

# Markus Gabriel Against the World

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**Abstract** According to Markus Gabriel, the world does not exist. This view—baptised *metametaphysical nihilism*—is explicated at length in his recent book *Fields of Sense*, which updates his earlier project of *transcendental ontology*. In this paper, I question whether meta-metaphysical nihilism is internally coherent, specifically whether the proposition ‘the world does not exist’ is expressible without performative contradiction on that view. Call this the *inexpressibility objection*. This is not an original objection—indeed it is anticipated in Gabriel’s book. However, I believe that his response to it is inadequate and that I have something illuminating to say about this state of affairs. My claim is that we can distinguish between two senses of ‘the world’, one of which is benign and acceptable, the other not. The acceptable sense of ‘the world’ suffices to answer the inexpressibility objection—at a certain theoretical cost, of course. To explain what this cost is, I turn briefly to an examination of Martin Hägglund’s *radical atheism*.

**Keywords** Markus Gabriel · The world · Ontology · Metaphysics of modality · Martin Hägglund · Radical atheism

## Introduction

According to Markus Gabriel, the world does not exist. This view—baptised *metametaphysical nihilism*—is explicated at length in his recent book *Fields of Sense*, which updates his earlier project of *transcendental ontology*. In this paper, I question whether meta-metaphysical nihilism is internally coherent, specifically whether the proposition ‘the world does not exist’ is expressible without performative contradiction on that view. Call this the *inexpressibility objection*. This is not an original objection—indeed it is anticipated in Gabriel’s book. However, I believe that his response to it is inadequate and that I have something illuminating to say about this state of affairs. My claim is that

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we can distinguish between two senses of ‘the world’, one of which is benign and acceptable, the other not. The acceptable sense of ‘the world’ suffices to answer the inexpressibility objection—at a certain theoretical cost, of course. To explain what this cost is, I turn briefly to an examination of Martin Hägglund’s *radical atheism*.<sup>1</sup>

## The World Does Not Exist?

Existence is defined by Gabriel as follows: X exists = X appears in a field of sense. Being an object is defined in the same way (2015: 167). Appearing in a field of sense is comparable to (but broader in scope than) belonging to a set. A book, for example, appears in several fields of sense, including that of books and that of physical objects. Note that because fields also exist, they too must appear in (usually distinct) fields of sense.

The world, if it existed, would be the domain of all domains, i.e. the field of sense in which all fields of sense appear. More explicitly (2015: 187), ‘the world’ refers to ‘any kind of unrestricted or overall totality, be it the totality of existence, the totality of what there is, the totality of objects, the whole of beings, or the totality of facts or states of affairs.’

With these definitions in place, Gabriel tries to demonstrate that the world does not (and cannot) exist.<sup>2</sup> The argument goes like this: if the world existed, it would be either an *additive* totality or a *unified* totality. An additive totality expresses the idea of a mereological fusion of existents—what Gabriel describes (2015: 188) as the ‘mere co-existence of all the particular fields’. On this conception, the world is not a field of sense, since it is nothing over and above all the particular fields of sense taken together. Gabriel’s argument against this approach is that in order to have an additive totality there must at least be a minimal degree of unity that warrants (or constitutes) the grouping together of all fields of sense within a single totality. In other words, additive totalities are themselves unified totalities, not a distinct alternative to them. If this is right, then it remains only for Gabriel to show that the world is not a unified totality—in order to show that it does not exist.

