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What Is Nothing?: Alenka Zupančič with Martin Heidegger

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The Proximity of Nothing

One of the aims of Alenka Zupančič in writing *What IS Sex* was not, we can be sure, facilitating a rapprochement between psychoanalytic thinking and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Although Zupančič does mention Heidegger's name in the book, she does so to point out the distance between the psychoanalytic position and Heidegger's. Furthermore, her approach to psychoanalysis does not lend itself to the questions that preoccupy Heidegger. Even if Zupančič were theoretically disposed to highlight a link to Heidegger's thought, now would hardly be the time, given the ebb in his reputation after the publication of his overt anti-Semitism in the *Black Notebooks*.

Zupančič clearly distinguishes the psychoanalytic position (that she associates with Lacan) from that of Heidegger. As she sees it, the contrast involves how each approaches subjectivity (or what Heidegger calls Dasein). From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, Heidegger gives death a dramatizing power for Dasein that properly belongs to enjoyment. It is not our relationship to death that differentiates the human as such but a relationship to enjoyment that constitutes the subject. She

states, “the structural place occupied, in Heidegger, by *death* as the very mode of human finitude that grounds specifically human immortality), becomes with Lacan the real of enjoyment, *jouissance*.”¹ According to Zupančič, Heidegger gets caught up in the problematic of death without seeing that death only matters for the subject because it represents the cessation of its enjoyment.

Despite all these factors that suggest Heidegger’s absence from the concerns of *What IS Sex?*, an intersection with Heidegger nonetheless occurs at the decisive moment of the book.² The most important insight of Alenka Zupančič’s *What IS Sex?* is her definition of subjectivity not as one expects, through signification – the subject is the speaking being, the subject of the signifier – but through a lack in signification. The subject is not so much the subject of the signifier as the subject of the absent signifier.³ For Zupančič, the key to language lies in what it subtracts rather than in what it makes available for the human being. It takes away one signifier in an act that Zupančič equates with what Freud calls primal repression.

Zupančič locates the emergence of the humanity at the moment of the unconscious recognition of the absent signifier. As Zupančič puts it, “the human (his)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with *one signifier ‘gone missing*.”⁴ This conspicuous absence of the signifier that would complete signification is not just not there. It is present as an absence. In Zupančič’s idiom, signification is “with without-one.”⁵ This present absence shapes not just how the subject emerges as a subject but its entire trajectory. Primal repression – the repression of the impossible final signifier that could complete signification – doesn’t occur once and then vanish but constantly weighs on the signifying system with what this system includes as an absence.⁶

By formulating an ontology of subtraction in which the very existence of beings depends the presence of nothing, Zupančič, without directly avowing it, reveals the hidden proximity of psychoanalytic theory and Heidegger’s philosophy. Zupančič’s psychoanalytic version of ontology shows that being is not just a neutral field. In order for there to be beings, there must be nothing. She reveals the ontological necessity of nothingness in a way that resonates with Heidegger’s insistence on this same ontological necessity. For both Zupančič and Heidegger, nothing is not the contrary of being but its *sine qua non*.

When we examine signification, we can see the traces of the subtraction of this nothing. Signification at once obscures the ontological status of nothing and points us to it through the necessity of primal repression. If we see primal repression as the repression or the subtraction of nothing, then the ontological status of nothing

becomes apparent. Or, as Zupančič contends, we recognize that there is “something in being that is less than being – and this something is precisely that which, while included in being, prevents it from being fully constituted *as being*.”⁷ This something is paradoxically nothing.

Zupančič’s insight into the necessary presence of nothing, while not an allusion to Heidegger, resonates with his philosophical project. In his famous lecture “What Is Metaphysics?,” Heidegger authors a panegyric to anxiety for its ability to reveal the nothing to us. The nothing, as Heidegger conceives it, constantly accompanies all beings but becomes apparent only in those moments when we abandon our preoccupation with a multiplicity of beings and consider Being as such. Though Heidegger doesn’t formulate our access to the nothing in terms of the signifier – specifically, the missing signifier – he nonetheless recognizes that the nothing plays a constitutive role for us. The nothing is not just a contingent part of our existence that we might encounter or not.

Like Zupančič, Heidegger grants the nothing a central ontological role. Without the presence of the nothing, we would have no possibility for self-awareness or for breaking from the various determinants that dictate our lives. It is the original encounter with nothingness that enables us to relate to anything at all. He claims, “Only on the ground of the original revelation of the nothing can human existence approach and penetrate beings.”⁸ For Heidegger, there are no beings without nothing, and Dasein has a privileged role in apprehending this nothing.

