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Antinomy of the Void

Where are we, if not in the midst of the void? The sheer fact alone that this question has in a way become rhetorical seems to render obsolete what throughout the Middle Ages was one of the most important and fiercely debated theoretical questions, namely the question of whether the void *existed* or not; a question, which – in a general dispute – joined together philosophers, theologians, early scientists, and even juridical authorities, who were eventually called upon to find a suitable compromise between the battling factions.¹ The apparent certainty that no dilemma regarding the existence of the void remains – which is considered both as the massively predominant presence in the Universe, the all-enveloping final frontier, as well as the necessary inner element of atoms and thus of matter itself – is nevertheless all too hasty and deceptive. And even though from today's point of view, this God-like decision-making as to whether something apparently so evident (though *in itself* unthinkable) as the void exists might appear almost a childish game, it is nevertheless necessary to state that this same conceptual decision-making regarding the existential status of the void, albeit in an essentially modified form, is still a key issue of modern philosophy, while combining the philosophy of nature with the fundamental question of ontological difference.

What is at stake now, in this modified question, however, *at least at first glance*, no longer appears to be the question, “Is there any void?”, but rather, is there anything *apart* from the void. The reason for stressing the phrase *at first glance* is not that this was not in fact a true dilemma, but rather to point out that another, slightly more complex aspect of it will be discussed later. It is important to note immediately, however, that even contemporary scientific claims, such as

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¹ We obviously refer to the famous 'Paris trial', taking place in 1277, when the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, banned or at least limited the Aristotelian thesis on the absolute non-existence of the void, since it supposedly limited God absolute power to create the void by moving the World in a straight line. The sentence was a compromise since it still allowed for the non-existence of the void within the sublunar World itself.

the physicist John Archibald Wheeler’s notorious statement that “empty space is actually not empty, but rather the seat of the most violent physics”, do not necessarily imply that the void does not exist. On the contrary, the void *does* exist, and exactly *as such, that is, void*, it is also the “seat of the most violent physics”, which perhaps makes it non-empty, but not necessarily non-existent. What is at stake here is not the existence of the void, but rather how we define it, and philosophy is not called upon to start deciding again whether the void existed or not *strictu sensu*, but rather to redefine it in a way that can re-compensate for the loss of what was its seemingly most certain property, total emptiness. Or to put it in more philosophical terms, what science perhaps really challenges is not the existence of the void, but its being pure non-being. It must be aid however that the reason why questioning the sheer existence of the void remains crucial is still, nevertheless, purely philosophical, although it might, as in Badiou, involve mathematics.

In a way, this complicated intertwinement has also become a complicated knot of philosophical names, or perhaps more precisely, a question of unusual cross-historical alliances. We will therefore try to discern the logic beneath the seemingly very unusual fact that perhaps the most prominent philosopher of the void today, Alain Badiou, endorses Aristotle, who claimed that ‘the void is not’, and subscribes to Aristotle’s struggle against the atomists, who claimed that the void necessarily exists; meanwhile, on the other hand, his arch-rival, Gilles Deleuze, usually considered the most ‘anti-void’ philosopher of recent times, actually takes the opposite path by praising Epicurus’ and Lucretius’ struggle to include the void in being. Since Mladen Dolar has recently presented a number of exhaustive and original analyses of Deleuze’ elaboration of Lucretius’ concept of *clinamen*, the present paper tries to complement his effort by emphasizing Badiou’s seemingly paradoxical insistence on Aristotle (who claimed that there is no void); the insistence, which seems to display – in terms of Badiou’s view of Greek philosophy – a fairly unusual view, according of which there is indeed *something that can be grasped* (although in an inverted form) about the (un-thinkable) void, *only insofar as the latter is denied or presumed impossible*.

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However, this paper does not focus on Badiou’s own arguments, which have after all been thoroughly discussed already, nor does it present a systematic study of the history of philosophy that scrutinizes in detail scarce documents on early atomists’ (Democritus, Leucippus) claims, or analyze well-known arguments

raised against their theories by Aristotle in *Physics*. Its main purpose is a purely conceptual analysis, which aims at developing a critical insight into Classical conceptions of the void and non-being, and tries to assess the importance of these concepts for contemporary philosophy (and, perhaps, science).

