

# Sitting at the Kantian Table of Nothingness

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**Abstract** This article appeals to the table of nothingness (*Nichts*) occurring within Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to assess three recent accounts of nothingness – by Graham Priest, Filippo Costantini, and Filippo Casati & Naoya Fujikawa – under the light of folk preconceptions about nothingness. After defining the two strongest preconceptions as the absence of unrestrictedly everything (*nihil absolutum*) and the idea of nothingness as a self-contradictory item (*nihil negativum*), I argue that both might be read as two Aristotelian connected homonyms, rather than conflating them into a single item (as Priest's and Casati and Fujikawa's accounts seem to do), or dropping the idea of the *nihil absolutum*, as Costantini's account does.

**Keywords** Nothingness. Kant's table of nothing. Aristotle's homonymy. Negative nothingness. Absolute nothingness.

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## 1 Absolute Nothingness (*nihil absolutum*) and Negative Nothingness (*nihil negativum*)

This article appeals to the table of nothingness (*Nichts*)<sup>1</sup> occurring within Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* ([1781; 1787] 1998)<sup>2</sup> to assess three recent accounts of nothingness (Priest 2014; Costantini 2020; Casati, Fujikawa 2019; Casati 2022, ch. 5) under the light of some folk preconceptions about nothingness.<sup>3</sup>

After a brief survey of the Kantian table of nothingness, in the first part of this paper I argue that a good view of nothingness should meet at the same time three *desiderata*, namely:

- (i) It should account for both the core preconceptions we implicitly or explicitly have about the nominal essence of nothingness, namely, the *nihil absolutum* (absolute nothingness) and the *nihil negativum* (negative nothingness) – cf. §§ 1.2-1.3. (About the notion of nominal essence, cf. § 1.2).
- (ii) Those two preconceptions should be kept distinct (cf. § 1.3).
- (iii) Those two preconceptions should be related (cf. § 1.3).

In the second part of the paper (§§ 2.1-2.5), I assess the above-mentioned recent accounts of nothingness. Since none of the three assessed views address all those *desiderata*, then they turn out not to be able to properly account for the nominal essence of nothingness.

### 1.1 The Kantian Table of Nothingness

Let us start with a brief overview of the Kantian table of nothingness. As Perelda correctly highlights, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, more precisely at the end of the *Transcendental Analytic*, “Kant [...] distinguishes four [different notions of nothingness], on the basis of the German scholasticism”, giving rise to a “table of nothingness” (2021, 103; emphasis added). The Kantian table of nothingness is conceptually based on his table of categories (of quantity, quality,

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**1** Some translators render the German word *Nichts* as ‘Nothing’. I prefer to use ‘nothingness’ because, at this stage, I would like to be agnostic as much as possible about whether the term ‘nothing’ is a mere negative quantifier or (also) a non-quantificational item (*the nothingness*). From § 1.1, I will also refer to Kantian nothingness as a bare object in general (following Smith’s 2023 reading of Kant’s formulation ‘*Gegenstand überhaupt*’). See also Stang 2021, 105. The phrase ‘object in general’ earlier occurred in P. Guyer and A. Wood’s edition: cf. Kant [1781; 1787] 1998, 382).

**2** References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV) use the standard A/B pagination (A: 1781; B: 1787).

**3** When I use the phrase ‘folk preconceptions’ or the like, I will mainly refer to our European languages conceptual background: cf. § 1.2.

relation, and modality: see KrV, A80/B106). Here is Kant's popular table of nothingness (KrV, A292/B348):

<b>Nothing,</b> as	
<b>1</b>	
<b>Empty concept without object,</b> <i>ens rationis.</i>	
<b>2.</b>	<b>3.</b>
<b>Empty object of a concept,</b> <i>nihil privativum.</i>	<b>Empty intuition without an object,</b> <i>ens imaginarium.</i>
<b>4.</b>	
<b>Empty object without concept,</b> <i>nihil negativum.</i>	

Before surveying the Kantian table, we need to introduce a key notion to understand how Kant can speak about (the) nothing at all (nothingness, *Nichts*), in spite of Parmenides' ancient 'forbidden'. As Smith wisely notices, tracing back the genesis of Kant's notion of nothingness, "even 'nothing' is still an 'object' in [...] [a] broad sense" (2023, 6). According to Kant,

The highest concept with which one is accustomed to begin a transcendental philosophy is usually the division between the possible and the impossible. But since every division presupposes a concept that is to be divided, a still higher one must be given, and this is the concept of an object in general [*Gegenstand überhaupt*] (taken problematically, leaving undecided whether it is something or nothing). (KrV, A290/B346)

Henceforth, I will also refer to nothingness as an 'object' or a 'bare object' as a lexical contraction of 'bare object in general' (*Gegenstand überhaupt*).<sup>4</sup>

I would highlight that *all* of the Kantian senses of nothingness can be understood as bare objects in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*), in spite of them being empty objects or devoid of objects involved whatsoever, as far as the highest concept of metaphysics is the bare object in general. These readings of the nothingness are not committed to objects strictly speaking, in the Kantian understanding of objects of

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise specified.

experience (*Objekte der Erfahrung*) that is. In fact, they are objects only in a broad sense in Kant's framework (*Gegenstand überhaupt*, exactly). To refer to this latter peculiar kind of objects, Smith (2023) wisely uses the neutral term 'item' (see, e.g., 2023, 7).