What then is the argument against the world being a unified totality? A unified totality, we are told, is a totality that is distinct from everything it unifies (2015: 189). As a distinct thing, it either exists in another field of sense, or in itself. If the world *qua* unified totality exists within another field, then that field also exists. Hence the two fields exist within a third field. If this third field is not the world, then it is a field that encompasses more than the world. Yet, the meaning of ‘the world’ excludes this possibility. Hence, we arrive at the conclusion that if the world exists, it must appear

<sup>1</sup> Note: I use the term ‘totality’ in Gabriel’s strong sense unless otherwise noted. See Gabriel (2015: 196):

‘The world’, ‘the meaning of it all’, ‘the domain of all domains’, ‘the One’, ‘absolutely everything’, ‘unrestricted totality’, ‘reality’, ‘Being’, ‘Beying’, ‘Being and Time’, and so on, are all short-hand (overgeneralised) terms for failed attempts at cashing out Parmenides’ misguided impression that we are somehow part of an all-encompassing sphere, the big thing, the universe, *una substantia, Deus sive natura*.

See also Gabriel (2013: 19)—where the following are effectively equated: the totality, the world, the absolute, the infinite, the domain of all domains, eternal freedom, and the unconditioned.

<sup>2</sup> For the implication that the world *necessarily* does not exist, see Gabriel (2015: 188, 214). The non-existence of the world is a priori according to Gabriel (2015: 245).

within itself. Gabriel denies that this is possible (2015: 189).<sup>3</sup> Appearing within itself would mean appearing besides other fields. To show why this might be problematic Gabriel offers the following thought experiment (2015: 140): imagine there are only three domains, e.g. chemistry, biology and french studies. If the world existed, it would have to belong to one of these domains. Obviously, the world does not belong to these domains—i.e. it is not a chemical or biological object, nor is it French. Hence, the world does not exist.

This argument appears to beg the question of whether the world could belong only to one of its immediate sub-domains: namely itself. Nevertheless, the underlying intuition—that it does not really make sense to say that everything literally appears within itself—may be sound.<sup>4</sup> At any rate, this is not the level at which I wish to engage Gabriel's account. Instead, the deeper issue I wish to focus on is this: how does Gabriel even manage to deny the existence of the world? I mean: how does he succeed in *expressing* that denial? This is what I call the inexpressibility objection. My contention is that Gabriel's position contains, or requires, a performative contradiction.

A version of this objection—which he attributes to Eduardo Luft—is anticipated by Gabriel in the text (2015: 189). His response to the objection is as follows (2015: 204): the objection presupposes that we must refer to the world when we say that it does not exist. No such reference is necessary—hence, the objection fails. No such reference is required in just the same way that we do not have to refer to the round square in order to deny that it is bigger than some ordinary square (2015: 203). Instead, we just deny that 'round square' refers to anything at all.

I now proceed further into the details of this objection. To start with, how does Gabriel understand denials or negations of existence in general? He writes (2015: 177): 'negation of existence (for one field) is often assertion of existence (for some other field).' This is why the world cannot be nonexistent in the same way as other things—as it would then exist in some field of sense.

Now, in order to say that there is no field of sense in which the world exists, it looks like we need to be capable of thinking about *all* fields of sense—not in the sense of holding them all in mind at the same time (which is clearly impossible)—but rather in the sense of legitimately and aptly asserting general claims that hold true of all of them without exception. However, Gabriel explicitly forbids quantification over—or thought about—all fields of sense taken together, since it is precisely this 'all' whose existence he denies (2015: 177).<sup>5</sup> It follows from this that Gabriel's denial of the existence of the world *cannot* be understood as the claim that there is—unrestrictedly—no field of sense that is the world or in which the world appears. And, this makes the denial of the

<sup>3</sup> One argument available to Gabriel, but which he does not use, is this: if a unified totality is distinct from everything it unifies, then the world cannot appear within itself, since it would then be unified by—and thus distinct from—itself.

