THE SOCIAL LIFE OF NOTHING

SILENCE, INVISIBILITY AND EMPTINESS IN TALES OF LOST EXPERIENCE

Susie Scott

ROUTLEDGE

The Social Life of Nothing

Nothing really matters. All the things that we do not do, have or become in our lives can be important in shaping self-identity. From jobs turned down to great loves lost, secrets kept and truths untold, people missed and souls unborn, we understand ourselves through other, unlived lives that are imaginatively possible. This book explores the realm of negative social phenomena – no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places – that lies behind the mirror of experience.

Taking a symbolic interactionist perspective, the author argues that these objects are socially produced, emerging from and negotiated through our relationships with others. Nothing is interactively accomplished in two ways, through social acts of commission and omission. Existentialism and phenomenology encourage us to understand more deeply the subjective experience of nothing; this can be pursued through conscious meaning-making and reflexive self-awareness.

The Social Life of Nothing is a thought-provoking book that will appeal to scholars across the social sciences, arts and humanities, but its message also resonates with the interested general reader.

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Acknowledgements

1 Being through nothingness

Nothing is all around us, circling and filling everything in social life. It is a vast terrain comprising all the things we have not done, that did not happen or that we have not become. It is the reverse mirror image of biographical selfhood: an infinite array of undone acts, unlived lives and unrealised potential. Consider the person who does not vote, turns down a job, has no religion, abstains from alcohol, keeps a secret, ends a relationship or does not have children. How should we understand these negative experiences? They might imply voluntary decisions made by rational free will or constraints imposed by structure and tradition. People may be consciously motivated by political beliefs, values, emotions and morality or perceive their situations more passively, as arbitrary positions. Nothing can be tangibly discerned, in foregrounded objects that are lost, absent or missing, or it can recede into an unseen, looming background of expansive, unknown territory. Finally, the effects of nothing upon personal life vary greatly. Sometimes we are all too painfully aware of what we do not have or cannot be, while at other times we could not care less. Whatever nothing means, however it is done, it is *something* significant which happens in society and shapes our understanding of ourselves.

Why does nothing matter?

Nothing is a paradoxical concept: at once nihilistic, abstract and intangible, and yet immense, chasmically wide and deeply meaningful. Unpacking this puzzle, we find ourselves in a cat's cradle of tangled and self-contradictory lines of thought: how can we study something that is by definition not-something? Even identifying such phenomena is difficult because of their inherent duality: should we focus on what is excluded, erased and unseen, highlighting the power of the 'constitutive outside' (Hall 1996) to demarcate what counts and matters (and what does not)? Or should we examine the negative space left behind when no-things are removed – the world of unseen objects and unknowable experience beyond these inscribed boundaries?

This book is about the *social* dimensions of nothing, as a distinct realm of experience and domain of study. Nothing is inevitably social in its formation, definition, management and consequences. Conceptually, this realm comprises

negatively defined social phenomena, such as non-identity, non-events, non-participation and non-presence. These exist in relational contrast to their positively imagined counterparts: no-things, no-bodies and no-wheres imply the lack of corresponding some-things, some-bodies and some-wheres. Nothing then creates experiences of not-having, not-doing and not-being, which can be just as important as positive experiences in shaping self-identity.

Sociology has neglected nothing. This may reflect the discipline's bias towards the tangibly observable. Sociology is classically defined as the study of social *things*: processes, structures and forces that shape individual behaviour (Durkheim 1895). Traditionally, this meant a focus on the extreme: a preoccupation with deviance and marginality at the expense of conformity. As critics of the Chicago School observed, the study of social problems held an enticing moral and political appeal; researchers gravitated towards the standpoint of the 'hip outsider' rather than the boringly familiar world of the 'square insider' (Gouldner 1962: 208). However, this focus on unusual *things* led to the neglect of subtler *no-things*: other social objects and forms that are not done, shown or seen.

Notions of familiarity, taken-for-grantedness and quotidian normality have been recognised within the sociology of everyday life and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Moran 2005; Jacobsen 2009; Scott 2009b; Misztal 2015). However, these approaches still rest upon ultimately positive constructions of social behaviour: what people *do* or *are*, but in mundane or unnoticeable settings. Ritzer (2007) similarly conceives of a something–nothing continuum on which all phenomena can be located. 'Nullities' are those that lie at one end of the scale because they lack distinctive substance, but these are still real, existent things that serve a social function. Non-places, for example, are settings with no local character (e.g. shopping malls), while nonservices are global and anonymous (e.g. automated checkout tills or online bookings). Conceptualising nothing in this way, as merely insufficient forms of something, tells only one side of the story. It leaves unexplored the enormous, intangible realm of everything else that we do, have or are *not* and that never comes to be.

