

## Heidegger, Nothingness, and Presence: Between Parmenides and Laozi

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This contribution reconsiders standard accounts of Heidegger's concept of being as presence by tracing other moments revealed in his thinking of nothingness, emptiness, and the clearing in the context of his European and East Asian sources. Heidegger's interpretations of Parmenides, early Greek philosophy, and of being as presencing (*Anwesenheit*) appear to assert the primordially of "the one" and a hypostatized, monistic "metaphysics of presence." This paper sketches a pivotal alternative thread within Heidegger's thinking, most evident in his interactions with East Asian discourses, by outlining how a distinctive interpretation of nothingness, emptiness, absence, darkness, hiddenness, and mystery emerged in his readings of Laozi and Zhuangzi and in his dialogue with a Japanese interlocutor. Heidegger's East Asian sources informed a key thread and model of his thinking that refused to reduce constitutive absence, emptiness, and nothingness to givenness, positivity, and presence or the logic of affirmation.

**Keywords:** nothingness – presence – emptiness – clearing – being – Laozi – Parmenides

### I. Introduction

Why is there something rather than nothing? As Leibniz already sensed in repeatedly posing this question, and Heidegger made explicit in his analysis of Leibniz's question and response to it, this question gives nothingness a dignity and priority, as part of the constitution of things rather than a merely parasitical absence or derivative negation, which it normally lacked in paradigmatic

European philosophical and theological discourses.<sup>1</sup> Nothingness, and later the emptiness of openness (*das Offene*) and the clearing (*die Lichtung*), become structurally elemental to being and the constitution of things. This thread in Heidegger's thought appears to contradict the idea of being as presence (typically entangled with everyday ideas concerning the spatial here and the temporal now) that is taken to be prior to and the ontological condition of all varieties of absence, emptiness, negation, and nothingness.

This paper traces moments in Heidegger's thinking of nothingness, emptiness, and the clearing, in the context of his European and Asian sources, that indicates a complication and alternative to the idea of being as presence. Despite his critique of presence in *Being and Time*, and his subsequent departures from it explored in this paper, Heidegger's elucidations of early Greek Presocratic philosophy and of being as presencing (*Anwesenheit*) appear, in various standard interpretations, to assert the primordially of "the one" — akin to Parmenides or even Plotinus—or, more critically, a hypostatized, monistic, and unitary "metaphysics of presence." In deconstructions of the presence model, being downgrades beings into mere ontic phenomena and obscures constitutive varieties of difference, otherness, or non-identity (Derrida 1967). The presence model appears to separate Heidegger's thinking from the elemental generative, self-stirring nothingness (*wu* 無) of early Daoism, the Neo-Confucian empty pole (*wuji* 無極) that culminates in the relational order of things of the supreme ultimate (*taiji* 太極), or the Buddhist self-emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of things of any fixed self (*ātman*) or self-nature (*svabhāva*). Nevertheless, Heidegger has also been seen as a thinker of an original, non-derivative nothingness and as a significant interlocutor with Chinese and Japanese philosophy, especially Daoism and Zen Buddhism.

Heidegger's distinctive thinking of nothingness, emptiness, absence, darkness, hiddenness, and mystery emerged from his own philosophical situation and through his engagement with two Daoist texts, the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, and his 1954 dialogue with a Japanese interlocutor (GA 12). Heidegger's East Asian sources accordingly shaped a key thread and model of his thinking that signifies an alternative to reducing all negation to affirmation, and nothingness and absence to givenness, positivity, and presence. A primary thesis of this contribution is that Heidegger's encounters with East Asian thinking in conjunction with his radical reinterpretations of Presocratic

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<sup>1</sup> See Heidegger (GA 9, 381 – 383). On Heidegger and nothingness, see Nelson (2017, chapter 8), and Nelson (2023, part 2); on Leibniz's different senses of nothingness, see Nelson (2025).

philosophy, particularly Parmenides as well as Heraclitus, led him to contest the dogmatic, positivistic (in a broader sense than mere scientism) understanding of absence and presence, nothingness and being.

