

Nothing to Speak Of

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Keywords: ontology; nothing; absence; non-existence; fiction

Abstract

This article is about nothing. Does that mean it is about something, namely, ‘nothing’? Or is there quite literally no thing that this article is about? Follow the dialogue between characters discussing the nature of non-existence and absences to find out! Along the way there will be tongue twisters, contradictions, paradoxes and riddles, ready to challenge our preconceptions of reality as we embark into the mysterious realm of nothingness.

Like many teens growing up in suburbia, I funded my escapades by babysitting. Pros – cash in hand, free reign of someone else’s nicer home, access to someone else’s fuller fridge, and the opportunity to watch cartoons on someone else’s comfier sofa. Cons – sitting with a baby whose life is suddenly your responsibility. But really, what was the worst that could happen?

This one time, Ema had asked me nicely. Helen was an easy kid, so surely nothing could go wrong. But ‘nothing’ was something I was going to get a lot more acquainted with, and with which I will now acquaint you ...

Ema: ‘Thanks for doing this!’

Suki: ‘Oh it is no problem, you go enjoy yourself!’

Ema: ‘Help yourself to the noodles in the fridge.’

Suki: ‘Amazing – I love your noodles. One day you must give me the recipe.’

Ema: ‘I promise, I will. But first, you promise you won’t invite any boys over?’

Suki: ‘Of course I won’t!’

And with those empty words, Ema was gone. So long, sucker! Ema clearly didn’t appreciate the ambiguity between ‘Of course I won’t (invite any boys over)’ and ‘Of course I won’t (promise that I won’t invite any boys over)’. Feeling pleased with myself, I waved Ema off. As she disappeared into the distance, I turned around, slammed the door behind me and bounded off to the kitchen in pure glee – noodles, cartoons, boys, here I come!

Disaster struck. The noodles were nowhere to be found. Helen was plonked in front of the television, eyes glued to the screen – she wasn’t going anywhere. But these noodles I had been waiting for were gone. Gone! The blood drained from my face, as I stared into the hollow gleaming fridge. Much like a mirror image of Helen in front of the television, I was gormless in the light of a rectangular glow. But Helen was satisfied gormless, whereas I was confused, horrified, gormless. This wasn’t the deal! Feeling massively hard-done by, I rang Ema.

Ema: ‘Is everything okay? Did I forget something?’



Suki: 'No! Yes! Maybe!'
Ema: 'Oh gosh, what is it?!'
Suki: 'There. Are. No. Noodles.'
Ema: 'Yes there are!'
Suki: 'Where? Not in the fridge there aren't!'
Ema: 'Yes there are!'
Suki: 'I'm looking in the fridge right now. There are no noodles in here.'
Ema: 'Ah well that is probably because you are looking for *existent* noodles.'
Suki: 'Come again?'
Ema: 'There are no *existent* noodles in the fridge. But there are *non-existent* noodles in the fridge!'
Suki: 'So let me get this straight ... You are telling me that there *are* noodles in the fridge, but that they don't exist? That the noodles in the fridge are of the non-existent type?'
Ema: 'Well I suppose so – make some existent ones of your own if you prefer!'
Suki: 'But you haven't given me the recipe yet.'
Ema: 'Ever seen Kung Fu Panda? The secret ingredient doesn't exist!'

Suki: 'For non-existent noodles, maybe, but what about for existent noodles?!'
Ema: 'Go and look after Helen, Suki, and then attend to your stomach. I'll see you later.'

Once again, Ema was gone. Now who was the sucker? I slumped down next to Helen, who was still satisfied gormless. Coincidentally, she was watching Kung Fu Panda.

Helen: 'Noodles look yummy!'
Suki: 'Yes they do! Did you have dinner before I arrived?'
Helen: 'I had noodles! Yummy!'
Suki: 'Did you eat them all up?'
Helen: 'Noodles all gone!'
Suki: 'Oh, I want some.'
Helen: 'Okay, here you go!'

Helen waved her little hands about and pretended to pass me a bowl of noodles from the screen. I didn't really catch on.

‘There are no *existent* noodles in the fridge. But there are *non-existent* noodles in the fridge!’

- Suki: ‘What are you doing?’
 Helen: ‘Here are some noodles! I’ll have some too! Look, eat!’
 Suki: ‘Errr ... thanks?’
 Helen: ‘Yummy noodles! Mmmmm! Can you taste it?’
 Suki: ‘There is nothing to taste!’
 Helen: ‘The noodles in the bowl! Like Panda’s, made with soup!’

