About Nothing

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ABSTRACT

The possibilities are explored of considering nothing as the intended object of thoughts that are literally about the concept of nothing(ness) first, and thereby of nothing(ness). Nothing(ness), on the proposed analysis, turns out to be nothing other than the property of being an intendable object. There are propositions that look to be both true and to be about nothing in the sense of being about the concept and ultimate intended object of what is here formally defined and designated as N-nothing(ness). We have been thinking about it already in reading and understanding the meaning of this abstract. Nothing nothings, we shall assert in all seriousness and with a definite formally definable literal meaning. The concept of N-nothing(ness) in that sense is a concept with identity conditions like that of any entity, the difference being that the concept of N-nothing(ness) is a nonentity and nonexistent intended object.

> "Here Mrs Mac Stinger paused, and drawing herself up, and inflating her bosom with a long breath, said, in allusion to the victim, 'My usband, Cap'en Cuttle!'
> "The abject Bunsby looked neither to the right nor to the left, nor at his bride, nor at his friend, but straight before him at nothing."
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> Charles Dickens, *Dealings With the Firm of Dombey and Son, Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation* (1848), Chapter LX, *Chiefly Matrimonial*, p. 923.

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1. Intentionality

If the logical form of established grammatical usage is any key to understanding the intended objects of thought and language, then, nonparadoxically, *nothing* is *something* a thought can be *about*. A thinking subject can think about nothing or nothingness as an intended object, and in so doing make nothing(ness), an intended object of exactly those thoughts.

Thinking about nothing in this sense is very different from not thinking at all. If I am thinking about nothing, then I am thinking rather than not thinking. If I receive the answer 'Nothing' to the obtuse question, 'What will I think about when I am dead?', then the intention should not be understood to say that after I am dead I will contemplate the concept of nothing(ness), but rather that I will then have ceased to exist, and will not be engaged in thinking or any other activity of any kind, even if my body should happen to persist for a certain time thereafter.[1]

Thinking of nothing in the negative sense of simply not thinking is very different from the positive sense of actually thinking in real time about nothing or about the concept of nothing or nothingness. It is also very different from thinking about nothing as the absence of some particular thing or kind of thing. If I reflect on there existing nothing in my bank account, this is not to encounter nothing or the concept of nothing or nothingness as an intended object of thought. Although, again, thinking about the fact that there is nothing in my bank account is manifestly different than not thinking about my bank account, or not thinking about anything in particular, or in the extreme case not thinking at all, as when I am cognitively disabled. Such predications can be handled by means of negative existentials in classical predicate-quantificational semantics, as asserting, $\neg\exists x\forall y[Money(x)\wedge My\text{-}Bank\text{-}Account(y)\wedge In(x,y)]$. This is not to think or speak of *nothing(ness)*. No such predicate appears. Rather, the intended object is my bank account, of which is predicated the lamentable property of not containing any money. Many cases can be similarly handled, but importantly not all facts involving a subject thinking about nothing or the concept of nothing or nothingness can be analyzed away by means of negative existentials.[2]

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[1] See Epicurus (1964, § 3). See also Wittgenstein (1922, 6.431–6.4311; 6.4311):«*Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens. Den Tod erlebt man nicht*».

[2] Quinean paraphrastic analysis techniques are imagined to eliminate ostensible references to *N*-nothing(ness) as something positive, an intendable object in its own right, in favor of negative

2. Intentionality in Thinking About Nothing(ness)

To think *of* nothing, in one of its obvious but philosophically less interesting meanings, is, equally, then, either not to think, or to think, but about nothing in particular or nothing of moment, or perhaps nothing that can even almost immediately afterward be recalled, or that the thinker is willing to share.

What, then, does 'nothing' mean in speaking of 'nothing in particular', as the right answer to certain questions, if there is no available particular predicate '*F*' of which reductively truthfully to say, $\neg\exists x F x$? Or is ostensibly speaking of 'nothing' or 'nothing in particular' a mere turn of phrase that should be eliminated from logically more circumspect expression by virtue of a kind of formal reduction of 'nothing' or 'nothing in particular' to the nonexistence of a particular kind of something (*F*)? What form could such an eliminative reduction of putative reference to nothing in particular to the nonexistence of something in particular be expected to take? Where does property '*F*' come from all of a sudden? Are we meant in that case to interpret '*F*' as a predicate variable to be instantiated in principle by any otherwise appropriate property, rather than a particular property? Even if we look at things in the most generous way, we appear committed in an extensionalist semantics to the implication that thinking of nothing or nothingness can only be understood as not thinking about something in particular, and not about nothing or nothingness.