Heidegger traced in several pivotal lecture-courses how Parmenides had dismantled conceptualizing being through categories, contradictions, negations, and their opposites to encounter being as presence. Unlike Parmenides, he interpreted being verbally as temporalizing presencing. The temporalizing cannot be reduced to either timeless eternity or to the present as a divided, isolated now-point (GA 35, 163 – 169). Parmenides excluded the way of nonbeing and nothing, as self-contradictory, and rejected the way of opinion (*doxa*) that wavered between light and darkness, presence and absence, being and non-being. Departing from their existential and afflictive “negative” senses of the 1920s, Heidegger came to advocate a more primordial nothingness and emptiness that becomes pivotal to being itself as the clearing, the free, and the open as well as its darkness, hiddenness, mystery, reserve, and withdrawal. This shift is marked in his interpretations of the *Daodejing* beginning in 1930. The dyadic structures of being-and-nothingness and presence-and-absence are not then the wavering of belief between two contraries, rejected as the way of opinion by Parmenides, which thoughtlessly presupposes being, since they are elemental to being itself and its very structure.

This contribution sketches four moments in Heidegger’s journey from presence to openness as they unfold from his early to later thought: (1) the privative sense of “mere” or conditional nothingness and negation as conceptual objects derivative of being and affirmative assertion; (2) the existential sense of confronting the nothingness of death, suffering, transitoriness, meaninglessness, radical anxiety, and boredom<sup>2</sup>; (3) the ontological-constitutive (yet not fully meontological-generative) sense concerning whether nothingness is elemental to the constitution of human existence, beings and being itself;<sup>3</sup> and (4) the emancipatory sense of nothingness and emptiness as liberating and releasing in free openness.

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<sup>2</sup> Despite Heidegger’s rejection of the “philosophy of existence” and “existentialism,” there is a strong existential thread to anxiety, death, boredom, and nothingness in *Being and Time* and “What is Metaphysics?” The most paradigmatic account of existential nothingness is found in Sartre (1943).

<sup>3</sup> On Daoist meontological generative nothingness, see Chai (2019), and in relation to Heidegger’s clearing, see Chai (2014).

## II. Nothingness in the Young Heidegger (1912 – 1916) and *Being and Time* (1927)

Heidegger credited Franz Brentano's dissertation *On the Manifold Senses of Being in Aristotle* (Brentano 1862) for awakening him to the question of the meaning of being (GA 81, 81). If being is expressed in myriad distinct ways, what then is its fundamental sense? Likewise, it can be asked if nothingness is given in various ways, does it have a fundamental sense, or is it an inconsistent, wavering term?

In his earliest published discussion of non-being in 1912, Heidegger addressed Alexius Meinong's theory of intentional irreal objects (GA 1, 27 – 29).<sup>4</sup> According to this theory, nothingness has givenness as an intentional object, albeit not an actually existing one, with its own validity structure. Given the theory of intentionality in Brentano, Meinong, and Husserl, nothing is not a thing (*Ding*); yet it is a matter (*Sache*) to be thought and discussed. Heidegger's 1916 doctoral thesis analyzed Thomas of Erfurt's modist speculative grammar, a work wrongly attributed to Duns Scotus. In this study, nothingness is derivative as the privation and negation of being (GA 1, 227; 230; 349). Still, it "exists" in the modes of signification and understanding, although not in the mode of being. Expressions such as not and nothing are meaningful, and presuppose an irreal or conceptual presence, even though they cannot directly express existent being. Heidegger's familiarity with theories of non-existing, irreal conceptual and linguistic objects (such as nothingness) and operations (negation) established the setting yet did not explain his ensuing questioning of nothingness.

These theories were controversial. Drawing on the new formal logic, Bertrand Russell famously critiqued Meinong on non-being and non-existent objects (Russell 1905; Jacquette 2015) and Rudolf Carnap polemically dismissed Heidegger's nothingness as a reification of negation (Carnap 1931). Such critiques presupposed two assumptions: (1) formal logic requires ontological simplicity and therefore the dependence of non-being on being, as its negation; (2) negation is derivative to and a device for assertion in explanations of existing or positive entities.

