

METAPHYSICS OF NOTHINGNESS: HEIDEGGER, IBN ‘ARABI AND NAGARJUNA

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Abstract

For this article, the author attempts to describe the metaphysics of nothingness from three sources; Martin Heidegger, Ibn ‘Arabi and Nagarjuna. Each of the philosophers engages the intimation of ‘the nothing’ to fathom the existential question of being, reality and logic. The idea for the article was influenced by Heidegger's seminal text “What is Metaphysic?” (1929/1998). Heidegger writes how human “a being held out into the nothing.” Why and how is human holding out into the nothingness? What are the boundaries that form this nothingness? Rather than risk into pessimistic existentialism, the author pursues the question of nihilism in the nothingness with the kind of joy, as Heidegger would say it: “Secret alliance with the cheerfulness and gentleness of creative longing.” With three different thinkers from different eras – Heidegger was a German philosopher but brought up with Christian teachings, Ibn ‘Arabi was an Andalusian Islamic Sufi whereas Nagarjuna was an Indian-Buddhist teacher – it is hoped that the idea about nothingness can be grappled and if not, be meditated upon.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, Ibn ‘Arabi, Nagarjuna, nothingness, metaphysics

Why ‘Nothingness’?

أَوَلَا يَذْكُرُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنَا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِن قَبْلُ وَلَمْ يَكُ شَيْئًا ﴿٦٧﴾

Does man not remember that We created him before, while he was nothing? (Al-Quran, 19: 67)

In the expanse of the world, there stands a reality unknown and mysterious to the human mind. Some people have called it God, and for some others, the cosmos. In this space of hiddenness, *nothingness* reigns. Voidness, emptiness, nihilation, *das nicht*, *śūnyatā*, *ketiadaan* – these are the names that were called forth in understanding the hiddenness sensed by our inner being. That the history of human mind still finding the time and will to excavate this reality – only language can even glimpse its periphery. Modern science cannot even sense the nothing much less measure the intensity and the level it may consist. Only our poetic mind can grope the nothing. “If logic is incapable,” writes Frithjof Schuon, “of drawing out of itself the truths of the Invisible, this is obviously because it cannot draw anything whatsoever out of itself (..)” (2006, p. 78). Only the thinking, meditating person can even formulate the nothing into words, its fullness, and even then, it is a *mere* cup of water from the ocean of Ocean.

The question of the nothing has always been a perplexing and a curious matter to many thinkers. It is there but stays inescapably hidden. It exists – which is why language can shape reality. Or better, nothingness is why language can be made sense in the first place. That language is ably employed can only *be* since we are close to the nothing. Because our essence; it stays in the nothing. My Muslim background can help situate this writing better; I believe in Allah and the Messenger, Muhammad. I pray every day, but the Whom that I am praying to is Unseen; cannot even be seen in this world. Ages ago, Prophet Moses attempted to see his God, but the mountains melted around him. The phenomenon of the unveiling was too great a burden that Moses directly *sujud* (prostrated), in awe not only to the Power but in awe too, of his

earlier desire, to even want to see God in the first place! Only one thing that makes one *sujud* to God and that is one's *belief*. Everything else pales to this belief. It is the kind of belief that creates and empowers the inner desire to kneel before God. At the core of my belief nothing is much more powerful, but the intellect itself.

God is the Unseen, the invisible Reality. God is the eternal divine wisdom (*al-Hikma al-Ilahiyya*). He exists in such a way that His existence is the highest reality in the existence. The hiddenness of His Aspect; it is the Nothingness and Presence of the Being. It is this Paradox that creates the beautiful tenseness of atheistic ideologue and religious belief in mankind. God is the Nothingness par excellence. In the Nothingness of which God rules supreme, the blazes of His nothingness moves and spreads all over His creations; bringing forth life (what is life but a 'previously-nothing?') and destroying life (does not life get back to its early inertia, the eternal nothing?).

What this article seeks to understand, in the most ephemeral way possible, is not about the God's existence, but the smallest spark of the Nothingness which is lost when we speak so much of appearances and creations. In our busy-ness with our everyday life, this spark is withheld from us. Without comprehending this spark, the Highest Reality cannot be known by our *aql* (intellect). My humble article here *attempts* to think nothingness, to write about our relationships with nothingness and why it matters to the intellect. The journey to this thinking, the depth of our thinking, is what Frithjof Schuon says in *Logic & Transcendence* (2009) as "contemplative interiorization." While the aspect of nothingness is an enigmatic element that aroused my interest, let me first admit that it is in Heidegger's writings, especially his lecture given in 1929, '*What is Metaphysics?*', that the concept of nothing turns incredibly profound. Heidegger's lecture describes in a most enthralling manner the ontology of human abyss; of how the anxiety, the power of language and homelessness of human essence are grouped in such way that the door to the nothing can be sensed fleetingly. It is to this lecture that this article will find its footing, as it gropes around in darkness. However, it is not enough to simply extend Heidegger's thinking; we need to know about the nothingness from different thinkers as well. There are two main reasons why Ibn 'Arabi and

Nagarjuna are selected to accompany the thinking of this article. First, I have been reading Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings for the past six years and have been very much impressed with his speculative metaphysics, which is Islamic Sufi brought to the extreme shore. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s works, for example in *Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, there is an undefinable rawness that runs against the Western philosophy or even Islamic philosophy per se. Ibn ‘Arabi’s longing for his God fits well with the *poetics of the unsayable*, making him well-suited to the task of this article. Secondly, my choice for Nagarjuna stems from finishing (and admiring) his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, an important Buddhist text. In the text, Nagarjuna brings his own understanding that everything is *empty signs*. His interpretation on *sunyata* (Sanskrit term that means ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’) and how it relates to Buddhist teaching enhances this article from a traditionalist (and proto-existentialist) perspective to the nuance of nothingness. With three different thinkers from different backgrounds, perhaps the problem (or the aesthetics) of the nothing can be further apprehended, and if not, at least appreciated for its mysterious hiddenness from everyday beings.

