

## CHAPTER I

# *Personal Identity*

Theodore Sider

### The Concept of Personal Identity

On trial for murder, you decide to represent yourself. You are not the murderer, you say; the murderer was a *different person* from you. The judge asks for your evidence. Do you have photographs of a mustachioed intruder? Don't your fingerprints match those on the murder weapon? Can you show that the murderer is left-handed? No, you say. Your defense is very different. Here are your closing arguments:

I concede that the murderer is a righty, like me, has the same fingerprints as I do, is clean-shaven like me. He even looks exactly like me in the surveillance camera photographs introduced by the defense. No, I have no twin. In fact, I admit that I remember committing the murder! But the murderer is not the same person as me, for I have changed. That person's favorite rock band was Led Zeppelin; I now prefer Todd Rundgren. That person had an appendix, but I do not; mine was removed last week. That person was 25 years old; I am 30. I am not the same person as that murderer of five years ago. Therefore you cannot punish me, for no one is guilty of a crime committed by *someone else*.

Obviously, no court of law would buy this argument. And yet, what is wrong with it? When someone changes, whether

physically or psychologically, isn't it true that he's 'not the same person'?

Yes, but the phrase 'the same person' is ambiguous. There are two ways we can talk about one person's being the same as another. When a person has a religious conversion or shaves his head, he is *dissimilar* to how he was before. He does not remain **qualitatively** the same person, let us say. So in one sense he is not 'the same person'. But in another sense he *is* the same person: no other person has taken his place. This second kind of sameness is called **numerical** sameness, since it is the sort of sameness expressed by the equals sign in mathematical statements like ' $2+2=4$ ': the expressions ' $2+2$ ' and ' $4$ ' stand for one and the same number. You are numerically the same person you were when you were a baby, although you are qualitatively very different. The closing arguments in the trial confuse the two kinds of sameness. You have indeed changed since the commission of the crime: you are qualitatively not the same. But you are numerically the same person as the murderer; no *other* person murdered the victim. It is true that 'no one can be punished for crimes committed by someone else'. But 'someone else' here means someone numerically distinct from you.

The concept of numerical sameness is important in human affairs. It affects whom we can punish, for it is unjust to punish anyone numerically distinct from the wrongdoer. It also plays a crucial role in emotions such as anticipation, regret, and remorse. You can't feel the same sort of regret or remorse for the mistakes of others that you can feel for your own mistakes. You can't anticipate the pleasures to be experienced by someone else, no matter how qualitatively similar to you that other person may be. The question of what makes persons numerically the same over time is known to philosophers as the question of **personal identity**.

The question of personal identity may be dramatized by an example. Imagine that you are very curious about what the

future will be like. One day you catch God in a particularly good mood; she promises to bring you back to life five hundred years after your death, so that you can experience the future. At first you are understandably excited, but then you begin to wonder. How will God insure that it is *you* in the future? Five hundred years from now you will have died and your body will have rotted away. The matter now making you up will, by then, be scattered across the surface of the earth. God could easily create a new person out of new matter who resembles you, but that's no comfort. You want *yourself* to exist in the future; someone merely like you just won't cut it.

This example makes the problem of personal identity particularly vivid, but notice that the same issues are raised by ordinary change over time. Looking back at baby pictures, you say 'that was me'. But why? What makes that baby the same person as you, despite all the changes you have undergone in the intervening years?

(Philosophers also reflect on the identity over time of objects other than persons; they reflect on what makes an electron, tree, bicycle, or nation the same at one time as another. These objects raise many of the same questions that persons do, and some new ones as well. But persons are particularly fascinating. For one thing, only personal identity connects with emotions such as regret and anticipation. For another, *we* are persons. It is only natural that we take particular interest in ourselves.)