Drawing primarily on Husserl's phenomenology, and elements of Brentano and Meinong, Heidegger recognized in the 1920s multiple modes of givenness beyond the "positivity" of factually existing things. Experiential givenness encompasses in *Being and Time* (1927), and related works, varieties of the not- and un- such as absence, lack, privation, as well as negative afflictive existential

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<sup>4</sup> On irreal objects and nothingness in Meinong, see Jacquette (2015).

states. In *Being and Time*, nothingness is disclosed in the radical objectless and self-concerned existential anxiety of being-towards-death (GA 2, 266, 308). In "What is Metaphysics?" (1929) and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929 – 1930), nothingness is revealed in anxiety, radical boredom, terror and horror, uncanniness, and worldlessness. In the nothingness disclosed in the negativity and affliction of existential limit-situations, all bearing and orientation are lost, all possibilities fall away, and one is confronted by the abyss (*Abgrund*) of nothingness without escape or appeal. This can be designated "existential negativity." Versions of this model are also articulated in existentialist philosophers from Kierkegaard to Sartre (1943), from which Heidegger distanced himself in the 1947 "Letter on Humanism."

Heidegger did not conclude with an experiential or psychological description of existential states in either 1927 or 1947. As a transcendental or ontological constitutive or structural precondition, nothingness makes both existential negativity and conceptual-logical negation possible. Philosophers as distinct as Bergson in his 1906 critique of nothingness or Carnap in his 1931 critique of Heidegger's nothing, reasoned that nothingness can only be the reification of negation, and negation is dependent on assertion and beings.<sup>5</sup> Heidegger rejected in his 1929 lecture the standard view (expressed earlier in Bergson (1906) and later in Carnap (1931) that negation (and thus also negativity) is parasitic on the given, the factual, and the positive (beings/entities) by making negation dependent on the nothing without which it could not transpire or function. Heidegger distinguished nothingness as the negation of beings, which, as Bergson and Carnap respectively argue can only be conditional and relative, from a constitutive nothingness prior to negativity.

Drawing on Heidegger's 1929 lecture, Sartre conceived nothingness as the transcendental condition of consciousness and subjectivity, with negation as its very structure, and Parmenidean being as superfluous or *de trop* (Sartre 1943). In Heidegger's lecture, negation and negativity can be experienced and said in myriad ways, and it is the elemental nothing that links them all. However, Heidegger attributed it to the constitution of being itself and, unlike Sartre, not to consciousness. In existential nothingness, everyday existence is radically placed in question, losing all direction, and thereby potentially being reoriented toward itself, others, and its world. This existential condition indicated for Heidegger a constitutive nothingness, irreducible to the subject, in which the nothing [as noun] nothings [as verb] as the condition not only of

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<sup>5</sup> Bergson (1906); Carnap (1931).

the non-existent and of negation but also of being, beings, and assertion. Heidegger's "nothing nothings" (*Nichts nichtet*) thus entails the impossibility of either positivism or nihilism.

Negation and nothingness must be understood from out of themselves, or from their own specific modes of givenness, which do not inevitably revert back to affirmation and being. In the *Science of Logic*, for instance, Hegel dismissed Chinese ideas of beginning with nothingness as incoherent. Heidegger criticized Hegel's strategy of making nothingness secondary to being and transforming negation back into affirmation (GA 68, 3 – 61).<sup>6</sup> However, despite Heidegger's analysis of the elemental nothing, his thinking of the primacy of being as presence appears to threaten in the end to once again reduce and sublate nothingness and negation.