The nothingness as *ens rationis* is any thought-item that one can build by subtracting or "cancel[ing] everything out" (KrV, A290/B347) quantitatively. Indeed, this kind of nothingness concerns the categories of quantity: instead of thinking about everything (totality), something (plurality), or just one thing (unity), we may think about nothing at all, namely, an empty concept that does not pick any item. As Smith explains, "If one thinks of an object but subtracts from it all the ways in which our cognition structures its appearing, then one is left with nothing, a mere thought-entity [*Gedankending*] that has no content" (2023, 8; emphasis added). The most relevant Kantian example of this kind of nothingness is the *noumena* (cf. KrV, A290/B347).

The second kind of nothingness, the *nihil privativum*, leads us close to one of the most relevant senses of nothingness, i.e., the absence of everything or the *nihil absolutum*. The standard definition of *nihil privativum* is based on the categories of quality (reality, negation, limitation): "Reality is something, negation is nothing, namely a concept of the absence of an object, such as shadow or cold" (KrV, A291/B347). Yet, as GÜngör (2017, 110 ff.) cleverly notes, we might acquaintance the *nihil privativum* as an either a lack or a privation. As lack, this kind of nothingness is what results from qualitatively subtracting (*viz.*, negating) everything from the phenomenal realm (reality); as a privation, it is what results from the interaction of "two opposing forces on the same [phenomenal] object" (110-11), namely, "the absence of a quality considered as a positive entity" (Smith 2023, 10). The latter reading of *nihil privativum* is *prima facie* closer to the standard reading of Kant's table of nothing as far as he does speak about phenomena as shadows or the cold, i.e., as the absence of positive entities such as light or heat. While this sort of nothingness as qualitative privation appears within the phenomenal realm, the former reading of *nihil privativum* does not turn out to be a perceivable absence. Rather, the *nihil privativum* as lack might ultimately be an absolute absence as well: the *nihil absolutum* (notwithstanding that it is a bare object in general: cf. *supra*). For the sake of this article, I will focus on the *nihil privativum* as lack (not as privation) and, as such, I will consider it as the main avenue to get the *nihil absolutum*. Not by chance, during his so-called pre-critical period, Kant had focused on the *nihil absolutum* rather than the *nihil privativum*. As GÜngör (2017, 76) notes, nothing as absolute occurs in Kant's pre-critical work *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration*

of the Existence of God,<sup>5</sup> and it occurs as the absolute cancellation of everything: “[...] if all existence is cancelled, then nothing is posited absolutely, nothing at all is given, there is no material element for anything which can be thought; all possibility completely disappears” (Ak. 2: 78; emphasis added). So, if we understand the second kind of nothingness, *nihil privativum*, as lack, rather than privation, then we arrive to the *nihil absolutum* view of nothingness by extending this lack to the global absence of everything.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the Kantian categories of relation (inherence-subsistence, cause-effect, reciprocal action), the third kind of nothingness – an *ens imaginarium* – is the absence of any substance (and consequently any causality, or reciprocity between agent and patient). To achieve this result, we need to imagine (whence ‘ens imaginarium’) to subtract (or cancel) any substance from space and time, so that we think by imagination about time itself and space itself, as they were empty “containers” of something (whilst they really are *a priori* forms of human intuition, *Anschauung*). That is just our imagination at work, as far as we cannot really experience anything beyond space-time, according to the Kantian first *Critique*. Yet, what we achieve is still an object in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*), although *fictional*, namely, space as such and time as such;<sup>7</sup> so much so that this third kind of nothingness even yields certain definite features. Indeed, nothingness as pure empty space and pure empty time (*viz.*, devoid of any substance, “empty intuition without an object”: KrV, A292/B348) is a bare object and we can attribute certain features to it; for example, “unity and all-inclusiveness in the case of space, or simultaneity and succession in the case of time” (Smith 2023, 14).

The last kind of nothingness is the *nihil negativum*, namely, the bare object in general based on the Kantian categories of modality (possibility/impossibility, existence/non-existence, necessity/contingency), especially on the categories of impossibility and non-existence, where we might understand impossibility as both logical and metaphysical, and non-existence as both that of an empty concept and an empty object (an “empty object without concept”: KrV, A292/B348). Indeed, what makes the *nihil negativum* logically and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kant [1763] 1992. Hereinafter, I also use the standard abbreviation ‘Ak.’ (*Akademie Ausgabe von Kants gesammelte Schriften*) to refer to Kant’s *The Only Possible Argument...*, that is, Ak. 2: 63-163.

<sup>6</sup> In other words, we can conceive the absolute nothingness as the result of an iteration of *nihil privativum* as lack.

<sup>7</sup> However, consider the following observation by Smith: “Although space and time are not object in the sense of [...] stand[ing] against the subject and [...] [they cannot be] known through cognition, they may still be objects in the broader sense of *Objekte*, as they contain a certain content that can indeed be known by us” (2023, 14; emphasis added).

metaphysically impossible – and consequently neither a thought-item built by our conceptual apparatus nor a possible object in itself – is the fact that the *nihil negativum* is invalidated, or nullified, by a self-contradiction: “The object of a concept that contradicts itself is nothing because the concept is nothing, the impossible, like a rectilinear figure with two sides” (KrV, A291/B348). To be more accurate, Kant’s example of a rectilinear figure with two sides might generate some issues about authentic examples of self-contradictoriness, as Smith notes (2023, 15). Another well-known example of self-contradictory concept is the renowned square-circle, that seems to be less controversial as a good example of negative nothingness.<sup>8</sup> However, to bypass this kind of uncertainties, I think we just need to define *nihil negativum* as  $\text{ix } x \neq x$ , namely, the item that is not self-identical, i.e., a self-contradictory object.<sup>9</sup>

In the next section, in the light of the Kantian table, I will introduce some preconceptions belonging to the ‘nominal essence’ of nothingness. Then I will intend those preconceptions as determinations of the bare object in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*).

