

Introduction

Let me commence with a juicy quote from the book at issue:

[N]othing stands everything on its head. This is why it is fitting that this book forms part of what seems to be a very minor area of philosophical enquiry, i.e., the philosophy of humor. Immediately, from the perspective of the "sensible ham", the philosophy of humor is a footnote to a minor footnote to the main philosophical topics. The philosophy of humor is not metaphysics, or epistemology, or ethics, it is a minor inquiry into one small part of the whole. The concern of the philosophy of humor is, apparently, that limited group of things we empirically encounter which cause us to be amused; why are some things amusing and most things not? Never, in a million years, would it occur to a "sensible ham" that looking into the phenomenon of humor would or could unveil the nature of reality. That would be absurd! If there is any hope to discover reality then it must lie down some grand avenue with a sufficiently grand-sounding name. (JR, 195)

Books can tell us many things about ourselves. *Inter alia*, Tristan Burt's *Joke of Reality* has told me that I have a spirited spiritual brother—though maybe not a spiritual spirited brother—working at an "antipodean university. A marginal nobody," like myself, since I have lived and worked for longer than twenty years in Akureyri, Iceland, close to the 65th parallel, i.e., one degree shorter in northern latitude than the touristically-catchy yet climatically-dismal Arctic Circle (JR, 195). Like Tristan Burt, I am no "renowned Professor at a prestigious University." (JR, 195) Neither he nor I can claim to be some Peter Singer, Axel Honneth, or Martha Nussbaum. We can't even claim to be, say, John Morreall, Steven Gimbel, or Lydia Amir.

Yet, like Tristan Burt, I too have come to believe with firm, rational conviction that the philosophy of humour can lead us into, pull us towards or, at least, push us onto, the deepest and/or highest levels of metaphysical reflection, as the far-more-illustrious G.K. Chesterton and Gilles Deleuze had already asserted long before the two living "marginal nobod[ies]" who were invited to participate at the 2025 ISHS annual conference in Krakow (see V1, 117-124). Explicitly, in the concluding book of our multi-volume project for De Gruyter's *Studies in Philosophy of Humor*, my co-author, Ársæll Már Arnarsson, and I had written as follows:

[H]umour... grant[s] a somewhat fleeting yet intense and even cruel access... [to] a powerful and dynamic field of being, capable of creation as much as of destruction. How to best describe and understand such an onto-logical realm is a philosophically daunting matter. The options are the most diverse. It could be Schopenhauer's Wille zum Leben... [o]r Nietzsche's Wille zur Macht... Or it could be Bataille's part maudite... It could be Jung's "gods", whose presence, potency, and pressures were said to be experienced psychically in sexuality as much as in spirituality. It might even be the ultimately ungraspable universal "order" set down by God's "eternal Law", which Maritain described oxymoronically as "cruel and saving" at once. Or it could be the atheist Castoriadis' ontological allegory for the basis of all that of which can be conceived, however imperfectly, by human beings, i.e., the "magma" ... There are so many terms [that] could be seen as plausibly applicable to the ontological ground that humorous activity can both reveal and hide: "Being", "God", "apeiron", "energeia", "the One", "natura naturans", "the Tao". We, as authors of this volume, do not know which one would best apply. (V3/2, 321-322)[1]

Unlike Ársæll and myself, Tristan Burt claims to know which term should best apply. It is actually none of the preceding, funnily enough. Nonetheless, repeated, relevant, revelatory references are made by Tristan Burt to Nietzsche's "Will to Power" (JR, 219-221), "God" (aka "Allah" or a "one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple, people eater;" JR, 16), "Being" (with a capital "B", e.g., JR, 72), the Anaximander-esque but declaredly Deleuzian conception of the "perfectly indeterminate" (JR, 151), the ever-tinkered and thought-provoking descriptions of "energy" developed by modern physicists (JR, 19 & 211-213), and, much more flippantly or *en passant*, Mount Olympus (JR, 197), Bataille (JR, 78), the Chinese word "wu" (JR, 103 & 125), and a 20th-century analogue of Telesius' 16th-century notion of *natura naturans*, i.e., Bergson's "creative evolution" (JR, 225).

Specifically, Tristan Burt argues that the best candidate amongst them all is the term "nothing." *A fortiori*, "nothing" is that which must now be addressed by *me*, i.e., for *me* to be able to offer *my* critical considerations, however deficient, silly, or meaningless they may be. In short, I shall talk about "nothing." I know, it sounds a bit odd, if not absurd, but philosophy is often so—at times, even unintentionally so. It's dirty work, but somebody's got to do it. Bear with me, then. Don't chicken out—and don't let the bear find the chicken either: It always ends badly, even if Tristan Burt writes competently about "chickens and eggs" (JR, 201-203) In any case, consider this point: I have just read a book about

"nothing." And be ready for a lot of "nonsense" as well.

Synopsis

Philosophy's known beginnings are knowingly a feasible beginning. Thus, Tristan Burt begins his study of "nothing" proper by mentioning and discussing, among others, Parmenides' time-honoured, inspiring, yet also highly enigmatic poetic fragments, which mused on well-rehearsed, canonical, indeed foundational issues such as "being" and "non-being," i.e., as far as philosophy is historically and institutionally concerned (JR, 75). Tristan Burt does so

- First, in the book's lengthy introduction—which is an earnest and somewhat exhausting attempt at easing the reader's duly troubled and possibly terrified mind in the face of "nothing," "nothingness," and even "meaninglessness;" or, perchance, at pacifying those of some unduly dismissive and peevishly disgruntled referees—woes be to them!
- Secondly, he does so in chapter one of six—or seven, plus an epilogue (JR, 12).

"[S]ix—or seven," precisely, as I have just stated, because, in the manuscript which I was kindly sent by the author himself for me to be able to evaluate it, chapter five occurs *twice*.^[2]

- A first time, when dealing with Saussure's "structuralism," pop art (i.e., Andy Warhol), Joyce, and Derrida (JR, 160); and
- then once more, when dealing with Barthes' "poststructuralism," nonsense artistry (e.g., Lewis Carroll), Wittgenstein, and Carnap (JR, 160).

Whether or not this numerical repetition is intentional, it does make a more-than-viable joke and, even more so, a reminder of language's artificial, conventional character. As especially 20th- and 21st-century French postmodernists have been so keen to elucidate and emphasise, all alleged linguistic "sense" is inexorably and invariably rooted in sheer "nonsense," which is an important philosophical topic running parallel to that of "nothing" in Tristan Burt's book—not least inasmuch as "the referent of nonsense is" said by him to be "nothing" itself

(JR, 84). However, for intuitive, sensible reasons of time and space, I must abstain from offering any extensive reflection on "nonsense" as such, especially with respect to the Wittgenstein-based concepts of *Unsinnigkeit* [nonsensicality] and *Sinnlosigkeit* [senselessness], which, in my view, could be interpreted differently than Tristan Burt does in his work, and cast light on the possible idea that "sense" and "nonsense" (JR, 22) may be born simultaneously out of a mindless, speechless, silent nothingness—a primordial condition which we could creatively dub "ab-sense".