The alternative considered in the discussion to follow is to make nothing or nothingness *N* (hereafter, abbreviating *N*-nothing(ness)) the specific intended object of certain thoughts, the force and content of which are not paraphrastically eliminated without loss of vital meaning by negative existential predications to properties other than *N*. Then we can say pleasantly that a thought is about nothing or nothingness, as in the case of thinking literally about nothing in particular, or thinking about what Jean-Paul Sartre in his (1943) existential phenomenological treatise, *Being and Nothingness* (*L'Être et le Néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*), means by his concept of

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existentials. The idea would be that instead of saying that we are thinking about *N*-nothing(ness), there is instead nothing of a certain description or answering to a certain distinguishing constitutive property or set of constitutive properties of which we are thinking. Similar applications are piloted for different purposes by W.V.O. Quine, especially in Quine (1951, pp. 20–46). See Pagin (2003, pp. 171–197).

nothingness (*néant*), wondering why there is something rather than nothing, and countless other applications referring to *N*, from the most seriously intended to Dickens's observation of the nuptially victimized Bunsby, possibly meant only figuratively as literary devices for purposes of exaggeration (Sartre, 1943), (Dickens, 1848).

What about Dickens's bamboozled Bunsby? Can a person literally look at nothing, or is this rhetorical excess? What is there to look at? Or is the point supposed to be that where he once thought he had a future to enter there is now nothing or nothing in particular to expect, the nonexistence of anything good, rewarding or personally satisfying to him, which has disappeared with the shrinking of his personhood in the recent unhappily wedded state into which he has been psychologically but otherwise in his judgment unaccountably bullied? Maybe something like that. Bunsby seeing no future or anything immediately around him could equally be eliminatively reductively expressed as, $\neg\exists x Can(Sbx)$. After all, it is not as though Bunsby can (*Can*) literally see nothing or nothingness, *N*, $\exists x[Nx \wedge Can(Sbx)]$, as a naïve reading of Dickens's comic description might suggest. There is in that case supposedly nothing there to see. How then is it conceivable to think about nothing or nothingness in the abstract as a concept arrived at through a chain of reasoning rather than by reflecting later on any once occurrent moments of perception?

Bunsby also cannot see anything if he is blind, but this would be a markedly different situation than Dickens describes. Bunsby is not blind, but comically going through some kind of cognitive shock, an externalized denial of unbearable facts, and he is paralyzed by the enormity of his plight and its immediate realization, to the point of experiencing a kind of sensory stupor. While his senses may be functioning properly neurophysiologically in and of themselves, there remains a neurological disconnection between their information intake and Bunsby's state of awareness, as his consciousness at least temporary suffers a kind of disintegration. From this standpoint, poor Bunsby, as Dickens explains his condition, is hopelessly enveloped in, and, metaphorically speaking, can only perceive, the nothing, the miserable nothingness before him in the wedded state he has just unaccountably entered. The future in particular has become an impenetrable void, and there is nothing positive there for him to discern even when he now as before tries to let hope run wild. Everything is instead a terrible alien blank from which all former value such as it was has been suddenly and mystifyingly leached. It has somehow come to pass that he has tied the knot with Mrs. Mac Stinger, and he is numb

with bewilderment and disbelief as to how it all occurred and what the dreary path must hold that now lies inescapably before him. Accordingly, in Dickens's image, he sees *nothing*:

This is still not yet to think or speak of nothing or nothingness as an intended object of thought, but instead only to signal that a thought or string of thoughts does not have an intended object capable of being designated or worth mentioning. Compare the teenager's answer 'Nothing.' to a parent's question, 'What did you do in school today?' Or to the potentially more urgent: 'What is wrong, dear?' Or the merely curious: 'What did you bring me from Hokkaido?' 'What are you holding in your hand?' 'What are you going to do with that letter?' We shall need to say something more positive about *N* if we are going to make a plausible argument about *N*-nothing(ness) as a semantically peculiar intendable object of thought.

3. Intentionality and a Strong Intentionality Thesis

To proceed, we consider next the logical implications of a strong Intentionality Thesis (IT):

> (IT) INTENTIONALITY THESIS:
> Every thought intends a first-person (internal to the thoughts of the thinking subject) transparently ostensible object, directly transcribable from the grammatical structure of the thought's linguistic expression as what the thought is about.

If (IT) is true, then the proposition that we can think about nothing in the sense of entertaining a thought that fails to intend any object by implication is false. We can therefore concentrate, for purposes of the present inquiry on the remaining alternative that if Intentionality Thesis (IT) is true, then we can think about nothing in the sense of entertaining a thought that is about an appropriate concept of nothing or nothingness, to be designated by a limiting-case predicate *N*, like zero or the null set, representing more generally in semantics the property *N* of being or having *N*-nothing(ness).[3]

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[3] The widely discussed topic of intentionality in an extensive collateral literature is associated in the late nineteenth century with the philosophy of Franz Brentano, (Brentano, 1874, p. 115). See Jacquette (2004). An independent ahistorical revival of intentionality theory is offered by Searle (1983). The priority of the intentionality of thought over language or of language over thought is discussed by Brentano scholar and intentionality champion Roderick M. Chisholm with Wilfrid Sellars (Chisholm & Sellars, 1958). Battlelines dividing mind-body reductive physicalism from proponents of

When the above interpretations and eliminative paraphrases are exhausted, we are encouraged to consider the possibility that we might be able to think about *N* as an unusual but still intendable object in every other respect like any other. If we do consider such thoughts as intending nothing or nothingness, then *N* is an intendable object of thought like any other, and is at the same time pure intendability. To think about *N*, about nothing or nothingness on the proposed interpretation, is univocally to intend a specific intended object, and in that instance and in that technical sense to think about something, in this instance, in particular, namely, nothing or nothingness. It is to do so, even though that 'something' which is thought about is precisely nothing and logically and conceptually, moreover, cannot possibly exist.[4]