## 1.2 The Nominal Essence of Nothingness

The notion of nominal essence, as it occurs, e.g., in Lynch (2009, 7-8) about the concept of truth, can be traced back to Locke ([1689] 1975, especially book 3, ch. 3, § 16). According to Lynch, for example, the nominal essence of F might be understood as “our folk concept of F. It embodies our preconceptions, the way we tacitly think about it in ordinary life [...] [T]he set of largely implicit beliefs we folk have about it” (2009, 7-8; emphasis added). We might intend the nominal essence of F as both the starting point of our conceptualization of F (namely, a minimal understanding of F required to analyze it properly) and the (final or intermediate) checkpoint(s) we use to be sure that our account of F meets the *desiderata* for our theory. The latter point implies that our account should explain as much as possible our intuitive pre-theoretical idea of F.

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<sup>8</sup> Both examples come from Christian Wolff (see, e.g., Smith 2023, 15, for some bibliographical references). However, the notion of *nihil negativum* had already occurred within the so-called ‘Second Scholastic’, explicitly in Francisco Suarez’s works, also pointing out the difference between *nihil negativum* and *nihil absolutum*: see Suarez, F. (1856-78). *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, XXXI, 2.8. Edited by M. André and C. Berton. 28 vols. Paris: Ludovicus Vivès.

<sup>9</sup> Nothingness as  $\text{ix } x \neq x$  is a definition occurring in Oliver, Smiley 2013, where the authors ultimately paraphrase ‘nothingness’ as an empty term (called ‘zilch’) which does not pick any object at all. We can find something similar in Severino 1981, 228-30, albeit with relevant differences that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Which are the preconceptions of the folk notion of nothingness?<sup>10</sup> Priest, for example, starts in his treatment by the preconception of nothing as “*absolutely nothing*: the absence of every thing [sic]” or the global absence (2014, 151). Voltolini highlights that “our intuitive pretheoretical idea of the Nothing conceives it as an inconsistent item” (2021, 185). Global absence and inconsistency seem to be two relevant preconceptions about the nominal essence of nothingness, at least within our European languages and way of thinking. This is not a coincidence: two of the most influential works of the European thought, Parmenides’ well-known *Poem* and Plato’s *Sophist* (based in turn on some Eleatic issues) deal exactly with the question of nothingness as global absence and inconsistent item. The fact that the notion of nothingness *prima facie* and intuitively recalls the absence of everything (*nihil absolutum*) seems, if not unquestionable, at least highly plausible, at least since Parmenides’ *Poem*. The same goes for the idea of the inconsistency of nothingness: the notion of nothingness seems to be self-contradictory, as noted by Plato’s *Sophist* 238b-239b, where Plato rejects the idea of the Eleatic absolute nothingness precisely because it is contradictory (the nothingness is and is not at the same time and in the same respect, because it is an <<it>>).<sup>11</sup>

The two main preconceptions of nothingness may be related to each other, completely or partially. Indeed, I think it is extremely relevant to have them in mind before any theorizing about (the) nothingness. However, it seems to me, the recent debate about nothingness (the first two decades of the 21st century, more or less) takes for granted that the idea of the absolute absence of everything is the main preconception of nothingness where we should start from. Not only that: even though someone identified the other relevant preconception about the nominal essence of nothingness (the idea of inconsistency), nothing much has been said about the relation among them. The inconsistency or the self-contradictoriness is usually a sort of checkpoint or final point of the theorizing about nothingness. Priest (2014), for example, starts from the absolute absence of everything to conclude that nothingness as such is and is not an object, and therefore is a self-contradictory object (cf. § 2.1).

Yet, nothingness is said in many ways, as the Kantian table of nothingness wisely shows. Let us see a brief, non-exhaustive list of possible preconceptions of the nominal essence of nothingness that ‘orbit’ the ideas of global absence and inconsistency, respectively:

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**10** I use the vague term ‘notion’ because, for the time being, we might overlook the question whether nothingness is a concept, an object, a noun-phrase, an empty term, a negative quantifier, etc. For a good disambiguation about that, see Costantini 2021.

**11** Yet, such a rejection is not tantamount to erasing one of the (putative) core meaning of the nothingness. Cf. also Severino 1981, 209-10.

Global absence (*nihil absolutum*)

- The absolute absence of (unrestrictedly) everything.
- What is 'outside' (the unrestricted totality) of being, namely, what is beyond the (unrestricted) totality of what is self-identical.
- The opposite (in Greek: *enantion*) of being.<sup>12</sup>
- The negation of unrestrictedly everything.

Inconsistency or Inconsistent item (*nihil negativum*)

- Any self-contradictory object or *the* self-contradictory object or the non-self-identical object.
- Something that is impossible at all.
- The ineffable, unspeakable, unthinkable (abstract or concrete object) that is not even contradictory, being beyond the domain of contradictory and non-contradictory objects.

