

Nothingness and Infinity

Katarzyna Kasia

Department of Culture Theory, Faculty of Management of Visual Culture
Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw



**Katarzyna Kasia,
PhD**

is a philosopher, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Warsaw, a recipient of grants from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kościuszko Foundation, and a visiting scholar at Princeton University. A lecturer at the Department of Culture Theory, Faculty of Management of Visual Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. A regular contributor to the weekly *Kultura Liberalna*, a member of the editorial board of *Przegląd Filozoficzno-Literacki*, and a frequent political commentator in the Polish media.
katarzyna.kasia@asp.waw.pl



Space has been one of the most important topics of philosophy since its very beginnings. Realizing the existence of space marks the beginning of all contemplation about the world itself, and above all about our own presence within that world, about the place we occupy within its inexplicable, unimaginably complex expanse. Contemplating the vast infinitude of the starry sky on a clear night can be an experience both awe-inspiring and utterly terrifying.

Terror of this sort always turns my thoughts to the philosophy of Blaise Pascal, whose vision of space is profoundly linked to the concept of infinity. Faced with a sense of anxiety over what is impossible to comprehend and even more impossible to describe, the most important question becomes the reason why we happen to be situated in a particular place. “When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the small space which I fill, or even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified, and wonder that I am here rather than there, for there is no reason why here rather than there, or now rather than then. Who has set me here?” (B. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. C. Kegan Paul 1885, p 28). What chain of causes has brought me to live exactly in this particular place and time? Or was it the decision of some grand architect who put everything together in such a way that I simply could not have found myself anywhere else, at any other time?

In Pascal’s view, the universe is permeated with meaning, impossible to understand from the perspective of man, who is “but a reed,” merely the frailest thing. The only thing that distinguishes us is the ability to engage in contemplation, but its outcomes do not actually bring us any solace. “For after all what is man in nature? A nothing in regard to the infinite, a whole in regard to nothing, a mean between nothing and the whole; infinitely removed from understanding either extreme. The end of things and their beginnings are invincibly hidden from him in impenetrable secrecy, he is equally incapable of seeing the nothing whence he was taken, and the infinite in which he is engulfed” (p. 20–21). The perceptible space, on this view, is al-

Nina Paszkowska,
Mozaika z latarnią
[Mosaic With a Lighthouse],
2019

ways but a tenuous foot-bridge between infinity and nothingness, whereas the world itself is engaged with both, being but a stage in the journey. And its significance and physical presence are both utterly negligible and extremely significant.

And this is what I find most astounding in Pascal's work: his realization of the split, ever present for us humans, between two irreconcilable perspectives. On the one hand, after all, I am convinced of the central role I play in my own little scrap of the macrocosm. Even if it were smaller than a poppyseed grain or a speck of pollen, even if it were the least important of all, it is still mine, and within it I have a sense of the causal power and importance of my decisions. On the other hand, however, if I look at myself from the point of view of the infinite, I am lost in its eternal coldness and darkness, and all my actions lose any meaning. Importance and unimportance are absolute, and thus equally paralyzing, because they apply after all not only to physical actions, but also to decisions of an ethical nature, and this means that my choices are simultaneously meaningless and conclusively binding for everything.

Pascal finds a way out of this aporia thanks to God, who in his philosophy represents the only possibility of reconciling everything with nothing or, in other words, infinity with emptiness. This transcendent point of view makes it possible to abolish the opposition that is most deeply rooted in our existence and thus to appreciate our own worth: "... we are something, but we are not all. What existence we have conceals from us the knowledge of first principles which spring from the nothing, while the pettiness of that existence hides from us the sight of the infinite" (p. 22). Another difficulty stems from the fact that the divine view is radically different from our own. A human being may admit to the existence of such a perspective, but is by no means able to adopt it. The best human reason can do is to flit between fleeting appearances, lacking the cognitive tools even to determine the limits of the finite within the infinite.

The reason for this impossibility is the complexity of human nature. We have body and soul, a duality inscribed in our very being; we are an inseparable "mixture of spirit and clay." The co-existence of these two elements is self-evident, and yet at the same time incomprehensible. Hence our frailty and our obligation to constantly attempt to understand, even if we are doomed to fail. Even if we tell ourselves that the only thing that determines our fate is physics, the very concept of infinity and the finiteness of space and time leads us into the realm of metaphysical thinking.

After all, what happens when the body dies? Do we physically cease to occupy our place? Do we fall into the abyss of nothingness? What happens to the soul when the corporeal clay falls off of it? Do we lapse into eternity, into an extra-temporal existence



where nothing limits us anymore? What happens to us in that eternity? Can we have any influence on it? What role is played by all our seeking and searching? According to Pascal, although doubts are irreconcilable, this does not mean that we should cease our metaphysical quest. On the contrary: "(...) he therefore who doubts and yet seeks not is at once thoroughly unhappy and thoroughly unfair. And if at the same time he be easy and content, profess to be so, and in fact pride himself thereon; even if it be this every condition of doubt which forms the subject of his joy and boasting, I have no terms in which to describe a creature so extravagant" (p. 5).

The concreteness of our being situated in time and space is temporary at best, and certainly a deceptive appearance. Constantly raising the question of eternity is more than just a possibility: it is an obligation that, in Pascal's terms, leads to making a bet in which we have everything to gain and nothing to lose. ■

Nina Paszkowska,
Cudowny świat
[Miraculous World], 2019