

Why Not Nothing?*

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1 Introduction

Suppose that you find pickles in your potato soup. You ask indignantly, “Why are pickles in my potato soup?” You are told that Mort put them in there when he prepared your soup. He did so because good old Bob told him, as a prank, that you favor pickles in your potato soup.

You may well remain dissatisfied, but the presence of the pickles has been explained to you. It is not an exhaustive explanation. It takes much for granted. It doesn’t explain Bob’s desire to play a prank or Mort’s capacity to make soup. More fundamentally, it doesn’t explain the existence of Mort, Bob, or the pickles. A fuller explanation would explain those things. It too would take a lot for granted, though, probably including some background conditions and general principles of psychology and biology.

The explanatory structure of this example seems to be completely typical. Seemingly, any answer to any question has to take something for granted. Explanations use some things to explain others.

But then there is the following metaphysical question, where taking anything for granted appears to be disallowed. Also, it seems to be as basic as a question can get.

Q Why is there something, rather than nothing?

Q asks why there is anything at all. Any answer to Q that is based on something seems to be immediately disqualified. Whatever the basis for the answer, Q asks for an explanation of why that basis exists in the first place. Yet how could an answer be any good if it is not based on anything?

*This is chapter five of Earl Conee and Theodore Sider’s introductory metaphysics book, *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*, forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

2 What is the Question?

We should be sure that we are focusing on a metaphysical question here. We should set aside nearby scientific ones. According to established science, the whole universe emerged from an explosion, the Big Bang. If so, then one question we can ask is this:

QBB What explains the Big Bang – why did it happen?

There is no established scientific answer to QBB. But it is a scientific issue. An answer might give a typical sort of causal explanation of the Big Bang. Such an explanation would identify one or more events and conditions that made the Big Bang happen in accordance with natural law. Or an answer might use just natural laws. It might be discovered that one or more basic laws of nature entail that the Big Bang was inevitable, or that it was more or less probable.

In any case, with a little further thought we'll see that Q definitely does not ask for an explanation of the Big Bang that cites causes or laws. In fact, the main question that Q seems to be asking asks looks altogether unanswerable.

To clarify the metaphysical question, let's consider the most minimal alternative reality that we can specify. This is an absolutely empty reality – no material objects, no dimensions of space or time, just nothing. And by “nothing” here we truly mean: nothing! Our maximally minimal reality not only does not include any objects or dimensions; it does not include any natural laws or any tendencies. It is empty in every way. Let's call it “W”.

This W at least appears to have been a possible alternative to the actual situation. One question that Q can ask is this:

QM Why is there anything more to reality than W?

If QM is what Q asks, scientific replies to the question about the Big Bang - in terms of causes or laws- seem disqualified. Those replies tell us why something happened, the Big Bang, by relying on at least one other thing that explains its occurrence, a cause or a law. QM asks about the existence of those things too, since W includes none of them. QM asks why anything of any sort at all exists. So it seems that an answer to this question cannot take for granted the existence of any sort of thing, not even a natural law. All answers available from science seem to take for granted at least one such entity without explaining why it exists.

3 Do We Get the Question?

Do we really understand QM? After all, we have no familiarity with the phenomenon of there being nothing at all. In fact, calling it a “phenomenon” is an overstatement. Nothingness is the absence of all phenomena, and everything else. The mind boggles.

On second thought, though, the mind doesn’t stay boggled. Let’s start with “nothing.” A reality in which nothing exists is just a reality in which there isn’t anything – no thing of any kind. We get that idea. We cannot *imagine* it. A silent blank void is as close as we can come, and that is not nothing. It is a spatial region with no sound, light, or matter. That is something. But understanding the topic of a question does not require being able to imagine what the question is about. For instance, we can understand questions that are about amazement. We have a good idea of what amazement is. Yet we have no mental image of amazement. We can imagine, say, Amanda’s being amazed. But that is only an image of Amanda making some typical display of amazement. It is not an image of the psychological state of amazement itself. Likewise, we have some understanding of what possibility is. We can picture specific possible things, but not their possibility. Yet we do not have a problem with understanding the topics of amazement and possibility well enough to comprehend questions about those topics. So if there is a problem understanding what QM is asking, it is not that we cannot imagine what it is about.