One might object that not all of these are authentic preconceptions of the nominal essence or folk notion of nothingness, as far as they seem to require a minimal philosophical training to formulate. I would reply by recalling that Lynch's (2009) Lockean account of nominal essence does not require the 'folk thinker' - so to say - to be explicitly aware of her own preconceptions.<sup>13</sup>

Maybe the list could go on, and probably some of these preconceptions can be related to each other, or some of them might even express the same idea. Indeed, we may say - echoing what Aristotle famously said about *being* - that nothingness too is said in many ways (*pollachôs legetai*; see, e.g., *Metaph.* 14.2, 1089a). Indeed, Aristotle's multivocity or homonymy of being involves the presence of a core meaning of being, i.e., substance (*ousia*), as far as anything we can say about reality refers ultimately to substance, namely, what *fully* is. To use Owen's famous notion, we could say that Aristotle's being has a "focal meaning" (used to render the Aristotelian Greek phrase *pros hen*, verbatim: 'to point towards one'), or better features "connected homonyms" (Irwin 1981, 524) or a "core-dependent homonymy" (Shields 2023, § 5). I will use one of Irwin's (1981) definition of homonymy in § 1.3. In the meantime, I just need to underline that, *mutatis mutandis*, there might be a focal meaning for nothingness too, around which all other preconceptions are based. More in detail, I am arguing that there are two core meanings of nothingness. In doing so, we need to sit again at the Kantian table of nothingness.

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<sup>12</sup> Here the reference is clearly Plato's *Sophist* (256b-259b), where he distinguishes between not-being as *enantion* from not-being as *eteron*.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lynch: "The nominal essence of F [...] embodies our preconceptions, the way we *tacitly* think about it in ordinary life - *even if, normally, we don't even recognize ourselves as doing so*" (2009, 7; emphasis added).



Indeed, given the survey of the Kantian table I proposed in § 1.1, the two focal or core meanings of nothingness are *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum*, as far as the former can be extended to accommodate the notion of *nihil absolutum*. One could object that I am arbitrarily leaving aside nothingness as *ens rationis* and nothingness as *ens imaginarium*. About the former, I would refer the reader to § 1.1, where I noticed that this kind of nothingness is a thought-item that one can build by subtracting or “cancel[ing] everything out” (KrV, A290/B347) quantitatively. So, this kind of nothingness is the result of the cancellation or subtraction of everything, although in terms of quantity. Similarly, about the nothingness as *ens imaginarium*, I would highlight that it is the result of subtracting (or cancelling) any substance from space and time (cf. § 1.1). Therefore, both nothingness as *ens rationis* and *ens imaginarium* share the preconception of a cancellation or subtraction with nothingness as *nihil absolutum*, although it is not an absolute cancellation.

With this in mind, I will show which is the (logical) relation between the *nihil absolutum* and the *nihil negativum* (cf. § 1.3). Finally, through the lens of this relation, I will evaluate and criticize three recent accounts of nothingness (Priest 2014; Costantini 2020; Casati, Fujikawa 2019 – cf. §§ 2.1-2.5), showing why they do not seem to properly account for the nominal essence of nothingness.

However, before proceeding, I would like to address another possible objection. As anticipated, both *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* are the focal meanings of nothingness that attract all the other preconceptions of the nominal essence of nothingness. Now, one might object that, from a pre-theoretical standpoint, the absolute nothingness (*nihil absolutum*) stands out from the other possible preconceptions of the nominal essence of nothingness. In fact, I myself believe that someone who is not trained in philosophy is more likely to think of the full cancellation of everything (*nihil absolutum*) when referring to the concept of nothingness, rather than thinking of a putative self-contradictory item or a non-self-identical item. So, why assume (as I do) that we also need the negative nothingness (*nihil negativum*) as a focal meaning of the nominal essence of nothingness? Recall what Lynch (2009) highlights about the Lockean notion of nominal essence: a “common human being”, namely, philosophically untrained people, is not required to be explicitly aware of her own preconceptions of what she is thinking (or searching) about.

### 1.3 The Relation between Negative Nothingness and Absolute Nothingness

In § 1.2, I pointed out that, similarly to Aristotle’s notion of being, nothingness is said in many ways (*pollachôs legetai*), as Kant wisely

shows in his first *Critique*. That's why I think we might take advantage of Aristotle's suggestion according to which 'being' should be read neither as ambiguous nor as univocal. I propose we should read 'nothingness' in a similar fashion. In doing so, I will refer to Irwin, who offers some readings of the Aristotelian *pollachôs legomena* leveraging Aristotle's use of "homonymous things" (1981, 524 ff.). Among these readings, what he calls "the moderate view" (524) seems to be the most useful for the sake of this article. First, "[...] x and y are homonymously F if and only if the name 'F' applies to both x and y, but a *different definition* [...] must replace 'F' in 'x is F' and in 'y is F'" (524; emphasis added). Second, on the moderate view, there are "[...] 'unconnected homonyms', with different definitions having nothing in common, and 'connected homonyms', with different definitions *having something in common*" (524; emphasis added).

If we apply this account of homonyms to the Kantian kinds of nothingness, we might say that *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* are connected homonyms: they can be defined in different ways and yet they *share* something, namely, the fact that both are bare objects in general rather than objects of experience. Therefore, appealing to Irwin (1981), we can say that: (i) x and y are *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum*, respectively; (ii) F is the property of being a bare object in general; (iii) 'x is F' means 'x is the absolute absence or cancellation of everything' (lack of everything, rather than privation of something: see §§ 1.1-1.2); (iv) 'y is F' means 'y is a self-contradictory item' (see §§ 1.1-1.2); (v) *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* are homonymously bare objects in general *and* they are connected homonyms.

