

## **Being and Non-Being: Friction or Fussion?**

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### **Abstract**

The question of Being and non-being remains enduring and fundamental in philosophical parlance. Parmenides' assertion that being is while non-being is not led to a shift in focus from the problem of being to a narrower study of individual beings. However, a closer examination, free from preconceived notions or biases, reveals that being and non-being are not separate entities but intricately intertwined. There is not merely friction between them, but rather a fusion or interweaving. Using the critical analysis method, this paper aims to demonstrate how being and non-being are interconnected and how being merges into non-being. To show that what exists between being and non-being is not just friction, but a fusion, the article posits that the term "NO/THING" holds a semantic analysis that reinforces the fusion of being and non-being. By breaking up the word 'nothing', one can view being and non-being as two sides of the same coin, rather than opposing forces.

**Keywords:** Being, Non-being, Metaphysics, No/thing.

## Introduction

Being is a philosophical concept that refers to the state of existence or the reality of something that exists. It is often represented as a manifestation of "something." Heidegger (1959) defined being as the illuminating force that sheds light on metaphysics. Dillon (2000:51) views being as the underlying reality from which a multitude of appearances can emerge. Conversely, Unah (2005: 28) described being as the enabling factor that brings beings or entities into focus. For Ibanga (2016) being is an inexhaustible source of possibilities and the process of conscious entities evolving, indicating that being possesses the boundless capacity to both exist and not exist. Therefore, being represents the fundamental and ultimate element of reality. In light of being as something that exists, what then can be said about non-being? Non-being is a philosophical concept that refers to the absence of existence or the non-existent reality. For Parmenides, it is represented as "nothing" (Stumpf, 1994: 16). Parmenides' assertion has given rise to numerous interpretations of the concept of Being (Unah, 2005). The problem has faced misunderstandings, preconceptions, and biases from various perspectives within the philosophical community. It has been understood in diverse ways, such as "the will to power," "will," "subjectivity," "mind," "matter," "the absolute," "eidos," "God," "evolution," "big bang," and many others (Okoro, 2012:125). From the Aristotelian scale of truth, being is truth and not-being is untruth (Aristotle, 2006: 248). In contrast, philosophers such as Jim Unah (2006) have put forth the argument that even nothingness can be considered as something. This is because within the concept of a thing, there exists the potential for its negation, allowing it to dissolve into nothing. Thus, when we talk about the problems of being and non-being, we aim to see whether there is a relationship them, that is, between something and nothing (Okoro, 2011: 117).

Against this backdrop, the present paper contends that the relationship between being and non-being goes beyond mere coexistence and is intricately interconnected. Rather than viewing them as separate entities resulting from our subjective perspectives, they are perceived in a dualistic sense. This stems from our inclination to lack objectivity and allow being to reveal itself fully. To demonstrate the convergence of being into non-being, the paper commences with a comprehensive overview of the historical discourse surrounding the notions of being and non-being in the realm of ontology, spanning from ancient times to contemporary thought. It

culminates in a thorough and systematic examination of how being merges with non-being, using the analysis of the term 'NOTHING' as a focal point. By presenting compelling semantic argument, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the subject. It aims to broaden the understanding of the relationship between these concepts and invites readers to delve into the profound interplay that exists between them.

### **Historical Overview of Being and Non-Being**

The intellectual journey of Greek philosophy revolves around three fundamental questions: What is the composition of the world? What exists in the world? How can we acquire knowledge? The quest for universality and understanding the essence of phenomena, as well as the nature of existence itself, can be traced back to Thales, who posited that water is the fundamental element underlying all phenomena (Copleston, 1993: 22). Anaximander, however, proposed that the underlying principle of phenomena cannot be any known entity; it transcends our comprehension (Copleston, 1993: 24). Following from Anaximander, the essence of existence is non-being, a concept that became a subject of debate during the philosophical eras of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus, in his philosophical perspective, reveals the intricate nature of being by asserting that it is in a constant state of flux. According to Heraclitus, being is perpetually changing, making it elusive and difficult to fully grasp and understand (Copleston, 1993: 44). On the other hand, Parmenides unequivocally stated, there is only being, and non-being does not exist (Copleston, 1993: 48). In his view, being is one and changeless. It referred to the physical, spherical, motionless, and homogenous world.