### III. Leibniz's Question, Constitutive Nothingness, and the Metaphysics of Presence

Leibniz repeatedly posed the question: why is there something rather than nothing? Leibniz's response expressed a sense of constitutive nothingness as a necessary constituent of God's creation from nothing, just as the 0 was as necessary as the 1 to the binary mathematics that expressed the rational order of nature.<sup>7</sup> Leibniz contended in his arguments for the necessity of God's existence that, as the condition of possibility (possible worlds) and actuality (this world), God's creation from nothingness and mathematics operating from the zero established individual things and their divinely pre-established relational harmony. Leibniz used this model to interpret the *Book of Changes* (the *Yijing* 易經) and Chinese philosophy, where he encountered generative senses of nothingness as the dark nourishing source from which things stir and emerge in incipience. He concluded that nothingness could not be autopoietic or self-generating and Chinese philosophy implicitly presupposed the monotheistic God.

Heidegger recognized that Leibniz's argument began with and thus presupposed the nothing and indicated the nothing without which there is no being (GA 9, 381 – 383). This entailed that nothingness is constitutive of being and being cannot disclose itself without nothingness. The relation between

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<sup>6</sup> Adorno likewise described Hegel's nothing and negativity as "only a moment in the movement of being" (Adorno 1971, 140).

<sup>7</sup> Regarding Leibniz on nothingness and Chinese philosophy, see Nelson (2025). Heidegger appears unaware of Leibniz's writings about China.

nothing, being, and becoming must be immanent to being. It is not an external strife, or dialectical negation that reverts to affirmation, as Heidegger attributed to Hegel and Nietzsche. Whereas they construed the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides as contraries, Heidegger interpreted them as complementary in disclosing being as presence (or presencing) and standing-forth and holding-sway (*phusis*). In Heidegger's radical reading, Parmenides did not dialectically or externally oppose being, nothing, and becoming; he disclosed their internal or relational differentiation in a jointure or fittingness (*Fug*) that is never without dis-jointure (*Unfug*). Parmenides' *dikē* or "justice" as *Fug* is never without its own dis-jointure. *Fug* expresses the fittingness or matching of a structurally differentiated whole (GA 35, 13 – 15).<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger has been interpreted as both a critic in *Being and Time* (GA 2, 25 – 26) and a subsequent proponent of the "metaphysics of presence" that Derrida argued ensnared his thinking.<sup>9</sup> Yet, if all varieties of nothingness and absence are merely expressions of being and presence that must dialectically result in affirmation, then Heidegger's account would fall under his own critique of Hegel as demanding affirmation from negation and not recognizing the nothing *as* elementally nothing in its own terms and sense.<sup>10</sup>

Heidegger appeared to maintain both the primacy of being as presence and that being ought to be relationally differentiated into a jointure (or structural whole) that was—in contrast to standard accounts of the timeless unitary or monistic one—constitutively characterized by temporality (presence as verbally understood presencing) and by the elemental refusal (*Verweigerung*) and withdrawal (*Entziehen*) of elemental, abyssal nothingness.

#### IV. Presence and Nothingness: Heidegger between Parmenides and Laozi

Hegel and Nietzsche considered Heraclitus to be the archetypal thinker of dynamic becoming as dialectical contradiction or strife. Parmenides was deemed a philosopher of a reified, static, abstract idea of being as he strove to overcome the strife of opposites, negativity, and becoming (Nietzsche 1980, 836 – 845). This approach has influenced Daoist scholars who seek to free the *dao* of the harmonious metaphysics of the one. The Parmenidean dictum to walk the

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<sup>8</sup> On *phusis* in Heidegger in comparison with Daoist *ziran* 自然 (literally, "naturally self-so"; conventionally translated as nature), see Burik (2025); Nelson (2023).

<sup>9</sup> See Derrida (1967); on Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism, see Burik (2010).

<sup>10</sup> See Heidegger's critique of Hegel's affirmative use of negativity in GA 68, 3 – 61; compare Adorno (1971, 140). On negation in Hegel and Heidegger, see Pöggeler (1995).



path (or the way) of that which is (*esti*) and reject the path of that which is not (*ouk esti*), interpreted as the paths of being and non-being, appears contrary to the priority of primordial generative nothingness in Laozi's *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, or the *Liezi*. There are two immediate skeptical reasons for suspicion here: it might seem that the aphorisms and fragments ascribed to Laozi and Parmenides are linguistically and culturally incommensurable, and that Heidegger himself reproduced, without resolving, the aporetic contradiction between being and nothingness.