Next step: we need to find what exactly is the connection between these connected homonyms. In doing so, I would first assume a cancellation view of negation as recognized (among others) in Routley and Routley, to understand Kant's absolute nothingness:

~A deletes, neutralizes, erases, cancels A (and similarly, since the relation is symmetrical, A erases ~A), so that ~A together with A *leaves nothing, no content*. The conjunction of A and ~A says nothing, so nothing more specific follows. In particular,  $A \wedge \sim A$  does not entail A and does not entail ~A. (Routley, Routley 1985, 205; emphasis added)

This cancellation view of negation plausibly is the fittest to our focal preconception of nothingness as *nihil absolutum*, namely, the global cancellation of everything that precisely "leaves nothing, no content" (205). Besides, the same view seems to be the most attractive to account also for the other focal preconception of nothingness, i.e., *nihil negativum*, as far as – to recall Routley and Routley's quote, "The conjunction of A and ~A says nothing, so nothing more specific follows". Let us consider, for example, the square circle in the light of

the cancellation view of negation: the conjunction of  $\langle x \text{ is square} \rangle$  and  $\langle x \text{ is round} \rangle$  does not pick anything at all.<sup>14</sup> In fact, if we appealed to a classic or complementation view of negation (i.e., denying something simply means excluding something), then such a contradiction would entail everything (*ex falso quodlibet*). However, this stands against our folk nominal essence of nothingness. Furthermore, a cancellation account of negation seems more aligned to Kant's use of negation in his *The Only Possible Argument...*, indeed. Within that pre-critical Kantian work, we already encountered nothingness as cancellation of everything when I analyzed *nihil absolutum* in terms of *nihil privativum* as a lack, following Gungör (2017). Now, we can come back to the so-called pre-critical Kant to encounter a sort of cancellation account of negation strictly linked to an inconsistent (self-contradictory) idea of nothingness:

in order that there should be an *internal contradiction* it is necessary that something should be *posited and at the same time cancelled*. [...] In our analysis of the concept of existence we saw [viz. Ak. 2: 73-5] that being or being absolutely posited [...] mean exactly the same as existence. Accordingly, the assertion 'Nothing exists' means the same as the assertion 'There is nothing whatever'. And it is obviously *self-contradictory* to add, in spite of this, 'Something is possible'. (Ak. 2: 78; emphasis added)

With this in mind, I introduce the following connection between the two focal meanings of nothingness, expressing it through a conditional relation:

(N) If there is the *nihil negativum*, i.e., a self-contradictory object, then there is the *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the cancellation of unrestrictedly everything,

where 'there is' needs to be read with no ontological commitment,<sup>15</sup> and 'object' should be read as a kind of 'bare object in general' – cf. § 1.1.

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**14** One might object that there is a substantial difference between denying a proposition and denying a term. However, I think it is a difference we can overlook for the sake of the paper inasmuch as I would like to focus on the preconceptions of nothingness, where such a difference – it seems to me – is almost irrelevant. The act of denying, indeed, can be read as a cancellation of something, where the domain of 'something', especially from a non-philosophically trained person, is likely pretty unrestricted (one can cancel or imagine canceling a truth-bearer like a proposition, as well as an object or an event, and so on).

**15** Maybe we may read 'there is' with an ideological commitment: following a certain reading of Kant's theoretical philosophy (and his philosophical background, like Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*: see, e.g., Smith 2023; Stang 2021), the highest concept of metaphysics is the concept of an object in general, "leaving undecided whether it is

One might object that the connection (N) either remains silent about which kind of nothingness is more relevant or introduces a sort of hierarchy between two kinds of nothingness – although in a different fashion: not through an exemplification relation but through a conditional relation. Indeed, we might be forced to reinterpret (N) as a necessary condition relation like: <there is the *nihil absolutum*> only if <there is the *nihil negativum*>. I would reply that, although a kind of conceptual hierarchy might occur in (N), it is far from being an ontological hierarchy. Therefore, we might epistemologically read (N) as follows. Given the nominal essence of nothingness (cf. § 1.2),

(N\*) If an epistemic agent S (implicitly or explicitly) conceives nothingness as *nihil negativum*, i.e., a self-contradictory object, then S (implicitly or explicitly) conceives *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the absolute cancellation of unrestrictedly everything,

as far as a contradiction where ‘not’ belongs to a cancellation view of negation “leaves nothing, no content” (Routley, Routley 1985, 205). Long story short, we can imagine *nihil absolutum* as the content of *nihil negativum*.<sup>16</sup> However, the aim of (N) and (N\*) is just to qualify the connection between two homonyms of nothingness.

In the next sections I will assess Priest’s (2014), Costantini’s (2020) and Casati and Fujikawa’s (2019) accounts of nothingness in the light of our nominal essence of nothingness and its connected homonyms or focal meanings (*nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum*), where such a connection is expressed through the conditional relation (N) or (N\*).

## 2      **On Three Recent Accounts of Nothingness**

### 2.1    **Priest’s Account of Nothingness: An Evaluation**

Let us step back, establishing whether the absolute nothingness (*nihil absolutum*) – namely, the “extension” of Kant’s second kind of nothingness (cf. §§ 1.1-1.2) – can be the only focal meaning of nothingness. We can find a similar approach in Priest, who exactly starts from the naïve preconception of nothingness as “the absence of every thing [*sic*]” (2014, 151). He argues that this absence is at the same

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something or nothing” (KrV, A290/B346). Clearly, we have already encountered this kind of item in the notion of *Gegenstand überhaupt*.