If this way of thinking makes sense, or can be made at slight cost to make sense, as we are encouraged intuitively to hope, then we shall need a way of referring to nothing as opposed to referring to something in particular that does not exist. The individual nonexistents might be collected under a universal generalization, as the nonexistent *F*'s, *G*'s, etc., all the individual possible nonexistences of this and that intended object, unicorns and centaurs, finally amounting in extensional union to all and only nothing or to nothingness. It would then further follow the further tolerable consequence that only existent entities *are* something, permissible intended objects of

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the conceptually irreducible intentionality of thought are already drawn by Chisholm's dilemma for reductive explanations of psychological phenomena in Chisholm (1957). Chisholm's dilemma is that in order to avoid conspicuous explanatory inadequacy a purported reduction must ultimately depend in general terms upon an ineliminable concept of intentionality, and on astronomical numbers of distinct individual intentionalities as abstract relations between thoughts and symbols for thoughts and their intended objects, existent and nonexistent, or considered in an ontically neutral or agnostic way. The challenge is for any reductivist to explain or explain away the intentionality of thought in the events of consciousness without appeal to any intentional concepts. For all its argumentive force, it is genteelly left as an open question whether the concept of intentionality can be eliminated or reduced away from future more rigorous scientific explanations of adequately described psychological occurrences. An extraordinarily heavy burden of proof in the process has nevertheless unmistakably been shifted to the reductivist side to explain if the intentionality of thought by which references to intended objects and decisions to act to bring about intended states of affairs are explained away exclusively in terms of purely non- or extra-intentional concepts. We intentionalists continue to wait for what is repeatedly trumpeted as the future direction of reductive scientific psychology to replace so-called 'folk' psychology, apparently as an article of faith based on deeper but unsupported metaphysical commitments, of which no sign has so far been seen in the marketplace of ideas.
[4] For a more extensive bibliography and satellite essays on intensional logics and Meinongian object theory semantics, see Jacquette (1996; 2009a; 2009b).

thought, ultimately anything of which we can think or to which we can truly or falsely predicate properties. None of this so far provides a concept of nothing or nothingness, which would be a matter entirely of its properties, the existence or nonexistence of which in turn should not be prejudged.

If thoughts generally intend objects, and if some thoughts are ostensibly about nothing(ness), what is it then to think about nothing, about nothingness? We do so, one might venture, whenever we consider even low-level but still philosophical questions about certain aspects of the nature and limits of thought. If we so much as ask, 'Can we think about N-nothing(ness)?', then we have already made nothing(ness) an intended object of that particular thought. Even if we say that the thought intended nothing, as long as we are wondering anything about it, such as whether or not it bears the converse intentional property of being capable of being thought about, and therefore in considering the solution to the question, or what it means and whether or not it is true, is to be thinking about N-nothing(ness).

Quantifiers, universal or existential, affirmed or negated, make no difference in understanding the semantics of thoughts that ostensibly intend nothing or nothingness, just as by grammatical parity they might intend round or roundness as objects of thought. We must accordingly confront nothing and nothingness as intended objects of some logically possible thoughts that are arguably often instantiated even in everyday thought and its expression. Anyone with a normally matured cognitive and linguistic capability is potentially able to think about the concept of nothing or nothingness, and so about nothing or nothingness as intended objects of certain thoughts. See Jacquette (2011; 2013).

4. Advantageous Semantic Resources of Intensional Logic

If we limit ourselves to classical symbolic logic with an extensionally interpreted semantics, then we cannot correctly interpret, 'Jean-Paul Sartre (s) proposes an existentialist phenomenological ontology (P) of nothingness (N)' purely in terms of the existential quantifier, as the formula:

$\exists x[Ps(Nx)]$

For this construction extensionally implies $\exists x[Nx]$, which is formally to say that nothing or nothingness exists. It cannot be that easy, or that logically, semantically, and especially ontically hazardous, to explicate the meaning

conditions of thoughts and their expressions ostensibly about nothing. Whether or not nothing or nothingness is potentially an intended object of thought, we do not want to be cornered into admitting that nothing, by virtue of supporting certain true or false predications, is an *existent* object in a classical extensional referential semantic domain. Such conflicting expectations might properly lead us from the familiar constraints of classical extensionalist logic to something more intentionalist and semantically intensionalist, and hence an ontically neutral logic in its full range of true predications and 'existential' quantifications.[5]

Nor do the problems of using only standardly understood quantifiers to express thinking about nothing or nothingness as an intended object end here. If we introduce a qualitative predicate '*T*' for 'thought' and a relational predicate '*I*' for 'intending' ('being about') something, then in classical extensional logic we cannot correctly symbolize thinking about nothing or nothingness as:

$$\exists x \neg \exists y [Tx \land Ixy]$$

This is unacceptable, because it states that there exists a thought that is not about anything and intends no existing, intended object. This places the symbolization immediately outside the present investigation, by flatly contradicting (IT). (IT) might finally be false and destined for the scrap heap, but to show this will take more work than merely formalizing the proposition that there exists a thought that is not about any, and as such intends no existing object.

