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The Dark Side of Being: On What There is Not

edited by Filippo Casati and Filippo Costantini

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Introduction

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In contrast to Quine's (meta-)ontology and his preference for desert landscapes, recent years have seen a renewed interest in 'non-being': non-existent entities, mere possibilia, negative properties, negative facts, absences, nothingness, voids, holes, etc. Interest in the category of non-being is not limited to ontology but has also found applications in the philosophy of mind, particularly regarding the role intentionality plays in relation to non-entities (Crane 2013; Priest 2016) and the problem of perceiving absences. Additionally, it has influenced the philosophy of art, especially in discussions about absence art – i.e., art that features absences as aesthetic objects (Farennikova 2019).

The questioning of Quine's orthodoxy began by first challenging the Parmenidean assumption that we cannot reference non-being. Indeed, this view seems self-defeating (aren't we speaking of non-being right now and thus referring to 'it'?), motivating philosophers to explore the realm of non-existence, particularly with the revival of neo-Meinongian (meta-)ontologies. Alternative approaches involve examining the possibility of empty reference, i.e., fully legitimate singular terms without any referents. Soon, however, non-entities acquired an even more significant role. Philosophers began discussing that strange object which is Nothingness, characterized as the

absence of everything,[1] sometimes arguing that it grounds all of reality (Priest, Gabriel 2022; Casati 2021; Casati, Fujikawa 2024). Others have argued for causation by absences or omissions, claiming that absences can feature in causal explanations (Dowe 2001; Schaffer 2004). The idea that non-being can play an explanatory role in various philosophical contexts seems to be gaining ground. At the same time, these ideas have faced significant criticism, notably from Mumford (2021) and Della Rocca (2020). While the former defends a position called Soft Parmenidism, the latter argues for the far more extreme view that there are no distinctions in reality, denying any positive role for non-being.

If we admit reference to nonexistent objects, why should we not admit that there are circumstances in which we see what is not? Psychologists are familiar with illusory contours such as the Ehrenstein illusion or the Kanizsa triangle. Recently, however, there has been a growing body of literature arguing that we experience and/or perceive absences. For example, Farennikova (2013) argues that absence experiences are perceptual phenomena. Moreover, Farennikova (2019) even contends that absences can possess aesthetic properties, implying that absence art has objective value. By contrast, others have claimed that while we can experience absences, we do not perceive them (Gow 2021a; 2021b).

This issue of *JoLMA* highlights the richness of the topic by presenting eight fresh papers that range from metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology, to philosophy of language, aesthetics, and philosophy of mind.

Metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological aspects of non-being are addressed by Fritzman, Meadows, Priest, and Simionato. Fritzman engages with contemporary discussions on grounding, arguing that being is incomplete since each entity partially grounds, generates, and constitutes other entities. As grounding is always partial, Fritzman contends that nothing is ever fully real, implying that non-being is integral to the constitution of every entity. Meadows critiques eliminativist error theories of absence causation, arguing that these theories are inadequately motivated. He challenges various arguments in the literature that conceptualize absence causation as problematic, concluding that there is no compelling reason to reject it. Priest raises a question for the modal noneist's understanding of fictional objects: what properties do fictional objects possess in the actual world? He argues that modal noneism does not fully answer this question and explores six possible solutions. Finally, Simionato engages with the analytic debate on nothingness, drawing on Kant's

1 Priest 2014; Casati, Fujikawa 2019; Casati 2021; Costantini 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Sorensen 2022.

Table of Nothing to critically assess three accounts in the literature (Priest 2014; Casati, Fujikawa 2019; Costantini 2020).

Moltmann and Pavone explore issues in linguistics and the philosophy of language. Moltmann introduces a new theory to account for the semantics of verbs such as 'lack' or 'be missing', proposing that these verbs reflect a strong notion of absence, on which the absence of a thing presupposes that that thing should have been there, to make something else complete. This modal notion of absence involves the concept of completion. Pavone examines the use of bare pairs of quotation marks to represent the empty string in formal linguistics and computer science, arguing that this practice is well-founded. Pavone contends that the conventions governing quotation marks in natural language make sentences containing empty quotations grammatical and meaningful.

The role of absences and negativity in aesthetics is the subject of Planiceanu's article on Spanish artist Manolo Millares. In one of the first contributions in English on this key figure of Spanish informalism, Planiceanu demonstrates how the interplay of presence and absence, figure and background, and material and void aligns with Adorno's concept of mimesis. Moreover, this interplay challenges traditional aesthetic formalism by exposing the artwork's inherent incompleteness.

Lastly, the field of philosophy of mind is addressed by Voltolini, who argues for a moderate version of the perceptualist position on absences. According to Voltolini, perceptual experiences of absence involve the removal of occlusion, which affects the non-conceptual content of perceptual experience and aligns with changes in its overall phenomenal character. Notably, Voltolini extends this view to the case of pictorial experiences of absences.

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Metaphysical Grounding and Being's Incompleteness

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Abstract In order to argue that Being is incomplete, this article engages recent views which regard metaphysical grounding as a form of ontological dependence. In contrast to foundational versions of grounding, it argues that grounding is ubiquitous, multidirectional, and multilevel. Each thing partially grounds, generates, and constitutes every other thing. Grounding is never full. Since grounding is always partial, a thing is never fully real. This is a condition of possibility of its reality. If it were to be fully grounded, *per impossible*, it would be incapable of further development or change. It would be wholly static and frozen. This is true for each thing and for the universe itself. The monistic One is never fully one and reality is never completely real. This ontology is gunky, junky, and hunky: everything partly grounds and is grounded by everything else, so that everything has parts and also is a constituent in a greater whole. Whereas the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna would assert that this means everything is empty and unreal, everything is partially real. However, things are never fully real because they are never fully grounded.

Keywords Grounding. Nāgārjuna. Non-Being. Rosenzweig. Schelling.

Summary 1 Metaphysical Grounding: Up, Down, Sideways, Looping, and Partial. – 2 Hunky but not Empty. – 3 Being's Incompleteness.

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1 Metaphysical Grounding: Up, Down, Sideways, Looping, and Partial

This article articulates its central claims by refiguring the concept of metaphysical grounding. "Contemporary figures don't fully agree on the concept of grounding", as (Bliss, Trogdon 2024) observe. It further develops certain aspects of that concept in dialogue with those figures, but in ways which do not fully agree with any of them. To anticipate several of the conclusions of this section, metaphysical grounding can be regarded as ontological dependence and frequently as constitution. Grounding as constitution does not require that a complex whole depend on its particular parts, but only on some parts or other. That is to say, grounding does not presuppose mereological essentialism, which maintains that objects have their parts necessarily, such that an object which gains or loses a part thereby ceases to exist. However, grounding encompasses not only 'constituent dependence', where a complex thing is grounded by its constituent parts, but also 'feature dependence', where a thing's features are grounded by the thing which bears them. Grounding is also symmetric: a complex thing is both grounded by and grounds its constituents and features.

Grounding is ubiquitous, multidirectional and multilevel. It is similar to coherentism's web of beliefs. Things at all levels each ground, generate, and constitute the other. Grounding is always partial, however, never full. No thing is fully grounded, even collectively, by everything else in the coherentist web. Things are never fully unified, nor is a thing ever fully itself. That a thing is never fully real is not a mere lack or incompleteness. As will be discussed below, a thing not being fully real is a condition of possibility of its reality. If it were to become fully real, *per impossible*, it would be incapable of further development or change. It would be wholly static and frozen. This is true for all things and for the universe itself. They are never fully real and they never completely exist.

Bliss and Trogdon (2024) propose three ways of typing cases of grounding, *x* grounds *y*. First, in metaphysical cases, the things that *x* concern are metaphysically linked with the things that *y* concerns. Metaphysical grounding considers cases where the ontological dependence of *y* on *x* is not one of identity, causality, or modality. Second, in logical cases, grounding claims correspond to logical inference rules, especially introduction rules. Finally, in conceptual cases, grounding claims correspond to conceptually necessary conditions.

Most of the proponents of metaphysical grounding assert that grounding relations are unidirectional: if *y* grounds *x*, then *x* cannot ground *y*. They are usually grounding monists, asserting that there is one core type. Grounding pluralists claim that there are several types. Most proponents further assert that grounding relations are

explanatory: if *y* grounds *x*, then *y* explains *x*. Raven (2015, 326) distinguishes unionists and separatists. Unionists regard ground as itself a form of explanation. Separatists hold that grounding supports explanation.

Infinitist or coherentist versions of grounding have not been developed, as most proponents accept foundationalism:

> The prevailing view amongst contemporary analytic metaphysicians, of a certain stripe, is one according to which reality is hierarchically structured by chains of phenomena ordered by the grounding relation that terminate in something fundamental. (Bliss 2014, 245)

They generally believe that grounding's fundamental entities are the elementary particles of particle physics. However, priority monists (Schaffer 2010) maintain that only one basic concrete object exists, the universe, which is the mereological maximal element, and that grounding relations terminate in the universe. Bliss and Priest (2018) list four of "the core commitments of metaphysical foundationalism *as commonly endorsed in the contemporary literature*". These commitments are:

> 1. The hierarchy thesis: Reality is hierarchically structured by metaphysical dependence relations that are anti-symmetric, transitive, and anti-reflexive. 2. The fundamentality thesis: There is some thing(s) which is fundamental. 3. The contingency thesis: Whatever is fundamental is merely contingently existent. 4. The consistency thesis: The dependence structure has consistent structural properties. (Bliss, Priest 2018, 2)

As discussed below, this article rejects all four commitments. It also rejects infinitism and foundationalism. It instead advances a coherentist version of grounding, according to which grounding is transitive, multidirectional, symmetric, and reflexive.

As already suggested, the distinction between partial and full grounding is crucial:

> Suppose [*P*], [*P′*],... grounds [*Q*]. Speaking in unionist terms, for a preliminary characterization of the distinction we can say that [*P*], [*P′*],... partially grounds [*Q*] when the former facts contribute to explaining the latter; and [*P*], [*P′*],... fully grounds [*Q*] when nothing needs to be added to the former to get a fully adequate explanation of the latter fact. Separatists might instead initially characterize the distinction in terms of partial and full determination. Sticking with unionism for the moment, we can say that, as any ground contributes to explaining what it grounds, any ground is a

> partial ground. But not all partial grounds provide fully adequate explanations of what they ground, so not all partial grounds are full grounds. A merely partial ground is a partial ground that isn't a full ground. (Bliss, Trogdon 2024)

According to this explication, all grounds are at least partial grounds, some partial grounds are full grounds, and all full grounds are also partial grounds. That all full grounds are partial grounds follows from all grounds being partial grounds. This departs from standard usage. That something is partial implies it is not full, in standard usage, and that something is full implies it is not partially full. Standard usage will be followed to avoid confusion.

There is never full grounding, only partial grounding. To speak here with the unionists – although this same point also holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the separatists – [*P*], [*P′*],... fully grounds [*Q*] when the former facts suffice for a fully adequate explanation of the latter fact. However, the full range of [*P*], [*P′*],... cannot be specified, and so [*Q*] cannot receive a 'fully adequate' explanation. Suppose that [*Q*] is the presence of a snake in an office. If [*P*] is that someone put the snake in the office, this would provide a partial grounding, a partial explanation. This might be sufficient, depending on an inquirer's cognitive interests, but it would not be a 'fully adequate' explanation.

More precisely, it would not be a fully adequate explanation unless whether an explanation is fully adequate depends on whether persons, given their interests, regard it as fully adequate. Here, whether a putative explanation actually is explanatory would be relative to an inquirer's interests. The same ground could be only a partial ground for some inquirers, but a full ground for others. Irrealist (Thompson 2018) and fictionalist (Thompson 2022) versions of grounding allow that whether an explanation is fully adequate is relative to the inquirers' interests. However, most proponents of grounding accept a realist version of grounding. They would agree with Fine's two conclusions:

> First, that there is a primitive metaphysical concept of reality, one that cannot be understood in fundamentally different terms; and second, that questions of what is real are to be settled upon the basis of considerations of *ground*. (Fine 2001, 1)

This article accepts Fine's second conclusion, with the caveats already noted, but it rejects the first.

To return to the example of the snake in the office, a fully adequate explanation would need to incorporate full explanations of all aspects of the universe since the Big Bang that played any role in getting that snake into the office. And since cosmologists inquire about the universe's initial state and how it originated, a fully adequate

explanation of the snake in the office would need to fully explain that too. Further, a fully adequate explanation would exceed not only the life of any person but also the time of the existence of *Homo sapiens* to cognize those facts. It might be asserted that there is a full range of [*P*], [*P′*],... which is sufficient for a fully adequate explanation of [*Q*]. Whether that assertion should be accepted depends on further metaphysical issues. The primary motivation for accepting that there exists a full range of [*P*], [*P′*],... which provides a fully adequate explanation of [*Q*] is the implicit assumption that reality is fully real, and so [*Q*] must have a fully adequate explanation. This article rejects that assumption. In any case, a fully adequate explanation of [*Q*] that cannot be cognized does not fully explain anything to anyone.

Not only did grounding's proponents converge on foundationalism, it has also seemed obvious to them that it is possible for *x* to fully ground *y*:

> Intuitively, there is a distinction between full and mere partial grounding. One way to illustrate the distinction is by way of the following contrast: while, for some suitable *p* and *q*, [*p* & *q*] is merely partially grounded in [*p*], [*p* ∨ *q*] is fully grounded in [*p*]. (Bliss, Trogdon 2016)

Although Bliss and Trogdon are correct that there is a notional distinction between full and partial grounding, grounding is always partial. Grounding relations are transitive. If A partially grounds B, and B partially grounds C, then A partially grounds C through the mediation of B. Further, if A partially grounds B, B cannot fully ground C, as B is not fully grounded. [*p* ∨ *q*] is partially grounded in [*p*] and also partially grounded in a logic's axioms and rules of inference. That logic, in turn, is partially grounded through its relations to and differentiation from other logics, mathematics and symbolic systems, in social institutions and practices, and so on. No collection of relations, properties, objects, or facts, or the universe itself, fully grounds [*p* ∨ *q*] or anything else. In this way, metaphysical grounding is similar to explanation, which is also always partial. A full explanation of an object would require an explanation not only of anything that has ever affected that object, but also an explanation of everything that has ever affected anything that has affected that object since the Big Bang – and likely beyond that, as it seems that the Big Bang itself could be explained. What passes as a full explanation seems so only because, relative to the context and interests, persons have no reason to further investigate other explanatory factors.

At this point, fundamentalists will insist that full metaphysical grounding and complete explanations are provided by the fundamental constituents of reality. Even if full grounding and complete

explanations can never be comprehended by anyone, they are nevertheless embedded in the fabric of reality.

A definitive response to fundamentalism is not possible here. Yet, two considerations can be adduced which may determine the intellect to withhold its assent. First, the assertion that reality has fundamental constituents must appeal to intuition for its plausibility. Although quantum mechanics has been interpreted as supporting fundamentalism, nothing necessitates or compels such an interpretation. It is the prior commitment to fundamentalism that motivates that interpretation. Second, fundamentalism requires either reductionism or eliminativism, whereby macrolevel properties and objects are explained, or explained away, by appealing to fundamental constituents. However, reductionism and eliminativism are only promissory notes. Such philosophers of physics and scientific metaphysicians as Batterman (2021) and Dupré (1993) provide reasons to reject fundamentalism. Moreover, the amount of information required for a complete reductionism and eliminativism is physically impossible (Fritzman 2024). The bank on which those promissory notes are drawn is bankrupt.

According to grounding internalism, if *x* fully grounds *y*, then *x* fully grounds *y* in every possible world in which *x* and *y* obtain. Grounding internalism entails grounding necessitarianism. According to necessitarianism, necessitation is necessary for grounding, such that if *x* fully grounds *y*, then it is necessary that *x* necessitates *y*. Skiles (2015) rejects grounding necessitarianism and argues for grounding contingentism. He maintains that there can be full grounding without necessity. He claims that a fact, *y*, can obtain wholly in virtue of metaphysically more fundamental facts, *x*, such that *x* fully grounds *y*. Although *x* fully grounds *y*, he argues that there are possible worlds at which *x* obtains but *y* does not. If Skiles were correct, then his refutation of grounding necessitarianism would, by *modus tollens*, refute grounding internalism. However, Trogdon and Witmer (2021) respond that Skiles' argument does not succeed because his supposed example of a non-necessitating full ground is actually an example of a partial ground. This article accepts a version of grounding contingentism by maintaining that grounding is always only partial, never full, and so it rejects grounding internalism as well its entailment, grounding necessitarianism.

Trogdon and Witmer reject the standard way of defining partial grounding in terms of full grounding. According to the standard definition of partial grounding (Correia 2005; Rosen 2010), *x* partially grounds *y* if and only if *x* fully grounds *y* either on its own or together with some additional facts. However, they argue that there are cases where *x* partially grounds *y*, but *x* cannot be further complemented to fully ground *y*. Reversing the direction of the standard definition, Trogdon and Witmer define full grounding in terms of partial grounding together with other notions.

Leuenberger (2020) also reverses the direction of the standard account of partial grounding and maintains that some facts have only partial grounds which cannot be complemented to full grounds. Although this article maintains that all facts, all things, have only a partial grounds, he gives an example of what he regards as a full ground:

> Let us suppose that Anna's being my niece is grounded in Martin's being my brother and Anna's being Martin's daughter. This is a case of full ground: the grounds fully account for what is grounded. (Leuenberger 2020, 2655)

This a case of only a partial ground, however, as the grounds to which Leuenberger refers only partially ground what is grounded. As noted above, grounding relations are transitive. That Martin is Leuenberger's brother and that Anna is Martin's daughter themselves have grounds, and so they cannot fully ground that Anna is Leuenberger's niece. Those grounding relations are partially ground in other facts. Even a genealogy of the Leuenberger family could not provide a complete account. It initially seems that Leuenberger's example is a case of full grounding because, relative to the context and cognitive interests, there is usually no motivation to further inquire about those other grounds.

Most proponents of grounding, such as Cameron (2008), Rosen (2010), Schaffer (2010), and Clark and Liggins (2012), regard it as transitive, irreflexive, and asymmetric. Paseau (2010) and Hiller (2013) recognize that grounding can be bidirectional, however, and reflexive self-grounding is countenanced by Jenkins (2011), Bliss (2014); Correia (2014), Wilson (2014), Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015), and Thompson (2016). Expanding on their insights, this article regards grounding as transitive, multidirectional, symmetric, and reflexive. Each thing affects every other at the macrolevel too, although each affects some things more than others. Hence, grounding is multidirectional and ubiquitous, producing an ontological web of relations, where each thing partially grounds – and, reciprocally, is partially grounded in – every other.

This can be articulated in terms of quantum entanglement. According to quantum mechanics, entangled particles are perfectly anti-correlated with respect to their spin. The spin of one of the entangled particles cannot always be calculated independently of the other. As a result of quantum entanglement and the Big Bang, to speculate, each thing is entangled with every other at the quantum level.

This article agrees with Schaffer's first two sentences but disagrees with the third:

> Metaphysics as I understand it is about what grounds what. It is about the structure of the world. It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it. (Schaffer 2009, 379)

This article maintains that no thing or level is ontologically fundamental. In an ontological web of universal reciprocity, each thing grounds every other, they ground it, and each reflexively grounds itself. Of course, some levels will be more important than others, given the cognitive interests of the researchers. As various researchers have different interests, the levels that are deemed important vary too.

Dasgupta (2014) and Litland (2016; 2018) have plural, many-many, or bicollective versions of grounding, according to which collections of facts can be non-distributivity grounded. Whereas many proponents of grounding proceeds as though only a single fact can grounded, proponents of bicollective grounding argue that a plurality of facts can be grounded by something more fundamental, even though none of those facts is grounded on its own: Dasgupta writes:

> The literature uniformly assumes that what is grounded must be a single fact. Here I disagree and argue that what is grounded can be a plurality too: there can be cases in which they, the members of a plurality, are explained in more fundamental terms, even though none of them admits of explanation on its own.

He further explains:

> My claim that ground is irreducibly plural is a claim about the logical form of ground. It is the claim [...] that, logically speaking, ground is a binary relation plural in both positions: *they* are grounded in *them*. Of course the limit case is a plurality of one, so it may turn out (as it happens) that in each actual case of ground a single fact is grounded on its own. Still, on my view the claim in each case would strictly speaking remain plural: that *they* (all one of them!) are grounded in *them*. (Dasgupta 2014, 1-2)

And he emphasizes that

> certain collections of facts are grounded plurally in the world's underlying nature: *they* (the members of the collection) are grounded in *them* even though none of them admits of a ground of its own. (Dasgupta 2014, 27)

This article's version of grounding has some similarities to bicollective grounding. It agrees that ground is irreducibly plural, as it maintains that each thing partially grounds, and is grounded by, every other thing. In this sense, it could be viewed as a further radicalization of bicollective grounding. The versions differ, however, in that the versions of bicollective grounding proposed by Dasgupta and Litland are foundationalist, one-directional, and irreflexive,

whereas this article's version is coherentist, multidirectional, reflexive, and symmetrical. Microlevel cognitions ground macrolevel cognitions, and vice versa. Microlevel cognitions also mutually ground each other, as do macrolevel cognitions. Since a cognition grounds other cognitions, which reciprocally ground it, it grounds itself. Persons are grounded by their memberships in groups, for example, and groups are reciprocally grounded by their members. Members and groups are co-determining, and both sometimes resist the ways in which they are grounded. Individuals have no ontological priority over groups, moreover, as individuals are always already members of, and grounded by, a variety of groups, which can be non-complementary, or conflicted.

Proponents of foundational versions of metaphysical grounding might charge that coherentist, multidirectional, reflexive, and symmetric grounding defeats the entire point of grounding. If grounding is metaphysically coherentist – to use an analogy from epistemological coherentism, where a belief is justified through its coherence with a set of beliefs – then there is nothing untoward about a web of reciprocal grounding. Since grounding is always partial, grounding is never full or complete, the coherence of grounding is also always partial. Its partial coherence is also a partial incoherence.

2 Hunky but not Empty

Ontology is hunky. But it is not empty. The parts of "atomless gunk" (Lewis 1991, 20) divide infinitely, such that every part of the whole has proper parts. If the world is gunky, then the parts of each whole all have proper parts, dividing forever into smaller parts. The converse of gunk is "junk" (Schaffer 2010, 64). If the world is junky, then each thing is a proper part of something, composing forever into greater wholes. The conjunct of gunk and junk is "hunk" (Bohn 2009, 29). If the world is hunky, then each thing has something as its proper part and each thing is a proper part of something.

This article refigures these notions. There is no thing that is not partially grounded by others. Each thing partially grounds, and is partially grounded by, every other thing, although a thing will be grounded more directly by some things than by others. No things or ontological levels are fundamental. There are no ultimates. Grounding does not bottom-out, it loops. If the proponents of grounding insist that the language of fundamentality must be retained, then it can be said that, paradoxically, each thing is fundamental, as each grounds, and is grounded by, every other thing.

This ontology substantially differs from that of the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. He holds that everything is ontologically unreal or empty (*śūnyatā*), lacking ontological reality or own-being (*svabhāva*;

also translated as 'essence', 'inherent existence', 'intrinsic nature', and 'substance'). He maintains that a thing would need to have *svabhāva* in order to be real. He denies that anything has *svabhāva*. Explicating his view in the language of grounding, Nāgārjuna claims that something could have *svabhāva*, and so be real, only if three conditions are met: to have *svabhāva*, something would need to be fully grounded, its full grounding would not depend on anything, and it would possess its full grounding intrinsically. Not only does he deny that anything has *svabhāva*, he more radically denies that anything has even partial grounding. Things are not even illusory, as illusions, *qua* illusions, require partial grounding. Everything is ontologically unreal, empty of own-being.

This article rejects Nāgārjuna's assertion that something must have *svabhāva* to be ontologically real. Maintaining that everything is partially grounded, it denies that things are wholly unreal or empty. This would be a consequence only if Nāgārjuna's claim that things must have *svabhāva* to be real is accepted.

McDaniel (2017) maintains that beings are fully real only if they do not exist by courtesy. "Being by courtesy" is a degenerate mode which is characterized by a low degree of being. Beings which exist by courtesy have a low degree of being, a low degree of naturalness, because there is no fundamental way in which those beings exist. However, all beings, without exception, exist by courtesy. There is no fundamental way in which any being exists. Rather, reality is an interdependent system, such that what a thing is is a function of its (constantly shifting) place within the network of relations. The network itself is never complete, however, it is always changing. Epistemological coherentism is an incoherentism; it is incoherent by its own criteria for coherence (Fritzman 1992). Metaphysical coherentism is an incoherentism too. The network is never complete and it never wholly coheres.

3 Being's Incompleteness

Grounding is always partial, reality is never complete, whole, or One: reality is not wholly real, and does not fully exist. Parmenides asserts that being is One and there is no nothingness. Although subsequent philosophers discussed nothingness (Sorensen 2023), few recognized that nothingness and being ground each other. It may be tempting to believe that, if grounding could be full, reality would be One. Were reality to be One, however, it would be none. Reality can be, only through its 'failure' to be One.

Insofar as the entire network of grounding is regarded as the Absolute, the One, the One can never be fully one, and reality is never completely real, as grounding is always partial. There is a constitutive

split within the One that prevents it from being one. That the One can never be one and that reality is not fully real are not reasons for regret. Rather, this split is constitutive, the condition of the possibility of there being anything. Although it cannot be argued for here, to be is to appear. Were the One fully one, it could not appear, not even to itself, and so it would not be. It would be less than nothing, having no ontological status. The One is never One. Although there is no other to the One, it is other to itself. Its otherness is intrinsic to it in the sense that it is always already dirempted. As grounding is always partial, everything is ontologically incomplete. Reality is never completely real, nothing ever wholly exists. Nothingness is "given in the heart of being" (Sartre 2018, 57) and "nothingness is this hole in being" (786). The nothingness that is a hole in being is consciousness, Sartre asserts, and for it alone does existence precede essence.

However, existence always precedes essence. Everything is holey. Nothingness is at the heart of being, its condition of possibility. Partial grounding is not no grounding, though. There is a hole in being, yet there is being with a hole. Because everything is partially grounded, everything has agency, the freedom to act and to not merely react. Things are finite; they cannot persist in their being. Yet, nothingness is another way in which being appears. When things go under, they do not cease to be; they become other than they were. Even the universal consciousness is always becoming other than itself, transfiguring itself.

Not only does this ontology differ from that of Nāgārjuna, as discussed above, it also differs from that of the Chinese Daoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*. For the *Tao Te Ching*, reality includes emptiness and that inclusion makes reality complete. The emptiness of a pot allows it to contain water. The emptiness at a wheel's hub allows it to attach to the axle. This emptiness is not nothing, as something is empty only relative to something else. The emptiness of the *Tao Te Ching* is actually a plenum, filled with water, air, or space. However, reality is ontologically incomplete.

This ontology also differs from the Platonic *erôs*, where all beings are driven to overcome their incompleteness, except for the highest being – the Beautiful or the Good – towards which they all strive. Even the highest being, however, is incomplete.

Yet, grounding is always partial, never full, and so nothing is ever wholly actual. Reality is not one. This is true for the whole, so-called, but also for each of its parts. Although in some logics it is a trivial truth that something is self-identical to itself, it is false in ontology. Nothing is ever itself. The self is never one. It is constitutionally incomplete. This is also true of the universal consciousness. It too is never complete, never one. Things are finite, they do not and cannot persist in the being that they have. However, nothing is not the opposite of being. Rather, nothing is a mode of being, another way

in which being appears. When things become nothing, then, they do not cease to be; they cease to be as the things that they were. This is why the universal consciousness is dynamic. It is always becoming other than it is, transcending itself. Grounding is never whole, it is always holely. There is one sense in which the universal consciousness is everlasting, indeed eternal, outside of time. There is another sense, though, in which it is temporal and finite, as it is always in the process of becoming other than it is. Even its eternal aspect is dynamic. Insofar as time is a measure of change, it would not be wrong to speak of the temporality of eternity, of the time outside of time.

Everything is partly grounded by everything else, and each thing in turn partly grounds all other things. Of course, some relations of grounding are stronger and more direct than others, and so grounding resembles gravity in this respect. Grounding also resembles gravity in that both are ubiquitous. Each thing grounds, and is grounded by, every other thing. Since each thing partly grounds all other things which in turn partly ground it, it – by virtue of the grounding relations it has with all other things, and the grounding relations they have with it – partly grounds itself.