Are you lost, already? Do not huff and throw your hands in the air, please! As Tristan Burt himself recites throughout his book, philosophy is meant to be hard to make sense of, and it does come across as being some sort of futile "madness" or pathological "lunacy" to the untrained mind (JR, 61). Isn't the philosopher but a pompous fool, or even a dangerous crank, in the spiteful eye of the common person? Was the great Socrates, for one, treated nicely by his fellow Athenians—that celebrated democratic lot? Or wasn't he savagely lampooned on stage, before the whole citizenry, by the popular comedian Aristophanes in *The Clouds*? (JR, 21) And was "Diogenes the Cynic" not ridiculed mercilessly too for his—as we would softly express it today, in a suitable politically-correct tone of voice—"alternative lifestyle"? (JR, 61)

The sage is a pitiable or even contemptible buffoon before the gaze, and inside the mind, of the ordinary man of the street—I would have gladly added "or woman of the street," but the rhetorical result could have been poor and, worse still, involuntarily offensive to some right-thinking people. Yet right-thinking people are precisely the problem, for their common sense is but "shadows on the wall" (JR, 121). Those who really know are thus believed to be really mad. This is, at the very least, the wisdom of Plato's immortal "Allegory of the Cave," which Tristan Burt dissects and debates discursively in the third chapter of his book (JR, 50 *et passim*).

In any case, even before Plato started writing his well-known and much-debated dialogues, there was proffered Parmenides' aforementioned key-lesson, i.e.,

the moment we even think of nothing (let alone seek to define it) we have already attributed a positive value (i.e., thinkability) to it, and done what we must not, should not, and, by rights, cannot do. We must not even think of nothing—the thought of nothing, qua "pure

absence" is impossible—and yet, obviously and ironically, we do think of nothing (Parmenides went so far as to write a poem about it). (JR, 70)

Such being, in short,

the ancient contradiction noted by Parmenides (i.e., that whatever you can think of—like, for example, an "actual, absolute nothingness", i.e., an absence of anything material and even an absence of the immaterial—must be at least thinkable and therefore in some sense positive and present and therefore not what you naively imagine it to be). (JR, 76)

Since Parmenides' early days, hardly any Western thinker has succeeded in escaping this naïve and ostensibly self-contradictory understanding of "nothing." Indeed, according to Tristan Burt, he himself is in truth the first thinker ever to have truly figured out "nothing," i.e., once and for all. Wittily, Tristan Burt remarks: "[A] marginal nobody, working in an area of apparently no real interest on a topic of very minor importance, *should* be the person to identify the nature of reality. Why? Because reality is a joke and this situation is obviously humorous. When reality is a joke then only the marginalized can hope to discover it." (JR, 195–196)

The Prussian philosophical giant Immanuel Kant, who is the main protagonist of chapter two, came possibly close to grasping "nothing" [*N/nichts*] in all of its momentous complexity and groundbreaking centrality, according to Tristan Burt. Kant did so while "consider[ing] the nature of representation itself," yet only and revealingly in "an appendix to an appendix to an appendix (the most buried of all parts of the [*First*] *Critique*)." (JR, 120) This near-miss consisted in Kant's burgeoning realisation that "[w]hen nothing is represented in the mind the mind is clear and undetermined/unlimited (or, synonymously, determined by nothing) and therefore it can grasp the absolute," for "absolute reality" is precisely that which, adhering closely to Kant's quizzical yet philosophically near-quotidian nomenclature of our cognitive systems, "we can intuit other than sensibly: nothing." (JR, 106–107)

What in Heaven or Earth could ever be so absolutely real as to be graspable by means of (pre-? or) "non-sensible metaphysical intuition," and indeed constitute the onto-logical springboard of all that which is, and which can be humanly thought of and verbalised, but be equally and concomitantly so elusive that all human beings encounter it in their

perceptual experiences as much as in their mental speculations, and even style lexically, as being "nothing" *tout court*? What sort of "undetermined, unconstrained, and unlimited" reality subsists in such an incongruous, paradoxical, curious, ironic, perchance funny state of ever-present absence and ever-hidden presence? (JR, 92) In Tristan Burt's own words:

absolute reality ironically and amusingly represents itself in such a way as to reveal itself only to the careful and thoughtful (those who understand or "get it") whilst going "over the head", as it were, of the thoughtless. And what kind of thing behaves in this way: making use of ironic representation to amuse the thoughtful whilst going over the head of the thoughtless? The answer to this question is: a joke. (JR, 106)

Succinctly put:

1. *Nothing is absolutely real (A = B)*
2. *Nothing is a joke (A = C)*
3. *Therefore, absolute reality is a joke (Therefore, B = C) (JR, 20)*

Metaphysics is not the end of the story. Tristan Burt's onto-logical elucidations possess ethico-political implications as well. Briefly stated:

4. *The appropriate ethical response to this [metaphysical realisation] is to renounce seriousness and recognize that everything (including everybody) and nothing is really a joke[,] the purpose of which is to give rise to your amusement and the amusement of everyone else in the community.*
5. *We thereby come to form a community grounded in a shared philosophical spirit of amusement and live harmoniously in a state of amusement. (JR, 224)*

The prime, generative, and ultimate ground of everything is a joke: "[I]n the beginning was the joke" (JR, 210). Hence, aligning our conduct to the cosmic order, we ought to learn not to take things seriously and—instead as much as surprisingly so, perhaps—rejoice in that very same, all-encompassing, *nihilistic* absurdity that so unnerved so dreadfully so many scores of proto-existentialist philosophers (e.g., Pascal; JR, 35; and Kierkegaard) and "existentialists" proper (e.g., Camus; JR, 34 *et passim*) since, at least, the fateful day on which Kant's Copernican Revolution began "trapp[ing us Western thinkers] within the

phenomenological realm, with the noumenal never more than a[n ungraspable] shadow which clouds our day" (JR, 194 & 219).

If I understand correctly Tristan Burt's quasi-Gallic, and possibly or sometimes inevitably Byzantine, hair-splitting deconstructive logic, the much-longed-for yet frustratingly-elusive noumenal domain cannot be grasped because *nothing* as such is there for us to grasp, which we effectively and immediately do, even in as prosaic a perceptual experience as when we look around ourselves and notice that, between us and the wall, "there is nothing" (JR, 8). Funny, isn't it? Nevertheless, much of great importance depends upon the proper understanding of "nothing," according to Tristan Burt. Let me try and explain it, however sketchily.

Amused and relaxed by this patently ironic, possibly mirthful, yet positively metaphysical realisation, better human societies should follow as an historical inevitability, insofar as people would cease to fight over gods, titles, distinctions, fame, glory, sex, money, success, etc., given that all such much-coveted but illusory goods would finally be recognised as being devoid of any deeper and/or higher meaning—exactly like people themselves, their strivings, and their transient, mundane, individual existences. All contingent beings are, in fact, nothing but "amusing illusions, mere representations of the real joke, whose purpose is simply to amuse ourselves and one another." (JR, 89) Look close enough, investigate the beginnings of all things as much as their end-point, and the conclusion will be the same: "[E]verything means nothing" (JR, 12). As Tristan Burt dares state on the scope and depth of his own apparent "cynicism:"

What about childhood cancer? What about war? What about violent crimes? These must be real, these (at least) must be taken seriously, surely? No, these things can be taken no more seriously—i.e., imbued with no greater reality—than chocolate cake, beautiful sunny days, and loving embraces. Only in this way can we offer real comfort to, for example, children suffering from cancer, and their loved ones. Only if we understand what life and death really are—as distinct from what they appear to be—can we help the child (and their relatives) understand that they are not really different from anyone else and that though they might appear to die, in reality they will continue living, simply in an apparently different form. (JR, 124)

Tristan Burt, however challengingly or perchance shockingly, would then seem to have found out what reality is truly like, and how such a reality can offer humankind a way not to fear disease and death, hence a way to cope with them. Not bad, for a book about "nothing."