The reasons are: (1) The fact that nothing or nothingness is not an existing intended object is not yet enough to single out the specific intended object of thoughts about nothing or nothingness. (2) Proponents often admit and even celebrate the supposed fact that (IT) implies that some thoughts are about or intend nonexistent objects. (3) Merely to advance the above sentence blatantly begs the question against (IT), and as such cannot be construed as implying anything more than a standoff with the intentionality thesis, a collision of opposing slogans. (IT), which can be formalized as $\forall x \exists y [Tx \rightarrow Ixy]$, is true in that case iff $\exists x \neg \exists y [Tx \land Ixy]$ is false, without providing an independent reason for supposing that $\exists x \neg \exists y [Tx \land Ixy]$ in particular, rather than (IT), is true. Nor

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[5] The backwards ∃ of 'existential' quantifier, contrary to the conventions of extensional logic, has no existential or ontic import in a Meinongian intensional semantics. See Parsons (1980, pp. 69–70), Routley (1981, p. 174). Further discussion in Fine (1982; 1984).

can we express the proposition that the dead think of nothing in the negative existential quantifier rather than intentional sense, if we assume that the dead have no thoughts: $\forall x[Dx \rightarrow \neg \exists y \neg \exists z[Ty \wedge Thinks(x,y) \wedge Iyz]]$. This latter proposition is true on the reasonable intrinsically intuitively plausible assumption that the dead do not think at all. The truth, if such it is, nevertheless does not unlock any secrets or encode any insights concerning the logical structure of living thoughts that are about nothing(ness) as an intended object.

A thinker thinks about N as an intended object in reflecting, for example, on whether there might have been nothing or nothingness, rather than something physical, material, dynamic, or spatiotemporal existing in the world. N-nothing(ness), as such, is never more than an intended object of thought, since it is, after all, literally nothing. It would appear that nothing prevents us from thinking about nothing, just as we may think about other things of abstract philosophical or mathematical interest. Nothing in the general semantic conceptual and ontic economy on such a conception is like zero and the null set in arithmetic and set theory (Kaplan, 2000).[6]

When we think and speak ostensibly about nothing and nothingness, we relate ourselves in thought to a curious assortment of intended objects, of things that we are free to think about. Hence, as we have emphasized, there is a sharp, formally representable logical, semantic, and ontic difference between a thought being about nothing or nothingness, as opposed to not being about anything. The intentionality of thinking about nothing(ness) is reflected in the intensionality of corresponding constructions for which classical quantifier duality is denied on the strength of (IT), proceeding from the above problematic logical formalization:

$$\exists x \neg \exists y[Tx \wedge Ixy] \leftrightarrow \exists x \forall y[Tx \rightarrow \neg Ixy]$$

Even if we are inclined to accept the proposition on the left of the equivalence, that a thought can be about something nonexistent, as compatible with (IT), there is no doubt that the formula on the right, that there exists a thought that is not about anything, logically contradicts (IT). If, indeed, we accept (IT), even if only for the sake of argument, then we have examples of

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[6] Among other useful sources on the history and role of the null set in contemporary set theory, see Conway & Guy (1996), Mendelson (1997), and Tiles (2012).

thoughts that are about nothing or nothingness as an intended object ready to hand:

(T1): This thought (T1) is about nothing(ness).
(T2): Some other thought (TN (≠ T2)) is about nothing(ness).

Neither (T1) nor (T2) need be true in order to harvest thoughts about nothing or nothingness as an intended object in applications of (IT). All we need referentially, and hence for inclusion in the logic's semantic domain, is a thinking subject having entertained the thought that a thought could be about *N*, in order to establish that in some sense thought can intend *N*.

What we need, then, in light of the abject failure of classical quantifier logic to express the possibility that a thought might be about nothing or nothingness as an intended object, is a special predicate. The symbolic predicate '*N*' for being or having constitutive property *N*–nothing(ness) further enables us to say:

$$\exists x \exists y[\, Tx \wedge Ny \wedge Ixy]$$

This elegant little formula may have much to recommend it, if only we can make sense of the deductively valid implication that:

$$\exists x[Nx]$$

Classically, this asserts that there *is* something that has the property of being or instantiating property *N*. Extensional semantics for the predicate '*N*' allow it no favoritism, but also require that there *exist* something that has the property of being *N*. So quickly and effortlessly do individually reasonable assumptions reach a logical impasse. What are logic and the commonsense interpretation of meaning supposed to conclude about the apparent reference of thought and language to nothing or nothingness which we have designated as *N*? What could it mean to think about and in other ways derivatively to intend and hence to refer to nothing or nothingness)? If '*N*' is a predicate, then what is its extension? It cannot be intensionally identified by virtue of its null extension alone, for it is not the only null extension predicate, as witness 'unicorn', 'centaur' and 'flying horse', 'the gods', 'phlogiston', 'vortices', 'ideal lever', 'ideal fulcrum', 'ideal gas', 'projectile moving without impressed forces', and uncounted others.[7]

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[7] I offer a detailed critique of the prospects of intensional logic in view of the failure of purely extensional systems in Jacquette (2010, especially pp. 22–140).