1. Reversed transcendentalism

The basis of this critical approach is embedded in a type of atypical skeptical attitude to the void. This attitude is not based on the standard skeptical argument whereby the void – insofar as it lacks any positive differential characteristics – cannot be thought at all and as such is non-recognizable: a useless concept, which is in itself ‘void’. Philosophy has found elegant ways of capturing this skeptical argument and turning it against itself by arguing that the mere fact that the void is unthinkable also makes it (at least) undeniable. Quite the contrary, the atypical skeptical attitude for which the present paper argues, tries to show that the real epistemological problem of the void is actually *not* that it is unthinkable, but rather that it is *somewhat ‘too easy’ to be thought of necessarily*. More precisely: *although* the void “in itself” is in fact *strictu sensu* unthinkable, a certain spontaneous logical necessity nonetheless exists, which in any attempt to ontologically conceptualize *matter* qua matter compels us to think of the void either as necessarily *present*, or as necessarily *identical to matter* itself. The first obvious problem of this supposed forced choice is, of course, that both of these spontaneous assertions, which posit the void either as *a necessary being*, or as *the true matter*, are highly problematic. This, however, does not mean that we *assume* they are wrong, or that our priority is to prove them inconsistent. Obviously, we will point to their internal contradictions and use them in a way. But the source itself of the critical attitude is *not* primarily based within an attempt to reveal how both of these exclusive alternatives form a quasi-antinomy; the source of skepticism is rather the *necessity itself* by which they are thought. ‘I doubt it, because I am unable *not* to think it (almost over-consistently)’: this is the essence of our view, which is perhaps best encapsulated by the following formula: *the non-existence of the void is as equally unthinkable as the void itself*.

So what we are basically trying to say – not in complete disagreement with Badiou, for that matter – is that there is in fact some sort of a *double*, not just single, *epistemological barrier* or impasse at work around the void (perceived of as an object of thought): not only is the void unthinkable (which obviously makes

it quite difficult to think of); it is also impossible *not* to think of it (as necessary); and the greatest danger here perhaps is not to remain unable to subsume it to a clear concept, but rather to succumb to this necessity and start thinking of the void as if it were *something* one can actually think of.

Or more precisely, the void is *non-thought* in two different ways. One is that the void is not thought, because it is unthinkable, and this is obviously also the general reason for the void remaining non-thought. Nonetheless, this option leaves open at least one route, which is *to think of the void as of the 'unthinkable'*. The second option, however, does not allow even for this thin possibility, since within the second version of non-thought, the void, driven by the necessity with which it is actually thought of, *disappears within the perfect clarity of its presentation*. So, in both cases, the void obviously remains non-thought because it is unthinkable; the difference between the two is that the first option at least allows for the void to be thought of *as* the unthinkable, while in the second option, the void is completely devoured by the thought itself that is necessarily thinking it. So the second option is indeed even 'worse' than the first. On the other hand, however, the *sheer existence* of this paradoxical twisted gradation within which *to think the void* actually means to *think it even less than not to think it at all*, the sheer existence of this inner difference within the non-thought, this shift in the 'normal' rules of thinking, clearly testifies to the opposite, namely to the fact that the void determined as the unthinkable *affects thinking*.² Eventually it is possible to say that the 'void' – the singular point which is at the same time unthinkable, thought of necessarily and lost within the necessity of its thought – is perhaps after all pinned to some minimal thought, a mere affection, which, however, emerges only on the flip-side of thought as a paradoxical shift in the positions within the way it is non-thought.

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This obviously does not mean that we claim to have reached some sort of 'great Outside'; we still cannot decide whether something like, for instance, the atomist 'void' exists or not; we simply lack the necessary epistemological tools to do so. The *only* two things that actually *can* be said about the void from a strict epistemological perspective are, first, that the void is unthinkable; and second,

² There are clearly some parallels to be drawn with Deleuze's concept of *cogitandum*, which he presents in *Difference and Repetition*. The scope of this paper, which is mostly dedicated to the concept of the void itself, forces us however to postpone a more elaborate comparison, both to Deleuze as well as to other comparable theories.

that – since its ‘opposite’, namely, the non-existence of the void is as equally unthinkable as the void as such – one is (via the exclusion of the speculative possibility that the void is indeed matter) compelled to think it *necessarily*. However, this necessary thinking of what is correctly supposed unthinkable gives way to the paradoxical shift between the two possibilities of *how the void can be non-thought*: to have a clear thought or to have a clear concept of the void, suddenly means to think it even less than not to think it at all, for to think of the void (necessarily) clearly means *not* to think it (at least) as the unthinkable. This peculiar gap within non-thought, nonetheless, clearly indicates that the ‘void’, marked by the *absolutely minimal negative determinations* in terms of being simultaneously unthinkable and what is impossible not to be thought of, does affect thinking, and that is all. It is *not the Void itself* (we have not yet even introduced any of its concepts) that has this effect of changing thought into the most radical form of non-thought; it is merely that its two negative determinations have this effect, which, however, even most determined of skeptics must concede, since they are, after all, her *own* determinations of the void that produce it.

