

Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing

Ligerz, “The Nature of Existence”

Philipp Blum, November 10, 2017

Abstract

Why is there something rather than nothing? Perhaps surprisingly, many philosophers have recently answered: there isn't. Such metaphysical nihilism most often comes in one of two forms: generalists think that the world is fully general, and does not contain any particulars; stuff monists think it is amorphous, and does not contain any individuals. I criticise the latter for not being able to account for objective similarity (two things having the same property) and the former for making commonality (two properties being had by the same thing) mysterious. By a truthmaker argument, these correlated problems – the one-over-many and the many-over-one – force us to accept both properties and particulars in our ontology.

“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 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.

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 particulars.

To account for the homogeneity in the many-over-one, we need particulars: we need to be able to ‘bundle’ features to say that some features are placed ‘together’.

The truthmaking argument for properties. The “problem of universals” properties are called upon to solve is the problem of explaining unity across diversity: The problem of universals is the problem of how numerically different particulars can nevertheless be identical in nature, all be of the same ‘type’. ([Armstrong 1978: 41](#))

The basic argument for the existence of properties is that we have to assume their existence if we want to solve the problem of universals. The argument, as I – and, I think, [Armstrong¹](#) – understand it, proceeds as follows:

- (i) It is a Moorean fact that different particulars are ‘identical in nature’.²
- (ii) By the truthmaker principle, this ‘identity of nature’ has to be grounded in reality.³
- (iii) Properties are what grounds such ‘identity in nature’ ([Armstrong 1978: 41](#)).

But what does ‘identity in nature’ consist in? We have to be extremely careful here, as there are at least three interpretations of such sameness, which give rise to different arguments:

- (i-1) Two different particulars, *a* and *b*, may be both *F*.
- (i-2) Two different particulars, *a* and *b*, may share a property.
- (i-3) Two particulars, *a* and *b*, may exhibit ‘qualitative’, but not ‘numerical’ identity.

I take all these three explications of (i) as somehow preliminary: the fundamental explanandum is the ‘unity’ we observe among the things in the world – “resemblance” is just a name for this pre-theoretical phenomenon: ...resemblance is always *identity of nature*: “This identity is partial in partial resemblance, and complete in complete resemblance.” ([Armstrong 1978: 95](#))

The three explications of (i), and the three versions of the argument from the problem of universals they give us, are all somehow defective. The first argument is rightly taken by Ostrich nominalists as a demand to explain the unexplainable; the second argument is too close to the argument from logical form to be an argument for the robust kind of properties Armstrong wants it to be; only the third one deserves the honorific title “argument from the problem of universals”, even though it is question-begging: “...if the notion of non-numerical identity turns out to be unanalyzable, then presumably we ought to accept it with natural piety as an irreducible feature of the world. And to accept irreducible non-numerical identity is to accept universals.” ([Armstrong 1984: 251](#))

Consider the following two inferences:

$$(1) \quad \frac{\begin{array}{c} Fa \\ Ga \end{array}}{(F \wedge G)a(\exists x(Fx \wedge Gx) \wedge x = a)}$$

1. Of what [Oliver \(1996: 46\)](#) calls “the argument from the problem of universals”, [Armstrong \(1978: xiii\)](#) says: “Its premiss is that many different particulars can all have what appears to be the same nature ... The conclusion of the argument is simply that in general this appearance cannot be explained away, but must be accepted. There is such a thing as identity of nature.”

2. Cf. also [Armstrong \(1984: 250\)](#), [Armstrong \(1980: 102\)](#). [Loux \(1998: 21\)](#) calls it a “prephilosophical truism” that “things agree in attribute”.

3. Armstrong did not always emphasise the argument’s dependence on the truthmaker principle as much as he should have: [Armstrong \(1989: 39, fn. 1\)](#), e.g., says that the argument for properties is an inference to the best explanation of “the facts about resemblance, talk of sameness of sort and kind, the application of one predicate to an indefinite and unforeseen multitude of individuals, etc.” As an inference to the best explanation, however, the argument lacks motivation, as shown by the availability of the ostrich’s position.

$$(2) \quad \frac{\begin{array}{c} Fa \\ Fb \end{array}}{F(a \wedge b)(\exists \phi(\phi a \wedge \phi b) \wedge \phi = F)}$$

While (1) is clearly universally valid, we feel some hesitation to grant (2) for any F : it does not follow from the facts that some elephant, Susi, is small and that some mouse, Tom, is small that there is one property Susi and Tom both have. In some cases, however, the inference is legitimate – in these cases, there has to be an explanation for this and the explanation of the validity of valid identity inferences, is that the preservation of truth is underwritten by the identity and hence the existence of some entity. There must be something *in virtue of which* the two particulars a and b resemble each other.

So there is a property, or feature, which grounds the qualitative similarity between a and b . This property defines a pattern among the particulars, it is a one-over-many and it gives us a notion of qualitative sameness which is different from numerical sameness. With the notion of a particular that has some, but not all properties, and thus has inner structure, we have the notion of an individual.

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 substraction 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 ‘substraction 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 improbable as everything can be” that there might be nothing but necessary existents. Against this claim, Thomas Baldwin (1996) deployed the following substraction argument, point out is 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 ‘substraction’ 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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