**16** Severino (1981, ch. 4) argues something similar, affirming that the content of any contradiction is nothing at all. However, it is not always clear if he adopts a cancellation view of negation or a classic-complementation view of negation. However, this issue is beyond the scope of the paper.

time a thing (assuming that there are non-existent objects: see 146-8; 150), therefore giving room for a thing that is and is not a thing (151), as well as Kant's *nihil negativum*. It seems that Priest accounts for both focal meanings of nothingness, therefore properly capturing the nominal essence of nothingness at its core. Indeed, Priest does not appear to properly distinguish between the absence of (Kantian) objects of experience, i.e., the *nihil absolutum*, and the absence *quae talis*, namely, a self-contradictory object as a bare object in general, i.e., the *nihil negativum*. I think that we can go beyond this shortcoming by sitting at the Kantian table of nothingness. As GÜNGÖR (2017, 76-7) notes, Kant's absolute nothingness does not seem to be self-contradictory, whilst Priest immediately delivers *nihil absolutum* as (a kind of) *nihil negativum*. Even if the absolute absence of every thing were and were not a thing – as Priest does underline –, yet I think we might say – *contra* Priest – that the absolute absence is and is not a thing at the same time but in different respects: <sup>17</sup> it is not a thing as *nihil absolutum*, but it is a thing as it is conceivable as a bare object in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*).<sup>18</sup> So, while Priest offers an account of nothingness where the *nihil absolutum* is at the same time and in the same respect also a (self-contradictory) thing (*nihil negativum*), I propose that we should keep the two meanings conceptually distinct. The *nihil absolutum*, hence, is not a self-contradictory item itself, and the nothingness can be a thing only under a different respect. This being said, it is true that the *nihil absolutum* is indeed related to self-contradictoriness, as I showed in § 1.3.

Furthermore, although Priest accounts for both focal meanings of nothingness (the absolute absence of every thing and the self-contradictoriness of nothingness), he seems to give more importance to the latter. Even more, the absolute cancellation of every thing (*nihil absolutum*) seems to be an exemplification of a self-contradictory object. In a nutshell, given the set of all the self-contradictory items, the absolute nothingness is a member of that set. Instead, in the light of the Kantian table of nothingness and his highest concept of metaphysics – the bare object in general (*Gegenstand überhaupt*) – both absolute nothingness and negative nothingness (*nihil negativum*) are

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**17** Because of limits of space, I need to overlook Kantian possible difference between 'thing' (*Ding*) and 'object' (*Objekt*). Also, I think this difference is beyond the scope of the present article.

**18** For the sake of completeness: "[Kant 1763] bases his ontological proof [...] on nothing as the impossibility of cancellation of all existence" (Güngör 2017, 74-5; emphasis added). However, this impossibility is not equivalent to contradictoriness: "Since there is no internal contradiction in thinking the absolute cancellation of all existence, this nothing [*viz. nihil absolutum*] does not occur out of a logical contradiction: thus, it is not *nihil negativum*" (76-7). Indeed, in his pre-critical work, Kant explicitly argues that "there is no internal contradiction in the negation of all existence" (Ak. 2: 78).

kinds of nothingness as bare object in general, regardless its being or not being self-contradictory. As we have seen, indeed, the four Kantian kinds of nothingness, *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* included, result from “concept divisions” (Stang 2021, 105). There, the highest concept is exactly the *Gegenstand überhaupt* (105), as mentioned, that is neither contradictory nor not-contradictory in itself.

Maybe we could understand Priest’s (2014) account in a slightly different way. In place of my reading in terms of exemplification, Priest might be wanting to conflate absolute nothingness into negative nothingness, or vice versa. However, this new reading as well would not properly account for the difference between the two kinds of nothingness according to Kant, as far as Kant’s *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* do not conflate or overlap each other – as we have seen from, e.g., GÜNGÖR (2017, 74).<sup>19</sup> A similar difference between the consistency of *nihil absolutum* and the inconsistency of *nihil negativum* also occurs in the first *Critique*’s table of nothingness:

One sees that the thought-entity (No.1) [viz. nothingness as *ens rationis*] is distinguished from the non-entity (No.4) [viz. nothingness as *nihil negativum*] by the fact that the former may not be counted among the possibilities because it is a mere invention (although *not self-contradictory*), whereas the latter is opposed to possibility because even its concept *cancel itself out*. (Kant [1781; 1787] 1998, A292/B348; emphasis added)

One could object that here Kant compares nothingness as *nihil negativum* against nothingness as *ens rationis*, rather *nihil privativum* or *nihil absolutum*. However, I already highlighted that nothingness as *ens rationis* is the result of the cancellation or subtraction of everything, although in terms of quantity (instead of quality): cf. § 1.1. Therefore, recalling that *nihil absolutum* is the cancellation of everything (Ak. 2: 78), I think we should not overlook the fact that in the first *Critique* Kant attributes consistency (i.e., not self-contradictoriness) to nothingness as *ens rationis*, and inconsistency to *nihil negativum* (“even its concept cancels itself out”).