Heidegger's remarkable interpretations of Parmenides during the 1930s (especially in GA 35 and GA 40) signal an alternative to this impasse. Heidegger's Parmenides is a poetic thinker of the way (words he also applied to Laozi) who did not assert opposing contraries but rather genuinely confronted and dismantled the external opposition between being, non-being, and appearing, becoming, or opinion (*doxa*). Parmenides' rejection of the coherence of thinking nothing and negativity, as well as his critique of the veridicality of appearances and the genuineness of change, led to a more elemental questioning. He dismantled at philosophy's very inception the stratifying opposition between being and its others (such as nothing, thinking, becoming, appearing, valuing) that characterized its subsequent forgetting of being.

Parmenides' philosophical poem *Peri Physeos* (On *Phusis*) lies at the origins of both the philosophical tradition of ontological assertions about being and, as evident in his own and Zeno's arguments against plurality and becoming, dialectical and skeptical refutation. Early Chinese and Greek skeptical and sophistic discourses recognized that we already have two and more, and are already within the many, as soon as we assert "the one"; and we are already within the one and the continuum as soon as we affirm the many and the separable. Nietzsche identified in 1873 fundamental tensions between Parmenides' thinking of being, his practice of negative logical refutation, and the becoming of appearance and opinion (Nietzsche 1980, 836 – 845). Heidegger traced in response their immanent belongingness in being as presence, nature as *phusis* (standing forth), and truth as *alêtheia* (unconcealedness).

The goddess Alêtheia taught Parmenides these three paths. Parmenidean being, as gathering in strife, cannot be then externally or "dialectically" opposed to nothing, thinking, becoming, appearing, or valuing. It is neither existential (in the logical sense), predicative, veridical, or some combination thereof. It is *aletheic* rather than dogmatically or dialectically asserting a monistic doctrine of an a- or anti-temporal oneness of being.



Heidegger deployed a similar language in speaking of Laozi's *Daodejing*, a text prioritizing an elemental not- (*wu*- 無-) and generative nothingness (*wu* 無). Neither can be products of a derivative, secondary negation of something existent or positive. Laozi is also designated a poetic thinker of the way. Influenced by the philosophy of becoming and process, modern interpretations of Laozi tend to accentuate becoming, transformation, flow, and process in contrast to its own language of *dao* as constant, enduring, and one.

However, being and nothingness, or Parmenides and Laozi, need not be contradictory opposites. Guided by Heidegger's Parmenides, we can ask whether the *Daodejing* affirmed *dao* 道 through a dialectic, strife, or process of changes of opposites or did it lack such constructions to arrive at its own disclosure within the *Fug* of concealment-unconcealment? Did it externally maintain the priority of nothingness over existence (*you* 有) or rather reveal their immanent jointure or relational structure?

## V. Heidegger and the *Daodejing*

The role of Daoism in Heidegger's journey is sustained and significant.<sup>11</sup> Heidegger's first direct recorded discussions of the *Daodejing* are found in the initial 1930 lecture versions of "The Essence of Truth" (GA 80.1). Heidegger played here with the language of mystery, hiddenness, concealment, and darkness in relation to the *Daodejing*.<sup>12</sup> He employed words that reappear throughout his discussions of the *Daodejing* and that became basic words of his later thinking.

In his lectures and correspondence, Heidegger repeatedly returned to *Daodejing* 28: "know the light and preserve the dark" (知其白, 守其黑). He associated this darkness and light with hiddenness and appearance, and the twofold structure of concealing-unconcealing, which are already seen in his readings of Heraclitus and Parmenides (GA 35). Heidegger's vision of the *Daodejing* makes clear that they are not external contradictory forces, but rather relational elements of a music-like fugue or jointure (*Fuge*). The "negative" terms of early Greek thought (such as darkness, night, and nothingness) take on nourishing qualities that Heidegger seemed to associate with Daoism.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Burik (2010); Chai (2022); Heubel (2020); Nelson (2023).