Holding up a mirror to this conventional terrain, I want to examine its reverse side: the vast, expansive background against which exceptional cases stand out. Here I respond to Brekhus's (1998) call for a sociology of the 'unmarked', discussed further below. Compared to positively 'marked' phenomena, the unmarked are empirically more prevalent and frequently encountered, yet tend to remain unnoticed (Zerubavel 2015). This paradox may be explained in terms of precisely this abundance. There is only a finite number of things we can do, be or have within the constraints of a lifetime but an infinite amount of things that we cannot. If nothing is everything, how can we even begin to study it?

What I call *the social life of nothing* can be traced through a dualism of ontology (what nothing is, where to find it and what it means) and trajectory (the sequence of events through which nothing happens). Nothing emerges from the social world and feeds back into it, suggesting antecedent conditions and resonating consequences. These can be observed at the micro- meso- and macro- levels of analysis, concerning respectively individual subjectivity and

biographical experience; interpersonal encounters and interaction order; and cultural trends and discursive formations. Taking a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1969), I focus mainly on the micro- and the meso- levels, but to some extent all three are intertwined, through the nexus of culture, history and biography (Mills 1959).

My approach rests on two axiomatic assumptions. First, nothing is a form of *social action*: it involves reflexive thought about the self in relation to others, taking into account their perspectives and anticipating social reactions. It creates meaningful experiences, which shape the biographical construction of self-identities. While I shall distinguish between two modes of social action that involve greater or lesser degrees of conscious intentionality, neither implies complete passivity or indifference.

Second, nothing is a *social process*, which unfolds through interaction, encounters and relationships with others in the course of everyday life. It involves a set of practices, which are 'done', or socially accomplished. Sometimes this involves harmonious negotiation, but it can also reflect power, conflict and inequality. Significant others (Mead 1934) may feature as central characters in dramatic episodes, or make subtler appearances in a gradual process of change; these people influence *how* the social doing of nothing can pragmatically unfold. Audience reception plays an important role, too, in co-defining the communicative meanings of nothing.

What and where is nothing?

Nothing may have been slow to capture the sociological imagination (Mills 1959), but this has not been the case for other disciplines. For centuries, the idea of nothingness and negativity has intrigued philosophers, theologians, natural scientists and artists as something fascinating, puzzling and essential to the human condition but which remains ultimately unknowable. Epistemologically, it is difficult to think about anything in the world without implicitly acknowledging its logical correlate, nothing, and as such the latter concept may as be inherent to the human mind (Green 2011). Yet we struggle to articulate what nothing is, our relationship to it and how it affects our lives.

Green (2011) suggests that some of this confusion has arisen from an ambiguous definition, with a conflation of two meanings. What he calls 'nothingness' refers to the *absence of something* (a specific object that is expected but missing, creating the perception of boundaried gaps and holes), whereas he uses the term 'nothing' to describe the *absence of everything* (a void of absolute emptiness, stretching out spatially into infinity and temporally into eternity). The former lends itself to mathematical and scientific study, through the examination of what exists in, around, before and after pockets of absence, whereas the latter has been more influential to philosophical and artistic questions about human consciousness and the limits of existence.

The mathematical representation of nothing was historically problematic in early Christian Europe. The digital counting system was not established here

until the sixteenth century; the medieval Catholic Church regarded zero as a heretic concept because it implied death and absolute annihilation, offending the belief that God was universal, infinite and eternal (Green 2011). Scientists like Copernicus, Pascal and Galileo were reluctant to publish their works through fear of persecution. Aristotle had also denied the possibility of nothingness insofar as something – God – had to have created heaven and earth. Nothing thus became a taboo subject; even using the word was thought to invoke the dangerous and magical force of the devil. This stood in contrast to Jewish and Muslim cultures at the time, which embraced Hebrew and Arabic symbols denoting wheels, circles or other closed spheres to represent the eternal cycle of life (Green ibid.). The subsequent rise of post-Enlightenment rationalism changed all this, however. In modern mathematics, zero is conceptualised as a quantifiable measure, denoting 'none' or 'no amount'. Zero can serve as a locational place marker, representing the position of a missing quantity in a numerical sequence, such as the binary system or a calculable unit, for example multiples of 10 in the decimal counting system.

