

## **The Hermeneutics of Nothingness: A Brief Comparative Study of the Ontological Structures of Dom Deschamps and Jean-Paul Sartre**

La hermenéutica de la nada: un breve estudio comparativo de las estructuras  
ontológicas de Dom Deschamps y Jean-Paul Sartre

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**Abstract:** The dichotomy between “being” and “nothing” (or non-being) constitutes one of the most enduring and challenging themes in the history of philosophy. From Parmenides, who defended the impossibility of non-being, to the complex Hegelian metaphysics, the reflection on existence and its absence has been central to the understanding of reality and consciousness. Although separated by two centuries, the Benedictine monk Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774) and the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) addressed this duality with radically original visions. The comparison of their notions of “being” and “nothingness” reveals not only the evolution of philosophical thought but also the persistence of certain fundamental questions, despite profound methodological and ontological divergences. This study aims to deepen this comparative analysis by exploring Deschamps’ monism of indifference and Sartre’s dualism of freedom, demonstrating how each philosopher, in their own way, used the paradox of being and nothingness to deconstruct conventional notions of reality and subjectivity

**Keywords:** Nothingness; Sartre; Dom Deschamps; Being; Metaphysics.

**Resumen:** La dicotomía entre el «ser» y la «nada» (o el no ser) constituye uno de los temas más persistentes y desafiantes en la historia de la filosofía. Desde Parménides, quien defendió la imposibilidad del no ser, hasta la compleja metafísica hegeliana, la reflexión sobre la existencia y su ausencia ha sido fundamental para la comprensión de la realidad y la conciencia. Aunque separados por dos siglos, el monje benedictino Dom Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774) y el existencialista francés Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) abordaron esta dualidad con visiones radicalmente originales. La comparación de sus nociones de «ser» y «nada» revela no solo la evolución del pensamiento filosófico, sino también la persistencia de ciertas cuestiones fundamentales, a pesar de profundas divergencias metodológicas y ontológicas. Este estudio pretende profundizar este análisis comparativo explorando el monismo de la indiferencia de Deschamps y el dualismo de la libertad de Sartre, demostrando cómo

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cada filósofo, a su manera, utilizó la paradoja del ser y la nada para deconstruir las nociones convencionales de realidad y subjetividad.

**Palabras clave:** Nada, Sartre, Dom Deschamps, Ser, Metafísica.

## 1. Dom Deschamps: The Monism of Indifference and the Dissolution of Reality

The philosophy of Dom Deschamps, rediscovered and re-evaluated in the 20th century, represents one of the most audacious and subversive metaphysics of the Enlightenment (the most original philosopher in Enlightenment according to Franco Venturi), but with repercussions that are still (largely) unexplored in social and political philosophy.

Léger-Marie Deschamps (1716-1774) was a Benedictine monk who lived most of his life in an abbey near Poitiers. He corresponded with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and other figures of the Enlightenment, but had a special friendship with and was admired by Diderot.

Even though some commentators on his work believe that he built his philosophy on the principles of Spinozism and materialism<sup>2</sup> – something that seems undeniable – this does not mean that he did not maintain a critical spirit,<sup>3</sup> a serious and intellectually honest reflection in relation to some aspects of Spinozist philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

His work, *La Vérité, ou Le Vrai Système* (The Truth, or The True System), remained obscure for a long time, but is now recognized as a radical critique of the systems of thought of his time, in many ways anticipating materialism and pantheism. Unlike his contemporaries, who sought in reason a means of establishing order, progress, and universal laws, Deschamps proposed a system that dissolves the very notion of distinction and order, revealing a final reality that is paradoxically one and empty.

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<sup>2</sup> This position is well known and begins with the reception of his contemporaries, such as Rousseau, Diderot, and D'Alembert (among others), and continues through to more recent commentators such as Jean Thomas and Francesco Toto (see references).