<sup>4</sup> Priest (2014: 193) defends the view that the world/totality appears as a part of itself.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gabriel (2015: 7). Gabriel's rejection of unrestricted quantification makes clear the proximity of his view to that of Patrick Grim (1991), who notoriously argues that the import of the semantic and set-theoretical paradoxes (and the phenomenon of indefinite extendability in particular) is that the very mechanism of quantification is broken when used unrestrictedly, such that it is not possible to quantify over (and thus think about) absolutely everything. An actually complete and infinite totality, e.g. the totality of truths or possibilities, is unthinkable, since any totality we can conceptualise can have its concept extended, thus showing it to be less than the 'all' we mistook it for. For an argument that Grim's view is inexpressible by its own lights, see Priest (2002: 229–32).

world problematically resemble the assertion ‘there is no beer in the fridge’—since, as Gabriel tells us (*ibid*), ‘there are only restricted quantifiers’. Again, without unrestricted quantification, we cannot express the denial of the world—any more than we deny the existence of beer *as such* by asserting ‘there is no beer in the fridge’.<sup>6</sup> This renders mysterious how Gabriel manages to rule out the possibility of the world existing in some field of sense outside the range of what he is able to quantify over or think about.

As anticipated above, Gabriel (2015: 204, *my italics*) interprets Luft’s objection as resting on the premise that, in order to know of each thing that it is not the world, it must be ‘true *of the world* that no object ever encountered is identical to it’. In this way, reference to the world is presupposed by our denial of its existence. Now, if the objection were simply that using the phrase ‘the world’ requires commitment to its existence, then Gabriel would be right to dismiss it. However, by focusing on Gabriel’s denial of unrestricted quantification we can see that this is not really the case. Specifically, when Gabriel says that no reference to the world is necessary in order to deny that it exists, he also means for this denial to be free of any unrestricted use of the quantifying phrases ‘all’, ‘not any’, ‘some’, etc. Framed this way, Luft’s objection is that Gabriel cannot express his denial of the existence of the world without implicitly quantifying over absolutely everything, which in his terms commits him to the existence of the world. Understood thus, we can now see that the comparison Gabriel draws—between the world and the round square—is inapt. *Contra* Gabriel, the two are importantly different because in the case of the round square, ‘for any X, X ≠ the round square’ does not require reference to the round square, whereas in the proposition ‘for any X, X ≠ the world’, the term ‘any’ quantifies unrestrictedly and thus refers to the world.

The denial of the existence of the world is not only different from ordinary negations of existence insofar as it does not involve commitment to the existence of the world in some field of sense. It is also different insofar as the exact extension of what is being denied of the world—‘existence’—is itself indeterminate, since for Gabriel there is no general concept of existence. As he puts it at one point (2015: 264): ‘the fact that everything exists does not mean that there is a unified field of actuality (‘reality’) that encompasses everything that exists.’ And, this is exactly because, if there were, *it* would be the world! So, in order to avoid having existence itself be the world, Gabriel denies that existence is the highest genus or that it is a univocal concept in the sense that everything exists in the same way (2015: 193). He writes (2015: 192): ‘there is no such thing as an answer to the question of what it is for an object just insofar as it is an object to appear in a field of sense just insofar as it is a field of sense.’ Similarly, there is no a priori property of appearance in a field of sense that is instantiated in the same way by everything falling under it.<sup>7</sup>

This puts a twist on his view that must be properly accounted for here. When Gabriel says that existence means appearing in a field of sense, we now see that what he is saying is not as clearcut or evident as it may initially have seemed. The concepts of

<sup>6</sup> This objection also applies if Gabriel wishes to argue instead that ‘the world does not exist’ is strictly meaningless, i.e. robustly or non-illuminatingly nonsensical in his terms (2015: 346). We would then ask: in what field of sense is it true that ‘the world does not exist’ is meaningless? Whatever the answer to this is — call it *w* — how does Gabriel rule out the possibility that in some field of sense other than *w* ‘the world does not exist’ is meaningful, or even false?

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gabriel (2015: 241): ‘appearing’ is not univocal. See also Gabriel (2015: 60).