5. Intentionality and Intensional Logic

If we can think about nothing(ness) as an intended object, as might be argued both on linguistic and phenomenological grounds we are able to do, then, as previously observed, we shall require a predicate 'N' for the concept. The only way we can restore classical quantifier duality compatibly with (IT), is by adopting an ontically neutral interpretation of the quantifiers, as in a free logic, but also by allowing nonexistent objects into a referential domain that subsumes but exceeds the logic's ontology. For this purpose, we shall require an intensional object theory predicate logic applied by means of a referential domain that far outstrips its ontology.

The idea of there being an intension for predicate 'N', the property of being nothing(ness), is not yet an occasion to rejoice. Can we reconcile ourselves to speaking of the set of all nothings or nothingnesses? The dilemma is that either predicate 'N' is instantiated by an intended object in the referential semantic domain of ontology + extraontology, or not. If it is, then there *is*, in at least a referential ontically neutral sense, *something* that is or has the property of being nothing or nothingness. If not, then there is nothing to which thought can refer, so that it becomes impossible on the assumption after all to think about or otherwise intend nothing(ness), contrary to (IT).

To say that nothing belongs to the intension of predicate 'N', $\neg \exists x[Nx]$, in effect, that nothing Nothings, in the ontically neutral quantifier logic, prevents thought even from taking nothing(ness) as an intended object of such intensional states and propositional attitudes as that of doubt, imagination, consideration, wonder, inference, comparison, and a host of others. If we are to make sense of the proposal that we can think about nothing or nothingness, even so thinly as when we doubt that nothing or nothingness can logically be an intended object of thought, then we must be prepared to accept as true the proposition that:

$$\exists x[Nx \wedge \neg E!x]$$

Evidently, however, we cannot go so far as to assert the following reductive analysis of the N predicate by means of the material equivalence:

$$\forall x[Nx \leftrightarrow \neg E!x]$$

If an intended object in the referential semantic domain of existents and nonexistents is N, then it does not exist. However, the converse is not

intuitively true, if, as it seems correct to say, if something does not exist, then it is nothing. If unicorns do not exist and flying horses do not exist, it does not follow deductively that unicorns having the constitutive property N = flying horses having the property M).

We cannot validly draw generalizations concerning the concept of N, if, like Sartre, we are interested in the phenomenology of nothingness, by considering specifically the unexemplified concepts of being a unicorn and being a flying horse. On the proposed object theory explanation of property N, Sartre can only be making things up to say about the concept of nothingness, for there is no nature, essence, or analysis to be given of N, beyond the thinnest of identity conditions required for N to be an intendable object of thought, as self-identical, identical to N. This is not to prevent Sartre from saying many interesting things especially in his phenomenology of nothingness about the nature and essence of those thinkers who intend N. There is nothing at all to say about N as the intended object of any such thoughts, but much to say about the thoughts and thinkers themselves, which is what Sartre on reflection seems to offer.

6. Analysis of Intendable N-Nothing(ness)

Not everything that fails to exist is nothing or nothingness. A golden mountain ≠ nothing(ness), on plausible intensional identity conditions for nonexistent objects, simply because there exists no golden mountain. Phenomenologically, it is also one thing to think of a golden mountain, and quite another to think of N-nothing(ness). Nevertheless, it seems true that:

$$\forall x[Nx \rightarrow \neg E!x] \wedge \neg \forall x[\neg E!x \rightarrow Nx]$$

We make progress by defining the constitutive property N in meta-predicate or metalogical terms in a second-order logic as the metalogical property of not existing and having only whatever extra-ontic (constitutive) properties are properties of every possibly intended (existent or nonexistent) object of thought in the logic's expanded referential semantic domain.[8]

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[8] On the grounds for distinguishing constitutive (nuclear) from extra-constitutive (extranuclear) properties in Jacquette (1996, pp. 114–116), N-nothing(ness) must be constitutive rather than extra-constitutive, because it is freely assumable as defining an intendable object and because the externally negated proposition that an object has N-nothing(ness), $\neg Na$, is intuitively not logically equivalent to the object having the complement of the property of being or having N-nothing(ness) in non-N-nothing(ness) or non-Na. Although thought is free to intend that an object a of which it is true that Na

The definition is given by this material equivalence:

N-Nothing(ness) as a Nonexistent Intended Object (and Nothing More)
$$\forall x[Nx \leftrightarrow [\neg E!x \land \forall y, \varphi[\varphi x \rightarrow \varphi y]]]$$

The concept of *N* can therefore also be defined as the property of being intendable (positive) and having no constitutive properties and consequently nonexistent (negative). However, it is not derivable as such from the immediately preceding biconditional defining *N* as a nonexistent intended object and nothing more. We must therefore assert as a distinct and logically independent theorem of the logic of *N* the unavoidably circular proposition, and consequently unacceptable as a definition of the concept of *N*, that:

N-Nothing(ness) as the Possession of No Other Constitutive Property
$$\forall x[Nx \leftrightarrow \neg \exists \varphi[\varphi \neq N \land \varphi x]]$$

We speak in what follows of nothing and nothingness or *N* without further qualification when we mean to refer to the concept as it appears in general discourse, and as *N* in designating more specifically the concept of *N* more exactly defined above. The concept of *N* is thereby made equivalent to a nonexistent intendable object that has no substantive or extra-ontic constitutive properties that are not also properties of any and every intendable existent or nonexistent object (Mally, 1914; Jacquette, 1996, pp. 70–79).