Why believe, though, that grounding is always partial, never full? Even if each thing is partially grounded by all other things, why not believe that the concatenation of the totality of those partial groundings together constitute full grounding? Were things to be fully grounded, they would then not be susceptible to change, neither development nor decay. Not only would mereological essentialism obtain, but things would neither gain nor lose parts. Things would attain complete perfection, perfection in the sense of completion, rather than the high(est) good. That would be stasis, a block universe in which nothing happens.

This can be further articulated in a related discursive domain. Heidegger (2010) distinguishes Being from beings, things, the ontological from the ontic. This is his ontological difference, according to which Being is never a being. Casati (2022) interprets Heidegger as a dialetheist who maintains that Being both is and is not a thing. Being itself must be, as it makes things be. Thinking with Heidegger, there is an originary diremption within Being. Being that is whole with no split severing it from itself, Being that is not a being, is a retrospective projection, a fantasy of nostalgia. That retrospective Being never appears as such, it never is, it never exists. Being is always already a being. The ontological is always already ontic. Heidegger's metaphysics is oriented toward the future: what things will become in the future is now, in the present, what they might become, which is open-ended. Further, since the ownmost possibility of each thing is that it will not be – in the case of entities, that it will die – Being includes nothing. Nothing is the heart of Being, its very core.

Whereas Heidegger focuses attention on *Dasein*'s moments of supposed authenticity – when *Dasein* is experientially confronted with the dread and anxiety of not existing, of dying – all modalities of existence reveal the character of Being. There are no privileged potentials or modes.

Thinking with Nisenbaum (2018), this ontology can be further explicated by Schelling (2000) and Rosenzweig (2005). In order for the human essence to be complete and fully real, they maintain, it must be in relation to both nature and God. The human must be in self-relation to the human too. No individual person can complete the human essence. The essence of the human is that of the species, not individuals. Only once the individual is in relation to nature and God, as well as to (ultimately all) other humans, can the human complete its essence and so be fully real.

Schelling and Rosenzweig must be further expanded. The human essence is not given in advance, constraining and bounding the possibilities of future development. Although it is the human essence that is discussed here, the points made regarding it hold for every other essence too, as well as for nature and God. Essence is rather a retrospective account of how it has so far developed. Hence, the human essence is never complete and never fully real. Not only because there is always the potential for future development, in which the essence becomes in new ways, but also because the relations to nature and God are never complete. This is the result of two factors that operate in conjunction. First, grounding is always partial, never complete, as has been discussed above, and so a thing is always constitutively incomplete. It is never fully real, it never fully exists. Second, essence itself is never complete, it is always open to the future, it is always developing. Although it is the human essence that is discussed here, the points made concerning it hold for every other essence too, as well as for nature and God.

The existence of the three fundamental kinds of beings – God, world, human – is not fully explicable, according to Schelling and Rosenzweig, and so on practical grounds they restrict the validity of the principle of sufficient reason, according to which everything must have a reason. They hold that the essence of each kind of being is constituted by, and hence explained by, its relations to the other two kinds of being. Human kind becomes real by entering into relation with the other two kinds of being, God and the world. Only in their relations to each other, to themselves, God, and world, do humans open themselves.

However, three points must be immediately added. First, what is true of the human is true of God and the world. In order to become real, each kind must enter into relations with the other two as well as into self-relation with itself. Second, no kind ever becomes fully real. Third, essence is a retrospective construction and so the distinctions

between kinds are not absolute or final. A kind permeates other kinds, and the boundaries between kinds overlap. The human is also natural, nature becomes human. God permeates nature, nature becomes divine. God becomes human. Humans participate and partake of the divine. What a kind is, is never fixed, finished, or final. Distinctions between kinds are primarily retrospective and always pragmatic.

That there is only partial grounding, that reality is not fully real, that reason contains a moment of unreason – all of this could be taken as a sign that creation, the Big Bang, is a mistake, that something has gone horribly wrong. The Kabbalah with its concept of the breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*), as interpreted by Isaac Luria, proposes this. Furthermore, the *Ṛg-Veda* and *Brāhmaṇas* teach that that things, by virtue of existing, owe an unpayable debt. The Sanskrit word that is translated as 'debt', *ṛṇá*, is etymologically and conceptually unanalyzable, as "the notion of debt is primary and autonomous, and does not allow a further analysis" (Malamoud 1996, 95). *Ṛṇá* is originary, and "so man's [*sic*] congenital debt, which explains everything, is not itself explained by anything, and has no origin" (95). The primordial human condition is that of owing a debt:

> In the same way as the notion of debt is already there, fully formed, in the oldest texts, so does the fundamental debt affect man [*sic*] and define him [*sic*] from the moment he [*sic*] is born. (95)

The *Ṛg-Veda* and *Brāhmaṇas* "define man [*sic*] as debt" (108).

Rather than a catastrophe, the unpayable debt that things owe for existing is a source of thanksgiving and gratitude.

> I used to think gratitude a heavy burden for one to carry. Now I know that it is something that makes the heart lighter. The ungrateful man [*sic*] seems to me to be one who walks with feet and heart of lead. But when one has learnt, however inadequately, what a lovely thing gratitude is, one's feet go lightly over sand or sea, and one finds a strange joy revealed to one, the joy of counting up, not what one possesses, but what one owes. I hoard my debts now in the treasury of my heart, and, piece of gold by piece of gold, I range them in order at dawn and at evening. (Wilde 1979, 276)

"The aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars 1963, 1). However, philosophy must also aim to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term 'fail' to hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term, and to recognize the moments where those failures cannot be overcome because they are constitutive of the very possibilities of there being things and of their hanging together.

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Error Theories of Absence Causation Are Not (Yet) Adequately Motivated

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Abstract In this paper I consider the merits and motivations for eliminativist error theories of absence causation, such as those offered by Beebee, Varzi, and Mumford. According to such views, there is no causation by absence. Here I argue that, despite offering an alternative picture of the practice of citing absences as causes, these views are inadequately motivated. I consider and reject a range of arguments for error-theoretic approaches, including appeals to ontological economy, physicalism and the causal closure of the physical, as well as Mumford's recent appeal to soft Parmenideanism. I also argue that the arguments in the literature which aim to show that causation by absence is conceptually problematic are less forceful than they might initially appear. The result is that there is no compelling reason yet why we should reject absence causation.

Keywords Eliminativist error theories. Absence Causation. Nothingness. Absences. Causation.

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1 Introduction

If we are right to think as the vulgar speak, then not all causation is by some positive existent: absences, wants, lacks, failures, omissions, non-occurrences, etc., cause. Schaffer (2000; 2004) gives an impressive catalog of the ubiquity and centrality of absence causation in both ordinary and scientific thinking about the world. However, this commitment to absence causation raises further questions. Where in our ontology do we place these negative phenomena? How can something come from nothing? Which of the many absences at a given location cause? Why these and not others? Some philosophers have attempted to give coherent answers to these questions, such as Martin (1996), Molnar (2000), and Kukso (2006). But such views seem to lie outside philosophical orthodoxy. We might wonder why. One reason might be as follows: in view of these mounting questions, it would surely be better to abandon this feature of pre-philosophical thinking about causation, and instead insist that causation is always by some positive existent. This is a position attractive to many, but articulated and defended robustly by Beebee (2004), Varzi (2006; 2007), Lavelle and Botterill (2013), and Mumford (2021).

However, some utterances of the vulgar have all the appearance, in many cases, of expressing causal truths: not getting her insulin, she fell into a coma; the lack of rain resulted in devastating forest fires; Flora's failure to water her plant killed it; etc. Rejecting absence causation, then, constitutes an eliminativist error theory.[1] The problem is exacerbated because many of the claims about absence causation to be denied are constituents of well-confirmed scientific theories. The vulgar – or at least their philosophical proxies – are owed reasons for thinking that they are involved in systematic error when citing absences as causes. In this paper I argue that this is not so straightforward as is commonly supposed, if recent discussions of the topic are indicative. The result, I argue, is that the right way to understand the dialectic of the debate, as it currently stands, is as follows.

(i) The best attempts to account for the truth of statements of absence causation without ontological commitment to absences are eliminativist error theories.

(ii) The stated motivations by the leading proponents of these approaches are inadequate to motivate an error theory about absence causation.

1 See Daly and Liggins (2010) for a categorization of error theories and a useful discussion of the kinds of objections to error theories that are dialectically permissible.

(iii) Other motivations which might naturally be thought to tip the dialectic against absence causation, such as ontological economy or physicalism, offer no clear support.

(iv) So, the burden of proof lies squarely on those who would deny absence causation.

Across sections (3) and (4) I make the case for premises (ii) and (iii). Before this, though, I will say something more substantive by way of articulating (i).

2 Causal Explanations, Causal Reports and Error Theories

Those who deny absence causation are committed to an eliminativist error theory. As Mebius observes, a commitment to absence causation is ubiquitous in a range of scientific disciplines: "The specification of negative causes is an integral part of molecular biology and neurobiology" (2014, 43). Here is how Schaffer puts the same point

> negative causation features in paradigm cases of causation including heart failure, gun firings, and all voluntary human actions, and is considered causal by the law and by ordinary language. (Schaffer 2004, 203)

But error theories, to the extent that they require revision to empirically well-confirmed theories, will require justification. Moreover, the more revisionary the position turns out to be, the greater our expectation should be of forceful reasons available in favor of it.

One significant strand of the literature takes the denial of absence causation as a starting point, and attempts to explain our discourse about absence causation without ontological commitment. Following an idea suggested by Helen Beebee,[2] the most well-developed explanation of our causal discourse offered by those who reject absence causation presses into service a distinction between, on the one hand, causal judgments which imply the existence of a negative cause, and, on the other, those which do not. Varzi (2006) and Mumford (2021) both follow Beebee's suggestion that when we speak of absence as causes of an occurrence, we should properly interpret this as providing an explanation of some occurrence. Of course, taking a denial of absence causation as one's philosophical starting point is perfectly legitimate in one sense: working out the most detailed,

2 Beebee 2004.

plausible version of an error theory is a valuable contribution to the debate. But this cannot be the end of the story: the crucial question, to be explored in sections (3) and (4), is whether there are compelling, non-question begging justifications to adopt the error theory as a starting point. First, though, it will be helpful to see how Beebee's proposal is meant to work, how it is developed by Varzi, and the extent to which the approach nonetheless requires us to deny well-confirmed claims of absence causation.

Beebee's proposal is that often when we speak of causes, our aim is to provide a causal explanation of some occurrence. Sometimes this involves citing a cause of the target of our explanation, but Beebee urges that this is not always the case. Following the language used by Varzi in his development of Beebee's suggestion, we can call causal discourse that has this "ontological pregnancy" a 'causal report'. Causal reports can also be used to provide causal explanations, which both Beebee and Varzi, following Lewis, construe as attempts to provide information about the causal history of an effect. Providing a causal explanation need not, the thought goes, involve citing a cause. The following possibility then suggests itself: sometimes our causal discourse involves providing a causal explanation, but without providing a causal report. In these cases, our causal judgements are not ontologically pregnant. Beebee and Varzi both claim that our judgments about absence causation can largely be explained in this way: it is causal explanation, not causal reporting.

Beebee's example illustrates the point of principle:

A. Oswald's shot killed Kennedy

is a true causal report, which could also be used to explain Kennedy's death. The sentence

B. Kennedy died because Oswald shot him

is a true causal explanation, and one in which the *explanans* picks out a cause of Kennedy's death. Contrastingly,

C. Kennedy died because someone shot him

is a causal explanation, Beebee urges, but one in which the *explanans* does not refer to a cause of Kennedy's death. This is because, if there were an event referred to, the event would be a disjunctive event, but there are no disjunctive events.

Beebee's example establishes the general point: causal explanations need not be ontologically pregnant. However, the friend of absence causation is likely to object that the example does not show that causal explanations involving negative *explanans* (or, indeed,

explananda) are not ontologically pregnant. Beebee's example has the peculiarity that (C) is a logical consequence of (B), which is why the truth of (C) is guaranteed by the truth of (B). But there is not yet any clear reason to conclude that other classes of true causal explanation will also involve explanans or explananda that do not refer.

Nonetheless, the proposal appears promising. Varzi (2006) develops the proposal in a way that makes it clear it would cover causal explanations featuring negative explanans. The line of reasoning goes like this: if causation is a relation and the causal relata are events, these can be described using either positive or negative language. As Varzi points out, if there is a true positive description of an event, the fact that it can also be described in a negative way need not entail there exists a negative event. Instead, the negative description simply serves to refer to the positive event. For example (Varzi 2006, 140):

(1) Al's non-jogging last night caused Tom's complaint

does not warrant commitment to negative events in cases where Al did not jog in virtue of some other action on his part, such as taking a walk with Sue. This is because "Al's non-jogging last night" is simply a negative description of what he in fact did: he took a walk with Sue. We might be unprepared to assert:

(2) Al's walk with Sue last night caused Tom's complaint,

but, according to Varzi, this is because (2) is likely to be misleading as a causal explanation of Tom's complaint: it might inappropriately lead us to wonder what Tom has got against Sue. (1) offers a better causal explanation than (2) insofar as it is not potentially misleading in this way, and it highlights a salient feature of the cause: that it is not a jogging. None of this, however, compromises the truth of (2). Given that "Al's non-jogging last night" and "Al's walk with Sue last night" co-refer, (1) and (2) are materially equivalent.

The upshot of this is that, in cases where there is a positive description of the causal antecedent referred to in a causal report by means of a negative description, the negative description can be used unproblematically in a causal report. In these cases, we can speak with the vulgar with impunity. So, Varzi appears to have cleanly identified a class of negative causal claims that we might avoid treating as ontologically pregnant. But, as Varzi also points out, there remain other cases that cannot be dealt in this way, e.g., cases in which there is no good candidate positive description of the causal antecedent. These apparently true claims of absence causation also need explaining consistently with the rejection of absence causation. Varzi's example (2006, 142) of this kind of case is:

(i) Al's failure to turn off the gas caused an explosion.

In the circumstances where Al did not even try to turn off the gas, but simply forgot, it is far less compelling to claim that "Al's failure to turn off the gas" refers to some specific positive event. After all, which would it be? The omission is of a general kind (a turning off) that occurs because Al performed a range of different positive actions over the period of time in question. But, none of those actions need be involved in the causal history of the explosion, at least in the absence of compelling reason to think so.

If no positive event is a plausible candidate for the referent of "Al's failure to turn off the gas", then the proposed explanation of the ostensive truth of (i) cannot get off the ground. If (i) were a true causal report, then it would give us reason to acknowledge negative existents. Varzi's response, following Beebee's lead, is to say that we should deny that (i) expresses a causal report and instead insist that it is "just a causal explanation in disguise". Properly, we should say:

(ii) There was an explosion because Al didn't turn off the gas.

There remains a wrinkle: although (i) can be used to express a causal explanation, strictly speaking it is false. So, in spite of all that has been said, we are still owed a reason to believe we are systematically in error in this kind of case. Why should we not instead take this kind of example to show the reality of absence causation?

It is important to note that it would not be adequate to simply point out that there are a range of other cases in which it is commonplace to assert things that are strictly untrue. Varzi pursues this strategy (2006, 144), observing that we often assert the following falsehoods:

(iii) Holmes lived in Baker Street.

(iv) The average star has 2.4 planets.

The problem with this strategy is that (iii) and (iv) are sharply disanalogous to (i). (iii) and (iv) both represent classes of cases where, when we learn to speak in this way, most of us normally do so with a fairly clear understanding that we are uttering falsehoods. Conan Doyle is rarely read as history of Victorian England, and jokes about 2.4 children during mathematics class serve to instruct the student not to take the surface grammar of some statements involving averages seriously. But it seems to be quite the reverse when we learn to speak about absence causation. When we learn that an absence of insulin causes hypoglycemia we do not learn this with any caveat, implicit or explicit, that really there are no absences. Moreover, as has been emphasized by Roy Sorensen (2008), many absences – holes,

shadows, and silences – seem to be tracked and, in the case of holes and shadows, clearly reified by our perceptual modalities. There seems, therefore, no clear reason why we should think that (i) really is like (iii) and (iv).

The problem, moreover, is not one that can reasonably be called minor. It is not restricted to some small, relatively unimportant subset of causal judgements. Nor is it even restricted to judgments about omissions, which Beebee and Varzi use as their guiding example, but instead applies to most absences of kinds. Consider the following claim medical science would have us believe is true of many patients with Fallot's Tetralogy:

a. An absence of heart wall tissue between ventricles causes hypoxia.

This is not a causal claim about an omission, but rather an absence of a (or various) kind(s) of matter. Nonetheless, it is similar in the following relevant respect: there is no positive event or state of affairs that is plausibly the referent of 'an absence of heart wall tissue'. In this case, the reason for this is that there are multiple different states of the world that could be the referent of 'an absence of heart wall tissue'. At one moment, there might be a certain volume of blood where the heart wall tissue should be; at another moment, there might be a numerically distinct volume of blood there; at yet another moment, whilst undergoing surgery, there might be no blood there, but air…

Consequently, for the same reasons that applied to (i), Varzi would need to say that (a) is also strictly speaking false. But, as with (i), (a) is simply one example of a very large class of claims about absence causation that the vulgar claim to be true: claims about absences of kinds of stuff. Other examples include:

b. The drought of 2017 caused widespread forest fires.

c. With no money in my bank account to pay my mortgage, my house was repossessed.

d. The lack of confidence amongst investors led to low growth.

As the quotes from Mebius and Schaffer at the start of this section point out, these kinds of commitments are ubiquitous in a wide range of scientific disciplines. But this means that those who would deny absence causation in the way proposed by Beebee and Varzi are not innocently committed to a minor set of revisions to which of the claims of the vulgar are, strictly speaking, true. The position is radically revisionary, and we are still owed a justification for thinking we are systematically in error in this kind of case. Indeed, the more revisionary the position emerges, the greater our expectation should

be of forceful reasons being available in favor of it. Let us now turn to look at a range of possible motivations, both extant and possible, for such eliminativism about absence causation.

3 Arguments For Eliminativism About Absence Causation

3.1 Arguments from Theories of Causation

The proposal at hand, which Beebee and Varzi offer among the most well-developed examples of, is that we should adopt an eliminativist error theory about absence causation. I have argued that, in consequence, we should expect compelling reasons to be offered before accepting it. It might be thought that this passes over an obvious line of reply. In Beebee's case, the appeal to the distinction between causal explanation and causal report is motivated by a prior commitment to a picture of causation, according to which causation is a relation holding only between events. This view about causation would make sustaining a belief in absence causation particularly challenging, because the non-occurrence of an event is, plausibly, not an event of any kind. Consequently, on this way of thinking about causation, there can be no causal relation in putative cases of absence causation. This, it might be urged, is a perfectly good reason to reject absence causation. It is not hard to see how this line of argument might be adapted for those committed to other theories of causation that entail the falsity of absence causation. For example, someone for whom causes must be physically connected to their effects might offer precisely the same reply.

The problem is that, although it is correct that if some such theory of causation were to turn out true, the probability of absence causation would be dramatically lowered, appealing to one's prior commitments about causation would not be sufficient to settle the broader dialectical question about absence causation. This is because, were we to accept an error theory of causation by absence, some of the claims we would thereby be required to give up on would be constituents of well-confirmed scientific theories about what causes what. They are casual claims that a philosophical theory of causation must treat as part of the data to be explained by that philosophical theory. Whether or not, for example, event-based, relational accounts of causation should be accepted needs to be evaluated in part by how much of the well-confirmed causal data it accounts for. But the rejection of vast swathes of empirically well-confirmed causal judgments should count rather against the claim that, e.g., exclusively event-based, relational approaches provide the best overall account of causation. The upshot is that, without further sustained argument that

a particular theory of causation is true, appealing to a prior theory of causation to motivate eliminativism about absence causation will be a question begging move.

For the appeal to a prior theory of causation to be dialectically admissible at this juncture, it should be plausible that despite rejecting so much well-confirmed causal data the theory is nonetheless the best available. This is a tall order, and no one in the contemporary debate has offered such an argument. Perhaps the reason for this lacuna is a tacit assumption that absence causation is a minor sub-topic of causation, whose details are to be sorted out after accounting for causation by positive entities. Were this true, it would make sense to think that a prior commitment to a theory of causation could provide sufficient reason for denying absence causation. But, this would be just a form of confirmation bias; absence causation is as central and ubiquitous a feature of our thinking about causation as one could hope to find.

3.2 Soft Methodological Parmenideanism

Stephen Mumford, in his recent book on nothingness and absence (2021), follows Beebee and Varzi in denying absence causation, and similarly recasts our discourse about absence causation as explanation rather than causal report. One crucial difference is that he denies that the explanations involved are causal explanations: "Absences cannot be causes. They can be explanations. But they cannot be causal explanations" (Mumford 2021, 82). Mumford, *contra* Beebee and Varzi, argues that conceding there are true causal explanations mentioning absences will not adequately escape a commitment to absence causation. Overall, though, Mumford's position on absence causation is similarly an eliminativist error theory, and faces the same dialectical question that Beebee's and Varzi's do: what reasons do we have for thinking that common-sense and a range of well-confirmed scientific theories are systematically in error in acknowledging absence causation? Mumford's account of absence causation is offered in the context of two broader claims, however, which need considering in relation to the dialectic of the discussion. One is an ontological claim about absences, and one is a methodological claim about belief in absences. These commitments might be thought to provide justification for denying absence causation, which is how Mumford presents them.

Mumford's ontological claim is just the general denial of negative beings of any sort: that nothing is not. He calls this 'soft ontological

Parmenideanism'.[3] It is 'ontological', because it makes a claim about what there is, and it is 'soft' Parmenideanism because it remains silent on other Parmenidean claims, particularly about negative beings and nothingness, such as whether we can coherently even speak about nothingness and non-being. Mumford contrasts this 'soft ontological Parmenideanism' with a methodological claim, soft methodological Parmenideanism. This is a claim about the dialectic of the debate about negative existents. In contrast to the 'hard' methodological Parmenidean, the soft methodological Parmenidean accepts the defeasibility of the ontological claim that nothing is not.

Let us consider each in turn. Mumford's ontological claim has much the same dialectical force in the present discussion as did Beebee's prior commitment to an event-based theory of causation: none, considered by itself. The difficulty arises here because claims about absence causation, particularly those constituents of well-confirmed empirical theories, count as confounding evidence for soft ontological Parmenideanism.[4] Proper evaluation of the merits of the ontological claim should involve, in part, adjudicating the merits of accepting or rejecting absence causation. Whether soft ontological Parmenideanism provides the best overall theoretical framework will depend on how we weigh the rejection of vast swathes of well-confirmed causal claims against, for example, considerations of ontological economy. The ontological claim, then, cannot be used straightforwardly against absence causation without begging the question.

Perhaps Mumford's 'methodological' Parmenideanism will be of more help. According to this, we should "proceed from the basis that commitment to negative existents is at the very least highly undesirable and ought to be avoided if possible" (Mumford 2021, 13). This assumption, were we to apply it to the question of absence causation, would clearly remove the burden of proof from denying absence causation. There are two problems with this, though. The first stems once again from the fact that many of the causal judgments are constituents of well-confirmed empirical theories. Mumford is not explicit about what he means by the phrase, but these casual claims provide some *prima facie* evidence against the claim that negative existents are "highly undesirable". Theoretical considerations can, of course, lead us sometimes to reject even well-confirmed empirical claims, but rarely without giving due consideration to the weight of evidence.

3 More precisely, Mumford's soft ontological Parmenideanism also includes the claim that there are no levels to reality. See Mumford 2021, ch. 1, for his discussion of these commitments.

4 As Mumford acknowledges: "It is causation *by* absence that is the real problem and sets a serious challenge even for soft Parmenideanism" (2021, 65).

The second problem relates to what the status of the methodological principle is meant to be. Even leaving aside the apparent truth of our causal judgments, what reason do we have to accept this methodological stricture? It does not seem to have the status of a basic methodological principle, in need of no further justification. It is hard to see how the evaluative phrase "highly undesirable" could not demand some justification, let alone careful specification. Understood as a basic methodological principle, it appears to be an expression of theoretical prejudice: a *horror vacui*. But this would be no more argumentatively forceful than Lewis' 'incredulous stare' (Lewis 1973, 86). What *would* give it force is compelling reason that negative existents are, as claimed, highly undesirable, and in some clearly specified sense. But then the force of soft methodological Parmenideanism depends on the strength of available arguments for the claim that negative existents are theoretically undesirable. The problem, though, is that whether it is acceptable to deny vast swathes of our commonsense causal judgments is itself germane to evaluating that claim. So, an appeal to soft 'methodological' Parmenideanism would, as much as the ontological variety, be question-begging as a means of shifting the burden of proof on to those who acknowledge absence causation.

3.3 Considerations of Ontological Economy

At this point, the critic of absence causation might suppose that they can simply motivate their position by appeal to the theoretical virtue of ontological economy. They might urge that the ontology they offer requires acknowledging one fewer category of being, so it should be preferred to the picture of a world shot through with causally efficacious absence. This, it might be urged, provides reason for thinking that, strictly speaking, our claims of absence causation are systematically false. What to make of this line of argument? There is, no doubt, an important place for an appeal to ontological economy in a valid argument against absence causation. However, at this point in the dialectic of the debate, such an appeal is illegitimate. This is because ontological economy can only be used to decide between theories that are 'equal in all other respects', and crucially in respect of their capacity to account for the data.

All parties to the debate about absence causation accept the need to account for the truth of our judgments about absence causation. Beebee's distinction between causal report and mere causal explanation was introduced explicitly to enable the critic of absence causation to preserve as many of these judgments as their opponent, whilst at the same time denying their ontological pregnancy. The same concern motivates Mumford's repudiation of causal explanation by absence in favor of explanation *simpliciter*. There is agreement, then,

about what makes for an adequate metaphysical theory of absence causation: it should be revisionary of our common-sense judgments only where we have good reason to think that those judgments are false. To appeal to ontological economy in favor of the critic of absence causation at this stage in proceedings we must *already* have reason to think that judgments such as (i) and (a)-(d) are, strictly speaking false. But this remains wanting.

The correct role for considerations of ontological economy in relation to the question of absence causation seems to be this: that the parsimony achieved by denying absence causation needs to be weighed against the systematic falsity in our judgments about absence causation. Appealing to considerations of ontological economy will only carry weight if we have some reason to think that those judgments are false. At this stage in the discussion, we have seen no reason for thinking that such judgments false: worse, as many are constituent claims of well-confirmed scientific theories, we have reason to accept them as true.

The foregoing line of reasoning relies on the following attractive methodological principle when answering questions of ontology: *ceteris paribus*, it is preferable to have a more inflationary ontology and deny no well-confirmed scientific claims, rather than have a more minimal ontology and deny such claims. This methodological principle could itself be called into question, but this could hardly help: it seems right to place the burden of proof for addressing this question on the shoulders of someone proposing to deny it. When it comes to claims like (1), Beebee and Varzi are on home ground: they do not violate the principle because the truth of such claims can be preserved in the way proposed by Varzi. Contrastingly, we are told that claims like (i) and (a)-(d) are false, strictly speaking. Insofar as (i) and (a)-(d), and claims like them, are plausibly true, we should, *ceteris paribus*, prefer a more inflationary ontology that secures this. So, appeal to ontological economy, it turns out, is no help to the critic of absence causation at this juncture. After all, we have been given no independent reason to think that these claims are, strictly speaking, false. The suggestion that these claims are false is not a consequence of the proposed distinction between causal reports and causal explanations. Rather, it is a consequence of an independent denial of absence causation. But this, of course, simply begs the question against the defender of absence causation.

3.4 Appeals to Physicalism

One further way we might motivate a denial of absence causation would be to appeal to physicalism. This, as with the foregoing appeal to ontological economy, might seem like a very natural move to

make. Formulating physicalism precisely and unproblematically is, of course, a matter for wider metaphysical dispute. Nonetheless, however formulated, physicalism should imply the following claim: all spatio-temporally located entities are physical. Negative phenomena, particularly e.g. holes, have, in the literature on the subject, been thought to raise a problem for physicalism along the following lines (see Lewis, Lewis 1970): if holes are not physical, then not all spatio-temporally located entities are physical. A similar tension might be thought to obtain between the existence of causally relevant absences and physicalism. The tension arises from the following, plausible enough, principle about causation:

(P) If c causes e, then c and e are spatio-temporally located.

But now, given the following two commitments of the friend of absence causation:

1. Absences cause,
2. Absences are not physical,

It follows that:

3. Absences are spatio-temporally located.

But (1), (2), and (3) imply

4. Not all spatio-temporally located entities are physical.

But, clearly, the denier of absence causation can reason with logical impunity from the falsity of (4), together with the truth of (3) to the falsity of (1). In this way, an appeal to physicalism could provide justification for denying absence causation.