The nothing constantly accompanies us, though we spend most of our time trying to avoid confronting it. As a result, we don’t have a constant awareness of the nothing except in its abeyance. It is only the experience of anxiety that allows us to register the nothing in its constitutive force. In the experience of anxiety, we recognize that what we are, as Dasein, is “being held out into the nothing.”⁹ We work at avoiding the proximity of the nothing because this proximity always triggers anxiety. But rather than trying to avoid anxiety at all costs, Heidegger demands that we reevaluate the experience of anxiety and recognize the existential insight that it provides. Though we suffer anxiety, it also has the effect of freeing us from the power of the social determinants that otherwise dictate our lives. The difficulty of sustaining anxiety, however, constantly threatens our freedom.

Heidegger believes that the turn away from anxiety – and thus from the nothing – represents an existential catastrophe.¹⁰ In the effort to avoid the confrontation with the nothing, we distract ourselves with beings. We engage in activities like idle chatter and seek out constant novelty because they promise respite

from anxiety. But this avoidance deprives us of the freedom that we find in the profound experience of existence. In Heidegger's early philosophy, our relationship to the nothing is the site of a morality play in which we stand to lose what is most valuable in our existence.¹¹

Though Zupančič enables us to recognize the hidden connection between psychoanalysis and Heidegger, some distance nonetheless remains between them. Heidegger's ethical and political critique of the contemporary world for its flight from the nothing fails to acknowledge how this flight is written into signification from the beginning. The turn away from the nothing is not a particular ethical failure of modernity or of certain individuals. It is rather constitutive of subjectivity, which is why we should not imagine that earlier epochs had a more authentic relationship to the nothing than modernity. The existential flight that Heidegger laments is an intrinsic part of subjectivity. Even the attempt to bypass subjectivity through an analysis of Dasein cannot short circuit the structural necessity of primal repression, which is what both makes possible the recognition of the nothing and makes impossible any direct encounter.

The avoidance of the nothing occurs through primal repression. Primal repression, as distinct from instances of secondary repression, is not optional. The fantasy that we could do without it is a fantasy of subjectivity without lack, which would eliminate the condition of possibility for the subject's emergence. Getting rid of the primal repression of the nothing would make it impossible for subjects to recognize the nothing because they would not exist as subjects. They would be incapable of the anxiety that Heidegger sees as essential for the apprehension of the nothing.

By locating our relationship to the nothing in primal repression, Zupančič transforms Heidegger's morality play centering on the nothing into a constitutive fact of the subject's existence. In this sense, not only does Zupančič reformulate the psychoanalytic project around the centrality of the nothing and thereby reveal its hidden affinity with Heidegger. She also offers an indirect corrective to Heidegger's conception of the nothing. It cannot be a matter of adopting a more courageous attitude and forgoing the distraction of beings in order to confront directly the horror of the nothing, as Heidegger proposes. Such a position fails to account for the fact that turn away from the nothing is the primal repression that constitutes our subjectivity. Paradoxically, it is the original repression of the nothing that makes possible the recognition of it.

Once we understand the turn away from the nothing in terms of primal repression, the point ceases to be authentically taking on the anxiety that the confrontation with the nothing produces, as Heidegger proposes. The task instead involves how we comport ourselves to what is missing. The nothing is not a presence that we can directly encounter but an absence that we must acknowledge and integrate into our subjectivity. Rather than dwelling in the nothing, we register its absence. This is the corrective that Zupančič offers Heidegger.

From Psychoanalysis to Heidegger

It often seems as if there is an untraversable distance between the philosophers of existence and psychoanalytic theory. Though the latter accommodates itself well to dialectical thinkers like Hegel and Marx, it has not enjoyed the same close relationship with those in the existentialist tradition, like Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir.¹² This is undoubtedly because Heidegger, Sartre, and Beauvoir privilege experience and fail to recognize how experience fundamentally deceives us. The basic insight of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious shapes our subjectivity in a way that any conscious account of our experience cannot register. But one of the deleterious effects of the distance between the existentialist tradition and psychoanalytic theory is that the latter shies away from existential claims.

What IS Sex? does not completely bridge the gap that separates these two theoretical positions. But it points us in the direction of a foundational shared concern. This shared concern is with the constitutive role that nothingness plays in existence. Our relationship to nothingness is constitutive for all the thinkers in the existentialist tradition. Psychoanalytic theory, in contrast, seems to reduce nothing to the status of an epiphenomenon. This is why a rapprochement between the two projects has always seemed impossible.

A contrast between Heidegger and Freud's attitudes toward someone claiming "it was nothing" will make the distance between the two positions clear. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes our response to a bout of anxiety. He writes, "When anxiety has subsided, then in our everyday way of talking we are accustomed to say that 'it was really nothing.' And *what* it was, indeed, does get reached ontically by such a way of talking."¹³ When we dismiss the cause of our anxiety as "nothing," we ironically identify the cause correctly, despite our attempt not to talk about it. We think that we are dismissing the experience as nonconsequential, but we are unknowingly avowing its great consequence through the use of the term "nothing."