Physics has been pivotal in establishing nothing as something that matters – precisely because it *is* matter. Newton pointed to the idea of universal space filled with substances and forces, such as gravity. Einstein demonstrated that even invisible forces could be observed indirectly, through their effects upon objects (Green 2011). These principles informed the study of vacuums, which are conceptualised as absolute emptiness and the absence of all matter. Cosmology, particle and quantum physics have challenged this assumption through the demonstration of subatomic particles in action: what is apparently nothing might really be something. For example, a meteorite shower occurs when a mass of cosmic debris passes through the atmosphere so fast that it leaves a void of multiple vacuums in its wake (Barrow 2000). Black holes occur when the gravitational field in a vacuum is so strong that it pulls in everything around it, including light, which cannot escape. Such 'catastrophic implosion' (Barrow ibid.) appears invisible to the external observer, yet conceals an enormous amount of internal activity. This has fuelled cosmological debates about the origins of the universe, the physical world and human life. Whereas religious Creationists believe that God created everything from nothing – that nothing existed before God – secular physicists argue that everything must be created from something else: matter cannot come into being or disappear, but rather can only change form.

The oppositional, contrasting concepts that nothing implies – everything, eternity, infinity – are just as difficult to imagine. Linguistic philosophers following in the Kantian tradition, such as Wittgenstein and Chomsky, suggest that there are limits to human understanding because of the constraining structures of language, cultural conventions and symbolic articulation (Green 2011). For example, we might wonder: what would a universe look like that contained absolutely everything possible, insofar as logically this must also include nothing? This conundrum is illustrated by the Hilbert's Hotel thought experiment, which considers adding infinite numbers of extra guests to an expandable

hotel. Even 'something' that appears to be full can accommodate more matter and so must have also partially contained nothing.

It may be beyond the capacity of the human mind to conceive of our own non-being: of the world without ourselves in it. Kant (1781) made a distinction between *noumena*, as objects or events that are presumed to exist objectively, and *phenomena*, as those that humans can apprehend through the frames of time, space and causality. Phenomena may be all that we can empirically study, while we cannot prove or disprove the existence of underlying noumena. Berkeley famously posed the empirical question: if a tree falls in a forest, but no one hears it, did it make a sound? Green (2011) extends this to the epistemological question of perspective: how can we know that something exists or occurs if no one is there to observe it? The same logic implies to our perception of negative phenomena. Without the certainty of rational doubt (the Cartesian maxim, 'I think; therefore I am'), how can we be sure that something did *not* exist or that nothing really happened?

Nothing also features in the philosophy of social cognition. Mumford (2019) identifies some cultural forms that signify negatively defined meanings: negative properties (e.g. a drink labelled sugar free), negative truths (e.g. atheism, as a certain belief that God does not exist) and non-existent particulars (e.g. a lost dog, as a specific object perceived to be missing). However, Mumford argues against the reification of these objects as having causal power. He claims that there are no negative existents (objects), only positive ones, and it is the presence of the latter rather than the absence of the former that causes things to happen. Rain makes us wet, rather than the lack of an umbrella. However, the interpretivist sociologist might contend that what matters is how people may nevertheless *perceive* negative existents, *construct* their meaning and *use* them to make sense of social life. If I spend the day at work sitting in wet shoes and soggy clothes, cursing myself for forgetting my umbrella, then that negative object has found a real place in my imagination.

In the creative arts, nothing recurs as a mysterious concept to explore and understand. The concept of negative space, used in fine art and photography, describes the areas around, between and behind objects in an image, which gives them their distinctive shape and character. Sometimes its function is to confer meaning indirectly to the object, through relational contrast, signifying Green's (2011) idea of 'nothing' as the absence of everything. For example, the white space that surrounds a silhouette accentuates its features by demarcating their boundaries against a contrasting background of neutrality. Modern conceptual art sometimes literally 'frames' nothing, for example in Rothko's monochrome block paintings or Klein's (1958) empty gallery exhibition (see Chapter 4).

In drama, the performative display of empty space suggests Green's (2011) notion of 'nothingness', the specific absence of something. Things that are not said, done, seen, heard or known about can be highlighted as significant, sometimes more so than what *is* present. We find this idea in the 'theatre of the absurd', where pointing out nothingness raises communicative uncertainty. It is also explored in comedy; for example, the sitcom *Seinfeld* (a self-styled 'show

about nothing') and Andy Kaufman's stand-up routine of appearing on stage, saying nothing and walking off (Green 2011). In theatre, the technique is used for moral and political effect through the principle of minimalism: stripping away all extraneous wrappings of chatter, distraction and clutter to reveal the inner core of meaning. The playwrights Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett made use of slowness, inactivity and pregnant pauses between sections of dialogue, to highlight that communication takes place through what is not said and done or what is tacitly known but left unspoken (Vicks 2015). In music, John Cage's composition *4′33″* highlighted the significance of silence: even sounds that are not notated still hold meaning (Cage 1952). Demarcating these within bounda-ried regions (the cessation and resumption of what went before) renders them listenable, visible or otherwise perceptible. Art therefore has the power to chal-lenge and subvert conventional understandings of what is and isn't *there* or *here* in the world, and shift our focus from the normatively seen to the conspicuously absent.