However, the force of appealing to physicalism at this point in the discussion is going to depend on how it proceeds. One way to appeal to physicalism might be to reason in the following way: physicalism is true; physicalism is incompatible with the existence of absence causation; therefore, there is no absence causation. But at this point in the debate over absence causation, such an appeal to the truth of physicalism is clearly going to be question-begging. Insofar as physicalism denies the existence of non-physical concreta, the argument assumes the very thing it is being pressed into service to establish: the non-existence of absence causation.

However, there is another way physicalism might be pressed into service here. It might be urged that physicalism is a well-motivated position, on the grounds of the argument from the causal closure of physics. This is, plausibly, the most powerful consideration

in favor of physicalism; it is the primary motivation for physicalism about the mental, commonly taken to be the domain most problematic for physicalism (see, e.g., Papineau 2002, ch. 1). Consequently, it might be urged, the justification afforded physicalism by that argument transmits to the denial of absence causation. An argument of this sort would not obviously face the same problem as the foregoing line of reasoning. Nonetheless, an appeal of this sort to physicalism is also illegitimate at this point in the debate about absence causation.

To see why, consider one formulation, given by Papineau (2002, 17), of the thesis of the causal closure of physics from the philosophy of mind debate:

(CCP) All physical effects are fully caused by purely *physical* prior histories.

Before we can be clear about the implications of this thesis for absence causation, we need to be clear about the answer to the following question: Should we take 'purely physical prior histories' to *include* absences or not? For an appeal to the principle to successfully transmit justification to the denial of absence causation, absences must be excluded from physical prior histories. If they were included, appealing to (CCP) could hardly warrant denying absence causation. But excluding absences will also be problematic, because this is just what (CCP) is supposed to warrant: there is no causation by absence. So, it turns out that this kind of appeal to physicalism would also be question begging against the friend of absence causation.[5]

4 Absence Causation Is Conceptually Problematic

I have argued that the approaches to defending error theories of absence causation examined so far cannot deliver proper justification. It has emerged at various point in the discussion so far, however, that if we had reason to think that absence causation is somehow conceptually problematic, then this would supply the desired justification. It seems likely that most people are attracted to an error-theoretic approach to absence causation because of something like this thought. However, it is less common to find sustained arguments to this effect.

5 This problem is not restricted to just this one formulation of the thesis of causal closure. The problem arises equally for all the following variations found in the literature (for a useful review of the range of formulations, see Lowe 2000):

(CCP*) All physical effects have complete physical causes (Papineau 1993, 22).

(CCP**) Every physical effect has a fully revealing, purely physical history (Sturgeon 1998, 413).

(CCP***) Every physical effect has its chance fully determined by physical events alone (Noordhof 1999, 367).

In this final section I consider two criticisms of this sort offered by Mumford (2021). The first arises, in Mumford's words, from "the simple lack of a credible understanding of how an absence is supposed to produce an effect" (70). The second concerns the difficulty of showing that absence causation does not proliferate wildly, which Mumford calls the problem of escalation.

Regarding the first criticism, the proposed complaint is that absence causation is conceptually suspect, because it is opaque how absences can cause at all. The trouble, according to Mumford, is that absences which putatively cause their effects are "literally nothing at all, as long as we are not equivocating in some way" (71). The result is an account according to which something is caused by a nothing. But, first, why should this be thought problematic? Mumford writes:

> This is, therefore, a nothing that we are told produces something, in contradiction of the Parmenidean principle that nothing comes from nothing. How would the nothing initiate a new causal chain? What action would the absent water exercise on the plant or its soil? (2021, 71)

These are complaints familiar from those who claim that causation requires some physical connection between cause and effect. As there can be no physical connection between an absence and any positive existent, there can be no absence causation. Mumford concedes, correctly, that this kind of complaint will carry no force for those not similarly committed, but argues that this results in a dialectical impasse: "But this is an unstable dialectical position for both sides. It seems all too easy for each to dig stubbornly in" (71). The critic of absence causation "can say that causation by absence is so ontologically troublesome that a theory of causation that allows it thereby betrays its weakness" (71). The problem for Mumford is that his assessment of the dialectical position can only be correct if there is already some reason to think that causation by absence is ontologically troublesome. But that is precisely what we are lacking. It may be in tension with the Parmenidean principle that nothing comes from nothing, but we have thus far been given no clear reason why we must accept this principle. Indeed, appealing to the Parmenidean principle to justify the claim that absence causation is incoherent puts the cart before the horse. It seems, then, that in the face of our well-confirmed scientific judgments about absence causation, the unmotivated claim that absence causation is conceptually problematic carries the burden of proof.

A second line of criticism of Mumford's argument here concerns the claim that the proposed absence must be "literally nothing at all, as long as we are not equivocating". What Mumford appears to have in mind is that if absence causation is not causation by nothing then

it would not count as absence causation: "It has to be nothing for this to be a genuine case of causation by absence. The cause cannot be an absence in name only: a disguised something" (71). It is not fully clear what manner of 'something' Mumford means here. If Mumford means to say that, for a genuine case of absence causation, the cause must not be a positive existent, then he is surely correct. The example Mumford uses to illustrate what he means here is the identification of an absence of water with some actual water located elsewhere: "By absent water, I do not mean some real water that is merely elsewhere, although that would be bad enough in explaining the plant's death" (71). This suggests that what Mumford has in mind is the restriction that the cause must not be a positive existent. However, this is not the only way in which we might understand the claim that absence causation involves causation by nothing.

Instead of accepting the claim that genuine cases of absence causation must be causation by nothing, we might claim instead that they are cases where the cause is a 'negative existent', rather than a positive existent. This would bring with it the burden spelling out what such entities are, and how they fit into a system of ontological categories; but this is, by itself, no objection. Moreover, there are, as Mumford is aware, a range of attempts to do just this, though not within the context of discussion of absence causation. For some committed to truthmaker maximalism, negative elements in one's ontology have seemed like an acceptable commitment: e.g., either acknowledging negative properties or acknowledging negative instantiation. These negative existents are, as Mumford accepts, sufficiently like a nothing to be objectionable to the soft ontological Parmenidean

> Our soft Parmenidean project requires that we seek to explain what we can about properties without invoking negative existents. If our best theory of properties leaves us no choice but to accept that there are negative properties, then we would have failed at this hurdle. (19)

The obverse of this, though, is that such negative existents are sufficiently like a nothing to be causes in genuine cases of causation by absence. The defender of absence causation is then able to reply to Mumford that absence causation is not causation by 'nothing', but causation by a negative existent. This would have the virtue of rendering irrelevant Mumford's foregoing complaint that nothing comes from nothing.

The line of reply above is deliberately sketched broadly enough to be catholic with respect to which kind of negative existents one believes in: the reply is available irrespective of which negative existents we wind up committed to. My aim here is not to adjudicate between the competing merits of, for example, negative properties and

negative instantiation. That is a larger project. The crucial point is that absence causation need not be understood as causation by nothing. Consequently, it would be no objection to absence causation that causation by nothing is an incoherent doctrine, should we be given compelling reason to accept that assessment.

I have argued, then, that the first of Mumford's two critiques of absence causation is not forceful. Now let us consider the second critique: the problem of escalation. This problem arises because, although *some* absences are treated as causes, there are other absences we normally do *not* consider to be causes. For example, Flora's failure to water her own plant might be judged a cause of its death, whereas *my* failure to water Flora's plant would likely not. The absence of heart wall tissue is identified by cardiologists as a cause of hypoxia in Fallot's patients, but not the absence of a Gore-Tex graft patch commonly used for surgical correction. The problem of escalation arises because many of these other absences seem credible as causes: e.g., the death of Flora's plant is as much counterfactually dependent on my failure to water Flora's, as it is on hers. Moreover, once we start acknowledging such causes, there might seem no end to them: the absence of merely possible gardeners might have to count as causes, as their presence would have prevented the death.

Such escalation, if it is unavoidable, would count as a serious problem for absence causation, because it would mean, as Mumford puts it, "[causation by absence] has consequences that play havoc with our ideas of what-causes-what and of the notion of cause in general" (Mumford 2021, 72). There *is* logical space to accept escalation and the proliferation of causes it brings with it – this is a position adopted by David Lewis[6] – but this is at least a *cost* to the theory. To that extent, it seems right that escalation would be a problem for absence causation, which thereby *would* provide some justification for an error-theoretic approach.[7] The real question, then, is whether escalation and proliferation of causation by absence really is unavoidable. The typical way the problem gets introduced is, just as has been done here, to cite putative examples of causation by absence, and then state absences of other things which, were they present, would prevent the effect. Next, arguments are offered against extant attempts to stop escalation. Mumford's discussion (2021, ch. 4) is a model of this is line of reasoning.

There are, however, two problems with the current state of the debate relevant to the force of this line of reasoning. The first and most serious problem is that the existing literature which attempts

6 See, e.g. Lewis 2000.

7 Though it is not clear that it would *vindicate* the error-theoretic approach: c.f. Mumford 2021, 73.

to explain why escalation does not occur specifically in cases of absence causation is just too thin on the ground to make a compelling case that it is *unavoidable*. Mumford, in his survey of this literature, identifies only four approaches in the literature: Lewis' view that many true claims of absence causation would be inappropriate to assert in most contexts; Hart and Honore's claim that genuine cases of absence causation are violations of norms, but spurious cases are not; Schaffer's claim, in the context of his causal contrastivism, that legitimate claims of absence causation highlight contextually salient contrasts for each cause-and-effect pair, whereas spurious claims do not; and Vaasen's view that genuine cases of absence causation are stable across natural changes to background conditions, but where what counts as a 'natural' change will vary according to conversational context.[8]

Three quarters of these approaches comprising the extant attempts to stop escalation construe either the truth or the assertability of claims about absence causation to be contextually dependent in some way. As Mumford correctly complains, such appeals to context will simply fail to deliver what is needed to consider absence causation a genuine feature of the world:

> As we are looking for a metaphysical solution to the problem of escalation, pragmatic considerations are of limited help only. Normative and contextual accounts have the consequence that a negative causal claim is only spurious, or genuine, relative to some context. This does not banish the escalation of causes, considered ontologically, then. (Mumford 2021, 76)

The problem for the critic of absence causation trying to motivate a blanket denial of absence causation by showing that the problem of escalation cannot be answered, though, is that the upshot of Mumford's complaint is that three quarters of the extant defenses of absence causation were off target from the start. The only metaphysical solution to the proliferation of causes discussed, due to Hart and Honore, appeals to norms, according to which non-normal absences do not count as cases of absence causation. This explains some of the data, such as why we do not treat my failure to water Flora's plants as a cause of their death: because I do not normally water them. One problem with this, as Mumford rightly observes (Mumford 2021, 74), is that there can be cases where an absence is a cause, but not because it is normally a cause. Consider again the example of patients with Fallot's Tetralogy, mentioned in section 2. It is not a 'normal'

8 See Mumford 2021, §§ 4.5.1, 4.5.3, 4.5.4 for detailed discussion of the contextual approaches of Lewis, Schaffer, and Vaasen.

occurrence for children to be born with a hole in their heart's ventricular septum (though it is not vanishingly uncommon). Nonetheless, the hole causes hypoxia in patients with Fallot's Tetralogy.

So, it turns out that in Mumford's discussion – the most recent and comprehensive – there is only one solution to the charge of escalation that is relevant to the claim that escalation is unavoidable. What absence causation faces, then, appears to be no more than a weakly motivated assertion that absence causation proliferates unavoidably. We are still owed a metaphysical account of the difference between genuine and spurious cases of causation by absence, and it may turn out that no good account can be given. But, as the debate stands, we are not entitled to the presumption that such an account is unlikely to be forthcoming. The upshot, then, is that Mumford's second criticism of the coherence of causation by absence also lacks force. In the absence of reasons to think that the doctrine is problematic, error-theoretic approaches to the question of absence causation remain unmotivated.

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On the Ontology and Semantics of Absence

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Abstract This paper gives a semantic analysis of 'completion-related verbs of absence' such as 'lack' and 'be missing' in English. The analysis is based on the notion of a conceptual (integrated or ideal) whole, the notion of a variable object and its variable parts, and an ontology of 'lacks' as entities whose satisfaction involves parts. The semantics will be embedded into that of object-based truthmaker semantics of modals.

Keywords Absence. Semantics. Verbs of absence. Lack. Be missing. Truthmaker semantics.

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Absence is a peculiar notion, yet it has been recognized as playing a role both in ontology and in semantics. There are different notions of absence, tough. On one understanding, absence contrasts with presence: being absent just means not being present. As such the notion has been discussed in the context of truthmaking: if there is an absence of a truthmaker of a sentence S, then that absence, as a reified absence, can be viewed as the truthmaker of the negation of S, of ¬ S. Absence has also been discussed in the context of the notion of part: there are parts of certain types of entities that consists in the absence of constituting material – the hole of a donut, openings in walls, empty spaces in design and art. But absence contrasts not only with presence (of a truthmaker or material). There is a stronger notion of absence in which the absence of a thing presupposes that that thing should have been there, to make something else complete. Absence in that sense is a modal notion that crucially involves the notion of completion. This notion is the one that is reflected linguistically in the semantics of what I will call 'completion-related verbs of absence'. In English, these verbs are *lack* and *be missing*, as below:

(1) a. The house lacks a door.
b. A screw is missing (from the chair).

(1a) roughly states that for the house to be complete, it needs to have a door. (1b) states that for the chair to be complete there needs to be a screw (in a particular place in it).

The notion of completion itself is a challenging notion, since it has an intensional dimension. Completion may relate to something that may be merely conceived as a whole, what I will call a 'conceptual whole'. Sentences with completion-related verbs of absence presuppose that the conceptual whole has only an incomplete actual manifestation, and they state that the full manifestation of the conceptual whole entails the presence of particular sorts of entities (a door in (1a), a screw in (1b)). With its relation to a conceived whole, completion-related absence is a modal notion, involving a form of weak necessity. I will outline a semantics of completion-related verbs of absence which is based on the satisfaction conditions of modal objects generated by conceptual wholes and their actual manifestations, objects which one may call 'lacks'. The semantics based on such modal objects will be similar in a number of respects to the 'object-based truthmaker semantics' of modals of the more familiar sorts, which I had pursued in Moltmann (2008; 2024). On that semantics, modal sentences describe modal objects, entities of the sort of needs, obligations, and permissions that come with truthmaking or, more generally, satisfaction conditions and that would be denoted by a corresponding nominalization if available. Thus, deontic modal sentences describe entities like obligations and permissions, entities that can

be satisfied and (in the case of obligations) violated by actions. Circumstantial modal sentences describe entities of the sort of dispositions, which can be satisfied by situations, and sentences conveying metaphysical modality describe modal objects based on essences, which can be satisfied by situations. Whereas an obligation and certain needs are satisfied or complied with by actions, a lack is satisfied by a completing part of the whole, or, as a derivative lack, by a situation of having that completing part. Like certain needs, a lack when satisfied will disappear, unlike lasting obligations and permissions.

Modal objects are typically denoted by nominalizations of modal verbs ('need', 'obligation', 'permission', 'disposition'). While in English there is no nominalization for *be missing*, the verb *to lack* comes with the nominalization *lack*, which I will adopt as the general term for the modal objects described by verbs of completion-related absence.

The view that the noun *lack* serves to permit reference to an object has often been subject to ridicule, most notably by Chomsky. Chomsky recognizes that 'John's lack of talent', like 'the flaw in the argument' behaves in relevant respects like a referential NP:

> If I say 'the flaw in the argument is obvious, but it escaped John's attention', I am not committed to the absurd view that among the things in the world are flaws, one of them in the argument in question. Nonetheless, the NP 'the flaw in the argument' behaves in all respects in the manner of truly referential expressions like *the coat in the closet* – for example, it can be the antecedent of *it* and serves as an argument, taking a theta-role. Suppose now that we make a rather conventional move, and assume that one step in the interpretation of LF is to posit a domain D of individuals that serve as values of variables and as denotata. Among these individuals are specific flaws […], John's lack of talent, and so on. (Chomsky 1981, 324).

The domain D, for Chomsky does not consist in actual objects, but constitutes just another level of syntactic representation. NPs like *John's lack of talent* were a motivation for Chomsky's semantic internalism and the rejection of the view that referential NPs serve to make reference to actual objects (see also Chomsky 1986; Pietroski 2017). This is in stark contrast to the view of this paper, which sets out to build a semantics of completion-related verbs of absence on an ontology of absences like 'lacks'.

In what follows, I will first focus on the verb *lack*, establishing a range of linguistic generalizations about it and outlining its general semantics with its connection to weak necessity. Then I turn to *be missing*, which differs in its semantics in important respects from *lack* and involves another intensional dimension, namely for the parts of the conceptual whole. Finally, I will make a few remarks about the related verb 'replace'.

1 The Semantics of *Lack*

1.1 Absence Vs. Presence

Here are first some remarks about the notion of absence as such. On one understanding of absence, absence is just the negation of presence, as the equivalence between (2a) and (2b) suggests:

(2) a. John is absent.
b. John is not present.

But in this context, absence has also been viewed as an object on its own itself, as a negative event or situation that makes a negated sentence true. Thus, rather there being nothing that makes *It is not raining* true, there is in fact an entity, the absence of rain, that makes the sentence true. Such 'reified absences', it has been argued, may even play causal roles (Kukso 2006). A related notion of absence is that of absence of material, which can lead to apparent parts of entities, such as holes, openings and intended empty spaces.

1.2 Completion-related Verbs of Absence

The notion of absence that I want to discuss in this paper differs from absence as the negation of presence. It is a notion related to completion and as such it is a modal notion. Semantically, it is a notion involved in the semantics of completion-related predicates of absence like *lack* and *be missing*.

Lack is an intensional transitive verb. That is, its indefinite complement has a particular nonspecific reading which does not permit existential quantification, the inference from (3a) to (3b):

(3) a. The door lacks a key.
b. There is a key x, the door lacks x.

Lack does not mean being absent, as opposed to present, of course. *Lack* primarily relates an individual to a missing part, rather than a location. Thus, *lack* seems to convey the negation of *have*, in examples as below:

(4) a. The door has a key.
b. The door does not have a key.
c. The door lacks a key.

(5) a. The cat has a tail.
b. The cat does not have a tail.
c. The cat lacks a tail.

(6) a. The picture has a frame.
b. The picture does not have a frame.
c. The picture lacks a frame.

There is one major difference, however, between *(not) have* and *lack*: unlike *have*, *lack* presupposes some form of incompleteness of the subject referent. Thus, the item said to be lacking generally plays a role of a required structural or functional part of an integrated whole.[1] By contrast, in corresponding sentences *have* just expresses a relation between an entity and something that is a structural part, which need not be essential or even expected.

Have, moreover, can convey relations such as kinship and possession, which *lack* cannot generally convey, unless there is a particular context in which such relations are expected or required:

(7) a. Mary has a ponytail.
b. ?? Mary lacks a ponytail.

(8) a. The house has a balcony.
b. ?? The house lacks a balcony.

(9) a. John has a daughter.
b. ??? John lacks a daughter.

(10) a. John has a painting by Picasso.
b. ??? John lacks a painting by Picasso.

(7b), (8b), (9b) and 10(b) are acceptable only if there was an expectation that Mary should have a ponytail, the house better have a balcony, John better have a daughter, or John better own a Picasso (given his general ambitions, for example).

The difference between *have* and *lack* is also reflected in the possibility of modal inferences. (6c) entails (11), but not so (6b):

(11) The picture should have a frame.

1 For the notion of an integrated whole or form/structure of an object see Simons 1987; Koslicki 2008; for linguistic applications of the notion to plurals, mass nouns, and part-structure modifiers see Moltmann 1997; 2018; 2005.

Likewise, on a reading on which (9b) is acceptable, it entails (12), but not so the negation of (9a):

(12) John should have a daughter.

Lack in the examples in (4c), (5c), and (6c) relates an entity that is the subject referent (a house, cat, or picture) to a *conceptual whole*, the full or ideal 'form' of the entity, a house with a door, a picture with the frame, and a cat with a tail. The presupposition thereby is that the entity the subject refers to manifests only to a limited extent that conceptual whole. The object NP of *lack* then describes the type of entity that is required for the subject referent to complete a manifestation of the conceptual whole.

The notion of a conceptual whole is not a hard to grasp technical notion needed only for the purpose of the semantics of completion-related verbs of absence. Rather there are conceptual wholes that we refer to explicitly in natural language and that are clearly part of our ordinary ontology. Architectural designs and plans (for actions) are of that sort. Plans in particular, that is, conceptual wholes for actions, play a role for the semantics of *partial(ly)* and *complete(ly)*:

(13) a. John's partial / complete realization of the plan.
b. The army partially / completely destroyed the house.

Partially and *completely* in (13b) relate to a conceived destruction of the house and convey that that conceived event is partially / completely manifested in the army's action.[2]

The conceptual whole and its completion does not require an object. Manifestations of conceptual wholes may also be individuals together with their (expected) possessions, or individuals together with relevant kinship or friendship relations needed, say, for the individual's wellbeing:

(14) a. John lacks a car.
b. John lacks a father.
c. Mary lacks a close friend.

Instead of a single object, the conceptual whole may also relate to a plurality as many (cf. Carrara, Arapinis, Moltmann 2016; Oliver, Smiley 2013):

(15) The protesters lack a good leader.

2 See Moltmann 1997 for such an analysis of *partially* and *completely*.

Lack involves a notion of an integrated whole that is itself not tied to single objecthood.

Both *have* and *lack* can relate an individual to a quality:

(16) a. Joe has wisdom.
b. Joe lacks wisdom.

(17) a. Mary has talent.
b. Mary lacks talent.

Should qualities be considered parts of an individual? As particularized properties or tropes (or modes), they certainly pertain to just one individual and are ontologically dependent on it. But tropes are not parts on a standard understanding of the notion of individuals. Intuitively, material objects have as parts spatial parts (at least that is what *part of* when applied to material objects picks out). But qualities can be considered part of a conceived whole, which means they need to be realized as particularized properties or tropes by any (complete) manifestation.

If a quality is said to be lacking, the quality need not be required for the object to fulfill standard conditions, but may just be desirable for a particular purpose. In such a case *lack* involves an *ideal conceptual whole*. An ideal conceptual whole may also pertain to particular circumstances of an expectation at a given occasion:

(18) a. Mary's lack of understanding was astonishing.
b. Mary's lack of attention to detail ruined the project.

Neither *lack* nor *have* impose any constraint to the effect that the absent entity be a structural part or even a well-delimited object. In that respect, as we will see, *lack* differs from *be missing* as well as *replace*.

The nominalization *lack* also appears without a subject in existential constructions as in (19a), where it relates not to an object, but to a location at a time, just like the simple existential sentence in (19b):

(19) a. There is a lack of water.
b. There is water.

Here the conceptual whole involves not a particular object, but a location.

The nominalization *lack* forms a complex predicate with *have*, in alternation to the simple verb *lack*:[3]

3 *Lack* has semantic correlates in other languages, for example German morphologically unrelated *Mangel*:

(20) a. John has a lack of understanding.
b. John lacks understanding.

This can be taken to be significant for the semantic analysis of *lack*-sentences, since it is just what we have with many intensional verbs, including *need*, *believe*, *assume*, and *think*: the noun in the complex predicate generally is a noun describing a modal or attitudinal object that comes with satisfaction conditions.

(21) a. John needs to have a car.
b. John has a need to have a car.

(22) a. John believes that it is raining
b. John has the belief that it is raining.

(23) a. John is permitted to leave.
b. John had permission to leave.

(24) a. John offered to buy the house.
b. John made an offer to buy the house.

The existence of the complex form in fact motivated object-based truthmaker semantics. The complex predicate always consists in a light verb such as *have* or *make* and a noun describing a modal or attitudinal object, an object that comes with satisfaction conditions, involving situations or actions as truthmakers or satisfiers. In the case of a need, this is an object that can be fulfilled or violated through actions. In the case of a belief, this is an object that can be made true or false by particular situations. In the case of a permission and an offer, it is an object that can be taken up by an action. The complex report, on that view, displays the logical form of modal sentences and attitude reports more transparently than the simple report. Thus, the logical form of (21a) and (21b) would be as follows, where *John to have a car* gives the satisfaction conditions of the need:

(25) $\exists d$(have(d, John) & need(d) & [*John to have a car*] (d))

Likewise, the logical form of *lack*-sentences as in (20b) will be based on the complex predicate in (20a), as below:

(i) a. Es mangelt Wasser.
b. Es gibt's einen Mangel an Wasser.
(ii) a. Es mangelt ihm an Talent.
b. Er hat einen Mangel an Talent.
(iii) a. Joe hat Talent.
b. Es mangelt Joe an Talent.

(26) ∃*d*(have(John, *d*) & lack(*d*) & [*of understanding*](*d*))

The paraphrase in (27c) is an informal way of describing the semantics of the simpler sentence in (27a), whose logical form is given in (27b):

(27) a. The house lacks a door.
b. ∃d(have(the house, d) & lack(d) & [*a door*](d))
c. The house's lack *d* of a door (based on a conceptual whole *C*) is satisfied iff for any possible entity *y* such that the composition of the house and *y* is a complete manifestation of *C*: there is an entity *z*, door(*z*), such that *z* is part of *y*.

The complement of *lack* may describe only part of what needs to be added to yield a complete manifestation of the conceptual whole. Thus (27a) is compatible with the house lacking also a chimney and a roof. The object NP of verbs of completion-related absence in general specifies only part of what is needed to yield a complete manifestation of the whole.

I take a lack to be an entity that can be satisfied by what needs to be added for the thing that has the lack (the subject referent) to be complete. The conceptual whole is only an implicit part of the semantics of *lack*; the object argument of lack gives a partial description of what needs to be added for the subject referent to be complete.

The relation between what is to be added and the lack is closely related to the relation of truthmaking or satisfaction. Unlike standard semantics, truthmaker semantics allows entities of various sorts to act as truthmakers or satisfiers, both of sentences and entities of the sort of needs, beliefs, and offers (in object-based truthmaker semantics). A lack as characterized in (27) actually can be mapped onto a closely related object, a lack', which has situations, rather than completing material, as satisfiers. This is the way to account for the inference from *lack*-sentences to *should*-sentences. In the next section, I will give an outline of truthmaker semantics with its object-based version, before returning to the formal semantics of *lack*.

1.3 Object-based Truthmaker Semantics

Here are briefly the essentials of truthmaker semantics and object-based truthmaker semantics in particular. Truthmaker semantics is based on situations rather than entire worlds, as well as on the relation ⊩ of exact truthmaking (or satisfaction) holding between a situation and a sentence. Truthmaker semantics is actually meant to be ontologically neutral in the sense that any entity can in principle play the truthmaker role as long as it serves the overall purposes imposed by the semantics. The term 'situation' should be understood as

a blanket term for entities able to act as truthmakers or satisfiers. Truthmaker semantics involves a domain D of situations containing actual, possible, as well as impossible situations.[4] Actual situations are part of the actual world; impossible situations are part of impossible worlds and would be truthmakers of contradictory sentences. The domain of situations is ordered by a part-whole relation $<$ (a partial order) and is closed under fusion $\oplus$. D includes a null situation (the fusion of the empty set) and the complete situation (an impossible situation that is the fusion of the set of all situations). Actions are a specific kind of situation. Actions may satisfy (comply with) or violate imperative sentences (rather than verify or falsify them).

A situation s stands in the relation $\Vdash$ of exact truthmaking or verification (satisfaction) to a sentence S just in case s verifies (satisfies) S and is wholly relevant for the truth (or satisfaction) of S. This means that s should not include anything that fails to bear on the truth (or satisfaction) of S. A situation s is an exact falsifier (or violator) of a sentence S just in case s falsifies (violates) S and s is wholly relevant for the falsity (or violation) of S. For Fine, situations are parts of worlds; but no further assumptions are made regarding their ontology beyond the roles they play within truthmaker semantics.