Take note that the discussion on the nothingness, since it is influenced by phenomenology, Buddhist theology and Sufism, is very interpretive and can be quite personal since the accounts at sometimes posits and highlights the experience of the author. As Heidegger would say it, in the analysis of phenomena, “We are ourselves the entities to be analysed” (1962, p. 42). There is an element of *Jemeinigkeit* (Heidegger’s concept which means ‘mineness’) that leaks, when elaborating poetical and mystical works. In respect to timeline, I will start with the modern philosopher Heidegger (20th century), and then to the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn ‘Arabi (12th century), and finally to the Indian sage Nagarjuna (2nd century). By the end of this article, I will conclude, and hopefully, knit some basic patterns of nothingness from these three distinctive and influential authors. The walk through the realm of nothing is not without its risk, and I ask the reader to be open to the grace of the depth of our thinking.

Heidegger and the Metaphysics of the Nothing

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was a renowned German phenomenologist who first studied Jesuit in Tisis, Vorarlberg but stopped and continued his studies in theology and philosophy in the University of Freiburg, Germany. There, he met with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who was at that time, the leading exponent of a new philosophy called as phenomenology. Husserl's early work on phenomenology, *Logical Investigations* (1900–01), influenced Heidegger to such an extent that he radicalized the Husserlian phenomenology as the poetic reverberation of *Sein* (Being), and how Western metaphysics are plagued by the forgetfulness history of Being. The idea of Heideggerian phenomenology is summarized by Taylor Carman: "If we had to define phenomenology as a study of appearance, in some sense of the word, we would have to add that the relevant contrast is not between appearance and *reality*, as it was for Husserl, but between appearance and *disappearance* – showing and hiding, revealing and concealing" (Heidegger, 1962, p. xviii). To comprehend Heidegger's philosophy, we must look at his idea on *Dasein*, German word which literally means 'being-there'. *Dasein* is an existing being, whose core is the issue of Being. Another word for Being is 'presence'. *Dasein* is a being who is aware of its existence and is involved in the project of caring with other beings. Heidegger calls *Dasein* *In-der-welt-sein* (being-in-the-world), a presence who is always, inescapably, with the world. As such, any rigorous analysis done on human being must take into consideration of the worldly context of the way *Dasein* is comported. Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics* (1998) asks a simple but a significant question: "*Wie steht es um das Nichts?*" "How is it with the nothing?" The question posed not only says 'hello' to the nothing but asks its feeling! Heidegger believes that the question of the nothing is neglected in our pursuit towards science, whose method has been *dominating* the thinking of modern man. Even the structure of humanities studies now has become engrained with scientific objectivity, instrumentation, quantification and measurement. Heidegger writes: "To demand exactness in the study of history is to violate the idea of the specific rigor of the humanities" (1998, p. 83). Why would history governed by the same

linguistics employed in the collection and the exactitude of data? The problem of scientific research is not just its dictating approach, but that in the course of its authentication of things, we have become blinded by science's usefulness and its compressive, massive methodology.

Heidegger muses, "Science wishes to know nothing of the nothing." But what can we know regarding the nothing? Is 'nothing' a being? It seems that in posing the question of nothing, an 'is' pops out. What *is* 'is'? It does seem that by speaking 'is', Being is manifested. In uttering Being, *das Nicht* (the nothing) too is affirmed. Being and nothing rhymes to the core since they are what our existence are made of. The nothing, Heidegger says, "is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple" (1998, p. 85). He asks further: "Where shall we seek the nothing?" The question playfully asks the whereabouts of nothing as if it is an accessible region where one can chart a bus. The assumption that we *venture* to seek Being means that it is already existing in the amalgamation of our humanity. Human existence moves in a world whose horizon is the collective meaningfulness of our understanding with other beings. Heidegger declares: "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" (1998, p. 87). What this 'whole' is can be observed in authentic boredom, which is triggered when one is bored. Heidegger pens further:

Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the
abysses of our existence like a muffling fog,
removes all things and human beings and one self
along with them into a remarkable indifference.
This boredom manifests beings as a whole (1998,
p. 87).

The statement above asks us to think deeper our relationship with our other self, the bored-self. The state of our boredom, Heidegger thinks, resides in the presence from which beings can be made sense. To be sure, our life in this earth is an existence full of boredom. Standing while waiting for appointments are a state of dreariness.

This boredom becomes even more distinct when the person we wait turns up very, very late. The anxiety turns into frustration, even anger. In passing away the time, one gets restless out of the waiting, which is why the modern man fidgets around and play with his smartphone, 'to kill the time.' In waiting, time is *stretched*; the reason why time feels incredibly slow in the state of boredom. Time is not a physical thing, but its stretchedness is so acute, that it covers over our other lighter mood like happiness. In this state of boredom, things around us become more 'manifested' in their beingness. The disquieting mood we feel is not something like an uninvited guest. It is already there, in the depth of our abyssal being, but the manifestness of the boredom incite a deeper anxiety to its surface. Boredom pulls out the wholesome of beings, but at the same time, the essence of the beings continue to be trapped under the opacity that is the smoldering boring.

