

Filippo Casati
Naoya Fujikawa

BETTER THAN ZILCH?

Abstract. In their paper ‘Zilch’, Oliver and Smiley claim that the word ‘nothing’ can be used as a singular term and that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and the word ‘zilch’ are empty terms, which fail to refer to anything. In this paper, we propose that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ can be used to denote null things such as absences, null objects or nothingness. We also claim that, *pace* their interpretation of Heidegger’s ‘*das Nichts*’ as an empty term, it should be understood as such a singular term that refers to nothingness.

Keywords: ‘Zilch’; ‘nothing’ as a singular term; empty terms; null objects; nothingness; Martin Heidegger

1. *Tertium datur*

Lost in Wonderland, under a mighty tree, Alice sits around a table with her new friends: the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. Everything is ready to begin the Tea-Party but only one thing is missing: the tea in Alice’s cup.

‘Take some more tea’ the March Hare said to Alice. ‘I have nothing yet’ she replied in an offended tone: ‘so I cannot take more’. ‘You mean you cannot take less’ said the Hatter: ‘It is very easy to take more than nothing’
([Carroll, 1865](#), p. 78)

Here the confusion is big because, while Alice uses ‘nothing’ as a quantifier, the Hatter uses it as a singular term.

In the tradition of analytic philosophy, the word ‘nothing’ is usually considered as a quantifier. Nevertheless, some philosophers in the tradi-

tion has recently introduced the view that ‘nothing’ can be legitimately used as a singular term as well. A prominent example of this view is proposed by Oliver and Smiley (2013). According to them, ‘nothing’ can be used not only as a quantifier but also as a singular term, introducing ‘zilch’ as a word which has the same meaning as ‘nothing’ as a singular term. In addition to this, they claims that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ are interpreted as *empty terms*, which fail to refer to anything.

We agree with Oliver and Smiley that the word ‘nothing’ can be interpreted not only as a quantifier but also as a singular term. However, we disagree with them on their implicit assumption that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ are interpreted *only* as empty terms. (In this paper we don’t argue against the claim that they *can* be used as empty terms. We do not endorse the position neither. We simply leave this matter open.) Even though they take “‘zilch’ as a paradigm empty term” stipulating its impossibility of referring to something as a “logical necessity” (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 602), they don’t give any argument for this referential-failure: they seem just to assume that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ are empty terms. Therefore, according to them, ‘nothing’ can be understood as a quantifier or as an empty term. *Tertium non datur*. However, some may argue against this position claiming that ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ can be *also* used in a third way (precisely speaking, in a third way, if they can be used as empty terms; in a second way, if they can’t) to denote *something*. Then, what do they denote?

Ironically, we can find some clue to answer this question in Oliver and Smiley’s explanation of the word ‘zilch’. They introduce ‘zilch’, claiming that ‘it is already well established to indicate non-entity or nil quantity or more generally nothing’ (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 602). Indeed, ‘zilch’ can be also used to denote such a zany thing as a non-entity, nil quantity or nothingness. For instance, in one of their examples ‘[a] ham sandwich is better than zilch’ (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 602), ‘zilch’ is naturally taken as denoting the absence of foods. It is also the case that the Mad Hatter is naturally taken to understand ‘nothing’ as referring to the absence of tea.

Of course, this is not how Oliver and Smiley mean their claim to be understood, since they take ‘zilch’ as an empty term. They just assume that ‘zilch’, ‘nothing’ as a singular term or other related terms never denote any zany object like a non-entity, a nil quantity or nothingness. Someone may claim that one possible way to make sense of this as-

sumption is that such zany objects never exist. However, one can argue against this supposition in the following two ways. First, according to some accounts, some of such zany objects may exist. For instance, Bunge (1966) gives some examples of null individuals from science. He shows that optics is committed to a null individual, l_0 , which is “the light field that, joined to any thing, leaves it unchanged” (Bunge, 1966, p. 777). If a scientific theory quantifies only over existent things, then, Bunge’s null individuals are perfect examples of nil quantities which exist and which can be named ‘zilch’ or ‘nothing’ as a singular term. Secondly, the non-existence of an object does not necessarily entail a referential-failure either. For example, from the view point of Meinongianism, some terms refer to non-existent objects (Parsons, 1980; Routley, 1982; Zalta, 1988; Priest, 2005). Even though some philosophers regard absences as nonexistent objects (Martin, 1996; Sartre, 1943), this doesn’t prevent ‘zilch’ and ‘nothing’ from denoting, for instance, the absence of foods from a Meinongian view point.