<sup>12</sup> On darkness and light in the *Daodejing* and Heidegger, see Burik (2019, 347 – 370); Nelson (2023, 51 – 52).

<sup>13</sup> On Daoist practices and concepts of nourishing life, some senses of which Heidegger appears to recognize, see Nelson (2020).

Truth has a twofold structure of presence-and-absence: (1) unconcealing of beings, world, and being as well as (2) concealing of darkness, hiddenness, mystery, earth, and nothingness. His strategy is to overcome fixating and limiting models of truth as matching correspondence and correctness. In the abyssal groundless ground of truth, the constitutive nothingness of being occurs as an elemental (and thus not merely derivative nor privative) refusing-withdrawing, hiddenness, and darkness. While the Presocratics indicated the priority of the shining forth of light and presence, the *Daodejing* expressed a generative, nourishing, and protective darkness and nothingness through which Heidegger increasingly reinterpreted the origins of Greek philosophy and the history of occidental metaphysics.

In Heidegger's early Greek-inspired model of "The Origin of the Work of Art," earth and thing express *phusis*, or the emergence, upsurge, holding sway, and presencing of beings. Briefly said, the thing is earth (darkness) standing forth and emergent in world (light). Human existence is the site and intermediary of the happening of works and things.

As early as the 1930 lecture versions of the "Essence of Truth," Heidegger's Laozi is identified with three unfolding elements: (1) elemental concealment, darkness, hiddenness, mystery, and nothingness as (2) preserving, nourishing, and safeguarding (rather than merely negative or privative) and as (3) freeing, letting, opening, and releasing. Heidegger's encounters with Daoism modify rather than replace the early Greek sources of his philosophical models.

## VI. Negation and Nothingness without the Primacy of Presence

The 1929 lecture "What is Metaphysics?" (GA 9) differentiated between: (1) the merely conditional or derivative negativity of nothingness as the privative absence of beings, (2) the ontological difference as the nothing and empty "between" beings and being, or the nothingness of being in relation to beings, and (3) the structural whole of being-and-nothingness. The third opens the way to his dialogues with Asian philosophies of nothingness and emptiness, and his own later conception of being's openness and clearing that cannot be reduced to the availability of presence unstructured by absence.

Through "What is Metaphysics?" (GA 9) and his 1938 – 1941 notes on negativity in Hegel (GA 68, 3 – 61), a twofold distinction emerged between (1) mere negativity, as denial, privation, and negation and (2) a necessary elemental negativity, as the withdrawal, refusal, nothingness, and abyss that is ascribed to – in language other than Heidegger's own – the immanent relational structure of being. It is in this context that Heidegger rejected Nietzsche's

diagnosis of nihilism and nothingness, as nothingness is not to be understood as denial or destructive annihilation (of life or will). Although Heidegger did not consider negation as a skeptical bracketing (*epoché*) of assertion, as in Pyrrhonian skepticism, he questioned how Hegel sought to convert negation into affirmation (GA 68, 3 – 61) and Nietzsche overcame negation with affirmation (GA 47; GA 48).

In Heidegger's readings of the *Daodejing* from 1930 to 1951, lingering with the concealed is the way to know the unconcealed, and with nothingness to know being. Since this indicates a twofold structure of being itself, lingering means remaining with rather than surpassing (and hence ultimately denying) the nothing in God or the absolute. Heidegger resisted following the typical *via negativa* that ultimately resulted in affirmation from negative theology to speculative dialectics.

Drawing on Chinese generative models of nothingness, Heidegger addressed the dark and hidden in a generative sense as healing, nourishing, and preserving.<sup>14</sup> Did the *Daodejing* inform his constitutive nothingness and did Heidegger learn from Daoism (and the generative sense of darkness and nothingness in Chinese discourses)?<sup>15</sup> Yes, insofar as Heidegger glimpsed and drew from this sense at times; yet, he cannot be said to take a "Daoist turn" and fully move from his own constitutive-ontological to a Chinese generative-meontological understanding of nothingness.