<sup>3</sup> Taking for instance the words of Diego Donna about Dom Deschamps' criticism of Spinoza: «du Deus sive Natura sur lequel la métaphysique spinozienne avait élaboré, dans le sillage des quatrièmes Méditations de Descartes, la notion positive d' "infini" comme causa sui. Les conséquences n'échapperont pas à Dom Deschamps, qui se demandera si un système de physique générale n'était pas en fin de compte l'autre face d'un système métaphysique». (Donna, 2021, p. 242).

<sup>4</sup> Debora Sico, in the review of Alfano's book, says: «come il materialismo di Dom Deschamps prenda consapevolmente le distanze sia dal monismo di Spinoza sia dalla posizione materialistica di Holbach. In particolare, nella *Réfutation simple et courte du système de Spinoza* (i cui due manoscritti autografi sono oggetto di analisi incrociata da parte dell'a.), il benedettino osserva che Spinoza attribuisce alla sostanza due predicati contraddittori (infinità e possibilità di essere modificata), commettendo un errore logico e ontologico.» (Sico, 2022, p. 198).

The central pillar of Deschamps' thought is the notion of the "All" (*le Tout*). This "All" is not the physical universe, nor a personal deity, nor the Hegelian absolute; it is the ultimate reality, one and undifferentiated, in which all distinctions perceived by human beings – whether between subject and object, between good and evil, or between "being" and "nothing" – are illusory. Dom Deschamps claims to be absolutely original in his thesis.<sup>5</sup> He argues that the reality we experience is only the "appearance" (*l'apparence*) of a deeper and more unsettling truth – his most daring thesis is that of the identity of being and nothing. This conclusion thesis is not merely a play on words but the logical consequence of his critique of our way of thinking and naming the world around us.

For Deschamps, our tendency to define "being" through its attributes (qualities, forms, colors, etc.) is the root of the illusion (we can sense a certain Spinozism in the background). An object is considered "something" because it possesses certain properties. However, he asks: what if we remove all possible attributes from an object? What remains? If we strip being of all its particularities, it becomes indistinguishable from non-being, from "nothing". In its purest essence, devoid of any characteristic that would make it "this" or "that", being is nothing. This fundamental identity leads to a metaphysics where existence, in its raw and unqualified form, is emptiness, the absence of distinction. This view is the basis of his atheism and pantheism: God, "being" in its totality, is not a transcendent creator or a personal being, but the undifferentiated reality itself, which is also nothing.<sup>6</sup> Note: there is a strong historical and traditional context for this approach.<sup>7</sup>

Plotinus, caught up in the mystical pursuit of rapture, argues for the One's transcendence of being, which leads to a negative and, naturally, mystical theology. This is how, in the medieval tradition (and still in the Renaissance), we find nothingness subjected to the priority of being, whether in ontology or logic, as in Meister Eckhart, or for example in Pedro Hispano,

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<sup>5</sup> Eleonora Alfano, in her book *Dieu est Rien* (God is Nothing), sought to uncover (from a historical perspective) the sources of Deschampsian thought, particularly concerning the concepts of "Tout" and "Rien". She refutes the monk's claim of originality, demonstrating that it was a recurring theme within the medieval Platonic tradition. Please see: Eleonora Alfano (2020). *Dieu est Rien. La métaphysique matérialiste de Dom Deschamps*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

<sup>6</sup> Eleonora Alfano says: «Ce qui est remarquable pour un auteur du XVIIIe siècle, c'est que Dom Deschamps, à travers son système et certaines de ses correspondances, a conservé un sens du Néant alors strictement dialectique et antinomique» (Alfano, 2020, p. 104).