Critique

Let these two numbered, very concise, almost skeletal passages stand here for the main argumentative thrust of Tristan Burt's ingenious, intricate, irreverent, incessant, and sometimes irksome or infuriating book, about which I have so thick a set of critical considerations that its thickness or, alas, my own, does actually require me to devote to these considerations the near totality of the available pages. As such, while I do hope to be able to provide the book's author with some valuable theoretical feedback, I also know that much of what I am going to state is likely to sound obnoxiously abstruse, if not ostensibly absurd, to most people, i.e., to all those persons who have not yet read this curious, catchy, canny little book.

Should these persons read it? Yes, of course they should! I, for one, enjoyed doing so very much; even if, on occasion, I felt as though I was being taken for a proverbial ride. Only Tristan Burt knows the truth about this point. In any case, should it be truly the case that I was taken for a ride, then I must thank the Almighty for making Tristan Burt as cunning as he is, or myself as stupid as I am. Why? because I liked the ride. It was unconventional, vigorous, and amusing. Who knows? Maybe that's why the ride has become proverbial.

As to my critical considerations, I organise them below in two main batches. The first one deals with *philosophia prima*, in the sense of speculative matters of ontology and metaphysics. The second one, perhaps a lick unimaginatively, deals with *philosophia secunda*, in the sense of applicative matters of ethics, politics, religion, and overall existential attitudes.

First Batch

A1. Setting the stage

In chapter one, Tristan Burt makes a powerful case in defense of Parmenides' archaic, poetic, Pythian claim whereby we cannot be said to be truly able to think of, and even less define lexically, "nothing" proper *qua* "pure absence," utter non-being, total vacuity, complete non-existence, etc., because the very moment in which we conceive of or even proffer this absence, non-being, vacuity or non-existence, we are *not* thinking of and saying nothing at all, but rather something, which may well be shiftily opaque and shockingly obscure, but which is also and somehow present and persistent, as well as liable of grammatical predication, logico-mathematical formalisation, and even sufficiently-intelligible lexico-philosophical or, at least, lexico-rhetorical assertion, e.g., James Joyce's whimsical "scholia" in *Finnegan's Wake* (see, e.g., JR, 19, 28, 76, 173, *et passim*). After all, as the noted Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset had already mused in the 20th century: "Of the squared circle we can only say that it does not exist, because its existence is impossible; yet in order to pronounce on the poor squared circle so cruel a sentence, we must previously have contemplated it - in some sense it must have been." (as cited in V3/2, 276)

While reviewing yet another valiant attempt at understanding "nothing" philosophically—i.e., Roy Sorenson's 2022 book entitled *Nothing: A Philosophical History*—Tristan Burt concludes that linguistic expressions characterising "nothing" proper as

an "absence of absence..." an "absence of total absences..." an "absence of action..." , a "potential absence..." an "absence of contradiction..." an "absence of referents..." and so on... cycle[-] us back... to the problem that there clearly is some presence (some positivity) involved in nothing[;] there must be in order that we can write books about it! So, nothing cannot be conceived of solely along the lines of absence, there is a presence where there is nothing but a presence of what?! That is the question. (JR, 76)

"Nothing" may well be nothing, if and when it is compared to the so-called "things" that lie scattered around us and that we ourselves are; all such things, moreover, being subjectable to empirical investigation, which is the inspired basis and inherent limitation of the modern scientific endeavour (JR, 76 *et passim*). However, as Parmenides had already intuited back in his day, "nothing" cannot be understood as utter and total "nothingness" in an absolute or, as stated, "pure" sense, for "nothing" is, at the very least, an implausible abstraction, a contradictory thought, pretty much like Ortega y Gasset's "poor squared circle," which is

doomed to be cast aside as illogical "nonsense," but only after having being imagined and thought of, to some extent, no matter how minimal or imprecise (JR, 12, 76, *et passim*).

Basically, building on Parmenides' venerable insight, Tristan Burt can reasonably state as follows: "where there is *really* no material or immaterial thing there is an absence of any possibility of conceptualization." (JR, 146) If, moreover,

- we take seriously Kant's *First Critique*—as many academics have done and will probably keep doing for a long time—and
- pay serious heed to Tristan Burt's meandering yet magnetic arguments based upon it (especially in chapter two), such that
- it may effectively be the case that "*Der Verstand vermag nichts anzuschauen*" ["the understanding can intuit nothing"] (JR, 92),
- then it can equally be argued that, as already quoted above, "nothing is absolutely real."

Concisely, prior to any apprehension *via* our sensible intuitions of time and space, and the necessary deployment of our intellect's "sense-making" categories of the understanding, upon which the marvellous system of modern physics celebrated by Immanuel Kant was developed, we apprehend *metaphysically*, i.e., non-sensibly, "nothing," "*Nichts*;" which is, according to Tristan Burt, an actually-existing yet ever-elusive nothingness serving, among or *ante* all other things, *qua* constitutive, fundamental precondition for the cognitive apprehension of anything or, to be more exact, of any-thing (JR, 9 & 13). That's how, if I 'get' Tristan Burt correctly, we can make sense of Kant's own dense and episodic prose on such immaterial matters: "*[N]ichts Wirkliches ist*" ["nothing real is"] (JR, 9 & 99).

Since my fluency in German is far too basic for me to claim any special and reliable expertise in Kant's critical philosophy, and there certainly exist far-more-qualified Kant scholars than I shall ever be able to become, I do not venture hereby into any elaborate discussion of how best to understand and translate into English Kant's "idiosyncratic" vocabulary—including how best to render the non-insignificant term "*nichts*" (JR, 9, 99, 139, *et passim*). Much, however, would seem to depend upon it, as far as Tristan Burt's argument is concerned.

Not to mention the fact that an early post-Kantian philosopher, the noted German pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer, had himself argued in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* that, by way of inward-looking meditation, he had somehow been able to peer behind the so-called "veil of Maya," which is always, necessarily, and deceitfully instituted by our spatio-temporal and conceptual epistemic coordinates when dealing with the world of common experience as much as scholastic and scientific thinking, and that he had retrieved a momentous, powerful insight into the true metaphysical quintessence of the cosmos, aka Tristan Burt's "absolute reality." Specifically, Schopenhauer had come in contact with a fundamental, eternally-chaotic, cosmic energy, which biological creatures such as ourselves experience *qua voluntas* or will, i.e., the Will to Live [*Wille zum Leben*]. Who is right, then: Tristan Burt or Arthur Schopenhauer? Whose path beyond or behind space-time and the categories of the understanding should be followed? Which metaphysical faculty should be granted pre-eminence? What would happen, for instance, were we to say that inward-looking meditation or listening to one's own Pascalian heart, rather than reason alone or above all, is the correct path to be followed?