More positively, here is reason to think that we do understand the question. We understand each word in QM. The word “why” comes closest to making trouble. This is not because we draw a blank. It is just that we lack full clarity about it. The “why” asks for explanation. Explanations differ. The question does not specify what sort of explanation is sought. In any case, we do see that it asks for an explanation. This is enough to make sense of the question. In addition to understanding the words in QM separately, we also see how they relate grammatically. We can put them together and comprehend the whole thing. We can show our understanding by re-phrasing QM with four easy words: Why is there anything? We do get the question.

To say that we understand a question is not to suggest that the question is easy to investigate, much less to answer. In the case of QM, it is not even easy to say what would qualify as an answer. In fact, answering QM seems hopeless, at least at first. How could there be an explanation that does not rely on anything?

4 Necessitarianism

Perhaps all explanations do rely on something. According to one important tradition on this topic, though, that fact does not prevent us from solving the problem posed by Q. The tradition says that we can explain why the possible reality that actually exists has something in it, unlike the maximally empty W, by showing that W is not even possible. We can understand why there is something and not nothing, by seeing that there *has to be* something. More specifically, we can be shown that one or more particular somethings have to exist. These would be **necessary beings**, that is, beings that exist in any and all possible situations. By seeing why one or more necessary beings exist, we understand why there is actually something. We understand that this turns out to have been inevitable.

Suppose that we can also see that each thing relied on to establish the existence of some necessary being is a necessary being too. If so, then we do not have to worry about the fact that we are relying on things to explain things. If we really can see that they are all inevitable, then we are left with no reason to wonder why they actually exist.

This necessitarian approach sounds promising in form, but it is dubious in substance. If it is correct, then we were making a mistake in thinking of the totally thing-free W as a possibility. Yet what would be impossible about W, exactly? Just that it lacks objects? But how could that be impossible? Temporary emptiness of some spatial region is possible. Once we grant this, there seems to be no upper limit on how much space can be empty and for how long. So why not a whole empty reality? Is W impossible because it lacks all natural laws? But what could be inevitable about laws of nature? Some things could have happened by chance rather than by law. Why couldn't reality have been entirely lawless? And if some possible reality with objects and events in it is lawless, then why would there have to be natural laws if there were no objects? So again, just what is impossible about W?

5 Godly Necessitarianism

Necessitarians have answers to these questions. There is a major division in necessitarian approaches at this point between theological necessitarians and nontheological ones. According to one main theological view, God is a necessary being. God would exist under any possible circumstances, so there could not have been nothing.

We should note an initial doubt about theological necessitarianism. It is subject to a problem of vanishing possibilities. We are talking about the traditional God here. God must be the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly loving and benevolent creator of the universe. Apparent possibilities vanish when we ask what sort of a reality such a being would allow to exist. For instance, it seems clear that there are some evils that God would not allow – perhaps the existence of suffering for no good reason, or the existence of unjustified human degradation. So, if the traditional God is a necessary being, such evil is not even possible. The appearance that the evil was even possible would be an illusion. Yet we can spell out in as much detail as we like how things go a reality that includes such evils but not God. Leaving God out of the situation does not give any appearance of making it an impossibility. So its impossibility is dubious.

And that is not all. Would God allow a reality in which there was no sentient life? Seemingly not. Seemingly, a perfectly loving and benevolent being would want to share existence with sentient creatures, and have those creatures do very well in their lives. An all-powerful being would be able to create thriving sentient beings. So no possible reality would be without them, if God exists necessarily. Thus, many more apparent possibilities would turn out to be merely apparent.

Note that the *existence* of God does not make this trouble. It can be that God actually exists. As long as God is not a necessary being, worthless and repugnant possibilities do not have to be allowed by God, in order to be possible. It can be that God is not in those alternative realities to prevent such inexcusably miserable things. It is the assumption of a *necessary* God that gives rise to the problem of vanishing possibilities. That is the very assumption of interest to us here, though, since it is that assumption that implies that there could not have been nothing.

