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“If it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles”: Ascertaining nihil in *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *King Lear*

Can there be knowledge about nothing itself, or does any epistemic claim about nothing fallaciously hypostatize "nothing" into something? Following Heidegger, this paper argues that a conception of nothing is the necessary precondition of any epistemology, and as such provides the foundation on which certainty—about anything—is possible. Through close readings of two seventeenth century texts, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I explore the ways in which the possibility of certain knowledge presupposes a definite concept of nothing and how this relationship discloses itself through the experience of skepticism. In the *Meditations*, Descartes' effort to prove the existence of the external world operates by means of a covert commitment to two irreconcilable doctrines of nothing. On the one hand, his proof rests on a tacit analogy between the principle of ontological dependence (any imperfect being necessarily entails a comparatively perfect being) and the doctrine of *ex nihilo nihil fit*: from nothing, nothing comes to be; on the other hand, the fact that the principle of ontological dependence entails the existence of a supremely perfect Being requires that Descartes affirm the opposite doctrine, *creatio ex nihilo*, or else deny God's omnipotence. *King Lear* affiliates these two doctrines of nothing with corresponding models of signification and social order. Furthermore, through its drama, the play lays bare the structural relation between nothing and knowledge that Descartes' text dissimulates. The form of radical skepticism that the play calls Lear's madness issues from the irruption of nothing itself, in Cordelia's catastrophically indecorous "Nothing, my lord." Ultimately, the play suggests that the solution to the problem of skepticism requires a reorientation from uncertainty about beings to certainty about nothing.