Personally, I have no conclusive answer to give to such grave interrogatives. At any rate, and at least for the moment, let's bow before Tristan Burt's version of Prussia, just as we bowed before his version of Greece. If Heidegger toyed at will with dusty Hellenic etymologies and devious Aegean translations, why shouldn't Tristan Burt be allowed to play a similar game? A game, yes. Maybe "an exceptionally good" one as well—yet and nonetheless, a characteristically childish activity (JR, 10). In the end, as Tristan Burt cheekily yet crucially asserts, "nothing/nonsense" is what is "really" ever at stake whenever confronting issues of such a philosophical import, given the ironic metaphysical principle that is actually at play all the time before our unseeing eyes: "Depression is really a joke, boredom is really a joke, happiness is really a joke, life is really a joke, pain is really a joke, pleasure is really a joke, philosophy is really a joke; it's all a joke, *it* is a joke, the definite article is a joke." (JR, 68)

Thus, summarily, "nothing," as far as I mis/understand Tristan Burt, should be said to be:

- "a presence," if not even "a positive presence," such that (JR, 70 *et passim*),
- Effectively hypostasising the basis for the epistemic 'filters' identified by Kant in his celebrated *Critique of Pure Reason*, this "presence" operates *qua* "background..."

- tabula rasa or blank slate" lying behind, permeating, and differentiating "everything" (12 & 100-104), i.e., every identifiable "thing" (every-thing) which our limited faculties can grasp (see especially chapter four's remarks on Derrida's "*différance*"), and that,
- curiously as much as candidly, is so ontologically 'thin,' perceptually 'impalpable,' and "perfectly transparent to us," as to be *de facto in/visible* (JR, 94), as well as
 - so clearly yet confoundingly vague as to be "incomprehensible," at first (JR, 84 & 217), and rightly passible of being labelled "nonsense" (JR, 13 *et passim*); hence,
 - such that it is immediately and prosaically encountered as being, and ordinarily referred to in our languages as meaning, "nothing" at all (JR, 135). *But* which,
 - very much like the air-filled empty spaces that we ordinarily and superficially discount as being "nothing," e.g., "[t]here is nothing... outside the window" (JR, 29),
 - should be better conceptualised by the philosophical investigator as an ontologically grounding, epistemically primary, paradoxically logical, and amusingly ironic twist, switch or reversal that is tantamount to "a joke" (see, e.g., JR, 10 *et passim*, and 145ff).

I hope I am not misrepresenting Tristan Burt's much ado about "nothing," i.e., his interesting book, a veritable triumph of nihilism, where we also read: "The real joke then represents itself first as nonsense/nothing and against this background of nothingness or nonsense, sensible things (phenomena) can be perceived, but none of these representations of reality can be said to be themselves real because they depend on the antecedent nothing/nonsense." (JR, 146)

A2. Throwing lettuce

Let me take a critical crack at it, now. Nothing that is "really" something is *not* "really" nothing (JR, 146). *Prima-facie* "nothing" that is effectively a "presence," a "background," an amazingly and amusingly ironic inversion, or, as Tristan Burt tersely concludes in the quoted numbered propositions of his argument, "a joke," is *ipso facto*—if not *ipso fato*—a nothing that is *something*; although not necessarily the same sort of "something" as some specific thing or some-thing. Asking "what is X?," then, may not be the wisest way to go about this matter, as Tristan Burt himself reasonably suggests, for such a question presupposes that we are dealing with a thing or some-thing (JR, 146).

Still, since we are not dealing with a thing or some-thing, it can plausibly be reasoned that the "nothing" at issue is actually *no-thing*, i.e., as stated, *not* some-thing. "Nothing" would then refer not to an *ens* [a 'being']—thus engaging in a short and perhaps pompous recourse to scholastic Latin—but might have nevertheless something to do with *esse* as such ['being' *tout-court*, yet more correctly translated as the infinitive "to be" rather than the gerund/present participle "being"]. Tristan Burt's reflections point in this *infinitive* direction, whether he is fully conscious of this matter or not, considering especially that he argues repeatedly and at length that trying to comprehend "nothing" proper as a well-defined or, at the very least, a definable, circumscribed, apprehensible, individualizable "thing"—should this "thing" be even as unsubstantial and as intangible as an "absence"—lies at the very heart of many a self-defeating, unresolvable, philosophical conundrum (JR, 146).

Rather than trying to grapple with this patently amorphous and uncertain mode of being as a some-thing or even just a something—hence, it doesn't really matter whether we opt for calling it "no/thing," "some/thing," "every/thing" or "any/thing"—I would suggest focussing on what premises one and two in Tristan Burt's argument, i.e.

- "nothing is absolutely real" and
- "nothing is a joke,"

have most obviously in common. That which these two premises patently share is the formulation "nothing *is*," i.e., subject "nothing" and the verb "to be," which points towards the onto-logical insight that I wish to highlight here: The "nothing" at issue is just *too* amorphous and uncertain to allow for any/thing else to be thought of it or said but that, simply and fundamentally, *it is*—whatever "it" and "is" may then in turn reveal themselves to mean and be, at least for us philosophers who positively wonder about such preposterous problems.

Incidentally,

- I am *not* arguing here that "nothing" is "Being" with a capital "B," for that would constitute an answer to the presumptuous interrogative "what is X?"—a question which Tristan Burt himself, following Derrida, treats most sceptically (JR, 72 & 146);

but

- only that this "nothing" pertains to, connects with or participates in "being" in some liminal, minimal, and/or perhaps initial or terminal way or form—in the broadest, most general, most generic, most imprecisely imaginable sense of the two terms at issue, i.e., "nothing" and "being." Such, then, is the "much a-be about no-thing" that I have invented and introduced *qua* punning, jejune, parodically Shakesperean title of the present text.
- Such a "nothing" would also be characterizable and, to an extent, understandable *qua* shorthand for, say, "nothing solid," "nothing visible," "nothing tangible," "nothing spatiotemporal," "nothing empirically testable," "nothing clear," "nothing focussed," etc., i.e., a mode of being that is 'less' than a "thing," (so much less, in fact, that is commonly styled and thought of as being "nothing" *in se* and is figured out, however imperfectly, by way of contrast with some/thing else than itself) but that *is*

Which is what, ironically, Parmenides might well have concluded himself, were we only in possession of all his writings, which we are not. Or, at least, this is the sort of conclusion that, in my modest and Italian-read view, would appear to have been reached by Parmenides' later student Emanuele Severino, whom Tristan Burt cites and considers in his book but, in my modest and English-read view, misrepresents (JR, 69-70 & 77). But I won't turn the present discussion into an exegesis of Severino's *Essenza del nichilismo* (Milan: Adelphi, 2nd ed. 1995/1981[1st ed. 1971]), which is itself a dense and much-debated book. Good philosophy books seem to be tomes on which people like disagreeing with one another.