Our inability to identify any positive cause for the anxiety points to the nothing itself as the cause. For Heidegger, when we say “nothing” here we really mean the nothing rather than not anything.

Freud takes a dramatically different tack concerning the garden variety statement about nothing. If I claim that my slip of the tongue meant nothing or that my dream signified nothing in an effort to dismiss its importance, Freud would conclude that such expressions of “nothing” conceal something – namely, repressed material. When I say “nothing,” I always mean something in the Freudian universe. In his essay “Negation,” Freud contends, “A negative judgement is the intellectual substitute for repression; its ‘no’ is the hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin – like, let us say, ‘Made in Germany.’ With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning.”¹⁴ For psychoanalysis, the dismissal of an experience of nothing becomes revelatory only when we interpret this nothing as a negation. By attempting to express nothing, I always signify something from the unconscious. For Freud, nothing is never just nothing.

In this sense, there is an almost perfect chiasmic opposition between Heidegger and psychoanalysis: Heidegger interprets negation as an unconscious awareness of nothing, whereas psychoanalysis interprets expressions of nothing as unconscious negations. The task of reconciling these two positions seems both impossible and inadvisable. Doing so risks violating one or the other or both in a bastard synthesis.

Thanks to *What IS Sex?*, however, the path to such a reconciliation becomes not only possible but also clearly illuminated. Zupančič’s theorization of primal repression – her insistence that signification must include a signifier that is absent – enables us to see how Heidegger and Freud (or existentialism and psychoanalysis) share a fundamental concern. This concern is the constitutive role of nothing in subjectivity. Instead of reducing every expression of nothing to a case of negation, Zupančič contends that psychoanalysis actually gives the nothing a central role. By looking at primal repression rather than just cases of secondary repression (as Freud does in the “Negation” essay), Zupančič shifts the terrain of psychoanalytic theory in the direction of Heidegger. Through the concept of primal repression, psychoanalysis understands that the nothing is actually included within signification in the form of a present absence. Without the nothing in the form of the included missing signifier, subjects would not emerge as subjects. They emerge through the registration of nothing in the signifying chain, and all their negations that might signal secondary

repression also harken back to this primal repression of nothing. In this way, Zupančič offers an addendum to Freud's "Negation" essay: every "no" is not just an affirmation of some positive unconscious material; it is also – and more importantly – an affirmation of the constitutive role that the nothing plays for subjectivity.

In her effort to transform psychoanalytic theory into an ontology, Zupančič reveals the intersection between psychoanalysis and Heidegger. Though this is not her explicit aim in *What IS Sex?*, Zupančič demonstrates how psychoanalysis can offer a corrective to existential philosophy. By aligning the nothing with primal repression, we can avoid the division of the world into those authentic beings courageous enough to endure the anxiety of the nothing and the fallen who have succumbed to the lure of an existential flight. If there is any authenticity to be had, it lies in recognizing the impossibility of any authenticity, in grasping that none of us can attain a privileged relation to the nothing because of the constitutive role that it plays for all of us. Since we encounter the nothing only through recognizing that we miss it, our only recourse is to grasp the radical equality that derives from this shared existential failure.

¹ Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 88.

² Perhaps the title of Zupančič's book is an allusion to Heidegger's lecture "What Is Metaphysics?"

³ One might read Zupančič's contention that the subject is the subject of the lack in signification rather than the subject of the signifier as a gentle rebuke to those who would associate this latter formula too quickly with Jacques Lacan. Though Lacan utilizes this formula on occasion, he also clarifies that the subject corresponds to what is missing in signification. In his seminar on ethics, Lacan states, "A subject originally represents nothing more than the following fact: he can forget. Strike out that 'he'; the subject is literally at his beginning the elision of a signifier as such, the missing signifier in the chain." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 224.

⁴ Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 47.

⁵ Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 48.

⁶ In the essay "Repression," Freud contends the primal repression creates an unconscious core that constantly attracts additional repressed material. Freud draws attention to "the attraction by what was primarily repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection." Sigmund Freud, "Repression," trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 148.

⁷ Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 44.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 105.

⁹ Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 105.

¹⁰ In "What Is Metaphysics?," Heidegger states, "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. Just as surely do we hasten into the public superficialities of existence." Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?," 106.

¹¹ After the turn in Heidegger's philosophy that occurs in the mid-1930s, references to anxiety disappear almost completely from this philosophy. Heidegger also ceases lamenting the existential damage done from idle talk and curiosity about the new.

¹² Heidegger, of course, vehemently rejects the label "existentialist" and does whatever he can to distance himself from Sartre. But for anyone looking at this distancing from the outside, it appears as a case of the narcissism of small differences.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 231.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Negation," trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press 1961), 236.