So how could God make it be *you* in the future? As noted, it is not enough to reconstitute, out of new matter, a person physically similar to you. That would be mere qualitative similarity. Would it help to use the same matter? God could gather all the protons, neutrons, and electrons that now constitute your body but will then be spread over the earth's surface, and form them into a person. For good measure, she could even make this new person look like you. But it wouldn't *be* you. It would be a new

person made out of your old matter. If you don't agree, then consider this. Never mind the future; for all you know, the matter that now makes up your body once made up the body of another person thousands of years ago. It is incredibly unlikely, but nevertheless possible, that all the matter from some ancient Greek statesman has recycled through the biosphere and found its way into you. Clearly, that would not make you numerically identical to that statesman. You should not be punished for his crimes; you could not regret his misdeeds. Sameness of matter is not sufficient for personal identity.

Nor is it necessary. At least, *exact* sameness of matter isn't necessary for personal identity. People survive gradual changes in their matter all the time. They ingest and excrete, cut their hair and shed bits of skin, and sometimes have new skin or other matter grafted or implanted onto their bodies. In fact, normal processes of ingestion and excretion recycle nearly all of your matter every few years. Yet you're still you. Personal identity isn't especially tied to sameness of matter. So what is it tied to?

## The Soul

Some philosophers and religious thinkers answer: the soul. A person's soul is her psychological essence, a nonphysical entity in which thoughts and feelings take place. The soul continues unscathed through all manner of physical change to the body, and can even survive the body's total destruction. Your soul is what makes you *you*. The baby in the pictures is *you* because the very same soul that now inhabits your body then inhabited that baby's body. So God can bring you back to life in the future by making a new body and inserting your soul into it.

Souls might seem to provide quick answers to many philosophical perplexities about identity over time, but there is no

good reason to believe that they exist. Philosophers used to argue that souls must be posited in order to explain the existence of thoughts and feelings, since thoughts and feelings don't seem to be part of the physical body. But this argument is undermined by contemporary science. Human beings have long known that one part of the body—the brain—is especially connected to mentality. Even before contemporary neuroscience, head injuries were known to cause psychological damage. We now know how particular bits of the brain are connected with particular psychological effects. Although we are far from being able to completely correlate psychological states with brain states, we have made sufficient progress that the existence of such a correlation is a reasonable hypothesis. It is sensible to conclude that mentality itself resides in the brain, and that the soul does not exist. It's not that brain science *disproves* the soul; souls *could* exist even though brains and psychological states are perfectly correlated. But if the physical brain explains mentality on its own, there is no need to postulate souls in addition.

Also, soul theorists have a hard time explaining how souls manage to think. *Brain* theorists have the beginnings of an explanation: the brain contains billions of neurons, whose incredibly complex interactions produce thought. No one knows exactly how this works, but neuroscientists have at least made a good start. The soul theorist has nothing comparable to say, for most soul theorists think that the soul has no smaller parts. Souls are not made up of billions of little bitty soul-particles. (If they were, they would no longer provide quick answers to philosophical perplexities about identity over time. Soul theorists would face the same difficult philosophical questions the rest of us face. For instance: what makes a soul the same over time, despite changes to its soul-particles?) But if souls have no little bitty soul-particles, they have nothing like neurons to help them do their stuff. How, then, do they do it?

## Spatiotemporal Continuity and the Case of the Prince and the Cobbler

Setting aside souls, let's turn to scientific theories, which base personal identity on natural phenomena. One such theory uses the concept of **spatiotemporal continuity**. Consider the identity over time of an inanimate object such as a baseball. A pitcher holds a baseball and starts his windup; moments later, a baseball is in the catcher's mitt. Are the baseballs the same? How will we decide? It is easiest if we have kept our eyes on the ball. A **continuous series**—a series of locations in space and time containing a baseball, the first in the pitcher's hand, later locations in the intervening places and times, and the final one in the catcher's mitt—convinces us that the catcher's baseball is the same as the pitcher's. If we observe no such continuous series, we may suspect that the baseballs are different. Now, we don't usually need this method to identify a person over time, since most people look very different from one another, but it could come in handy when dealing with identical twins. Want to know whether it is Billy Bob or Bobby Bill in the jail cell? First compile information from surveillance tape or informants. Then, using this information, trace a continuous series from the person in the jail backward in time, and see which twin it leads to.