However, a mere, minor sidenote on Emanuele Severino and Tristan Burt is, in my reasoned view, *de rigueur* here. The latter's "nothing," in fact and in ultimate analysis, might well be but a clever, contemporary, nihilistically-worded reiteration of Anaximander's "all-enveloping... all-ruling... infinite... indeterminate... indefinite... limitless... immortal... ambiguo[ous]" *apeiron*, whichever translation of this archaic Greek term may then be preferred, i.e., "the divine... whence all things are generated" by way of "opening the whole... [i.e.] the integral invasion of the different by the same," namely, "the positive, [aka the state of] being," which is styled by the late Italian philosopher as "an immense flower... the petals [of which] fight with one another to expose their colours to the light" (*idem*, 396-397 & 404).

The seemingly contradictory assertion "nothing is" is, admittedly, very little to go by. It doesn't say much. But what else would you like to get out of "nothing" proper? Another book? Four books? A new book series for De Gruyter? Still, should 'more' be wanted out of "nothing," then allow me to elaborate some additional considerations. Specifically, if Tristan Burt

- is capable of asserting that "nothing is a joke," and therefore
- provides *ipso dicto* an answer to the classic metaphysical question "what is X?," then
- it is because he is writing about some streak, shade or shape of "being," whatever that is in actuality ("being" being itself a term that can be philosophically daunting),
- whence possibly derive all "beings" proper, be they "things," contraries, gods, animals, people, windows, gusts of wind, farts, holes in the Swiss cheese, passages under archways, Gothic cathedrals, mosques, quarks, quirks, thoughts, perceptions, gestaltic instabilities, incongruities, jokes built thereupon, frightening absurdities, or even more amorphous and more uncertain modes of being too, including
- the liminal, minimal, critical, and perhaps initial or terminal "nothing" where all logico-mathematical systems, philosophico-linguistical inquiries, and physico-cosmological investigations end up ashore at some late point of their intellectual journeys
- —as masterfully exemplified by Tristan Burt himself, I must add, by means of clever feats of deconstruction ranging from Carnap's logical positivism and NASA's latest depiction of the beginnings of the universe, to Wittgenstein's recognition of semantics' bottomlessness and T.S. Eliot's depiction of the existential emptiness affecting the "hollow men" inhabiting the universe studied by NASA's top-notch scientists (JR, 224).

Stating that "nothing is a joke" is, admittedly, a bit of a joke. The funny thing being, moreover, that *a bit of a bit* of a joke is that with which we end up: "Nothing is." That's all we can credibly assert, based on the material provided and investigated by Tristan Burt, who might then be guilty of metaphysical hubris—like when he writes, in a hardnosed yet honestly joking way, that his book contains "the most important discovery in the history of philosophy." (JR, 9)

Having questioned the first and second premise, then the derived third proposition-*cum*-sub-conclusion, "absolute reality is a joke," must be approached with cautious scepticism, which

leads me to immediately suspend judgment before any claims concerning "absolute reality."

- On the one hand, in fact, Tristan Burt's brave exercise in philosophical reasoning might have led us, once more, into the personally awing and intellectually arresting presence of *Der Gott der Philosophen* ["The God of the Philosophers"] (GP, vol. 2, 238), Whom one of Heidegger's prize students, Wilhelm Weischedel, styled in the 1970s *qua* "Vonwoher," i.e., the "wherefrom" or "whence" all being and/or beings derive, even if we may never be able to determine what God *in se* is and how It, He, She, Co, En, Ey, Xie, Yo, Ve or Ze may operate. As Weischedel wrote: "[E]r ist das Vonwoher, dessen Begriff aus der Betrachtung der Weltwirklichkeit entspringt, wenn diese als seiend, als nichtseiend und als schwebend angesehen wird..." (*idem*) [It is the wherefrom, whose concept springs from the consideration of the reality of the world, when this reality comes to be seen as existent, inexistent, and floating], i.e., "das absolute Schweben" [the absolute floating]. "Transcendence," whether made subjectively real by way of, say, direct mystical revelation, or merely suspected as being an objectively real possibility because of some indirect, incomplete, rational approach, is that liminal, mystifying domain which Tristan Burt himself encounters repeatedly in his book; but it is also a notoriously murky domain that philosophical reason and—even less likely—scientific reason cannot duly probe and investigate (JR, 22 *et passim*).
 - Or else, Tristan Burt may be independently corroborating Gilles Deleuze's 1960s reflections on the peculiar set of philosophical issues that the latter had tellingly labelled "the adventure of humor," e.g., the witty "Stoic... paradoxes" of old and the enigmatic "Zen... koans" of the Orient, all of which, in Deleuze's view, "demonstrate the [original and/or ultimate] absurdity of [all linguistic-conceptual] significations... [and] discover [the multiplicity of singular] objects-events... communicating in the void which constitutes their substance" (as cited in V3/1, 119). Without forgetting that this "void" cannot be the contradictory "pure absence" plaguing so much Western philosophy since Parmenides' day. Deleuze, in fact, believed that "[t]he negative is an illusion, no more than a shadow of problems... [that] can [better] be[-] grasped as... hypotheses" concerning very tricky yet veritably thinkable "Idea[s]", such as "difference and the problematic," which are both endowed with a degree of "positivity," according to the French metaphysician (DR, 202-203).
 - "Nothing," in this perspective, might then be inferred to be an uncertain,

unclear, unanswerable, yet posited hence positive interrogative; if not the shifty, shapeless, bewildering, and even breaking ground itself whence interrogatives arise, i.e., the "virtuality" inherent to, or the mere "possibility" of putting, novel as much as old, ever-returning, puzzling metaphysical and/or theological questions about, say, "Being," "the Same," "the Different," "repetition," "multiplicity," "singularity," "(non-)being," "the One, order," etc., as much as "virtuality" and "possibility" themselves (see especially DR 201-203). Words, after all, can only chase after more words, in the often-vain attempt at making sense of things. In his dense ontological writings on such matters, Deleuze used recurrently the metaphor of "the throw of the dice," i.e., the repeatable and perhaps repeated or to-be-repeated—Deleuze was thinking of the Nietzsche's Hindu-inspired theory of the recurrence of the same, which has recently been reiterated by physicists *qua* theory of the multiverse—"aleatory point at which everything becomes ungrounded," insofar as "[e]ach" throw is "the chaosmos [sic] from which the cosmos emerges... [and] takes the chance all at once" (DR, 199-200).

- As far as I am capable of grasping Deleuze's complex metaphysics and, hopefully, rendering it somewhat intelligible in my own words, while also applying it to Tristan Burt's own narrative of a truly elusive yet consequential cosmic irony, each unique, instantaneous singularity in all the possible universes' infinite multiplicities is an awesome event, a Leibniz-esque monad, which contains *everything*—hence and *a fortiori* "nothing" too, insofar as such monads embrace the Big Bang, time, space, all physical and non-physical relations and manners of relations, all things that are logically thinkable and unthinkable, that which happened and may have happened, that which is and might be, and that which may happen and will happen, all possible questions and lines of questioning, and *that which is not*, as stated, i.e., that which can be
 - "interpreted as the limit of a process of degeneration" (e.g., the mysterious *quid* 'before' the Big Bang; that which lacks both haecceity and quiddity, that which is prior or external to time and space)
 - "or as the antithesis of a thesis" (e.g., 'non-being,' 'no-thingness,' 'immortality,' etc.) (DR, 203).