The problem gets worse. Apparently, any flaw or defect of any kind would be avoidable, with no net cost, by one with sufficient knowledge and power. For instance, pain serves us as a signal of bodily damage. But equally effective painless signals seem quite possible, making pain seem a defective way to accomplish this signaling function. A being with boundless love, power, and benevolence would avoid all defects. So it seems that wherever such a being exists, the world would be entirely painless. And the same goes for any other imperfection – it would be banished. Reality would be flawless. If all of this is correct, then only perfection is even possible, if God is necessary. Yet that seems to leave out virtually all of the possibilities! Almost everything that we would otherwise have thought to be possible is less than perfect. All of that would turn out to be impossible. Amazing!

Thus, there seems to be a high price in credibility to pay for thinking that God is a necessary being. So why think so?

6 Ontological Arguments for a Necessary Being

Let's look into a classic sort of argument for a necessary God, an Ontological Argument.¹ Our initial version of it will have two phases. The first assumption is the claim that the concept of God is the concept of a being who is maximally perfect. If that is not your concept of God, it does not matter for present purposes. We are looking for a necessary being to answer our present question. If the necessary being happens to fit your concept of God, or otherwise qualify as God, then that is an additionally interesting and important fact. But it is actually incidental to present purposes.² We will not even use the term "God" in our formulation of the argument. The current argument aims to establish the existence of a necessary being by using the concept of the most perfect being. We can scrutinize the merits of this reasoning, whatever the connection turns out to be between the most perfect being and other understandings of God.

Let's begin with a preliminary sketch of the argument. It is about a concept. **Concepts** are our ideas; they are our ways of thinking about things. The first assumption of our first version of the argument asserts the existence of a particular concept. It says that there is a concept of something that is maximally perfect. The other assumption of the first phase of the argument is that it is impossible for anything to be maximally perfect without existing. Relying on these assumptions, the first phase concludes that something that is maximally perfect exists.

The second phase of the argument adds the third and final assumption. This is where necessary existence comes in. The claim of the final assumption is that necessary existence is implied by maximal perfection. Using this assumption together with the conclusion of the first phase, the argument draws the final conclusion: something maximally perfect exists necessarily. Amazing!

Here is the whole thing in a nutshell.

¹The Ontological arguments in this chapter aim to prove the necessary existence of a being who is traditionally identified as God. The Ontological Argument of the "God" chapter aims to prove the actual existence of God. Both versions to be discussed in this chapter derive primarily from Rene Descartes' presentations of the argument in his *Meditations* and *Replies to Caterus*, though they are not primarily intended to be historically faithful renditions of his reasoning. The first version owes most to the *Meditations*.

²The focus is reversed in the chapter "God."

First Ontological Argument

Phase 1

- Pr1. There is a concept of something that is maximally perfect
- Pr2. Anything that is maximally perfect must exist.
- C1. Something that is maximally perfect exists.

Phase 2

- C1. Something that is maximally perfect exists.
- Pr3. Anything that is maximally perfect exists necessarily.
- C2. Something maximally perfect exists necessarily.

If this argument succeeds, then our entirely empty alternative reality W turns out to be impossible. A perfect being has to exist, no matter what.

This argument has strengths. Initially, Pr1 looks safe. We do have that *concept* at least, don't we? Well, we'll see...

Meanwhile, the claim of Pr2 seems even safer. Doesn't a thing have to exist, in order to be maximally perfect? After all, doesn't a thing have to exist, just in order to be pretty good, or mediocre, or even bad, much less perfect?

Actually, this has been doubted. For instance, isn't it a fact that Santa Claus is a very good fellow, distributing all of those presents every year? Yet Santa does not exist. So existence is not required in order to be good.

On reflection, though, that reasoning looks faulty. It is not really so that Santa is good, period. And this is not because of any scandalous hidden truth establishing that Santa is bad. It is just that no Santa exists to be in any condition at all, good, bad, or otherwise. Rather, the fact in the vicinity is just that *according to the Santa folklore*, Santa is good. This fact does not imply that Santa is actually good, any more than it implies that Santa exists.

Anyway, Pr2 is defensible even if some fictional character manages to be good without existing. Pr2 says that to be *maximally* perfect, a thing must exist. Maybe unreal things like Santa can be good, maybe even perfect in some ways. As long as the uppermost level of perfection is reserved for existing things, that is all the second assumption says. And that is plausible.

Unreal things, however glorious in their own way, are rather ethereal and inconsequential in comparison to something great that actually exists.

