**“What is Metaphysics?” by Martin Heidegger**

“What is Metaphysics?” is the inaugural lecture Heidegger gave in 1929 at Freiburg University. It is about what he calls, “the nothing” and in particular, how we can experience it. In essence, Heidegger pits logic (in the form of intellectual negation; the “not”) and science (which rejects the idea of nothing) against a deeper, philosophical experience of the world.

What is Metaphysics?

At the outset, Heidegger says that, rather than making this a discussion of metaphysics itself, what he will do is “take up a particular metaphysical question.” This will allow us to immerse ourselves in metaphysics; rather than merely discuss the topic from the outside, as it were. So what is a metaphysical question? He asserts that all metaphysical questions have two features:

1. They always encompass the whole range of metaphysical problems.
2. They can only be asked from the “essential position of existence (*Dasein*)…” It is a questioning here and now, for itself.

A look at the root of all fields of scientific inquiry (something which has been neglected for too long) reveals three aspects: relation, attitude, and irruption. First, science demands a relation to the world. This relation obviously refers to beings themselves – *and nothing besides*. Second, scientific endeavour arises from a freely chosen attitude we orient ourselves with. This attitude directs itself toward beings themselves – *and nothing further*. Third, scientific inquiry requires an *irruption* into the whole of beings such that they “break open and show what they are and how they are.” This irruption involves a confrontation with beings themselves – *and beyond that nothing*.

Something in this brief inquiry gives Heidegger pause. He wonders about the way he has described the field of scientific inquiry (beings) with reference to something different (nothing), which I have italicised above. Can we eliminate this addition without loss? Is it merely superfluous verbiage? What is it, this *nothing*, anyway?

The Nothing and Negation

Logic tells us we can’t even think about the nothing as nothing because all thought is necessarily about something. As soon as we form the thought, the nothing we are thinking about is no longer the nothing we had our sights on; rather, it is a something, the something we are thinking about. Since we can’t “make the nothing into an object, have we not already come to the end of our inquiry into the nothing”? According to logic, this is certainly the case, but Heidegger questions whether logic ought to be the final arbiter in this domain and opts to forge ahead anyway.

Since the nothing is the “complete negation of the totality of beings”; i.e. “**non**-being pure and simple” [emphasis added], we seem to be dealing with the negative, a state of affairs which would indeed throw our discussion into the realm of logic and the intellect. This gives us the question Heidegger will seek to resolve in this lecture; namely, whether intellectual negation (as in “not”) is prior to our understanding of the nothing or whether the “not” is given because of the nothing. He will argue for the latter.

Experiencing the Nothing - Anxiety

Since Heidegger defines the nothing as the “complete negation of the totality of beings”, if we are going to be able to experience the nothing, we must also be able to encounter beings as a whole. “The totality of beings must be given in advance so as to be able to fall prey straightway to negation – in which the nothing itself would then be manifest.”

Of course, we can simply imagine the whole of beings in an “idea” and then negate this in our thought. However, “[i]n doing this we do attain the formal concept of the imagined nothing but never the nothing itself.”

To get some traction here, Heidegger distinguishes between “comprehending the whole of beings in themselves and finding oneself in the midst of beings as a whole.” The former is impossible, but the latter happens all the time. Indeed, it is the fundamental core of human existence. “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.” Heidegger points to boredom (not boredom of this or that, but a “profound boredom”) and “joy in the presence of the Dasein – and not simply of the person – of a human being whom we love” as examples of modes of attunement which reveal beings as a whole.

In a similar way, Heidegger claims that the fundamental mood of anxiety is able to reveal the nothing and opens us to an experience of it. By anxiety, Heidegger is not talking about common anxiety which is reducible to fear, i.e. fear of this or that thing. Rather, in anxiety we don’t know what it is that we are anxious about; “all things and we ourselves sink into indifference.” It is in this profound indifference that the nothing reveals itself to us.

How is it with the Nothing?

So, anxiety brings the nothing before us, but, if we pay attention to this experience, we will see that it doesn’t reveal itself as a being. “Just as little is it given as an object. Anxiety is no kind of grasping of the nothing.” Rather, we encounter the nothing *with* beings as a whole. What does this mean? In anxiety, “beings as a whole become superfluous.” The nothing doesn’t *annihilate* beings, nor does it negate them. What happens is that “anxiety finds itself precisely in utter impotence with regard to beings as a whole”.

