Nothingness in Western Thought, Eastern Philosophy, and Abstract Expressionism

Introduction

The study of nothingness has become an enduring philosophical inquiry, inviting thinkers to grapple with the most fundamental aspects of human existence. At its core, it asks why there is *something* rather than *nothing*, and what it means for being to emerge out of absence – a question that probes both the limits of human reason and the foundations of metaphysics. This question remains central not only to ontology but also to broader fields, such as ethics, cosmology, and human self-understanding. The way we define "nothingness" fundamentally shapes our understanding of the universe's origins, the meaning we assign to existence, and the limits of what can be known. Nothingness exists as multiple distinct ideas rather than a single unified concept – for example, Parmenides' denial of "non-being" as unthinkable (B2), Plato's split between eternal Forms and the realm of becoming (509d–511e), Mahāyāna śūnyatā as dependent co-arising (Nāgārjuna, MMK XXIV:18), and Daoist wu as a generative emptiness (Laozi, Dao De Jing 11). The meaning of "nothingness," however, is never fixed; it shifts according to the perspective of those who ask the question and the intellectual worlds they inhabit – a reminder that every philosophical response is both a product of its historical moment and constrained by its context.

In Western philosophy, nothingness has often been treated as an absence or a negation – something that must be explained or overcome. Parmenides declared that the very notion of "non-being" was beyond thought. Plato created two distinct realms through his philosophical work by separating eternal forms from the temporary realm of becoming. Aristotle argued that nothingness is a state of potentiality from which non-actualised being can reach actual existence. Nietzsche and Heidegger introduce new perspectives into the discussion, viewing nothingness as a disruptive force that dismantles established structures of meaning and enables new forms of existence.

Eastern philosophical thought approached the concept of nothingness from a distinctive perspective. For Mahayana Buddhist philosophers, *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is not to be seen as a void but as the necessary condition from which all things arise and pass away. This view emphasises that all beings exist in relation to other forms because they cannot exist independently. Daoist philosophers expand on this view, arguing that *wu* (non-being) is the originating source of everything that exists. *Wu* (i.e. nothingness) is seen as a fertile emptiness from which heaven and earth emerge, and ultimately the natural process that creates reality instead of a problem to be solved according to most Western philosophers.

Art offers us a unique and disparate lens to understand nothingness. Through art, nothingness transforms from a metaphysical idea into a tangible form that people can experience. In this sense, Abstract Expressionism transformed the philosophical inquiry of nothingness into tangible artistic expressions. Through his drip paintings, Jackson Pollock demonstrates how artistic creations can emerge when artists relinquish control and allow chance and unpredictability to guide their work. Similarly, Mark Rothko's large colour fields open spaces that allow viewers to simultaneously experience the sensation of emptiness and completeness. These artists' works not only illustrate abstract ideas, but they also participate in interpreting the concept of nothingness.

Building on the philosophical and artistic explorations of nothingness, this essay asks: how is the idea of nothingness interpreted differently across intellectual traditions from across the world and various time periods? And what new critical lens does the dialogue between these competing frameworks – from Western metaphysics to Buddhist and Daoist thought – offer us? To better understand nothingness as both a limit and a generative force in human thought, this essay also seeks to explore how artists perceive and represent nothingness through various art forms. How does the embodiment of nothingness in art help us understand its boundaries and its potential for sparking creativity?

I argue that Western and Eastern philosophical traditions construct distinct yet complementary visions of nothingness. Western views construct nothingness as an absence and void, whereas Eastern philosophers view it as a source of potential. Additionally, Abstract Expressionist art mediates between these visions by transforming philosophical concepts into embodied, experiential forms. In doing so, artists like Pollock and Rothko reveal how engagement with nothingness can deepen our understanding of being, knowledge, and the creative process.

Western Philosophies of Nothingness: From Absence to Crisis

Western philosophers throughout history have studied nothingness as a fundamental adversary that challenges both reason and existence, as well as all forms of meaning. Non-being has functioned as a core philosophical limit and conceptual power throughout history, starting from ancient Greek metaphysics until its transformation into modern existential ideas during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Parmenides was the first to construct a systematic method for studying this question through his denial of "nothingness" as a legitimate ontological category. In doing so, he set the tone for the entire Western tradition: *ontology itself became equated with being*, and anything outside that realm was deemed

unthinkable – a development that, as Patricia Curd notes, defined the scope of metaphysical inquiry from antiquity onward (*The Legacy of Parmenides* 42). In Parmenides' poem On Nature, he argues that "what is, is" and "what is not, is not," rejecting "non-being" as unthinkable and unsayable (*On Nature* B2). For him, reality is a seamless, unchanging whole – and to think of "nothing" is already to think of "something." Western metaphysics established its core principles through the complete rejection of non-being, as absence was seen as an inherently contradictory concept.