Nothing to do with sociology?

Brekhus (1998) argues that sociology's neglect of nothing reflects an epistemo-logical blind spot, caused by our asymmetrical treatment of social phenomena. What he calls the 'marked' – things that are empirically unusual, politically salient, ontologically uncommon or morally questionable – commands a dispro-portionate amount of attention, so that we train the sociological gaze upon the extreme, exotic, unusual and deviant. These visible, colourful objects stand out as remarkable, echoing Bakhtin's (1968) notion of the carnivalesque: exagger-ated breaks from the mundane and routine. Meanwhile, the 'unmarked' back-ground of contextual ordinariness remains unexamined, taken for granted as normal. The marked/unmarked distinction stems from linguistics, where one item of a lexical pair is accented or highlighted, while the other is passively defined by the absence of emphasis. The unmarked therefore represents the normative case, default condition or generic type (Zerubavel 2018).

Value judgements may be built into these contrast pairs, when the marked cat-egory is denoted as deviant and subordinate compared to the dominance and assumed neutrality of the unmarked: for example, with gender, where the label 'woman' is marked, but 'man' is unmarked (De Beauvoir 1949). Brekhus suggests that this can occur in binary or trinary formations, whereby the unmarked com-prises a 'normal' mass, either hierarchically above the marked minority (e.g. time on (unmarked) versus time off (marked) work) or between two ends of a spectrum (e.g. genius (marked) – sanity (unmarked) – madness (marked)). This can give a misleading impression of the empirical prevalence of the marked. Colourful, stark and vivid images of extreme behaviour easily slip into caricature and stereotype. Extreme cases are perceived as if widespread and typical rather than rare and unusual, 'making the episodic appear endemic' (Brekhus 1998: 37).

Brekhus calls for the foregrounding of unmarked, background phenomena to put them under the sociological microscope. 'Reverse-marking' is achieved by

inverting the contrast between Gestalt figure and ground to study the negative space around marked social objects. For example, in 2016, Professor Johannes Haushofer of Princeton University published his 'CV of failures'. This document listed all the 'Awards and scholarships I did not get', 'Research funding I did not get' and 'Paper rejections from academic journals'. Haushofer accounted for this as deliberate reverse-marking, which aimed to '*give some perspective*' on the competitive, individualistic culture of academia:

> Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible.… This sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me.
>
> (*Guardian*, 30 April 2016)

However, we can go further than mapping terrains and gazing at landscapes. Negative space is filled with *people* who socially accomplish nothing, through the interactive processes of not-doing, not-having and not-being. Sociology's contribution, then, is to analyse the forms of social action that go on within unmarked sites and uncover the negotiated meanings of nothingness.

How do we experience nothing?

Shifting the focus of analysis from object to agent raises new and different questions of subjectivity. Instead of asking what nothing 'is' in itself, as if it had an objective true reality, we ask how people experience it: how does nothing appear to us, and what does nothing feel like? This takes us into the realms of phenomenology and existentialist philosophy, both of which are concerned with the relational act of apprehension. Ontological questions of the nature of being, and what it means to be, are addressed here in terms of personal existence within a world of objects, to which we consciously relate. Nothing can be conceptualised not as a thing-in-itself but as a relationship between perceiver and perceived. It is perspectival, defined subjectively from the agent's point of view, as well as intentional, enacted through a carefully directed aim.