Usually in boredom, things look plainer. Objects have lost their rainbows since the observer himself is being boring. But boredom is not the only happening which manifests beings as a whole; there is another mood such as joy, which is provoked to the surface when we meet our loved ones. Joy and boredom attune us to beings, and this attunement, Heidegger considers, "conceal from us the nothing we are seeking" (1998, p. 87). Heidegger thinks that the type of mood which can disclose the nothing in its most fundamental nature is the fundamental mood of anxiety (1998, p. 88). Anxiousness is an existential structure of human being; a form of *fitrah* (an Arabic and Malay language which closely resembles the word 'primordial state'). Anxiety is different than horror in that it does not cloud one's mind, for example, when we are afraid of something, we tend to be panic and confused, creating further irrational actions. Angst is a fundamental phenomenon of Dasein, but it comes to us in such a way that "a peculiar calm pervades it" (1998, p. 88). There are two extended propositions by Heidegger in the essay *What is Metaphysics*: Firstly, in anxiety we say "one feels uncanny" (1998, p. 88), and secondly, anxiety makes manifest the nothing (1998, p. 88).

I would like to elaborate what Heidegger means by the uncanniness above, and its relation to the nothing. In consciousness, things slide and slip away. The phenomenon of slipping away is like

a receding, and can be oppressive. Let us cite an example. I am currently sitting on a chair. There is nothing remarkable about the chair except that it serves a purpose; something that I can sit on, so as to rest my body. My indifference toward the chair ropes my existential structure to the anxiety that is always there since as beings, we ‘hover’ in the chasm of anxiety. However, the more I am aware of the chair, the lesser my anxiety gets. Heidegger believes “anxiety leaves us hanging, because it induces the slipping away of beings as a whole” (1998, p. 88). The hovering of ‘the nothing’ is uncanny in the sense that ‘the nothing’ is what we are holding to as Dasein. The manifestation of anxiety brings us another impact: “*Die Angst verschlägt uns das Wort.*” “Anxiety robs us of speech.” (1998, p. 89). Heidegger continues: “Because beings as a whole slip away, so that precisely the nothing crowds around, all utterance of the ‘is’ falls silent in the face of nothing” (1998, p. 89). The ‘is’ turns quiet when nothingness is all there is in its abyssal depth. The crowding of the nothing, to quote Susan Sontag, is “precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare” (2002, p. 29). Language stay silent in the baring of nothingness. In the silence of language, we speedily fill up with more talks, revealing further our concealed dread for the nothingness. Heidegger bemuses: “That in the uncanniness of anxiety we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk only proves the presence of the nothing” (1998, p. 89). We talk incessantly, but do we not realize the gift of emptiness whose vacuum lends us gravity for contemplative meanings?

The question of anxiety as a fundamental attunement have been a source of intellectual fecundity to many thinkers other than Heidegger, for example, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In a book entitled *The Concept of Anxiety*, the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard pronounces: “Flee from anxiety he cannot, for he loves it; really love it he cannot, for he flees from it” (2014, p. 53). It is a paradox: We cannot run away from anxiety for it is already part of our peculiar whole, but we keep on running from it. Kierkegaard defines further anxiety as “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (2014, p. 51). In another paragraph, anxiety is termed by Kierkegaard as “the anxious possibility of being able” (2014, p. 54). Kierkegaard is aware that it is in anxiety

that possibility grows wings. In a deep jungle, one prepares tools to hunt deer for one is anxious what to eat tomorrow.

Heidegger sees anxiety as the ground from where we sink into, but its depth is immeasurable, sudden. "Anxiety," Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*, "is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*" (1962, p. 231). Angst cannot be exactly pinpointed; it is already *there* but comes from nowhere. No instruments can be exacted against it. This is why when anxiety recedes, one says, "Ah. It is nothing." In my local Malay slang: "*Takde apa-apa hal la.*" Exactly since nothing 'is', the nothing can be called forth, to come over, to cover its invisible track. Heidegger contemplates: "*In der Angst ist einem 'unheimlich.'*" "In anxiety one feels uncanny" (1962, p. 233). The German word for uncanny is *unheimlich*, literally meaning 'homelessness' or 'unhomelike', points to the possible state of beings abandoned by its essence. The poetic resonance here is that, to be in the state of anxiety is akin to the taste of not being at home with our inner being. Heidegger writes, "Being has become manifest as a burden. Why that should be, one does not know" (1962, p. 173). One does not know, since one does not *care* to know. Anxiety and uncanny, structured in the simple core of 'care' – the elements that make up being-in-the-world – are what bring forth conscience. It is conscience which saves human from being lost to the appeal of mass public and the technics of herd mentality. However, conscience has the charisma of silence. One usually silent the call, and drowns right into the fashion of society and digital trend.