Pr3 is also plausible. It is easy to believe that necessary existence is in some way better than contingent existence. Necessary existence is definitely more impressive. Perhaps this is because that necessary existence has a special sort of perfection not shared by contingent existence.

But let's reconsider the initial assumption, Pr1, which says that there is a concept of something that is maximally perfect. Again, this initially seems beyond doubt. We can just consult our inventory of concepts and sure enough, we have the concept of something maximally perfect. Doesn't that settle the existence of a concept of something maximally perfect?

Yes and no. The meaning of Pr1 turns on how we take the ambiguous word "of" in its wording. Here is an analogous case with the same ambiguity. Suppose I say, "There is a painting of an animal on my wall." This sentence is ambiguous – what I say might be true in two drastically different ways. First, it might be that a painting on my wall is "of" an animal, because it is a portrait of a particular animal, say, a certain moose that the artist saw. Using "of" in this way, our claim attributes a relationship between two existing things: the canvas on my wall and that moose. The claim says that the one portrays the other in paint.

But equally, it might be that I have a painting "of" an animal by having there a painting that represents a mythical animal, say, a hippogriff. It is still correctly called a painting "of" an animal, but now in a new sense. Hippogriffs do not exist. No actual animal was painted. The new meaning is that it would take a certain sort of animal for the painting to portray something real. In effect, the painting specifies how part of the world would have to be, for the painting to have been drawn from life. It would take the existence of a hippogriff for the painting to be an accurate depiction of something. When a painting requires an animal in this way - in order to be drawn from life - that is something else that we call a painting "of" an animal.

The same goes for concepts. You do not have a concept "of" something as being maximally perfect, understanding "of" in the first way, unless you are related to some existing thing by conceiving it to be maximally perfect. The two of you have to exist and you have to be conceptually related to it. In contrast, you have a concept "of" something as maximally perfect, understanding "of" in the second way, if you have a concept that applies to something only if that something is maximally perfect. The concept specifies a standard. It calls for the utmost perfection. Unless that level of perfection is there, the concept does not apply. But the concept can exist and specify

maximal perfection in order to apply, without actually applying. We still say that it is the concept “of” something maximally perfect. We say this to signify that the concept requires maximal perfection for it to apply, just as something can be a painting “of” a hippogriff because the painting requires an actual hippogriff to be an accurate depiction.

Equipped with this distinction, we can interpret Pr1. Pr1 says that there is a concept “of” something that is maximally perfect. Is that true? Well, if we take the “of” in the second way, then there is such a concept. We do have the idea of being maximally perfect. At least, we have this idea abstractly, however unsure we may be about details of what makes for the highest level of perfection. We have the idea of something having whatever it takes to be most perfect. So we must agree that this concept exists. Interpreted in this way, Pr1 is true.

But now comes trouble. When we combine this interpretation of Pr1 with Pr2, the conclusion of the first phase does not follow. Pr2 says: anything that *is* maximally perfect must exist. So, in order to imply the first phase conclusion, namely, that a maximally perfect being exists, Pr2 has to work in combination with a claim to the effect that something *is* maximally perfect. Yet Pr1 now does not say that anything is maximally perfect. Pr1 says only that a concept exists that has maximal perfection as a requirement for its application. Thus, when we understand the “of” in Pr1 in this way, Phase 1 of the argument goes wrong.

Understanding “of” in Pr1 the other way makes one large improvement. The conclusion of the first phase now follows. Pr1 now says all of this: there is a concept and there is a something, these two are related in such a way that the first is a concept of the second, and the second is maximally perfect. So now Pr1 implies that something *is* maximally perfect. Thus, since Pr2 says that whatever is maximally perfect must exist, it follows that something maximally perfect does exist, just as the conclusion says.

Taking Pr1 in this way, with the “of” relating a concept to an existing thing, why believe it? Only this much is clear: there is a concept that applies to something that is maximally perfect, *if it applies at all*. If we have Pr1 say *only* that much, though, then we are back to the other interpretation and its problem. The argument needs Pr1 to claim something beyond that. It needs Pr1 to claim that there is something to which the maximal perfection concept *does* apply. So *we* need a good answer to the question: why believe that? If we already knew that a most perfect thing existed, then we could use that knowledge to justify this claim about the concept applying. But we don’t already know that. It is what we’re trying to see proven. Without knowing that, we lack justification for believing the claim that the concept applies.