One could thus say that the double aspect of the epistemological problem of the void in fact merges the two poles of Kant’s critique (analytics and dialectics) into a single issue: not only is it necessary to posit conditions according to which the void can be (or cannot be) subsumed to a concept (analytics); at the same time, and correlative to the first effort, it is also necessary to find a way to cope with the fact that every thought that *actually does subsume it to a concept changes* the void into some form of “transcendental appearance” (dialectics). In order to actually think *something* about the void, it is necessary *not* to think it *as something*, and this *non-thinking* itself seems to present some sort of additional ‘transcendental’ condition of its thinking. For it is only within non-thought or within the paradoxical difference between the two ways of non-thinking the void that the minimal pinning of the void to a thought occurs in the form of this same internal change within the order of thought itself caused by the disarray between its two necessary minimal negative determinations. Thus in terms of its methodological approach, the present paper could be described as some sort of ‘reversed transcendentalism’, because in contrast to Classical transcendentalism, which posits what has to be thought of *as necessary* in order *for anything to be thought of at all*, ‘reversed transcendentalism’ actually ‘deactivates’ a thought (or a concept) by *proving its necessity*, while positing this same non-thought as the additional transcendental condition of thinking.

The central problem this paper faces, then, lies in the fact that *all* existing historical philosophical *concepts* of the void (in its relation to matter or space) – similarly to the case of the ‘ontological proof of God’ – in fact *do imply its necessary existence* (not a small paradox for something that is actually nothing), and thereby form some sort of presentation of the void that is simultaneously its negation. They all represent the second version of the non-thought within which the void is even more lost than by not being thought of at all; they all belong to the sphere where thinking of the void becomes measured by negative numbers, as it were. However, difficult as it is, this no longer seems to be a completely insurmountable problem. We will try to show that the epistemological situation – which has been discussed only abstractly thus far – in some way repeats itself within ‘matter’ itself. Key importance in this quest will be bestowed on a concept which was at least implicitly developed by Plato, the concept of ‘false nothing’, i.e. a concept of nothing that not only does not exist (which seems rather plausible), but which is also false.

2. The antinomy

Such has become our certainty that the void not only exists, but is even to be considered both the largest and the smallest element of space, as well as both the all-enveloping and the most-inner element of matter, that one could easily be tempted to rephrase the slightly worn-out paraphrase of the Leibniz’s notorious statement regarding the point of absolute certainty, which supposedly inaugurates philosophical speculation and thus philosophy itself. The one thing we seem to know – beyond any doubt and beyond any epistemological dilemma – is that there is ‘*something*’ rather than nothing; this ‘something’, however, being predominantly void, is nonetheless, in all of its ontological features, closer to *being nothing* rather than something. So, yes, there is something rather than nothing, but the problem, as well as the additional cause of philosophical wonder, seems to be that this ‘something’ that marks the primacy of being over non-being, is either *fundamentally* or *entirely* nothing, with any third option seemingly excluded.

Obviously one element of nature seems to shatter the equation; one reminder of the pure indeterminate ‘something’ that seems to resist the void, which is of course matter *qua* matter. We shall see, nonetheless, that in its relation to the void, that is, under the anti-Aristotelian supposition that the void is – matter

qua matter can be conceived ontologically in only two ways, which in a way also coincide with the two different ways of defining *being qua being* itself. Either matter is – which is the case in all atomistic models – submitted to a certain *topological* as well as *ontological* primacy of the void, or matter *qua* matter is conceived of as consisting of the void *exclusively* and thus, necessarily, merely *appearing different* from the void of which it consists entirely. This second option could perhaps be associated with some Buddhist dialectical systems; in more recent philosophy, it is mostly associated with Badiou, who tries to relate it also to Aristotle.