Phenomenology stems from the pragmatist philosophy that we interact with the world through its objects, which we interpret in terms of their purposeful relevance to our intended action (Peirce 1903; James 1890; Dilthey 1907). There is an infinite number of ways in which reality can be perceived; each individual imposes their own frame of reference upon it to create a unique subjective experience or lifeworld (Husserl 1913). How things (dis-)appear therefore depends on the observer's position and perspective: their 'intentionality' towards objects of significance (Husserl ibid.). By attending to what is relevant and 'bracketing out' the irrelevant, we impose categorical order upon an otherwise undifferentiated stream of consciousness (Husserl ibid.). In the social world, we align these lifeworlds to reach intersubjective agreement about what situations mean, and so together accomplish an idea of social reality (Schütz 1972). These shared definitions may consolidate into reified

institutions, which appear as if essentially natural, despite their precarious construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

To the perceiving mind, only certain objects, or phenomena, manifest themselves. Phenomena 'shine forth', standing out as meaningful, while everything else fades and recedes into the background (Heidegger 1927). Similar ideas are found in psychology's affordance theory (Gibson 1966), which teaches that the perceived properties of objects depend on the observer's motivations. Relevant objects appear to us as tools, suggesting how we might use them, and thus being practically 'ready-to-hand' rather than merely abstracted or 'present-to-hand' (Heidegger 1927). Phenomena announce themselves to our gaze, existing in-order-to be used, and manifesting their purpose and functionality (Heidegger ibid.). Other objects may appear as obstacles, relevant insofar as they block our path to a goal (Peterson 2018).

This subjective experience is also embodied. We encounter perceptual objects through sensory filters and know things through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1945) which creates different moods of attunement (Heidegger 1927). Consciousness originates from the inner horizons of this 'lived body' and radiates outwards across spatial and temporal horizons (Husserl 1913). The parsing of tools, obstacles and irrelevances constitutes what Sartre (1936) calls the 'pragmatic attitude' of everyday life: a mode of pre-reflective consciousness when everything is operating as normal.

Nothing can therefore be understood as an occasioned attribution of irrelevance. It is applied pragmatically to ideas and objects that currently *don't* matter and consequently *aren't* matter. They are the irrelevant 'everything else' that recedes into the background of negative social space. Unmarked social reality, as an alternative domain of study, therefore exists not in an entirely different realm, but rather alongside marked reality. It hovers in the background, surrounding the phenomena we selectively recognise and engage with. This forms the mirror image of Merleau-Ponty's (1945) 'world of perception', or subjectively embodied lived experiences, suggesting instead a container of *unlived* experiences.

However, such definitions are only matters of provisional truth: valid until they cease to be useful and effective. No-things we have hitherto ignored or not thought about suddenly appear if they prevent us from doing what we intended to or alter our perception of what we have done. Dormant ideas are awakened and jolted into life. Suddenly, irrelevant objects become relevant, tools turn into obstacles, and meaningless ideas are redefined as meaningful. Heidegger (1927) calls this state of mind 'falling': an alienating effect of being pulled out of the usual, known territory of the lifeworld and thrown into disorderly, chaotic uncertainty (Peterson 2018). In ethnomethodological terms, this engenders a state of reflexive consciousness about things that were previously taken for granted (Garfinkel 1967; Giddens 1984). The pragmatic attitude is frustrated and breaks down, causing an emotional response (Sartre 1936). Through its nihilistic capacity for defamiliarisation, nothing generates anxiety, making us feel 'ill-at-ease' (Heidegger 1927; Vicks 2015).

This has implications for the way we make sense of things that have and have not happened in our lives. What does and doesn't stand out in memory – the somethings and nothings we perceive – crafts the contours of a landscape unique to each individual. The lifeworld is just one version of the truth, a vision of how reality appears to us, given the framework of our intentional aims and value structure. A particular constellation of stars light up against the darkened night sky, and as we join the dots apparent meaning shines forth. But this picture is unstable, provisional and necessarily incomplete: if we change aim or shift perspective, the pattern reconfigures, and a different meaning emerges. What had appeared to be nothing can turn out to be something and vice versa. This occurs across the temporal arc of selfhood, understood through biographical reflection. As we move between the perspectives of our past, present and future selves; the fate of the transient *Dasein* (being here, now) is wrapped up with its former and current states (Heidegger 1927). Nothing has 'eternal recurrence' beyond its current moment, radiating, resonating and reverberating in all directions and occurring at all times simultaneously (Nietzsche 1882).

Existentialism helps us to address the implications of this predicament, as an ethical duty towards one's own potential self. The title of this chapter alludes to Sartre's (1943) influential text, *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's theory is predicated on the idea that individual life is absurd in its circumstantial arbitrariness. In the absence of any absolute, essential meaning, it is up to us to create our own values and thus determine our fate. Consciousness is nothing, quite literally, but we fill it with thoughts and perceptions, objects and ideas. This intentional consciousness *of* something forms the basis of autonomous existence or Being-for-Itself. Challenging conventional religious notions of God as creator, and the 'spirit of seriousness' that led to belief in inherently good or bad characters, objective reality and transcendent givens, Sartre (ibid.) famously said that we construct our own realities by choosing our beliefs, values and attitudes: 'existence precedes essence'.