The call of conscience brings forth 'the nothing' into the discourse. Pursuing this argument, Heidegger writes: "Conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent" (1962, p. 318). Care (like anxiety) is perceived in its 'nowhereness', but forces Dasein into an armor of reticence, the same source why human can turn silent, goes into a corner, and meditate. The call, which is nowhere, comes from *nowhere*. It drifts, Heidegger says, "here and there, in the abyss of our existence like a muffling fog" (1998, p. 87). The nothing grows in the recession of appearances and entities. But is nothing even a being? Heidegger answers: "The nothing unveils itself in anxiety – but not as a being" (1998, p. 89). A true anxiety is the readiness to behold and grasp Being. The

occurring of anxiety is a “shrinking back before beings” in a kind of “entranced calm” (Heidegger, 1998, p. 90). We can observe closely how a sense *for* the nothing is vital in obtaining an entranced calm. Throughout the history of Zen Buddhism, the monks are profoundly taught to annihilate the self, so that in the recession of self, meditation can take place, so as to achieve calmness. Meditation another form of “shrinking back before beings”; to withhold and to destroy the self at the same time.

Heidegger states: “In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety, the original openness of beings as such arises; that they are beings – and not nothing” (1998, p. 90). Take note how the nothing is expressed like “a clear night”, a different type of nothingness, a cloudless night where contemplation and wonderment grow. The “original openness” above is like an expanse of clearing where the ambiguity of truth is possibly embraced. In this state, it is only “on the original manifestness of the nothing can human Dasein approach and penetrate beings.” (1998, p. 91). Heidegger then shifts to redefine the term Dasein. “Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing” (1998, p. 91). The statement moves Dasein from literally ‘being-there’ to an entity that is not only the site for nothingness, but an existence who holds fast to the chasm of nothingness. Heidegger further suggests: “Going beyond beings occurs in the essence of Dasein” (1998, p. 96).

The inner existential realm of human being is always thought by Heidegger and Nietzsche as a sort of abyss, a depthless bottom where thinking grows its rudimentary root. According to wiktionary.org, the meaning of ‘abyss’ is “anything infinite, immeasurable, or profound.” In existentialist literature, the abyss is that vast unknown region which manifests the powerful grip of anxiety. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche states:

Not the height: the precipice is terrifying! The precipice, where the glance plunges *downward* and the hand reaches *upward*. Where the heart is made dizzy by its double will. Ah, friends, can you perhaps guess what is my heart’s double will? This, this is *my* precipice and my danger, that my glance plunges

into the height and my hand would like to hold on
and support itself – by the depths! (2005, p. 123).

Nietzsche is both terrified and fascinated by the height, and he shudders even more by the chasm that lies down. There is a real literary intensity in Nietzsche's abyss-groping and abyss-holding statement above. Man is no longer a master of his mind, but advances like a spiritual beast. The fear of plunging downward into the depth is absurdly imagined by Nietzsche like an ascension of man's being. In the poetic dreams of Nietzsche, "the human is a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman – a rope over an abyss" (2005, p. 13). The term overhuman by Nietzsche is a direct translation of the German *Übermensch*, an imminent people whose stronger willpower provides new values and overreaching goal for present-day humanity. Nietzsche expressed the abyss in a different colour than Heidegger's 'ground for astonishment'; it is "a dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still" (2005, p. 13). The human abyssal ground moves but it moves precisely since it is perpetually *standing still*. The dualist vibration between being-still and being-move sustain the necessary conflicts and harmony in our *jasad* (Arabic and Malay word which signifies 'body'). Nietzsche's image here represents the absurd existence of human, the spiritual beast who longs but shudders at the sight of danger. Near to the end of '*What is Metaphysics*', Heidegger provides us further hint to the workings of nothingness, a statement which I believe will wrap up our discussion on Heidegger's thinking on the nothing so far:

Only because the nothing is manifest in the ground of Dasein can the total strangeness of beings overwhelm us. Only when the strangeness of beings oppresses us does it arouse and evoke wonder. Only on the ground of wonder – the manifestness of the nothing – does the 'why' loom before us. Only because we can question and ground things is the destiny of our existence placed in the hands of the researcher (1998, p. 95-96).

Ibn ‘Arabi and the Imagination of Nothingness

Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi was born in Mursiya, al-Andalus (which is Murcia in current Spain) around 1165-1240. Henry Corbin, introducing Ibn ‘Arabi’s works in *History of Islamic Philosophy* (1962), suddenly turns small and praises: “We now come to the shore of an endless sea, to the foot of a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds” (1962, p. 291). Ibn ‘Arabi was called by his followers as Shaykh al-Akbar, the Greatest Master, a title fit for a person who has (in the estimation of Osman Yahia) produced a staggering amount of works – 700 books, treatises and collection of poetry (with 400 surviving).¹ His magnum opus, *Futuh al-Makkiyya* (translated into English as *The Meccan Revelations* or *The Openings in Makkah*), have 560 chapters and some chapters are book-like in length which can fill up to 17,000 pages according to Yahia’s critical edition. Eric Winkel is right when he writes that listening to Ibn ‘Arabi, is “to be flung on the path” (2010, p. 57). It is a path with a goal of understanding the mysteries of Allah. Ibn ‘Arabi based his philosophical writings from Al-Quran and the Hadith (the sayings of Prophet Muhammad), Islamic theology (*al-‘ilm al-ilahi*) and other great Sufi teachers. The dualist quality of the reality – between earth and sky, between light and dark, body and spirit – is an important aspect of Ibn ‘Arabi’s literature. The coupling of light (*nur*) and darkness (*zulma*) can be understood in the pairing of God, the Light of Reality, while the darkness is the uncreated light of nothingness, the absolute nonexistence (Chittick, 1989, p. 13-16). There is The Light and there is the light. God created the Angels (*Malaikat*) from light, however when compared to God’s Light, His creations become darker in contrast. The intensity of the creation, or the levels of creation (*tafaddul*) is something which Ibn ‘Arabi focuses upon – to create distancing effect from *Al-Haqq* (True Reality) to His pale creations. Again and again, the cosmos are described by Ibn ‘Arabi in dualist dialectics; luminous (*nurani*) and dark (*zulmani*), subtle (*latif*) and dense

¹ According to J. Clark and S. Hirstenstein (2012), only 300-350 texts were actually written by Ibn ‘Arabi.