To formulate this antinomy more precisely: either, do we consider matter and void as fundamentally different, which will finally result in the thesis that the void – as the *exclusive location* of matter's presence in the Universe, which itself exists independently of matter – is the *unconditioned condition* of matter's 'being there'. Or do we – and this seems to be the only remaining solution except the first one – grasp them in their indifference, which will necessarily result in the thesis that matter *qua* matter is merely a certain type of presentation of the void. The question seems to be, of course, why it is necessary to exclude the opposite (or third) speculative option, i.e. that the void is merely a certain appearing of matter? The general answer to this question would be that in fact it has become incomprehensible – on a general level – to think of any *dynamic system* or *system of change* which would not – in one way or another – include a minimum of the void, either as an integral component, or as its 'motor'. The *non-existence* of the void is as equally unthinkable as the void itself, which implies that the void, although unthinkable, is at the same time thought *necessary*, as well as necessarily *thought*. However, it is also important to note immediately that the same argument that for us 'moderns' almost indisputably proves the existence of the void, namely the perception according to which the void was the *sine qua* of all movement or change, and in fact in its reversed form was the basis of Aristotle's argument that the void is not. That is, Aristotle claimed that movement and void actually exclude each other, and since one cannot deny the existence of movement perceived as the presentation of nature, the void cannot exist.

With the third option thus excluded as supposedly unthinkable, one is obviously stuck with the two alternatives that clearly form an antinomy. Nonetheless, they have something in common. In both cases, we clearly stumble on a certain *ontological primacy of the void*: either the void is *the being* of matter's *Dasein*, or

matter *qua* matter is *fundamentally void*. However, it is nevertheless clear, and important to note, that the second speculative option, that matter consists of the void exclusively – again – already indicates that the void *qua* void cannot be regarded simply as empty space.

So, let us first focus on the first alternative of this forced choice: the atomist concept of the void. Although it presents a very basic, almost spontaneous model of thought, the atomist concept of the void is built on a series of paradoxes. These paradoxes nonetheless also constitute its essence. The atomist concept of the void is in fact *meaningful* only insofar as it is paradoxical: without being paradoxical, the atomist concept of the void would become meaningless. Perhaps this is the reason for its enormous appeal and beauty: despite its simplicity, it already harbors and incorporates some of the key problems of Classical (as well as contemporary) philosophy; despite being ‘void’ – since it was first conceptualized – the void has been buzzing with all kinds of constitutive paradoxes that form its essence. This could be one possible way to answer to Wheeler’s challenge.

The first and the most basic of these paradoxes is that the void is *at the same time* defined as the *exclusive location of all that exists*, as well as, *absolutely empty*. The paradox, however, does not reside in this seemingly obvious contradiction, but rather within the fact that there *is no contradiction* between the two determinations; or perhaps even more precisely, it lies in the fact that *the void is itself* this contradiction, which the two determinations express. The void can, in fact, constitute the exclusive location of matter *only insofar* as it is empty, and moreover, there has to be some *excess of the empty void over matter* to allow atoms to move. So the void is not only essentially empty; it also has to *exist as such*, because nothing can move through a sphere of absolute density. So the basic atomist claim could be expressed as follows: void must exist *within nature*.

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Or to put it from yet another perspective: simultaneously (generally and essentially) defined as the *exclusive location of matter*, and – for that same reason – (locally and ontologically) defined as the *absolute absence of matter*, the void, in terms of its relation to matter, constitutes *the existing negation that unilaterally conditions the existence of that which it negates*. Now, this is the crucial paradox. Not only since it proves that the atomist conception of the void necessarily implies the *existence of nothing* within nature, but also, and even more importantly, since the void itself if perceived in this way also constitutes a spectacular juncture

of a *being and Being itself*. Void not only necessarily exists as a localizable presence, but also unilaterally conditions the existence of matter, and this *unilateral conditioning of the existence* (of all ‘there is’), is in fact one of the possible ways of defining being qua being itself. Not only does the atomist conception of the void necessarily imply the existence of a certain surplus of the void over matter – void qua void must exist to facilitate the movement of atoms – which implies that some sort of *appropriate space of nothing* within space exists (although it is not strictly localizable); the atomist conception also spontaneously posits this exceptional surplus being of the void as the necessary (pre)present condition of matter’s *Dasein*, which stands in absolutely no inner relation to matter, with the later standing in complete dependency on this outer principle: without the void, matter cannot move; without the void, matter has no structure; without the void, matter cannot *be*. Not the void, but *Being* (in the form of nothing) has never been thought of so *consistently*; however, this also seems to be the key problem if one tries to look at the atomist void from the opposite perspective.