Plato built upon his predecessors to create an advanced dualistic system, which distinguished between being and becoming. In *The Republic*, Plato draws a fundamental distinction between the realm of eternal "Forms," which embody true being, and the shifting, imperfect realm of sensory experience (Plato 509d–511e). In making this distinction, he carried forward Parmenides' legacy in a new way: permanence became the measure of reality, while change and impermanence were treated as signs of instability and therefore considered less real. Although the term "nothingness" does not appear in his text, the concept is present in the contrast he establishes between fleeting, material copies and the eternal, unchanging archetypes they attempt to replicate. Aristotle, meanwhile, turned the discussion inward. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle introduced the idea of "potentiality" (*dynamis*), describing it as a state of "non-actualized being" that enables transformation: "what is potential can become actual" (IX.1). This redefinition marked an important shift: rather than viewing non-being as simple absence, Aristotle understood it as a latent capacity within being itself – a readiness for change that makes transformation possible. Yet even this reframing remained within the broader Western framework, where non-being continued to exist only in relation to what it might eventually become.

Western metaphysical thought followed this trajectory for centuries. Philosophers either dismissed non-being entirely, reimagined it as an eternal principle, or described it as a potential state within being itself. This long-standing approach shaped the boundaries of philosophical inquiry and determined how questions of existence and change were understood. If "nothing" could not be thought, how could one explain change? The material world exists as an imperfect copy of eternal form, yet we continue to experience it as constantly changing before our eyes. Modern philosophy introduced new perspectives into this ancient debate about reality and knowledge. Friedrich Nietzsche made the final and most radical break from this entire metaphysical tradition. Declaring the "death of God" in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argued that the collapse of transcendent meaning would plunge Western thought into a crisis of nihilism – the realisation that "there is no truth, no absolute, no meaning" (§343). Nietzsche viewed nihilism not merely as a descent into despair, but as a point of departure – a profound challenge that demanded an active, creative response. This crisis called for a *revaluation of all values* (*Umwertung aller Werte*) (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* Preface §6), a radical rethinking of how meaning could be constructed once

metaphysical certainties had vanished. In this view, nihilism opens up the possibility for individuals to break free from inherited illusions and construct new systems of value based on their own lived experiences and agency. In this reconfiguration, nothingness is no longer a distant, external void but an existential condition. Nothingness becomes a space that shapes human identity through the boundaries it defines.

Through his ontological study of "nothingness," Martin Heidegger accomplished this change. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he asks the fundamental question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (Heidegger 1). According to Heidegger, nothingness serves as the essential foundation that allows us to comprehend being. This experience emerges most clearly in moments of intense anxiety, when the familiar structures of our world collapse and our true existence is laid bare. In such moments, nothingness discloses itself as the ground against which all meaning takes shape – the silent backdrop that makes differentiation, understanding, and negation possible. It reveals the fundamental condition of all meaning, transcending intellectual understanding to become an essential part of human experience. As Heidegger writes, “The nothing is the complete negation of the totality of beings; it is the origin of negation itself” (Heidegger 35).

In this way, Western philosophy established nothingness as an essential requirement for existence and thought through its new conceptual frameworks. The void evolved from being a source of fear into an unsteady power that destroyed established systems, yet allowed scientific discoveries and showed how fast value can vanish. Nietzsche and Heidegger developed groundbreaking philosophical frameworks, yet they still adhered to conventional metaphysical perspectives by treating nothingness as a problem to be solved rather than as a fundamental essence to be understood. In a similar fashion, Eastern philosophical traditions establish that existence emerges from the fundamental essence of "nothing," which serves as the basis for all creation.

Eastern Philosophies of Nothingness: Emptiness as Foundation and Flow

While Western thinkers have often treated “nothingness” as an adversary – a void to reject, transcend, or confront – Eastern philosophy approaches the same concept from a disparate perspective. Rather than negating the outlook, “nothingness” is seen as the condition that makes existence possible in the first place. The base serves as the core element that produces meaning and defends it from being destroyed. Contrastingly, the space functions as a creative void, allowing structures to form and things to transform.

