

# THINKING FROM A VOID

If philosophy is the art of posing good questions, rather than providing the correct answers, then subtle (or not so subtle) shifts in the formulation of philosophical inquiries are worth paying close attention to. With regard to thinking, the scope of questioning has broadened in recent years, signalling, at the same time, a return to the ancient ways of addressing this theme in Parmenides and Plotinus, among others. In addition to the formally ontological and pragmatic concerns brought to bear on matters of epistemology – *what is thinking? what does it do and how?* – the ecological manners of probing thinking – *what is its site? where does it emerge from and where does it reside?* – have flourished. Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* and my own *Plant-Thinking*, both published in 2013, are only a couple of vegetally inflected examples of this tendency, which in the Western context at least (it is fair to say that Kohn is definitely not limited to this context), may be found already in Aldo Leopold’s 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac*, with its programmatic essay “Thinking Like a Mountain”, or in Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* dating back to 1972.

It turns out that the site of thinking is not only the head, and not only the human or animal head at that. The entire sentient body thinks as it negotiates its dynamic sojourn in the world. Plants and forests, mountains and rivers do so too, their growth and decay, gathering and falling apart being the expressions of plant-, forest-, mountain-, and river-thinking. By implication, madness is not just a disorder of the brain, but a sign of maladjustment between the thinking body and its milieu, or within the very milieu that thinks itself. There is, then, in ecological questions, in which the *where* is no less important than the *what*, a successive broadening of the circles of thinking from the brain to the rest of the central and peripheral nervous systems, from the nervous system to a sentient body, and from a sentient body to its interactions with the environment.

The hypothesis of extended thinking is far from new. It is there in Plotinus’s reflections on how the One thinks itself into existence via the different (vegetal, animal, human, etc.) modes of being. It also flickers in the Parmenidean fragment (B3), according to which “there is the same thing for thinking and for being”. But the hypothesis gets an unprecedented lease on life in a global situation of world-devastation, attributable to cumulative technogenic outcomes of a certain

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historically and culturally specific practice of human thinking. World-devastation – the desertification of the world – the world’s becoming-void: does this multifaceted process not complete the circle of abstraction that, having emerged from the void in the form of thought, drags existence itself into the void?

## IT TURNS OUT THAT THE SITE OF THINKING IS NOT ONLY THE HEAD, AND NOT ONLY THE HUMAN OR ANIMAL HEAD AT THAT

In this brief text, I want to tarry with the void, whence a strand of thinking that, having quickly become dominant, actually devastates the world emerges. I want to do so not with my mind on a default setting of automatic rejection, but, precisely, thinkingly, exploring the whereabouts of this strange thing that precludes every *where*. Because, curiously, while much of what goes under the name of thinking (including the algorithmic or computational paradigms, AI, game theory, and so forth) is voiding, the void itself has not been thought – whether as a result of having been unconsciously omitted from the domain of thinking, or as a result of having been substantivized and domesticated, or, again, having been rendered graspable, ineffable, and ultimately unthinkable.

To recap: we have, on the one hand, the expansion of thinking and of the proper site of thinking to the body and to the milieu, and, on the other, contraction to a void, which, nonetheless, rapidly expands, swallowing up the world or recasting the world in its own image. Perhaps, though, the two hands or sides pertain to the same phenomenon of thinking-as-voiding, except that in the first case it is congruent with the void of things, of matter and the environment, while in the second it militates against them. We ought to think through thinking-as-voiding against the backdrop of this opposition *and* co-belonging.

The power of abstraction voids (nullifies) finer differences that consequently evade the cognitive

apparatus. Algorithmic translation commits reality to numbers that are but the means of the void. Death and pure negativity give us an existential foretaste of the void. An anthropogenically induced sixth mass extinction massifies death at the expense of life itself and its irreducible diversity. The growing desert is the void ecologically substantialized or hypostatized; as I have written elsewhere, more than a particular ecosystem, “the desert is a state of mind cast over the earth,” the earth reshaped on the model of the barren abstractions of thinking. In its dominant (I would venture to say *hegemonic*) configuration, thinking has been the relentless conversion of the void of thought into an actual void in the world, into a world void of the world, the void of the world. To riff on Parmenides, it becomes increasingly apparent that at the end of the current path of devastation “there *will be* the same thing for thinking and for being.” The same thing: next to nothing.