The different accounts of zany objects presented until now consider only consistent entities. However, Oliver and Smiley formally define ‘zilch’ as $\iota x x \neq x$ or $x : x \neq x$, where $x : Fx$ is a plural description which is read as ‘the thing or things that individually F ’ (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 604). Given that none of those entities described above seems non-self-identical, none of them is a good candidate for the denotation of Oliver and Smiley’s ‘zilch’. Someone may conclude that ‘zilch’ as $x : x \neq x$ necessarily fails to denote anything. However, dialetheism, together with paraconsistent logic, tells us that this is not necessarily the case: a dialetheist, who advocates the truth of some contradictions, can admit that something is not self-identical accepting, at the same time, that everything is self-identical. Indeed, some philosophers take nothingness as a non-self-identical thing (Priest, 2014). Despite Oliver and Smiley don’t even mention those accounts of zany objects, they are already on the market.

Certainly, all entities and non-entities that have been discussed so far are contentious and one may naturally doubt whether they can represent a possible denotation of ‘zilch’ or ‘nothing’ as a singular term. Nevertheless, especially given the recent developments of metaphysics of nonexistence, dialetheism and paraconsistent logic, it is too hasty to simply ignore them. This remark doesn’t want to show that ‘zilch’ or ‘nothing’ as a singular term cannot be an empty term. This is rather an attempt to suggest that they can be singular terms which refer to

something, namely to a non-entity, a nil quantity or nothingness. Now, established that *tertium datur*, why should someone take this third option seriously? Surprisingly, we can understand the reason by considering one of Oliver and Smiley's applications of 'zilch': Heidegger's *das Nichts*. In this case, the lack of consideration for a third possibility drives them to give a wrong interpretation of it. In what follows, we show that any correct interpretation of Heidegger's *das Nichts* should take '*das Nichts*' as referring to something.

2. *Das Nichts* is not Oliver and Smiley's zilch

According to Oliver and Smiley's interpretation, '*das Nichts*' is translated as 'zilch'. Based on this consideration, they show how (1), which is one of the most notorious and controversial claims in 'What Is Metaphysics?', is true.

(1) *Das Nichts selbst nichtet*.

According to them, (1) is understood as 'zilch is zilch', which is formally represented as ' $O \equiv O$ ', where ' O ' is a symbol for 'zilch' and \equiv is what they call weak identity¹. Since, by the definition of weak identity, ' $x \equiv y$ ' is true if both x and y are empty terms (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 602), ' $O \equiv O$ ' is logically true.

However, this interpretation faces a problem. If 'zilch' is the correct way of reading *das Nichts*, then all propositions about *das Nichts* contained in 'What Is Metaphysics?' should be interpreted in the same way. What follows when their interpretation is applied to the other occurrences of *das Nichts* in 'What Is Metaphysics?'? Consider the following propositions²:

¹ To obtain this interpretation, Oliver and Smiley interprets the verb '*nichten*' as 'is zilch' in addition to taking '*das Nichts*' as 'zilch'. This interpretation of the verb can be contested. As they mention (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 611), '*nichten*' is a verbalization of the noun phrase '*das Nichts*' and thus naturally interpreted as expressing what *das Nichts* does. However, 'is zilch' is a predicate which makes identity statement when it is filled by some noun phrase: it doesn't express any deed at all. (We thank the anonymous referee who made this point to us.)

² All quotations from Heidegger are translated by the authors from Italian editions with the exception of *The Metaphysical Foundation of Logic* (1978) which is directly quoted from the English translation.

- (2) a. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] absolutely differs from that [entity].
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 63)
- b. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] represents the absolute indifference.
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 65)
- c. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] assaults / attacks us.
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 68)
- d. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] is revealed by the angst.
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 69)
- e. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] is present.
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 68)
- f. Nothing(ness) [*Das Nichts*] oppresses the Da-Sein.
(Heidegger, 1967, p. 70)

A problem is that, assuming Oliver and Smiley's interpretation, all these sentences are false even though Heidegger means them to be true. To see the reason, let us appeal to their distinction between weak and strong predicates. An n -place predicate F is strong with respect to its i -th place if it is analytic that $F(\dots, a, \dots)$ is false whenever a is empty, where \dots, a, \dots is a sequence of n terms whose i -th member is a ; otherwise it is weak with respect to its i -th place (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 603). They present four kinds of weak predicates, that is, (i) weak identity \equiv , (ii) nonexistence predicates, (iii) semantic predicates which deal with empty terms and weak predicates, and (iv) negation of strong predicates. The apparent truth of the following examples may illustrate why these kinds of predicates are counted as weak.