Everyone agrees that spatiotemporal continuity is a good practical guide to personal identity. But as philosophers we want more. We want to discover the *essence* of personal identity; we want to know *what it is* to have personal identity, not merely how to tell when personal identity is present. If you want to know whether a man is a bachelor, checking to see whether his apartment is messy is a decent practical guide; if you want to tell whether a metal is gold, visual inspection and weighing on a scale will yield the right answer nine times out of ten. But having a messy apartment is not the *essence* of being a bachelor, for *some* bachelors are neat. Weighing a certain amount and appearing

a certain way are not the essence of being gold, for it is possible for a metal to appear to be gold (in all superficial respects) but nevertheless not really *be* gold. (Think of fool's gold.) The true essence of being a bachelor is being an unmarried male; the true essence of being gold is having atomic number 79. For in no possible circumstance whatsoever is something a bachelor without being an unmarried man, and in no possible circumstance is something gold without having atomic number 79. All we require of practical guides for detecting bachelors or gold is that they work most of the time, but philosophical accounts of essence must work in all possible circumstances. The **spatiotemporal continuity theory** says that spatiotemporal continuity is indeed the essence of personal identity, not just that it is a good practical guide. Personal identity just *is* spatiotemporal continuity.

The theory must be refined a bit if it is really to work in every possible circumstance. Suppose you are captured, put into a pot, and melted into soup. Although we can trace a continuous series from you to the soup, the soup is not you. After being melted, you no longer exist; the matter that once composed you now composes something else. So we had better refine the spatiotemporal continuity theory to read as follows: persons are numerically identical if and only if they are spatiotemporally continuous via a series of *persons*. You are connected to the soup by a continuous series all right, but the later members of the series are portions of soup, not people.

Further refinements are possible (including saying that any change of matter in a continuous series must occur gradually, or saying that earlier members of such a series *cause* later members). But let's instead press on to a very interesting example introduced by the seventeenth-century British philosopher John Locke. A certain prince wonders what it would be like to live as a lowly cobbler. A cobbler reciprocally dreams of life as a prince. One day, they get their chance: *the entire psychologies of the prince and the cobbler are swapped*. The body of the cobbler comes to

have all the memories, knowledge, and character traits of the prince, whose psychology has in turn departed for the cobbler's body. Locke himself spoke of souls: the souls of the prince and the cobbler are swapped. But let's change his story: suppose the swap occurs because the brains of the prince and the cobbler are altered, without any transfer of soul or matter, by an evil scientist. Although this is far-fetched, it is far from inconceivable. Science tells us that mental states depend on the arrangement of the brain's neurons. That arrangement could in principle be altered to become exactly like the arrangement of another brain.

After the swap, the person in the cobbler's body will remember having been a prince, and will remember the desire to try out life as a cobbler. He will say to himself: 'Finally, I have my chance!' He regards himself as being the prince, not the cobbler. And the person in the prince's body regards himself as being the cobbler, not the prince. Are they right?

The spatiotemporal continuity theory says that they are *not* right. Spatiotemporally continuous paths stick with *bodies*; they lead from the original prince to the person in the prince's body, and from the original cobbler to the person in the cobbler's body. So if the spatiotemporal continuity theory is correct, then the person in the cobbler's body is really the cobbler, not the prince, and the person in the prince's body is really the prince, not the cobbler.

Locke takes a different view; he agrees with the prince and the cobbler. If he is right, then his thought experiment refutes the spatiotemporal continuity theory. Here is a powerful argument on Locke's side. Suppose the prince had previously committed a horrible crime, knew that the mind-swap would occur, and hoped to use it to escape prosecution. After the swap, the crime is discovered, and the guards come to take the guilty one away. They know nothing of the swap, and so they haul off to jail the person in the prince's body, ignoring his protestations of innocence. The person in the cobbler's body (who considers



himself the prince) remembers committing the crime and gloats over his narrow escape. This is a miscarriage of justice! The gloating person in the cobbler's body ought to be punished. If so, then the person in the cobbler's body *is* the prince, not the cobbler, for a person ought to be punished only for what he himself did.

