

# Voidness and Artistic Creation: Between Aesthetics and Ethics

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**Abstract** The notion of ‘void’ has assumed multiple meanings across traditions. The Western view generally opposed voidness to Being’s fullness, whereas Taoism and Buddhism understood it not as lack, but as an active condition allowing phenomena to manifest. Void (*mu* in Japanese) or emptiness (*kū*) are not principles but the immanent experience of impermanence and interdependence. Emptiness and form, void and fullness, are complementary: the void is the infinite backdrop from which things arise. Artistic practices can express this coexistence, promoting an ethical exercise of self-transformation in understanding reality and acting in the world.

**Keywords** Voidness. Daoism. Buddhism. Art. Aesthetics. Ethics.

**Summary** 1 The Ambiguity of a Notion. – 2 Another Way to Deal with ‘Voidness’. – 3 Artistry as Dealing with Void.

## 1 The Ambiguity of a Notion

The polyvalent nature of the term ‘void’ or ‘emptiness’ is undeniable. In modern Europe, after centuries in which the very possibility of its existence was excluded, it began to be thought of as an inert ‘space’ in which masses and energy move and interact. In art, emptiness as a ‘spatial concept’ has been present in important movements and works that marked a break with the artistic experiences of the eighteenth century. However, in the Western world, emptiness has always touched on the semantic sphere of ‘nothingness’, understood as ‘non-being’, as opposed to ontological fullness. Non-being is not

(echoing Parmenides), emptiness is inert, it is the absence of power or effectiveness. Some fundamental traditions of thought in Central and Eastern Asia, on the other hand, have given emptiness a totally different meaning, understanding it as a highly active, welcoming dimension, as a condition of possibility for the occurrence of reality.

By sketching briefly some crucial moments in the conceptions of emptiness between the West and the East can help to clarify the many meanings attributed to 'emptiness', starting with the conception of ancient materialism, from Greece to Rome, from Democritus to Epicurus and Lucretius. Right from its early beginnings, Western philosophical speculation took form as ontology, a discourse on the nature of being – the One, that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be, according to Parmenides, who inaugurated the history of ontology. Being *is*; and being is a fullness, a presence. The first Western philosophers to give credence to the concept of the void were Leucippus and Democritus in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Parting ways with other natural philosophers, they hypothesized atoms, invisible and eternal elementary particles, as the primal principle and compositional element of reality. With no means for physical experimentation, the hypothesis of these ancient atomists was based entirely on a theoretical construct. Democritus, in fact, refers to space with the names "void" (*kenon*), "nothing" (*me on*), and "infinite" (*apeiron*), while he gives to each of the substances the name of "entity" (*to on*) (Democr., DK 68 A 37). Reality thus is not rooted in any divine order, nor in an absolute and unitary being, but rather in the dizzying and unpredictable motion of atoms that collide and unite in the void. Nothing else is needed to explain the formation of physical reality, which is the only *de facto* reality. Every living formation, including people, is nothing more than a dynamic configuration of atoms and emptiness. Emptiness, a constituent of everything, makes possible the fullness of a being by assigning limits to it. According to this conception, fullness (*pleres*) is absolutely not the origin since it is completely inconceivable if not juxtaposed with the void (*kenon*), which makes it possible via the aggregation of atoms. Similarly, without the void, movement would not be conceivable. The elements that were traditionally included as being part of the Real, which were 'canonised' in the philosophical thought of Empedocles – earth, air, fire, water – are not at all 'elementary' to Democritus. They are generated like anything else on the basis of combinations of the atoms of matter. The fact that they are invisible to the naked eye does not mean they have no substance; quite the contrary, all of matter is composed of these minimal particles that aggregate and disaggregate, giving origin to forms that dissolve and reform into other structures. This never-ending process of aggregation and dissolution gives every entity (*to on*) its origin in the all-pervasive and all-encompassing infinity that embraces all manifestation of reality.