(*kathif*), spiritual (*ruhani*) and corporeal (*jismani*), revealed being (*zahir*) and hidden (*batin*). In another paragraph, Ibn 'Arabi speaks of the two-fold condition of moods, "Desirable is two-fold, a desire for proximity and desire for seeing." "And fear is two-fold, a fear of punishment and a fear of a veil over the Divine" (2016, p. 83).

The common Arabic term Ibn 'Arabi uses to speak of the nothingness in *Futuh al-Makkiya* is 'adam, which can also mean 'nonexistence', 'lack' or 'absence'. 'Adam is not a highly specialized term like Buddhist *sunyata*. Sometimes, Ibn 'Arabi employs *al-khala'*, which can have the same meaning between 'emptiness' and 'void.' Unlike Heidegger's ontological description of the nothing, or Nagarjuna's concise, logical compression of *sunyata*, 'adam in Ibn 'Arabi's vocabulary usually refers to the nothingness when paired with the act of creation, nonexistence or in the Presence of God. In Ibn 'Arabi's creative imagination, nothingness also refers to one who is *haba'* (dust) in the sight of Truest Reality, Allah. Only as *haba'*, a person can profile the *truth* of the nothing. In *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Lights (Mashahid al-asrar al-qudsiya wa-matali al-anwar al-ilahiyya)*, Ibn 'Arabi writes a hint from The Divine Reality, "Your knowledge is scattered dust. Your qualities are nothing. Your reality is only a metaphor in a corner of My being" (2001, p. 4). The dustiness manifests the quality of mankind as a lowliest creature in comparison to Divine reality, and at the same time, the alchemy from which mankind is created from. The nothing is but a realm, the austerity of the soul, as a receptor of God's insight. At the beginning of *Futuh al-Makkiyya*, he writes (*Futuh al-I* 10.26, cited from Chittick, 1989: xiv):

When I kept knocking on God's door
I waited mindfully, not distracted,
Until there appeared to the eye of the glory of His
Face
And a call to me, nothing else.
I encompassed Being in knowledge –
Nothing is in my heart but God.

In Sufism, the human body is nothing but a site in receiving God's Goodness. Forms are both veils and receptors of True Knowledge. "There is nothing in *wujud* (existence) but veils hung down," says Ibn 'Arabi (*Futuhāt* III, 214.9; 1998, p. 110). Such is his devotion to his God that everything he sees is not just symptoms of God's existence, but God's Glory manifested as forms:

My eyes have never gazed
 on other than His Face
My ears have never heard
 Other than His words!
(*Futuhāt* II, 459.21; cited in Chittick, 1989, p. 84.)

The things that Ibn 'Arabi hears and sees – they are blinding! Ibn 'Arabi believes that True Light manifests Itself thoroughly into the structure of his inner belief. The Light lights up the shadowy corner of his soul and blinds his sight to the things themselves until everything is but a paler reality to Allah. The phenomenology of Ibn 'Arabi is a poetic praise to the Most Gracious. As such, the practical aspect of praising, the *solat* (prayer), becomes another 'supersensory sensibility', creating "the world in which spirits are materialized and bodies spiritualized" (Corbin, 1969, p. 182). In prayer, there is unity of being, between Creator and creature. The unity, which is paradoxical in nature, is expressed by Ibn 'Arabi: "We have given Him to manifest Himself through us, whereas He has given us (to exist through Him). Thus the role is shared between Him and us." "If He has given us life and existence by His being, I also give Him life by knowing Him in my heart" (cited in Corbin, 1969, p. 247). In prayer, a higher creative imagination is needed. This imagination must be tapped by our inner concentration to behold the existence of the Higher Plane. This statement shows the difference between one who is *khusyu'* (solemn) in prayer and one who is only performing a ritual. "For prayer," Corbin describes in the gnosis of Sufistic tradition, "is not a request for something: it is the expression of a mode of being, a means of existing and of *causing to exist*, that is, a means of causing the God who reveals Himself to appear, of 'seeing' Him, not to be sure in His essence, but in the *form* which

precisely He reveals by revealing Himself by and to that form” (1969, p. 249).