- (3) a. The present king of France is the present king of France.
- b. The present king of France does not exist.
- c. 'The present king of France' denotes the present king of France.
- d. 'Is the present king of France' is true of the present king of France.
- e. The present king of France doesn't walk.

This list of weak predicates doesn't need to be the exhaustive one: for instance, someone may take intentional predicates like 'think of' as weak with respect to its second place. However, nothing above suggests that the predicates listed in (2) are weak with respect to their places which are filled by '*das Nichts*'. For example, there is no reason to think that 'represent' is weak with respect to its first place (even though it may be weak with respect to its second place): when ' t ' is an empty term, ' t represents s ' is as much not true as ' t walks' is not true. The same argument

holds for the other predicates in (2). Indeed, Oliver and Smiley take ‘is different from’ as strong (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 603) and it is hard to find any relevant difference between this predicate and ‘differ from’, which appears in (2a). Now, according to Oliver and Smiley, ‘ F is strong’ is represented by ‘it is analytic that $x \equiv O \rightarrow \sim Fx$ ’ (Oliver and Smiley, 2013, p. 604). Since $O \equiv O$, it follows for any strong predicate F that $\sim F(O)$, that is, $F(O)$ is false.

In this way, according to their interpretation, sentences in (2) are false. Of course, some of Heidegger’s claims can be false: nothing wrong about this. However, given that the principle of charity is a good guide to read classic texts, an interpretation that turns a whole essay into a collection of false propositions doesn’t look charitable at all. So is the reading proposed by Oliver and Smiley.

As we have seen, they treat ‘*das Nichts*’ as an empty term and this is the main reason why Oliver and Smiley’s interpretation makes many of Heidegger’s claims false. Moreover, this treatment leads to another difficulty. Indeed, according to Heidegger, ‘*das Nichts*’ is not an empty term at all. He takes it as referring exactly to the zany object that Oliver and Smiley have avoided. To see this, let us focus on Heidegger’s definition of object.

In *Wegmarken*, Heidegger claims that:

‘object’ (*objectum*) means what is put in front of the perception, the imagination, the judgment, the desire and the intuition. [...] Objectum is what is represented. (Heidegger, 1967, p. 28)

According to Heidegger, every time we refer to something with an intentional act (for example, with our thoughts, imagination or emotional states), then this something is an object. Since the beginning of his philosophical career, Heidegger has supported this position in many other places (Heidegger, 1967, 1927, 1957, 1989).

Given this specific definition of object, it is impossible to have empty terms since all words and all thoughts refer to something regardless of its existence. Following Heidegger’s example, as the name ‘rose’ refers to the rose in the garden, the ‘redness’ of the rose refers to something as well because, while “I am mentioning it [while I am naming the redness of the rose], I think about it and I represent it” (Heidegger, 1967, p. 29). Noun phrases, such as the ‘the present King of France’ or ‘the absence of foods’ represent something. ‘Nothing’ is not an exception. Despite

Oliver and Smiley's interpretation, Heidegger is explicit about this. In *The Metaphysical Foundation of Logic*, he states:

'thinking about nothing' is ambiguous. First of all, it can mean 'not to think'. [...] Secondly, it can mean 'to think nothingness' which nonetheless means to think 'something'. In thinking of nothingness [...], I am thoughtfully related to nothingness and this is what thinking is about. (Heidegger, 1978, p. 3)

Exactly the second way of interpreting the sentence 'thinking about nothing' is relevant for the metaphysics developed by Heidegger.

Someone skeptical can object that all those quotations are from different essays and that no one can guarantee their relevance for a good interpretation of 'What Is Metaphysics?'. However, there are some important evidence on our side in this essay as well. First of all, '*das Nichts*' cannot be an empty term because Heidegger claims that the human beings (in his jargon, the *Da-Sein*) can have a direct phenomenological experience of its denotation, through anxiety (Heidegger, 1967, p. 102). Given Heidegger's definition of object, if a human being can have such a phenomenological experience, then this phenomenological experience should refer to an object.