‘existence’, ‘appearance’, etc., are all equivocal for Gabriel, which is to say that his account really has the following form: existence is appearing in a field of sense *or* *qua*appearing in a field of sense or *za*appearing in a field of sense, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Since there is no totality, there is no unified sense of ‘existence’. That is why Gabriel challenges all competing views to specify what they mean by ‘existence’, if not appearing in a field of sense (2015: 193).<sup>9</sup>

To return to the main point of contention: the inexpressibility objection can now be stated as follows: even if the world does not exist, how does Gabriel rule out its *qua*appearing in a field of sense and so *qua*existing? If Gabriel does not intend to rule this out, then his position is not nearly as anti-onto-theological as it presents itself as being. For it is hardly a universal (or even prevalent) tenet of onto-theology that being is said univocally! Thus, on the one hand, if Gabriel does not intend to rule out the just described equivocal possibilities, then he does not intend to rule out onto-theology, and we might consequently wonder what the point of meta-metaphysical nihilism is supposed to be. On the other hand, if he does intend to rule these possibilities out (of the world *qua*existing, etc.), then how does he accomplish this feat without quantifying over absolutely everything? In his own terms, is not Gabriel just whistling the nonexistence of the world—that is, trying to give illicit expression to the (supposedly) inexpressible?

Gabriel is quick to criticise the attempt to express the inexpressible in Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and others. This is in the context of emphasising that his denial of the existence of the world is not intended to take with the left hand something that is then given back with the right, i.e. to parameterise the denial to phenomena, to the understanding/reason, to literature, etc. If the world does not exist then there is no meaning of being or existence: it cannot be said, but neither can it be whistled or indirectly alluded to, Gabriel tells us. The attempt to whistle the inexpressible leads to performative contradiction.

For example, Gabriel (2015: 201) observes that Heidegger runs into this problem when he attempts to express the meaning of existence indirectly by inventing ‘new poetical expressions, such as the verb “to world”’. The world does not exist, but it worlds. But this is just another form of pretending to not be whistling it, where one really is whistling it. And again, we cannot whistle it, as there is nothing to whistle or whistle about.’ That Gabriel so emphatically presses this line of critique makes it very hard to subsequently deny that he wants to rule out any equivocal sense in which the world might *qua*exist, etc.

In summary, the problem here is twofold: on the one hand, in denying the existence of the world, Gabriel implicitly—and illicitly—treats existence as univocal, which amounts to using plain, analytical language to whistle unrestricted quantification. On the other hand, by giving up any claim (2015: 213) to an ‘all-encompassing theory,

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gabriel (2015: 242): it is allowed that fields are akin to what Latour calls ‘modes of existence’. In connection with this, Gabriel asserts that the structure of fields is more like ‘being-qua-other’ than ‘being-qua-being’.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Fine (2007: 28): a position that denies unrestricted quantification struggles to distinguish itself from one that accepts it, since it says that no interpretation of the quantifier is unrestricted, which applies to this claim as well. Thus, Gabriel cannot say that *no* interpretation of the quantifier is unrestricted—only that *this* or *that* particular interpretation is not unrestricted. Hence, his challenge to competing views: like Aristotle defending the principle of non-contradiction, commitment to the no-world-view is effectively *anhypothetical*: it requires for its defense that the opponent make the first move.

algorithm, rule, principle, or concept', Gabriel effectively ties one hand behind his back: the denial of absolute generality is by its own lights restricted rather than absolutely general.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Gabriel has no good reason to preclude whistling allusions to fields of sense whose quaexistence or zaexistence is in principle left open by his refusal/proclaimed inability to quantify over absolutely everything.

## The Cost of Expressibility

To resolve this impasse, we need to find a way to make the inexistence of totality compatible with ontological univocity. Equivocity is too high a price to pay for subtracting the world from our ontology. More importantly, it is not *necessary* for avoiding what is actually *problematic* about the world—or so I contend. It is not necessary insofar as we can conceive of a totality that is finite, open and contingent, and in this way benign.