This was not as utopian as it sounded, however: Sartre (ibid.) emphasised the great burden of responsibility implied by having to constantly choose how to think, feel and act: we are 'condemned to be free'. Living authentically, or in 'good faith', involves tireless self-questioning and moral self-evaluation. To fully confront this responsibility is existentially terrifying, creating a kind of 'nausea' through the 'vertigo of possibility' (Sartre 1938, 1943). Mortality awareness makes this moral imperative weigh more heavily: realising the inevitability of one's death and thus the limitations of one's being. As Kierkegaard (1843, 1849) argued, the prospect of non-existence is so terrifying that it evokes angst: a sickening feeling of terror, fear and dread. Tillich (1952) argued that it requires courage to live towards one's death: to carry on being despite the anxiety evoked by knowing its ultimate futility. Anxiety differs from fear in that it lacks a specific object and cannot be tamed: non-being, or nothingness, is too immense to contemplate, so it threatens the basic foundations of being. Challenges to ontic, spiritual and moral self-affirmation evoke emotions of, respectively, death awareness, meaninglessness and anomie, and guilt and condemnation (Tillich ibid.).

Moreover, such acts of courage are socially as well as individually good. Levinas (1974) argued that suffering, borne with proper dignity, is a relational act: we suffer for, alongside or in recognition of others, when witnessing evil attacks on our common, shared values. From his inter-human perspective, he argued against 'useless' suffering – that which serves only oneself – and emphasised an ethics of responsibility towards the collective soul of humanity. Challenging the individualistic self-other dyad, Levinas advocated a relational mode of conducting oneself 'face-to-face' with the whole social nexus in which we are embedded.

However, instead of practising this courageous social morality, Sartre (1943) said that we spend much of our lives acting in 'bad faith': denying our freedom and agency, and blaming external obstacles and barriers for what we have (not) done. This might include fatalistically believing that our past defines us, or that a personality trait prevents us from achieving our full potential. The same anxiety motivates many activities undertaken to fill life with spurious meaning, such as risk-taking leisure, material consumption, conformity to authoritarian leadership (Fromm 1942) and entitative group affiliations (Hogg 2007). These provide a distraction from the essential meaninglessness, pointlessness and absurdity of life and deny the inevitability of death (Becker 1973). Bad faith allows us to escape the fearsome burden of freedom (Fromm 1942) and the responsibilities of living an authentic life through self-determination (Yalom 1992).

Although Sartre rejected the notion of the unconscious, the practice of bad faith involves self-deception: one part of the mind deceives the other. Craib (1994) describes this as feeling 'double-minded' or 'of two hearts', and suggests that on a meta-level, this deception is itself denied. It is unusual to recognise ambivalence in one's attitudes, he argues, for doing so threatens to destabilise the internal world of objects and shatter our ontological security. Craib neverthe-less advocates confronting this grim reality and recognising the 'importance of disappointment'.

If all of our positively performed actions (including beliefs and attitudes) involve responsible choice, this raises the question of whether the same prin-ciples can be extended to ways of *not* acting. Can orienting ourselves towards nothing be an act of good faith, insofar as it is consciously enacted to a meaning-ful end? As an intentionally directed relationship, it may serve to distance the agent from unwanted ways of being, thus protecting their sense of selfhood, authenticity and integrity. Recognising and taking responsibility for the nothing-ness that surrounds us demands the exercise of free will, the power to create meaning for ourselves.

How does nothing happen?

Sartre's paradox that consciousness is at once *nothing* (in itself) yet always *of something* (even when this is nothing) invites us to examine the relationship between self and situation. Who exactly is this subject who confronts the world of objects and interprets their symbolic meaning? How do we distinguish between the

things that matter and the no-things of irrelevance, and how does bracketing the latter affect our relationship to them? Can we still have intentionality towards objects that are not ostensibly present if we can discern their hypothetical existence? Nothing has to be brought into existence by being imagined, made or done, and this requires a self-reflexive mind. However, the self does not exist in isolation but rather alongside other people; it is a fundamentally relational entity. How, then, do we interact with other minds to socially accomplish nothing?