In anxiety there is a kind of “shrinking back before…” and it is this which makes up the nothing. In other words, the nothing is a “repelling gesture toward beings that are in retreat as a whole.” Far from being annihilation, the nothing is, in fact, a *nihilation*; a nihilation of the world. Heidegger describes this by saying *the nothing itself nihilates*.

The nihilation of the nothing is a repelling force, which beings as a whole shrink back before, but this doesn’t make it a purely negative or destructive act. Instead, in this repelling, the nothing actually discloses beings as beings, that is, “as what is radically other – with respect to the nothing.” The nothing actually makes possible the revelation of beings in general. Since “existence in its essence relates itself to beings – those which it is not and that which it is – it emerges as such existence in each case from the nothing already revealed.” This is what Da-sein actually means: “being held out into the nothing. Holding itself out into the nothing. Dasein is in each case already beyond beings as a whole. This being beyond beings we call “transcendence.”” If Dasein wasn’t this holding itself out into nothing, then “it could never be related to beings nor even to itself. Without the original revelation of the nothing, no selfhood and no freedom.”

Far from being an empty concept or reducible to logical negation, the nihilation of the nothing has turned out to lie at the heart of Being itself; i.e. that by which beings come to be in the first place. How could negation (logic/intellect) be prior to the nothing we have discovered here, when negation precisely requires something to negate in the first place and that something (beings) only appears because of the nihilating of the nothing? It is clear that “negation is grounded in the not that springs from the nihilation of the nothing.”

This simple line of questioning has also demonstrated that the power of the intellect with logic as its tool is insufficient when it comes to inquiring about Being.

If all this is true, shouldn’t we be in constant anxiety in order to exist at all? In a sense we are, but the anxiety is covered over in the way we “lose ourselves… among beings in a certain way” and turn toward them in our preoccupations. “The more we turn toward beings in our preoccupations the less we let beings as a whole slip away as such and the more we turn away from the nothing.” The nothing is always “nihilating” without our being aware of it. This anxiety is always right there, just beneath the surface. “Original anxiety can awaken in existence at any moment. It needs no unsual event to rouse it.” “Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through Dasein…”

The Metaphysical Question

Metaphysics is precisely “inquiry beyond or over beings, which aims to recover them as such and as a whole for our grasp.” Since our discussion of the nothing has carried us into this very realm, it has proven to be a “metaphysical” question. So, let’s return to those two features of metaphysical questions Heidegger outlined at the start and see if we have met them here:

1. Metaphysical questions always encompass the whole range of metaphysical problems. In our discussion, we have seen how the revelation of beings (Being) in general is grounded in the nothing. So, “assuming that the question of Being as such is the encompassing question of metaphysics, then the question of the nothing proves to be such that it embraces the whole of metaphysics.”
2. Metaphysical questions can only be asked from the “essential position of the existence (*Dasein*) that questions.” In other words, in the questioning, the questioning Dasein is itself always implicated. Our question has shown us that the nihilation of the nothing which reveals beings in general (Being) only takes place when Dasein holds itself out into the nothing. In a very real sense, Dasein is the ‘location’ of this opening. As such, the question “puts us, the questioners, in question. It [the question of the nothing] is a metaphysical question.”

Concluding Remarks

There are a couple of points to note in conclusion here; one concerning science, the other Dasein (human existence) itself. First, this investigation into the nothing (which science and logic dismiss) has proven that science, rather than being the superior and foundational discipline it lauds itself as, is only possible if this ‘holding out into the nothing’ has preceded it. This means that science is grounded in metaphysics. An important and relevant consequence of this is that philosophy can “never be measured by the standard of the idea of science.”

Second, Dasein (human existence) holds itself out into the nothing. This is the same as saying that the essence of Dasein is to go beyond beings. Since this ‘going beyond’ is metaphysics itself, this implies that “metaphysics belongs to the “nature of man.” It is neither a division of academic philosophy nor a field of arbitrary notions. Metaphysics is the basic occurrence of Dasein. It is Dasein itself.”