Historical records reflect that the world has undergone a basic intellectual development shift, revealing how understanding evolved from nonexistence to existence and from apprehension to a state of openness.

The Buddhist concept of śūnyatā (emptiness) serves as the most direct illustration of this philosophical perspective. Central to Mahāyāna thought, śūnyatā is not simply "nothing" in the sense of void or negation. Instead, it refers to the lack of inherent, independent existence in all phenomena. The philosopher Nāgārjuna, writing in the second century CE, makes this point in his seminal *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way*): "Whatever is dependently co-arisen," he writes, "that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way" (Nāgārjuna, MMK XXIV:18). In other words, *śūnyatā* does not mean that things do not exist or that reality is void; rather, it reveals that all phenomena arise only through interdependent causes and conditions. As Jay Garfield explains, "to call something empty is to deny its independent essence, not its existence" (303). Because everything arises in dependence on everything else, nothing possesses a fixed, self-sufficient essence – existence itself relies on a dynamic, relational web, which establishes its basic state of becoming.

The modern understanding of being offers researchers new avenues for studying metaphysical subjects. Western philosophy requires an explanation for why existence exists as something rather than nothing. The Buddhist perspective addresses this question by illustrating how being and non-being coexist in a unified system, which defines the essence of reality. What we call "something" exists only because of the absence of inherent existence – because of śūnyatā. For Nāgārjuna, this insight means that emptiness is not a negation of reality but a redefinition of it: "emptiness is not other than form, and form is not other than emptiness" (MMK XXIV:19). By rejecting both the extremes of eternal being and absolute non-being, *śūnyatā* articulates a Middle Way in which reality emerges as a dynamic field of interdependence. As Ames and Hall explain in their interpretive translation of the *Dao De Jing*, this kind of relational ontology "locates meaning not in discrete substances but in the transformative interplay of processes" (23). In this framework, the "void" is not a lack of meaning but a generative condition that enables new forms of experience to arise.

The Daoist philosophy views nothingness as a creative power that operates differently from Western philosophy, which typically regards it as a void. In *Dao De Jing*, Laozi describes wu (non-being) as the source of all that exists: "The Dao gives birth to One. One gives birth to Two. Two gives birth to Three. Three gives birth to the ten thousand things" (Dao De Jing 42). Wu functions as a productive base that generates various forms of multiplicity. In Chapter 11, Laozi uses the image of a wheel to illustrate this idea: "Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub; it is the centre hole that makes it useful" (Dao De Jing 11).

Here, emptiness does not represent nothingness in the Western nihilistic sense; instead, its "usefulness" arises precisely from its openness – the capacity to generate, enable, and sustain all forms. As Ames and Hall observe, this conception of *wu* underscores a relational ontology in which "what is most valuable lies not in substance but in the spaces that make interaction, movement, and change possible" (67). This perspective shows why emptiness carries profound ethical, political, and practical implications: it is the condition that allows social systems, moral frameworks, and even physical structures to operate dynamically rather than remain static.

The philosophical teachings of Daoism suggest that reality operates as an energetic system in a state of constant transformation. The Chinese concept of Wu Wei (无为) means non-action or effortless action, but it requires active engagement with the natural flow of the Dao, which represents the universal pattern. Just as emptiness is not a static void, non-action is not mere inaction. Acting requires a natural approach that enables performers to engage in real-life events without imposing artificial frameworks on the situation. This conceptualisation of nothingness demonstrates the essence of Dao, a primordial source that is the origin of every form of existence.

Nothingness influences how reality is perceived in various philosophical traditions. In Western thought, it is often treated as a boundary – the point where language, logic, and meaning collapse. This perspective raises the classic question: "Why is there being rather than nothing?" Eastern philosophy approaches the problem differently. Instead of viewing nothingness as an endpoint, it begins with emptiness as the foundation from which all things arise. This approach shifts the main question from why existence is possible to how it unfolds through relationships and constant change. From this view, existence and non-existence are not opposites. They create and sustain one another, forming a single, dynamic reality. This way of thinking is not only theoretical. It also shapes how people respond to the unknown. By grounding reality in connection rather than opposition, Eastern traditions offer new ways to understand human experience, emotion, and the pursuit of balance.

Eastern perspectives also deepen our understanding of what nothingness reveals. Western thinkers often respond to the void with anxiety or by seeking meaning through decisive action. Eastern traditions, by contrast, show that embracing emptiness can lead to liberation. The experience weakens the sense of individual separation and shows that all things exist in relation to one another. Śūnyatā and wu encourage people to move with the natural flow of reality, rather than resisting it. Seen this way, nothingness becomes more than an abstract concept. It becomes a guide for living – one that helps people adapt, find balance, and stop trying to control everything.