Meadian social selfhood

The social behaviourist Mead (1934) argued that mind, self and society were all interconnected in a process of reciprocal influence. He began with the pragmatist axiom that social reality is constructed through goal-directed human action. We relate intentionally to objects that include other people, and, crucially, oneself. Human minds are unique in having a reflective capacity: we can think (as subjects) about ourselves (as objects), imagining ourselves in others' worlds just as we see them in our own. Cooley (1902) referred to the Looking Glass Self as this view of oneself from an external perspective, its imagined judgements evoking 'self-feelings' like pride or shame. Mead made a distinction between two phases of the self, who cycled in an internal dialogue or conversation: the impulsive, subjective 'I' and the reflective, objectified 'Me'. However, the creative 'I' of the mind is a slippery, elusive agent who cannot be consciously understood. We cannot witness ourselves acting in the present, or know our own subjective motives, because as soon as we think about experience it becomes objectified: 'I cannot turn around fast enough to catch myself' (Mead 1934: 174).

Selfhood is relational, involving reflection, perspective-taking, definition and judgement (Scott 2015). It is an ongoing, dialogic process that is never finished, and exists in a perpetual state of becoming. Identity is not static, held or had, 'never gained nor maintained once and for all … it is constantly lost and regained' (Erikson 1959: 118). Instead, it can be better understood as a comparative process of 'identification' with (or without) other social objects (Williams 2000). The 'Me' is socially shaped by reference to normative conventions and the presumed views of the generalised other: we import society into the mind as an organised set of attitudes towards ourselves, which guides our conduct (Mead 1934).

Mead (ibid.) proposed the analytical concept of the act: the most elementary unit of human behaviour (Hewitt 2007). The act is discretely formed, with a beginning and end, which starts when the previous act is interrupted. It is also pragmatically functional, purposive and goal-directed in helping the actor to express or realise an intention. Mead argued that the act has four stages – perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation – whereby we identify symbolic objects, indicate these to ourselves, design intentions and carry them out.

The *social act* is an important variant of this. We use significant symbols, such as language, to communicate shared meanings: a communicative gesture is

one whose author understands the meaning it will have for the other and antici-
pates the response it will 'call out' in them (Mead ibid.). When a social act
becomes institutionalised, through the shared maxims and normative codes of a
community, members can more easily 'take the role of the other', predicting and
coordinating their conduct through this attitudinal assumption (Mead 1934).

   Doing nothing can be understood as such a Meadian social act. Just like posi-
tively doing something, it involves 'minded, symbolic, self-reflective conduct'
(Lindesmith, Strauss and Denzin 1999: 21), composed by a thinking, creative
agent ('I') with an intentional orientation towards social objects. These include
real or imagined others, their anticipated judgements and the set of cultural atti-
tudes they represent. If I decide not to do something normative and conventional,
such as send my children to a mainstream state school (see Chapter 6), I reflec-
tively imagine how my peers may regard this as deviant and subsequently disap-
prove of me. Nothing is symbolically communicative and gestural, calling out to
a common repertoire of meanings shared between the actor and their audience.

Weberian social action

Next, I argue that nothing is a form of *meaningful social action*. Weber (1922)
used this term to describe action that is motivated by subjective meaning and
directed towards a goal, effect or object in the social world. Weber made a dis-
tinction between 'action' and mere 'behaviour' insofar as the former involves
attributions of meaning, rather than merely instinctive response. He further
specified that 'social action' was that which 'takes account of the behaviour of
others and is thereby oriented in its course' (Weber 1922: 88). Sociology was 'a
science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order
thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' (ibid.). Meth-
odologically, this required an interpretivist epistemology, which aims to under-
stand social meanings from the perspective of the actor (*verstehen*), in contrast
to the positivist recourse to external observation and objective measurement. It
is interesting that in his definition of meaningful social action, Weber includes
the possibility of not-doing things, which seems to have been overlooked:

> Action in this sense may be either overt or purely inward or subjective; it
> may consist of positive intervention in a situation, or of deliberately refrain-
> ing from such intervention or passively acquiescing in the situation.
>
> (Weber 1922: 88)

Weber identified four ideal types of social action: traditional (based on norm-
ative conventions, or the way things have always been), affective (driven by
emotion), value-rational (motivated by personal beliefs and values), and
instrumental-rational (goal-oriented and involving careful means-ends calcu-
lation). Only the latter constituted meaningful social action, according to the
above definitional criteria (Craib 1997), but it is possible to imagine ways of
accomplishing nothing that fit into the other categories. Abstaining from eating

meat for religious reasons, for example, might constitute traditional action but also be meaningful as a sociocultural practice. Purposeful non-participation in a political election could be classified as value-rational or even affective action, but this too would have significantly meaningful 'courses and effects'.