The truthmaking / satisfaction relation $\Vdash$ applies to both declarative and imperative sentences: declarative sentences are made true by situations that are their exact truthmakers or verifiers, imperatives are complied with by actions that are their exact satisfiers. The following standard conditions on the truthmaking of sentences with conjunctions, disjunctions, and existential and universal quantification then hold. Here '$\oplus$' stands for the operation of fusion, applying to two entities or a set of entities:[5]

(28) a. $s \Vdash S \,\&\, S'$ iff for some s' and s'', $s = s' \oplus s''$ and $s' \Vdash S$ and $s'' \Vdash S'$.
b. $s \Vdash S \vee S'$ iff $s \Vdash S$ or $s \Vdash S'$.
c. $s \Vdash \exists x\, S$ iff $s \Vdash S[x/d]$ for some individual d.
d. $s \Vdash \forall x\, S$ iff for a minimal set X of situations such that for each individual d, there is a situation s', $s' \in X$, and $s' \Vdash S[x/d]$, $s = \oplus(X)$

Truthmaker semantics assigns to a sentence S not only truthmakers (or verifiers), but also falsifiers (or violators), situations in virtue of which S is false and which are wholly relevant for the falsity of S. This allows a straightforward formulation of the truthmaking

4 Note that truthmaker semantics, unlike what the name may suggest, does not pursue the philosophical project of grounding the truth of a sentence in actual objects. The interest of truthmaker semantics is semantic only, involving descriptive metaphysics or 'naïve metaphysics'.

5 I will set aside the truthmaking conditions of conditionals, as they involve issues not relevant for present purposes.

conditions of negated sentences: a truthmaker of ¬ *S* is a falsifier of *S*. With ⫞ as the relation of (exact) falsification, the condition on the truthmaking of a negated sentence is given below:

(29) $s \Vdash \neg S$ iff $s \dashv S$.

Also complex sentences are assigned both verification and falsification conditions. For conjunctions and disjunctions, the falsification conditions are those below:

(30) a. $s \dashv S \,\&\, S'$ iff $s \dashv S$ or $s \dashv S'$.
b. $s \dashv S \vee S'$ iff for some s' and s'', $s = s' \oplus s''$ and $s' \dashv S$ and $s'' \dashv S'$.

Given sentence-based truthmaker semantics, a sentence *S* will have as its meaning a bilateral content, a pair <pos(*S*), neg(*S*)> consisting of the set pos(*S*) of exact verifiers of *S* and the set neg(S) of exact falsifiers of S.

The idea of object-based truthmaker semantics is that modal and attitudinal objects come with truthmaking conditions as well, or rather satisfaction conditions of various sorts which are best formulated in terms of truthmaker semantics. Thus, a particular obligation can be fulfilled by certain actions and can be violated by other actions. A permission differs from an obligation in that it only has satisfiers not violators. A belief can be made true by situations and be made false by others. If a modal or attitudinal predicates comes with a clausal complement or subject, then that clause will act as a predicate of the described attitudinal or modal object, giving its satisfaction conditions. Truthmaker semantics permits a single formulation of the content of a clause applicable to both modal objects of necessity and possibility. This condition consists in establishing that the satisfiers of the object and the truthmakers of the clause are identical, and if the object has violators, the violators of the object and the falsifiers of the sentence are identical as well. This is the property *prop(S)* that holds of an object *d* just in case *d* has the same satisfiers as *S* and, if *d* has violators, *d* has the same violators as *S*:[6]

(31) For an (imperative or declarative) sentence *S*,
$\text{prop}(S) = \lambda d[\text{pos}(d) = \text{pos}(S) \,\&\, (\text{neg}(d) \neq \emptyset \rightarrow \text{neg}(d) = \text{neg}(S))]$.

The very same sentence meaning in (31) is applicable to modal and attitudinal objects of different flavors and forces. Modal and attitudinal objects of possibility (of any flavor or type) have both satisfiers

6 See Moltmann 2018, 2024.

and violators; modal and attitudinal objects of necessity (of any flavor or type) have only satisfiers.

1.4 Lacks as Modal Objects

Completion-related verbs of absence describe modal objects, entities of the sort of 'lacks'. Modal objects may come into existence in different ways. In the case of strong obligations and strong permissions, the modal object is created by an illocutionary act of, for example, commanding or offering (under suitable circumstances). In the case of weak permissions, the modal object is constituted in part in relation to what is not excluded by a weak obligation (Moltmann 2018; 2024). Not all modal objects are 'created' or constituted that way. Abilities or dispositions are modal objects as well, satisfied by behavior manifesting the ability. Telic modality presents a very different way in which a modal object comes about. In the case of telic modality as in *John needs to practice in order to win the competition*, the modal object is generated by a particular condition, John's winning the competition. The satisfiers of that modal object are just the actions required by circumstances of John winning the competition.

Essences 'generate' modal objects too, and in object-based truthmaker semantics would be at the center of the semantics of sentences conveying metaphysical necessity (Moltmann 2018). Essences in fact are closely related to the conceptual wholes involved in completion-related verbs of absence. But essences involve essential properties of objects, rather than conditions of unified wholes not necessarily pertaining to objects and yielding only a weak form of necessity.

Let us then turn to the modal objects described by the verb *lack*, that is, 'lacks'. *Lack* is a noun for a modal object, an entity that comes with satisfaction condition. In English, a satisfaction predicate for lacks is perhaps *take care of* and in German *beheben* 'suspend':

(32) a. The lack of chairs was taken care of.
b. Der Mangel an Stuehlen wurde behoben.

This means that a modal object that is a lack is satisfied when it is made to disappear. Lacks share that property with needs. Telic modal objects (needs of some sort) and completion-related modal objects disappear once they are satisfied. By contrast, obligations may have to be continually satisfied.

I take lacks to be generated like telic modal objects, on the basis of conceptual wholes.

Conceptual wholes in fact will generate two sorts of objects. First of all, conceptual wholes as 'forms' generate variable objects – variable

embodiments in the sense of Fine (1999). Variable embodiments, for Fine, are entities that allow for the replacement of parts or of constituting material. A variable embodiment or, what I call, a variable object *d* is an entity that is associated with a function *f* mapping *d* to a concrete manifestation at a time. A ship, allowing for a replacement of part, is a variable embodiment, as is a 'the water in the container' (which allows for replacement of water quantities), as is 'the president of the US' (which can be manifested by different people at different time). Clearly, the manifestation of a variable object need not realize all of the form associated with the object. A statue may lose a part, yet still remain the same statue. This means that the form needs to be conceived in a more differentiated manner, permitting for non-essential or, better, less essential structural parts. The notion of a conceptual whole is meant to incorporate such differentiations.

A conceptual whole will also generate a modal object that is a lack, on the basis of a variable object associated with it. Suppose for a conceptual whole *C* and a variable object *d* associated with a function f_C, such that for the present time *t* and actual world *w*, the entity *a*, $a = f_C(d, t, w)$, is an incomplete manifestation of *C*. Then there is a lack *e* at *t* in w such that an entity *b* satisfies *e* just in case $a \oplus b$ is a complete manifestation of *C*, where $\oplus$ is a suitable structure-preserving composition function. Here *e* can be called the lack generated by C and *d*. Thus, the satisfaction conditions of the lack described in (33a) will be, informally, as in (33b):

(33) a. the house's lack of a door
b. For a conceptual whole *C* such that the house is an incomplete manifestation of *C*, for the lack e generated by *C* and the house (= the house's lack of a door), any possible entity y satisfies e iff the composition of the house and y is a complete manifestation of *C* and there is a possible entity *z*, door(z) such that z is part of *y*.

More formally, the semantics of the noun *lack* together with an indefinite complement will be as below:

(34) For a conceptual whole *C*, a variable object *d* (= [NP]) associated with the manifestation function f_C, a time *t*, and world *w* such that $f_C(d, t, w)$ is an incomplete realization of *C*, for the modal object e generated by *C* and *d*, <*e*, *C*> ∈ [NPs lack of an N]$^{t, w}$ iff for any *x* in an (accessible) world *w'*, *x* satisfies *e* iff there is a *y*, *y* ∈ [N]$^{t,w'}$ and *y* < *x*.

Note that this semantics makes use of the actual world and present time and thus not fully embedded within truthmaker semantics. The present interest is simply to show the similarit of object-based truthmaker semantics to the semantics of completion-related verbs of absence based on lacks as satisfiable objects to be satisfied

by particular entities. A more satisfactory formalization will have to await another occasion.

We do not need to take care of the semantics of the verb *lack*, given the decomposition of *lack* as a complex predicate *have (a) lack* and the assumptions that semantic interpretation applies to the underlying structure – as in (27).

Let us then turn to the inferences from *lack*-sentences to sentences conveying weak necessity, such as the inference from (6c) to (11) and from (9b) to (12). Given object-based truthmaker semantics of modals, *should* as in (35a) will be a predicate of modal objects and its prejacent will specify the satisfaction conditions of that modal object, as in (35b):

(35) a. The house should have a door
b. ∃e'(should(e') & [*the house have a door*](e'))

All this requires is generating another lack *e'* from the lack *e* that is the house's lack of a door. This is achieved by fixing *e'*s satisfiers as informally below:

(36) For a situation *s*, *s* satisfies *e* iff *s* is a situation of the house having *x*, for some entity *x*, such that *x* satisfies *e*.

The inference in (37) thus follows from the logical forms of *lack*-sentences and *should*-sentences as in (38a, b) as well as the ontology of lacks in the two senses, as having entities as satisfiers and as having situations as satisfiers:

(37) The house lacks a door.
The house should have a door.

(38) a. ∃*e*(have(*e*, house) & [*lack of a door*](*e*))
b. ∃e'(should(e') &[*the house have a door*](e'))

Should applies to derived lacks, but of course these are not the only modal objects that *should* applies to. *Should* applies to a great range of different types of modal objects, including deontic and epistemic modal objects.

2 The Predicate of Absence *Be Missing*

Be missing seems to share uses with *lack*.

(39) a. A leg is missing from the chair.
b. The chair lacks a leg.

(40) a. A door is missing from the hut.
b. The hut lacks a door.

However, despite apparent equivalences in some contexts, *be missing* differs semantically from *lack* in a number of respects. Basically, *be missing* involves a restriction to structural parts, but not so *lack*; a difference that has significant consequences for the semantics of the two verbs. There is another more obvious difference between *be missing* and *lack*. The subject of a *lack*-sentence explicitly refers to an entity said to be incomplete. By contrast, *be missing* involves implicit reference to something that is said to be incomplete (Zimmermann 2014).

One manifestation of the first differenceis that unlike *lack*, *be missing* is not generally possible with qualities:

(41) a. John lacks talent.
b. ??? John is missing talent.

(42) a. John lacks deeper understanding.
b. ??? John is missing deeper understanding.

Be missing also dislikes mass NPs, in contrast to *lack*:

(43) a. The well lacks water.
b. ??? Water is missing from the well.

(44) a. The dish lacks salt.
b. ??? Salt is missing from the dish.

Lack and *be missing* thus, more or less, display the mass-count distinction with respect to their object argument position. The subject argument of position of *be missing* is restricted to structural or functional parts with respect to a structured whole, but not so the object argument position of *lack*.

This difference goes along with another significant semantic difference. The subject of *be missing*-sentences may quantify not over particular possible objects, but what standardly would be regarded individual concepts restricted by the conceptual whole (Zimmermann 2014; Saebo 2014):

(45) a. Three screws are missing (from the IKEA set).
b. Three stamps are still missing (from John's almost complete stamp collection).

(45a) can mean that three screws of a particular kind meant to be in the IKEA self-assembly package were not there. (45b) can mean that

particular kinds of stamps meant to complete the collection were not yet there. (45a) and (45b) can be true even if those screws or stamps do not exist. On a standard semantic view, pursued by Zimmermann and Saebo, the subject of the sentence ranges over individual concepts or rather pragmatically individuated individual covers, sets of properties, or functions from properties to truth values.

The issue is how it is possible for such individual concepts to be restricted by the intensional part of the sentence. An important observation, made by Saebo (2014), is that the same quantifier may range over actual and intensional parts of the whole:

(46) Several things are missing from the collection,

Saebo takes this to mean that quantifiers with *be missing* range uniformly over individual concepts.

On the present view, the cases discussed by Zimmermann receive a straightforward account. The subject of *be missing* may range over variable parts themselves. Given a conceptual whole, there will also be parts of conceptual wholes, concepts of screws or stamps, for example; and these parts themselves generate variable parts, entities associated with a function mapping a time and a world to a manifestation at the time and the world. Variable objects are of the very same type as particular objects (of type *e*), and thus quantifiers range over variable objects and particular manifestations (rigid objects) alike.

The semantics of *be missing* now needs to take the possibility of quantifying over variable objects. Below the predicate *be missing* is taken to be a four-place predicate holding of a lack, a conceptual whole *C*, a variable object generated by *C* and a variable object generated by a sufficiently small part of *C*:

(47) For a time *t* and world *w*, a conceptual whole *C* and a variable object *d* associated with the manifestation function f_c and such that $f_c(d, t, w)$ is an incomplete realization of *C*, a variable object *d'* associated with the manifestation function $f_{c'}$ for a small part *C'* of *C*, for a lack e, if $<e, C, d, d'> \in [be\ missing]^{t,w}$ iff *e* pertains to *d* and for any *x* in an (accessible) world *w'*, if *x* satisfies *e*, then $f(fC'(d', t, w) > x$.

Unlike *lack*, *be missing* thus is restricted to entities play the role of structural or functional parts and therefore need to come with some form of unity themselves

3 The Transitive Verb *Miss*

The transitive verb *miss* has an apparently quite different meaning from the predicate *be missing*, by describing an objectual attitude of longing for an object:

(48) John misses his brother.

In fact, the polysemy of the root *miss*, describing, in English, a completion-related modal verb of absence with *be missing* and an objectual attitude of absence with *miss*, appears in many languages (French, *manquer*, Italian, *mancare*, German *fehlen*). There is certainly a way in which the objectual attitude of longing is related to the completion-related modal verb.

First of all, we can note that transitive *miss* is also restricted, in its object position, to single objects, excluding quantities and qualities (unless they form a particular kind (the hot water Mary was used to, the kindness of John's parents):

(49) a. ?? Mary misses hot water.
b. ?? Joe misses kindness.

Transitive *miss* generally relates an individual to an existing object or an object that existed in the past. It describes a mental state whose satisfaction requires the closeness (in physical space or interaction) with the missed object. There then is an intuitive sense in which a satisfied mental state involves completeness: the mental satisfaction will be based on the establishing of relevant relations to the object in question. By contrast, the mental dissatisfaction is due to those relations not being in place.

4 Predicates of Replacement

Predicates of replacement are semantically related to the predicate *be missing*. Both *replace* and *be missing* relate to variable parts, based on merely conceived parts. Let us first note that replacement can generally apply only to structural, often functional parts:

(50) Mary replaced the wheel / the table top / the screw.

Replace cannot apply to qualities and aspects of objects such as surfaces or appearances of objects:

(51) ??? Mary replaced the color / the texture / the weight / the surface / the appearance of the object.

Quantities can be replaced only when they are described as well-delimited:

(52) a. John replaced the water in the container.
b. ??? John replaced a bit of water in the container.

Replacement means taking away a structural or functional part and putting a similar or equivalent object in its place. Interestingly, *replace* can even apply to structural / functional parts described as absent:

(53) John replaced the missing screw.

This is what seems to be going on in such examples. *The missing screw* refers to a variable object that fails to have an actual manifestation, and it is that variable object that is being replaced by an actual part, or rather by a variable part that has an actual manifestation at the present time. The missing screw is treated as an object, one that fails to have an actual manifestation and as such is replaced by an object that does have an actual manifestation.

5 Conclusion

Completion-relates verbs of absence crucially involve the notion of a conceived whole with the possibilities of an incomplete and a complete manifestation. The notion of such a unified whole is broader (or perhaps just distinct) from single objecthood: it comprises various sorts of wholes without objecthood being at stake, including individuals together with their possessions, family relations or friendships, locations and pluralities. What matters for occasions to constitute wholes are relations such as possession, kinship, expectations, suitability for certain purposes or goals.

Conceptual wholes in turn have conceptual parts. Both give rise to variable objects (or variable embodiments). Conceptual wholes give rise to variable wholes, wholes that may have different manifestations at different times and in different circumstances. Likewise, parts of conceptual whole, conceptual parts, give rise to variable parts, which may fail to have actual manifestations. Variable wholes and variables parts semantically have the very same status as 'ordinary' objects (rigid objects).

The proposed semantics of verbs of completion-related absence made central use of the notion of a 'lack', a modal object that can be satisfied by actual or variable parts that have actual manifestations. A lack appears to be on a par with a modal object of metaphysical necessity based on essence. But a lack is based on a conceptual

whole that permits partial manifestations and thus involves only a weak form of necessity.

The involvement of graded modality is also reflected in a natural ordering among lacks. Lacks are ordered in part by the size of satisfiers, as in (54a) as well as the degree of manifested qualities, as in (54b).[7]

(54) a. Mary's lack of money is greater than John's.
b. Joe's lack of kindness is greater than Bill's.

Lacks are objects that like needs, permissions, and laws come with satisfaction conditions. What is peculiar about lacks, though, is that their satisfiers are completing parts of wholes. This yields the connection to truthmaker semantics. Truthmaker semantics permits various kinds of objects to act as truthmakers (or satisfiers), as long as they play the truthmaking role. In the case of lacks the completing parts would manifest an implicitly understood conceptual whole. Even if this is not quite the same relation as truthmaking, there are significant similarities and joint contrasts to possible worlds semantics.

One overall conclusion from the proposed semantics of verbs of completion-related absence one can draw is that the notion of in integrated whole and the correlated one of a structural part are important notions in the semantics of natural language: they pertain to a level of 'intensional' mereology that is in stark contrast to the use of extensional mereology that has dominated natural language semantics for quite some time.[8]

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7 Can the modal objects of missing also be objects also be ordered by the importance of the object missing for the particular whole at hand? That does not really seem to be possible:
(53) The house is more missing from the house than the door.
Why that should be so is still to be investigated.

8 See Champollion, Krifka 2017 for the use of extensional mereology in natural language semantics.

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Quoting Nothing

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Abstract This paper argues that the practice of employing bare pairs of quotation marks to represent the empty string in formal linguistics and computer science is well-founded in the implicit conventions governing the use of quotation marks in natural language. In the framework of the Inscriptional Theory of Quotation (ITQ), it is argued that sentences containing empty quotation (i.e., empty quotational sentences) are grammatical and meaningful. Furthermore, the notion of an empty string is employed in the analysis of reported speech to provide a unified account that identifies mixed quotation as the primary form of reported speech.

Keywords Empty string. Empty quotation. Mixed quotation. Ostensive definition. Reported speech.

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1 Introduction

The empty string is a fundamental concept in computer science and formal linguistics. It is defined as a string of length zero, meaning it contains no characters. In certain instances, it is represented by the symbol 'ε', that is, by a referring expression with a type-⟨*e*⟩ semantic value. In most programming languages, including Python, Java, Swift, and others, the empty string is typically represented using quotation marks without any content in between. This is illustrated in (1) below. (1-a) is an example from Python language, wherein the empty string appears at the end of the line, to ensure that there is no extra content after the exclamation mark. In the follow-up (1-b), the empty string is used to represent missing data.

1-a. print('Hello' + '!' + '')
1-b. email = ''

Such examples illustrate limiting cases of *pure quotation* (or *metalinguistic quotation*) as opposed to *attributive quotation*. In contrast to attributive quotation, pure quotation is employed not to report someone's speech, but rather to talk about linguistic expressions, e.g., to ascribe them syntactic, orthographic or semantic proprieties, as illustrated in (2a)-(2-c). Sentences (2-d) and (2-e) appear, at first glance, to be pure quotational sentences about zero-length linguistic expressions. In fact, if we assume that they are grammatically correct and meaningful, then they appear to be true and false, respectively.

2-a. 'Ho' is a Chinese proper name
2-b. 'Ho' has two characters
2-c. 'Ho' denotes Ho
2-d. '' has no characters
2-e. '' has eight letters

The use of empty quotation in programming languages is motivated by certain practical considerations. For example, the use of quotation marks with nothing between them maintains consistency with the representation of non-empty strings, as strings with content are typically enclosed in quotation marks. Extending this convention to the empty string produces a uniform syntax. The empty string can be defined with respect to a given string s as follows: $'' = s[i..j]$ with $i > j$, where $s[i..j]$ is a generic sub-string of s that starts at position i and ends at position j (Gusfield 1997, 3-4). For every string s, s concatenated with '' yields s: $s^\frown'' = s$, $''^\frown s = s$ (Partee, Meulen, Wall 1990, 434). Consequently, the empty string is a sub-expression of every expression. Given that it plays the role of a neutral element within a linguistic system, it can be said that it exemplifies any linguistic

determinable (e.g., character length, syntactic category, etc.) to a degree of 0. As a result, the empty string can be considered compositionally neutral with respect to both the syntax and semantics of the expressions in which it occurs.

In certain contexts, it is convenient to consider the empty string as a singleton containing an empty tuple of characters: {⟨⟩}. To illustrate, suppose we want to obtain the name 'HO' from 'H', 'O', and '' by concatenation. This can be achieved through operations on sets of indexed characters, as follows: {⟨0, H⟩} ∪ {⟨1, O⟩} ∪ {⟨2, ⟨⟩⟩}. In programming languages empty quotation is employed in various scenarios, such as handling user input, initializing variables, building strings, and so forth. As will be demonstrated in Section 3, it plays a role in the analysis of ordinary mixed quotation.

This paper addresses the question of whether the conventions governing the use of bare quotation marks in programming languages to represent the empty string are in alignment with the conventions that govern the use of quotation marks in natural language. In the framework of the Inscriptional Theory of Quotation (ITQ), which posits that quotations are linguistic expressions with type-⟨*e*, *t*⟩ semantic values, it will be demonstrated that sentences containing empty quotations (i.e., empty quotational sentences), such as (2-d) and (2-e), are grammatical and meaningful. It will be argued that the use of bare quotation marks in programming languages is motivated by the implicit rules governing quotation marks in ordinary language.

The paper runs as follows. Section 2 outlines ITQ. In Section 2.1, ITQ is extended to encompass the phenomenon of empty quotation. Section 2.2 addresses the issue of the grammatical acceptability of empty quotational sentences. The argument is presented that sentences such as (2-d) and (2-e) are grammatical. The illusion of their non-grammaticality is explained by showing how, in certain contexts of use, empty quotation predicates may appear to be vacuous (in a sense that will be defined). In Section 3 the notion of empty string is employed to analyze ordinary language, by demonstrating how it enables a unified account of reported discourse, with direct and indirect speech identified as special cases of mixed quotation. Finally, Section 4 presents our conclusions.

2 Inscriptional Theory of Quotation (ITQ)

A number of attempts have been made in the philosophy of language and linguistics to formalize the nature and function of quotation. For an overview of these efforts, see Cappelen and Lepore (2007). The predominant focus has been on developing a unified theory of quotation that can encompass various quotation forms, including pure quotation, direct quotation, indirect quotation, hybrid quotation, and

mixed quotation. Within such a program, most theories concur that a quotation – what Recanati (2001, 649) terms *close quotation* (as opposed to *open quotation*) – is a referential expression of a certain kind, such as a proper name (Tarski [1933] 1956, 159), a definite description (Geach 1957, 82), a demonstrative (Davidson 1979; Cappelen, Lepore 1997), a function (Richard 1986). This perspective can be described as *Referentialism about Quotation* (RQ), which posits that a quotation is a singular term (or serves as a singular term).

In contrast to RQ, ITQ suggests treating quotations as complex predicates that *ostensively* describe classes of inscriptions/utterances (cf. Pavone 2024). Such a predicativist view on quotation is informed by the work of Goodman (1951, 262) and Scheffler (1954). According to ITQ, a quotation as a whole – i.e., a quotation-mark expression consisting of both quotes and what is enclosed between them – describes a class of objects in a replication relation to each other, where replication is understood as a relation of similarity in relevant linguistic features associated with a set of linguistic determinables, $k = \{d_1,..., d_n\}$, which is contextually/pragmatically provided.

To illustrate, consider the example provided in (3) below. In certain contexts of use, it can be reasonably assumed that (3-b) is a replica of (3-a), but this is not necessarily the case when the intended linguistic similarity is taken with respect to a different set of relevant linguistic determinables.

3-a. CAT
3-b. cat
3-c. CAT

Let us suppose that *k* includes length in characters, lexical category, font, and no other element. In this case, (3-b) would be a replica of (3-a), as it has the same length and the same font as (3-a), and both are common countable nouns. In contrast, (3-c) is not a replica of (3-a), as it does not replicate the same font as (3-a). However, by assuming an alternative set of relevant features, expanded to include the uppercase/lowercase distinction, and reduced to remove the font, (3-c) counts as a replica of (3-a), while (3-b) does not. It can be said that the conventions governing quotation in natural languages provide quotation-marks expressions with a character, in the customary Kaplanian sense (1989), that is, a rule for determining the conditions of applicability of a quotation predicate in various circumstances of evaluation and contexts of use. The conventional linguistic meaning of a quotational sentence is to be supplemented through a pragmatic process of identifying the relevant notion of replication.

The quotation-mark expression occurring in (2-b), for instance, is to be regarded as a complex predicate ostensively describing the following class of objects: $\{x: x \approx_k$ ↘Ho↙$\}$. The symbol '$\approx_k$' represents a

replication relation between inscriptions/utterances defined with respect to a certain set *k* of contextually provided linguistic determinables. The small arrows represent Reichenbach's token-quotation marks (1947, 284). We can define them as a pointing device that the quoter employs to provide the applicability conditions for the quotational predicate by demonstrating a quotational exemplar, i.e., that particular object printed between token-quotation marks that has both perceptual and non-perceptual properties. As linguistically incorporated, they introduce a covert demonstrative pronoun into the language. Consequently, token-quotation marks play a dual role, acting both as a demonstrative and as a means of demonstration. The extension of the quotational predicate is to be construed as follows: the class of inscriptions/utterances that are similar in linguistic form (with respect to *k*) to the quotational exemplar.

Accordingly, (4-a) below is to be analyzed as (4-b), which asserts that all *k*-replicas of the quotational exemplar can be used as a verb. However, the truth-conditional value of (4-b) may vary depending on context of use. To illustrate, if the set of the relevant linguistic features in a context *c* includes the lexical category to which the quotational exemplar belongs (i.e., proper name), $[(4\text{-b})]_{c} = 0$, as no *k*-replica that has the same lexical category as the token-quoted item can be used as a verb (no proper name can be used as a verb.). In contrast, $[(4\text{-b})]_{c^*} = 1$, in a context *c** providing a set of purely orthographic determinables. In fact, 'ho' is a verb in the Italian language.

4-a. 'Ho' can be used as a verb
4-b. $\forall x(x \approx_{k} \searrow \text{Ho} \swarrow \rightarrow x$ can be used as a verb)

To formulate the rules by which a linguistic similarity is specified, the Kaplanian notion of semantic context of use is supplemented by a set *k* of linguistic determinables. The extension of a quotational predicate is defined as the class of linguistic objects that have (or are) the same determinables (as specified in the context) as the quotational exemplar. A limiting case arises when the process of specifying the notion of replication at stake leads the addressee to identifying the extension of the quotation predicate with the singleton containing the quotational exemplar itself. For instance, there will be contexts of use in which (5-a) below, whose inscriptional analysis is (5-b), is not true.

5-a. 'Ho' = 'Ho'
5-b. $\forall x(x \approx_{k} \searrow \text{Ho} \swarrow \leftrightarrow x \approx_{k} \searrow \text{Ho} \swarrow)$

Intuitively, the quoter suggests a range within which the search for the recipient should be conducted, to identify the kind of replication involved for the domain of applicability of the quotation predicate.

To assist in the comprehension of a quotation, the quoter may also provide a range of exemplars, illustrating both positive and negative applications of the quotation predicate (cf. Pavone 2023, 242). We define appropriate contexts of use as those that provide linguistic determinables that are exemplified by the quotational exemplar. It would be inappropriate, for instance, to attempt to define a class of objects that have the same color as an exhibited colorless object. Let us call this appropriateness constraint (AC) on contexts of use for quotation-marks expressions. This may be seen as an instance of Grice's maxim of relation (1989, 28).

2.1 The Semantics and Pragmatics of Empty Quotation

The theoretical framework previously outlined provides a basis for the semantics and pragmatics of empty quotation. Quotational sentences (2-d)-(2-e), repeated below for convenience, illustrate instances of empty quotation.

2-d. '' has no characters
2-e. '' has eight letters

In contrast to Gomez-Torrente (2010), who thinks that our pre-existing understanding of quotation does not permit the desired interpretation of (2-d), in terms of a true sentence about the empty string, we maintain that the conventions that elucidate non-empty quotations in natural languages are the same as those that elucidate empty quotation in programming languages.