So Pr1 stands in need of justification. An argument with an unjustified assumption does not prove anything.

Thus, either way we read the “of” in the first assumption, this version of the ontological argument for a necessary being appears to fail in its first step.

We seek something that exists necessarily. In the version of the Ontological Argument that we just considered, the inference to necessary existence occurs in the second phase. We have seen that the reasoning gets into trouble before that. So we didn’t even get to anything about necessary existence. We should briefly look at a version that involves necessary existence from the beginning.³

The new version begins by assuming that the “essential nature” of the maximally perfect being includes existing necessarily. Something’s **essential nature** is the combination of features that the thing has to have in order to exist. Therefore, whatever features we discover in a thing’s essential nature must characterize it, no matter what its circumstances are – including its actual circumstances. Again, the assumption says that necessary existence is one of the features in the essential nature of the maximally perfect being.

The other assumption in the new version spells out an inescapable connection between a feature being in a thing’s essential nature and the thing’s having that feature. The assumption is that if necessary existence is included in something’s nature, then the thing exists necessarily. These two premises yield the conclusion that the maximally perfect being exists necessarily.

Second Ontological Argument

- Pr1. The essential nature of the maximally perfect being includes existing necessarily.
- Pr2. If necessary existence is included in the essential nature that some being has, then the being exists necessarily.
- C. The maximally perfect being exists necessarily.

One good thing about this version is that the second assumption, Pr2, is not seriously disputable. If a being has necessary existence in its nature, then it has necessary existence – that’s for sure.

Support for the new Pr1 derives from some thinking about perfection that is familiar to us. The idea is that when we reflect on what goes into

³This second version is suggested by some of what Descartes says in his *Replies to Caterus*.

the loftiest heights of perfection, one feature that we find included is that of having the most impressive sort of existence, namely, necessary existence. That reflection seems to be the best defense of Pr1.

Trouble for our second Ontological Argument is familiar too. The current Pr1 includes the phrase “the essential nature *of* the maximally perfect being.” There is that “of” again. On one reading, this phrase has the premise say, among other things, that the maximally perfect being exists and has a nature. If the first assumption says that, then it ruins the argument. The argument is supposed to prove that a maximally perfect being exists. An argument cannot prove anything that it assumes to be true.

On the other hand, Pr1 may be just claiming something about a requirement for a concept to apply. Pr1 can be interpreted as saying that there is a concept that applies only a most perfect being, if at all, and in order for it to apply, the being must have an essential nature that includes necessary existence. All of that is plausible. It does not assume that a most perfect being exists. So let’s read Pr2 that way.

Familiar trouble arises. Now the needed logical link to the conclusion has been lost. The second premise, Pr2, makes a claim about “the essential nature that some being has.” So in order for Pr1 to link with the claim made by Pr2, Pr1 has to be about a being that *has* some nature. Yet as we now read Pr1, it does not say that anything has any nature. It just specifies a requirement for a concept to apply. So the two premises do not work together to imply the conclusion.

Thus, either way we read Pr1, the reasoning fails to prove the existence of a necessary being. Let’s try something else.

7 Ungodly Necessitarianism

A necessitarian answer to the question of why anything exists does not require anything as exalted and wonderful as a maximally perfect thing. Any necessary being of any sort, however otherwise unexciting, would fill the bill. The entirely empty reality W would turn out to be impossible. There are numerous humbler candidates for the status of necessary being.

Let’s use the label “ W^* ” for a definitely *possible* reality that is as empty as it is possible to be. *If* it is possible for there to be nothing at all, then W^* is identical to W . But if more is needed for W^* to have been a genuine possibility, then W^* includes the least more that makes it possible. The following is a new necessitarian reason to think that W^* must contain something, and so W is not possible.

How would things be in W^* ? “Things” may be the wrong word, because there is as close as possible to nothing there. But still, there is a factual situation in W^* . It is a fact about W^* that it is as empty as can be, for instance. We should rephrase our question. What would be true in W^* ? Well, for instance, W^* would lack all moose, since no moose is a necessary being. It seems to follow that it would be true in W^* that there are no moose.