Greek philosophy began with being as presence, a paradigm that now dominates the modern globe (GA 14, 6 – 7). Heidegger clearly discussed Greek philosophy and German-language poets and mystics much more frequently and in greater depth and detail than Laozi or Zhuangzi. These European sources without doubt primarily inform his thinking. Nonetheless, they don't fully clarify Heidegger's language and strategies that encompass and adapt early Daoist elements.

Although Heidegger did not abandon the model of being as presence, it is modified through his reflections on time (GA 14, 11 – 12) as well as forms of elemental absence. The latter are expressed through forms of presence or givenness and as such cannot be understood as mere or abstract presence (GA 14, 13 – 14; 18; 23). The "primacy of presence" thus names "a question and task"

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<sup>14</sup> On Daoist generative-meontological nothingness, see Chai (2014) and Chai (2019); for an overview of generative nothingness from Wang Bi to Neo-Confucianism, see Nelson (2025); on nourishing life, see Nelson (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Compare Chai (2014, 583 – 601); Heubel (2020); Nelson (2023); Wenning (2011, 556 – 568).

rather than a conclusion (GA 14, 37) and requires a transition to letting-unconcealing (GA 14, 51). As a differentiated jointure, or relational whole, presence structurally necessitates absence, refusal, and withdrawal (GA 14, 23).

## VII. Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Open Clearing

Heidegger developed a methodology of formal indication (*formale Anzeige*) during the 1920s that characterizes the basic concepts of *Being and Time* such as existence, Dasein, and being-in-the-world (GA 12, 313). Formally indicative concepts empty and contest reified notions, open a way, and free concrete particulars. Formalizing is an emptying that dismantles in order to release the concrete to speak from itself. In the late 1920s, Heidegger's nothing signified a formally indicative concept rather than an unreal object or real entity. Formal indication as a method of opening and freeing becomes the way as wayfaring in openness. Heidegger's later philosophy deepened rather than rejected his earlier sense of method.

In the emptiness of the clearing (*die Lichtung*), emptying is characteristic of the clearing and open enregioning. His image of the clearing is of dark forested paths (*Holzwege*) suddenly opening in a clear exposed area. In his etymological analysis, the word *Lichtung* expresses a thinning out and opening up, and not only lighting. Interpreted transcendently, it expresses the condition and space of possibilities and reasons. In an ontological reading, the clearing indicates the play of light and dark and the structural relationality between being and nothing, presence and absence, fullness and emptiness.

Heidegger attributed emptiness not only to the clearing but, through *Daodejing* 11 and 28, to the thing from "The Uniqueness of the Poet" in 1943 (GA 75, 43 – 44) to the 1949 Bremen lectures (GA 79, 5 – 23) and 1950 essay "The Thing" (GA 7, 167 – 187). "Poetic thinking," such as occurred in Parmenides, or Hölderlin, is a letting emerge. *Daodejing* 11 hints at the openness of the between. Beings result in usability, while non-being preserves being. Emptiness preserves the being of the thing: the vessel, the wheel, the room. The between appears as empty and nothing; yet it is the counterpart in encountering-responding as the opening and place for temporal-spatial locality. The gathering of the in-the-midst and the meanwhile that orients thoughtful, reminiscent, poetic dwelling. The spontaneity and meaningfulness of human spirit and life are found in the simplicity of things, and dwelling in emptiness and simplicity, as Heidegger remarked of these two early Daoist virtues in the wake of his 1943 reading of *Daodejing* 11 (GA 75, 42 – 43).

Heidegger's analyses from 1943 to 1950 of the emptiness of the jug (or vessel), the wheel, and the room in *Daodejing* 11 show how the emptiness of the thing is simultaneously the thing's gathering of world. Its emptiness is the condition of positivity and presencing of the thing, as much as presence is the condition of emptiness, and uselessness of use. This contrasts with the mere emptiness of annihilation threatened by nuclear war, which expresses the scientific-technological perspective in which the thing is impoverished, as it disappears in its physical constitution, pragmatic-technical use, and eventual destruction.