<sup>7</sup> Debora Sico underscores the persistent tradition connecting All and Nothing, while simultaneously pointing to the decisive philosophical contribution of Dom Deschamps, who propelled the coexistence of these concepts to the center of academic inquiry.: «La negazione del principio di non contraddizione tra Tutto e Nulla è una tesi filosofica riconducibile allo Pseudo-Dionigi, padre fondatore del misticismo cristiano. A questa tradizione, il materialismo metafisico di Dom Deschamps dona un nuovo slancio vitale, pur distinguendosi per l'affermazione della coesistenza tra due esseri metafisici contraddittori ("Il Tutto" e "Tutto"). (Sico, 2022, p. 198).

who made the notion of nothingness a universal and negative sign. Ockham attributes two meanings to nothingness: as something that is not real, that is, what is not but can still be, and as what is not and cannot be (for example, a chimera).

This means that the notion of nothingness and non-being was already rooted in metaphysics and logic, and this, while not explicitly defended by many modern authors, is nevertheless implicit, whether in the postulation of metaphysical or logical principles or in the most elementary anthropological philosophy. Pascal, therefore, wondered, “What is man in nature? A nothingness in relation to the infinite, an immensity in relation to nothingness, a middle term between nothingness and the whole” (Pascal, 1995, 58). This means that Deschamps is not just mentioning the topic of nothingness, but is bringing it back into philosophical debate in a powerful and assertive way.

Dom Deschamps builds upon Leibniz's ideas, and precisely with the same guiding question: “Why is there anything? Why existence?” (*Le mot de l'enigme*),<sup>8</sup> which at its core translates Leibniz's own question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”, especially when nothingness is simpler and easier than anything? Deschamps, however, advances with the existence of nothingness (néant); a nothingness that means that negative existence exists,<sup>9</sup> and it exists because everything (tout) and nothing (rien) are the same in relation to the whole (le tout). The philosopher explains:

Everything (tout) that contains no parts exists and is inseparable from The Whole (Le Tout) universal, which contains parts, and of which it is the affirmation and the negation simultaneously. Everything [tout] and The Whole [le tout] are the two riddle names of existence, names that the cry of truth distinguished by placing them in our language. Everything and Nothing are the same thing. (Deschamps, 1993, p. 133).

This conception is transposed into his main work, *Le Vrai Système*, in which he advocates a cultural and moral “revolution” for the history of humanity (the “third and final state”). This (utopian) anticipation derived from a pair of opposites: “Le Tout” and “Tout”. Both corresponded to the two perspectives from which existence should be conceived, the first being the material or natural whole, and the second one the sterile – negative – attribute of existence, therefore equivalent to nothingness (rien). Individuals have a dual nature (physical and metaphysical), and therefore, to access to truth they must accept the negative and the negation

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<sup>8</sup> Robinet, quoting from Deschamps' work *Le mot de l'enigme*: «aussi peut-on répondre à la question métaphysique “pourquoi y a-t-il quelque chose ? pourquoi de l'existence ?” de cette manière inattendue : “Parce que le rien est quelque chose, parce qu'il est l'existence, parce qu'il est tout (ME, XXIX)». (*Apud* Robinet, 1974, p. 296)

<sup>9</sup> Robinet states: “L'existence négative existe. L'existence négative n'est pas la pure et simple négation logique de l'existence positive qui, seule, existerait. Deschamps affirme l'existence négative de rien. Rien n'est pas une absence, un concept en creux, le vide de l'affirmation. Il est l'affirmation de la négation” (Robinet, 1974, p. 292).

of his main faculty, reason; «en d'autres termes, pour atteindre la Vérité, il est nécessaire pour l'homme de nier Dieu créateur pour affirmer le Dieu non-créateur» (Alfano, 2020, p. 152). In this sense, one can understand how individuals can be living in a sterile existence when guided by "illusory" (social and religious) reason. But this also means that individuals are progressing toward freedom, a state realized in the undifferentiated All (or the unity of existence), understood metaphysically as the needy identity of reality's unity with Nothingness.

