Nicholas Waghorn


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