Emptiness, now linked with generative elements of nourishing and preserving through the *Daodejing*, allows the gathering of the thing and the thing to gather world. Laozi's empty vessel gathers and gifts a world. Heidegger elucidated the empty thing through the emptiness of the jug, the wheel, and the room drawn from *Daodejing* 11 to articulate the emptiness of the thing and the thing's gathering and enregioning of world in which emptiness operates as the condition of the limited givenness (restricted, insofar as even the absent, the not-, and the empty are given and presented), positivity, and presencing of thing and world.

In *Being and Time*, the thing is formed in the human relational nexus as pragmatically ready-to or objectively present-to-hand (GA 2, 79 – 82). In the 1940s and 1950s, by contrast, things form and open regions and localities of meaningful encounter. There is no radical distinction between natural and made things: vessels, wheels, and rooms are "made" objects. The potter in "The Thing," which drew directly from the *Daodejing*, forms and shapes emptiness, as mortals are named the shapers of emptiness (GA 7).

Moreover, Heidegger's 1954 "Dialogue on Language" (with a Japanese Interlocutor) offers a radical teaching of emptiness in relation to Japanese and (more implicitly) Buddhist thought (GA 12, 79 – 146).<sup>16</sup> Absence and emptiness are sites of gathering in this dialogue: emptiness is the site of the gathering of thing and word; the emptiness of language gathers words-things (*koto-ba* 言葉, GA 12, 134 – 138; 145); emptiness opens the gathering that occurs on the Noh stage (GA 12, 101); the absent deceased friend (Shūzō Kuki) is gathered in thoughtful remembrance and conversation; and the empty sky gathers color and form (GA 12, 97; 136).

The Japanese expression for color (form) and emptiness (the open, the sky), *iro-ku*, was adapted from *se kong* 色空. The *Heart Sutra*, a core text of the *Perfection*

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<sup>16</sup> On senses of emptiness in Buddhism and Heidegger, see Nelson (2017, chapter 8).

of *Wisdom* literature, stated the mutuality of form and emptiness: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form" (Conze 2004, 162 – 163). They are not externally opposed or synthesized, as there is no inherent or fixed self-nature, but belong together as interdependent in their very differentiation.

Heidegger showed in his 1957 work *Identity and Difference* that such mutuality (or "sameness") requires constitutive difference (*Unterschied*). It does not entail oneness as identity. Difference is not derivative. It is elemental to being in its refusal and withdrawal, and the concealment that conditions truth as unconcealment (GA 11, 59). The non-negational groundless and empty abyss resists being taken as another implication or affirmation. There is no ascetic renunciation (or conditional negation) here for Heidegger, but only releasement.

### **VIII. Emancipatory Nothingness and Releasement into Openness**

In Heidegger's postwar works, being is still primarily interpreted as presencing in key writings such as "Time and Being" that continue to draw on his Parmenides-interpretation of the 1930s (GA 14, 1 – 25). At the same time, being is not self-enclosed fullness; it is fundamentally empty and open. The present is not atemporal eternity but the structurally differentiated whole of temporalizing such that presence signifies presencing. Further, emptiness as the open region is freeing and releasing for human thinking and dwelling.

This empty open is constitutive of light and dark, presence and absence, and affirmation and negation. At the same time, being has its own structure of elemental nothingness and of concealment, hiddenness, refusal, and withdrawal that are not derivative expressions of privation or negation. It is therefore not being as a static, monistic, fully given or positive presence or "the one" that sublimates and lacks any difference and non-identity.

Heidegger's journey not only drew from Early Greek but also from East Asian sources. Nothingness and emptiness, as they are interlinked with the fourfold and the clearing, are transformed from a sense of their existential horror to constitutive elements of being itself. In Heidegger's later thinking, nothingness, emptiness, and the open clearing are associated with releasing things and human existence into their own ways of being. This model reorients thinking about being, language, and human dwelling. It intersects in part with, while remaining distinct from, the liberating significance of meditative (or bio-spiritual), ethical, and linguistic practices articulated in Daoism or Buddhism.



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