Second Batch

- On the other hand, should we concede, even for the sheer sake of argument, that "absolute reality is a joke," then the joke could still be liable of qualification, including the arresting one of being a *cruel* I am thinking, e.g., about Schopenhauer's *Wille zum Leben*, which is described by the great German pessimist as toying blindly (see V2, 47-51), hence all-the-more-mercilessly, with the living ones and, above all, the loving ones, i.e., as if the feeling and fighting creatures seeking for survival and successful reproduction were silly puppets, sex-crazed marionettes, hetero-directed tools, unthinking enamoured characters out of some Romantic poem or song cycle, or the foolish simpletons inhabiting the towns of Fünsing and Schilda—not Königsberg, strangely enough, as far as comic German folklore is concerned. (Yes, there does exist such a thing as German humour, even if Schopenhauer resisted the idea.) Perhaps, only austere Prussian philosophers, serious Teutonic bureaucrats, practical Baltic seafarers, God-fearing Protestant believers, and rigorously-disciplined Junker children roamed the streets of that illustrious city, which is generally known today as "Kaliningrad."

This reference to Schopenhauer allows me to shift entirely the discussion onto the ethical, political, and existential aspects of Tristan Burt's argument. In particular, I wish to address the following point: Jokes, even if they are jokes and 'got' as such, aren't always funny, or that much funny.

- A cruel joke, for one, can inspire little or no amusement even in the person him/herself who proffered it—the key spring for its proffering being not fun or amusement in any significant or relevant form and shape, not even a sadistic one, but rather the callous and calculated desire to humiliate, ostracise, offend, and/or otherwise mistreat the butt/s of the same joke, whether for the mistreatment's own sake or some ulterior end.
- For another, and more generally, humour can fail, as all of us must have probably and painfully experienced at some point in our lives, but the failure doesn't *per se* disqualify the joke, jest or jeer at issue from constituting humour, e.g., an unsuccessful rejoinder that was intended *qua* humorous persiflage, attempted as such, but miserably ill-timed, poorly thought-out, badly worded, and/or otherwise gravely deficient. Even a prank that is deemed to be "in poor taste" or a jest that is said to be "out of place" do not cease to be, respectively, a prank and a jest, i.e., instances of "humour" proper. Indeed, the most capable and 'edgiest' humourists and comedians

toy intentionally around the blurry, grey area separating propriety and impropriety, reaping applause when successful and boos (or worse) when unsuccessful. (Tristan Burt himself cites chapter one of V3/2, where even murders of resented comedians are recorded and discussed.)

- Also, jokes can be amusing but frustrating, unpleasant, and/or hurtful at the same time, or even sorely and severely painful. Contrary to what Tristan Burt assumes throughout his book, "amusement" (JR, 10 *et passim*) and a great host of negative emotions can occur together and coexist, e.g., discomfort, dismay, distress, disappointment, dislike, disgust—and many more that do not begin by "d." Such a combination of contrasting elements may seem perplexing, *prima facie*, but our literary and musical jargon quickly reveals how it is far from being an oxymoronic oddity, an erroneous exception, or a flimsy flight of fancy. Age-old adjectives such as "tragicomic," "comicotragical," and "bittersweet," or later technical nouns such as "dramma giocoso," "jocoseriosity," and "dramedy," connote or refer to such mixed feelings, which, for one, the art of "Epic or Dramatic Comedy," as James Beattie had already discussed in the 18th century, aims at producing and reproducing intentionally (as cited in V1, 71).

Matters of perspective are paramount, in this connection. Perspective, however, implies a viewpoint, and a viewpoint can only exist if there is a viewer. Who is the viewer, when the alleged "joke" of "nothing" is at stake? My answer would be "someone," i.e., very concisely, some existing *person* (N.B. I intentionally avoid the term "subject" and prefer "person" instead; see chapters one and four in V1 on Polanyi's *personalism* to grasp the full import of this choice). Something that comes across as very funny to Mrs x doesn't necessarily come across as being so to Mrs w, y, q, or z. There might even exist a fundamental, absolute joke, as Tristan Burt claims, and it might even possess a meaningful intention or benevolent "purpose," which is a psychologically bizarre and onto-logically unwarranted anthropomorphising ingredient of Tristan Burt's fourth proposition-cum-sub-argument—to speak frankly as much as bluntly. Nevertheless, should there even be such intention or purpose, whether or not any "amusement" results is bound to depend on who 'gets' the joke as a joke *and*, because of their *personal circumstances* (in the broadest possible sense of this hereby-Italicised expression), finds the joke at issue amusing rather than, say, obnoxious, or at least as amusing as it is obnoxious, and in any case not more obnoxious than it is amusing.

"Amusement," after all, is a term pointing towards cognates such as the "ludicrous" and the "absurd," the latter term occurring repeatedly in Tristan Burt's book (see, e.g., JR, 13-14 *et passim*). And while we may frequently regard "ludicrous" and "absurd" as positive qualifiers, we should not neglect a significant point made in the 19th century by William Hazlitt (see V1, 80) and, again, Arthur Schopenhauer (as cited in V1, 95), i.e., that these adjectives turn promptly into insults as soon as they apply to someone or something a person cares much about—not least his or her own previous and/or present self.

Tristan Burt argues that the wise person, indeed "the thoughtful" writ large, is the one who can 'get' the fundamental joke of reality and be amused by it, in a way that is reminiscent of the laughing Abderian philosopher Democritus, Tristan Burt's inspirational Diogenes the Cynic, or the mirthful Buddha of the East-Asian tradition, i.e., the monk Qieci from Fenghua (JR, 106). This is certainly a clever and captivating rhetorical move, given that Tristan Burt's audience comprises, primarily, philosophers. Who, among us, wouldn't like to be a wise person? Aren't we all *philo-sophers*, i.e., 'lovers of wisdom,' etymologically speaking?

As brave, brotherly, and even brilliant as this move may be, it is nonetheless a questionable intellectual sleight of hand, which hides from view *ab ovo* all those unfortunate biological, medical, social, economic, cultural, and political conditions under which a suffering person happens to live, or is even coerced and condemned to live, such that this person can still grasp the joke of reality discussed by Tristan Burt and find it unamusing. Were such conditions duly and candidly considered, "[t]he appropriate ethical response..." (see Tristan Burt's fourth numbered proposition in the opening quotes) could then be considerably different than the one advised by the book's author, who concludes with too much ease and too much eagerness, plus a pinch of arrogance, that those who cannot laugh at reality's metaphysical joke are a bunch of "serious people," "thoughtless" dorks, "sensible hams," and worse still, perhaps (JR, 18, 47, 106, *et passim*).

This being, incidentally, a critical point that the Canadian ethicist Jean Harvey had already moved, at the close of the last century, against John Morreall's praiseworthy rediscovery of the centrality of humour for Western philosophy, and Morreall's individualistic approach, which could far too promptly turn someone's unwillingness or inability to laugh and/or see the comic side of things into a blameworthy flaw or negative trait of character of the agelastic person, who would then become, according to Jean Harvey, a twofold victim of fate

or society, for s/he is a suffering victim who is further victimised by being deemed "‘oversensitive’, ‘paranoid’, ‘thin-skinned’", and gravely devoid of any or most "sense of humour" (as cited and discussed in V2, 100-201 & 291-293). Prudently, on this dismal yet decisive point, Ludwig Wittgenstein would remind us of the existentially pivotal fact that "*Die Welt des Glücklichen ist eine andere als die des Unglücklichen*" [The world of the happy person is another than that of the unhappy person] (as cited in V2, 296).