In contrast with the void of the ancient atomists, the other alternative of the antinomy has the advantage of being associated as well as advocated by one of the contemporary world’s best philosophers. First of all, it has to be noted, however, that Badiou’s ‘void’ has almost nothing to do with the void perceived as a *natural or physical phenomenon*. It is defined only as the “*proper name*” for the *inconsistency* of being qua being. As such, the void is obviously also not perceived through its supposed relation to matter, but similarly to Hegel, through its negative relation to the abstract concept of one; with the obvious difference that in Hegel’s famous theory of repulsion, one and the void (at least for a moment) coincide within some sort of principle of multiplication, while in Badiou’s theory, the void, determined as the proper name for the inconsistent multiple, is more or less perceived as the direct consequence of the non-existence of the one. So, Badiou’s void is not thought through its relation to matter. Nonetheless, it is also true that Badiou does directly state the following: “If there are ‘atoms’, they are not, as materialists of antiquity believed, a second principle of being, the one after the void, but compositions of the void itself, ruled by the ideal laws of the multiple whose axiom system is laid out by ontology.”³

³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, Continuum, London & New York 2005, p. 58.

Badiou's rejection of the atomist void rests primarily on his thesis that in terms of a "natural situation" – which is obviously the type of situation we are concerned with here – the void can never appear as a "term" or "place" of a particular presented situation. Defined as the inconsistency of being qua being, the void is non-presentable within the order of the count-as-one that orchestrates the perfect consistency of every presented situation. As the 'basis' of presentation, the void cannot appear within presentation, since presentation as such is possible only insofar as the void remains '*what is presented*', and thus, as it were, stays hidden on the 'down-side' of presentation. Within the presentation of a "natural situation", void or nothing can become distinguished only by acknowledging the fact that "every situation implies the nothing of its all", that is, it is only distinguishable as some sort of a "phantom of inconsistency" that eludes the consistent order of presentation, *without leaving a single trace* within the situation from which it was discerned.⁴

The only thing we can affirm is this: every situation implies the nothing of its all. But the nothing is neither a place nor a term of the situation. For if the nothing were a term that could only mean one thing: that it had been counted as one. Yet everything which has been counted is within the consistency of presentation. It is thus ruled out that the nothing – which here names the pure will-have-been-counted as distinguishable from presentation – be taken as a term. There is not a-nothing, there is 'nothing', phantom of inconsistency.

It is easy to notice the principal contrast: not only does the atomist void present a natural phenomenon; it also presents the exclusive platform of *all there is within* presentation. On the other hand, Badiou's void – in terms of a natural situation – *presents* itself by constitutively remaining *outside* the order of presentation – within which it is discernible only as pure nothing. So although it is perfectly plausible to say that the atomist void already presents a way of thinking of the void as being qua being, it is also clear that the atomists' and Badiou's theories of the void also represent diametrically opposed conceptions of being qua being itself: in atomist theory, if one tests it at its limit, being qua being can be (at least) discerned as the unilateral conditioning of existence emerging within the void (thus becoming nothing). In Badiou, on the other hand, being qua being is, purely and simply, the inconsistent basis of presentation that itself

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54, 55.

cannot be presented (even though it is the only ‘thing’ that is actually being presented) in order for the presentation itself to occur.

It is also easy to recognize that the atomist’ concept of the void for Badiou cannot be anything else but a result of the various effects of the One: on one hand, the void is defined in relation to the atom, which bears the name of the Enemy, and shares its definition of being ‘indivisible’; on the other hand, also the void itself, perceived as the margin of all-encompassing totality of being, is necessarily one. So, not only is Aristotle correct (for whatever reasons of his own) that the void, perceived in such a way, does not exist; for Badiou, it also has to represent (or at least, it should have represented) *a false type of nothing*. This is quite an interesting constellation, which is, however, (in contrast to Plato) not in Badiou’s vocabulary: something that not only *does not exist*, but is, *furthermore*, also a *false nothing*, a simulacrum of nothing.