The site or the non-site of thinking affects everything thinking does and doesn’t do. That thinking can think everything and everywhere – a quasi-magical ability that philosophers interpret in terms of its universality – is due to its genetic ties to the void, in the face of



which every *where* and every *thing* are equal in their potential nothingness. The thinking of the void is thinking with the *minus* sign, whereas that of an extended, ecological or eco-phenomenological variety is thinking with the *plus* sign: the one emanates from and makes grow a black hole, in which that which is thought is lost; the other irrupts from the plenitude of existence that thinks and that is all the more vibrant the more synergic connections it creates. Still, the void (above all, the void of thinking, or thinking as voiding, within limits) is indispensable even for ecological thought. It is this indispensability that thinking needs to rediscover behind the covers of abstraction, negativity, death (singular and massified), the desert, and the abyss.

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The void is classically defined through its non-occupation by bodies, which does not prevent it from accommodating things of a non-bodily kind, such as relations (*versus* parties to a relation). In Antiquity, the notion of the void (*kenon*: a substantive form drawn from the adjective *kenos*, “empty”) was treated on a par with place and space, as Pseudo-Plutarch relates: “The Stoics and Epicureans make a place, a void, and a space to differ. A void is that which is empty of any thing that may be called a body; place is that which is possessed by a body; a space that which is partly filled with a body, as a cask with wine” (Ps. Plut. *Plac.* 1.20). What is the emptiness of the void that does not fit the orders of empty space and empty places? There are no possible intersections between the void and things – particularly, things of a bodily type – by contrast to a completely inhabited place or an incompletely filled space. The *horror vacui* or *kenophobia* it awakens in us goes hand in hand with our attachment to the total continuity and contiguity of existence, the attachment to absolute attachment without breaks, ruptures, gaps, the *diastemata* of the Atomists. A similar reaction on the philosophical plane prompts Aristotle in Book IV of his *Physics* to conclude that “the void with the independent existence that some assign to it is not [*ouk esti kenon*]” (214b12).

The void *is not*; yet the void *is*, inasmuch as it exists in thought and, moreover, exists with the necessary determinations and discernments, distinguishing it from space and place. It is, likewise, as the uncanny

*whence* of thinking. One can argue, in the manner of Edward S. Casey in *The Fate of Place*, that, if it is determinable and discernible, the void is no longer “a strict void”. But, I ask, does the void need to coincide with itself, to follow strictly the self-identity of its concept? Truly self-consistent, the void is void of itself. Thinking might be this very non-coincidence with itself of the void, reverberating in the disquietude of questioning and particularly in philosophical questions, such as *Why is there something, rather than nothing?* And questioning is only one form of the void’s non-self-coincidence, which makes itself known wherever there are relations, those dynamic structures of the one tentatively stretching toward the other. If voiding didn’t operate in the forms of human and nonhuman thinking, neither existence nor relationality would have enough breathing room; they would not be not airy enough to breathe with their intended and extended meanings. Hence, my earlier contention that ecological thought, which has situated the mind in the whole body and the mind-body unit in the environment, cannot get by without the void of thinking.

## THE ISSUE IS NOT WHETHER BUT HOW EACH BEING SURFACES FROM THE VOID, KEEPS ITS RELATION OR NON- RELATION TO IT, VOIDS, AND THUS THINKS

Death and the abyss it stands for in Hegel’s or Heidegger’s philosophy and, later on, in existentialism is an obvious expression of the void. It looms large over the horizon of world-devastation. But how does the void bear on life, from its very beginning? Instead of death, let’s take the example – which is, certainly, much more than an example – of birth. In the case of mammalian births, the event is not complete until the umbilical cord is cut, physically confirming the newborn’s separation from the mother. The cut is not spatial, even though it is *also* that, and it does not belong to a place; it is an instantiation of the void, which need not be something purely abstract



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(in fact, abstraction is only one of its masks). While, according to the classical definition, the void is “empty of any thing which may be called a body”, it infiltrates bodily and material reality, or, better, this reality is interspersed with the void. (Those who subscribe to a view, according to which the mind is not split from the body, would have to agree that the mind’s life must be interspersed with the void to the same degree as the life of the body, which is not set apart from the mind.) The newborn, whose umbilical cord is cut, begins breathing by herself, relating to atmospheric otherness without the mediation of the placenta, or with the vegetal world for a planetary placenta, as Luce Irigaray has put it in her recent works. Not yet thinking, breathing across the void is the physiological foundation of thinking, taken in a sense broader than cognitive activity. Or, more precisely, it is the cornerstone of mammalian thinking, which has little to do with cerebral structures of the mammalian brain.