Helen had a penchant for games of make-believe, and was much better at engrossing herself in the fiction of it all than I was. But I tried to play along, and followed Helen’s lead of what was authorized in this game of pretence. Apparently, whatever the author says goes, and we just needed to understand the fictional characters and their food as being abstract artefacts of the author’s creation. This worked for a little while, but eventually I cracked...

- Suki: ‘Mmmmm. Tasty! Are there leaves in this?’
 Helen: ‘No, silly, only noodles! Panda doesn’t eat leaves!’
 Suki: ‘Okay, but in real life pandas do eat leaves ...’
 Helen: ‘Panda doesn’t eat leaves! Panda eats noodles!’
 Suki: ‘Who made the noodles?’
 Helen: ‘Panda ...’
 Suki: ‘Who made Panda?’
 Helen: ‘Panda’s mummy.’
 Suki: ‘Wrong. It was DreamWorks.’
 Helen: ‘DreamWorks made Panda? So Panda is really real?’
 Suki: ‘No, I’m sorry Helen, Panda does not exist.’
 Helen: ‘But then what did DreamWorks make?’

Good point Helen. Outsmarted by a kid. Maybe Helen was on to something, that fictional objects are actually existent abstract artefacts ... But still, fictional food didn’t fill up my very non-abstract non-fictional belly.

I tried to explain that *in the movie*, noodles are tasty and Panda exists, but *outside the movie*, those noodles and that Panda are not real enough to eat and stroke. It is false to say that pandas eat noodles, unless we are saying *in the movie*, pandas eat noodles.

Helen outsmarted me on this as well, precocious little thing, saying that there are some things about Panda that are true *outside the movie*, for example, that Panda makes her feel good. That is *not* true in the story, as DreamWorks did not write Helen into the fiction (though I am sure she would have loved that). So there was no one-size-fits all way of treating our talk of fictional things.

By this point, Helen had got a bit upset that I had inadvertently stepped outside the pretence and spoke from the real-world perspective. So I changed the channel, took Helen begrudgingly to her bedroom, put her to bed and took myself back to the fridge for another look.

Milk. That was it! Finding some cocoa powder, I made myself a milkshake and called my friends that it was time for them to come round. That’s right, my milkshake brings all the boys to the yard! Felix, Ziggy and Andrei came over to my rescue in a hot shot, and with loads of supplies.

- Ziggy: ‘Yo, I can’t believe you were left with an empty fridge – what’s the point of babysitting if you don’t get free food?!’
 Suki: ‘I know. Ema tried to make out that there were noodles in the fridge, but that they were non-existent, and I could help myself to them. Then, just before you arrived, Helen tried to feed me fictional food from the television! I am so hungry guys. My stomach is not well, it is more like *a* well! It is positively empty!’
 Andrei: ‘How can anything be *positively empty*? Emptiness is a lack, an absence, a negative ... So nothing can be positively negative!’
 Felix: ‘Although of course, when you consider “nothing” as a thing, rather than no-

thing, then “nothing” is positively negative!’

My eyes rolled and my stomach grumbled.

Suki: ‘I’m telling you, my stomach is so positively empty, it is but a mere shell of its former self! A barren land that once was abundant ... but alas, now, *there is nothing*.’

Andrei: ‘Are you quite certain about that, there being nothing, Suki? You are starting to sound like Ema ...’

Suki: ‘Oh yeah, quite certain. Though I do think my empty stomach is less philosophically objectionable than Ema’s non-existent noodles, though they are both quite tragic phenomena.’

Andrei: ‘But how can there *be* nothing, Suki? You say “there is nothing”, but where? If *there* is nothing, *where* is it? Can nothing have a location?! Can nothing exist?! How can nothing *be*? To say “there is something”, sure, but “there is nothing”, surely not! If nothing is where there is not something, then nothing is where something does not exist. So you cannot say without contradicting yourself that “there is nothing”, because that is to say that there exists a non-existent thing, or that something literally is nothing. And don’t forget that we are having this conversation precisely because you were displeased with non-existent noodles, so please try to remain consistent! I shall therefore ask you again, Suki – are you quite certain about there being nothing?’