In accordance with the instructions set forth by ITQ, (2-d) is to be logically rendered as (2-d'), where the quotation predicate has this extension: $\{x\colon x \approx_k \searrow\swarrow\}$, for some *k*-replication. This is the class of all *k*-replicas of the token-quoted item. (2-d') asserts that all *k*-replicas of the token-quoted item have no characters. Similarly, command (1-a) can be interpreted as (1-a'), which instructs us to print one replica for each token-quoted item.

1-a. print('Hello' + '!' + '')
1-a'. $\exists x \ldots z(x \approx_k \searrow \mathrm{H} \swarrow \wedge \ldots \wedge z \approx_k \searrow\swarrow)$. PRINT $x \ldots z$ (in this order)
2-d'. $\forall x(x \approx_k \searrow\swarrow \rightarrow$ x has no characters)

Bare quotation marks are predicates lacking appropriate contexts of use. The use of bare quotation marks in sentences such as (2-d) and (2-e) violates AC, as the minimal blank between quotation marks fails to exemplify linguistic features. However, violation of AC may trigger a pragmatic calculation for a conversational implicature.

Let us consider the following scenario. It is known that John is a person who lacks scruples, and the speaker wishes to assert that Tom is similarly corrupt, possibly without explicitly committing to that assertion. The speaker might say that Tom has the same scruples as John. This assertion is evidently false, given that John has no scruples. However, the speaker conveys the content that Tom is a person without scruples. Communication seems here to violate the Gricean maxim of relation "for the purpose of getting in a conversational implicature by means of something of the nature of a figure speech" (Grice 1989, 33).

A similar phenomenon we propose occurs with the interpretation of empty quotations, such as in (2-d) and (2-e). Since no linguistic object is exhibited, the quotational predicate extension is literally empty: there is no object that has the same linguistic form as the token-quoted item, which does not exemplify linguistic features. Consequently, sentences (2-d) and (2-e) are trivially true. However, the violation of AC can result in a pragmatic calculation that leads to a conversational implicature.

The desired class of objects, that is, the singleton containing the empty string, can be obtained through a pragmatic process that can be described as follows. The violation of AC prompts the addressee to interpret the token-quoted item as a proxy for what it metonymically represents (by a form of deferred ostension). The token-quoted item (the minimal blank between quotes) can be seen as the output generated by the command to print the empty string. This causal relationship allows for an interpretive shift from effect to cause, that is, from the token-quoted element to the empty string. For this interpretation to take place, it is necessary to ensure that the blank between quotation marks is of a sufficient length, such that it does not exceed the blank that typically separates characters within a word. Therefore, the extension of the quotation predicate is to be construed as the class of replicas of the proxy token-quoted item, that is, the class of replicas of the empty string. Given that the empty string has only one replica, namely the empty string itself, for any linguistic determinable that it exemplifies at a degree of 0, the quotation extension is identical to the empty string singleton.

2.2 Grammaticality of Empty Quotation

Some scholars (e.g. Sorensen 2008) maintain that sentences such as (2-d)-(2-e) are grammatical (and meaningful), while others (e.g., Gomez-Torrente 2001; Saka 2006; 2011) argue that they are not. However, our intuitions are mixed. Those who argue for the grammaticality thesis and those who argue for the ungrammaticality thesis are both committed to explaining respectively the apparent ill-formedness and well-formedness of (2-d)-(2-e). ITQ appears to be able to do this job better than its competitors.

According to Sorensen (2008, 58), (2-e) can appear to be ill-formed due to its obvious falsity, but the judgment of ungrammaticality, he argues, is nullified when true empty quotational sentences, like (2-d), are considered. This explanation seems to be inadequate for two reasons. The assertion that Hitler won World War II or that a circle has four sides is obviously false, yet this does not trigger ungrammaticality judgments. Furthermore, those who reject the grammaticality of empty quotations tend to reject both (2-d) and (2-e). Sorensen should also provide an explanation for the illusion of ill-formedness of (2-d).

Saka (2011, 206) argues that sentences such as (2-d) may appear to be well-formed due to their capacity to convey/communicate a truth, in virtue of a context-induced reading, given that communication of truths does not necessarily require well-formedness. To explain the disagreements on the grammaticality of empty quotational sentences, the author invokes what he calls the speech-only thesis, which posits that language is only speech, and writing is not strictly a language. Consequently, from a linguistic/naturalistic point of view on language, empty quotational sentences appear to be ungrammatical because they cannot be pronounced in such a way to produce a corresponding utterance in a natural spoken language (2011, 216). In contrast, from a logical/philosophical point of view on language, in which any syntactic/semantic system counts as a language, empty quotation can appear to be grammatical.

Saka's approach to mixed intuitions is based on premises regarding the nature of language and disciplinary differences between linguistics and philosophy of language that are highly controversial. An alternative explanation of mixed intuitions that is less committed to general assertions about the nature of language and methodological issues in the language sciences would be preferable. This is what ITQ seems to provide.

The underlying concept of ITQ is that quotations are ostensively defined predicates. This implies that quoting requires an associated ostensive act. In defining a quotational predicate, the quoter employs token-quotation marks as a pointing device to describe the class of replicas (in some relevant set of linguistic determinables *k*) of the quotational exemplar. When a bare pair of quotation marks occurs, the addressee of the quotation may interpret the associated ostensive act, performed by the token-quotation marks, as lacking a *demonstratum*. Under this interpretation, the quotational predicate appears to be vacuous – from which a judgment of ungrammaticality. Alternatively, the associated ostensive act is interpreted as genuinely pointing to something that helps the addressee to find the correct condition of applicability for the quotational predicate. The possibility of these two readings is a candidate for explaining our mixed intuitions about the grammaticality of empty quotations.

3 Empty Quotation and Reported Speech

The concept of empty string is not limited to programming languages. It can also play an important role in the analysis of ordinary language. It is widely accepted that mixed quotation, illustrated by (6-a) below, is a hybrid case of reporting speech that exhibits both direct and indirect verbal forms. However, through the concept of empty string, mixed quotation can be analyzed as a basic reporting verbal form, of which the direct and indirect forms arise as limiting cases. Bare quotation marks can play a role in reported speech analysis similar to their role in programming languages as useful placeholders or to express default values in situations where a string is expected but may be absent or unspecified.

The inscriptional analysis of (6-a) is (6-b). The individual constant '*a*' denotes Paul, '≡' is a symbol for the paraphrase relationship between inscriptions/utterances, the capital '*Y*' represents the set of all sub-strings of the corresponding inscription *y*, 'I(*z*, *y*)' is a 2-place predicate expressing that *z* inscribes/utters *y*.

6-a. Paul said that proper names "are not words in a language"

6-b. $\exists x,y(x \approx_k \searrow$are not words … $\swarrow \wedge x \in Y \wedge y \equiv \mathrm{P} \wedge \mathrm{I}ay)$

As a whole, (6-b) asserts that there is a replica (with respect to a set of relevant linguistic determinables *k*) *x* of the token-quoted items such that *x* is a sub-string of a paraphrase *y* of the inscription P, and Paul inscribed *y*. P is defined as the value of a binary function Φ which takes the unquoted (U) and the quoted (Q) parts of the complement clause of the mixed quotation as its arguments. Φ works as follows: $\Phi(\mathrm{U}, \mathrm{Q}) = \mathrm{U}^\frown\mathrm{S}$, that is, U concatenated with S, where S is construed as a paraphrase (in the context of the reporter) of *x*, and *x* is what the reportee (Paul) inscribed. In other words, $\mathrm{S} \in [x]_r$, where $[x]_r$ is defined as the set of all expressions that in the context of the reporter have the same semantic value as *x*. Conventionally, S can be assumed to be the shortest expression in $[x]_r$.

In this framework, direct and indirect speech arise as limiting cases of mixed quotation when the function Φ takes empty string as one of its two arguments. A covert empty quotation is postulated in indirect speech, illustrated by (7-a), whose inscriptional analysis is (7-b). In (7-a), the complement sentence contains no quoted part. Hence $\Phi(\mathrm{U}, \text{''}) = \mathrm{U}^\frown\mathrm{S}$, where $\mathrm{S} \in [x]_r$, as above. Given that *x* is a replica of an empty string, *x* is devoid of any semantic value, or alternatively, it is assigned a null semantic value. Accordingly, $[x]_r$ is the set of all expressions that in the context of the reporter have a null semantic value. The shortest expression in $[x]_r$ is a string with a length of zero. Therefore, $\mathrm{U}^\frown\mathrm{S} = \mathrm{U}^\frown\text{''}$, and P = U. (7-b) asserts that Paul inscribed an inscription *y* such that the empty string *x* is trivially a sub-string

of *y* and *y* is a paraphrase of P. In a similar manner, direct speech can be analyzed as a case in which Φ(‘’, Q) = ‘’⁀S.

7-a. Paul said [that] ‘’ proper names are not words in a language
7-b. $\exists x,y(x \approx_k \searrow\swarrow \wedge x \in Y \wedge y \equiv \mathrm{P} \wedge \mathrm{I}ay)$

4 Conclusion

Some scholars, such as Gomez-Torrent and Saka, argued that empty quotations are not grammatical. This perspective contrasts with the conventional practice in formal linguistics and programming languages of employing empty quotes to represent the empty string. In response to this phenomenon, proponents of the non-grammaticality thesis may invoke the homonymity thesis, postulating that the quotation marks employed in programming languages do not belong to the same type as those used in natural languages. In contrast, this paper has argued that the practice of using bare quotation marks in formal linguistics and programming languages has its roots in the conventions governing the use of quotation in natural languages. According to ITQ, quotation-marks expressions are predicates ostensively defined by means of the exhibition of a quotational exemplar. The ostensive definition at stake is based on the notion of similarity in linguistic form defined with respect to a set of contextually provided linguistic determinables. The appropriateness constraint, what has been called AC, is violated where a bare pair of quotation marks occurs, as no linguistic item is here token-quoted. The violation of AC prompts the addressee to interpret the minimal blank between the token-quotation marks as a proxy token for the empty string that it metonymically represents. Such a conversational implicature appears to be a well-established and an accepted convention within the domain of programming languages. The notion of empty string is not limited to programming languages. It plays a role in the analysis of ordinary mixed quotation, which has been proposed as the primary reporting form. Direct and indirect reported speech can be regarded as special forms of this.

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Scars of Resistance: Manolo Millares's Aesthetics of Negativity

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Abstract Manolo Millares emerged as a key figure in Spanish Informalism during the 1950s, a time marked by Francoist censorship and repression. This article examines Millares's complicated position during Franco's regime, arguing that his focus on absence and materiality, analyzed through Adorno's negative dialectics, constituted a radical form of aesthetic protest. Millares utilized mixed media to create works that evoked themes of death and violence, yet transcended mere figuration. Millares's innovative approach, characterized by the use of burlap and incisions on the canvas, challenged traditional aesthetic unity and formalism. By engaging with multiple forms of absence and non-identity, his work resisted subsumption into political or aesthetic narratives.

Keywords Informalism. Adorno. Millares. Absence. Nonidentity. Non-being. Mixed-media.

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1 Introduction

Manolo Millares (1926-1972), recognized in contemporary art criticism as a prominent figure in Spanish informalism, emerged as an avant-garde artist in the 1950s during a period of censorship and repression by Francisco Franco's regime. In his work, which involved an ensemble of materials and mixed media, Millares was influenced by Surrealism (whose traces can be seen in the asemic writing he sometimes used, a successor of automatic writing), Art Informel, Arte Povera, and other international post-avant-garde currents, all of which contributed to his unique style. Although Millares's works often evoke themes of corporeal death and violence, they nevertheless transcend figuration. Instead, they invite viewers to engage intimately and literally with the artwork, fostering a closeness that stems from the materiality of the works, the rigid fabrics, and the absence-made-present through incisions on the canvas. The fragility of the ensemble, seemingly on the verge of disintegration, creates a sense of impermanence and vulnerability, prompting contemplation of one's inherent proximity to death. The use of materials sourced from the streets and garbage dumps, whose histories the artist deliberately preserves, complicates the relationship between works of art and their historical and social context.

This article starts with an account of the difficult political situation experienced by Manolo Millares, along with other Spanish artists from the informalist movement, due to the appropriation of avant-garde art by Franco's dictatorship. After WWII, Spain, while grappling with the aftermath of its Civil War, found itself isolated under Franco's repressive regime, which enforced severe censorship and controlled cultural expression. Nonetheless, artists like Millares gained international recognition, participating in prestigious exhibitions such as the Venice and Saõ Paulo Biennales. However, this success came at a cost because it was facilitated by the very regime that the artists opposed. The Francoist government strategically used cultural diplomacy to bolster its image abroad, integrating avant-garde art into its propaganda efforts to outwardly project a modern image while internally maintaining its authoritarian grasp.

Critics such as de la Torre (2015), Guasch (2008), Medina Martín (2016), Rivero Gómez (2020), and Vilas (2021) have described Millares and his contemporaries either as ethical artists exposing the regime's brutality or as its instruments. However, the reality was more nuanced, and my article explores this tension between resistance and co-option in art under complex political circumstances. More specifically, I argue that Millares's work embraces a different kind of aesthetic resistance by engaging with absence and non-being, concepts whose aesthetic dimensions can be productively understood using Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy. Adorno's negative dialectics, which

emphasizes the importance of nonidentity and the materiality of objects, provides a framework for understanding Millares's art beyond its immediate political and purely formal dimensions.

2 Background and Theoretical Framing

Informalism[1] is an art movement that emerged in postwar Europe, animated by the rejection of traditional forms[2] and echoing the existential anguish felt after WWII. Although France is regarded as the starting milieu of informalism, with artists like Jean Fautrier, Henri Michaux, George Mathieu, and Jean Dubuffet gaining international recognition, Italy and Spain developed their own forms of informalism. For example, in Italy, Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, and Emilio Vedova became representatives of spacialism and exhibited an intense engagement with material, texture, and performance. Spanish artists, such as Antoni Tàpies, Manolo Millares, Rafael Canogal, Antonio Saura, and Luis Feito, hindered by the political restrictions of Franco's regime, looked to Italy's art scene as a gateway to broader European influence, especially as the Venice Biennale became a major venue for their international debut in the 1950s. While Lucio Fontana's explorations of space and Alberto Burri's expressive use of material influenced Spanish artists (notably Manolo Millares and Luis Feito), who incorporated a similar rawness and material intensity into their works, Spanish informalism displays a dynamism and tension that sets it apart from its European counterparts. As Pasini notes,

> In these reverse sides of paintings[3] rises the cry of the most authentic informal challenge, with a dramatic […] quality difficult to find in the rest of Europe: there is a Goyaesque hallucination,

1 The term *art informel*, translated into English as 'informal art' or 'informalism', was coined by Michel Tapié in his influential book *Un art autre* (1952). In fact, Tapié used both *art autre* and *art informel*; however, the latter became more widely used (for an account of informalist terminology, see Pasini 1995, 179-82). The umbrella-term *art informel* includes currents such as lyrical abstraction, tachism, gestural painting, spacialism, performative painting, and art brut (see the entries "Art Autre" and "Art Informel" in the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, 2009, 116, 122).

2 Informalist artists were reacting not only against the classical figural forms (represented, especially in Spain, by Christian realism and classicism) but also against the formalism of the historical avant-gardes. As the critic Lawrence Alloway notes, informalism "dispenses with most of the conventions of traditional modern art. The rejected rhetoric includes geometry, formal composition, and the purification of art by the exclusion of objects" (cited by Whiteley 2012, 96).

3 Pasini is referring here to the informalist strategy of exposing the 'back' of a painting, as well as the frame, mounting materials, and hardware, as an integral part of a painting.

> a continuous and devouring 'sabbath' of unprecedented bestiality. (1995, 287)

> In questi rovesci di pittura sale l'urlo della più autentica sfida informale, con una drammaticità […] difficile da riscontrare nel resto d'Europa: vi si respira un'allucinazione goyesca, un continuo e divorante 'sabba' di inaudita bestialità.[4]

Because the aim of this article is not to offer a systematic classification of the different forms of negativity in Millares's work, my framework is speculative rather than analytic. More specifically, this article adopts a speculative dialectical approach to exploring Millares's work and his socio-historical context. I propose Adorno's concept of nonidentity from *Negative Dialectics* (1973) as a lens through which informalism and particularly Millares's work can be theorized as resistance against rigid forms and a drive towards raw expression. Adorno's method of negative dialectics is only 'negative' insofar as it adopts nonidentity as foundation. Although the terms 'negative' and 'negativity' appear frequently in Adorno's work, he never approaches negativity as an independent concept; rather, negativity is always at work in a dialectical process.[5] Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973), which David Sherman called "his philosophical masterpiece" (2016, 353), sets out to turn dialectics around by emphasizing negation (the operative aspect of negativity):

> As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a 'negation of negation' later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. (Adorno 1973, xix)

However, exposing the rationale and *modus operandi* of negative dialectics as a manner of doing philosophy is an arduous task, seeing that discontinuity and concretion are emphasized in contrast to and in tandem with the syllogistic structure of classical metaphysics. *Negative Dialectics* (1973) is perplexing because it seeks "to

4 All texts that appear in both English and the original language (Spanish or Italian) are translated by the Author.

5 Adorno was skeptical of the idea of pure, or strong and unmediated, negativity. For him, the dialectical process was essential to philosophical understanding. In "How It Is (After Auschwitz): Adorno and Beckett" (2020), Jean-Michel Rabaté notes the following regarding Adorno's reception of Beckett's emphasis on negativity in relation to theory of art: "Adorno expressed some incomprehension about the issue of negativity, and noted: 'Very enigmatic remark about a kind of positivity contained in pure negativity. In view of such absolute negativity, one could be said to quasi live'" (119).

serve authentic concretion" (xix) while remaining, for the most part, a "largely abstract text" (xix). It is important to note that Adorno's position is, however critical of classical metaphysics, is nevertheless not anti-thought. Adorno emphasizes the importance of conceptual work in reaching the concept's other. His project in *Negative Dialectics* is an attempt "by means of logical consistency to substitute for the unity principle, and for the paramountcy of the supraordinated concept, the idea of what would be outside the sway of such unity" (xx). The contention that the concept is not identical with the object to which it refers underpins Adorno's critique of identity, which is at the heart of *Negative Dialectics*. The anti-identitarian premise that concepts and their counterparts in the world (objects) never completely overlap sets up one of his most important theses regarding negative dialectics, which is that "dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity" (5) in which "contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity" (5). Thus, Adorno turns the unity of the concept into the heterogeneity of the object.[6] Adorno's negative dialectics is based on Hegel's dialectical method, which reconciles opposites through the process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. As Sherman points out,

> while Hegel argues for 'the *identity* of identity and non-identity' […], Adorno argues in effect for the *non-identity* of identity and non-identity: 'To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn towards non-identity, is the hinge of negative dialectics'. (2016, 355; emphasis added)

Therefore, Adorno's notion of nonidentity resists the reductive impulse of philosophy to encapsulate reality in static concepts, just as informalist artists reject the confines of traditional aesthetic categories and opt, instead, to foreground the expressive materiality and unique particularity of their works. Adorno's critique of identity-thinking – that is, the philosophical tendency to subsume particulars into overarching, totalizing concepts – finds a parallel in the informalists' rejection of classical representation and compositional harmony. In *Aesthetic Theory* (2013), Adorno aims to complicate the negative-affirmative structure internal to the work of art to such an extent that, under the weight of the excess of negative determinations, art's very structure would collapse, uncovering its instability.[7]

6 As Andrew Bowie explains in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (2013), Adorno links identity (and its counterpart, nonidentity) to Kant's categories of understanding, upon which constitutive subjectivity is built, and Hegel's concept (*Begriff*) "as a dynamic structure of inferences that encompasses the changing status of things which results from their shifting relations to other things" (26).

7 For more on Adorno's dialectical approach to aesthetics as representative of his view of art as a meaningful reflection of social and historical truths, see Melaney 1997.

Moreover, Adorno focuses on art's constitutive 'absence' – the elusive aspect of art mirrored in the informalist treatment of material as an active, resistant force, made most apparent by the use cuts in the canvas (by artists like Fontana, Burri, and Millares), which emphasize the object's resistance to smooth conceptualization and reveal an underlying tension between materiality and form. Regarding the relationship between philosophy and this constitutive absence of the art object, Malt states the following:

> The accumulation of propositions creates a limit, a place where the discourse comes up against the absence of its object – against art's 'not saying'. Adorno continually reapplies his language to that place, accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks, multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence. His language is negative, but it does not negate its object […] so much as it negates or continually modifies itself. (2018, 212)

Although Malt collapses the discussion of the work of art into the matter of negative philosophy and critical language alone, I would like to insist that Adorno develops an understanding of art in which art achieves what philosophy cannot perform: the collapse of the material and productive forces that it incorporates in establishing a (false) semblance to the world. Speaking about modern art in particular, Adorno (2013) argues that art absorbs the accelerated modes of production and discards the old, obsolete forms that pedants may cling to. Unlike philosophy, which operates with rigid logical operations that it cannot discard, the work of art, when it is authentic and autonomous, always has something of the new and opposes the Zeitgeist while also bearing the scars of its past reconfigurations. Unlike philosophy, art does not have reason, order, and clarity inscribed in its content; rather, it opposes discursive modes of thought and bears truth and criticism in its core. Modern art carries forward the disintegration of what it contains, not least by turning against itself, against the forces of accelerated production which it appropriates: "The murderous historical force of the modern is equated with the disintegration of all that to which the proprietors of culture despairingly cling" (47).

Informalist art likewise rejects the confines of representation and, in particular, abstraction's "essentiality, the formal

Melaney focuses especially on Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment as it is reflected in twentieth-century literature, culminating in a discussion of the political dimensions of Adorno's aesthetic theories.

rigor, the compositional brevity, the geometric order, according to a need to prune the existing for the benefit of its general elements" ("l'essenzialità, il rigore formale, la brevità compositiva, l'ordine geometrico, secondo una necessità di potatura dell'esistente a vantaggio dei suoi elementi generali"; Pasini 1995, 40), while informalism "indicates a way of entry, of intrusion into existence and its vortices, seeing as the artist wants, metaphorically, but also physically to dive into the work, attack it, possess it" (40; "indica un modo di entrata, di intromissione nell'esistenza e nei suoi vortici, in quanto l'artista vuole, metaforicamente, ma anche fisicamente tuffarsi dentro l'opera, aggredirla, possederla"). Therefore, similar to Adorno leading dialectics to its collapse from within metaphysics, informalism places the artist "inside the work, between matter and energy" (41, "dentro la cosa, fra materia ed energia").

In more concrete terms, Manolo Millares's use of burlap and mixed media in his paintings reflects a materiality that resists subsumption into a singular narrative, whether political or formal, as well as resistance to full codification. His work, marked by themes of death and disintegration, parallels Adorno's critique of identity and totalizing thought. I argue that Millares's focus on absence – a space where the material world and its histories are both present and negated – is an attempt to create a radical form of artistic expression that resists immediate co-option by political narratives, authoritarian and progressive alike. This absence, or non-being,[8] generates a radical site of protest that challenges both the political and aesthetic status quo.

By analyzing his works and their sociohistorical context, this article highlights how Millares's art navigates and ultimately transcends

8 In Adorno's philosophy, absence and nonidentity are distinct but intersecting concepts. Absence refers to a deliberate rejection of images or fixed representations (for a thorough investigation of Adorno's 'ban on images', see Truskolaski 2021) – a refusal to overlay reality with idealized or conceptualized images that obscure its material truth. Absence thus acts as an ethical stance, as well as aesthetic and conceptual strategy, by keeping thought open to the complexity of reality and resisting the impulse to reduce it to simple, conceptual identities. In this sense, absence can be seen as a form of negative space, one that holds a disciplined openness towards what exists outside of full comprehension or conceptual closure. Non-being, on the other hand, relates to what is denied presence within the bounds of conceptual identity. For Adorno, the concept of non-being connects to his notion of nonidentity, which emphasizes the aspects of reality that elude thought's ability to define, categorize, or assimilate it fully. Non-being is not mere emptiness or nothingness; it is the excess of reality that resists being subsumed under thought. Non-being also represents the limit of what thought can contain – what remains 'other' and, thus, nonidentical to any conceptual framework imposed upon it. In Adorno's view, both absence and non-being serve as markers of resistance against systems of thought that attempt to fully encompass and harmonize the world. In this article, I use the two terms as overlapping and coextensive in both Adorno's and Millares's works. Thus, I maintain that absence captures the openness to what exceeds the grasp of knowledge and remains irreducibly other, while non-being serves as the accumulation of non-representable material that conceptual thought cannot fully absorb and categorize.

the contradictions imposed by the Francoist regime. I argue that the power of Millares's paintings lies not in their political content per se but in their ability to convey a broader critique through their materiality and engagement with absence. This approach offers a new reading of Millares's art, one that emphasizes the importance of non-being in understanding the resistance embedded in his work.

3 Historical Context and Representational Conflicts

At the end of WWII, Europe saw the establishment of new political regimes and a reconfiguration of the continent along the East-West line of division. Spain, often excluded from accounts focusing on this division, was still coming to grips with its own bloody Civil War (1936-39). After the military coup organized by a nationalist military junta and the subsequent civil war, won by the coupists, Spain became closed off to the rest of the world. Held down by the iron fist of the Falangist organization, which was supported by the Carlist (traditionalist) faction and blessed by the supreme authority of the Catholic Church, Spain found itself under the dictatorship of general Francisco Franco (aka El Caudillo). For the following three and a half decades, Spain suffered under severe censorship, repression, and control of politics, culture, and social life enforced by acts of public violence, such as execution, torture, and military and police brutality. During the Franco dictatorship, Spain became a place from which no scream could escape. Therefore, it was not the abstract potentiality of death or the glorification of the subject's valor in the face of demise but the horror of concrete death at the hands of an authoritarian regime that concerned Spanish artists at the time.

During this period, Manolo Millares emerged as one of the most radical avant-garde artists. Along with other artists of his generation[9] – the generation that followed the world-renowned Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dalí – Millares succeeded in piercing the wall of silence and censorship surrounding Spain. In fact, he became internationally recognized and appreciated, presenting his work in some of the most renowned art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale (1956 and 1958) and Saõ Paulo Biennial (1957). Or, at least, this is the story endorsed by some critics (de la Torre 2015; Salazar 2019; Gómez 2017) – that of an ethical painter committed to exposing the pain and grief of a country under political repression. In reality, behind the international success of Spain's radical artists of the 1950s and 60s was the very Francoist regime that the artists were condemning.

9 The most celebrated avant-garde artists in Millares's generation are Antoni Tàpies, Manuel Rivera, Rafael Canogar, Antonio Saura, and Pablo Serrano.

During the Cold War, the ideological rift between East and West, represented by distinct cultural and economic models – capitalism and communism – placed Spain in a strategic position in relation to the US, which wanted to extend its military presence in Europe. The negotiations between the US and Spain aimed to establish US military bases in Spain in exchange for economic aid. The talks were complicated by mutual distrust but, informed by shared opposition to the USSR and its sphere of influence, the agreement took place gradually, with the final document signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1953. The Spain-US bilateral agreements bolstered Franco's regime, countering any immediate prospects for political change in Spain (see Bowen 2017). In the early 1950s, Spain received significant economic assistance from the US. Moreover, the international condemnation imposed on Spain in 1946 by the United Nations Security Council for Spain's support of the Axis Powers during WWII was gradually relaxed and eventually lifted, with Spain being admitted to the UN in 1955. During the Cold War, UN member countries prioritized security strategy over ethical concerns with an anti-democratic regime. For Spain, as Franco was aiming for international integration while maintaining his authoritarian yoke at home, international public support was key. Therefore, towards the end of the 1940s, cultural diplomacy became a crucial component of Spain's foreign policy.

As Víctor Nieto Alcaide and Genoveva Tusell García (2015) indicate, the regime began to gradually integrate artistic manifestations that went beyond academicism, the officially-endorsed style in post-Civil War Spain. Consequently, during the late 1940s and 1950s, avant-garde art started to be integrated into exhibitions mandated by the regime, which sought to modernize Spain's image internationally. Initiatives like the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid in 1951, Spain's participation in the Venice and Saõ Paulo Biennales, the launching of the Hispano-American biennales (1951 in Madrid, 1954 in La Havana, and 1955 in Barcelona), with varying degrees of success, as Miguel Cabañas Bravo (1996) documents, facilitated this cultural shift. Although the political landscape within Spain remained largely unchanged, these cultural efforts broke the cycle of post-war isolation and integrated Spanish art into the global scene.