### Psychological Continuity and the Problem of Duplication

Locke took the example of the prince and the cobbler to show that personal identity follows a different kind of continuity, **psychological continuity**. According to the new theory that Locke proposed, the **psychological continuity theory**, a past person is numerically identical to the future person, if any, who has that past person's memories, character traits, and so on—whether or not the future and past persons are spatiotemporally continuous with each other. Locke's theory says that the gloating person in the cobbler's body is indeed the prince and is therefore guilty of the prince's crimes, since he is psychologically continuous with the prince. As we saw, this seems to be the correct verdict. But Locke faces the following fascinating challenge, presented by the twentieth-century British philosopher Bernard Williams.

Our evil scientist is at it again, and causes Charles, a person today, to have the psychology of Guy Fawkes, a man hung in 1606 for trying to blow up the English Parliament. Of course, it might be difficult to tell whether Charles is faking, but if he really does have Fawkes's psychology, then, Locke says, Charles *is* Guy Fawkes. So far, so good.

But now our scientist perversely causes this transformation *also* to happen to another person, Robert. Coming to have Fawkes's psychology is just an alteration to the brain; if it can happen to Charles, then it can happen to Robert as well. Locke's

theory is now in trouble. Both Charles and Robert are psychologically continuous with Fawkes. If personal identity is psychological continuity, then both Charles and Robert would be identical to Fawkes. But that makes no sense, since it would imply that Charles and Robert are identical to each other! For if we know that

$$x = 4 \quad \text{and} \quad y = 4$$

then we can conclude that

$$x = y.$$

In just the same way, if we know that

$$\text{Charles} = \text{Fawkes} \quad \text{and} \quad \text{Robert} = \text{Fawkes}$$

then we can conclude that

$$\text{Charles} = \text{Robert}.$$

But it is absurd to claim that Charles = Robert. Though they are now qualitatively similar (each has Fawkes's memories and character traits), they are numerically two different people. This is the **duplication problem** for Locke's theory: what happens when psychological continuity is duplicated? (Or triplicated, or quadruplicated . . .)

Williams chose spatiotemporal over psychological continuity because of the duplication problem. Before we follow him, let's think a little harder about spatiotemporal continuity. Just as a tree can survive the loss of a branch, a person can survive the loss of certain parts, even very large parts. You are still the same person if your legs or arms are amputated. Yet losing a part causes a certain amount of spatiotemporal discontinuity, since the region of space occupied by the person abruptly changes shape. Thus, 'spatiotemporal continuity' should be understood as meaning *sufficient* spatiotemporal continuity, in order to allow for change in parts while remaining the same thing or person.

How much continuity is 'sufficient' spatiotemporal continuity? Imagine that you have incurable cancer in the right half of your body but are healthy in the left. This cancer extends to your brain: the right hemisphere is cancerous while the left hemisphere is healthy. Fortunately, futuristic scientists can separate your body in two. They can even divide the brain's hemispheres and discard the cancerous half. You are given a prosthetic right arm and right leg, an artificial right half of your heart, and so on. You need no prosthetic right brain hemisphere, though, because the remaining healthy left hemisphere eventually functions exactly as your whole brain used to function. (Though fictional, this is not wholly far-fetched: the hemispheres of the human brain really can function independently when disconnected, and duplicate some—though not all—functions of each other.) Surely the person after the operation is the same as the person before: this operation is a way to save someone's life! But the operation results in a fairly severe spatiotemporal discontinuity, since the continuity between the person before and the person after is only the size of half the body. Moral: even the continuity of only half the body had better count as sufficient for personal identity.

But now the spatiotemporal continuity theory faces its own duplication problem. Let us alter the story of the previous paragraph so that the cancer is only in your brain, but is present in both hemispheres. Radiation treatment is the only cure, but it has a mere 10 percent chance of success. These odds are not good. Fortunately, they can be improved. Before the radiation treatment, the doctors divide your body—including the hemispheres—in two. Each half-body gets artificially completed as before; then the radiation treatment of the cancerous brain-halves begins. This gives you two 10 percent chances of success rather than one. But now comes the twist in the story: suppose the unlikely outcome is that *each* hemisphere gets cured by the treatment. So the operation results in two persons, each with one of your original hemispheres. Note that each is 'sufficiently'

spatiotemporally continuous with you, since we agreed that a half-person's worth of continuity counts as sufficient. The spatiotemporal continuity theory then implies that you are identical to each of these two new persons, and we again have the absurd consequence that these two new persons are identical to each other.