This radical contradiction of the negative attribute with the positive attribute, negates everything that is physical and relative and serves to postulate, on the one hand, the full affirmation of the whole that is nature and, on the other, to legitimize the categories of infinity and eternity (infinity negates the finite, eternity negates duration). The natural whole is the world of our effective existence, where all beings are linked and resemble one another (in the physical order there are no opposites). It is this immanent agreement that men fail to (or rather, don't want to) understand when they only see separations and oppositions; in reality, separating and opposing things is not a result of the natural order, but of the social order. The one true contradiction is found between the Finite and the Infinite; however, this contradiction is resolved on the plane of existence, which is one and the same. Deschamps says,

Existence has two essentially contrary ways of being viewed, that is, by itself or by what composes it. If it is viewed by itself, it is Everything that contains no parts; if it is viewed by what composes it, it is The Whole that expresses the parts. The discovery of truth consists in seeing Existence from both aspects and then developing them (Deschamps, 1993, p. 438).

The identity of Everything with Nothing serves to invalidate our illusory projections. It allows us, in the immediacy of perception, to believe that nothing exists or that everything exists,<sup>10</sup> and in doing so, to justify a simple existence, stripped of possessions and prejudices. Therefore, the values we can assume are relative, as they depend on feelings, intelligence, or belief, as in the case of God. The philosopher who identified his philosophy as 'rieniste' states the following about the belief in nothingness:

On ne peut être rieniste qu'autant qu'on croit à rien; c'est-à-dire à l'existence négative qui est inséparable de la positive. Pour pouvoir dire strictement qu'on ne croit plus à rien, il faudrait avoir cru à rien et n'y plus croire, avoir été rieniste et ne le plus être, ce qui n'est pas possible à moins qu'on ne devienne fou (Deschamps, 1993, p. 297).

Put differently, Deschamps tells us to live life just as it is, in a harmony born from pure contradiction; a simple duration in a universe indifferent to values, but to live it from the

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<sup>10</sup> As Robinet simply puts it: «la perception de rien s'accompagne de la croyance à rien. Puisque rien existe, puisque nous avons la perception de rien, croire à rien doit être compris comme une croyance à cette existence négative, négative, mais existant» (Robinet, 1974, p. 296).

perspective of eternity. Living should be as simple as possible (devoid of artificial, complex, or delusional constructs). Human language and thought are, for Deschamps, the main tools that perpetuate the illusion of distinctions. By naming things – “tree”, “stone”, “man” – we artificially separate them from the “All” and grant them an individual existence that they, in fact, do not possess.

The true reality, the “All”, the Everything around us, has neither names nor parts; it is what he calls the “state without laws and without customs” (“l’état sans lois et sans coutumes”), a condition of pure indifference where there is no morality, politics, religion, or any hierarchy (that’s why Jean Thomas called atheist and in a sense, pantheist).

This vision is profoundly subversive and has deep existential and ethical implications. Deschamps’ philosophy seeks to disenchantment the human being, revealing the illusory nature of the phenomenal world. “Nothing” in Deschamps is, therefore, not an absence, a mere void, but an ontological substance. It is the very raw material of being, the inert and undifferentiated ground from which everything seems to emerge, but to which everything returns, like ephemeral bubbles on the surface of a boundless ocean.

In summary, Dom Deschamps’ “nothing” is static, substantial, and identical to “being”, since the whole prefigures everything. It is the primordial condition of the “All”, the absolute potentiality before any manifestation or differentiation. Individual existence is an accident, a temporary “appearance” that obscures the fundamental truth that the ultimate reality is the complete unity of everything and the absence of everything.

## **2. Jean-Paul Sartre: The Dualism of Freedom and the Anguish of Nothingness**

A more familiar reader of the French philosopher’s works knows that his project, *Being and Nothingness*, is an extraordinary development of ideas, notions, and concepts that were laid out in his earlier works, considered the philosopher’s youthful works (See Castro, 2006). But that doesn’t mean that is not original, in the same way that Dom Deschamps was.