Aren’t truths something, though? For instance, it is an actual truth *that there are moose*. In saying this, it seems that we are referring to an entity that *is* that particular truth. The standard philosopher’s term for this sort of thing is **proposition**. If we state that there are moose, a proposition is what we state; if we believe that there are moose, the same proposition is what we believe. Any truth is a proposition. And since the proposition that there are moose is a truth, it exists. In general, in order to be in any condition at all, an entity has to exist. In some other possible realities, in W^* for instance, that proposition is another way. It is false in W^* , because there are no moose there. Since the proposition is in the condition of being false there, the proposition exists there. Any proposition is either true or false under any possible conditions. So if we take this line about propositions, we can conclude that any proposition is a necessary being.

Thus, the minimal possible reality W^* is *not* the absolutely empty W , because W^* has propositions in it. The general necessitarian answer to the question of why reality is not absolutely empty is that some things have to exist. The present version of necessitarianism says specifically that there have to exist the truths of each possible reality, and the falsehoods too.

Was it really legitimate to infer the existence in W^* of the proposition that there are no moose? There would have been no moose, were W^* to have been the real world. That is actually true, and it is about W^* . So it might follow that this proposition *actually* exists. But why does the proposition that there are no moose, or any other proposition, have to exist *in W^* too*? Why? There would be no moose in W^* , but how exactly does that imply that there would exist in W^* an entity that is content of the claim that there are no moose?

We said that there is a factual situation in W^* . Maybe that is only loosely accurate. Maybe the strict truth is this. Here in the actual world, where we are reasoning about W^* , there do exist facts that are about how things would be in W^* . But, were W^* to have been the actual world, there would have been no factual situation. There would have been nothing, not even the truth that there was nothing. Why not think that W^* is the absolutely empty W after all?

8 Minimal Contingency

Whether or not there are any necessary beings, an important version of Q remains to be considered:

QC Why is there anything that does not have to exist?

Our minimally occupied possible reality, W^* , includes necessary beings if there are any. But W^* includes nothing **contingent**. In other words, W^* includes nothing that exists without having to exist. Yet the actual situation is clearly populated by things that do not have to exist: moose, moons, muons, moors, and more. QC does not ask why *all* of the particular real things exist. (That is a good question, but a different one.) QC asks why any *unnecessary* thing exists. QC asks why there is any contingency, anything beyond the absolute minimum.

9 Anthropic Explanation

An anthropic explanation might seem helpful here. Anthropic explanations seek to account for some phenomenon by pointing out how the phenomenon is required to place us in a position to investigate it. In the present instance, the idea would be something like this. Any possible reality must contain a multitude of contingent things, in order for us to exist in that reality and ask QC. At the very least, it must contain us. We are not necessary beings. So it is no wonder that the actual world has contingent things in it and is therefore not the minimally occupied W^* .

It is doubtful that this anthropic account answers QC satisfactorily. It is a good answer to a different question. Suppose that we were asking this:

QWC Why does the world in which we exist include contingent things?

QWC takes it for granted that we are in the world, and asks why contingent things are present with us. If that is something we wonder about, then it seems to be directly responsive to point out that we are contingent ourselves. That point seems capable of removing any puzzlement about why a reality with us in it has contingencies.

Unlike QWC, QC does not ask about what accompanies us in the actual world. It is true that if there were no contingent things, then we would not exist to ask QC. But QC asks about our existence just as much as it asks about the existence of any other contingent thing. When we are asking QC,

we are asking why any contingent thing at all actually exists. A reply that just identifies something that is required for us to exist is unresponsive to this question.

10 Godly Explanation

God might seem helpful in answering QC. If God is a necessary being, then God is in our minimal possible reality, W^* . We can assume that God has the power to create contingent things. It seems that God's reason for creating contingent things would explain why they exist too.

But we have also seen that a necessary God gives rise to the problem of vanishing possibilities. Here, the problem plays itself out as a difficulty about what contingencies God could create. First, perhaps under any possible circumstances God would have exactly the same reasons for creating, and God would use those reasons in the very same way to decide what to create. If so, then it seems that God would always create exactly the same reality. We are assuming that God is a necessary being. Given this, just one creation would be the only possible created reality. It would not even be contingent, since it would exist along with God in the one combination of circumstances that is even possible.