The void is not a transcendent source, nor it is an immanent law. It is space devoid of matter that allows the minimal, fundamental components of matter to create forms. After the atomists, the void as a philosophical framework, along with explicit argumentation in favor of its existence and its active and constituent function in reality, were largely abandoned, and even came under attack. Aristotle expressed himself clearly against the postulates of the atomists, considering their position to be untenable. In the fourth book of his *Physics* (IV, 7-9) he defines place as the boundary of the containing body at which it is in contact with the contained body. He thus excludes the possibility of the existence of a void. Every space coincides with the limits of the objects contained within it, with their boundaries; and at the edges of one body another body begins, perhaps just air. The void is a place that contains nothing, but this is a contradictory proposition. It would be a place deprived of its very essence because it is deprived of its capacity to contain, which is exactly what defines it. The existence of the void also generates another paradox for Aristotle: being empty, such a space would have no distinctions within it, no structure and no direction. And this lack would exclude the possibility of any movement of bodies within it.

Curiously, the same condition, i.e. movement, that was posited by the atomists as proof of the existence of the void is used by Aristotle to assert its impossibility. In the void everything would be immobile because there would be nothing to set a body into motion, and vice versa, there would be nothing to stop any movement that had begun (*Ph.*, IV, 215a18-22). This position would dominate Western thought until the modern era. The void cannot exist because it would negate the cosmic order, violating the laws of logic, the coordinates of human intellect: nature cannot be other than an orderly and continuous whole. The Aristotelian solution for explaining the movement of celestial bodies in space that is not empty, but also not disturbed by the presence of air, would enjoy a long afterlife. It involved the postulation of a fifth essence in addition to the four canonical ones: the ether, a diaphanous, intangible, and immutable substance (*De an.*, I, 3, 268b-70b). Western thought was characterized by a growing *horror vacui*: the void had to be excluded from physical conceptions in order to avoid the contradictions posited by Aristotle and to ensure that no discontinuity was introduced into Creation. Put simply, the work of God could tolerate no internal fractures. The void can only exist as a principle, the primal condition for the development of the created by means of divine will, which creates out of nothing. The void might coincide with all of space that accommodates the things of the world, but since God is everywhere at all times the presence of an 'active' void within the worldly horizon cannot be possible.

As opposed to the Greeks, Christian thinking introduces the active presence of the infinite – God is the infinite *par excellence*. The void

would have to await the modern era to witness the reaffirmation of its right to exist, and it would be neither theologians nor theorists to affirm its relevance, but rather scientists basing their convictions on empirical evidence. It was no coincidence that Cartesian rationalism, in reducing the uncertainty of the physical world to the two fundamental characters of extension and motion, again posits space and body. Extension constitutes both the nature of the body and the nature of space, and the two do not differ from one another. That which we commonly mean as 'void' is nothing other than a space in which matter is particularly rarefied. In the physical world, there are greater and lesser condensations of solid bodies, but it is to be excluded that there are places without bodies since space and bodies coincide.

## 2 Another Way to Deal with 'Voidness'

It is precisely the void that constitutes the nucleus of the philosophical and religious experiences that go by the names of Taoism and Buddhism. In what sense can we speak about 'void', in these contexts? At the basis of these cultural forms there is no intellectual framework, or complete theory of the void, but there are experiences of the void, generally fostered by an artistic or, even better, a meditative training or practice. In Taoism and Buddhism the void does not indicate in any way a reality that is defective with respect to a being conceived as full, immutable, and coherent. A well-known passage from the *Daodejing* 道德經 (The Classic of the Way and Virtue) underlines the efficacy of voidness, its capacity to promote "usefulness":

Thirty spokes share one hub. Precisely in the empty space is the utility of the wheel. One kneads clay to make a vessel. Precisely in the empty space within is the utility of the vessel. One cuts out doors and windows to make a house. Precisely in the empty space within is the utility of the house. Thus, what is there profits us for the usefulness of what is not there. (Lao-tzu 2001, 45)<sup>1</sup>

Here 'void', or 'emptiness', translates the Chinese term *wu* 無 (in Japanese *mu*): not-being-there, absence, lack, void. Not only voidness lies at the heart of utility, but also – and here Taoism meets and intertwines with Buddhist thought – every entity is empty, both spatially and temporally. It has no autonomous, substantial nature but always exists in relation to something other than it; it is always

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger implicitly recalled this idea in his lecture on *das Ding* (the thing) (Heidegger 1954, 172-90).

penetrated and permeated by that which surrounds it. The world is structured as an infinite network of interdependent, non-self-sufficient elements. And this 'vacuity of essence', as already mentioned, is not a matter of theory, but a question of experience. Breathing, in its alternation between fullness and emptiness, is the prime instrument of meditation in bringing the practitioner closer to the substanceless and impermanent dimension of being.