Our assertion that the epistemological impasse of the void is actually double, internally contradictory (not only is the void unthinkable, but also dangerously easy to be thought of necessarily), is thus obviously not in general contradiction to what Badiou is saying. It nonetheless significantly shifts the perspective. “To set off in search of nothing” is for Badiou a “pointless” effort, which he associates with poetry, while stressing that this romantic search for a “lacuna” that supposedly eluded the order of presentation is in fact what makes “poetry complicit with death”.⁵ Now, although Badiou’s thesis might be perfectly correct (we certainly do sympathize with it), we still claim that the real problem of this ‘search for nothing’ or void is not that it is *necessarily unsuccessful*, but *rather that it is made suspicious by its all too frequent success*. And the medium of this successful ‘taking possession of nothing’ would certainly not be presented by the weary poet’s search for eternal repose, but rather by a much more aggressively influential sphere of human agenda, namely, by the *mystical core* of almost any religion. It is in fact quite surprising that Badiou in general, almost systematically, and in all possible aspects, neglects the influence of mysticism, and the fact that within all of its branches, ranging from the mystical aspects of Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism to the heavily influential concept of *kenosis* in Christian mysticism, we encounter numerous testimonies according to which,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

by means of methods that elude ‘ordinary’ rationality, the void (or the Absolute) has in fact *has been attained*.

In any case, it seems all to come down to the question of how nothing appears within presentation, to the question of whether a falsified nothing exists. And this finally also brings us to Badiou’s unexpected allegiance to Aristotle, and even more so to Plato. We will try to show that Badiou’s void, while being rather independent of the atomist concept, is nonetheless modeled on Plato’s non-being, at least in one absolutely crucial feature. So, if there was a precursor to Badiou’s ‘void’ in antiquity this is certainly not presented by the void itself, but rather by Plato’s non-being.⁶

3. Non-being vs. the void

One could say that the ancient Greek philosophy has left us with a heritage of three major developments regarding the void.

1) The first development is certainly Anaximander’s empirical discovery, as early as the sixth century before the Common Era, that the Earth was after all not positioned on a back of a giant tortoise, to borrow Roberto Nobbio’s slightly sarcastic but historically accurate metaphor, but that is in fact a rock floating in empty space. It is important to note that what is arguably to be considered the first step in science was, in fact, so closely connected with the discovery of the void. And this is in fact a discovery, not in the sense that it would tell us something essential about the void itself (after all, what the void represents here is in a way no more than a substitute for a turtle) but rather in the sense of answering directly our initial question: where are we? We are *somewhere* in the *nowhere*. And if there is any meaning to the void that I would really put beyond any suspicion, it would be precisely the constant scientific progress of finding us more and more lost somewhere near the non-existent centre of the void, which is in

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⁶ Before proceeding, it is very important to note that the way in which we interpret Aristotle bears absolutely no relation to Aristotle’s own intentions. We are well aware that the type of reading we propose, measured in terms of the history of philosophy, is evidently wrong. So again it needs to be recalled that the emphasis of this paper is on a purely conceptual analysis that tries to test various concepts of the void at their limits, as it were. However, this remark does not apply to the analysis of Plato’s inclusion of non-being in being. That is, in Plato’s case we do (or at least try to) follow his argument.

this sense completely beyond the dilemma, whether it is empty or not. For in this sense, the void is only a kind of a non-substantial marker of a gradual loss of any natural horizon.

2) The second major development regarding the void is, however, the development of two of its concepts, namely that of the atomists and Aristotle's. Now, although Aristotle actually only borrows Democritus' conception of the void, termed in Aristotle as "a place with nothing in it", in order to submit it to a critique that will eventually end in denying the void's existence, the two concepts are actually *far from identical*. By which I mean, that what is at issue here is not merely a matter of two diametrically opposed conclusions based on the same definition, and obviously on the background of two completely different ontological visions of what is now arguably called matter; it is not merely a question of atomism versus Aristotle's substance. The problem we face is also and primarily a problem of two different definitions, despite the fact that these are nominally the same.

The prime reason for this is that Aristotle's conclusion that the void does not exist is not to be considered only as a conclusion, but also as an *integral part of the definition itself*; thus, Aristotle's complete definition would be: a place with nothing in it, which as such does not exist. From the perspective we are proposing, however, this additional clause is not to be considered so much as an ontological marker, but as a conceptual tool. The inclusion of the decision on the inexistence of the void in its definition has as its result the effect of a crucial topological shift or subtraction. It consists of subtracting the void from being thought of in triangular frames of its relation to matter via the mediation of non-being, with the void itself being conceived of as both the *local* non-being of matter and its exclusive *location*, and submitting it instead by means of seclusion to a very different constellation of thought, whereby the void, firstly, no longer appears primarily conceived of as the space or *topos* of matter, but is rather instead being explored in *its own relation to what it supposedly was*, that is, in its relation to the *concept* of *topos* or place. And secondly, the void appears no longer defined by its immediate identity with the non-being-of-matter, but is rather itself being conceived *as the possible presentation* of nothing, and thus, consequently, being thought *through* its *difference* with nothing (and no longer in its identity to non-being), or even, *as the inner difference* within nothing itself. So – in obvious contrast to what Aristotle himself would have to say on this mat-