This is a problem, because it sure seems that there are many different contingent possibilities. For instance, there are actually various hummingbirds in various places. Had their habitats happened to develop differently, hummingbirds would have been more or less differently distributed. That surely seems to be a possibility. There are countless similar ones. It is difficult to believe that this appearance of multiple possibilities is entirely misleading.

Second, suppose again that there is a necessary God. But now suppose that in different possible realities God has different reasons for creating. If so, then those differences allow for the different contingencies. There would be the different possible created outcomes, none of them necessary.

But then the initial differences in God's reasons would turn out to be the origin of the contingencies. All differences would stem from these variations in God's reasons. Assuming all of this, QC would turn out to be asking: Why do any of these variations in God's reasons exist? To answer QC, we would need to explain why God has any particular batch of these reasons.

A third alternative does somewhat better. Perhaps God's reasons for creating leave ties among possible creations. That is, there might be alternative contingent realities that are exactly equally best at fulfilling all of

God's purposes. The different possibilities arise from God's ability to choose freely from among these alternatives. In each different alternative reality, God makes a different free choice about which of these creations to bring about.

The main trouble with this new answer is that it can account for only a narrow range of possibilities. Recall that it is part of this explanation that God is a necessary being. So there is no possible reality without God. The possible creations by God as we are now understanding them drastically restrict the possibilities. In all possible realities God's reasons for creating are fulfilled. Yet many other things appear to have been possible. For example, all of the following seem possible: thoroughly boring mindless realities that would have been of no value by any standard, unfortunate realities where the bad outweighs the good, and fairly nice realities where most lives are worth living while none is terrific. It is not credible that these alternatives would flawlessly fulfill the reasons that a perfect God would have for creating. Thus, the free choices of a necessary God could explain only contingencies that would fulfill perfect purposes perfectly.

Since we recognize more possibilities than that, we have to keep looking for their explanation. If God is not necessary, then at best God is part of the present problem and not its solution. Wherever God does exist, God is one of the contingencies for which we seek an explanation. And wherever God does not exist, God is not there to make any choices that might explain contingent things.

11 Tendentious Explanation

If not God, then what about goodness? Let's consider the idea that good things that can exist have an innate tendency to exist. The more perfect possible things have a greater tendency to exist than the less perfect. The better things are overall in a possible reality, the stronger is the tendency of that possibility to be an actuality.⁴

Various things are credibly regarded as good, including benevolent deeds, pleasant experiences, beautiful art, and enriching relationships. When we survey the candidates for goodness, it becomes clear that all reasonable candidates involve the existence of contingent things like people and experiences. In contrast, it is clear that our maximally empty possible reality W^* is thoroughly neutral in value. W^* is too blank to be any good. In

⁴Leibniz, one of the leading philosophers of the 17th century, proposed something along these lines.

this view, then, W^* is just barely possible. It does not have the propensity to exist that better possibilities possess. Thus, the new explanation of why there is something beyond the contents of W^* is that the actual existence of contingent good things manifests the intrinsic tendency of possible good things to exist.

The idea that the good tends to exist is comforting. It has three problematic features, though. The least fundamental problem is that the idea seems unjustifiably optimistic. Why is it *good* things that have this tendency, rather than bad or neutral things? Of course any decent person finds the good more attractive than the other two, and so decent people are drawn to produce and preserve the good. But this cannot explain why there are any contingent things at all. The claim is that there is a tendency to exist that each possible good thing has on its own, without the assistance of appreciative people who already exist. The alleged tendency to exist of the good possibilities in particular needs some defense.

That problem is not fundamental, because an equally satisfactory explanation of contingent things lacks this bias toward the good. It could be claimed instead that all contingent things, good, bad, or indifferent, have a propensity to exist. This would provide the core of the same sort of explanation. Again, W^* is just barely possible, while the actual world displays countless manifestations of the tendency toward existence of contingent things.

A second and more basic problem with this idea is the obscurity of the relevant tendency. Our understanding of tendencies seems to require that they be possessed by existing things and explained by existing things. For instance, fragile things have a tendency to break. The breaking does not already exist and may never exist. Some fragile things never break. But all things that *have* this tendency do exist, and the tendency is accounted for by the structure and environment that those things actually have. A possessor of tendencies might be remarkably hollow. Current physics asserts a tendency for particles to form in empty space. But if so, this is a tendency of something actual, space, and it is explained by something actual, physical law. We are totally unfamiliar with a tendency that is had by something merely possible that does not exist.