Particularly important for the development and recognition of Spanish informalism, of which Manolo Millares was part, was Spain's participation in the Venice Biennale. The country sought to project an image of modernity through its cultural exports while continuing to rely on traditional stereotypes, such as realism.[10] This approach

10 Realism was aligned with the regime's cultural policies, which sought to project an image of modernity while maintaining a strong connection to Spain's historical and cultural heritage. By promoting realism, the regime aimed to integrate contemporary

gradually improved the reception of Spanish art in Italy and, subsequently, all over Europe. Over a decade, Spain's art scene distanced itself from fascist tropes, initially replacing them with religious and traditional themes. By the end of the 1950s, abstractionism, especially in the form of informalism, became the official art style of the Franco regime, under the direction of Luis Gonzales Robles, Chief of Exhibition Services in the Office of Cultural Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The 1956 Venice Biennale was particularly notable. Spain's exhibit included solo shows of 19th-century painter Juan de Echevarría and sculptor Pablo Gargallo, alongside contemporary artists. For the first time, the Spanish Pavilion included abstract works, thus aligning with international trends while maintaining a connection to Spanish tradition. The Spanish commissioner Marquis of Lozoya framed contemporary abstract art as a continuation of a long-standing tradition, neutralizing its potential political implications. As Romina Viggiano notes:

> The informal artists – Tàpies, but also José Tharrats, Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manuel Millares, Luis Feito, Manuel Mampaso Bueno, Enrique Planasdurá, and Ángel Ferran in sculpture – arrived in Venice presented by Luis Felipe Vivanco, an intellectual close to the avant-garde before and after the Civil War, who in the catalog retraced the Spanish artistic experiences of recent years, highlighting the renewal of religious art and the exhibitions promoted by Eugenio D'Ors's Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte or the Ibero-American Biennials. Vivanco considered the 'new art' a spiritual style where the artist follows his 'inner necessity', like his ancestors when they drew the bison in the Altamira cave. The interpretation allowed justifying the traditional realism of Spanish painting even in non-figurative compositions.
>
> Gli artisti a-formali – Tàpies ma anche José Tharrats, Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manuel Millares, Luis Feito, Manuel Mampaso Bueno, Enrique Planasdurá e Ángel Ferran in scultura – approdano a Venezia presentati da Luis Felipe Vivanco, un intellettuale vicino alle avanguardie, prima e dopo la guerra civile, che in catalogo ripercorre le esperienze artistiche spagnole degli ultimi anni evidenziando il rinnovamento dell'arte religiosa e le mostre promosse dall'Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte di Eugenio D'Ors o dalle Biennali Ispanoamericane. Vivanco reputa la 'nuova arte' uno stile spirituale in cui l'artista segue la sua 'necessità

artistic expressions with a sense of continuity and stability. For further information, see the review of Portalupi 1954.

> interiore',come i suoi antenati quando disegnarono i bisonti nella caverna di Altamira. L'interpretazione consente di giustificare il tradizionale realismo della pittura spagnola anche nelle composizioni non figurative. (2019, 336)

This portrayal of Spanish art, rooted in traditional art and extending through figures of the Spanish Golden Age, such as El Greco, Zurbarán, and Velázquez, sought to present an unbroken development from historical and modern art. This strategy presented contemporary art as an expression of Spain's enduring spirituality and cultural identity, effectively neutralizing its political and ideological dimensions, especially the modern artists' opposition to the regime. Abstraction, which lends itself to readings focused solely on the formal, aesthetic dimensions of the works of art, fit the official regime's image of innovation and openness without breaking with the traditionalist and religious line of expression endorsed by the government.

Millares's opposition to the regime was expressed subtly in his works before the 1960s and more openly afterward – for example, through such series as *Mutilados de paz* (Mutilated by Peace) (1965), dedicated to his father Juan Millares Carló, a literature and language educator and affiliate of the Republican Left, whose position as a teacher was revoked by the Franco government after the Civil War.[11] Moreover, from 1957 onwards, Millares started to openly express his opposition to the Francoist dictatorship through gestures such as forming the informalist group El Paso with Manuel Rivera, Rafael Canogar, Antonio Saura, and other contemporary artists, whose manifesto reads:

> We are moving towards a revolutionary practice (in which our dramatic tradition and our direct expression are present) that responds historically to a universal activity. […] We are heading towards a great artistic transformation in which to find the expression of a 'new reality'. And towards an anti-academy, in which the spectator and the artist become aware of their social and spiritual responsibility. The action of El Paso will last as long as the aforementioned conditions are maintained in our country.
>
> Vamos hacia una plástica revolucionaria (en la que estén presentes nuestra tradición dramática y nuestra directa expresión), que responda históricamente a una actividad universal. […] Nos encaminamos hacia una gran transformación plástica en la cual encontrar la expresión de una 'nueva realidad'. Y hacia una antiacademia, en

11 For a discussion on Millares's expression of political opposition to the Franco regime, especially as related to his family's history of repression, see Gómez 2017.

> la que el espectador y el artista tomen consciencia de su responsabilidad social y espiritual. La acción de El Paso durará mientras las condiciones antes expuestas se mantengan en nuestro país. (Cited in Juan Ovejero 2014, 75-6)

Manolo Millares's participation in international biennales, despite his critical stance against the Franco regime, exemplifies the complex relationship between modern artists and the state. Some critics (i.e., Vilas 2021; Kishinchand López 2016) discuss how Millares's abstract work, initially a radical expression of dissent, became part of the regime's strategy to project a modern image abroad. Polish essayist K.A. Jelensky (1961) viewed this as an attempt to sanitize and domesticate the rebellious content of young Spanish artists for cultural propaganda. Therefore, although they benefited greatly from the international exposure they received with the help of the regime's cultural campaign, Millares and others were burdened by the contradiction between the advancement of their artistic careers and their positions as ambassadors of an image of Spain that was radically different from the social and political reality of life inside Spain, which was marked by violent repression. Eventually, the artists distanced themselves from the regime. Millares followed Antonio Tàpies and Antonio Saura in withdrawing, from 1960 onwards, from the exhibitions organized by the regime.[12] The artists participated, in 1964, together with Pablo Picasso, in the anti-regime exhibition *España Libre* organized in Italy "by some representatives of the Communist Party" (Tusell García 2006).[13]

The association between the informalist artists and the Francoist government gave rise to suspicion regarding the artists' ethical principles[14] and compounded the already uncomfortable position of the artists. Post-avantgarde artists, expressing themselves through abstract form, were constantly criticized for not being more explicit in their work.[15] The abstract expression of the Spanish informalists – specifically, for the purposes of this article, that of Manolo Millares – epitomizes this tension. In navigating these contradictions, Millares and his contemporaries had to reconcile their desire

12 See the discussion around the group's withdrawal and the public declarations of the artists in Tusell García 2002, 100.

13 It is unknown whether there were repercussions for the artists in Spain for their participation in this exhibition.

14 In today's criticism, one finds both the accusatory position, such as in Pablo Vilas's article "Manolo Millares: Anti-Francoist Art Sponsored by Franco?" ("Manolo Millares: ¿arte antifranquista patrocinada por Franco?") (2021), and decontextualized interpretations of the formal elements of the artist's works; seldomly are the two dimensions treated together.

15 For example, see the discussion of Millares's brother's criticism of the artist's abstract burlap paintings in de la Nuez Santana 2017.

for artistic freedom and international recognition with the danger of being co-opted by the regime they opposed. This tension underscores the struggles faced by artists working under repressive political systems, in which their art becomes both a tool for personal expression and a pawn in larger ideological battles:

> The torn burlap of Millares, the battered and damaged surfaces of Tàpies or Saura's violent brush strokes expressed their own intense feelings of tragedy, loss and suffering. Informalist art had wished to be a cry of rebellion and would present itself as a silent but effective recrimination. But its initial threat was outweighed by the possible gains for Franco's regime. This made for a strange marriage of Informalist art to the official institutions of a dictatorship. (Tusell García 2006)

The internal and external pressures on Spanish informalism are reflected in the formal tension they exhibit. Manolo Millares, seeing himself enmeshed in the very structures he sought to critique, turned to burlap to express his main concerns (such as death, isolation, corruption, and cruelty). However, the resistance that he mounts through the combination of formal elements is sustained not by the social and political tensions his work inhabits but by absence (considered, in this article, in tandem with non-being).[16] To understand the role of absence in Millares's work, it is important to approach it through a theoretical apparatus contemporaneous with him and marked by similar concerns. The work of Theodor W. Adorno, informed by the shadow of war and questions related to the role of art in an all-encompassing free market,[17] which operates in tandem with whichever dominant political force is in place at a given moment, offers an interpretative alternative, distinct from the criticism focused on the guilt/redemption binary, though without erasing such criticism either.

16 Adorno's understanding of non-being and absence emphasizes the unrealized potential within society and actuality, which he views as transformative. Adorno's approach, often termed 'imageless materialism', advocates an awareness of possibilities outside the current structure, viewing non-being as the potential for social and political renewal that is obscured by societal structures. In contrast, Heidegger's philosophy sees non-being as a 'withholding' or 'refusal' intrinsic to being itself – a condition that allows *Dasein* to emerge. For Heidegger, non-being is marked by a productive presence because it is only considered from the perspective of *Dasein* and never on its own. Non-being, or fundamental absence (rather than the absence of something), are the background of Dasein's process of nihilation, which is a renewal of its condition of existence in accordance to Being. For an analysis of how Adorno's approach to non-being, absence, and potentiality fundamentally differs from Heidegger's, see Macdonald 2011.

17 For an elaboration of Adorno's critique of the free market and late capitalism, see Cook 1998; Prusik 2020.

4 The Work of Art's Resistance Through Concretion

In his seminal work *Negative Dialectics* (1973), Adorno aims to revolutionize dialectics by emphasizing negativity over synthesis and affirmation. As David Sherman (2016) notes, Adorno sought to liberate dialectics from its affirmative traits without diminishing its determinacy. This involves a challenging philosophical task of emphasizing discontinuity and concreteness over the syllogistic structure of classical metaphysics. Adorno's anti-positivist and anti-totalizing stance aims to bring closer to thought the other or alien of thought. In *Negative Dialectics* (1973), he argues that the concept is not identical to the object it represents, which is central to his critique of identity. There is never a complete dissolution of the object into the concept. Instead, Adorno posits that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" (5), meaning that the relationship between object and concept, particularly in art, is never resolved completely and harmoniously.

Throughout his work, Adorno stresses the importance of the object, arguing that philosophy should engage with the diversity of objects rather than use them merely as mirrors for thought:

> [The] substance [of a changed philosophy] would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion. (1973, 13)

Adorno's writing style, with its detailed descriptions and conceptual dissections, seeks to frame objects within their sociohistorical context, aiming for a closer approximation to reality. However, Adorno's negative dialectic method constantly shifts the ground of this reality, resulting in a constant undoing of certainty, much like Millares's art does in relation to any fixed interpretation, be it informed by his aesthetic expression, the socio-political content of his work, or the contextualization of the work as a pro- or anti-Francoist instrument. Millares's work evades rigid signification through the intensity of expression, the interplay of signification within the painting, as well as the relation that the work maintains with the world, by its incorporation of found objects or the holes which open it to the outside. Moreover, the minimal figuration that the artist maintains, in depicting vague forms of human or animal bodies, coupled with the negation of that very figuration through the commitment to abstraction and rejection of symbolic meaning, maintains the shifting relation of form and content, hindering a classifying gaze.

Another important concept for Adorno is mimesis, which refers, as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), to the imitative behaviors

observed in nature, but is extended, as in *Aesthetic Theory* (2013), to his broader philosophical and aesthetic considerations. In the context of art, mimesis involves the reproduction of thoughts and objects while maintaining the dialectical difference between subject and object. Nevertheless, Adorno argues that artistic expression (especially in modern art) acknowledges that mimesis, the act of imitation, is seen as outdated and ineffective for true understanding, as mimicking an object does not recreate the object's true form. Consequently, mimesis is confined to art, which critiques and incorporates this imitation by transforming it into a tangible form (2013, 152).

Manolo Millares' art resonates with Adorno's negative dialectics and theory of mimesis, especially in its engagement with the materiality of painting, expressed through the themes of death and war. Millares's mixed-media paintings depict death and the disintegration of human remains, emphasizing the material and historical preoccupations that align with Adorno's post-war philosophy. I argue that Millares's art rejects utilitarian interpretations (political or formal) and instead focuses on the irreducible materiality of his subjects. His approach mirrors Adorno's insistence on the object's primacy in philosophy, creating a parallel between Adorno's negative dialectics and Millares' method. Both Adorno and Millares emphasize the importance of engaging with the sociohistorical context and materiality, challenging conventional notions of identity and unity.

In a series of paintings that he created in Madrid after moving from his native Canarias to the mainland in the last decade of his life, Millares expressed his preoccupation with a human reality beyond experience. He was concerned with the objectivity of the work of art – the irreducible materiality of painting and death. His archeological training brought him close to the Guanches, the indigenous population of the Canary Islands, exterminated by the Spanish settlers, and he spent hours drawing and then excavating their remains.[18] This experience provided him with the memories and materials[19] which he later used in his sculptural mixed-media paintings allowing the dead to die over and over again in his works. The closeness of Millares to the main themes of his work (cruelty, war, crucifixion, and torture, all in some way connected to finitude and death) is rooted, first and foremost, in his material and historical preoccupations. As Cirlot argues,

18 As Rivero Gómez (2020, 102) argues, although I do not agree with his commentary on Millares's discovery of his fear of death in his early preoccupation with the Guanches, Millares's work reveals a transformative art practice centered on the materiality of the dead and mummified body rather than a transcendent fear of finitude.

19 Millares's favorite canvas, burlap, was used in Guanche burials. Millares's first burlap painting was in 1955. Afterward, he used the material consistently in his work, either alone or together with other materials, such as metal or wood.

> the archeological element alludes to the 'death of man' not in the sense of post-Nietzschean philosophy but as an encounter with the remains of thinking beings, shattered, unravelled, rummaged through, reduced to a materiality that can easily, at any moment, dissolve into dust: 'Homo humus'. (1968; 44)
>
> Lo arqueológico alude a la 'muerte del hombre', no en el sentido de la filosofía posnietzscheana, sino en el sentido real de encontrar restos de seres pensantes, destruidos, deshilachados, revueltos, reducidos a una materia que fácilmente puede ya deshacerse en polvo: 'Homo humus'.

The materiality of Millares's paintings, grounded in the tense sociohistorical situation surrounding his work, points to the encounter between those who cannot share one another's life or death – an encounter with the radical other or non-being. Such an encounter with non-being is produced by Millares's focus on concretion. Millares seeks the concretion that allows his work to break with the generality of the abstract art piece. As Moreno Galván, Millares's friend and art critic, confirmed, the attention Millares paid to the process of finding different materials and objects for incorporation into his paintings was remarkable. Millares's effort was focused on including bare materiality into his paintings without allowing the work of art to erase the reality of its existence in the world. The materials were not supposed to become identical with the artwork:

> In my field expeditions with Millares, I have traced with him the possible reunion of lost archeological traces – his great passion – though I have also seen him look through the garbage dumps in search of an old espadrille, a moldy and rotten spoon, or a decrepit hat, to weigh the possibility of bringing them back to life by including them, as witnesses of life, into art. There, in that quest, there is no contradiction. What he looks for is always the similar.
>
> En mis expediciones con Millares, yo he rastreado junto a él el posible reencuentro de perdidas huellas arqueológicas – su gran pasión –, pero también le he visto mirar por los muladares a la busca de una alpargata vieja, una cuchara mohosa y carcomida o un sombrero decrépito, para tantear la posibilidad de devolverlos a la vida incluyéndolos, como testigos de la vida, en arte. Ahí, en esa búsqueda, no hay contradicción. Lo que busca es siempre el semejante. (Moreno Galván, cited in de la Torre 2014, n.p.)

Millares, therefore, privileges a desubjectified gaze that brings to light the process of mimesis involved in creating artworks. The artist creates a common world for the found materials, though, as in

Adorno's understanding of mimesis in art,[20] commonness is not a synthesizing factor. Millares's works do not subsume the materials and objects that comprise them. On the one hand, the resistance of a painting in the face of aesthetic synthesis emerges from the overwhelming number of elements that constitute it. The varied textures, the thick threads that sow some of the pieces together, the fabrics contorted in myriad ways, imitating at times outstretched flesh, at other times nothing identifiable, the lost shoe, tubes, pipes, cables, and the unrelenting black, all stubbornly refuse synthesis, in spite of their proximity. On the other hand, the resistance of Millares's work comes from the obstinacy of the objects and materials in preserving their histories, their autonomy, their outsideness in relation to the work of art. Millares explained his focus on the object by describing the object in human terms, thus switching the focus from the artist as central subject to the object as an autonomous entity:

> When I use, for example, sackcloth, ceramic fragments, or soil, I force myself to conserve them exactly as they are, as the importance of the object or fragment, with its worth intact, finds in the expressive medium of my painting a fundamental right, the value of something that has not been violated. (2003a, 111)

The leap out of the painting into the materials is equivalent to the leap out of abstract metaphysics into the world of experience in Adorno's work. The artist's description captures the creative process that starts with an object and does not erase or consume the object in question (just like Adorno's negative dialectic, which, starting with nonidentity, does not subsume it under identity) but allows it to partly retain its features. The shoe in *Animal de fondo* **[fig. 1]**[21] illustrates this point by being placed half inside, half outside of the painting. For the onlooker, the shoe forms part of the painting, elongating the tail-like folds of the burlap; at the same time, if read from right to left, even if just for a brief moment, the painting creates the impression of a leg, with its ligaments torn, though still shoed. Furthermore, the shoe can take center stage as an object semi-detached from the painting that maintains its heterogeneity as an object with its own range of significations in the world.

However, the materials found in a painting, whose autonomy Millares preserves so effectively while incorporating them into the overall piece, are 'materials' only when forming part of an artwork;

20 For Adorno, art's process of mimesis does not result in synthesis, as he argues in *Aesthetic Theory* (see pages 191, 202).

21 The painting references the homonymous poetry book by Juan Ramón Jiménez, published in 1949.

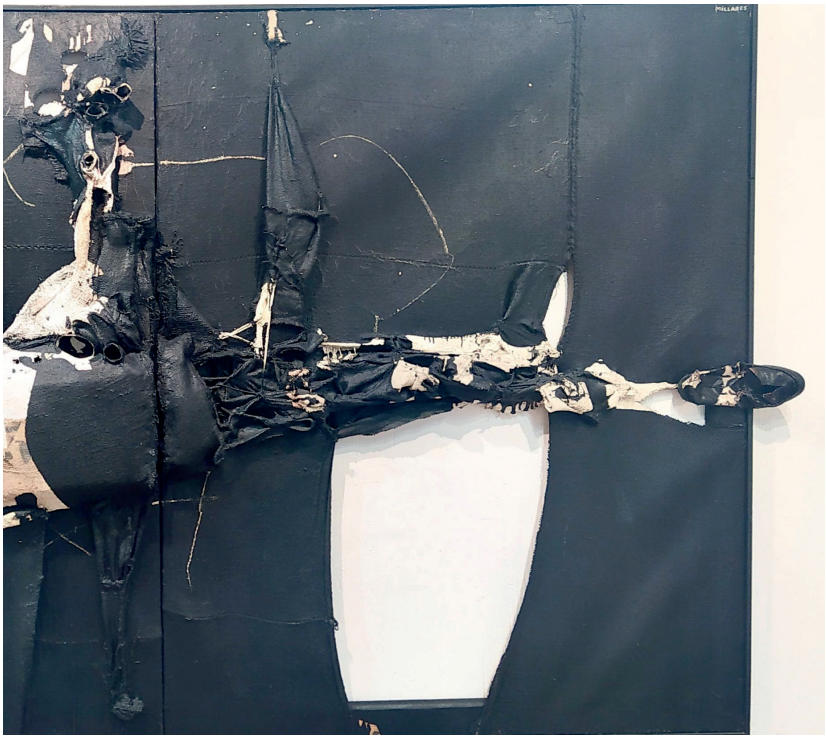

Figure 1 Manolo Millares, *Animal de fondo*. 1963. Detail. Fundación António Pérez, Cuenca, 2022

otherwise, they are potato sacks, shoes stolen by dogs, stubborn rope refusing to be cut by dull kitchen scissors, plastic tubes on the Mediterranean beach… Without the work of art, according to Millares, there is "nothing else other than rubbish" (2003b, 111). Rubbish, the material of the painting, its foundation, only becomes 'material' when art incorporates and frames it, forcing it to speak. The 'material' is only possible because painting is its second nature, which also means that its materiality is partly modified by its inclusion into the painting (upon inclusion, the material not only represents itself but also signifies within the painting and in relation to the other elements with which it comes in contact). The mimetic relation that sustains a work of art is not between the painting and the rubbish but rather between the painting and its materials. Thus, given that materials are always already included in the artwork, the mimetic relation is between the artwork and itself, though in the folds of the artwork there are material, aesthetic, and historical elements without which the artwork is not possible. Adorno describes art's ability to expose itself and the processes folded within its materials as follows:

> Those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence […]. The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form. (2013, 69)

The 'amorphous' in Adorno's text is Millares's rubbish, which, by partly keeping its autonomy and history, cannot be completely subsumed to the work of art. The work of art, in its mimesis with itself (with the materials that constitute it), exposes this process and along with it, its own outsideness (the fact that the material comes from rubbish, from the amorphous state that preceded it).[22] Millares instinctively expresses the folded mimesis that his paintings perform:

> Beneath these canvases, beneath this disgusting antiaesthetic gash so similar to the bitter sack of caustic relics of an invented saint, someone waits for the miracle of an explosion of flowers precisely upon this very soil-shoe-in-tin-rag-rubbish that is raised upon this unspoken mound of our illustrious history. (2003b, 111)

What Millares (and Adorno in the quotation above) is missing in his description is the fact that, underneath the swaying waves in the sea of mimesis between the artwork and the colossal world that it mobilizes and generates, there is an incomprehensible moment, a moment of absence that sustains this entire structure.

5 Homunculus: Scars and Non-Being

Between 1958 and 1969, Millares paints his series *Humúnculo*, containing, perhaps, the works most emblematic of his style. The paintings in this series use minimal figuration to enact an estranged, tormented, and ambiguous corporeality. Over a decade, Millares's

22 For Adorno (2013), works of art, while creating a world, also participate in negating other works, currents, ideas, or arrangements of matter. The consequence of this process of negation is that "art threatens to become allergic to itself; the quintessence of the determinate negation that art exercises is its own negation. Through correspondences with the past, what resurfaces becomes something qualitatively other" (49). Art continuously negates the immediate, or what simply is, because it appropriates material and has the power to completely reinterpret it. However, this form of material negation demands the critical gesture of self-negation in order for art to perform its radically negative function of negating itself, if it is to have any claim to autonomy, to not being completely co-opted and reified by the system of production, which, Adorno argues, is the ultimate task of modern art: "Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber" (2). Moreover, the process of self-negation is cumulative because there is an aspect of historicity and sedimentation to it. As Malt (2018) notes, "form is revealed in an act of negation or denial of that which is not it, but which accumulates around it and thus defines it negatively" (202).

homunculus evolves in his art, highlighting the loss of essential human traits such as rationality and dexterity, and ultimately portraying a bleak and restrained existence (García-Perera, Andreu-Lara 2013). The figure of the homunculus is made to appear in relief by the ensemble of objects, materials, the frame, the background, and so on (the ensemble of materials and forms that we call the painting). The homunculus continues the work of mimesis with its background, while the background has a life of its own, making things appear and disappear, both within and beyond the painting. Torn apart, sown, cut out, the homunculus's unexpressed screams fill the space of representation. But the background does its work, swallowing the figure back into its intense blackness, at the same time making the work appear in its raw materiality **[fig. 2]**.

As the homunculus screams and falls silent by means of the background, the background loses its compactness in relation to both the figure that it sustains and the cuts that expose the wall behind the painting.

The cuts in the canvas, of which Millares's work makes extensive use, are sometimes interpreted by critics[23] to signify infinity. This interpretation, combined with Millares's connection with the Guanches, follows the Francoist regime's narrative at the Venice Biennales, which reduces abstraction to sublimated and modernized religious expression. Instead, Millares's cuts in burlap simply show the wall, the 'outside' of the painting, putting in question the self-sufficiency of the artwork, revealing the relation between the materials within the painting and those of the wall (or of the frame of the painting, which is sometimes visible). The cuts in the canvas (employed by several artists at the time, such as, notably, Italian Spatialist artist Lucio Fontana and informalist Antonio Burri)[24] are a clear 'No' to the tradition of formalism in art and to the model of aesthetic unity.[25] And beyond all this, they express Millares's commitment to the

23 Such as de la Torre 2015, 186.

24 As opposed to Lucio Fontana's spatialism and Alberto Burri's materic informalism, who focuses on form and the harmonious integration of cuts and rips in his burlap works, Millares maintains a focus on materiality and a dynamic laceration of the canvas without refining or aestheticizing the overall effect of the painting. For more information and comparisons of Burri's and Millares's uses of cuts in the canvas, see Crispolti's "A Stubborn Investigation of the Image of Contemporary Man in His Existential Truth" ("Una terca investigación de la imagen del hombre contemporáneo en su verdad existencial") (1992). For a comparative study of, on the one hand, Fontana and Burri's version of informalism and, on the other, Luis Feito and Manolo Millares's particular interpretation of it, see Alonso Sánchez's *Comparative Study of Informalism in Italy and Spain* (*Estudio comparado del informalismo en Italia y España*) (2016).

25 Aesthetic unity, a term coined by art critic and painter Roger Fry, is determined by a work of art's formal harmony and its self-sufficiency in relation to its materials and its context in the world. In *The Artist and Psychoanalysis* ([1924] 2010), Fry states the following: "The form of a work of art has a meaning of its own and the contemplation of

Figure 2 Manolo Millares, *Homúnculo*. 1960. VEGAP, Madrid, 2016

double negation that defines the artwork: the negation of the world in its play between background and figure, and the negation, from the outside, of the painting as an intact unity; and once more, the negation of the outside as such, by the power of the artwork to reach beyond itself, to allow the bare wall to come in and to claim it as one of its materials. In the play of mimesis, the work of art performs its absolute other – the absence that envelops it and into which the work of art is dislocated.

More specifically, in the case of Millares and his cuts, there are several possible interpretations. First, the wall and the painting materials become 'aware', in their mutual negation, of a third area (the space – or absence – between them) that starts to interject; there is always an outside of the outside, which pours in through that opening in the painting. The elements that form the painting are, therefore, always at odds with themselves – always slightly offset in their identity to themselves (therefore, nonidentical with themselves). When the negative dimension encroaches, the aspect of absence or non-being becomes definitive for the work of art. Non-being is the agent that intervenes in the dislocation of the work of art in relation to itself.[26] Second, the double negation is performed in relation to the work's signification: the way it addresses, through its artistic language, the sociohistorical world with which it comes into contact. In this case, Millares's writing favors a reading of his paintings informed by the unknown[27] rather than by the author's circumstances or creative will:

the form in and for itself gives rise in some people to a special emotion, which does not depend upon the association of the form with anything else whatever" (8).

26 Although this point seems to address a similar 'dematerialization' of art as explored by Lucy R. Lippard in her 1968 essay with John Chandler "The Dematerialization of Art" and, subsequently, in her 1973 work *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Millares's work does not belong to this trend of conceptual art. Lippard explores a shift in (mostly Anglo-American) art starting in the 1960s and 1970s from an art focused on materials to art that centers mostly on the intellectual process, bringing art closer to abstract thinking and away from tangible products. Moreover, Lippard understands dematerialization as a move towards conceptualization and even negation of the material, commodified aspects of art, thus replacing the focus on material with conceptual engagement (on this point, see Lund 2020, 73, 74). At the opposite pole from this perspective is European informalism, especially as represented by Manolo Millares, whose approach prioritizes the intensification of matter devoid of ideality and representational imagery – matter "with a brutal and desperately actualistic presence" ("con presenza brutale e disperatamente attualistica"), as Argan notes (2010, 53-4).