Parmenides' firm declaration that only being exists and non-being does not sparked a profound conflict between being and non-being. He argued that our perception of being as constantly changing is merely an illusion created by our senses. In reality, there is no process of becoming, and nothing can transition out of being or come into existence (Omoregbe, 1990: 78). Being simply is and is not anything else. Parmenides' reasoning behind the absence of becoming in reality is based on the idea that if something were to come into being, it would either originate from being or non-being. If it arises from being, it is already part of being and does not truly come into existence, as it is not new but already inherent within being. If it arises from non-being, it is essentially nothing, as only nothingness can emerge from nothingness. Parmenides attributed the belief in something emerging from nothing to the deceptive nature of

our senses. In his view, reality is unified, unchanging, and infinite. Anything that does not align with the essence of being is rejected as non-being, as nothing. With his assertion that there is only one way to apprehend being as the one and nothing else, Parmenides establishes the foundation for the struggle between being and non-being. The investigation into the nature of being began earnestly with the challenging Parmenidean proposition that being exists while non-being does not (Unah, 2005: 3).

Leucippus and Democritus posited that the world is comprised of two eternal and independent origins: being represented by atoms, and non-being represented by void space (Copleston, 1993: 73). According to Democritus, non-being is an absolute void, and it is within this void that atoms interact (Copleston, 1993: 74). On the other hand, Empedocles held a different view, asserting that the concept of void is synonymous with nothingness. He questioned the existence of void by asserting that "Nowhere in the world is there any void; and where would it come from?" (Podolny, 1986:18). Podolny (1986:17) provides further insight into Empedocles' position showing that before Empedocles, ancient Greek thinkers has also contended that emptiness, or non-being, is not just non-existent but also beyond the realm of conceptualization. According to these philosophers, the void not only does not exist but even the act of contemplating it is deemed impossible. The view held by these thinkers is that void is nonexistent and beyond the realm of human conception.

The discourse surrounding the nature of being and non-being persisted with Plato, who followed the line of thought established by Parmenides. Plato asserts that being is eternal and unchanging. He associates true being with the realm of ideal entities, suggesting that the physical things we perceive are not genuine realities but mere appearances. Unlike Parmenides, however, Plato does not subscribe to the notion that being is singular. He believes that being is manifold and does not restrict our capacity to comprehend the concept of being. According to Plato, being exists exclusively in the world of forms (Plato, Book VII) and differs from the objects and phenomena we encounter in our everyday experiences.

Aristotle (2006) posits that the subject matter of metaphysics is "Being qua Being," which refers to being in its purest form, devoid of any particular attributes. According to Aristotle, this pure being serves as the foundation of reality, and he associates it with the concept of God. In Aristotle's view, the being of entities resides within phenomena that possess the potential to

transform into something else. This perspective is exemplified by his theory of Act and Potency, which explores the inherent capacity of beings to transition from a state of potentiality to actuality. Aristotle's notion of being is not detached from the world; rather, every being carries within itself the inherent ability to cease to exist. Through the process of actualization, non-being manifests itself as being. This concept laid the groundwork for Heidegger's existential phenomenology, which sought to reformulate the understanding of being. Aristotle also acknowledges that being exists in the void, but it remains inaccessible and inconceivable, as it has no specific location in the world (Diana-Abasi, 2016: 2).

Building upon the aforementioned ideas, in Greek philosophy, "being" encompasses all the concepts that can be attributed to the idealized opposite of what we observe in our surroundings. It represents the counterpart that encapsulates all aspects of the everyday physical world. On the other hand, this physical world is referred to as "becoming" or "genesis," denoting the continuous process of transformation and change. In this philosophical framework, being and becoming are distinct concepts that capture the contrasting nature of the idealized realm and the ever-changing reality we experience (Dillon, 2000: 51). Indeed, for Parmenides and many influential Greek thinkers of his time, being represented the unchanging and eternal nature of existence, while becoming, change, and motion were perceived as illusory or deceptive (Unah, 2006: 4).

During the Medieval period, there was a prominent association of Being with God. Philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham put forth the idea that being itself is synonymous with God. They introduced a dichotomy between Necessary Being and Contingent Being. Necessary Being refers to an infinite being that is uncreated and whose existence is inevitable. This necessary being is self-sustaining and owes its essence to nothing but itself. On the other hand, contingent beings are creations of the necessary being, such as humans. Contingent beings are finite and lack the responsibility for their own existence, as they depend on the necessary being for their being. This perspective emphasized the theological and metaphysical understanding of being as inseparable from the concept of God and the distinction between the eternal and the contingent (See Russell, 2000).