This obscurity is part of a wider problem. Having a tendency to exist is having a certain feature. Yet the explanation attributes this feature to things that merely *might have existed*. It is difficult to make sense of mere possibilities having any features at all. We can understand how various specifications *would* specify things having certain features *if* those specifications were realized. We have a much harder time with the idea that some alleged

entity, although it is no real thing, nonetheless manages to have a feature. *What* has the property? An unreal thing? Isn't the phrase "an unreal thing" like the phrase "a fake duck"? Just as fake ducks are not ducks at all, unreal things are not things at all. There are no such things! And if there are no such things, then there are no such things to have any tendencies.

Even if we could make sense of the idea that some possible contingencies have a tendency to exist, there would remain a different sort of fundamental problem for the view. What reason do we have to think that any such tendency claim is true? Compare this to the claim that contingencies tend to exist with the opposite claim. It could be claimed that it is *difficult* to get into existence. It could be claimed that all contingent things are prone *not* to exist, while the "easy emptiness" of W^* had a strong tendency to be realized. This view would conclude that the actual world contains contingencies by a fluke. The existence of contingencies would run contrary to the tendency among possibilities.

This opposite hypothesis seems no less credible than the other one. The problematic fact for the explanation is that we have no reason to believe in any such tendency.

12 Statistical Explanation

Here is a final idea about why there is anything real that does not have to exist. As we have repeatedly noted, it is plausible that diverse contingencies are possible. Some alternative realities contain life and some do not; some are governed by laws of nature and some are not; some contain good things and some do not; some contain only sorts of things that we have thought of and some do not. It is plausible that there are infinitely many of these possibilities.

Our minimal possibility W^* is of course a possibility. But there is convincing reason to think that W^* is importantly unique. It seems that reality could have lacked all contingent things. So W^* includes only what must be, if there are any such things. Furthermore, what must be does not vary. There is no multiplicity of alternate realities, each of which includes only necessary things, but without containing all necessary things. If a thing is truly necessary, it is included in every last possible reality. Thus, W^* must have in it all necessary beings (if any), and only necessary beings. Also, no change is necessary. So any necessary beings in W^* do not change. They are just there.

If all of this is correct about W^* , then there must be just one minimal

alternative reality. There is no way for two possible realities to contain the unchanging necessary beings, and nothing else. There would be no difference between “them” at all, and so there would be just one possibility, not two. W^* is the unique minimal possible reality.

Thus, it seems clear that there are infinitely many possible realities with various contingencies, and only one possible reality without any contingencies. Each alternative reality is entirely possible. Each might have been the actual world. But now we are dividing the range of possibilities into those with contingent thing and those with none. This yields infinitely many possibilities on one side and a single possibility on the other. From this perspective we can see that some contingency was *almost* bound to exist. The presence of some contingency was the closest thing to inevitable. If the one alternative reality without any contingency had been the actual world, that happenstance would have been a fluke of the most gigantic proportions.

These observations do not quite completely explain why anything contingent exists. W^* remains a possibility. We have not seen a conclusive reason why the minimal possibility was not realized. What we may have seen is why it was *virtually* necessary that something more existed.

13 Conclusion

We have seen various candidate answers to our two main questions:

QM Why is there anything more to reality than the empty W ?

QC Why is there anything that does not have to exist?

None of the answers is completely satisfactory. The statistical sort of answer to QC answers QM as well as it answers QC. But it does not quite tell us why the maximally minimal possibility W^* did not turn out to be actual. Maybe this is as good an answer as we could possibly get, though. We think that countless alternative realities could have been actualities, one of them being W^* . If so, then there cannot be an airtight reason why any one of them did not turn out to be the actual reality. They all had a chance.

Further Readings

Three essays that are worthwhile as further readings are “On Explaining Existence” by Nicholas Resher, “Why Is Reality As It Is?” by Derek Parfit, and “Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?” by Robert Nozick. (The question addressed in Derek Parfit’s paper is the question of why everything is as it is, which is different from our question of why anything exists, although it includes our question.) These essays are conveniently gathered together as the first section, “Existence,” of the following collection.

Steven D. Hales, *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings*, Wadsworth, 1999.