understanding of seeming that manifests itself, i.e. shows itself from itself. Hence, the original signification of the notion lies not in the derivative meaning but in seeming as manifestation (without assuming something else that lies *behind*). Thus, in the original sense, seeming do belong to Being for “Being essentially unfolds *as* appearing” (2014, s. 110-111).

The third distinction is concerned with Being and thinking which Heidegger discusses in detail for this distinction is at the same time one which has become the most prominent one. To begin with, thinking, he asserts, does not originally nor exclusively signify a function of the intellect as its Latin translation *intelligere* suggests (Heidegger, 2014, s. 134). For the originary understanding, Heidegger refers to the Greek understanding of logic for he states that there is indeed an inceptional relation between *phusis*, logic and Being, yet for apprehending this we have to rid ourselves from the opinion that logic belongs to reason (2014, 136). At this point, Heidegger clarifies that the Greek root *legein* for logos originally means *gathering* (2014, s. 138). In this sense, referring to Heraclitus’ usage of logos in his fragments, Heidegger argues that logic originally means the “gathering gatheredness that constantly holds sway in itself” (2014, s. 141). In what follows, Heidegger states that *phusis* and logos



are the same since they are the gatheredness of beings (2014, s. 145). So what we already have here is the identity – in the Heideggerian sense of the term – of Being as *phusis* and Being as *logos*.

Concerning the unity and the disjunction of thinking and Being, Heidegger goes back to the Greek word *noein* for thinking that means to “take in”, “to let something come to oneself” (2014, s. 153). Considered this way, what is let open is Being itself: where Being is opened up, it is at the same time taken in. It should once again be reminded that apprehension has nothing to do with being a property of human Dasein; rather it is a “happening (*Geschehen*) in which humanity itself happens, and in which humanity itself thus first enters history (*Geschichte*) as a being, first appears, that is [in the literal sense] itself comes to Being” (2014, s. 157). Stressing the notion ‘happening’, Heidegger maintains that what speaks of under the conventional translation “thinking and Being are the same”, is the belonging-togetherness of apprehension (as letting-in) and Being (as *phusis*) (2014, s. 162).

The fourth dynamics of relation is between Being and ought. In this regard, Heidegger points out that the exact separation between Being and ought goes parallel with Being’s becoming *idea* and thinking’s becoming *assertion*. Peaking in Kant, this domination of thinking as “self-sufficient reason” blocks Dasein’s originary access to the reciprocal unity and disjunction of Being and the ought (Heidegger, 2014, s. 220).

Understood contemporarily, Being is in separation from becoming, thinking and the ought. However, understood originally, Being is both in unity and in disjunction with these notions reciprocally. In this sense, there is an original strife between these notions – in the Nietzschean sense of the word – through which these notions are brought out in the open.

Earlier in *Being and Time*, Heidegger remarks that Being is that through which beings are already understood as beings (2001a, s. 25-

26). Furthermore, he hints at the phenomenon of *truth* which must be ontologically clarified in order to account for a proper preparation for the question of Being (2001a, s. 228). The detailed execution of the latter, however, was ceded to *Introduction to Metaphysics*. So, focusing on the notions of unconcealment and concealment, what is novel in *Introduction to Metaphysics* seems to be the very proximity between Being as *phusis* and truth as *aletheia*. To *destroy* the modern conception of truth as correctness – correspondence between ‘thought’ on the one hand and outside ‘reality’ on the other – Heidegger goes back to the Greek understanding of *aletheia* as unconcealment, i.e., revealing. So, distinct from the contention of truth as correctness, what *aletheia* has to do is the manifestation and coming to the light of beings from out of themselves. Indeed, this manifestation is the ground of assertion that the modern conception of correction is based on: “before an assertion can be made about an entity, the entity itself must be manifest, out in the open” (Caputo, 1988, s. 522). Accordingly, in Heidegger’s words, “Truth, as un-concealment, is not an addendum to Being. Truth belongs to the essence of Being” (2014, s. 122). Thus Being originally discloses as *phusis* which makes manifest; and since this manifestation is coming to unconcealment out of concealment, *phusis* and *aletheia* originally belong together. The disclosure of Being, however, takes place through the “original revelation of the nothing” (Heidegger, 1993a, s. 103). Heidegger puts this forward as follows:

For human existence the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counter-concept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs (Heidegger, 1993a, s. 104).