To further grant the enduring nature of God, the cosmogonic myth of how the earth and everything there-in was created comes to mind. In the opening book of genesis, it is emphatically

stated that God created the heavens and the earth. This has been interpreted to mean that God created the world and universe out of nothing that is, *creatio ex nihilo* (See McFarland, 2022). This interpretation gives credence to 'nothing' as that which houses a 'thing' because it is from nothing that the world and universe was created. However, contemporary theology scholars like Justin Martyr (McFarland, 2022: 5), argue that darkness or formless void was upon the face of the earth, therefore, God only put order in the midst of chaos, he (God) never truly created something out of nothing (McFarland, 2022: 4-5). However, darkness or formless void is itself nothing but an abstract concept of inexistence. Darkness is not a presence of something, it is rather the absence of light and a state of nothingness. Thus, it can still be interpreted to mean God created the world and universe out of nothing. This accounts for why darkness cannot be measured except in terms of light. From either interpretations of the creation story, one can sufficiently claim that God created the world and universe as a self-disclosure of God manifested in the thoughts or the mind of God and subsequently in his declarations that brought things into existence (Whitney, 2020: 47). This seems to give credence to the argument of medieval philosophers who construe God as the necessary being.

The multitude of responses, whether denying or affirming the existence of Being and non-being, indicates the significance and interconnectedness of these two concepts. In an effort to address this problem, the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel stands out for his unambiguous perspective. According to Hegel, the process of becoming begins with the merging of "pure being" and "nothingness."

In Hegel's framework, being and non-being are juxtaposed as the thesis and antithesis, respectively. Being represents the starting point or thesis, while non-being serves as the opposing antithesis. The synthesis arises from the dialectical interplay between being and non-being, resulting in the concept of becoming. Through this process, being and non-being merge and transform into a higher form of reality, known as becoming. Hegel's philosophy often employs this dialectical approach, where opposing ideas or concepts interact and give rise to a higher, more comprehensive understanding (Hegel, 1955). This is how the Hegel tried to reconcile the problem of being and non-being in his logic.

According to Schopenhauer (2002), the key mistake made by all philosophical systems is their failure to acknowledge the intrinsic relationship between intellect and matter, or being and

non-being. He argues that intellect and matter are interdependent and inseparable. Each exists only in relation to the other, and they stand or fall together. They are essentially two perspectives or manifestations of the same underlying reality. From one point of view, we perceive being or intellect, while from the opposite point of view, we perceive non-being or matter. Schopenhauer suggests that these two aspects are fundamentally intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation. They are ultimately different expressions of the same underlying essence (Schopenhauer, 2002: 114).

Indeed, in the 20th century, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1967:1) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1956: 78-79) reignited the exploration of being in philosophical discourse. Heidegger, in particular, believed that the question of being had been overlooked and neglected in Western philosophy. He saw the need to revive and prioritize this inquiry, making it the focal point of his philosophical framework. Heidegger's existential phenomenology aimed to investigate the nature of being and the human existence, delving into the fundamental ontological questions surrounding existence, authenticity, and our relationship to the world. Sartre, on the other hand, emphasized the existentialist perspective and the freedom of individual choice, exploring the concept of being and non-being in relation to human existence and personal responsibility. Both philosophers played significant roles in bringing the question of being back into philosophical discourse in the 20th century.

Heidegger posits that the question of Being remains an unresolved problem. His seminal work *Being and Time* (1967) is entirely dedicated to delving into the essence of being in its comprehensive unity. His inquiry focuses on Being itself, or the Being of beings, as distinct from individual beings. Being serves as the origin of beings, revealing itself through them. Consequently, Heidegger argues that we should turn to the source of beings in order to gain a deeper understanding (Azenabor, 1996: 266). We will return to how Heidegger explored this problem in the latter part of this work.

Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist philosopher, takes a different approach to the concept of being. He rejects the idea that being is the source or essence of beings, contrary to the early Greek philosophers' beliefs. According to Sartre, being is not a hidden reality in which objects participate, and he dismisses idealistic or mystical notions about being. He polemically argues that being is not what beings manifest. Instead, Sartre views being as contingent and denies that

it can be explained through variations. He asserts that being simply exists, without any inherent purpose or justification for its existence. Sartre introduces the distinction between being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) and being-in-itself (*en-soi*) (Sartre, 1956: 78-79). The former refers to conscious being, while the latter refers to unconscious being. Sartre suggests that the foundation of being is nothingness, as it emerges from a state of non-being.