So, following a Kantian approach to the question of nothingness, it seems we need to distinguish the negative nothingness from the absolute nothingness, *contra* Priest’s (2014) explicit or implicit intention.

Before moving to Costantini’s (2020) account, I would like to address another possible objection about the negative nothingness. One could object that *nihil negativum* is not an inherently inconsistent

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<sup>19</sup> See GÜNGÖR: “These two nothings [viz. the negative nothingness and the absolute nothingness] [...] may easily be conflated but are in fact *mutually exclusive*” (2017, 74, emphasis added).

notion, but a coherent conception of any contradictory item. I would reply recalling KrV, A292/B348, where Kant explicitly claims that “even its concept [*viz.* the notion of *nihil negativum*] cancels itself out”. Now, a concept that negates (or cancels)<sup>20</sup> itself is precisely an inherently inconsistent notion, rather than a mere coherent conception of what is contradictory.

## 2.2 Costantini’s Account of Nothingness

One of the starting points of Costantini is the notion of ‘object’: “everything whatsoever is an object” (2020, 1420) both in a Quinean and in a Neo-Meinongian kind of ontology (1420).<sup>21</sup> This starting point is very similar to the Kantian notion of bare object in general, in turn based on Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica*. The ingenious move by Costantini is to build the notion of nothingness by indefinitely extending the concept of object (§§ 4-5).<sup>22</sup> In a nutshell, Costantini (2020) conceives the notion of *nihil absolutum*, i.e., the global cancellation or absence of unrestrictedly everything, by understanding the notion of everything as an indefinite plurality of totalities of items, each larger than the other as far as it includes what the other excluded. Whatever remains excluded from a totality’s domain but can be included within a more comprehensive totality is exactly nothingness *et sic in infinitum*. In this way, Costantini accounts for the notion of *nihil absolutum* spreading it throughout a series of “different objects that play the role of nothingness” (1426), as far as, assuming indefinite extensibility, the whole everything that nothingness is supposed to contrast is always susceptible to further extension, “i.e., there can be no maximal plurality that can play the role of the domain of the quantifier *everything*” (1430). In sum, given indefinite extensibility, we should not conceive the *absolute* nothingness at all; rather we should water it down to a “*relative* notion” (1430), thereby losing the *nihil absolutum*.

## 2.3 Costantini’s Relative Nothingness: An Evaluation

I share several others’ opinion that Costantini 2020 represents one of the most original accounts of nothingness in the literature. However,

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<sup>20</sup> Here, I use ‘negation’ and ‘cancellation’ as interchangeable because I assumed a cancellation account of negation: cf. § 1.3.

<sup>21</sup> As Costantini writes, “[I]t is also true for the Quinean that everything is an object: the concepts ‘existing thing’ and ‘object’ coincide” (2020, 1420).

<sup>22</sup> Costantini (2020, § 2) introduces what one needs to know about indefinite extensibility to understand his account of nothingness.

I feel it does not properly account for the nominal essence of nothingness I introduced since § 1. Indeed, if we want to account for a certain notion (in our case, the notion of nothingness), we need to constantly check that the developing theoretical account meet the *desiderata* imposed by our pre-theoretical idea of that notion. Now, speaking of the nominal essence of nothingness, the *nihil absolutum* is one of the strongest preconceptions we have about it. Therefore, Costantini's reduction of the *nihil absolutum* as a series of different objects that play the role of the nothingness does not seem to make justice to that strong preconception as far as such a reduction converts the absoluteness of the nothingness into a (series of) relative instances of the nothingness.

Costantini is fully aware of this: "Our account of nothingness has dissolved the absolute notion of nothingness in favor of only a relative one" (2020, 1434). Yet, he thinks we can "leave without such an absolute notion" (1434). However, he does so because his conception of nothingness is able to account for sentences where 'nothing' or 'nothingness' occur as a noun phrase (1434), therefore meeting the *desiderata* of those philosophers - like Priest (2014) - who affirm that there are logical and linguistical situations where 'nothing(ness)' cannot be reduced to negative quantifier phrases. To be honest, this is not the most relevant weak point I find within Costantini's strategy. What is at stake - in my opinion - is the need of addressing our folk preconceptions of the nominal essence of nothingness, among which stands out an absolute idea of nothingness as cancellation rather than a relative idea of cancellation.

Furthermore, even if we accepted Costantini's reduction of the absoluteness of the nothingness into a (series of) relative nothingness, there still was the lack of the other focal meaning of nothingness, namely, *nihil negativum*: the other strong preconception of our nominal essence of nothingness. In fact, although Costantini (2020, § 3) shows how to achieve an inconsistent notion of nothingness that clearly echoes *nihil negativum*, yet he explicitly wants to "restore consistency" (1424). Also, even if *nihil negativum* somehow occurred in Costantini (2020), it seems there would be no account that explains which relation holds between the negative nothingness and the absolute nothingness. Therefore, neither (N), nor (N\*) relations seem to hold in Costantini's account (2020).

## 2.4 Casati and Fujikawa's Account of Nothingness

Let us assess another interesting account of nothingness, namely, Casati, Fujikawa 2019, using the Kantian table of nothingness, the difference between the *nihil negativum* and the *nihil absolutum*, and the (N) and (N\*) relations.