Secondly, contrary to Oliver and Smiley's interpretation, the idea that '*das Nichts*' refers to something can actually explain why *das Nichts* constitutes the fundamental metaphysical problem, which is presented and analyzed in 'What Is Metaphysics?'. The problem goes as follows. According Heidegger, *das Nichts* is not an object (Heidegger, 1967). From this and his definition of objects, it immediately follows that the only action of naming it would turn *das Nichts* into its opposite, namely an object. Since thinking and saying are supposed to be the act of objectification (Heidegger, 1967, p. 33), then thinking and talking about *das Nichts* turn it into what it is not by its own definition. Even "the [fundamental metaphysical] question [what is nothing?] has something unusual. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that 'is' such and such; we posit it as an object" (Heidegger, 1967, p. 98). Heidegger realizes that, because '*das Nichts*' refers to something which is supposed to be unreferable, then *das Nichts* becomes unspeakable, ineffable (Priest, 2002, p. 241). If '*das Nichts*' is interpreted as a empty term, this metaphysical problem is completely unintelligible. No ineffability problem would arise. Unfortunately, this metaphysical riddle is not addressed in 'Zilch'. Oliver and Smiley think that '*das Nichts*' does not

refer to anything as an empty term, and thus, they do think that having a good account of empty terms means also having a good account of *das Nichts*. On the contrary, Heidegger thinks that, since all ideas, concepts and words refer to an object, then ‘*das Nichts*’ refers to an object as well. To properly treat Heidegger’s metaphysical problem, we need to consider the third option which Oliver and Smiley decide to rule out.

If we succeed in discharging Oliver and Smiley’s interpretation, then for us one important question still remains: what do the human beings refer to when they use ‘*das Nichts*’? What is that zany object, that weird thing which is supposed not to be a thing at all? Since the purpose of this paper is just to discharge Oliver and Smiley’s interpretation of *das Nichts* and to introduce a third possible option according to which ‘*das Nichts*’, ‘nothing’ as a singular term and ‘zilch’ denote something, we leave this question open.

To conclude, this paper has proposed two main theses that radically diverge from the ideas presented by Oliver and Smiley: first of all, according to the account presented here, ‘nothing’ can be meaningfully interpreted, not only as a quantifier or an empty term, but also as a singular term which refers to some null thing. Secondly, we give one example of such a term that refers to a null thing, namely, Heidegger’s ‘*das Nichts*’, showing how Oliver and Smiley’s interpretation is not rigorous nor plausible. And that’s better than zilch³.

References

- Bunge, M., “On null individuals”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1966): 776–778. DOI:10.2307/2023807
- Carroll, L., *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1865. DOI:10.1017/CB09781139568555. The page reference is to the reprint in M. Gardner (ed.), *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.

³ Reading between the lines, someone may have noticed that we incline to sympathize with the idea that *nothing* refers to a contradictory object. This impression is not entirely wrong. However, in this paper, we leave this problem open since the aim is only to show that the reading proposed by Oliver and Smiley cannot be correct. For an interpretation according to which not only nothing is a contradictory object but also Heidegger himself endorses dialetheism see Filippo Casati, PhD Thesis, St. Andrews, forthcoming.

- Heidegger, M., *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953. [In French:] *Être et Temps*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1927. [In English:] *Being and Time*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Heidegger, M., *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen: Verlag Gunther Neske, 1957 and Stuttgart: Verlagsgemeinschaft Ernst Klett-J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger GmbH, 2002. [In English:] *Identity and Difference*, New York, NJ: Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1969, and Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002. [In Italian:] *Identità e Differenza*, Milano: Adelphi, 2009.
- Heidegger, M., *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1967 and 2nd revised and expanded edition, 1976. [In English:] *Pathmarks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. [In Italian:] *Segnavia*, Milano: Adelphi, 1987.
- Heidegger, M., *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik im Ausgang von Leibniz*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1978. [In English:] *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Heidegger, M., *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 1989. [In English:] *Contribution to philosophy (of the Event)*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012. [In Italian:] *Contributi alla filosofia (Dell'evento)*, Milano: Adelphi, 2007.
- Martin, C.B., "How it is: Entities, absences and voids", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996): 57–65. DOI:10.1080/00048409612347061
- Oliver, A., and T. Smiley, "Zilch", *Analysis*, 73 (2013): 601–613. DOI: 10.1093/analysis/ant074
- Parsons, T., *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.
- Priest, G., *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 and 2nd. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199254057.001.0001
- Priest, G., *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Priest, G., *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199688258.001.0001

- Routley, R., “On what there is not”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 43, 2 (1982): 151–171. DOI:10.2307/2107527
- Sartre, J. P., *L’Être et le Néant*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1943. [In English:] *Being and Nothing: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Zalta, E., *Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.

FILIPPO CASATI
University of St. Andrews
Department of Philosophy
fgec@st-andrews.ac.uk

NAOYA FUJIKAWA
Kyoto University
Center for the Promotion of Interdisciplinary Education and Research
fjnaoya@gmail.com