Each of our theories, Locke's psychological continuity theory and the spatiotemporal continuity theory, faces the duplication problem. A single *original person* can be *continuous*, whether psychologically or spatiotemporally, with two *successor persons*. Each theory says that personal identity is continuity of some kind. So the original person is identical to each successor person, which then implies the absurdity that the successor persons are identical to each other. How should we solve this problem?

Some will be tempted to give up on scientific theories and instead appeal to souls. Continuity, whether psychological or spatiotemporal, does not determine what happens to a soul. When a body is duplicated, the soul in the original body might be inherited by one of the successor bodies, or by the other, or perhaps by neither, but not by both. While this is a tidy solution, it is unsupported by the evidence: there still is no reason to believe that souls exist. It would be better to somehow revise the scientific theories to take the duplication problem into account. (If we succeed, we will still need to decide between psychological and spatiotemporal continuity, or some combination of the two. But set this aside for the remainder of the chapter.)

As we originally stated the scientific theories, they said that personal identity is continuity. We could restate them to say instead that personal identity is **nonbranching** continuity. Continuity does not *normally* branch: usually only one person at a time is continuous with a given earlier person. In such cases there is personal identity. But the duplication examples involve branching, that is, two persons at a time who are both continuous with a single earlier person. So according to the restated

theory, there is no personal identity in such cases. Neither Charles nor Robert is identical to Guy Fawkes. You do not survive the double-transplant operation.

Unlike the claim that the successor persons are identical to each other, this is not absurd. But it is pretty hard to accept. Imagine that, before the operation, you receive some good news: the left-hemisphere person will survive the division operation. Excellent. But now, if the modified spatiotemporal continuity theory is correct, then if the right-hemisphere person survives in addition, you will not survive. So it is *worse* for you if the right-hemisphere person survives. You must hope and pray that the right-hemisphere person will die. How strange! The news that the left-hemisphere person would survive was good; news that the right-hemisphere person would also survive just seems like more good news. How could an additional piece of good news make things much, much *worse*?

### Radical Solutions to the Problem of Duplication

Duplication is a really knotty problem! Perhaps it is time to investigate some radical solutions. Here are two.

Derek Parfit, the contemporary British philosopher, challenges a fundamental assumption about personal identity that we have been making, the assumption that personal identity is *important*. Earlier in this chapter we assumed that personal identity connects with anticipation, regret, and punishment. This is part of the importance of personal identity. The last paragraph of the previous section assumed another part: that it is very bad for you if no one in the future is identical to you. That is, it is very bad to stop existing. Parfit challenges this assumption that identity is important. What is really important, Parfit says, is psychological continuity. In most ordinary cases, psychological continuity and personal identity go hand in hand. That is

because, according to Parfit, personal identity is nonbranching continuity, and continuity rarely branches. But in the duplication case it does branch. In that case, then, you cease to exist. But *in the duplication case*, Parfit says, ceasing to exist is not bad. For even though you yourself will not continue to exist, you will still have all that matters: you will have psychological continuity (a double helping, in fact!).

Parfit's views are interesting and challenging. But can we really believe that utterly ceasing to exist is sometimes insignificant? That would require a radical revision of our ordinary beliefs. Are there other options?

We could instead reconsider one of our other assumptions about personal identity. The duplication argument assumes that if personal identity holds between the original person and each successor person, we get the absurd result that the successor persons are the same person as each other. But this absurd result follows only if personal identity is numerical identity, the same notion that the equals sign ( $=$ ) expresses in mathematics. We made this assumption at the outset, but perhaps it is a mistake. Perhaps 'personal identity' is *never* really numerical identity. Perhaps all change *really does* result in a numerically distinct person. If so, then we would not need to say that branching destroys personal identity. For we could go back to saying that personal 'identity' is continuity (whether psychological or spatiotemporal—that remains to be decided). In branching cases, a single person can stand in the relationship of 'personal identity' to two distinct persons; that is not absurd if personal identity is not numerical identity. We would still need to distinguish mere qualitative similarity ('he's not the same person he was before going to college') from a stricter notion of personal 'identity' that connects with punishment, anticipation, and regret. But even this stricter notion would be looser than numerical identity.