The problem with meta-metaphysical nihilism is that it is a discourse that is implicitly under erasure from start to finish. One way of avoiding this state of affairs would be by retreating to a purely epistemological stance, one that does not try to be ontological at all. But, insofar, as we wish to continue our speculative adventure across the ontological landscape, this is not an option. What we need is a way to interpret the finitude of cognition that does not mandate epistemological quietism. This can be accomplished, I suggest, on the basis of a neglected interpretation of the dialectical trajectory of post-Kantian ontology, according to which totality only exists insofar as it is finite and contingent—and not insofar as it would necessarily exist or be akin to Spinozist substance. The latter properties characterise a 'thick' or 'strong' totality that can be subtracted from our ontology without thereby having to give up the univocity of being. They are replaced by an inverse and complimentary commitment to the possibility of there being nothing at all—i.e. to what I call *modal nihilism*.

The nothingness involved in modal nihilism is defined as the negation of the totality of beings—nonbeing *simpliciter*.<sup>11</sup> This presupposes, of course, that nothingness and totality *qua* being are distinguishable. Can this distinction be maintained? And, more generally, is nothingness conceivable? In his study of the opening of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Houlgate asserts (2006: 269) that whilst being and nothingness are in some sense distinct, 'by virtue of its very purity and *immediacy* as sheer nothingness... such nothingness is itself indistinguishable from indeterminate being'.<sup>12</sup> The exact nature of

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gabriel (2015: 22): meta-metaphysical nihilism ('anarchical realism') lacks any 'overall principle that organises everything, unless you want to call the no-world-view a (methodological?) principle'. Gabriel goes on to say (ibid) that the no-world-view is only a principle insofar as it 'defines a limited space of orientation'. This is comparable to the conclusion reached by Hellman in his modal-structuralist version of the no-world-view (2007: 95): we simply assume that *anything we can recognise* as e.g. an entity will conform to our current understanding. In this way a 'limited space of orientation' permits a functional emulation of univocity, but one that remains (as Hellman observes) fundamentally Carnapian in spirit, and thus unable in principle to support an unrestricted rejection of the world.

<sup>11</sup> This definition is adopted from Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' (1998: 85). It is also comparable to that which Houlgate ascribes (2006: 269) to Hegel: "no space, no time, no 'presence,' no determinacy, no 'things,' no *being* whatsoever but the pure and utter *not*."

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gabriel *apropos* Hegel (2013: 63): 'the difference between being and nothingness is necessarily nullified, for being cannot be determined against nothing, without nothing itself *ex hypothesi* becoming something determined through this operation.'



this claim is admittedly hard to parse, but it appears to mean that, when we look at the entailments of the content of the concept of absolute nothingness, we see that it is actually contradictory insofar as that content entails the existence of something, so that nothingness ‘vanishes’ into being. If any attempt to conceive nothingness ends in contradiction then there literally is no *consistent* concept of nothingness—only an endless proliferation of inconsistent *doppelgänger*s.<sup>13</sup>

But is this correct? I do not think so. Ignoring the dubiousness of inferring presence from double absence—and keeping in mind that an absence is not a *thing* in any sense—the fundamental question here is whether, although not itself a form of presence, absence is necessarily presence-involving or presence-implicating. Is negation somehow conceptually parasitic—must it always be restricted in scope? Or, should it be taken as *sui generis*? This looks like a dialectical impasse. But, since Gabriel cannot deny the null possibility any more than he can deny the existence of the world (as this would require quantifying over *all* possibilities), this is not an impasse we have to overcome here. For present purposes, we are free to conclude that the *prima facie* conceivability of absolute nothingness is in fact not misleading, a long tradition of resistance not withstanding.