Even weaker appears to be the fifth numbered proposition in Tristan Burt's quoted arguments: "We thereby come to form a community grounded in a shared philosophical spirit of amusement and live harmoniously in a state of amusement." How? When? Why? What? Should one even concede all four prior propositions, the issue of jovial nihilists coming together and living together like John Lennon and Yoko Ono would have probably dreamt of is not something that can be determined by reason alone: It is an *empirical* issue. Tristan Burt's "thereby" is, at best, an indication of hope in humankind's ability to find peaceful ways to coexist despite obvious differences and disagreements, or of faith in the future benevolence and prosperity of a secular world where pluralism, tolerance, tranquillity, a healthy sense of axiological indifference, and abundance of good humour have become the general norm.

Whether or not such a scenario can materialise, and whether or not anyone would care at all about "communities" under such novel conditions—given that, "really," communities too are "illusions," exactly like "individual people," i.e., they are "nothing" or, at best, jokes—it is something that neither I nor Tristan Burt can settle (JR, 155ff). Only human history can do that, if it will ever do at any future point. Personally, I regard such an outcome to be highly unlikely, though not logically impossible, considering in particular the fact that "illusions" such as "my land, my property, my country, my family, my life, my language, my god, etc." have been giving no sign whatsoever of losing their grip on people's hearts and minds—a grip that, in ever-various and varying order, they have been enjoying since time immemorial (JR, 125).

In nuce, Tristan Burt universalises his own personal perspective on things, and "nothing" too, thus neglecting how different sets of personal circumstances may rationally justify very different interpretations of that same basic, foundational "irony" or "incongruity" (JR, 23, 84, *et passim*), which he thoughtlessly characterises as an "obvious[//]y" amusing joke (JR,

57, 62, 66, 97, *et passim*), i.e., as if the absolute metaphysical joke at issue were inherently, indubitably, inexorably funny and, were we each and all to merely apply in earnest an enlightening droplet of philosophical "thoughtful[ness]," universally so (JR, 82). Then again, the actual "irony" or "incongruity" at play might be *just* that, i.e., something that is not particularly amusing or only potentially amusing, exactly like all ironies and incongruities tend to be, insofar as they can come across as unamusingly doleful (e.g., a cruel or bitter irony) and/or unnerving (e.g., a disquieting, perplexing or frustrating incongruity).

Perhaps, what Tristan Burt's investigation of "nothing" proper has retrieved, but struggles to recognise as such, is the gestaltic shift, and even the occasional gestaltic instability, between background and foreground that his investigation implies. Such shift and occasional instability can indeed be amusing, and even very much so, but if and only if the viewer's attitude towards it is so disposed. (And yes, should anyone be wondering, "nothing" doesn't have to function solely as a gestaltic background: It can be foregrounded too, e.g., the unknown solution to a riddle that we cannot solve, the likely skulking animal that we cannot see in the dark forest despite all our peering, the sedulous mysterious God Whom we feel in our hearts, etc.)

By 'leaping' so comfortably and so straightforwardly from the metaphysical joke to untroubled, untroubling, "peaceful amusement," Tristan Burt seems to be moving along a humour-biased theor-ethical line that is close to John Morreall's one, under this specific respect (JR, 10)—yet not solely because of the emphasis on possessing a sense of humour *qua* being a desirable and even expected virtue of the individual, but also because Tristan Burt gives fundamental theor-ethical primacy to the linguistico-conceptual abstractions which we call, in contemporary British English, "nothing" and "nonsense." Once again, most philosophers might perceive no real problem with this choice of emphasis. Philosophers, after all, spend much of their lives in a contemplative world made precisely of such abstractions.

An alternative approach, however, could be to give fundamental theor-ethical primacy to actual living persons, rather than linguistico-conceptual abstractions. Tristan Burt, in what perhaps constitutes a token of performative contradiction, lists himself a variety of pressing personal concerns—meaning concerns that are typical of, and essential to, persons at large—which he obviously regards as personally important too—in the sense of being

significant for him *qua* the specific person that he is. We could highlight the proper disposal of "garbage," purchasing a "mattress" needed for sleeping on it, providing food so as stop being "hungry," holding a paid "job," and taking care of "kids"—one's own "daughter[s]" at the very least (JR, 122).

Worse still, Tristan Burt does not appear to discriminate between 'needs' (as that which may be wanted and without which we die) and 'wants' (as that which may be wanted and without which we do *not* die), hence equating "money" with "food" and "shelter," for instance, *qua* "material needs" (JR, 93). A living man and a loving father, I am pretty sure that, were Tristan Burt cast in the thick of the tropical jungle with his children, he would soon start searching for food and shelter rather than money, even if big stacks of cash were available to him amidst the luscious green trees... Stacks of cash in the middle of the tropical jungle? Tristan Burt and his children having no food and being at risk of harmful or even deadly exposure to the heavy rain, the heat, or the forest's many, dangerous, wild, frightening animals? What am I talking about? Is this a joke? Perhaps. It is, *au fond*, a matter of perspective: An eminently *personal* matter.

An external observer, having performed a suitably Bergson-esque "anaesthesia of the heart," might interpret the whole scenario as being comical (see V1, 104 *et passim*). But what of Tristan Burt and his family? How would they respond? While I do not wish him nor his family any harm, such harrowing personal circumstances could be the ideal ones for Tristan Burt to be able to test his own humorous, allegedly "cynic" philosophy (JR, 61, 219 and, arguably, 214) of, essentially, mirthful ataraxia and apatheia, and thereby console himself, as much as his own children, by cultivating the de-personalising, noisily quietist, seemingly hedonistic yet unintentionally Stoical or Epicurean notion whereby "if we understand what life and death really are—as distinct from what they appear to be—can we help the [dying] child (and their relatives) understand that they are not really different from anyone else and that though they might appear to die, in reality they will continue living, simply in an apparently different form," i.e., the "joke" that "reality" consists in, and which includes, on a par, "cancer... wars... crimes" as much as "chocolate cake, beautiful sunny days, and loving embraces." (JR, 124)

Perhaps appropriately, a deep-seated, unseen, theological irony might explain why Tristan Burt can apparently afford to be so equanimous, if not cavalier, with regard to "cancer...

wars... crimes," and their positive, life-affirming counterparts. Unaware of the event, his investigation into "nothing" may have led Tristan Burt to stumble upon

- God,
- God's constitutive incongruity (aka "God's... humour," V3/2, 324), and
- God's Providence.

That is why he can be such an uncommonly Panglossian optimist before the very worst and the most tragic that can befall onto a person. As regards God, I have already mentioned Weischedel's *Vonwoher*, and I shall limit myself to that, here. As regards God's sense of humour, though, I wish to recall the longstanding neo-Platonic and Patristic tradition of apophatic theology, which approaches the divine *via negativa*, and reveals its transcendence by way of incongruous, ironic expressions, which might even be called "godly jokes," e.g., Philo of Alexandria's "luminous darkness" of the Almighty (as cited in DC, 264), "the silence of the perpetual choir in heaven" (Rev., 8:1), Tertullian's famous motto "*credo quia absurdum*" (as cited in V3/1, 48), or Saint Augustine's mystical yet whimsical adage: "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*" ["If you understand it, it's not God"] (Sermon 117, as cited in FJ, par. 2).