Given that for Heidegger Nothing is the very ground through which Being as *phusis* and truth as *aletheia* comes to the fore, one may ask, how is Nothing itself revealed then? This question brings us to the second part of the paper. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explicates anxiety [*Angst*]

as a state-of-mind in detail. Distinguishing it from ordinary fear in the face of something definite, Heidegger asserts that what anxiety is anxious about is Being-in-the-world as such (2001a, s. 232). Keeping this line of thought, later in *What is Metaphysics*, Heidegger puts it as follows: “Holding itself out into the nothing, Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call ‘transcendence’” (1993a, s. 103). At this point, Käufer proposes that “what Dasein transcends *to* is the world, the background for the comportment toward entities” (2005, 484). Yet, for Heidegger, the world is not a being either:

The world is nothing – if ‘nothing means: not an entity in the sense of the occurrent, and moreover: nothing in the sense of not-being-an-entity, nothing of what Dasein as such transcends [...] the world: a nothing, no entity, – and yet something; nothing that is – but being (1990, as cited in Käufer, 2005, s. 484).

So it is seen that Heidegger’s understanding of world, Nothing and anxiety are interwoven. “In that in the face of which one has anxiety, the ‘It is nothing and nowhere’ becomes manifest” (2001a, s. 231). However, this does not mean that the world is absent itself. Rather, while the beings within-the-world tends to possess no importance in anxiety, the worldness of the world becomes all the more manifest and even obtrude (Heidegger, 2001a, s.231). Furthermore, when anxiety dissolves, we immediately do feel that it was *nothing*: “the nothing itself – as such – was there”. (Heidegger, 1993a, s.101).

Posing the why-question and properly following it functions as a “happening”, as indicated above. Now, anxiety takes Dasein over, for it is always a not-yet. That is, Dasein is always towards its own possibility. This possibility is characterized by being either *inauthentic* or *authentic* possibilities in *Being and Time*. This relation also has to do with the analysis of death and incompleteness that Heidegger discusses through *Being and Time*. In this sense, Dasein is never complete but always a not-yet; from the moment of birth, it is towards-death. This *oscillation* makes the

basic characteristic of Dasein as always *in-between*. Heidegger puts this poetically as follows: “half in being, half not in being, which is also why we cannot belong to any thing, not even to ourselves” (2014, s.32).

From the moment of birth, Dasein is factually *thrown* into the world of *das Man* (the they). It does what *das Man* does, behaves in the way *das Man* behaves and so on: the norm is always already out there. However, there still lies the possibility of Being otherwise, i.e. Being authentic (2001a, s.168). Being-authentic for Heidegger has to do with owning up to its own basis, as the basis of a nullity. This owning up opens itself in the phenomenon that Heidegger calls “anticipatory resoluteness”. In this sense, when Dasein is resolute, it concedes the fact that it is the “null basis of its own nullity” (Heidegger, 2001a, s.354). And being anticipatory means owning up to one’s Being-towards-death as always being incomplete and not-yet.

In this sense, Heidegger states that what anxiety makes manifest is Dasein’s “potentiality-for-Being”, that is, “Being-free for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself” (2001a, s.232). Now this anxiety happens if and only if one is ready for the *call of conscience* which is an appeal for “summoning it to its ownmost Being-guilty” (Heidegger, 2001a, s.314). Here in the call of conscience, Dasein is both the caller and the called (Heidegger, 2001a, s.324) in the sense that the potentiality-for-Being calls its own lostness-in-das-Man to its very authentic possibility which at the same time has to do with Being-guilty and Being-towards-death. And yet, one can only *hear* the call when one is ready; that is, when wants-to-have-a-conscience (Heidegger, 2001a, s.314). That at the same time means that one is ready for anxiety. At this point, I assume that asking the why-question also amounts to that state of being-ready. So, the relationship between anxiety and Nothing must be understood reciprocal.