Ziggy calmed us down and wanted to get to the task at hand, which was eating, or else he would be quite certain that they would never be certain of anything at all ever again. Such is the problem with thinking too much – a professional hazard. Ziggy got us back on track:

Ziggy: ‘Thankfully, we have brought round some real, existent, binge food. Andrei, Felix, show Suki what you got!’

We sat on the carpet where Helen once was, and in the middle of us they presented a heavenly array of sandwiches, chocolate and crisps. An existent array, as Ziggy clarified. He said that there really are (at least) two types of things – the existent and the non-existent – and to get to that distinction, it would help to go through another distinction first – that of essence and existence:

Ziggy: ‘Things have essences, as in, what those things are like. These essences are a separate matter from whether those things exist or not.’

Suki: ‘Isn’t being existent or non-existent part of something’s essence, by being part of what it is like?’

Felix: ‘I think the point is that *what* something is is different from *that* it exists. We can separate essence from existence.’

Ziggy: ‘Yes, I think that there are things that we can describe the essence of even though those things don’t exist. For example, all those fictional foods that Helen was palming off onto you – those foods didn’t actually exist, but they had an essence.’

Andrei: ‘Nah I’m with the kid on this one if you ask me. Kids speak a lot of truth because their brains haven’t been poisoned yet by all this theoretical crap. How could we ascribe an essence to something that doesn’t exist? It must exist in some way in order to have an essence, otherwise what is it that has the essence?’

Felix: ‘I think the point was that there is a thing that can have an essence, namely, a non-existent thing, and so we could say that the fictional entities are non-existent things.’

Andrei: ‘I simply don’t understand how you can describe something that doesn’t exist.’

Ziggy: ‘Easy, just like Helen did, by following what the author said of it.’

Andrei: ‘And what if there is no author?’

I came up for air from the stash of chocolate to give me two cents’ worth.

‘So you cannot say without contradicting yourself that “there is nothing”, because that is to say that there exists a non-existent thing, or that something literally is nothing.’

Suki: ‘There is always an author – if I ask you to imagine the most amazing chocolate milkshake, made out of blending all of the chocolate bars we have left – perfection. So that perfect milkshake doesn’t exist, because in fact I am about to eat all the chocolate. But that non-existent milkshake still has an essence, specifically the one I just described, or authored, if you like. That allowed you to have an idea of the perfect milkshake – you could tap into its essence despite it not existing!’

Andrei: ‘I disagree. What you authored or created was an idea for us, a very existent idea. It’s not like there wasn’t anything for us to grasp the essence of. Rather, the essence belonged to the idea which did exist – it existed in our minds.’

It appeared harder to divide essence and existence than we first thought. But still, I was not prepared to accept that non-existent things were ideas.

Suki: ‘The perfect milkshake does not exist as an idea in my head. It just does *not* exist. We didn’t make it. But we can describe it. So it is a non-existent thing. Not an existent idea.’

Ziggy: ‘Yup. I’m with her.’
Suki: ‘Thank you, Ziggy. You are a good man.’

Ziggy: ‘And to add to that, if I may, that the idea of this perfect milkshake is not actually the same thing as the perfect milkshake. If that perfect milkshake were to exist, then it would be a real physical tasty thing, but ideas are not real physical tasty things. Ideas cannot be drunk, but milkshakes can. The point is, there is a difference between the idea of the perfect milkshake and what the perfect milkshake is. Ideas are, after all, by their very nature, about something. So the idea of the perfect milkshake is about the perfect milkshake. When we talk of the perfect milkshake we describe that very thing, not the idea of it.’

Andrei: ‘But if the idea of the perfect milkshake is about the perfect milkshake, but the perfect milkshake doesn’t exist, then what exactly is that idea about? You would not be referring to anything, and so all of your talk of the milkshake would be meaningless!’

Felix: ‘No, it’s not that we fail to refer to *anything*, but rather that what we are successfully referring to is a non-existent thing – a *thing* that does not exist.’

Suki: ‘Yes, Felix! That’s it. There is no need to postulate some sort of weird existent entity in the mind, like an idea, or some sort of weird abstract entity from a fiction, like a fictional artefact.’

Andrei: ‘So you think that a non-existent thing is *not* a weird entity?’

Ziggy: ‘No, I do not think they are weird entities. But whether they are weird or not, I think they are undeniable. There are more things that don’t exist than things that do!’

Andrei: ‘Like what?’

Suki: ‘Things from the past.’

Felix: ‘Like the dinosaurs.’

Andrei: ‘But they are still kinda here, in the form of fossils, right?’