N is the total absence of whatever properties are beyond those minimally required of objects generally to be intendable objects at all, but that do not include being intendable or an object as themselves constitutive. These are not constitutive but extra-constitutive properties, and it is by virtue of sharing only these and no constitutive properties that the constitutive property *N* is singled out intensionally from all other properties. The point is that as an intendable

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has the complement property of being or having non-*N*-nothing(ness). In that case, it is true of nonexistent object *a* by free assumption that both *Na* ∧ non-*Na*, but it does not follow logically that therefore an impossible object *a* does not have the property of being *N*-nothing(ness) or that ¬*Na*, which would result not merely in an impossible intendable object, but in an outright logical syntactical contradiction, *Na* ∧ ¬*Na*. The logic recoils at such a conclusion, because we do not expect contradictions to be validly deducible from the true proposition that *Na* and that a thinker freely intends that the said intendable impossible object *a* has the complement predication, non-*Na*. There is a line to be drawn in intensional logic between the comprehension of impossible intendable objects and the suggestion that logical contradictions are forthcoming from true and otherwise unproblematic assumptions.

object, N has only what it needs in order to be an intended object, and absolutely *nothing* more. If every intendable object has at least one constitutive property, and if being intendable as an object is not a constitutive property, then there must still be at least one constitutive property that every intendable object has in its possession, by virtue of which it can logically be identified and distinguished from every other intendable object.

We can say that N has along with every other intended object the extra-constitutive property of being intendable, and, what amounts to the same thing, the extra-constitutive property of being an object. What makes the property of being intendable extra-constitutive, is that we cannot freely posit a nonexistent intendable object that is non-intendable, or such that it is not intendable. It is impossible for an object not to have the extra-constitutive property of being non-intendable or of not being intendable. The reasoning has this elementary logical structure:

Argument for Preserving Universal Intendable Objecthood and Possession of at Least One Constitutive Property by Every Intendable Object, Hypothetically Including N = N-Nothing(ness)

$\forall x[Nx \rightarrow O!x]$
$\forall x[O!x \rightarrow \exists \varphi[\varphi x]]$
$\forall x[Nx \rightarrow \exists \varphi[\varphi x]]$

As a consequence, constitutive property N poses no possible counterexample threat to the universal constitutive propertyhood of every intendable object of thought. Nor on the same grounds does constitutive property N logically challenge the universal referential domain comprehension principle instantiated relevantly here for constitutive property N in the first assumption of the inference formalized as $\forall x[Nx \rightarrow O!x]$. The truth of the final step of inference in $\forall x[Nx \rightarrow \exists \varphi[\varphi x]]$ is trivially guaranteed by the tautology, $\forall x[Nx \rightarrow Nx]$, and there is logically no need for constitutive property N-nothing(ness) to possess any other distinctive or distinguishing constitutive properties beyond itself, in addition to constitutive property N.

If we are interested in the general concept of intended object, therefore, we cannot afford to overlook the concept of N as a further unadorned unqualifiedly intended object. N, on such a conception, is accordingly the most basic and fundamental intendable object with no predicational frills or additions by virtue of possessing any other constitutive properties than the constitutive property

of being nothing or nothingness. It earns title to this constitutive property in turn by being the subject of no extra-constitutive properties other than the property of being an intendable object, and whatever possessing such an extra-constitutive further entails among other extra-constitutive properties, such as being intendable, being an object, being self-identical, unitary, a possible referent, and the like.

It may be controversial to consider being = N or being ≠ N as constitutive properties. However, they cannot reasonably be regarded as extra-constitutive of the intended object of being N itself. The suggestion that being or having property N is constitutive rather than extra-constitutive preserves the intuitive truth of the object theory principle that every intendable object has at least one constitutive property. The constitutive property of being N has the constitutive property of being N and nothing else constitutive, although it has whatever extra-constitutive properties it shares in common with every other intendable object of thought, again and nothing more (Meinong, 1915, pp. 176–177).[9]

We want to be able to say that whatever if anything property N consists of, it consists anyway of the property of being = N. However, we cannot intelligibly propose that N consists of any constitutive properties other than the constitutive property of being N, while it enjoys exactly the same extra-constitutive properties as every other intendable object, among others, of being intendable, an object, and a distinct individual referent of certain terms, such as 'a', if, in an ontically neutral quantifier semantics, the sentence $\exists x[Nx \wedge x=a]$ is true. If it is also true that $\exists x[Nx \wedge x = b]$, then we shall have no choice except to conclude that $a=b$.