The mysticism of Creation, in Ibn 'Arabi's theosophy, is called as a theophany (*tajalli*). It takes real power to ensemble creation and as such, requires divine imagination. Henry Corbin, interpreting Ibn 'Arabi's text, states: “The God whom it ‘creates,’ far from being an unreal product of our fantasy, is also a theophany, for man's Active Imagination is merely the organ of the absolute theophanic Imagination (*takhayyul mutlaq*)” (Corbin, 1969, p. 183). When one prays, the remembrance of God and His Power resides in active imagination – but this imagination should not think God as resembling other creature but to imagine oneself in the face of God's Presence, in nothingness, to create space for our soul to move towards solemnity and respect. In a declaration that is influenced by Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin writes, “Prayer is a theophany par excellence; as such it is ‘creative’; but the God who reveals Himself to Prayer in this Creation, and this Creation, at this moment, is one among theophanies whose real Subject is the Godhead revealing Himself to Himself” (1969, p. 183). Swayed by Ibn 'Arabi's research, Corbin's phenomenological description regarding Islamic prayer is wonderfully mysterious. Sufism is the question and beauty of evoking the unsayable, the experience of *ma'rifa* “the light that illumines and clarifies” and the intensity that “dazzles, blinds, and ultimately extinguishes the one designated as a ‘knower’ (*al-'arif*)” (Shah-Kazemi, 2002, p. 155). God discloses His Essence of Himself in His creation's prayer but His true audience is nothing but Himself; the prayer has become a *mere site* to receive His Grace, a site of Openness, receiving and bestowing *nikmah* (Divine pleasure) to the owner of the prayer.

Existence is neither Being nor nothingness but is situated in the middle, vaguely. The connection between Being and nothingness is called *barzakh* (isthmus). All three aspects of existence – Being, *barzakh*, nothingness – come to be through the great faculty of our imagination. (This is not to say everything is imagination, but that we can *conjure* the images as such). The cosmos is called *al-khayal mutlaq* (nondelimited imagination) while the imaginal world, *al-khayal al-muqayyad* (delimited imagination).

The Nondelimited Imagination is thought by Ibn ‘Arabi as a “horn made out of light” (*Futuhat* I, 306).

The concept of *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) is very much celebrated in Sufism.² To be alone means to purge the noises of everyday, to strengthen one’s resolve to be alone with the One God. Ibn ‘Arabi writes in *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, “Your heart will not become clear of the mad ravings of the world except by distance from them” (1989, p. 31). In the process of spiritual departure, the believer empties himself except the remembrance of Allah. If Zen Buddhism teaches its disciples to empty one’s mind of emotions through *Mushin* (mind without mind), Sufi teaches one to vacant one’s mind by performing *dhikr* (remembrance), so that the Beautiful Names of Allah can shine through, ultimately encompassing one’s emotions. One of Ibn ‘Arabi’s commentators, Sheikh ‘Abdul-Karim Jili, believes that the root to *khalwa*, is *al-khala’* (the void). This void refers to a realm which the world existed before its creation. It is possible to look at how being in *khalwa* bridges the believer’s spirit, from one act of creation to one state of nonexistence. To be in the state of *khalwa* is like having the possibility to open the door to an inner voyaging (*suluk*) to layers of layers of improbable realms. According to a report by Ibn ‘Arabi, at one of the realms close the end of the spiritual journey, his being “is eradicated, then withdrawn, then effaced, then crushed, then obliterated” (1989, p. 48). Here, the consciousness of the nothing erupts and sways like no other.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s literature, the true nature of human being only resides when one is a servant to God. To highlight his words: “There is nothing but a servant and a Lord. The servant is not distinguished from the Lord save through poverty” (*Futuhat* I, 733.35; cited in Chittick, 1998, p. 48). The true awareness of the relationship between a servant and a Lord happens when one is *poor* towards his Lord. Contained within this poverty-state is the incredible wealth of *wujud* (existence). There is a hierarchic order in our worldly existence but belief in and *sujud* to Allah constitute

² For further philosophical descriptions on *khalwa*, see Fauzi Naeim M. (2018). Ibn ‘Arabi and the metaphysics of solitariness. *The XXIV World Congress of Philosophy*.

as the highest point from where we can soar as Allah’s creation. Everything else is valueless without this ideal servanthood. Ibn ‘Arabi writes: “Worship is a real name of the servant, since it is his essence, his abode, his state, his entity, his self, his reality, and his face” (*Futuhat*, II 153.33; Chittick, 1989, p. 311). Being a true servant of God is the condition to being *al-Insan al-Kamil* (Perfect Human), which ibn ‘Arabi believes to be the essential goal of human essence. Human is not foremost a political animal (Aristotle), a vessel for emptiness (Nagarjuna), will-to-power (Nietzsche), being-in-the-world (Heidegger) or a social distinction-seeking agent (Bourdieu); he is first and primarily a servant of God. It is in ‘*ibadah* (Arabic and Malay language which can also mean worship) that the essence of man is hidden. It is in ‘*ibadah* that our essence can glorify our servant-state. “When man becomes aware of the true knowledge of himself,” Ibn Arabi states, “and occupies himself with the knowledge of his own realities in respect of the fact that he is human, he sees difference between himself and the cosmos” (*Futuhat*, II, 308.22; Chittick, 1989, p. 311). The difference can only lie in the greater journey that is nowhere but within our interior dimension.

Nagarjuna, Voidness, *Śūnyatā*

Nagarjuna (150-200) is an Indian-Buddhist philosopher whose work, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (मूलमध्यमककारिका) – ‘The Middle Way’ – paths the way for Madhyamaka’s thought. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nagarjuna argues that all *dharma* (the state of a thing or a phenomenon) has the essence of *śūnya* (emptiness/ voidness) and does not have any *svabha* (intrinsic value). His ideas on emptiness are influenced by his understanding of Gautama Buddha’s teaching who in *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya* (*The Heart Sūtra*) says:

O Sariputra, form does not differ from voidness, and voidness does not differ from form. Form is voidness and voidness is form; the same is true for feeling, conception, volition and consciousness.³

³ Sariputra is known as the best follower of the Buddha’s *śravaka* (hearer).