Now, by means of Being-not-yet, Being-towards-death and always

having a potentiality, Dasein is also tacitly aware that there could have been nothing instead of beings; to put the question from the other way around. In this regard, Heidegger says that “that which we have anxiety about is our potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world” (2001a, s.235). Thus, that Being-otherwise both in the senses of authenticity and of not existing at all come to the fore at those rare times of anxiety.

In a nutshell, I have so far attempted to elucidate on Heidegger’s understanding of Nothing with regard to Being and the ontological difference. This attitude is shaped from the beginning by considering Heidegger’s treatment of Nothing in relation to metaphysics. Although Heidegger’s repudiation of traditional metaphysics is widely acknowledged, one must not lose sight of his insights that allows him to place metaphysics within a certain era of the *unfolding of Being itself*. That is, the idiosyncrasies that traditional metaphysics possess are not due to some “errors” or “misconceptions” on its own behalf. Rather, the condition of metaphysics well coincides with and in a certain sense amounts to the historical condition of Being, and as well, Nothing. To elaborate, referring to Heidegger’s remarks on a Descartes quote may be proper: “Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree, whose roots are metaphysics, the trunk of which is physics, and the branches which extend out from that trunk are the rest of the sciences.” Just after giving place to Descartes’ analogy, Heidegger asks, “in what soil do the roots of the tree of philosophy find their support?” (1976). And eventually, the answer will be Being itself. The problem, Heidegger declares, about metaphysics is that though it “harbors” the truth of Being, it does not recognize its own soil (1976). Why this is so? Indeed, the withdrawal of metaphysics from Being is not any fault of itself. Rather, Heidegger clarifies, “the question [of Being] is inaccessible to metaphysics as such” and that “a treasure withheld from it yet held before it” (1976). Heidegger clearly declares that the question of Being is the comprehensive question of metaphysics. However, concerning that metaphysics cannot recognize its own soil –

Being – these quotes say much more than why this is so; they say that this *must be* so. To briefly put in a Heideggerian way, metaphysics is the destiny and a certain face of Being. However, it is also destined to remain indifferent to its very ground.

The present paper was opened up with Heidegger’s identification of philosophy and metaphysics in his 1964 Lecture *The End of Philosophy and The Task of Thinking*. At the very same lecture, what Heidegger also proclaims is that philosophy now has come to its final stage, and he asks what task is reserved then for thinking. Accordingly, Heidegger first explicates what is to be understood from this notion of ‘end’ and he says that one should understand *end* in the sense of place (1993b, s.433). So, philosophy – as metaphysics – has come to a certain place from a prior place. For Heidegger, while “the development of philosophy into independent sciences” signifies the completion of philosophy, it marks the triumph of sciences that see nature as manipulable (1993b, s.434-435). Elsewhere in *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger refers to this manipulability by means of the notion *standing-reserve*; that is, nature is no more allowed to show itself in the sense of *phusis* and anymore in the sense of even an object [*Gegen-stand*]; but as standing-reserve. Dasein is now called upon to a challenge which amounts to not only exploiting nature; but a state where every other possible access to nature is blocked in the sense of *Enframing* [*Ge-Stell*] (1977, s.23).

At this very point – in the end of metaphysics – Heidegger asks, what if the *dissolution* of metaphysics to distinct sciences prepares the path to another beginning? This task to a new beginning would be neither philosophical in the sense of metaphysics nor scientific (1993b, s. 436). Heidegger himself concedes that this task of thinking that is neither metaphysical nor scientific is startling from the beginning. At this point, however, he hints at the phenomenological motto “to the things themselves” as an antidote and wants the reader to hear the ‘themselves’ (1993b, s.438). This motto, for Heidegger, should become the horizon at the end

of philosophy, towards a new beginning.

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