We are far away from nihilism: the void is an infinite condition of possibility for the occurrence of any phenomenon, any physical, psychological, or metaphysical manifestation which, like a wave, rises from the great ocean and returns to it.

Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and non-action - this is the level of heaven and earth, and the perfection of the Tao and its characteristics. Therefore the [Emperors], Kings, and Sages found in this their resting-place. Resting here, they were vacant; from their vacancy came fullness; from their fullness came the nice distinctions of things. From their vacancy came stillness; that stillness was followed by movement; their movements were successful. [...]. Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and [non-action] are the root of all things. (Legge 1962, 57)

And just like waves, events, phenomena, and the various activities of being human are processes, relations - not objects. Art is not a discipline exalted above all others; it is one of the different ways of coming into contact with the experience of the void, of making it an operating principle. In this dimension there is no longer a subject who performs the work; the work occurs, gratuitously, giving sensible body to the circulation of energy and interrelations. It is precisely the void that allows the circulation of the vital breath, the energetic exchange between subject and object, which are discovered to be one - distinct, but not separate - in the process of generation-dissolution, inspiration-exhalation emersion-immersion against the backdrop that animates and accommodates them. At the same time, however, the backdrop exists only in virtue of the phenomena played out against it. The backdrop is in no way a metaphysical foundation that exists 'before' and 'beyond' things, bodies, or events: backdrop and phenomena are one.

Artistic gesture is thus a function of the void: the power and efficacy of the void are brought back by the means of figuration, or the composition of a poem. Ink forms are deployed on paper over a white background: the fullness of determined presences emerges from the voidness, while revealing it by contrast. It shows the efficacy of the void the same way that the void contains the potentials for fullness, without there being a splitting of planes - here the visible, the

manifest, the tangible; there the latent, the invisible, the unutterable. The variation of fullness and emptiness confers dynamism and preserves the invisible within the visible; it is the only thing that can render the figuration in its totality (see Cheng 1991; Jullien 2003).

Void and fullness are *yin* and *yang*, complementary opposites that constitute the Tao. In Zen Buddhism, the void (*kū* 空) is the condition of freedom and fluidity that coincides with the realization of phenomena through their perpetual interplay. It is the horizon of acceptance, an infinite and indeterminate place that encompasses being and non-being, but not one given *a priori*, independent of the events that occur within it. Vacuity is a condition for the possibility of all material forms, but with them it shares a lack of self-fulfillment. It too is always relational. As written in the so called *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō* 般若心經 in Japanese, *Prajnaparamita sūtra* in the Sanskrit version) form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form (in Japanese: *Shiki fu i kū kū fu i shiki, shiki soku ze kū kū soku ze shiki* 色不異空空不異色, 色即是空空即是色, “Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Form as emptiness, emptiness as form”). Emptiness is also empty of itself. It is a backdrop that does not exist prior to the manifestations played out against it; it allows them to occur and comes into existence with them.

‘Emptiness’, or ‘voidness’, translates the Japanese *kū* (*kōng* in Chinese), which is the ideographic translations of the Sanskrit *śūnyatā*, ‘voidness’ as a deflation, emptying, dissolution of substantiality and of any claim to ontological autonomy on the part of any reality. All forms are empty, that is, devoid of their own essence. They exist only as related to something other than themselves, they exist only as conditioned and conditioning aggregates. In Japanese, *kū* can also be read as *sora*, and in this case it indicates the celestial vault, therefore an infinite opening, a ‘chaos’ that envelops all phenomena, the total inclusiveness that is not susceptible to being encompassed by anything. Voidness is not a substance, literally it is no-thing: it is a continuous ‘emptying’, an ‘evacuation’ even if its hypothetical absolute substantiality. Above all, it must not be assumed as a principle, one must not cling to it as a stable dimension beneath the mobile and insubstantial multiplicity of phenomena. Every form, or phenomenon, cannot claim ontological solidity. It occurs as pure relationality, its mere presence is the relationship with itself and with something other than itself. But the reverse must also be said: emptiness is a form among forms, it cannot claim a status different from that of all the forms and names that can be invoked. One cannot cling to emptiness by turning it into a principle, otherwise it loses its function as an ethical indicator, its signaling a different way of relating to things and the names that denote them. Thus, fullness and voidness, both in nature and on paper, are never separated from one another, because they imply one another. The spiritual dimension (*shen* 神 in

Chinese) is realized precisely where fullness is crossed by emptiness, and vice versa: on paper, something apparently incomplete remains, but through that incompleteness the spiritual unfolds.

