

**Nicholas Waghorn**, *Nothingness and the Meaning of Life: Philosophical Approaches to Ultimate Meaning Through Nothing and Reflexivity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 299 pages. ISBN: 9781472531810. Hardback: £65.00.

Nicholas Waghorn set out to write a book explaining how the concept of ‘nothing’ can provide ultimate meaning and therefore explain the meaning of life—but he failed. This is not my assessment, but Waghorn’s own (pp. 228–232). He began the project thinking that “nothing was the only candidate that might block the regress with regard to meaning that we find when we search for ultimate meaning” (p. 228). But Waghorn finds that every account of ‘nothing’ that he considers begs the question against its rivals “even to the point of assuming an entire methodology” (p. 228). Not only, therefore, did “the investigation into nothing itself [seem] to go badly awry”, but the problems “afflicting certain lines of inquiry within this book ... turn and afflict this book as a whole, including this conclusion and indeed this very sentence” (p. 228). This late confession is followed by a statement of the implications of the failure:

So this book being about nothing and/or the meaning of life is no more important than the book being about universals, or the mind—body problem, or tort law, or origami.

Outlandish as it may initially appear, this book could be replaced by any other book: *On the Plurality of Worlds*, *Creative Evolution*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Peter Rabbit* (note that this sentence is also a part of this book) (p. 230).

Waghorn begins Part 1 with Heidegger’s discussion of *das Nichts* before addressing critiques by Carnap and Derrida. Part 2 considers the potential for debate between such ‘Continental’ and ‘analytic’ thinkers regarding ‘nothing’, before considering dialetheism, and returning, in the light of the foregoing discussion, to Heidegger and Derrida with the addition of Marion. Each approach to ‘nothing’ that is considered is observed to be question-begging against alternative approaches. Part 3 addresses the possible application of nothingness to the quest for ultimate meaning (Waghorn’s discussion of which draws on Nozick) and considers both Eastern and Western religious perspectives on the problem. Waghorn’s ‘Concluding Speculations’ admit that the problems revealed by his inquiry into nothingness are no less applicable to the book that is the result of that inquiry: “the focus on ‘nothing’ in this book is entirely misguided” (p. 229).

Waghorn's decision to begin his inquiry with Heidegger seems entirely justified. Heidegger's 1929 discussion of nothingness ignited the famous debate with Carnap and raised the profile of the topic in both 'Continental' and 'analytic' philosophical circles. But it is the detailed exegesis of Heidegger that first indicates that the book's topic is not sufficiently clearly defined and that Waghorn has indeed been unduly distracted by the term 'nothing'. Idiosyncratically, he uses a translation of the archaism *Seyn* ('Beyng') to refer to what is on the ontological side of the Heideggerian ontological difference. He takes this ontological reality to be the later Heidegger's central concern. (Waghorn controversially locates the 'turn' relatively early, in 1929 (p. 11) and concedes that his use of the term *Seyn* is vulnerable to the accusation of being anachronistic (p. 12).) Despite stating an aversion to introducing his own jargon (p. 161), Waghorn proposes to use another term, 'Beyng/nothing' (p. 28), for this focus of his book.

There are two problems with this choice of neologism. Firstly, Waghorn does not thereafter use it consistently; the terms 'Beyng (or nothing)' (pp. 109, 111), 'Being (or Beyng/nothing)' (p. 116), and 'the ultimate' (p. 192) are also used as synonyms without explanation. And, at one point, he seems to suggest that consistent use of the terminology is unimportant: "We can thus take what is characterised in Heidegger's account of 'Beyng/nothing' ..., or *whatever name it wishes to travel under*—such as 'Being' under erasure, 'it', 'Beyng'—as an account of nothing, provided we understand 'nothing' here in Heidegger's ambiguous terms." (p. 28, italics mine). Secondly, this reading of the later Heidegger's *Sein*(or *Seyn*, etc.) as identical with 'nothing' is questionable. The secondary source that Waghorn quotes in support of this identification (p. 240, n. 105) itself quotes a passage from Heidegger that makes clear that this identification is intended to serve as a disruptive reminder that Being is not an entity (it is, rather, as Waghorn rightly recognises, an ineffable mystery (p. 26)) and that a 'rhythm' of concealing and revealing is integral to Being, "which shows itself and at the same time withdraws" (M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. J.M. Anderson and E.H. Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 55.). Without significant qualification, therefore, 'nothing' is a misleading term for, and a distraction from, the later Heidegger's central philosophical concern. In fact, as I have argued in some detail (G. Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), pp. 29–38), that concern is with the ineffable mystery to which the human world can be experienced as being answerable.