We suppose that every intendable object has at least one constitutive property. Where every intendable object other than N is concerned, the object's constitutive properties include more than merely the property of being that very object. N is different precisely for this reason, because its intensional identity conditions depend exclusively upon N having only the constitutive property N of being or having constitutive property N. This occurs only in the case of the constitutive property of being N itself, and possessing whatever properties the property of being N immediately logically implies, while by definition and free intention possessing no other constitutive properties. We can nevertheless conclude, where symbol '$O!$' represents the extra-constitutive

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[9] See Jacquette (2001), Parsons (1978 ; 1980, p. 24), Routley (1981, pp. 264–265).

property of 'being an intendable object', as '!' generally marks the distinction between extra-constitutive and unshrieked constitutive properties:

$$\forall x[\,O!x \leftrightarrow \exists \varphi[\varphi x]\,]$$

It follows from the above working assumption that thought can intend N-nothing(ness), that the intended object N has at least one constitutive property, disappointingly being identical to N, any and all of which must somehow derive from the constitutive property N itself, but possessing no other distinguishing constitutive properties.

The constitutive property N additionally has the extra-constitutive properties it shares with all other intendable objects, of being an intendable object, being an object of thought, being an object, being intendable, belonging to an intensional logic's referential domain, and whatever further extra-constitutive semantic or ontic properties are shared by all other intendable objects. Uniquely, among all other intendable objects, the constitutive property N of being or having N is constituted exclusively by its being the only intendable object whose intensional identity involves nothing beyond its self-identity. As a distinct intendable object, it has analytically exactly this trivial constitutive property, of being or having N, of being nothing other than itself, while lacking any further characterizing constitutive property. Hence, N has no nature, essence, or deeper meaning of concept to discover or explore. Those, including Sartre, who speak of nothing or nothingness as though it had more savor have drastically failed to understand the concept.[10]

The suggestion that N is a constitutive property then allows us freely to entertain, as we could never do with respect to extra-constitutive properties like existence, possibility, completeness, or the like, the assumption that an intendable object is non-N, or which is such that it is not the case that it is or has constitutive property N. This is logically, semantically and ontically harmless, because it allows an intensional formalism to countenance intendable objects other than N, such as any existent object or any object characterized by any constitutive property other than N. That is to say, we are free thereby to assume as an intendable object any object other than N, which is an expected and reassuring result, rather than any sort of challenge to the logic or semantic

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[10] Sartre is apparently willing to countenance the possibility of meaningfully saying something constitutive about nothingness. Sartre writes for example: «Or on the contrary is nothingness as the structure of the real, the origin and foundation of negation?» (Sartre, 1943, p. 7). See Sartre's discussion throughout Part One, 'The Problem of Nothingness', pp. 3–70.

integrity of object theory with a constitutive N property. Any intended object other than N will nevertheless have other constitutive properties than being itself, whatever it is, or being N, by virtue of which under Leibnizian identity conditions it can be distinguished from every other intended object of thought.[11]

N as an intended object of certain thoughts as a result is any nonexistent object that has only those extra-constitutive properties that are indistinguishably had by any and every intended object, which is to say that it has the constitutive property of being N. *And*, the point is, *nothing else*. It has no other constitutive properties beyond being or having constitutive property N. We need not commit ourselves to what extra-constitutive properties are essential for every minimally intendable object. Likely candidates for the category nevertheless include being an intendable object, being an object, intendable, capable of being thought about, self-identical, unitary, and whatever other extra-constitutive properties might belong to any and every intendable object in a language's referential domain, without supporting further qualification. It is whatever extra-constitutive properties entitle a putative intended object a place in a referential domain that consists of the combined ontology and semantic extra-ontology of existent and nonexistent intendable objects, intensionally comprehended by every logically possible combination of all constitutive properties and their complements.

If the above analysis of N is correct, then N itself, defined as a nonexistent minimally intendable object, is nothing more than or other than pure intendability. N, as we should expect, has no color, shape, weight, flavor, or any other extra-ontic constitutive property φ. It is literally nothing, but nevertheless nonparadoxically something that thinkers can intend, think of or about, refer to in thought and its expression. If we choose to dress the object with further properties, then we are *superadding* something to the intendable object N that does not belong intrinsically to its nature, concept, or essence, as when we attribute the property of being boring or exciting to an intended object, perhaps an event, performance or performer at the theatre. We consider for convenience as representative of the things that might be said in superaddition to the bare bones of N such things as the property of being a projection of the mind's fear of the unknown personal oblivion that may be

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[11] Leibnizian intensional identity conditions are already standard for existent objects. I argue that identity is itself intensional rather than an extensional relation in Jacquette (2010, pp. 137–140).

expected when death occurs, and the cessation of individual consciousness. We refer, again, for convenience, to this psychological and philosophical superadditive attribution to *N*, marked by this attitude, although perhaps not entirely in fairness to its tradition, as *an* (not *the*) *existentialist* dressing of the intended object of *N*.

N, besides being itself a nonexistent object, as we have emphasized, has only the extra-constitutive properties that belong to every intended object. Thus, *N*, like every other intendable object, by possessing the property of being intendable, supports the further crucial implication that certain thoughts can intend *N* as an intendable object. If we try to say that *N* is either more or less than pure intendability, then we shall have either strayed, on the one side, into making nothing into something more specific than whatever is implied merely by its being capable of being intended, thereby necessarily confusing it with some other intendable object other than what is strictly *N*. Or, on the other side, crossing over from *N* as an intendable object with negative existential quantification. There are obviously such concepts, even if no one has so far thought to give them a name, but they are different than the concept of *N* are pure intendability and quantificationally nothing more.