We have seen that although absolute nothingness is inconceivable according to Gabriel, the nonexistence of the world is not. The putative connection between these two things is this: since we cannot ascribe properties to a nonexistent thing, and being (totality/the world/etc.) does not exist, we end up having to accept a plurality of (logical) forms, i.e. we lack the expressive generality needed to conceive of nonbeing *simpliciter*. That is how the equation of being and nothing comes to occlude the possibility of nothingness. Now, Gabriel admittedly goes further in *Fields of Sense* than in *Transcendental Ontology* in disassociating himself from Heidegger’s strategy (on a certain reading, at least) of using this equation as a prop for breaking through the finitude of thought towards an eschatological understanding of ‘being’ beyond being. This is the significance of Gabriel’s polemic against the whistling of existence in all its forms. And, as can now be seen, this is also the significance—or potential significance, if indeed I am right—of my claim that Gabriel does not go far enough towards fully disassociating himself from this Heideggerian lineage. Specifically, Gabriel now holds that being is nothing and cannot become something (2015: 206). I have argued that he is incapable of justifying this new stance—in particular, the implicitly univocal and unrestrictedly absolute meaning assigned to the impossibility of the world. My alternative to treating the world as either contingently or necessarily nothing is to treat it as contingently something; or, more carefully, to distinguish between the finite totality that contingently exists, and the necessary, infinite totality that does not exist. The nonexistence of the latter does not endanger the ability to think in absolutely general terms. In other words, even if ‘the world’ does not exist, this does not forbid access to the ‘all’ implicated in the minimal sense of quantifying over actual being and thinking in absolutely general terms. We should not throw out the metaphysical baby with the Spinozist bathwater.

<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein Cunningham writes (2002: 170): ‘accompanying any radical absence is an absence of absence, and so to attribute a negativity to nihilism is one-sided.’ Here, once again, the claim is that we cannot conceptualise nothingness except as always already vanishing into, and shot through with, ontological positivity.

Whistling the meaning of existence is a way of signalling that the world *qua* infinite totality withdraws from all determination—i.e. is in this sense limitless—but is *not* thereby nothing. Gabriel wants to avoid any such conception of the world as profound limitless ontological withdrawal. I have argued that his attempt to do so fails—but I agree with the underlying intention. In light of this agreement, the idea that the absolute or infinite withdraws from all determination can only mean one thing from the viewpoint of the present essay. It emphatically does *not* mean that the absolute, presently inexistent, ‘will have been necessary’ in some currently incomprehensible sense. It means that there could be, or could have been, nothing at all, no being or possibility or truth, no abstract or mathematical reality, etc. Again, it does not mean that on the far side of a ‘Wholly Other’ refractory to all thought, some sort of transcendent, superlative being could emerge. This eschatological ontology should be replaced, I am suggesting, *not* with meta-metaphysical nihilism (which is unsatisfactory for the reasons given above) but rather with modal nihilism, an ‘apocalypse that is strictly nonrevelatory’. This option is intimated in the work of Martin Hägglund, which I now turn to. Hägglund claims to discern in the thought of Jacques Derrida a consistent relational ontology of finitude similar to the one I am aiming for here.

Hägglund’s adaptation of Derrida certainly raises a number of tricky interpretative issues, which for brevity I condense into the following question: what is the general relation between deconstruction and religion, and to what extent, specifically, does it resemble negative theology? As Hägglund notes (2008: 3), it is common to juxtapose deconstruction and negative theology insofar as *différance*, just like the God of negative theology, is both ‘the condition for everything that can be’, whilst itself being (in some sense) nothing. To the extent that nothingness is here implicitly reified, this ‘nothing as something’ stands outside of and transcends the structure of finitude. As Hägglund puts it (*ibid.*), God is said to be without being ‘insofar as being is understood as a category of finitude’. Does *différance* also stand outside of and transcend the structure of finitude? Hägglund sees himself as correcting an interpretative tendency along these lines, one which occurs whenever ontological alterity is construed as parameterising knowledge to the near side of the distinction between being and what is *otherwise than being*. To avoid this it must be emphasised that for Derrida the idea of a gift of being or sense—of a plenitudinous donation from beyond the finite realm—is decisively subverted, leaving us only with the gift of death.<sup>14</sup>