In Hannah Arendt’s writings as well, the event of birth is a bodily and social expression of the void. For her, action, which is not to be conflated with labour or work, is the site of thinking. As she puts it in *The Human Condition*, “action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities”. The freedom of a new beginning at birth is indebted to the void that overshadows all particular questions of origins, such as into which family, class, culture, epoch a child is born. That this beginning “can make itself felt in the world” is a reverberation of the void. Natality, for its part, includes alongside biological birth the political birth of a subject, a coming-together of newcomers in word and deed (that is to say, in *logos*). The beginning of thinking, where and when the first bio-physiological beginning is rebegun, circles back to the void, guaranteeing the novelty and freedom of action.

If, within bodily reality, birth is in touch with the void, then what happens to those living beings who are not born, but, for instance, germinate, like plants? Does the uninterrupted continuity of vegetal growth, the rootedness in place of a tree, a shrub, or a flower, preclude its voiding and, therefore, thinking? Consider



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the throw of seeds, spores, or pollen, the phenomena of dehiscence or splitting – at times explosive and rather dramatic – that release parts of plants into the world. The void shines (or darkens) through the movement of detachment from the mother plant, which, on its obverse, is the movement of relating to the atmosphere and the earth, to other plants, pollinating insects, and seed-spreading animals. Consider, further, the connection of nature to birth via the Latin *natura*, derived from *nato* – the past participle of *nascere*, to be born. Nature is the birth and continual birthing of everything and everyone, a continuous arising from and return to the discontinuity of the void. The issue is not *whether* but *how* each being surfaces from the void, keeps its relation or non-relation to it, voids, and thus thinks.

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The futile and protracted standoff between materialist and idealist schools of thought blinded philosophers in the West to the joint, if also internally differentiated, provenance of matter and consciousness from the void. One of the void’s material signatures is the makeup of atoms that consist mostly of empty space (ninety-nine

percent of their makeup is emptiness, to be exact). The void between and within atoms was familiar already to the ancient Atomists, who managed to see through the apparent solidity of matter without the assistance of microscopes and similar technological inventions. Buddhism raised the void (*Śūnyatā*) into an ontological principle, which may be reached in meditative practice by means of themeless concentration. Taoism sees in the void (*Wu*) a state of mind unramified into the objects of thought and concern. Thinking is inoperative here, but it springs from the void and is, like matter itself, largely comprised of the void.

## THOUGHT OR SPIRIT PRESENTED ITSELF AS ANTIMATTER, SHORN OF SPATIAL EXTENSION AND WEIGHT

Traditionally, thought or spirit presented itself as antimatter, shorn of spatial extension and weight. Contemporary physics teaches that matter actually comes about together with antimatter, much of which seems to have been destroyed after the Big Bang. As Frank Close puts it, “Antimatter is a weird topsy-turvy shadow of matter, like tweedledum to our tweedledee, where left becomes right and positive turns into negative”. Protons in antimatter have a negative charge; electrons – the positive. Whenever antimatter touches matter, immediate destruction ensues, lapsing back into the void. Metaphysical thought has, since its very inception, occupied the structural place of antimatter toward the material world: everything it brushed upon was inverted, axiologically and ontologically, into the opposite. The current whirlwind of world-devastation is a set of practical effects unleashed by that contact.

What if, however, just as matter is paired with antimatter, so thought (which is necessarily extended and ecological) crops up in the company of antithought that eschews extension and its ecological context? If that were the case, then antithought would be undoubtedly metaphysical, turning thought upside down and symmetrically changing “orientation in

thinking” (to make use of Kant’s memorable title) from right to left and left to right. The similarity between the effects of antithought and antimatter indicates the proximity (indeed, the intimacy) of matter and thought joined together, and separated, by the void. What from our contemporary standpoint appears as “thinking otherwise” is, at bottom, thinking, which has been displaced by antithought. In fact, the chiasmic pattern of matter and thought has been the following: antimatter has mysteriously evanesced, leaving the matter of the universe behind; antithought has persisted, provoking the massive disappearance of thought.

Despite the proliferation of materialisms said to be “new”, today’s clash, the gigantomachy of thinking in the twenty-first century, no longer involves materialism and idealism. Nor will the fate of thinking be decided in a battle between the plenitude of existence and the death-bearing void of abstraction. The void does not oppose positive and substantive being; it is, rather, void against void. The void of abstraction is *for something*: its metaphysical avatars invariably serve this or that purpose. The void of thinking otherwise is really *for nothing*, a void thoroughly voided. The task of thinking from the other void is one of voiding without devastating, of coming to terms with the void of matter, nature and births or birthing, of listening to how different modes of existence let the void reverberate in and between them. The fulfilment of this task hinges, in other words, on preserving freedom in the sense of vacancy, the field of thinking and being staying fallow (in keeping with the Old French *voide / viude*) and, in its fallowness, receptive to surprising, unpredictable growth, or... to nothing at all.

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