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From our modern perspective, it is easy to deride the wranglings of medieval scholars over the number of angels that could dance of the head of a pin and whether Nature abhors a vacuum. But as John Barrow reveals in this timely and important book, new discoveries in science have shown that these scholars were right to suspect that Nothing has hidden depths.

It is a concept shot through with paradoxes: even innocent-looking phrases like "Nothing is real" flip their meanings as we ponder them, like those illusions that look like a vase one moment, and opposing faces the next. Nothing is fertile, too, as Barrow shows via a stunning trick that allows every number one can think of to be built out of nothing at all.

But his book is about far more than mind games. Arguably, the most important discovery of 20th-century physics is that there is no such thing as nothing: even the tightest vacuum is teeming with subatomic particles popping in and out of existence, according to the dictates of quantum theory. Now, many astronomers suspect that such "vacuum effects" may have triggered the Big Bang itself, filling our universe with matter. Indeed, the very latest observations suggest that vacuum effects will dictate the ultimate fate of the universe.