By positing that “form does not differ from void”, Buddha transforms the relationship between things and human into a dualistic compartment; each complements each other, and yet, has voidness when viewed meditatively. In an intrinsic level, there is no difference between form and the act of seeing the form; all is relative *dharma*. There is a special reason why voidness holds supreme in Buddhist thematic philosophy; Buddha does not want his followers to be so entranced and obsessed with the world that they forget to meditate in seeking enlightenment. Buddha asks his followers to understand *pratītyasamutpāda*,⁴ which means *dependent origination*; that things have cause and effect. Only in understanding dependent origination that the concept of karma can be understood, and *dukkha* (suffering) can be withhold. For Buddha, human life in this world is full of *avidya* (delusion, ignorance). The process towards ultimate in life is termed in Buddhism as *bodhichitta* (the enlightened or the awakened mind).

Nagarjuna’s philosophy is both interpretation and commentary on Buddhist teaching. Accordingly, it is only in understanding and following the concept of *sunyata* (emptiness/voidness), can man achieve peacefulness within him, which is also the ability to differentiate between illusion and fact, the essential and the unnecessary. Like all existentialist writings after him (Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus), Nagarjuna’s philosophy celebrates the idea of paradox. All *dharma* is not eternal (if not why do we grow old?) and at the same time, all *dharma* is eternal (if we are eternal, how could we achieve *samsāra*, ‘rebirth?’). To understand further, I quote here several of his texts:

*na svato napi parato na dvabhyam napy ahetuhah /
utpanna jatu vidyante bhavah kva cana ke cana
(1:1).*⁵

⁴ In Pali, it is called as *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

⁵ The Sanskrit texts here are referenced from Mark Siderits & Shōryū Katsura, (2013), *Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Boston: Wisdom Publicationsss.

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:

Never in any way there any existing thing that has arisen.

Here, Nagarjuna goes beyond than the idea of cause and effects by stating that existents are not resulted by causes or conditions. He rejects all the possible ways existents come to be. Nothing can come from a dharma and no dharma can beget a thing.

*yady asunyam bhavet kim cit syac chunyam iti api
kim cana /
na kimcid asty asunyam ca kutah sunyam
bhavisyati (13:7).*

If something that is non-empty existed, then something that is empty might also exist.

Nothing whatsoever exists that is non-empty;
then how will the empty come to exist?

*astiti sasvatagraho nastity ucchedadarsanam /
tasmad astitvanastitve nasriyeta vicaksanah
(15:10).*

“It exists” is an eternalist view; “It does not exist” is an annihilationist idea.

Therefore the wise one should not have recourse to either existence or nonexistence.

Logic is overcome through the differences between positive and negative proposition. Not everything is right but not everything is wrong either. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* offers instead: The Middle Way. According to Buddhist Teacher Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso, “Middle Way means that the true nature of the phenomena we experience lies in the middle, between all possible extremes that can be conceived of by the intellect” (2003, p. xi). The reason why Nagarjuna seems to talk in circle, rejecting everything there is –

under the pretext of emptiness – is to offer advice to his followers, to be careful with *prapañca*,⁶ the concretization of our desire into things. Nagarjuna sees everything as fiction. There is no *real Al-Haq* (True Reality) which is celebrated in Ibn ‘Arabi and Sufism. In Nagarjuna’s existentialist thinking, every phenomenon is empty, void, or in the Malay language, *ketiadaan*. Unlike Heidegger who sees and excavates Being in every existence, Nagarjuna’s beingness is formless and valueless. The form of Nagarjuna’s teachings is called in Sanskrit as *catuskoṭi* (tetralemma): In approaching the problem of *dharma*, he considers four possible ways and rejects each one of them. To take an example of the intrinsic value of ‘mango’, Nagarjuna argues that; (a) it is not a mango; (b) it is not non-mango; (c) it is both not mango and not non-mango (d) it is not both. There seem to be two realities in Nagarjuna’s thoughts: Conventional reality and ultimate reality. The conventional reality is the culture of life we are leading now through meaningful relationship with the world. The ultimate reality is the eternal dedication towards the world of *nirvana* by the annihilation of *dukkha*. At the end of the final chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Chapter 27), he says:

*Evam drstir atite ya nabhum aham abhum aham /
Ubhayam nobhayam ceti naisa
samupapadyate (27: 13).*

Thus the views that in the past I did not exist, I did exist,

both and neither – none of these holds.

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā can be considered an early extant of nihilism. If we have to scratch the surface of Nagarjuna’s text, it is that *life is absurd*. Since life is absurd, the best way to understand its meaning is to reject what life is and strive instead to the condition of the eternal and the finite. *Sunyata* grounds life’s existence. Here, meditation is everything; the entranced way in opening up the path towards thinking, of *letting be*. The highest Truth for Nagarjuna is

⁶ Mark Siderits dan Katsura (2013) translates *prapañca* into English as *hypostatization*.