Whether Derrida should be read in this way—as ‘scrubbed up and sanitized’ in Caputo’s words (2011: 33)—is not the key issue in the present paper. Nevertheless, I will proceed as if Hägglund is right, and that it is in view of his being right that we should read passages like the following from Derrida’s essay on apocalypse (1984: 30): the limit of ‘criticism’ comes into view ‘in the groundlessness of a remainderless self-destruction of the self, auto-destruction of the autos itself’. On my preferred reading, this is not to be taken as the madness of reason under self-application that would allow Derrida to have his own eschatological gift of being (or ‘beyng’, etc.). Rather, the reflexivity of auto-immunity is the contingency of contingency in a perfectly clear ontological sense that does not open out onto the possibility of necessity once again (or

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Cunningham (2002: 158). For Hägglund (2008: 19) *différance* is not a merely transcendental condition of possibility ‘in Kant or Husserl’s sense, because such conditions only apply to the experience of finite consciousness’. Rather they are ‘ultratranscendental’ insofar as nothing is exempt from them.



of any ontological plenitude), but only the possibility of nothing—i.e. an ‘apocalypse that is strictly nonrevelatory’. In a purely relational ontology, the totality, insofar as it exists, is finite and contingent, even if it is potentially infinite.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this totality has none of the problematic features Hägglund has in mind when he asserts (2008: 86) that the finite can never be a totality. In particular, it is not a positive or complete infinity, it does not have self/intrinsic existence, and it does not preclude but rather enables radical alterity. Most importantly, perhaps, it cannot be understood as the indestructible material substrate of being (however chaotic and anomalous) without devolving back to the viewpoint of a necessary being or necessity of being that would somehow be exempt from the auto-immunity that Hägglund, for the most part, does not hesitate to conceptualise as exceptionless.<sup>16</sup>

I say ‘for the most part’ since there are traces of a tension in Hägglund’s position as well. Specifically, the logic of radical atheism demands either that time itself is auto-immune, or that it is not. Time itself, Hägglund tells us (2008: 79), is ‘the impossibility of any “in itself”’. Again (2008: 81), ‘... Derrida argues that what makes it possible for anything to be at all, at the same time makes it impossible for anything to be in itself.’ These look like decisive statements, but it is not always clear from his discussion that Hägglund accepts that time itself is not in itself. The potential for confusion here stems from the following line of reasoning: if time is the reason why nothing is in itself, then wouldn’t taking away time mean taking away the reason why nothing is in itself, and thus facilitating once again the possibility of the in itself?

If this were the case, it would explain why Hägglund is tempted to deny that time is itself subject to auto-immunity.<sup>17</sup> For example, at the beginning of *Radical Atheism* he writes (2008: 3): ‘the negative infinity of time is an *infinite finitude*, since it entails that finitude cannot ever be eliminated or overcome.’ And later (2008: 28),

If there can be nothing without the spacing of time, then all metaphysical ideas of something that would eliminate the spacing of time are ideas of something that would extinguish everything. The ideal of pure life is the ideal of pure death...

One way of reading this passage is as follows: *were* the spacing of time to be eliminated, everything *would* be extinguished. But, it turns out that such an extinction depends on the very metaphysical ideas that Derrida successfully deconstructs. Hence, there is no real possibility of extinction.

Now, although such a reading cannot be dismissed *out of hand*, it is unsatisfying insofar as it merely folds Derrida back into the Heideggerian tradition: the destructive power of time is restricted insofar as it does not apply to time itself. Here is the crucial passage that shows, I think, where Hägglund’s sympathies ultimately lie (2008: 220, n.): *différance* is only infinite in the sense of being ‘indefinite’; otherwise, the ‘movement of *différance* is finite, since the tracing of time itself is absolutely destructible and thus may be extinguished’. I take it from the context that this is meant to illustrate a key difference between Derrida and Hegel: on this reading, whereas Hegel interprets the

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Derrida’s characterisation of ‘structural totality’ in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (2001: 153).