Waghorn articulates the meaning of ‘nothing’ in some of the same terms that are often used in connection with the concept of ineffability: it has no properties (p. 51), we encounter problems when we try to secure reference to it (pp. 50–1, 66), it cannot be spoken of (p. 67) or thought about (p. 77). But it appears that his distraction by the terminology of ‘nothing’ prevents him from identifying this more promising candidate for fulfilling the quest for ultimate meaning, namely, ineffability. As I have argued, the concept of ineffability is uniquely able to terminate the regression that results from questioning regarding the meaning of life. Therefore that concept, and only that concept, is able to evoke what supplies ultimate meaning, the quest for which initially motivated Waghorn’s project. I have argued that while the language of ‘nothingness’, ‘*Angst*’, and ‘absurdity’ may provide appropriate terms with which poetically to evoke the ineffable, this constitutes only one pole of a dialectic, which must also include terms like ‘measure’, ‘answerability’, and ‘meaningfulness’ (*Ineffability and Religious Experience*, pp. 123–128). In Heideggerian terms, we could say that each of the mutually-correcting poles of this phenomenological dialectic corresponds to a moment of Being’s revealing/concealing ‘rhythm’.

Waghorn finds that the main reason why ‘nothing’ turns out to be unable to terminate the regress started by the quest for ultimate meaning is because no philosophical account of ‘nothing’ can defend itself against rival accounts in a non-question-begging manner—or even without assuming a whole methodology. As he rightly points out, “there will always be a kernel that will be unavailable to discursive talk and non-circular rational reconstruction” (p. 80). Waghorn finds in the analytic case an especially stark example of the problem of contradiction that “arises when a given methodology tries to understand its own limits, but proceeds to do so by utilizing the methodology under examination” (p. 54).

But, guided by the recent work of Iain McGilchrist, I have put forward a reading of the phenomenological method which can be used to support the view that ultimate meaning is supplied by the ineffable. Briefly, I argue that existential phenomenology incorporates both a rational and a descriptive, poetic moment (*Ineffability and Religious Experience*, pp. 123–131). It is a methodology that uses reason to the limited extent that reason itself permits. It can defend itself

against rival (e.g., thoroughly rationalistic) methodologies, demonstrating reason's limitations *in rational terms*, and thereby transcend the usual, rational scope of philosophical inquiry. It turns out that the subject–object split, which pervades all rational discourse, is best viewed, with Karl Jaspers and John Dewey, as a useful distinction to be transcended, rather than a dichotomy. In this way, phenomenology uses reason like a ladder, which, once climbed (and *only* then), must be kicked away. It rationally demonstrates the existence of a point where rational argument must give way to poetic description. Having rationally established the validity of the concept of ineffability, it is only in such poetic terms that phenomenology can further evoke the ineffable source of ultimate meaning to which human life is answerable, thereby cultivating a sense of that answerability.

Waghorn's resistance to the idea of ineffability as a source of ultimate meaning owes to the familiar self-reference antinomy and difficulties in securing reference that ineffability claims apparently involve (pp. 186; 276–279, nn. 69–71). But I, and other recent writers on ineffability, think that these objections can be satisfactorily answered (S. Jonas, *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics* (New York: Palgrave, 2016); G. Bennett-Hunter, 'Ineffability: Reply to Professors Metz and Cooper', *Philosophia* 44.4 (2016), pp. 1267–87).

Nicholas Waghorn's readings of the wide range of philosophers with whom he engages are impressive, as is his ability to elucidate the work of both 'analytic' and 'Continental' thinkers. But, as Waghorn makes it explicitly clear that he is well aware, what is missing from *Nothingness and the Meaning of Life* is a credible philosophical thesis of the author's own.

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