Indeed, the question of being has sparked a plethora of arguments and interpretations throughout the history of philosophy. The term "Being" itself, as the most general and abstract concept, may appear empty and lacking in specific information. Some early Greek thinkers opposed the idea of emptiness or nothingness, while others embraced and utilized it as a means to deepen their understanding of reality and counter the threats of nihilism and superficiality (Unah, 2006: 6). This divergence of views on being has led to a division in the study of being, classified as *metaphysica specialis* and *metaphysica generalis* (Unah, 2006). The former camp regards the search for being as a pseudo problem and directs their attention to the study of individual beings. These thinkers often belong to the scientific community and focus on specific fields of study, making empirical claims about the understanding of reality. On the other hand, the latter camp engages in pure metaphysics and ontology, delving into the fundamental nature of being itself. Thinkers like Heidegger fall into this category, as they explore the deeper dimensions of being, seeking to unveil its essence and significance. It is within this context that philosophers have grappled with the question of being, offering diverse perspectives and interpretations that shape the ongoing discourse in metaphysics and ontology.

### **The Fusion of Being and Non-Being**

Indeed, the historical analysis suggests that traditional Western ontology, starting from Parmenides and extending through various philosophical movements, faces challenges in making meaningful sense of the concept of being without considering its relationship with non-being. The interplay between being and non-being has been a recurring theme in philosophical discussions, highlighting the intricate nature of existence and the need to address both aspects for a comprehensive understanding. Fraught with this unpalatable prejudice, Heidegger states that traditional metaphysicians "Does not induce Being to speak for itself, it does not recall being in its truth, and it neither recalls truth in its unconcealedness, nor does it recall the nature of unconcealedness" (Heidegger, 1959:313).

Efforts have been undertaken to address the perplexing nature these concepts by bridging the apparent gap between being and non-being. One notable proponent of this endeavor is Jim Unah, who aligns himself with the ideas put forth by Heidegger. In his inaugural lecture titled *Even Nothing is Something*, he asserts that: “The first critical point here is that the question of Being and the question of non-being are intrinsically interwoven. The one could not go without the other, because in the nature of human thought and in the nature of things the question concerning something (i.e. Being) and the question concerning nothing (i.e. nonbeing) always dovetails into each other (Unah, 2006: 7). The gamut of Unah’s argument is that, when we mention being, it leads us to beings and the search for Being ends in Nothing. Thus, for Heidegger, ‘not’ is the core of philosophy, it is the core of reality. Being and non-being is equivalent

The essence of his argument revolves around the notion that when we speak of being, it inevitably directs our attention to entities, and the quest for Being ultimately culminates in Nothingness. Consequently, according to Heidegger (1967), the concept of "not" constitutes the fundamental element of philosophy and reality alike. Being and non-being are thus considered to be equivalent. In order to demonstrate the unity of being and non-being, Heidegger argues that something contains the negation of itself within itself. The act of negation involves asserting that a particular thing is not something else, as illustrated in human thought when we express statements such as "Tris is not a seamstress". The presence of negation within being points to the inherent interconnectedness of being and non-being. ‘Not’ is primordial and it springs from the experience of nothing itself. According to Heidegger, “The Not does not come into being through negation, but negation is based on the Not which derives from the Nihilation of Nothing” (Heidegger, 1956, 341).

Unah (2006:15) argues that the presence of nothingness is inherent in human nature, which becomes evident when we find ourselves in distressing situations. In such moments, we often reassure ourselves by saying phrases like "nothing is the matter with me." Unah explains that in moments of dread, we directly encounter nothingness. When we experience dread and acknowledge the absence of something, it is not the philosophers of nothingness prompting us to do so. We do it instinctively because nothingness is ingrained in the very fabric of human existence. It is an integral part of our being's composition. Unah & Osegenwune, (2010: 39) writes that: “...the point at issue here is that the human mind, for all intents and purposes, cannot

be conscious of nothing where nothing is understood to mean “not anything” or “total nothing” and that whatever the mind thinks about must be something connected to the world in one way or another”. Following from the view of Unah, who, in turn, agrees with Heidegger’s concept of being in his treatise *Being and Time (Zeit und Sein)*, that Being cannot be reduced to a thing, but it also implies a duration. This durational principle of Being is also evident in Unah’s view. It suggests that the very evocation of non-being immediately calls into its presence the object that it appears to negate, and that the state of being and non-being may represent a fluctuating state.

Expanding on the unique cognitive capacity of the human mind, we can contend that it has exerted a substantial influence on the origination and evolution of the concept of nothingness. It is through this inherent cognitive ability that the term "nothing" was initially coined. The process of conceptualization is deeply ingrained in human cognition, demonstrating that the intentional act of conceiving nothingness as nothing is an innate characteristic within us. It is this particular act that captivates my interest as it serves as a suggestive indication of the potential unity between being and non-being.