<sup>16</sup> *Différance* excludes all “metaphysical theses”, including that of necessary being (2008: 22).

<sup>17</sup> It would also leave Hägglund open to Cunningham’s charge of reifying nothingness into something absolute. Cunningham claims that Derrida reifies the nothingness that is ‘outside the text’, which leads to a tacit monism of *différance qua* totality (2002: 162).

ceasing to be of ceasing to be as the glorious revelation of positive infinity, Derrida treats it as the destructibility of time itself, which would thereby leave nothing at all.<sup>18</sup> Taking this possibility seriously whilst avoiding any slide back into negative theology—or what Cunningham calls nihilism—requires a strictly de-reified construal of nothingness, which must not be misconceived as a special sort of semi-structureless or chaotic something. Rather, the movement of *différance* has to apply to itself, and this only makes sense in terms of modal nihilism. In this way, we see that the possibility of there being nothing at all is internally coded into the hyper-rationalist and relationalist logic Hägglund identifies in Derrida. What I am suggesting, in other words, is a resolutely univocal and demystifying construal of the logic of *différance*.<sup>19</sup> Such an understanding treats the contingency of contingency in terms of a comprehensible possibility of nothing rather than an incomprehensible possibility of necessity. It is this logic I wish to appeal to as an alternative to Gabriel’s meta-metaphysical nihilism.

## Conclusion

To conclude briefly, I agree with Gabriel that the critique of totality has an important core of truth. But, there is no compelling reason to think that this critique has any other message than the one it seems to have: namely that being is finite. In particular, we need not infer from this that the world is nonexistent in any sense that prohibits unrestricted quantification over absolutely everything. Doing so leads to the inexpressible objection and performative contradiction.

In its positive aspect, the simplifying and unifying thesis of this essay is that the absolute, the unconditioned, actual infinity, and Spinozist substance (i.e. what is conceived and is through itself), are aligned or mutually entailing notions, and so stand and fall together. Insofar, as the world is aligned with these notions, the world does not exist. But, equally, insofar as the world is *not* aligned with these notions, it does exist. The result of giving up the world (in the relevant senses) is a sort of acephalous Spinozism whose nature and consequences have yet to be fully explored.

In this essay, I have sided with Hägglund’s radical atheism over Gabriel’s meta-metaphysical nihilism, as it seems to offer a more resolute and satisfying means of rejecting the eschatological distortion of the critical impetus embedded within post-Kantianism. Again, Hägglund is right in holding that rationalism or what he calls ‘hyper-rationalism’, points towards a finite, relational ontology, and there are philosophical as well as extra-philosophical reasons for modelling being in relational terms. The philosophical reasons have to do with the purging of substance and of mysterious, inaccessible intrinsic properties from our ontology; as well as the heritage of post-Kantianism in general, wherein the insistence on the non-existence of totality creates a point of connection and communication with the logical and mathematical impetus issuing from the investigation of totality and paradox after Cantor (the latter

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: ‘The ceasing to be of ceasing to be would not bring about consummation; it would rather eliminate the condition for anything to be.’ Cf. Hägglund (2011: 140), ‘it is precisely the dream of something beyond the condition of autoimmunity that Derrida’s radical atheism calls into question.’

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gabriel (2015: 22): ‘...post-Heideggerian French philosophy was right to the degree to which it was explicitly directed against ontotheology and false where it turned into “postmodernist” constructivist hyperbole.’

constituting the nonphilosophical support for relational ontology). What emerges is a finite ontology in which everything is contingent in at least this sense: that there could have been nothing at all. Again, being is the sort of thing of which it can be said that there could have not been any. Finally, this means that the traditional question of why there is something rather than nothing must remain without positive solution. It is just a brute fact, in the final analysis, that anything exists; the *Principle of Sufficient Reason* is thus false, not because of the victory of irrationalism or religious mystification but precisely because of their failure.

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