the teaching of Buddha, the core of his philosophy, the 'why' he leads his austere life. The way to this is through the emptiness of the soul, the *vipaśyanā* (insightful meditation). The *sunyata*-voidness means to believe that everything does not have any intrinsic value but there is a middle way between the left and the right, down and up. Fire is not hot but is also hot. Ice is cold but is also not cold. Existence according to Nagarjuna's nihilistic thought is not rational. But the understanding towards this irrationality is through rational, logical proposition. Only through the highest discipline of *sunyata* can world-suffering be cast aside, along with other things, including existence itself. In the later school of Buddhism after Nagarjuna's era, such as Zen Buddhism, the emptiness is thought by Master Shen-hui as a way for which mind can challenge itself, to gain understanding and reflection. Zen means the essence "of seeing into the nature of one's own being" (Suzuki, 1927, p. 13). Thoughts on attainment of emptiness can be seen in Chinese concepts such as *wu-nien* (no-thought) and *wu-hsien* (no-mind) when meditating on authentic Buddhist life. To look inwardly, one must find a footing in the space of emptiness. It is thus Shen-hui can say quietly, "Seeing into nothingness – this is true seeing and eternal seeing" (Suzuki, 1949, p. 30).

Summary

In the introduction above, I note how Heidegger's essay *What is Metaphysics?* is what motivates the article, but there is a reason why the article starts with a quote from Surah Maryam which bears repeating: "Does man not remember that We created him before, while he was nothing?" (Al-Quran, 19: 67). Other than the fact that I am Muslim and Al-Quran is my foremost text, the statement from Surah Maryam states how "he was nothing" is the prior condition of our being. It is our *fitrah*, our existential disposition. We are previously nothing and after birth, we turn into *something*. The transformation from nil to creation is why we can *sense out* the nothingness, the primordial circumstance of our being. Our existential structure is grappled by the question of 'to-be' and 'nothing.' That we keep on forgetting the question of 'to-be' (because of our busyness with everyday things) is not because this

disposition stands far from us, but that it is too near to us. Just like someone who is wearing spectacles, most of the time, he is not even aware of the glasses in front of his eyes since his sight is too full, too enraptured with things seen.

The nothing is a reality unseen but felt – this can be read in Heidegger, Nagarjuna and Ibn ‘Arabi. It is a presence, hidden under the surface of words, just like Being. The nothing is what being is held to, that which provokes anxiety (Heidegger); the state of emptiness so as to achieve nirvana since nirvana is but emptiness (Nagarjuna); the nonexistence reality from where creation finds its ground, the creation who is nothing but serves as servant of Allah (Ibn ‘Arabi).

Heidegger is interested to see the problem of the nothing in the presence and unconcealment of *Seinsfrage* (Question of Being), the way we comport ourselves in everyday entities as being-in-the-world. The perspectives Heidegger employ are existentialist, ontological. On the other hand, Ibn ‘Arabi believes that the nothing is what constitutes everything except God since God is imperishable, and as such, ‘the nothing’ is the condition of every God’s creations. In contrast to Heidegger who sees nothingness as *what* stands in the essence of Being that is held in anxiety, Ibn ‘Arabi’s nothingness points to the finite and lowly human presence in the face of *Al-Haqq*. He believes that through rigorous preparation, *dhikr*, unceasing meditation, one can travel inwardly beyond the realm one finds oneself in. His Sufi path looks at a combination between Islamic theology and mysticism through the power of Imagination. Conversely, Nagarjuna pushes Buddhist thought on the nothing towards the argument of *sunyata*, a breadth of emptiness which already resides within us, a state which must be achieved to escape from the confusion of the world to the realm of *nirvana*. The voidness or nothingness is akin to an extreme reality which logical analysis seems needed to explain it, at least according to Nagarjuna. However, it can be fully grasped through the foundational and intuitive Buddhist yogic knowledge. His Middle Way is the paradox between logical proposition and religious meditation. The one who realizes that the world is void – one who has stopped believing the illusion of life – is on the path of liberation.

If Heidegger, the most modern among the three thinkers discussed, requests his readers to unshackle from the pinning of progressive technology, to meditate on Being and the silence of the nothing, Ibn 'Arabi and Nagarjuna desire more from their followers, to lead an ascetic life, to forsake the worldly homes and prejudices, to find bliss through the emancipation of earthly desires. *Sutta Nipata*, a collection of ancient Buddhist text, advises: "What is before thee, lay it aside; Let there be nothing behind thee; If thou wilt not grasp after what is in the middle, Thou wilt wander calm" (cited from Suzuki, 1927, 142). The calmness here resides through the impoverishment of things by the meditator. Of the three thinkers, only Ibn 'Arabi speaks and praises God interminably. To him, only when one longs and seeks the presence of God that truest contentment can be felt.

It is not accidental that each of the thinkers we have gone through – no matter how fleeting – had different degree of ideologies and came from different region of the world. Heidegger was a German phenomenologist who was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, German Idealism and Nietzsche; Ibn 'Arabi, a Sufi Muslim, was from Andalusia, and was raised in the great Islamic period of Spain; Nagarjuna was an Indian teacher of the Buddhist Middle-Way. Each has a different take on what philosophy is, the best way to approach it, and yet each has the deepest love for the thinking, for the metaphysics, for the *movement of our inner being*. This article attempts to position the nothingness, its boundaries, to escape from the political debacle between West and East (which is always about whose side has the better claim to truth), but in the process of going over the writings of Heidegger, Nagarjuna and Ibn 'Arabi, the discussion still get back to the tenseness between the West and the East. But the tenseness here is a going-beyond of the politico-geographical landscape of West and East, and I trust, resides ambiguously in the creative vastness of our abyssal depth, tinged with poetic clear night of the nothing.

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