I stated "a deep-seated irony" because religious matters, unlike scientific, literary, comedic, or strictly philosophical ones, are treated by Tristan Burt in a surprisingly careless tone which, given the level of intellectual sophistication shown by him in all other contexts, suggests a modicum of prejudice or sheer ignorance—to speak, once again, frankly as much as bluntly. Thus, "God" and "Allah" are equated, in a most facile manner, to "a one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple, people eater," despite the manifest historico-cultural insignificance of the third *vis-à-vis* the first two (JR, 16). "Killing" in the name of "God" is quickly and superficially dismissed as "mindless" (JR, 39), when in fact such an ungodly horror may involve a lot of rational planning and committed cogitative reflection (see the discussion of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* murders in V3/2, which Tristan Burt includes among his sources). The "god who judges you" is flippantly opposed to the "tedious... loving god," thus displaying no consideration for the vast theological literature about the mutual relationship between, say, the virtues of *justitia* and *caritas* (JR, 45). "[T]he absolutely real God" or, at least, its "representation," is known to the strangely blessed Tristan Burt, notwithstanding millennia of contrasting views on such a notion, which countless

theologians and mystics have claimed to be ungraspable (JR, 101). The list could go on and on. For the sake of completeness, let me add only the following four points:

- "[T]he understanding... can grasp what is meant by the statement 'there is nothing in this glass' ... [with] no difficulty. Whereas we cannot, in a similar fashion, understand the meaning of the statement 'God is in this glass'." (JR, 102) A basic knowledge of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* would immediately contradict such a brazen claim, given that God *qua* Creator and Upholder of the partially-intelligible, generally-ordered, logically-consistent, and physically-coherent universe in which people and their glasses exist implies that God is also in this glass. But we don't have to engage in any Scholastic theology to get this. As often stated by my old, piously Catholic aunt Rosetta, who has never read Thomas Aquinas and never finished her studies in primary school because of the Second World War: "You can't see God, just like you can't see thought, but He is everywhere, in everything, with His Holy Spirit." God bless her.
- "Certainly, if we assume an omniscient, all-powerful, creator—God—it is extremely difficult to make sense of the requirement for revelation." (JR, 115) Again, a sprinkle of Aquinas would promptly cast doubt on such a strong claim. God established an eternal law that we can intuit, in part, and explore rationally, in another part, i.e., the natural law. Yet, given that people are patently capable of making mistakes and fail in their use of reason, He has also given us His divine law, as *per* the Revelation. But there is a deeper point at stake. How can Tristan Burt or, for that matter, any human being know what an omniscient, all-powerful creator would be like and act? We are not omniscient, hence there's plenty of stuff that we don't and can't know. And we are not all-powerful either, hence we can't even begin to guess all the ways in which such a power can be exercised, including deciding when and why restraining it.
- "What kind of (sadistic) 'loving' parent would bring a child into the world knowing that the precondition for that life, was that the child would be born stupid, thinking that they would eventually die (of cancer or some other horrible disease perhaps)? There can, logically, be no (good) God, but there must really be a joke." (JR, 126) Maybe there is an evil God. The Marquis de Sade might have believed as much. Or maybe there is a good, loving parent, who knows that the best way for humankind to go through life is to be born defenseless and ignorant, strive to grow into adulthood, face difficulties and diseases, and even die terrible early deaths at times. Either way,

Tristan Burt's prose is too little and too dismissive, as if he had resolved in a couple of paragraphs centuries of keen theological reflection and intense religious meditation.

- "Whatever really exists must be something to be taken seriously (God), the entire cosmos couldn't be a representation of joke, come off the grass! Our immediate reaction is to be dismissive of these kinds of claims." (JR, 156) Throughout the book, Tristan Burt relies on a trite and false equation of seriousness and religiosity that has been challenged by, say, the lived example of Saint Francis (see, e.g., V3/2, 19-22) and the Orthodox tradition of the so-called "fools of God" (see, e.g., V2, 141-148), as well as the theological reflections of the Lutheran Kierkegaard (see V1, 89) and the Catholic Chesterton (see V3/1, 173, and V3/2, 22).

Perhaps, Tristan Burt is stuck in "Joyce's attack on God as the paradigmatic 'serious dad' ... [or] God of Babel" (JR, 173, 180, *et passim*), such that "God-the-Father" is regularly and comically reduced to a creatural state, to the peculiar point of reasoning that the "serious" parent "postulate[d by] religion" is an "Eternal Adult" that has never been a child, and that this postulate contradicts the available "empirical evidence" on the way in which creatures grow (JR, 58). Similarly comical, and theologically uninformed as far as most Christian confessions are concerned, is the rendition of the relationship between "God" and the believer as one in which the latter is "free[d...] of ultimate responsibility" by "throw[ing] their hands up to" the former (JR, 58)—if only it were that easy!

I single out and underline Tristan Burt's dismissive tone in connection with religious themes and topics because theologians and priests may well be the best allies in Tristan Burt's valiant attempt at making sense of "nothing" proper, given their extensive expertise in matters of transcendence—not least the aforementioned apophatic tradition. Moreover, Tristan Burt's intriguing investigation displays the chief aims and attributes distinguishing the religious enterprise:

- Wishing to "make sense of the cosmos" at the most comprehensive level, including matters of "cosmic origin" (JR, 218);
- addressing the metaphysical questions of what "reality" ultimately consists in, and in a declaredly "absolute" sense (JR, 147);
- "ground[ing]" individual conduct and "character," as well as collective standards of "behavior[-]," in the metaphysical answers to the preceding questions (JR, 168-169);

and even

- paving the way for "go[ing] back to paradise" (JR, 197) as much as
- enjoying "democracy, hospitality, happiness, pleasure, heaven" (JR, 66),
- all of which can be attained by fulfilling "the ethical obligation to party, to laugh, to have a good time. *To be ethical is to party... [R]eality is a joke*, a cause of amusement, something charming, pleasing, and entertaining" (JR, 44).

Above all, while producing a book serving, at the very least, as an intuition pump for a 21st-century version of Nietzsche's laughing nihilism, Tristan Burt's investigation of "nothing" leads us into noticing the likely primacy of being, insofar as "nothing" itself is some sort of *presence*, something that *is*, however tenuously and paradoxically, or even jokingly—again, like the opening "squared circle" pitied by Ortega y Gasset. Whether this "being" is God or something else, I do not know. However, in its ironic appearance out of nothing, it does smack of God's Providence—I had not forgotten about the third point in the list; I had to build towards it.

Note

This review essay had initially been selected for publication in the *Israeli Journal of Humor Studies*. However, following the [16 September 2025 report by the UN Human Rights Council](#), and in due consultation with the editor of said journal, it was withdrawn from publication therein and issued hereby instead.

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Endnotes

[1] Tristan Burt cites V3/2, but in connection with how cruelty has been used to teach seriousness (JR, 21).

[2] All page references are based on said manuscript and are likely to differ from those of

the published tome.