27 Rather than representing a moment of indeterminacy, Millares's engagement with the unknown is, as I theorize it here through Adorno's work, a commitment to a form of art that is reflective of an essential yet elusive dimension – one that cannot be fully articulated or captured in familiar terms. For Adorno (2013), an artwork's expressive power lies in its ability to gesture towards a truth that is not dictated by external logic but arises from within its own necessity. Art (particularly modern art) is "not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, of an unknown that – by way of the subject – is self-determining" (105). Thus, the

> I reject the possibility of believing myself to be the conscious controller of these paintings that have emerged from inside me. I keep the new, the unseen in the lost dimension of rough sackcloth whose only parallel is the dark, intangible unknown […].
>
> I have never been afraid – and I repeat it here – to say just how much escapes my comprehension. It does not frighten me because I have truly never felt the necessity to understand what I paint. Somebody is sure to accuse me of having no idea of what I'm doing. I don't care. It does hurt me however, when people say that I'm missing the point, that I am somehow avoiding the true reality of man.
>
> To today's reality I freely add my voice of protest by tearing apart fabrics, with pockmarked textures, a chaos in rope, beauty wrinkled beyond recognition, an open wound in Mother Earth and the truly terrifying spectacle of the homunculus flowering amidst the humble willows reserved for such a day. (2003a, 107)

Surely Millares draws inspiration from the Surrealist's automatic writing practice as a way of decoupling the creative process from its signification. However, Millares's reflections about his work suggest that there is something more to it, especially given the accusation that his art was co-opted by Franco's regime. For Millares, communication is a function of the work of art's incomprehensibility. The painting's incorporation of objects from the world (which he takes great care to describe in many of his texts), which bring their own history and signification, belongs to the same process of communication – communication towards the secret, that which is unsayable, and its betrayal (by making the materials speak). Millares realizes that the work of art speaks about the manner of representation and that there is only one truth beyond the work, which, in fact, is also "the true reality of man" (107): that beyond the absence we know, there is another absence, more radical.[28] And it is to this second absence that the work of art, with its sacrificed homunculus, is faithful.

unknown, in this case, is a pre-conceptual element, resistant to contemplation and, as such, not contained in human knowledge and experience as such.

28 The concept of 'second absence' or 'radical absence' that I conceptualize here extend Adorno's notions of absence and non-being through Maurice Blanchot's concept of 'the other night' in the *Space of Literature* (1982). For Blanchot, as Allen explains in *Aesthetics of Negativity: Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy* (2016), the other night is "the subterranean night, one without stars, without the constant mirroring between the infinite conjunctions of the constellations in the night sky and the scintillations of the waves beneath them, is thus another kind of night that is outside change and signification" (38). Thus, in this essay, a 'second' or 'radical' absence is a dimension that negates representation without, nevertheless, positing another concept as a substitute. The effect that this second or radical dimension adds is one of obscurity or opaqueness.

Millares knew that this was the only possibility for a radical form of protest in overwhelming circumstances – that is, given the death and violence of his time, and the intense political forces battling over the subsumption of art, the only possibility for emancipation could only come from beyond the limits of politicized realism and aestheticized abstraction. It had to come from art informed not merely by absence but by absence of the second degree: the nothingness that brings into community multiple nonidentities without resolving them. Such absence or non-being is not a mystical solution to an obscure problem, as Millares recognizes. The freedom to organize any kind of community, especially in times of terror and repression, that would not be either immediately repressed or, as it happened with the Spanish informalists, incorporated into a campaign aimed at whitewashing a dictatorial regime's crimes; that would not grapple for the right to signification, dividing across its own sections and assigning ranks; that would not collapse under self-righteous destructive nihilism; this freedom can only come from openness to that which calls each one of us into question most radically as subject. Millares's paintings call into question art itself, together with the critical gaze that judges it between condemnation and mystification.

6 Conclusion

Manolo Millares's work is an example of how art can be informed by its historical context while simultaneously standing apart from it. His work, created under Franco's repressive regime, engages with themes of death, violence, and disintegration while rejecting the modernist notion of the work of art's complete autonomy and the canvas as a mere representational space of the world. Instead, Millares's art embraces an aesthetic of pauperism, utilizing burlap and found objects to perform the process of falling apart and disintegration, embodying Adorno's philosophical method of disintegration, which seeks to dismantle the subject-object correspondence.

Millares's use of cuts in the burlap abolishes the two-dimensionality of the artwork, emphasizing the primacy of materials over harmony and order. These incisions expose the wall behind the canvas (along with an entire world beyond it, missing yet present), challenging traditional aesthetic unity and formalism, and revealing the artwork's fundamental incompleteness. This interplay between presence and absence, figure and background, material and void, aligns with Adorno's concept of mimesis, according to which an artwork maintains an irresolvable dialectical tension between subject and object.

Although Millares's works align with the international informalist movement, whose chief theorist Michel Tapié advocated a renewed artistic vision focused on materials, they are also part of the Spanish

avant-garde, particularly through Millares's involvement with the group El Paso. However, Millares goes beyond the reaffirmation of humanity through art in light of WWII and the Spanish Civil War, events that were ever-present in the art of that time. His disintegrating burlap works embody the artist's incapacity to control the materials, the expression, and, beyond the artist's studio, the incorporation of the art into a dictatorial regime's campaigns. Using his works, Millares expresses the incapacity of the artist and the human to dictate over matter and society. However, by engaging with multiple absences, an artwork can perforate the presence of various subsumption mechanisms towards an aesthetic infra-emancipation.

In summary, this article identified four types of absence. First, 'material absence', which introduces an outside dimension into an artwork, creating a tension between the contained image and the broader external reality. Second, 'historical absence', which represents past experiences and backgrounds that remain present within an artwork but are not entirely visible or explained (this type of absence includes the erased or overlooked memories of repression under Franco's regime). Third, 'absence at the intersection with nonbeing', which, informed by Adorno's negative dialectics, involves an absence of fixed identity and through which objects and concepts resist rigid definitions, emphasizing the constitutive openness of an artwork to dialectical engagement and its resistance to ideological or political co-option. Fourth, 'existential absence', represented in Millares's works through the themes of disintegration, death, and suffering. Millares's use of fragmented and torn forms alludes to the fundamental absence of holistic human experience, making the absence present in intimate terms while turning the human perspective into an inhuman gaze.

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Actual Properties of Fictional Objects

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Abstract I want to address a certain problem concerning fictional objects or at least a problem that arises given a certain understanding of them. This is an understanding which takes them to be non-existent objects which have the properties ascribed to them in the fictions in which they occur in worlds that realize those fictions. Being fictions, these are not the actual world. The question, in a nut-shell, is: what properties do those objects have at the actual world? I do not expect the meaning of this question to be very clear at present. So in the first part of this paper I will give the background to make it so. I will then explain the question in more detail. Having done that, I will canvass some answers to it. The aim of the paper is not to advocate any one of these, but simply to lay them out for further consideration. I end with a few further thoughts.

Keywords (Modal) noneism. Non-existent objects. Fictional objects. Characterization Principle. Nuclear properties.

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1 Introduction

I want to address a certain problem concerning fictional objects or at least a problem that arises given a certain understanding of them. This is an understanding which takes them to be non-existent objects which have the properties ascribed to them in the fictions in which they occur in worlds that realize those fictions. Being fictions, these are not the actual world. The question, in a nut-shell, is: what properties do those objects have at the actual world?

I do not expect the meaning of this question to be very clear at present. So in the first part of this paper I will give the background to make it so. I will then explain the question in more detail. Having done that, I will canvass some answers to it. The aim of the paper is not to advocate any one of these, but simply to lay them out for further consideration. I end with a few further thoughts.[1]

2 Background

So let me explain the view of fictional objects which gives rise to this question. I shall not defend this view here. I have done that elsewhere, notably in *Towards Non-Being* (hereafter, TNB).[2] The point is simply to frame the question I want to address. According to this view, fictional objects are non-existent objects of a certain kind. We will get there in due course, but let us start more generally.

3 Noneism

The view that some objects do not exist is *noneism* (a word coined by Richard Sylvan). It is more often called *Meinongianism*. This is poor terminology. It is true that Meinong did endorse a version of noneism, but so have most logicians in the history of Western logic.[3] And Meinong's version of noneism was a quite specific version of the view, different from many others. Calling the view *Meinongianism* is therefore like calling the view that there is a God *Thomism*.

Now, since Russell's attack on Meinong, and Quine's influential essay "On What There Is", noneism has been considered by most

1 This is a written-up version of a talk given at a one-day logic workshop at Tokyo University in January 2024, and the Seminaire *Fiction, Imagination, Vérité*, Ecole Normale Supérieure, February 2024 (online). I am grateful to the members of the audiences there for their helpful thoughts and suggestions.

2 Priest [2005] 2016.

3 See the 2nd edition of TNB, ch. 18.

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anglo-philosophers as a view only slightly shy of insanity. The usual arguments against the view are, however, lame.[4]

In particular, there are no problems about quantifying over non-existent objects. Quantifiers work in the familiar fashion. The universal quantifier is *all*. Its dual, the particular quantifier, is *some*. 'All *x*s are P' is true if all objects in the domain of quantification satisfy 'P'. 'Some *x*s are P' is true if some objects in the domain of quantification satisfy 'P'. The domain of quantification may contain both existent and non-existent objects.

Since most philosophers have a knee-jerk reaction to read $\exists x$ as 'there exists an *x* such that'. I will write $\Im$ for the particular quantifier, and write $\wr\!\downarrow$ for its mate, the universal quantifier, to keep it company. If one wants quantifiers that are existentially loaded, 'every existent *x* is such that' and 'some existent *x* is such that', one can define these in the obvious way: using a perfectly ordinary monadic predicate, E*x*, *x exists* – (incorrect) interpretations of Kant[5] notwithstanding:

$\exists x A$ is $\Im x(Ex \wedge A)$

$\forall x A$ is $\wr\!\downarrow x(Ex \rightarrow A)$

There is only one touchy issue concerning noneism. To see what this is, let us consider an example. Suppose that we characterize an object, *x*, as a detective of acute powers of observation and inference, living at 221B Baker St. Call that condition *D(x)*, and let us call the object thus characterized *h*. (*D* for Doyle, and *h* for Holmes.) Is it true that *D(h)*, that is, that Holmes was a detective of acute powers of observation and inference, living at 221B Baker St? It is natural to reply *yes*.

There is a general principle at issue here which we may call the Characterization Principle (CP). This is to the following effect.

a/the *x* such that P is indeed P

P is any condition. *a* and *the* are indefinite and definite description operators. The indefinite operator is simpler,[6] and I will use it in what follows. If one writes this as, the CP can be written:

$P(\varepsilon x Px)$

The CP might well appear analytic. However, no one, noneist or

4 See, again, the 2nd edition of TNB, ch. 18.

5 See Priest 2019, § 2.3.

6 Definite descriptions just add a uniqueness clause to the behavior.

otherwise, can endorse it in unrestricted form. Triviality follows with a two-line argument. Let B be any statement. Consider the condition $x=x\wedge B$. (If you do not mind vacuous quantification, the first conjunct may be dropped.) Write *t* for $\varepsilon x(x=x\wedge B)$. Then the CP gives $t=t\wedge B$, from which B follows. (This argument is, in fact, what is behind Russell's more specific criticism of Meinong.) Yet, clearly, some instances of the CP are true. For example, it is true that a thing which is a federal capital of Australia (Canberra) is a federal capital of Australia. So how is the general CP to be qualified?

A standard answer is that it holds provided some existent thing satisfies P:

$$\exists x Px \rightarrow P(\varepsilon x Px)$$

This is Hilbert's version of the principle.[7] However, it will not do for a noneist. The x in question may not exist.

We may replace the $\exists$ with $\mathfrak{S}$, and the result is right enough; but it does not help us. We need to know, for a given P, whether the antecedent of the conditional is true. Thus, we wanted to know whether Holmes, that is, εxDx, is such that $D(\varepsilon xDx)$. If it does, some non-existent object satisfies *D(x)*. But to suppose that $D(\varepsilon xDx)$ would obviously beg the question. This is, in fact, the fallacy behind the Ontological Argument.[8]

4 Modal Noneism

So when does something characterized in a certain way satisfy the characterization? Meinong himself never, in fact, answered the question cleanly. There are currently three relatively well worked-out answers proposed by contemporary noneists.[9] One involves a distinction between characterizing and non-characterizing conditions; one involves a distinction between two forms of predication; one uses a world semantics. This last is *modal noneism* (often called *modal Meinongianism*), and is the one we will be concerned with here.

According to this, there is a plurality of worlds. Some are possible; some are impossible; and one (of the possible ones) is actual **[fig. 1]**.

7 And if we require there to be a unique existent that satisfies P, and use a definite description operator, we get Russell's.

8 See Priest 2018.

9 See Reicher 2022.

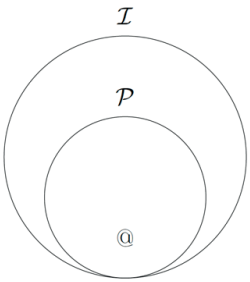

Figure 1
Worlds, possible and otherwise

$\mathcal{P}$ is the set of possible worlds; $\mathcal{I}$ is the set of impossible worlds; @ is the actual world.

According to this view, if one characterizes an object in a certain way, the object *does* have its characterizing properties – but not necessarily at the actual world (though it may). It has them in the situation one envisages when one thinks of the object; that is, at those worlds that realize the situation. (There may be more than one of these, since the situation envisaged may be under-determined in many ways.)

Thus, Doyle characterizes Holmes in a certain way; and when we read his stories we imagine the situations he describes. Holmes has his characterizing properties in those situations, that is, worlds. The worlds required for this understanding may be possible or impossible worlds. Thus, in the story 'Sylvan's Box',[10] Graham and Nick find a box that is both empty and has something in it. That is a contradiction; so the worlds that realize the story are impossible worlds. (I am assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that the correct logic is not a paraconsistent logic. However, the point does not depend on this. Whatever one takes the correct logic to be, there can be a story in which logically impossible things happen.)

We are nearly at the point where I can explain the problem I wish to discuss, but one further observation will be useful. As just observed, an object that is characterized in an inconsistent way requires there to be inconsistent worlds. It might be thought that, dually, an object that is described in an incomplete way requires incomplete worlds. This, however, does not follow. It is true in the Doyle stories that Holmes is either right-handed or left-handed (or maybe ambidextrous); but Doyle does not tell us which. So the characterization is incomplete. It does not follow that worlds that realize the story are such that Holmes is neither right-handed nor left-handed. In some he is the one; in some he is the other.

10 TNB, § 6.6.

5 The Issue

We are now at the point where I can explain the exact problem I want to address. Again, let us use Holmes as our example. We know quite a lot about Holmes' properties at some worlds – those that realize the Doyle stories. But those worlds are not the actual world: the stories are fiction, not history. What properties does Holmes have at the actual world?

We know some of these of various kinds:

- *Other-Wordly Properties*: It is not (actually) true that Holmes lived in Baker St. What is true is that in the worlds that realize the Doyle stories Holmes lived in Baker St. So Holmes actually has the property of *living in Baker St in the Doyle stories*. Hence non-existent objects may have actual properties inherited from their fiction.
- *Intentional Properties*: I have thought about Holmes. So Holmes has the actual property of having been thought about by GP.[11] Hence non-existent objects may have actual properties generated by the intentional relations to cognitive agents.
- *Status Properties*: Holmes actually has the property of being non-existent and, as described, of being a possible object (unlike Sylvan's box, which has the property of being an impossible non-existent object). So non-existent objects may have properties in virtue of their existential status.
- *Logical Properties*: Holmes has the properties of being self-identical, $\lambda x(x=x)$, being something, $\lambda x(\exists y\ y=x)$, and so on. So non-existent objects can have properties simply in virtue of logic.
- *Negations of Existence-Entailing Properties*: If it were true that Gladstone (actually) kicked Holmes or that Holmes (actually) kicked Gladstone, then Holmes would have entered into a causal process, and so would have existed. So these statements are not true. Hence Holmes has the property of *not having kicked (or having been kicked by)* Gladstone. Generally, if Px entails that x exists then a non-existent object has the property $\lambda x(\neg Px)$. Whether a certain property is existence-entailing may be a matter of dispute.
- *Properties that Follow from These*: What is true at the actual world is closed under logical consequence. So a non-existent object can have properties that follow logically from the above. Hence Holmes has the property of *being non-existent and self-identical*.

11 One may balk at calling such things properties. However, I mean by 'property' nothing more than what are often called *abundant properties*. That is, the extensions of some condition or other.

Possibly there are other kinds of properties that non-existent objects actually have. But even if there are, it would seem that they are going to leave a lot of questions open. Is Holmes actually right-handed? Is he a detective? Does he live in Beijing? Is he even a person? Those matters appear indeterminate. What is to be said about them? That is the question I wish to raise.[12]

In the next section I will turn to some possible answers. But let me end this section with an observation concerning another approach to the characterization problem. The approach is that espoused by Terry Parsons and Richard Routley/Sylvan. This depended on a distinction between nuclear/characterizing conditions and non-nuclear/non-characterizing conditions. The CP is legitimate for and only for nuclear/characterizing conditions.[13] Parsons and Routley coupled this account with an account of fictional objects according to which whatever holds of a fictional object in a fiction is actually true, provided that what that is is characterizing. Clearly, this account answers a lot of the questions concerning the actual properties of non-existent objects which are left open by a modal noneist account: Holmes is a detective, lives in London (not Beijing), is a person. It may be thought that this gives such an account an advantage over a modal noneist account. This would be too fast, however.

For a start, the account faces the problem that no one has ever given a definition specifying which properties are nuclear/characterizing, and which are not. Both Parsons and Routley just give a list of examples, and hope that the reader with catch on.

That is bad enough, but the account of fiction provided has specific problems of its own. We are still faced with questions such as whether Holmes was left-handed or right-handed. This is no trivial problem. Given the account in question, it is actually true that he was either left- or right-handed. To suppose that he was one or the other would seem to be arbitrary. But to suppose that 'Holmes was right-handed' and 'Holmes was left-handed' are neither true nor false – or even worse, simply false – means that we have a true disjunction where neither disjunct is true. There may be ways to handle this fact; for example, by applying some kind of supervaluation technique. But doing so forces a rejection of standard logic, which a modal noneist account does not.

Matters do not end there. According to such accounts, 'a detective lived at 221B Baker St' is actually true. But we know that 'no detective (in particular, Holmes) has ever lived at 221B Baker St' is actually

12 Of course, if any of these properties is existence-entailing, that would settle the matter – though whether a property is existence entailing is a question on which there may be reasonable disagreement.

13 For discussion and references, see Priest 2024.

true. So we have a contradiction concerning Baker St. And whatever is to be said about the thought that some contradictions are true, there is nothing to be said for this one.

At this point one might be tempted by the thought that when authors of fictions appear to talk of actually existing objects, like Baker St, they are not referring to the real object, but to some fictional *dopplegänger*.[14] This is a move of desperation. When Doyle used the words 'Baker St', he did not change their meaning, or *a fortiori* their referent, any more than he changed the meaning of the words 'detective', 'revolver'.[15] When I wrote 'Sylvan's Box' I was referring to Richard, my old friend. Some of the things said about him in the story are actually true. Some are only true in the fiction. I was referring to him none the less.

6 Possible Solutions

Let us now turn to some possible solutions to the problem. My aim is not to endorse any one of them, but simply to lay them out and discuss aspects of the plausibility of each.

Solution 1 is a robust realism. For each non-existent object, *a*, and each property, P, except those canvassed in the previous section, either P*a* or ¬P*a*, though there is no way of ever determining which. This is the case if one is a realist about existent objects. One may simply maintain a realism about non-existent objects.

If someone insisted on this solution, I do not know that I would have any good arguments against it. A constant domain semantics is already committed to a certain kind of realism about non-existent objects anyway.[16]

However, I confess to feeling uncomfortable with this solution. There is a natural pull toward the thought that non-existent objects especially fictional objects are, in some sense, our own creation. The thought that they might have properties that are, in principal and for ever, beyond our ken is jarring.

Solution 2 is perhaps the simplest. The attribution of every such property is neither true nor false. Technically, this is easy. One just takes the logic of the actual world to be FDE. And the main cost is, of course, that it forces a move away from classical logic to a logic with truth value gaps. Perhaps there are other good reasons to do this; perhaps not. But the consequences have to be reckoned with. Note

14 The moves made by Parsons and Routley are more sophisticated than this, but in the end equally inadequate. See Priest 2024.

15 See Priest 2019.

16 As is pointed out in TNB, 2nd ed., ch. 14.

that this solution does not suffer from the same problem as the gappy account required by the nuclear/characterizing-property solution to the characterization problem which I discussed in the last section. Sherlock Holmes is either left-handed or not in the worlds that realize the Doyle stories, but these are not the actual world.

I note that having truth value gaps does not require identity to be non-classical. It could be the case that at possible worlds (and so @) the extension of = is, {<d,d>: d ∈ D}, where D is the domain of quantification,[17] and its anti-extension is the complement of this. That does raise the question of when to characterizations of non-existent objects are of the same object. But that issue may be addressed in some way or other.[18]

However, one might take it that one should allow for identity statements that have no truth value. In that case, the anti-extension of = would be a proper subset of the complement of its extension. It might then turn out that the identity 'Holmes = Pegasus' is neither true nor false though this would be counter-intuitive.

Solution 3 is to take every atomic sentence, *Pn*, of the kind in question to be false, and then use the truth/falsity conditions of a gap-free logic. This procedure has a certain naturalness, and retains Excluded Middle. A cost is in determining which sentences are atomic. This is not, of course, a problem for formal languages. That is given by the syntax. But when we apply the semantics to a natural language, problems arise. Thus, *is transparent* and *is opaque* are both syntactically atomic, though each is equivalent to the negation of the other. Moreover, there would seem to be no natural way of justifying the thought that one is more basic, the other to be defined from it. Perhaps the simplest solution is to take both as atomic. The cost of this is having to give up the natural thought that one is equivalent to the negation of the other. Perhaps this is no loss, since one can still maintain this for existent objects:

∀x(x is transparent is ↔ ¬x opaque)

One might suggest that the biconditional already has to be limited to physical objects. Maybe non-existent objects are a certain kind (perhaps abstract objects?) such that the application of mundane predicates to them, such as *is transparent* or *lives in Baker St*, are simply category mistakes. The restriction then makes perfectly good sense. However, since we *can* apply such predicates to the objects at other worlds, the thought does require us to suppose that category mistakes are world-dependent. This is not so plausible.

17 Or strictly speaking, the set of identities. See TNB, § 2.9.

18 TNB, § 4.4, gives an answer appealing to what it calls the *Principle of Freedom*.

Solution 4 is that there is more than one actual world. We noted that one is not committed to the thought that a fictional object is perforce gappy at a world that realizes the fiction. There may be many worlds that realize the fiction, and the indeterminacy may go one way at some of these and the other way at others. We now use the same idea, except that we suppose that there is more than one actual world, the apparent indeterminacy going one way in some of these and the other way in others.

The thought that there is more than one actual world was, in fact, advocated by Richard Sylvan.[19] I confess that I find this solution unpalatable. There is only one actual world. For better or for worse, this is it. If there is more than one world that one might be inclined to call actual, I think this just shows is that they are all parts of one big actuality.

Solution 5 There is more than one Holmes. Specifically, the characterization picks out different objects at the different worlds that realize the Doyle stories. For every relevant P, some of these are P at the actual world and some of them are ¬P there. This does not solve the problem. We still want to know of any particular Holmes whether P or ¬P actually holds. In particular, we want to know this of the object that Doyle picked out with the characterization.

Solution 6 is that there is more than one Holmes at the actual world. The semantics of TNB allows for the truth value of identities to change across worlds. So the semantics allows for two things, call then Holmes_1 and Holmes_2, such that at any world, *w*, which realizes the Doyle stories, $\text{Holmes}_1 = \text{Holmes}_2$; but at @, $\text{Holmes}_1 \neq \text{Holmes}_2$. At @, Holmes_1 is left-handed and Holmes_2 is not left-handed. And so on for all the other undetermined predicates.[20] This solution saves the phenomena, but seems to me to do so in an entirely *ad hoc* manner.

7 Conclusion

I have been discussing a noneist account of fictional objects based on modal noneism. My question was: what properties do non-existent objects have at the actual world? The framework of modal noneism tells us some of these, but leaves the answer concerning many other properties open.

We have seen that there are several ways one might go about answering the question in such cases. I have not tried to adjudicate

19 Sylvan 1997.

20 As given in TNB, the semantics enforces the constancy in truth value of identity statements at possible worlds (see TNB, § 4.5.). However, one may simply drop the constraint which enforces it.

between them; but for what it is worth, Solution 2 – giving up Excluded Middle–seems the simplest. If one wishes to endorse Excluded Middle, Solution 3 seems the simplest way to go.

The rest I leave for further reflection.

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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*)[1] occurring within Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* ([1781; 1787] 1998)[2] 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.[3]

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,

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):

Nothing,
as

1
Empty concept without object,
ens rationis.

2.
Empty object
of a concept,
nihil privativum.

3.
Empty intuition
without an object,
ens imaginarium.

4.
Empty object without concept,
nihil negativum.

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*).[4]

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

4 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[ling] 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,[5] 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.[6]

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;[7] 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

5 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.

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

7 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.[8] However, to bypass this kind of uncertainties, I think we just need to define *nihil negativum* as $\iota x\ x \neq x$, namely, the item that is not self-identical, i.e., a self-contradictory object.[9]

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.

8 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.

9 Nothingness as $\iota x\ x \neq x$ 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?[10] 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>>).[11]

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:

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.[12]
- 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.[13]

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 homonimy 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.

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

13 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[ling] 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* ∧ ~*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 <*x* is square> and <*x* is round> does not pick anything at all.[14] 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 absoultum* in terms of *nihil privativum* as a lack, following Güngör (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 addedd)

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,[15] and 'object' should be read as a kind of 'bare object in general' – cf. § 1.1.

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 insomuch 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 notice 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 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*.[16] 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 time a thing (assuming that there are non-existent objects: see 146-8; 150),

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.

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. However, Priest does not appear to properly distinguish between the absence of (Kantian) objects of experience, i.e., the *nihil absolutum*, and the absence *qua 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: [17] 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*).[18] 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 kinds of nothingness as bare object in general, regardless its being

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).

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).[19] 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 *cancels 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 notion, but a coherent conception of any contradictory item. I would reply

19 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).

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)[20] 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).[21] 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).[22] 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, I feel it does not properly account for the nominal essence of

20 Here, I use 'negation' and 'cancellation' as interchangeable because I assumed a cancellation account of negation: cf. § 1.3.

21 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).

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

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 view.

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).[23] 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*

23 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 *Nihil absolutum* (absolute nothingness)	Accounting for the *Nihil negativum* (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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Perceptual Experiences of (Depicted) Absence

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Abstract In recent philosophy of perception, an important debate has been raised as regards whether one can experientially perceive absences. Three main positions have been discussed: radical perceptualism, cognitivism, and metacognitivism. In this paper, first of all, I want to claim that perceptualism can be maintained in a *moderate* form, once one explains the proper role that the relevant expectations play, as *weakly cognitively penetrating* one's perception of absence in its phenomenal difference from a previous perceptual experience. Moreover, I want to claim that a similar result can be applied to *pictorial* perceptual experiences of absences, once one takes pictorial experience as a genuine yet *sui generis* perceptual seeing-in experience.

Keywords Perception of absences. Pictorial absences. Moderate perceptualism. Radical perceptualism. Cognitivism. Metacognitivism.

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1 Introduction

At least since Sorensen (2008) and Farennikova (2013), an important debate has been occurring in contemporary philosophy of mind as regards whether one can experientially perceive absences. Three main positions have been hitherto presented in the debate:

1. the *radical perceptualist* one, for which one genuinely experientially perceives absences, whether veridically (Farennikova 2013; 2015) or non-veridically (Mumford 2021);
2. the *cognitivist* one, for which grasping absences is a matter, if not of beliefs or other cognitive states (Block 2023, 185), of intellectual seemings (Gow 2021b; see also O'Shaughnessy 2003, 330);
3. the *metacognitivist* one (Martin, Dokic 2013), for which one's experiences are affected by absences at an upper level of cognitive phenomenology, by their being imbued in their mode with a feeling of surprise.

In this paper, first of all, I want to claim that the perceptualist position can be maintained in a *moderate* form (MPP), once one explains the proper role that the relevant expectations play, as *weakly cognitively penetrating* one's perceptual experience of absence in its phenomenal difference from a previous perceptual experience. Indeed, MPP also conforms with the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2012; 2015). As we will see, a perceptual experience of absence is basically a matter of occlusion removal affecting a change in the non-conceptual content of one's perceptual experience, as matching a change in the overall phenomenal perceptual character of that experience. Moreover, I want to claim that a similar result can be applied to *pictorial* experiences of absence, once one takes pictorial experience as a genuine yet *sui generis* perceptual *seeing-in* twofold experience, as affecting in particular the so-called *recognitional fold* of that experience. Section 1 presents the main pros and cons of the aforementioned positions. Section 2 elaborates MPP. Section 3 applies this position to the case of depicted absences grasped in a seeing-in perceptual experience.