A Semantic breakdown of the word "NOTHING" reveals several aspects of its meaning and relevance for the question of being and non-being. When we analyze the word “NOTHING”, we can identify some other words within it. The first word is “NO”. The word "NO" indicates the absence or negation of something. It is often used as a negative response or denial to a question or request. The second word is “NOT”. The word “NOT” is a negation or denial indicating the absence or negation of something. It is used to express negation or opposition. The third word is “THING”. The word “THING” refers to an object, item, or entity. It describes something that exists or can be identified. By combining these words, we form the term “NOTHING”, which encompasses the concept of the absence or negation of any specific object, item, or entity. By the intentional act of the mind, we join the words and arrive at the concept of ‘Nothing’. Through this deliberate engagement of the mind as well, we can unite both being and non-being under the concept of 'Nothing'. This observation highlights the interconnection between nothingness and existence, as both concepts are intricately intertwined. It suggests that nothing can give rise to something, just as something can lead to nothing, as they are mutually embedded within each other.

In an attempt to further frame the debate around the issues of language and semantics, it's important to acknowledge the contributions of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's later work *Philosophical Investigations* which reflected his shift away from the more formal and logical approach found in the *Tractatus*, centered upon the problem of how language is often inadequate to discuss the philosophical nature of the world and universe. Language for him is rather a collection of words and phrases that can be used to refer to a variety of different concepts, which can lead to confusion or misinterpretation (Wittgenstein, 1963). Following from his claim, instead of looking at these kinds of debates as simply being a duality between "a thing", and "nothing", or "being", and non-being, Wittgenstein discussed the idea that the philosophical quest for universal truths are often built upon premises that can be considered as "nonsensical", and "sensible" (Wittgenstein, 1961). Those that are deemed "nonsensical", can nevertheless lead to conclusions that are logical and grounded in empirical truths. Thus, 'nothing' which may seem nonsensical contains within it 'thing' which may lead to logical conclusions. Thus, philosophers may wish to focus on the semantic or linguistic constructions that govern philosophical debate in an attempt to unravel and make them clearer.

Furthermore, there are variations in diverse languages. For instance, some of the nuances of African languages, especially some grammatical constructions in African languages are different from those of European languages. For example, in European languages, concepts, such as "no", "not", and "non"— represent free particles that can be associated with nouns ("nothing"), verbs ("do *not* do something"), and even adjectives (think of the colloquial English greeting "How are you?"; to which one responds, "I am *not* bad."). In Nigerian languages, Yoruba language for example, the negative particle is often embedded within the verb. So, for example, in standard Yoruba, one can say "I am not going to the store" (Èmi kò lo sí ilé ìtájà); but one would have difficulty finding an exact translation for the English word "nothing" (perhaps *kò sí*, which more accurately means "there is nothing"). Likewise in many Niger-Congo languages, the negative particle is often rooted within the verb. In standard Swahili, "I am not going to the store" means (*Siendi dukani*); but one would also not find an exact translation for the English word "nothing" (perhaps *Sio kitu* which means "it is not a thing" or '*hakuna kitu*' which means "there is nothing"). In any event, such negative verbal particles actually are very congruent with Heidegger's concept that 'Being' is not merely corporeal existence, but also implies a degree of duration. Thus, going beyond the idea that nothing implies something, as this work accurately

surmises, the lesson from African languages is that the English word “nothing” does evoke the changing, ephemeral nature of Being and matter, because negating is an intrinsic part of action, and not just material existence.

## Conclusion

The article examined the Parmenidean perspective on being and non-being, which has generated philosophical interest in the concept of "Nothing." Numerous efforts have been made to address this matter, seeking to resolve the inherent problem it presents. This work contributes to these endeavors by asserting that being and non-being are intricately intertwined and cannot be divorced from each other. This ongoing Western debate largely centers upon semantics. Both being and non-being as is the case with the idea of “nothing” as being semantically bound to the thing that it negates, are intrinsically interwoven. One cannot not possess a thing, unless a thing exists in some other time or context. Therefore, instead of mere friction, there exists a fusion between these concepts, as exemplified by the analysis of the word "NOTHING". The mention of being implies the presence of non-being, and conversely, any discussion of non-being acknowledges the existence of being. This interconnectedness is demonstrated through the concept of NO/Thing, highlighting that an examination or exploration of one concept invariably leads to the consideration of the other.

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