ter – our argument would be that by deciding that the void is not, Aristotle in a way secludes the void from its relation to matter or substance, which gives rise to two perhaps even more fundamental questions: the question of the relation between void and space, and the question of the relation between the void and nothing. Or more precisely, by secluding the void into non-being, or by subtracting it from being, Aristotle, firstly, *breaks the immediate identity between void and empty space*, which, in the atomist constellation proves necessary, since the void is the exclusive space of matter, and forces us instead to think of the void through its inner relation to the concept of *topos* or place as such. And secondly, by the same gesture, and even more importantly, Aristotle also renders it possible *not to think* of the void appearing in its immediate identity with the non-being-of-matter, and rather instead opens the possibility of thinking of the void – not in its immediate and local being-nothing – but rather as of the possible *presentation* of nothing, which clearly implies a minimal difference between the two concepts. However, before clarifying argument further, it is necessary to present the third Classical development in which the void is involved.

3) The void is namely also, and from the philosophical perspective, *predominantly*, one of the two competing and almost contemporary versions of the inclusion of non-being in being that mark the departure from Parmenides' monism. The story goes that Plato was so jealous of Democritus that he ordered all of Democritus' scripts to be burned. The story is obviously unreliable, as it is uncertain that Democritus was actually one of the protagonists in Plato's dialogue *Rival Lovers*. The personal love-hate relationship thus remains blurred. Nevertheless, it is clear that from Plato's perspective the atomist concept of the void could not have been seen as anything more than an unprecedented vulgarity. Not because it constituted a rupture with Parmenides, one much more radical than Plato's own, but because the concept of the void as conceived by Democritus does not really touch on the point of *pure nothing*, and thus does not really live up to the expectations of *being non-being*.

Plato's inaugural critique of Parmenides and his followers consisted of the idea that they wrongly presupposed non-being to be the *opposite* of being, which necessarily led them to the unsustainable conclusion that non-being as such is not. On the contrary, Plato says that non-being is not to be conceived in terms of a negation of being, but only in terms of being *other* than being. "It seems that when we say *that which is not*, we don't say something contrary to that which is,

but only something different from it”.⁷ So one could say that Plato’s first gesture is precisely to construe a *false nothing*, some sort of ‘transcendental appearance’ of nothing; a nothing that seems to be thought of all *too consistently by those who at the same time deny it* (namely Parmenides and his followers). And in a way, the whole of Plato’s procedure constitutes a delimitation from this false nothing, perceived as *the existence of the opposite of being* within (the presentation of) being.

It has to be admitted that from, the – as it were – ‘physical’ aspect, Plato’s own theory on the inclusion of non-being in being may seem quite banal, and arguably might even have been dismissed as a type of naïve paralogism of the senses: for instance, “movement is the non-being of standstill”, and conversely, standstill is the non-being of movement. From the metaphysical point of view, however, his solution is, nevertheless, brilliant, perhaps unsurpassable. Movement is the *nothing* of standstill only insofar as *movement exists*; it is nothing (of its other) only insofar as it is *not* nothing; this finally brings us to the general conclusion that *non-being as such*, conceived in terms of being *other than being*, has in fact no other place but its own other, that is being, within which it disappears. The presence of non-being in being is *actually null, nada*, nothing. As in Hegel, also in Plato, nothing can truly be grasped only insofar as it is *actually understood as pure being*: the only form in which nothing can exist is in the form of its Other; movement, or, anything that can be placed in a ‘negative’ relation to something else, is thus, in all of its positive banality, the exclusive location of non-being in being, the existence of which is thus equal to zero. However, this obviously does not mean that non-being is not; after all, Plato’s claim is precisely that non-being is; quite the contrary, it only means that *non-being is actually equivalent to a certain order within existing things*; instead of presenting a dark horizon or the calling of the deep, non-being’s presence can be marked only by a certain, for that reason empty, +1 equivalent to +0. Non-being exists, it is included; it is nevertheless present only as (pure and simple) nothing. The similarity (to say the least) with Badiou is evident: a certain surplus being exists in the form of non-being, a certain surplus that haunts the consistent order of presentation, which is, however, merely distinguishable in its disappearance, while remaining strictly delimited from any type of *existent nothing* within presentation.