As the authors claim, the key idea of their account is to take “the absence of everything, and, thus, nothingness, as *the complement of the totality*” (2019, 3741). In doing so, they develop a mereological account of nothingness, explicitly inspired by Priest’s (2014) mereological approach to the question of nothingness, but embarking on the opposite way – as I am going to recall. Whilst Priest (2014, 152-4) identifies nothingness with the mereological sum of the members included in the empty set (“the fusion of the members of the empty set”, 154), where those members are ultimately the collection of non-self-identical things (cf. 152-7), Casati and Fujikawa conceive nothingness as “what we get when we subtract every object from the totality of everything” (2019, 3748). This result is exactly the complement of the totality: “the totality is the [mereological] sum of all objects [...] regardless of their ontological status” (3749) (namely, regardless of those objects are existing or non-existing). According to Casati and Fujikawa – explicitly following Priest’s suggestion – what defines an object as such is self-identity: “the predicate of self-identity is equivalent to the first-order objecthood predicate in the following sense: [...]  $x$  is an object iff  $x=x$ ” (3749). Therefore, given this definition of the totality of all objects (everything at all), Casati and Fujikawa introduce the notion of nothingness as something that is not part of the totality, as far as nothingness is by definition the absence of absolutely and unrestrictedly everything. Of course, since the nothingness is not self-identical (being the complement of the mereological sum of all self-identical objects) and is self-identical (being exactly the complement of the totality and not something other), Casati and Fujikawa make use of paraconsistent logic (in particular they adopt an inconsistent mereological system: see § 5). The nothingness is and is not an object because it is and is not self-identical.

Although Casati and Fujikawa (2019) develop a different account from Priest’s (2014), their starting point and their conclusion, as far as this paper is concerned, are the same. Both mereological accounts move from the preconception of nothingness as the absence of everything (Casati, Fujikawa 2019, 3740; Priest 2014, 151). Recall that *nihil absolutum* is one of the strongest preconceptions of the nominal essence of nothingness, one of the two focal meanings of nothingness. Short after, both Casati, Fujikawa (2019) and Priest (2014) are able to account for the other strong preconception of nothingness, namely, its inherent self-contradictoriness, *nihil negativum*. However, we have already seen (§ 2.1) why Priest’s view of nothingness is arguably not compatible with our nominal essence of nothingness. In the next section, I will assess Casati and Fujikawa’s account against our nominal essence of nothingness and its ‘connected homonyms’ (*nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum*).

## 2.5 Casati and Fujikawa's Mereological Account: An Evaluation

Although Casati and Fujikawa's (2019) view is able to account for both focal meanings of nothingness, it turns out to conflate them into each other, *contra* the Kantian thesis that they should stay distinct (cf. § 1). Indeed, Casati and Fujikawa's (2019) nothingness is: (i) the complement of the totality (*viz.*, the [mereological] sum of all self-identical objects) and (ii) an inconsistent object, since the nothingness as the complement of the totality is and is not, at the same time and in the same respect, part of the same totality (see §§ 4.1-2). In classical logic, as well as in classical mereology, "[the complement of the totality] contradicts the fact that everything is a part of the totality [...] *immediately deliver*[ing] the uncomfortable situation in which the totality is not a *really* totality after all" (3750; some emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> As mentioned, they resolve by adopting a paraconsistent mereology and viewing the nothingness as an inconsistent item. (i) and (ii) account for *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum*, respectively. Yet, they do not account for their relation as homonyms (cf. § 1.3). This is because the fact that the nothingness is the complement of the totality (*nihil absolutum*), immediately delivers the inconsistency of nothingness (*nihil negativum*), *contra* both (N) and (N\*). (N) and (N\*), I argue, cannot simply be overlooked by a valid account of nothingness, as they are in turn based on the Kantian idea that *nihil absolutum* and *nihil negativum* should stay distinct, as well as on a cancellation account of negation that swiftly compliments our *nihil absolutum* strong preconception of nothingness. Hence, my objection to Casati and Fujikawa is that, while they too pick both dimensions of the nothingness, they do not substantiate sufficiently their distinction.

## 3 Conclusion

In this paper I evaluated three recent accounts of nothingness using the Kantian 'table of nothingness' (*Nichts*). I focused on two preconceptions of nothingness, namely, *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum*. The former I read as lack, rather than privation, extending this lack to the global absence of everything, thereby arriving to the *nihil absolutum* view of nothingness that Kant himself used in his *The*

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<sup>23</sup> See also Casati, Fujikawa (2019, 3750): "the totality is the sum of every object, and thus everything is its part. Thus, in classical mereology [...] no object is not a part of the totality, and thus the totality doesn't have its complement". Therefore, thinking about nothingness as the complement of the totality would be unacceptable within classical logic and mereology.

*Only Possible Argument...* (1763), and later implicitly (or at least potentially) in his first *Critique*.

After connecting the negative nothingness and the absolute nothingness through a conditional relation (N) and its epistemological version (N\*), as they were connected homonyms in an Aristotelian fashion (see Irwin 1981, 524ff. and cf. *supra* § 1.3), the result is as follows:

Account of nothingness	Accounting for the <i>Nihil absolutum</i> (absolute nothingness)	Accounting for the <i>Nihil negativum</i> (negative nothingness)	Distinction between the absolute nothingness and the negative nothingness	Connection between the negative nothingness and the absolute nothingness in terms of connected homonyms
Priest 2014	yes	yes	?’	no
Costantini 2020	no	?’	no	no
Casati, Fujikawa 2019	yes	yes	no	no

\* I use a question mark because there might be at least one understanding of Priest’s (2014) account according to which the distinction holds: cf. *supra* § 2.1

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