Artistic Meditations: Abstract Expressionism and the Embodiment of Nothingness

Philosophers throughout history have studied nothingness by using abstract terms that appear to exist outside the realm of common human experience. Through art, we can link our individual inner experiences to the external world that surrounds us. Embodiment enables people to experience abstract ideas as physical sensations that they can perceive through their senses. In this way, art becomes more than aesthetic expression: it becomes a method of philosophical exploration. This is especially evident in the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-twentieth century, a movement that transformed into a direct visual and emotional experience. Through their work, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko brought this abstract concept to life. They presented nothingness not as an idea confined to thought but as something that exists in space – something that people can see, respond to, and even inhabit.

In Abstract Expressionism, nothingness becomes something a viewer can feel, not only think. Painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko used scale, process, and colour to turn the void into an encounter. Rothko was explicit about content: "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing." He rejected the notion that technique alone could justify a work; a painting had to carry psychological or spiritual weight (Rothko, *Writings on Art*). With that claim in view, consider first Pollock.

At first glance, Pollock's large drip paintings seem to abandon traditional artistic standards. The paint appears chaotic, scattered across the canvas without clear structure or technique, and many critics at the time dismissed his work as a rejection of skill. Yet Pollock was pursuing something far more radical. He wanted to erase the boundaries between intention and accident, between control and chance, between self and environment. "I don't use the accident," Pollock explained. "I deny the accident" (qtd. in Naifeh and Smith 571). By releasing control, he turned painting into a process of discovery rather than execution. This deliberate "letting go" echoes the Daoist idea of *wu wei* – acting through non-action – where outcomes arise naturally from unforced movement.

Pollock's intense physical engagement with the canvas also reflects Heidegger's idea of *Geworfenheit*, or "thrownness," the condition of being placed into a world where meaning must be made from uncertainty. As critic Harold Rosenberg described in "The American Action Painters," Pollock's canvases were not final objects but "arenas in which to act" (23). Seen in this way, his work becomes more than a painting. It is a record of action, a trace of thought in motion, and a philosophical statement about how meaning emerges from process itself (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Jackson Pollock, Autumn Rhythm (Number 30), 1950. Enamel on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Pollock's methods illustrate both Western and Eastern understandings of the concept of nothingness. His work, according to Western existentialism, exemplifies the confrontation with meaninglessness, which Nietzsche and Heidegger describe through his acceptance of the void and his rejection of artificial order in the face of chaos. Yet from an Eastern perspective, Pollock's surrender to process parallels the Daoist notion of wu wei – action through non-action. Through his process of surrendering control, Pollock did not lose his ability to act because he merged with the natural progression of events. The artist's will does not create the painting independently because it emerges from continuous exchanges between the artist's body and the materials, as well as their surrounding environment. It is a material enactment of nothingness as a process rather than an object.

If Pollock makes the void move – a record of thought in action – Rothko makes it hold still. His canvases stage the silence that Rothko insisted painting must carry when he said, "There is no such thing as good painting about nothing." Mark Rothko achieves a sense of stillness through his paintings – a stillness that draws the viewer into a contemplative, almost meditative state. At first glance, Rothko's large-scale canvases appear as simple compositions: luminous rectangles of colour floating against vast, quiet backgrounds (see Figure 2). Yet their simplicity conceals a powerful complexity. Rothko's aim was not to create "pictures" but to produce immersive experiences (Rothko 86). Standing before them, viewers frequently describe a striking dissolution of self, a sensation in which the boundaries between subject and object begin to blur. This response reflects what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as

the “intertwining” of perception and world – a condition in which the self is no longer a detached observer but becomes part of the relational field of experience (247). In this sense, Rothko’s art enacts a visual form of śūnyatā: it does not present fixed meaning but instead reveals being as inherently dependent, relational, and without inherent essence. This transformation in perception sets the stage for the following discussion of how emptiness, far from negating meaning, provides the very condition for its emergence.

