

Why there is something rather than nothing

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“Why is there something rather than nothing?”, the “ultimate why-question” (Wippel 2011) or the “puzzle of existence” (Goldschmidt 2013), is multiply ambiguous: on a first disambiguation – why should we believe that there is something at all, rather than nothing –, it asks about the truth of what I will “metaphysical nihilism”, the view that there is nothing. *Metaphysical nihilism* is an error theory, implying that almost all of us are radically mistaken in their beliefs, and must, to earn its place among world-views that are candidates for serious consideration, explain away its initial implausibility, by (i) salvaging as much as possible from the ordinary beliefs that contradict it, offering us a friendly reinterpretation that is compatible with its truths and (ii) explain why the reinterpretation is preferable, i.e. why we thought, and thought falsely, that metaphysical nihilism is wrong.

Contemporary versions of metaphysical nihilism take, for all I know, one of two forms. **Generalists** go about (i) by constructing (or stipulating that there be constructed) a feature-placing language, consisting of sentences that “neither contain any part which introduces a particular, nor any expression used in such a way that its use presupposes the use of expressions to introduce particulars” (Strawson 1959: 203). With respect to (ii), they offer us what we may call ‘surplus structure’ arguments: physical theories, they argue, do not oblige us not to be generalists, and go on to conclude that therefore, and for general reasons – simplicity, parsimony, minimisation of epistemic risk –, we *should* be generalists.

Another form of metaphysical nihilism maintains that there is no-thing, i.e. that there are no individuals. Impressed by logico-linguistic differences between count nouns and mass terms, such as “water” and “milk”, some philosophers have been led to accept a sui generis ontological category. While most of these accept several members of this category of uncountables, **stuff monists** will say that all there is is an undifferentiated ‘world-stuff’. Being undifferentiated and uncountable, this thing will not qualify as an individual.

Another way of taking “why is there something rather than nothing?” is as a question not about the truth, but the explanation of the claim that there is something. This question, in turn, is ambiguous between “must there be something?” and “is there something that must exist?”. *Metaphysical contingentism*, the view that there might be nothing, answers both question in the negative: there is no necessary being, first, and everything there is, second, is not just individually, but also ‘collectively’ contingent.

Feature placing. Unlike ordinary noun-predicate sentences, feature-placing sentences are truth-apt even though they do not contain terms that refer to particulars—that is, they do not have *logical subjects*, where a logical subject is an object of reference (Strawson 1959: 138). The term ‘it’ in such sentences is not used as a pronoun: this can be seen by observing the difference in meaning between ‘it is raining’ and ‘*a* is raining’ where *a* is a schematic letter. Candidates for substitution values for *a*, such as ‘the sky’ or ‘the cloud’ are of dubious grammaticality and seem straightforwardly different in meaning.

Hawthorne & Cortens (1995) suggest a method of extending feature-placing language to provide a language suitable for ontological nihilism.

The problem the generalists faces is akin to, and perhaps even the very problem as the so-called ‘many-properties’ problem Jackson (1975) raised against adverbialist theories of the content of perception. Jackson argues that the adverbialist will not be able to ‘group’ perceptual features in the right way, analysing both the perception of a red square and a green circle and the perception of a green square and a red circle as a case of perceiving roundly, squarely, greenly and redly (1975: 130).

This is connected to a problem about numbering. Hawthorne & Cortens (1995: 149) say that “it is raining once” describes a way in which it is raining – this is plainly just false. It’s with numbers that Strawson sees the limits of the feature placing language: Strawson (1959: 207) draws the line between feature-placing expressions and those that require particulars in terms of cases in which criteria of reidentification apply: as soon as we can distinguish between its catting more and its catting again – that is whether there is one cat or two – we are committed to objects.

The contingency of the world. The so-called “argument from contingency” is a version of the cosmological argument typically associated with G.W. Leibniz. Pruss (2009: 25–26) presents it as follows:

PSR: Every contingent fact has an explanation.

SUM: There is a contingent fact that includes all other contingent facts.

∴ Therefore, there is an explanation of this fact.

NEC: This explanation must involve a necessary being.

DEF: This necessary being is God.

In the contemporary discussion, most of the attention has focussed on the PSR. The plausibility of **sum** depends on our conception of totality: van Inwagen (1983: 202–204) has argued that **sum** is impossible, as the conjunctive fact would have to contain, and explain, itself.

The subtraction argument. In recent years, a particular version of metaphysical contingentism has received a lot of attention. It is an attempt to defend a positive answer to the question “could there be (or have been) no concrete objects?” by way of an argumentative strategy based on what has become known as a ‘subtraction argument’.

Lewis (1986: 73–74) says it is not possible that there is nothing at all; (Armstrong 1989: 25) says the idea is only “attractive at a relatively shallow level of reflection”. Both David Lewis (1986: 73) and David Armstrong (1989: 93) hold it is necessarily false that there might be nothing, even if “nothing” were restricted to contingent existents. Lowe (1996: 118) concurred, while van Inwagen (1996: 99) thought it is “as improbably as everything can be” that there might be nothing but necessary existents. Against this claim, Thomas Baldwin (1996) deployed the following subtraction argument, point out it is possible that there are just a finite number of contingent existents none of which necessitates the existence of any other of them, so that, by subsequent ‘subtraction’ and the **S₄** axiom, the possibility of there being nothing follows. The premisses are (Baldwin 1996: 232):

B₁: There might be a world with a finite domain of ‘concrete’ objects.

B₂: These concrete objects are, each of them, things which might not exist.

B₃: The non-existence of any one of these things does not necessitate the existence of any other such thing.

The argument then runs as follows:

1. By **B₁**, there is a possible world w_3 accessible to the actual world with three objects, x , y and z .
2. By **B₂**, there is a world w_2 accessible to w_3 in which x does not exist, but y and z do.
3. By **B₃**, nothing exists in w_2 that does not exist in w_3 .
4. By **B₂**, there is a world w_1 accessible to w_2 in which y does not exist, but z does.
5. By **B₃**, nothing exists in w_1 that does not exist in w_2 .
6. By **B₂**, there is a world w_0 accessible to w_1 in which z does not exist.
7. By **B₃**, nothing exists in w_0 that does not exist in w_1 .
8. By **S₄**, w_0 is accessible to the actual world.

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