Suki: ‘What about things from the future.’

- Felix: 'Like little Helen's grandchildren.'
- Andrei: 'Well they are just hypothetical at this point.'
- Suki: 'So what about those hypothetical things, the merely possible things.'
- Andrei: 'Maybe their potential to exist exists now.'
- Suki: 'What about the impossible things?'
- Felix: 'Like a square circle.'
- Andrei: 'But I can't even think of that! If it's a square then it isn't a circle, and if it's a circle then it isn't a square – there is no such thing as a square circle, not existent or non-existent!'
- Ziggy: 'So you are denying that square circles don't exist?'
- Andrei: 'That isn't quite what I was going for ... I just find it hard to think of what does not exist, because what does not exist is not there to be thought of. And some things are impossible to conceive of, like the square circle, so it is hard to see what on earth it could refer to.'
- Suki: 'Nothing on earth, that's the point – we agree that it does not exist, but what I am saying is that it is a non-existent *thing*! After all, isn't it true to say that the Panda from the film I was watching with Helen earlier does not exist? And that there are some pandas that exist like those in China, and some pandas that do not exist like those in DreamWorks?'
- Andrei: 'I'm not sure – if there is no thing to talk about, then there is nothing truthful that can be said of "it", not even to say "it" does not exist, because there is no thing to make that true.'
- Suki: 'Not even its absence? Doesn't its absence from the world of existent things make it true to say that it doesn't exist?'
- Felix: 'It appears to me that we have stumbled upon something of a paradox, or a riddle, of non-being. It seems that just by using a term for a thing meaningfully, like "Panda", commits us to referring to that thing, even when we deny its existence.'
- A tricky situation. Felix summarized our debate:
- Felix: 'Basically, the argument is over what qualifies as a "thing". Ziggy and Suki think that there are existent things and non-existent things, whereas Andrei thinks that there are only existent things. If it doesn't exist, then it is not a thing.'
- Suki: 'I don't understand how you could be so blinkered, Andrei. Think again of the perfect milkshake. We agree that its ingredients exist, and you can imagine what it would be like if we put all those ingredients together. Still, we didn't put those ingredients together, so that perfect milkshake doesn't exist. Yet it is a thing that we are talking about.'
- Andrei: 'I agree that it doesn't exist, I just disagree, as Felix pointed out, that it is a thing. You cannot divide things up into the existent and the non-existent. There will be nothing on the non-existent side. Existence is not something that you can ascribe to some things and not others.'
- Suki: 'Yes it is – existence is a non-trivial property that luckily you and me have, but unfortunately the perfect milkshake does not have.'
- Andrei: 'I disagree – existence is a trivial property that everything has! The perfect milkshake does not exist, but it is not a thing that can have some properties and not others. There is no "thing" for the properties to be properties of!'
- Suki: 'What do you think we are talking about then when we fantasize about the perfect milkshake?'
- Andrei: 'Firstly, I actually struggle to imagine the perfect milkshake, because I don't know how to make it perfect – it gets better with every additional chocolate bar being added to the

mix and with every extra sweet thrown on top, without ever reaching perfection.'

Ziggy: 'You know what would make it more perfect? Making it exist!'

Andrei: 'Not if you ask me! Existence is not something you can just add, like a cherry on top! Existence doesn't add anything to our understanding or concept of the milkshake! It is not a way of describing something, or saying what it is like. After all, if it were, saying it doesn't exist would be to take something away from it, so that the "thing" lacks something. But how can something that does not exist lack something?!

Suki: 'Errr, quite easily – the Panda in the film lacked the recipe for the noodles, and Captain Hook lacks a second hand. And do you know what Panda and Captain Hook have in common? Being non-existent!'

Suddenly, like a door to Narnia, we saw a fridge gleaming at the other end of the room! How strange! We leapt up to see what was behind that mysterious fridge door on a mission to find those noodles, and much to our horror and confusion, inside was a dinosaur, Helen's grandchildren, a square circle, and ... noodles that were not noodles. It was a mission impossible, after all! Munching away on the last empty sandwich, we concluded that, at least, it was food for thought.¹

Note

¹ Ideas from this article are from my forthcoming book, *What's in a Doughnut Hole? And Other Philosophical Food for Thought*. Please note that all characters and situations in this article are fictional and any resemblance to reality is accidental.

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Cite this article: Finn S (2023). Nothing to Speak Of. *Think* 22, 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175622000240>

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