⁷ Plato, *Sophist*, 257b. Quoted from: *Plato Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997, p. 280.

From this perspective, it becomes all too clear that the competing form of inclusion of non-being to being, the one presented by the atomist conception of the void, not only appears over-dramatic from Plato's point of view, but also purely and simply fails to meet Plato's conditions for being non-being. The void is neither generated in the order of existing "others", which would arguably mark 'the plane of immanence' in Plato's thought, nor, even more importantly, does it ever reach the point of being absolute nothing, since it not only *is*, but is also necessarily presupposed as a spatial presence in which matter appears.

It is clear that what Aristotle presents as the definition of the atomist void in fact applies only to the point of the void's necessary excess over matter: although it is true that also for the atomists the void *as such* is determined by the complete absence of any matter, it is, however, at the same time, *and as such*, the exclusive spacing of matter's presence. The basic paradox of the atomist void is obviously that the void is simultaneously the *existing negation of matter* and its *exclusive location; its own existence that negates matter is at the same time the condition of matter's appearing*. That is what makes of the void, which exists only insofar as it *exists independently* of matter, (although one would usually find them in the same spot), the condition of matter's appearing, which is in itself unilaterally unconditioned; this is why all attempts to grasp matter and void in their difference end in the impossibility of *not thinking* of the void as of the *existent being of matter's 'being there'*. Or, in other words, the void's existence that negates matter, which is, however, at the same time, the unilateral condition of matter's appearing, is why the void is necessarily thought of as the presence of presence.

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From the 'metaphysical' point of view, Plato is, or would be, correct in rejecting the void as a worthy rival to his own operation. However, this only proves clear, via Aristotle, although perhaps involuntarily, refocusing the conceptualization of the void from being thought of in its immediate identity with non-being to the speculative possibility of the void being thought of as the presence of nothing. Namely, the concept of the void indeed implies a certain difference that is perhaps even more fundamental than the difference between the void and matter itself, namely the difference between nothing and the void, which, however, really *becomes discernible precisely insofar as the void is simultaneously grasped as equal* to nothing.

What is at stake here is clearly a certain difference of the same, or a difference in nothing, which can be, however, only attested in terms of *existence*. Although the void is nothing, both in the sense that void is clearly not-a-thing, as well as in the atomist sense that the void appears as the existent negation of matter, it also holds that the void necessarily exists, and is thus, apart from being nothing, also not-nothing. Or more precisely: although the void is not something other than nothing – as a matter of fact, it can be conceived of only as a form of nothing – it is also not-nothing, *since in order to be nothing, it has to exist*. Namely, exactly insofar as the void marks *the presence of nothing*, it is not-nothing, and cannot be conceived of as pure non-being. And from this perspective, Plato would be completely correct. And although the logic seems to be the same as in the case of his own inclusion of non-being in being, it is actually not.

In Plato's case, it is true that a particular form of non-being, such as movement-being-the-non-being-of-standstill, in fact implies that non-being can actually intervene as non-being only in a form of a being. This would be the Platonist version of Deleuze's famous "negativity of the positivity itself", which he attributes to Nietzsche. It is nevertheless clear that for exactly the same reason, *non-being as such* is present in the world only as pure nothing, or as *nothing that is also the nothing of itself*. In the case of atomist' void as mediated by Aristotle: is true again that non-being is in fact non-being only insofar as it exists. In order to *present* nothing, the void cannot be 'nothing', and although void is nothing, it is at the same time *its existing presence*, and is thus space rather than nothing. Exactly insofar as the void marks the presence of nothing, it is not-nothing. Either way, both in the case where we perceive of the void as different from nothing, or when we perceive it as nothing, we actually end with the same result: the void cannot touch upon the point of being pure nothing, and is thus, from the metaphysical point of view at least, an implausible form of inclusion of non-being in being. And I think this is the place where the decision needs to be made: either to stick with the atomist surgical incision, with the high drama of there being a mysterious presence which conditions what it negates, or to side with Badiou, and claim that the history of the void has been written by those who claimed that it was not.