Two ways of doing nothing

I propose a key distinction between two modes of social action which accomplish nothing. First, *acts of commission* (which I shall call '*doing nothing*') occur when we deliberately choose not to do or be something with conscious intentionality. This typically involves negative motives of avoidance, disengagement, disavowal, refusal or rejection. These social acts are performative displays, designed with an audience in mind: the actor wants to be seen not to be doing something and to have their reasons acknowledged. They are making a point, sometimes a public, political statement, by not doing what is expected. Examples include refusing medical treatment, turning down a job, rejecting a sex/gender assignation, going on strike, home-schooling one's children, and conscientious objection to military conscription. When demonstrably 'doing nothing', the actor considers but rejects a particular option for its negative associational meanings.

In terms of Mead's social act, this involves the four stages of perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation in relation to a symbolic object. The actor first recognises something that they do not want, considering its meanings and implications, and feels motivated to avoid it. They design instrumental-rational action in relation to this negative symbolic object, which has social consequences for themselves and others. For example, they may disavow an unwanted identity, defining themselves negatively by what they are not. Acts of commission thereby accomplish *doing a not-something* or *being a not-someone*. This produces two new symbolic objects: the recasting of the repudiated object (something becomes nothing), and the embrace of an alternative, replacement or substitute, which now comes into being (nothing becomes something). For example, a transgender woman who rejects her biologically assigned sex categorisation may simultaneously regard herself negatively (non-male) and positively (female).

Second, *acts of omission* (which I call '*non-doing*') occur when we more passively neglect or fail to act, ending up in another position by default rather than conscious intention. External circumstances prevent us from pursuing certain paths; hypothetical scenarios are foreclosed, inaccessible or impossible; or opportunities do not present themselves. For example, a person may not take up a potential career, not develop an intimate relationship, not engage in political activism, or not feel drawn to a religious faith. In these cases, the individual is not consciously rejecting the object in question, but rather finds that as their life unfolds it simply does not happen for them. These hypothetical yet non-emergent 'anythings' remain undone, hiding behind the mirror in parallel, unlived lives.

Omissive non-doing results in states of non-having or non-being, which are less clearly defined by negational contrast. The actor does not feel strongly

disinclined towards one option so much as drawn towards another, which holds more meaning. Their motives are neutral rather than critical, leading to actions prefixed by 'non-' rather than 'dis-': non-identification, non-participation, non-engagement and so on. Acts of omission tend to be private rather than publicly communicated and are much less performative: they are not strategically designed with an audience in mind. Indeed, the individual may not even be aware of the hypothetical alternative until other people point out the omission.

Acts of omission involve the four stages of the Meadian act, albeit more subtly and nebulously. Potential objects hover in the background, on the horizon of possibility. The actor may or may not perceive them but is in any case pro-pelled elsewhere, manipulating the undone object by not following its path. The endpoint of this journey – the recognition of non-doing – may not be imagined in advance of its conclusion. For example, a woman of child-bearing age may be aware of her possibility throughout these years, but will not definitively discover whether it will actualise until the window closes (Letherby 2002). She is kept in a perpetual state of protention, or 'not yet' (Husserl 1913), unable to write her self-narrative while the events are still unfolding. Later on, with hindsight, she reflects upon what could have been and tells it as a story, rendered meaningful by feelings like resentment, relief or regret.

Who does nothing with us?

These two modes of social action are not only a matter of private self-reflection but also performed and negotiated with significant others. Adopting a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer 1969; Manis and Meltzer 1978; Rock 1979), I consider nothing to be a form of *joint action* (Blumer 1969), involving defini-tions and negotiations of meaning (Thomas and Thomas 1928; Strauss 1978). Individual performance 'lines' (Goffman 1959) must be coordinated with others, and are modified by audience reception. Social acts unfold within a micro-social context of encounters and relationships, evoking reactions and responses, and thus become *inter*-actions.

Blumer (1969) identified three key principles of symbolic interactionism: first, humans act towards social objects on the basis of the *meanings* that these things have for them; second, these meanings arise out of social *interaction*; and third, meanings can be modified by *interpretation* or the *interpretative process*. The Meadian internal dialogue between the 'I' and 'Me' of a singular self was re-imagined by Blumer as a 'conversation of gestures' between many different selves: 'We modify our lines of action on the basis of what we perceive alter's implications to be with respect to our manifest and latent plans of action' (McCall and Simmons 1966: 136).

We communicate through symbolic gestures (Blumer ibid.), such as language, which holds encoded, tacitly agreed-upon meanings to participants and are used to index a wider set of shared, background values (Schütz 1972) or vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940). There are many common phrases and idioms through which we allude to nothingness in everyday conversation. For example, consider