Figure 2. Mark Rothko, No. 14, 1960. Oil on canvas. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Rothko’s treatment of space and colour echoes the Buddhist notion of śūnyatā. Like the concept of emptiness in Nāgārjuna’s philosophy, Rothko’s voids are not empty in a negative sense. These beings exist with active potential and relational connections. The painting lacks both numbers and storytelling elements, which enables viewers to create their own emotional and cognitive interpretations through their personal connection with the artwork. Rothko creates relational areas in his paintings, which serve as meeting spaces between viewers and artworks through his elimination of subject-object distinctions. As art historian Simon Schama puts it, Rothko’s paintings “insist on the void but make it luminous” (213). The vacant area in Rothko’s art invites viewers to witness the simultaneous presence of being and nonbeing.

The two artists challenge established artistic authorship rules and control methods, rejecting the Western expectation that art must visually represent a subject to generate meaning. Through their work, Pollock and Rothko express the idea of nothingness in distinct yet complementary ways, revealing the depth and

complexity of the concept. Pollock's embrace of movement, chance, and surrender mirrors the Daoist principle of wu wei, or "action through non-action," dissolving the divide between intention and spontaneity. Rothko, by contrast, creates void, stillness, and relational space that evoke the Buddhist notion of śūnyatā, revealing emptiness not as absence but as the condition that allows meaning to emerge. Together, their approaches align with Sol LeWitt's claim that "the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product" (80), illustrating Nāgārjuna's view that emptiness exists as a generative state whose value lies in the possibilities it makes possible.

By situating their work within these parallel yet divergent traditions, Pollock and Rothko transform abstract philosophy into embodied experience – a transformation that becomes even clearer when we consider how their paintings actively dismantle conventional ways of seeing. The experiential nature of these artworks demonstrates how nothingness can transform our perception and understanding of the world. Rothko once said that a painting "lives in the eye of the sensitive observer" (*The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* 93). Meaning is not fixed in the artwork itself; it emerges through the ongoing exchange between viewer and painting. This evolving relationship mirrors how Buddhist philosophy understands truth – as something that arises through continuous interaction rather than static definition.

Pollock's paintings embody this idea in their tension between structure and chaos. His work creates a space where these two forces coexist, offering viewers both material forms and glimpses of the void beneath them. In this way, Pollock and Rothko demonstrate that nothingness is not only a theoretical concept. It is a lived experience that unfolds through active engagement. Their paintings resist a single interpretation and instead invite multiple, shifting responses that change with each encounter.

Through this dialogic process, Abstract Expressionism becomes more than an art movement. It becomes a form of philosophical practice that translates the idea of nothingness into human experience. Pollock and Rothko reveal that nothingness is not an absence to fear but a condition that allows new ways of seeing, feeling, and creating meaning to emerge.

Rethinking Nothingness as a Way of Being

For centuries, philosophers and artists have approached nothingness as more than a contradiction, seeing it as a gradual movement from fear and absence to acceptance, creativity, and lived experience. What began as a Western anxiety over the limits of being gradually evolved into an Eastern view of nothingness as the source from which all existence arises. Abstract Expressionism continues this evolution by

translating philosophical ideas into physical acts, such as deliberate gestures, surrendering control, and spontaneous creative processes. In this way, nothingness becomes more than an abstract idea. It is a continuous process that links thought and action, emptiness and creation, and theory and lived experience.

Western philosophy has struggled with the concept of nothingness since Parmenides dismissed it as unthinkable and Heidegger reframed it as a central question of existence. Within this tradition, nothingness is often treated as a void to be filled or a threat to be overcome. This reflects a deep anxiety about the fragility of meaning. Eastern philosophy offers a different approach. In Buddhist and Daoist thought, emptiness is not an absence but a necessary condition for existence. Being arises through its relationships and interdependence with everything around it. This view challenges rigid definitions and invites us to embrace the fluid and interconnected nature of reality.

Abstract Expressionism mirrors this philosophical shift in material form. Artists like Pollock and Rothko present nothingness not as negation but as a possibility. Their work transforms the void into a space of participation and reflection. Through chance, openness, and ambiguity, they invite viewers to encounter nothingness directly, not as something to solve but as an experience that unfolds over time. Meaning is not fixed on their canvases. It emerges through interaction, uncertainty, and discovery. In this way, nothingness becomes a field of potential, a place where creation begins.

This understanding carries significant implications for how we perceive existence. Grappling with nothingness reveals the limits of knowledge, yet it also opens a path to freedom that transcends those limits. Meaning does not exist as a permanent feature of the universe. It is created in the spaces where being and non-being meet – in silence, ambiguity, and the ongoing search for understanding. Far from being a void to escape, nothingness is the foundation from which creation arises and the ground on which thought and life unfold. It is a generative space where transformation becomes possible precisely because something is missing.

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