Before starting, a caveat. In this paper, I will only deal with so-called perceptual experiences of absence in the sense of the experiences that something is not out there, *propositional absences*: in the paradigmatic example, one's experience of coming back to a café one was sitting some minutes before and seeing that the laptop one left on one of the café's tables is no longer there (Farennikova 2013). Hence, I will not be concerned with the perceptual experience of objects that can themselves be considered absences, *objectual absences*: e.g. black dark, *qua*

absence of light,[1] or silence, *qua* absence of sound (Sorensen 2008).[2] Since these absences can be conceived as instantiations of properties merely described as negative, undoubtedly, the latter sort of experience is of a genuine perceptual kind, as we will briefly see.

Indeed, suppose that in the *overall phenomenal perceptual character* of a perceptual experience one distinguishes between the monadic *mental oil* or *mere phenomenal character*, i.e., the pure what-it-is-like of an experience, and the relational *mental paint* or *presentational character* (Block 1996; 2003), i.e., the *presentation* that the experience features that constitutes the mere phenomenal character of that experience make of the perceivable worldly properties that are ascribed to the objects of that experience.[3] For example, in perceiving a red object, the reddish feature of a perceptual experience constitutes its mere phenomenal character of that experience, while the fact that such a feature presents the *redness* ascribed to that object constitutes its presentational character. That presentational character makes it the case that the experience is of a perceptual kind. For only having a mere phenomenal character makes an experience sensory, but not perceptual – as is well known, this is the point for Block (1996; 2003) to only ascribe mere mental oil to an experience like orgasm. Now, on the basis of that distinction between mere phenomenal character and presentational character, one may further distinguish between the blackish experience one has when closing one's eyes, somehow mimicking the condition of a blind person, and the experience one has of the dark black around when one opens one's eyes in the dark, or even between the deafish experience one has when closing one's ears, somehow mimicking the condition of a deaf person, and the experience one has of the silence around when one opens one's ears (as Philipps 2013;[4] Šterbáková 2019; Varzi 2022 also suggest). For although those pairs of experiences respectively coincide in their mere phenomenal character – they are both blackish,

1 For the difference between the latter and the former kind of experience, cf. also Gow 2021a. Yet instead of discussing the perceptual experience of dark black, Gow discusses the case of experientially perceiving an empty space. But perceiving an empty space is not perceiving an objectual absence. For an empty space is just a space with admittedly no things inside that is however surrounded by other things (say, a wall), which are fully given to a perceptual experience.

2 To say nothing of holes as (bound) absences of matter (Casati, Varzi 1994).

3 This distinction between mere phenomenal character and presentational character is related to but is different from Fish's (2009) analogous distinction. Unlike Fish, for me, first, mere phenomenal character is monadic, not relational, and second, presentational character is a relation between experiential properties and perceivable worldly properties, not the right-hand side *relatum* of that relation.

4 However, Phillips captures this phenomenological distinction differently (and erroneously, for me); namely, as a distinction between failing to hear and having mere phenomenal awareness (2013, 346).

both deafish – they differ in their respectively not having vs. having a presentational character. So, the latter are perceptual experiences, while the former are experiences missing a perceptual character. Indeed, the latter respectively present the dark black and the silence *all around*, taken as perceivable worldly properties that are instantiated and are merely described as negative: one's blackish experience presents *darkness*, which can be described as absence of light, as instantiated all around; one's deafish experience presents *silenceness*, which can be described as absence of sound, as instantiated all around. Hence, the latter experiences of each pair – experiencing the dark black, experiencing silence – are undoubtedly of a perceptual kind.[5] For since they have not only a mere phenomenal character but also a presentational character, they respectively differ from the former experiences of each pair in their having an *overall phenomenal perceptual character*.[6]

2 The State of the Art

If one looks at the main positions in the debate on the issue of the so-called perceptual experiences of absence, none of them seems to be really satisfying. Let me start with the most implausible account, the cognitivist one. As I said in the Introduction, according to this account grasping absences is a matter, if not of beliefs, of intellectual seemings. On the one hand, the *traditional* cognitivist position, which holds that a so-called perceptual experience of absence is just a matter of belief in the absence of something, is clearly untenable. For it does not account for the fact that one's grasping absences conspicuously affects one's phenomenology, as the reaction in discovering that something that was out there is no longer out there clearly shows. For this reaction corresponds to one's enjoying an 'Aha'-experience; namely, an experience in which one realizes how things stand (Mulligan 1988). So on the other hand, the *amended* cognitivist position, which makes so-called perceptual experiences of absence a matter of intellectual seemings (Gow 2021b), is better than the traditional one. For it acknowledges that so-called perceptual experiences of absence have some sort of phenomenal character, though

5 O' Shaughnessy (2003, 329 fn. 29) claims that only the first experience is perceptual. Indeed for him, there is a dark look, but not a silence look. This is curious, since the experience of silence can occur as an interval between the experiences of sounds, just as the experience of dark black can occur while switching the light off and on.

6 This way of putting things may explain why two perceptual experiences of numerically different silences are phenomenally identical (Šterbáková 2019, 42): they have not only the same mere phenomenal character, but also the same presentational character pointing to the same worldly property of *silenceness* (as instantiated twice all around).

of a cognitive kind. Yet to ascribe a cognitive phenomenal character to *all* such experiences is not enough. For while undoubtedly some of these experiences are merely cognitive, some others, especially the paradigmatic ones like the one involving the missing laptop, are really perceptual. As the difference between the following two cases, one clearly cognitive and the other clearly perceptual, should be able to show.

Consider first the case in which one realizes that a certain sign which is tokened along the wall at any of the other floors of one's house – say, a 'no smoking' sign – is not there at the top floor. Here clearly, one merely experientially enjoys a cognitive realization of the fact that one's contrary expectation, generated via one's perceiving that sign's tokens at the other floors, is not fulfilled at the top floor. One has no clear idea of the exact dimensions, form, and size of the supposedly missing sign. Yet second, consider the case in which, on coming back to the car one had left parked some minutes before, one no longer sees one of the car's rear windows, for some thieves broke it in order to steal what stood on the car's back seat. Here the situation sounds completely different. One's astonished realization of the rear window's absence is not only induced by one's contrary expectation's being unfulfilled, but also grounded in the changed perceptual experience of something involving the car. The car seems now weird in a way the wall was not. As when one no longer sees the keys one had left few minutes before on the small table near the house's door. "How funny", one would say in reacting to this weird situation.

Here enters the second approach, the metacognitivist one. Right, its defenders will say, that sort of astonished realization that characterizes the paradigmatic cases of so-called perceptual experiences of absence is not a mere cognitive experience of realizing that something is missing. For it is rather a metacognitive feeling of surprise. If one wants to compare this feeling with an 'Aha'-experience, it is not the sort of smart experience that one enjoys while demonstrating a theorem's conclusion, but the sort of uncanny experience that popped up into the poor Oedipus' mind when realizing that Jocasta is the same as Mummy; the feeling of surprise is imbued with a sense of disorientation.

Yet, appealing to feeling of absence does not provide sufficient conditions for a so-called perceptual experience of absence.[7] For, as Martin and Dokic (2013, 119) seemingly acknowledge, that feeling may occur both when one experiences that a certain thing is no longer there and in the opposite case of *experience of presence*; namely, when one experiences that *a new thing* has popped up in the perceived scene.

7 For reasons why this metacognitive feeling is not even a necessary condition of perceptual experience of absence, cf. Cavedon-Taylor 2017, 362-3.

Consider the following scenario. A subject is sitting in a café in front of an empty table and then her fiancé asks her to close her eyes. Once she opens her eyes again, a laptop is on the table (say, it is her unexpected fiancé's gift). Once again, a feeling of surprise arises. Yet this time is prompted by the *presence* of the laptop, not by its absence.[8]

Now comes the third account, the *radical perceptualist* one. According to this account, one genuinely experiences absences perceptually. The account comes in two variants: a *veridicalist* one, according to which one's genuine perceptual experience of absence is veridical (Farennikova 2013; 2015), and the *non-veridicalist* one, according to which one's genuine perceptual experience of absence is a form of illusion (Mumford 2021). Yet it seems to me that such theories must face a dilemma – either perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated, or they fail to be such – neither of whose horns is particularly pleasant. Let me explain.

Here is the first horn of the dilemma, along with its unpleasantness. According to this horn, the account must admit that perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated by one's expectations, as indeed Farennikova (2015) does.[9] If in the paradigmatic case one did not expect the laptop to be there, one could hardly perceptually experience the laptop not to be there. But then the account must convincingly explain how such expectations cognitively *penetrate* the alleged perceptual experiences of absence instead of merely accompanying it. Yet it is hard to provide this explanation. For if cognitive penetration were at work, the perceptual experience of a certain scene enjoyed by a subject having certain expectations should be different from a perceptual experience of the same scene enjoyed by another subject failing to have those expectations. Yet, as Farennikova herself stresses (2013, 432), here the problem of *phenomenal collapse* immediately arises: one's expectation-driven perceptual experience of a certain absence-involving scene seems to be phenomenally indistinguishable from the perceptual experience of that scene enjoyed by another subject (or even the same subject in different circumstances) failing to have such expectations. How can a subject phenomenally distinguish between the perceptual experience she

8 According to Varzi (2022, 226-7), the absence surprise is phenomenally distinguishable from than the presence surprise, as some empirical studies based on infants' reactions seemingly show. Possibly, it depends on the kind of objects involved. One may anecdotally remember *2001 Space Odyssey*'s cult scene in which a group of hominids frantically reacts to the sudden presence of the black monolith.

9 As regards the position that perceptual experiences are cognitively penetrated, I do not take that position as claiming that so-called late perception is such – modularists on perceptual experiences well concede this claim, see Pylyshyn 2003; Raftopoulos 2009 – but as claiming the more substantive thesis that perceptual experiences as such are so penetrated, as e.g. McDowell (1994) maintains.

has of the café's table when erroneously expecting that the laptop is still there and the unprecedented perceptual experience that another subject has of that empty table?

As regards this horn of the dilemma, *qua* veridicalist Farennikova (2013) ultimately admits that expectations are not decisive. For what counts for the perceptual character of the absence experience is the imaginative production of a localizing template that is straightforwardly mismatched by the perceptual scene not only in most cases, namely the paradigmatic ones – e.g., when one perceptually experiences that there is no laptop on the café's table, contrary to one's expectations – but also in some other cases, when expectations are fulfilled and yet the mental image of the missing thing is not matched by the things that are there – e.g., when one perceptually experiences that there are no trees in a desert, as one would expect (Farennikova 2013, 441, 446-7; 2015, 628-9). This imaginative production is performed in mental imagery, say in imagining-seeing, not in mere imagination, if the latter is taken as falling in the same basket as propositional supposition – as Farennikova says, "a visual template of object O will refer to a representation of O in visual format" (2013, 441; italics added). So, if top-down influences on perception occur via mental imagery, as some maintain (e.g. Nanay 2023), in support of Farennikova's position one may say that perceptual experiences of absence are genuinely cognitively penetrated.

Yet, as regards this horn of the dilemma, appealing to the imaginative production of a localizing template in order to save the idea that perceptual experiences of absence are cognitively penetrated is not decisive either. For that production may take place both in cases of experiences of absence that seem to be genuinely perceptual, the paradigmatic ones, and in cases that do not seem to be such, e.g. when one feels that the beloved that left one is not around not only in the very city in which the couple lived together, but also in any of the rooms of the house one shared with her in that city. Once again, neither the partnerless city nor the partnerless rooms seems weird in the way the laptopless table seemingly is.

So, one may revert to the second horn of the dilemma: the perceptualist account must deny that the relevant experience is cognitively penetrated, by going non-veridicalist and assimilating perceptual experiences of absence to cases of illusory perceptual experiences. In unconsciously drawing an inference from what is present to what is absent in a perceptual scene, one merely erroneously takes the original perceptual experience of that scene as if it were an experience of absence, as Mumford (2021) claims. Notoriously, illusory perceptual experiences are in general not cognitively penetrated, as optical illusions show. Consider the famous Müller-Lyer illusion (Fodor 1983). Even if one knows that the segments of the two geometrical figures one faces have the same length, one sees the segment embedded into

Figure 1
Chiara Ferragni's illusory nude-look. Author's photo, 2024

converging wedges as shorter than the segment flanked by diverting wedges. So, in their being illusory experiences, also perceptual experiences of absence are not so penetrated.

Yet first, the non-veridicalist must convincingly explain how the absence experience can work as a perceptual illusion, since in its case expectations supposedly play a role that do not play in standard illusions. Second and more relevantly, the non-veridicalist can hardly explain the difference between ordinary experiences of absence and *genuinely illusory* experiences of absence. To see the point, compare an ordinary case in which one sees a naked body when one expected to see a clothed one with a genuinely illusory case in which one sees a clothed body that one however erroneously takes as naked, e.g. because the person in question wears a dress that merely simulates nudity, as in this photo of the famous Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni wearing an illusory nude-look dress **[fig. 1]** (for other cases of genuine "illusions of absence", cf. Block 2023, 182-3; Varzi 2022, 236).[10]

At this point, an obvious question arises. If none of the main positions really satisfactorily accounts for so-called perceptual experiences of absence, how can they be explained?

3 My Own Account

Here comes my own moderate perceptualist proposal (MPP). For MPP, the relevant expectations only *weakly penetrate*, in conformity with the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2012; 2015), the relevant perceptual experiences.

10 Varzi (2022, 234) discusses another case in which one experientially perceives that someone is absent while that someone is instead present, but she is unrecognizably disguised. This case can also be assimilated to a case of a genuinely illusory perceptual experience of absence.

On the one hand, as in any case of weak cognitive penetration, the (failed) conceptualized expectations penetrate the latter primarily with respect to the *overall perceptual phenomenal character*, not to the content, of such experiences. For such expectations merely prompt a certain subject to experience that such a character changes from time *t*, when she perceptually experiences a scene including an item, to time *t'*, when she perceptually experiences a scene that sounds *overall phenomenally differently*. Indeed, since that very item is no longer present, *further details of the original scene that such an item previously occluded are now perceptually experienced*. To put it in Noë's (2004, 61) terms, what was originally perceived to be present as absent is now perceived as fully present. Thus, in this situation one is facing a case of phenomenal contrast between two intrasubjective experiences, the contrasting and the target experience (Siegel 2011), which one reads as a perceptual phenomenal contrast that can further be taken as involving a difference in the *non-conceptual* content of such experiences. Indeed, such a difference may hold only for a subject that can note it, as triggered by the failure of conceptualized expectations related to a *previous* perceptual experience stored in her working memory.[11] In actual fact, *t* and *t'* may be temporally separate or even occur one after the other. Simply, one's (failed) conceptualized expectations prompt one to perceive the relevant phenomenal difference between such experiences. To repeat, this is a difference in their overall phenomenal perceptual character further taken as a difference in their non-conceptual content.

To get the point of this difference, in the paradigmatic case of the laptopless table, at *t'* a certain subject perceptually experiences non-conceptual details of the table (primarily, certain colors, if not also shapes) that at *t* she could not perceptually experience, since they were occluded by the laptop that is now no longer out there. Thus, although her perceptual experience of the scene at *t'* is phenomenally indistinguishable from the perceptual experience *another* subject lacking the expectation *of a laptop out there* may have of that scene, as phenomenal collapse stresses, this occlusion removal makes that experience phenomenally distinguishable from the perceptual experience *she* had at *t* of the original scene. In my previous terms, not only the mere phenomenal character, but also the presentational

11 Clearly, also Farennikova thinks that her templates are stored in working memory (2013, 441). Yet since for her productive imagination – actually, mental imagery – is involved in such templates, for her working memory must be directly prompted by internal, not by external, stimulation (which is instead for working memory its paradigmatic way of functioning: Nanay 2023, 51), as I on the contrary suppose that it is the case as regards genuine cases of perceptual experiences of absence. As Nanay (2023) stresses, what distinguishes mental imagery from genuine perception is this difference in stimulation.

character of that experience changes. Indeed, the new experience's features present new worldly properties characterizing the non-conceptual content of the resulting perceptual experience, e.g. the color of the portion of the table that was previously occluded by the laptop, and fail to present old ones, e.g. the color of the laptop itself.

Hence, the target experience with its own non-conceptual content, mainly determined by colors and shapes, is merely *conceptually described as* a perceptual experience of absence. In perceiving the color and the shape of the portion of the table that was previously occluded by the laptop, *one says* that one sees the laptop's absence. Yet properly speaking, in having that perceptual experience whose content is non-conceptual, one is not having the so-called epistemic propositional state that is described by saying *that* one sees that the laptop is absent. That state would indeed have a conceptualized content, but if it occurred, it would occur at most post-perceptually, not perceptually. As I said, the target experience is merely prompted by the (failed) expectation that the laptop is out there. Hence, it is merely *weakly* cognitively penetrated (Macpherson 2012): concepts do not determine the content of that experience, which is genuinely non-conceptual; they merely enable one to have that experience with its specific overall phenomenal character.[12]

Here the situation is structurally like the situation one encounters in the following case of a 'lighting up' configuration **[fig. 2]**. After having been for a long time the mere experience of certain black-and-white spots, a perceptual experience whose overall phenomenal perceptual character is noted to change at a later time is also discovered at that time to be an experience whose non-conceptual content is now that of some horsish silhouettes on a background, which is merely *conceptually described* as a perceptual experience of horses. In actually coming to see those silhouettes, one *says* that one sees what one faces as horses. Again, this phenomenal change is weakly cognitively penetrated. For the relevant concepts merely prompt it (suppose somebody asks the perceiver, "don't you see the *horses* there"?).

On the other hand, failure of expectations is *not necessary* for having the relevant perceptual phenomenal change, as the model of *cognitive penetration lite* (Macpherson 2015) predicts. According to this model. it may be the case that there are two such experiences sharing the same overall phenomenal perceptual character, one that is prompted by a top-down conceptual influence and another that is not

12 I agree with Varzi (2022, 230-4) in distinguishing the perceptual experience that something is absent, e.g. that a white sheet of paper is not out there, from the perceptual experience of something as an absence, e.g. the perceptual experience of a white sheet of paper as an absence of text. Yet properly speaking, both such experiences are post-perceptual, that is, they do not correspond to what is really perceived in a perceptual experience of absence.

Figure 2 *Horses*. By courtesy of Paola Tosti, 2015

so prompted. In actual fact, that perceptual phenomenal change may occur also in other cases, in which what one experientially perceives *now* as different with respect to what one experientially perceived *before* is precisely what one expects. Consider an example provided by Cavedon-Taylor (2017) that involves a tactile perceptual experience. After a dental operation, *in accordance with one's expectations* one may experientially perceive in a tactile mode that the extracted tooth is no longer there, in a certain part of one's mouth. For MPP, what one now enjoys as phenomenally different from one's previous perceptual experience of that part of one's mouth is the tactile perceptual experience of the lateral surfaces of the teeth that flanked the extracted tooth, which were previously occluded by that tooth.[13]

Putting things in this way is immediately advantageous. Since absence does not really figure in the content of the target experience, my account does not face the problem – assuming for argument's sake that it is a problem – of appealing to a weird notion of causality (Sorensen 2008; Farennikova 2013) to explain how one can experientially perceive (propositional) absences; namely, negative facts to the effect that something is not out there. For one's target perceptual experience is instead caused by the perceived object along with its non-conceptually grasped properties; e.g., the color of the table in its no longer occluded part.

But there is more than that. If one compares MPP with the other proposals on the market, it turns out that MMP is better than them.

13 This explanation is better than Cavedon-Taylor's one. For, in its *not* appealing to a specific mismatch between one's body schema and tactual stimulation, as Cavedon-Taylor instead does (2017, 363-5), it conforms to a general explanatory model.

To begin with, on the one hand, unlike the best cognitivist approach that appeals to intellectual seemings, MPP claims that *some* cases of the so-called perceptual experiences of absences are indeed *perceptual* experiences of phenomenal changes having to do with occlusion removals that are merely *described* as perceptual experiences of absences (e.g., the perceptual experience of the absent laptop). Moreover, on the other hand, also the reverse holds. Unlike the radical perceptualist position, MPP claims that *some* cases of so-called perceptual experiences of absences are indeed *cognitive* experiences in which one mentally imagines something absent from the perceptual scene (e.g., the experiential imaginings of the absent ex-partner).

At this point, one may obviously wonder what makes it the case that a so-called perceptual experience of absence is cognitive or perceptual. But MPP has an answer to this worry. All depends on whether a previous perceptual experience is stored in working memory for a phenomenal comparison. If this is the case, the experience of absence is perceptual; if not, cognitive.

Consider the following two cases. First, I get to the beach and I realize that a person over there is naked. Since in my working memory I have stored no previous perception of that person as clothed, the experience that she is unclothed is cognitive. The situation is just the same as when one gets to a nursery and sees a lot of naked newborn babies; one would not assume that one sees them as unclothed. Second, I am already at the beach and I realize that my freshly met partner, who was previously clothed, is now naked. Since in my working memory I have stored a previous perception of that partner on that beach as clothed, the experience that she is unclothed is perceptual. I now see some colors and shapes of her body that I did not see before, as hidden by her clothes. I am not only surprised, but also (pleasantly or not) shocked, by what I see, just as if I were attending to a strip-tease in a nightclub.

Curiously enough, this cognitive/perceptual distinction also holds for the cases of a perceptual experience of *the absence of an absence* (Varzi 2022, 228-9). If one returns to the Louvre after having been told that *Mona Lisa* has been stolen and instead re-sees it in Salon Carré, since it has been hung there again after its recovery, one does not experientially *perceive* the absence of an absence, but merely *cognitively* revises one's expectations. For one's perceptual experience matches in its overall phenomenal perceptual character the perceptual experience one originally had while entering the Salon. Yet if one touches with one's tongue that part of one's mouth that has been filled with an implant after having touched it after a certain tooth's extraction, one does experientially perceive the absence of an absence, i.e., the absence of the post-extraction cavity. For one's perception of the implant has an overall phenomenal perceptual character different from the character of one's previous perception of the

cavity, since one now feels the surfaces of the surrounding teeth as occluded by the shape of the new implant.

Finally, as regards the aforementioned problem of sufficiency failure encountered by the metacognitivist approach, MPP can explain why a metacognitivist feeling of surprise occurs both in the case of a perceptual experience of absence and in the case of a perceptual experience of presence. For the mechanism at play is exactly the same. In both cases, one experientially perceives an overall phenomenal difference between two perceptual experiences prompted by the failure of one's expectations. Simply, while in the experience of absence one sees something that is no longer occluded – the occlusion removal concerns the visual scene's *background* – in the experience of presence one sees something that now occludes other things – the occlusion appearance concerns that scene's *foreground*. To put it again in Noë's (2004) terms, while in the former case one now perceives as fully present what one originally perceived to be present as absent, in the latter case one now perceives to be present as absent what one originally perceived as fully present.

Let us go back to a previous example. Suppose that at *t* a subject experientially perceives a completely empty table. Then she closes her eyes and once she opens them again at *t'*, contrary to her expectations a laptop is out there! The overall phenomenal perceptual character of her experience has changed, since one now sees some portions of the table that were openly in view for her as occluded by the laptop's colors and shapes.

4 Perceptual Experiences of Depicted Absences

Once I have explained how things go as regards ordinary perceptual experiences of absence, I can find a solution to the problem of *pictorial* experiences of absences, a case that Farennikova herself (2019) answers in the affirmative.

To begin with, I must clarify what I mean by pictorial experiences in general. By following Wollheim,[14] I will here stick with the claim that pictorial experience is a genuine yet *sui generis* twofold perceptual experience of *seeing-in*, in which one simultaneously perceives both the picture's *vehicle*, i.e., the physical basis of the picture, in the *configurational fold* (CF) of that experience, and the picture's *subject*, i.e., what the picture presents, in the *recognitional fold* (RF) of that experience.[15]

14 Wollheim 1980; 1987; 1998; 2003a; 2003b.

15 One may account for this supposition by taking the second fold as a knowingly illusory perception of the vehicle as the subject (Voltolini 2015), but of course other accounts are available.

This said, I am not interested here in discussing the *general* phenomenon Wollheim focused of how one can perceive in a picture a presented subject that is not there, as when in facing Leonardo's *La Gioconda* one sees an enigmatic smiling woman on the background of a typical Italian landscape. Someone describes this phenomenon affecting pictorial perceptual experience in general as another yet different case in which one sees something present as absent (Noë 2012, 85). Nor am I interested in discussing the *specific* phenomenon of seeing depicted *objectual* absences, as when one sees a shadow in a photo, taken as absence of light (Pettersson 2017). Instead, I am interested in discussing the *other* specific phenomenon of seeing depicted *propositional* absences, of which a pictorial version of Farennikova's original example may constitute the paradigmatic case. On coming back to the café and realizing that her laptop is no longer there on a certain table of that café, one takes a picture of that table, which allegedly presents the absence of that laptop again.[16]

In the previous Section, we have seen that perceptual experience of absence is basically a matter of occlusion removal. Now in the RF of a seeing-in experience, one can certainly perceive occlusions. For the picture's subject amounts to a scene (Nanay 2022), in which one perceives certain items as standing in front of other items; e.g., "a woman in a hat standing in front of a clump of trees" (Wollheim 2003a, 3). Hence, by so standing, the first items can partially occlude the second ones and be seen as such occluders.[17]

But if one can perceive occlusions in the RF, one can also perceive absences in it. Yet the constraint for such an experience is the same as that affecting ordinary perceptual experience; namely, one can perceive absences in the RF of seeing-in experiences, provided that such absences are the outcome of overall phenomenal perceptual changes in one's seeing-in experience, notably in its RF, having to do with occlusion removals. Such changes are typically prompted by the failure of one's previous expectations entertained in accordance with originally having that experience.[18]

16 Pettersson (2012, 257) provides another example having to do with a photo of Manhattan's skyline taken after September 11, 2011, seemingly including the absent Twin Towers.

17 Cases of photos in which one sees not a whole solar eclipse, but the Moon's shadow as covering a great part of the Sun, while leaving manifest its flaming corona (Pettersson 2012), do mobilize depicted occlusions. For clearer cases of depicted occlusions with paintings, see again Pettersson (2011, 283, 293).

18 Is this appeal to a change in the overall phenomenal character of the RF of the seeing-in experience compatible with the idea that the RF is cognitively penetrated, so as to have a *conceptual* content (Voltolini 2015)? Yes, for the conceptual change that affects the RF's content, as grounded in its overall phenomenal perceptual character, does not concern absences *qua absences*. In the example I now provide, the relevant conceptual change involves passing from seeing the protagonist's body as *veiled* to seeing it as displaying *her breast* (and possibly *her pubis* as well).

Figure 3 Artemisia Gentileschi, The Allegory of Inclination (1615-1616). Artstor

An example may clarify matters. Only one who knows by means of subsequent seeing-in experiences of Artemisia Gentileschi's masterpiece *Allegory of Inclination* that such a masterpiece has been restored by removing the veils that Il Volterrano painted in order to cover the depicted body of its female protagonist, in now grasping in the new seeing-in experience of that picture her depicted torso as no longer clothed, as one instead grasped it in the previous seeing-in experience of that picture, one can perceive the absence of those veils. For in its RF one now grasps the bodily colors and shapes that were previously occluded by the colors and shapes of such veils. As the following figure, showing the picture before and after the restoration, clearly shows **[fig. 3]**.[19]

19 So, *pace* Pettersson (2012, 262), from a *perceptual* point of view there may be a difference between a photo presenting the absence of something (say, a collapsed rock) that was presented in a previous photo of roughly the same scene, and a photo allegedly presenting the absence of something else (say, a criminal) that was *not* presented in a previous photo of roughly the same scene.

5 Conclusion

Let me take stock. In this paper, I have defended the idea that one can have perceptual experiences of absence. Yet not only such experiences occur only in certain limited cases; namely, those in which a previous perceptual experience of a certain scene is stored in working memory for a phenomenal comparison with a later perceptual experience of that scene suitably modified, as corresponding to a change in the overall phenomenal perceptual character of the respective experiences. But also, properly speaking the later experience is not a perception of a (propositional) absence, is only *described as such*. For in actual fact, it is a perceptual experience of a scene perceptually modified, by means of occlusion removal, as regards some of the low-level properties of the scene's objects now available to the perceiver. Such properties are grasped in the new non-conceptual content of that experience corresponding to that phenomenal change. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same situation holds in the genuinely perceptual twofold pictorial experience of a depicted absence.[20]

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