In radical contrast, the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, in his work *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, is built upon a fundamental and irreducible dualism: the “being-in-itself” (*l’être-en-soi*) and the “being-for-itself” (*l’être-pour-soi*). This distinction is the key to his entire ontology and existentialism.

As mentioned, Sartre distinguishes two regions of being: the Being-in-itself (*l’être-en-soi*) and the Being-for-itself (*l’être-pour-soi*). Sartre uses the concept of Being-in-itself – which

he takes from Hegel – to designate Being. The In-itself, then, refers to the being of the object, of the thing. It is massive, full, and identical to itself; that is, it is closed “in itself” without any internal fissure or negativity. The Being-in-itself is what it is: the material reality, the world of objects, the reality of inanimate things. It is the rock, the table, the universe in its massive, opaque, and non-conscious materiality. The being-in-itself simply is; it is full, identical to itself, with no possibility of relating to its own being or having a future that is not its simple continuation. Sartre describes it as a being “stuck” to itself, without “fissures” or “distances”.

The “being-for-itself”, on the other hand, is the being of human consciousness. And this is where Sartre’s notion of “nothingness” manifests itself (as we will see further on).

Unlike Dom Deschamps, Sartre’s “nothingness” is not a substance or a state but rather an active negation, a “fissure” (la fente) in being. Consciousness, the “for-itself”, is not identical to itself; it is what it is not and it is not what it is. Consciousness is a “nothingness” that interposes itself between reality and itself, allowing it the freedom to distance itself from the present, to project itself into the future, and to deny its past. This capacity for negation is what Sartre calls “nothingness-making” or “nihilation” (néantisation). Sartre writes:

The for-itself, as the foundation of itself, is the upsurge of the negation. The for-itself founds itself in so far as it denies in relation to itself a certain being or a mode of being. What it denies or nihilates, as we know, is being-in-itself. But no matter what being-in-itself: human reality is before all else its own nothingness. What it denies or nihilates in relation to itself as for-itself can be only itself. The meaning of human reality as nihilated is constituted by this nihilation and this presence in it of what it nihilates; hence the self-as-being-in-itself is what human reality lacks and what makes its meaning. Since human reality in its primitive relation to itself is not what it is, its relation to itself is not primitive and can derive its meaning only from an original relation which is the null relation or identity. It is the self which would be what it is which allows the for-itself to be apprehended as not being what it is; the relation denied in the definition of the for-itself – which as such should be first posited – is a relation (given as perpetually absent) between the for-itself and itself in the mode of identity. (Sartre, 1956, pp. 138).

Sartre takes the notion of negation from Heidegger,<sup>11</sup> which we can summarize by saying that “the world is everything that I am not”. In other words, when we question an object, we cast negativity upon it; for example, by asking why it appears this way and not in another way. Consciousness presents things to us in a mode of non-being. It should be noted that the “for-

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<sup>11</sup> Cabestan and Tomes tell us the following about this 'relation' with the Heideggerian terminology: «D’une certaine manière Sartre emprunte ce néologisme à Heidegger dont la Nichtigkeit ou néantisation – terme traduit à l’époque par ‘néantissement’ – dérive du verbe nichten que le philosophe allemand construit à partir de la négation nicht et du substantif das Nichts. Dans QQM, Heidegger demande: “Qu’en est-il du néant (Nichts)?”, et répond en distinguant la néantisation (Nichtigkeit) ou dévoilement du néant, et l’anéantissement (Vernichtung) en tant que destruction ontologique qui est le contraire de la création. Dans QQM Heidegger soutient que “c’est le néant lui-même qui néantit (das Nichts selbst nichtet)”». (Cabestan & Tomes, 2001, p. 40).

itself” constitutes itself precisely as “not being” the “In-itself”, and for this reason, the for-itself is the nothingness through which “there is” being. Nothing separates consciousness from itself.