### 3 Artistry as Dealing with Void

The painter's or the poet's work reveals itself as an ethical exercise, because it is a form that trains one to experience the coexistence of opposites in the immanence of everyday life and translates into concrete gestures. Furthermore, painting is not a continuous addition of autonomous lines and strokes, but a progressive reduction of singular determinations to allow relationships to unfold – thanks both to the intervention of the viewer, who immerses themselves in the painting and imagines the details, the glimpses veiled by mists, and to the freedom of the image from any rigid determination. Painting is ultimately an ethical act because it encourages the vital breath that spreads among phenomena. The painter must not confine or block the ink strokes, but welcome and give rise to an indefiniteness as a sign of dynamic potentiality. The German verb *entbilden* is useful for expressing a similar de-imaginative, de-figurative exercise. *Entbilden* means to free oneself from representations still attached to the external senses; it is a purifying of form and imagination, a de-figuring, that is, an opening of the figure, making it available to transformation (see Ghilardi 2017, 280-371; 2024, 81-129).

The work can still be a place where the paradoxical unity of contact and distance is held together, as a condensed space-time that becomes formed matter, an event in which to try, test, and experience proximity to things, to oneself, to life – and at the same time measure and tolerate the inescapable distance. The work is a way to make 'otherness', the alterity that trespasses one's identity, fruitful. It translates absence into formed matter. In contemporary ink painting, artists like Zheng Chongbin have ventured into the territory of the informal, developing new paths in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy since the post-war period. In his pictorial series entitled *The Dimension of Ink* (2009) or *Six Canons* (2012), ink becomes a 'quasi-matter', a matter of absence. The support is an evanescent background that attracts and welcomes the gaze, and also returns to being a rock face on which graffiti are engraved in negative, white on black. An Italian artist like Claudio Parmiggiani has found in ephemeral and subtle substances the material capable of supporting new forms. Shadows, dust, and smoke translate absence into form, exposing to the gaze the residue of something that has been removed. Grey soot has settled on empty walls: in the spectral white, as in a negative photo, the 'icons of absence' of hundreds of ghostly books (*Sculture d'ombra*, 2003) are imprinted, forms that

were or perhaps will be again. The soot gives the walls, the empty spaces of rooms, and the air that fills them, the character of an elusive subjectivity. Between material and immaterial, neither form nor non-form, the soot allows itself to be imprinted and imbued with figures and meanings.

Contemporary art seems indeed to encounter the void in two main ways, *via* the discovery of Japanese and Chinese painting, of that dynamic relationship between the white of the paper and the black of the ink, or dealing with void as removal, lack, or limit of the visible. A third way could be that of conceiving of voidness as the, unavoidable yet burning, incandescent remnant of reality. The 'discovery of space' coincided, for Lucio Fontana, with a unique and continuous dimension that encompasses and absolves within itself all determination of form: fullness and emptiness end up dissolving into one another, and the pictorial space goes beyond the limits of this dichotomy. It is beyond, or short of, the fullness/void schism. Unexpectedly, it could mark a possible meeting point with the tradition of the Byzantine icon, where gold is used as a color/non-color to indicate the invisible, and also an attempt to get beyond the Suprematism of Malevič, of his white squares against a white background, black squares on white, or black on black. In music, we can find traces of the efficacy of void in the blank scores by authors like John Cage, Tōru Takemitsu, or Jonathan Harvey; silence also stretches time and space of one's psyche, or reveals the infinite space of the soul, whose limits are unknown. Or, again, void is the darkness, both disturbing and welcoming, in which the character in Bill Viola's video *Ascension* (2000) moves and ultimately dissolves. In all these cases, voidness should never be understood as a simple negation of fullness, as pure 'non-being'. Rather, it is the inner side of the fullness of being, its complement, the symbolic name of the unlimited openness to which every work ultimately alludes, and on which it depends at the same time.

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