When we consider ontic relations for intendable property-object *N*, we arrive minimally at the following intuitive principles, formalized in the intensional logic toward which we have previously gestured:

Ontic Relations for Intendable N-Nothing(ness)

(1) $\exists x[Nx]$
There is an (existent or nonexistent) intendable object of *N*-nothing(ness).

(2) $\forall x[Nx \leftrightarrow [O!x \wedge \neg \exists \varphi[\varphi x \wedge \neg [O! \rightarrow \varphi x]]]$
An object is intendable *N*-nothing(ness) iff it is an intendable object (and nothing more).

(3) $\exists x[Nx \wedge \neg E!x]$
N-nothing(ness) does not exist (a nonexistent intendable object).

(4) $\neg \exists x[Nx \wedge E!x]$
Equivalently, there is no existent *N*-nothing(ness).

(5) $\forall x[Nx \rightarrow \neg E!x]$
Equivalently, again, all N-nothing(ness) is nonexistent.

(6) $\neg\forall x[E!x \rightarrow Nx]$
It is not the case that all existent objects are N-nothing(ness).

(7) $\neg\forall x[Nx \rightarrow E!x]$
It is not the case that all N-nothing(ness) intendable objects exist.

(8) $\neg\forall x[\neg E!x \rightarrow Nx]$
It is not the case that all nonexistent objects are (or have the property of being) intendable N-nothing(ness).

(9) $\forall x \neg[\neg E!x \rightarrow \neg Nx]$
Everything is (all objects are) not such that being nonexistent implies not being (or not having the property of being) N-nothing(ness).

(10) $\exists x[Nx \wedge \neg\exists y[E!y \wedge Ny]]$
Some (existent or nonexistent) intendable object is such that it is (or has the property of being) N-nothing(ness) and nothing is an existent object that is also(or also has the property of being) N-nothing(ness).

The concept of N as such is indistinguishable again from the concept of being intendable, and hence of unqualified objecthood. It is the otherwise totally empty concept of being an existent or nonexistent intended object of an existent or nonexistent thought. Relying on some of these ontic propositions and a form of the general (IT) thesis, we can now formally derive the implication that there is at least an intendable, existent or nonexistent thought that intends N. We assert, first, that there is an existent or nonexistent (ontically neutral) thought T, such that for any intendable object $O!$, T intends, I, intendable object $O!$. The inference holds immediately once we include N among the intendable objects belonging to the intensional logic's referential domain of existent objects in an ontology and nonexistent objects in an extra-ontology.

Argument for the Intendability of N-Nothing(ness)
1. $\exists x \forall y[[Tx \wedge O!y] \rightarrow Ixy]$
2. $\exists x[Nx]$

3. $\exists x[Nx \wedge O!x]$
4. $\exists x,y[Tx \wedge Ny \wedge Ixy]$

At the opposite predicational extreme, we consider the metalogical extra-constitutive property of being a maximal intended object, possessing every constitutive property and its complement, red and non-red, round and non-round, N and non-N or non-N-nothing(ness), and so on. Such an intended object, needless to say, is metaphysically impossible. Like the round square, however, it is nevertheless capable of being intended, thought about as distinct from any other intended object intensionally by virtue of having all constitutive properties and their complementsφ truly predicated of it, and is, indeed, for this reason, not only necessarily nonexistent but *maximally impossible*:

(M) M-Maximal Impossibility as Intended Object
$\forall x[Mx \leftrightarrow \forall \varphi[\varphi x]]$

The opposed poles in a full object theory semantic domain are therefore N, the intendable object of N, possessing no constitutive properties other than N itself, the constitutive property of being N, and those extra-constitutive properties implied by its being intendable, that it shares with every other intendable object, and (M), at the opposite extreme, where an intendable object has *all* constitutive properties *and* their complements. Every other intendable object of thought is situated somewhere between these two semantic extremes.

Since such an intendable object is metaphysically impossible, there is no need to add the explicit provision, as in the case of (N), that the maximally impossible object does not exist or has the supervenient property of being nonexistent. We would nevertheless certainly be within our rights semantically to add the explicit nonexistence condition for emphasis in the formula, $\forall x[Mx \leftrightarrow \neg E!x \wedge \forall \varphi[\varphi x]]$. If we supplement the principle that in order to be something other than nothing an intendable object must have at least one constitutive property other than being itself that does not belong to any and every intendable object, then it would be unnecessary also to add the clause to the definition of (N) that the intendable object N does not exist. The nonexistence of N would then follow from the universal proposition, $\forall x[E!x \rightarrow \exists \varphi[\varphi x \wedge \neg \forall y \varphi y]]$, where the expanded biconditional obviously does not hold. We could in that case define N more economically as, $\forall x[Nx \leftrightarrow \forall y,\varphi[\varphi x \rightarrow \varphi y]]$. In this form, it is even more apparent that the

concept of *N* presented here is equivalent to that of being a purely intendable object, which is alternatively redundantly to say being intendable or being an object, in the most general sense.

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