By questioning the world, by formulating a question, consciousness is already operating a negation. For example, when looking for Pierre in a café and not finding him, consciousness “nihilates” Pierre’s presence, highlighting his absence. “Nothingness” is not a theoretical concept; it is an ontological experience of freedom. It is the “for-itself” that brings nothingness into the world. Human freedom resides precisely in this capacity to “nihilate” itself, to deny itself as an “in-itself” (an object, a thing) and to project itself into a future of possibilities. Says the french philosopher:

The for-itself as the nihilation of the in-itself temporalizes it-self as a flight toward. (...) Thus the for-itself is both a flight and a pursuit; it flees the in-itself and at the same time pursues it. The for-itself is a pursued-pursuing. [...] This pursuing flight is not given which is added on to the being of the for-itself. The for-itself is this very flight. The flight is not to be distinguished from the original nihilation. To say that the for-itself is a pursued-pursuing, or that it is in the mode of having to be its being, or that it is not what it is and is what it is not-each of these statements is saying the same thing. The foritself is not the in-itself and can not be it. But it is a relation to the in-itself. It is even the sole relation possible to the in-itself. Cut off on every side by the in-itself, the for-itself can not escape it because the for-itself is nothing and it is separated from the in-itself by nothing. The for-itself is the foundation of all negativity and of all relation (Sartre, 1956, p. 472).

Sartre’s “nothingness”, therefore, is the ontological condition of freedom; it is the abyss that separates the “for-itself” from the “in-itself”, making it a being of possibilities, but also being of profound anguish. Anguish (*l'angoisse*), one of the central concepts of Sartrean existentialism, is the awareness of this freedom and the responsibility it implies. The human being is “condemned to be free” because there is no pre-defined essence for him. His existence precedes his essence. The absence of a God or a fixed human nature means that man must create himself at every moment.

In contrast to Deschamps’ “nothingness”, which is static and identical to being, Sartre’s “nothingness” is dynamic, active, and existential. It is not the end of distinction but the very condition of the distinction between consciousness and the world, between freedom and facticity.

### **3. Comparative Conclusion: The Static Monism vs. The Dynamic Dualism**

The main difference between the two approaches lies in the nature and let us say, in the function of “nothingness”. For Dom Deschamps, nothingness is the undifferentiated identity of being, a metaphysical concept that dissolves distinctions and points to a fundamental and inert



unity. His system is a radical monism, where the perception of plurality is an illusion and the only truth is the undifferentiated “All”.

Deschamps’ “nothingness” is the substantial foundation of the real, the point of return for all appearances. It is a “nothingness” that silences, that dissolves multiplicity into a single and static reality. Deschamps’ philosophy is, ultimately, an invitation to detachment from the illusion of the world and to the contemplation of a final truth that transcends all human understanding.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, nothingness is the ontological negation that differentiates conscious being from inert being. It is the fissure that creates the gap between consciousness and the world, between the subject and the object. It is the condition of freedom, anguish, and human existence. His system is an existentialist dualism that elevates the “fissure” of nothingness to a central position for the understanding of the human condition. Sartre’s “nothingness” is not a static destiny but a dynamic engine of existence, the abyss that man must fill with his choices and his responsibility. It is a “nothingness” that screams, that demands action, and that condemns man to be free. One cannot, however, deny something that seems too evident: the necessity of nothingness for both. Both Deschamps’ metaphysics and Sartre’s existential-ontological phenomenology require the existence of the concept of nothingness as the foundation of their system of thought, which simply means that it is from the necessity of nothingness that everything gains meaning

In short, while Dom Deschamps uses “nothingness” to ground a unitary worldview where all differences are annulled, Sartre employs it to explain the freedom and responsibility of a conscious being who is not identical to himself, and who is, therefore, condemned to be responsible for his freedom. The analysis of their respective philosophies demonstrates not only the gap in time between them but also the different ways in which philosophy, in its search for meaning, can confront the paradox of being and non-being. “Nothingness” in Deschamps is an endpoint, a metaphysical silence; in Sartre, it is a starting point, an existential scream that launches man into his own history.

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