Can we really believe that our baby pictures are of people numerically distinct from us? That too would require radical belief revision. But sometimes, philosophy calls for just that.

#### FURTHER READING

John Perry's anthology *Personal Identity* (University of California Press, 1975), is an excellent source for more readings on personal identity. It contains a selection from John Locke defending the psychological continuity view, a paper by Derek Parfit arguing that personal identity is not as significant as we normally take it to be, a paper by Thomas Nagel on brain bisection, and many other interesting papers. Perry's introduction to the anthology is also excellent.

Another good book, also called *Personal Identity*, is co-authored by Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne (Blackwell, 1984). The first half, written by Swinburne, defends the soul theory of personal identity, and is especially accessible. The second half, written by Shoemaker, defends the psychological continuity view.

Bernard Williams introduces the problem of duplication in 'Personal Identity and Individuation', in his book *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

## CHAPTER 5

# *Why Not Nothing?*

Earl Conee

### Introduction

Suppose that you find pickles in your potato soup. You ask indignantly, ‘Why are there pickles in my potato soup?’ You are told that Mort put them in 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?

### What is the Question?

We should be sure that we are focusing on a metaphysical question. 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 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 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 the following one:

QM: Why there is anything more to reality than W?

If QM is what Q asks, then scientific replies to the question about the Big Bang—in terms of causes or laws—seem disqualified. Those replies tell us why something happened, namely, the Big Bang, by relying on at least one other thing that explains its occurrence, such as a cause or a law. But QM asks about the existence of those other things too, since W includes none of them. QM asks why anything exists of any sort at all. 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.

### 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 the word ‘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 a topic of a question does not require being able to imagine that topic. 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 a 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 rephrasing 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?

## 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 rather than 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 itself a necessary being. 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 exactly what would be impossible about W? 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?

### 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 Godly necessitarianism. It is subject to a problem of vanishing possibilities. We are talking about the traditional God here. God has to 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 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 in 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 for them 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 the 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 who had sufficient knowledge and power. 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 lacking in defects. And the same goes for any other imperfection—it would be banished. If 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?

## Ontological Arguments for a Necessary Being

Let's look into a classic sort of argument for a necessary God, an ontological argument.<sup>1</sup> Our initial version of it will have two

<sup>1</sup> The 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

phases. The first assumption of the first phase 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 (!).

Here is the whole thing in a nutshell.

versions to be discussed in this chapter derive primarily from Rene Descartes's 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*.

<sup>2</sup> The focus is reversed in the chapter 'God'.

## First Ontological Argument

### Phase 1

*Premise1:* There is a concept of something that is maximally perfect

*Premise2:* Anything that is maximally perfect must exist.

*Conclusion1:* Something that is maximally perfect exists.

### Phase 2

*Conclusion1:* Something that is maximally perfect exists.

*Premise3:* Anything that is maximally perfect exists necessarily.

*Conclusion2:* Something maximally perfect exists necessarily.

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

This argument has strengths. Initially, *Premise1* ('Pr' for short) looks safe. We do have that *concept* at least, don't we? Well, we'll see . . . Meanwhile, the claim of *P2* 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, P<sub>2</sub> is defensible even if some fictional character manages to be good without existing. P<sub>2</sub> 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 anything great that actually exists.

P<sub>3</sub> 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 necessary existence has a special sort of perfection not shared by contingent existence.

But let's reconsider the initial assumption, P<sub>1</sub>, 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 P<sub>1</sub> 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 on the wall 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 P1. P1 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, P1 is true.

But now comes trouble for the argument. When we combine this interpretation of P<sub>1</sub> with P<sub>2</sub> the conclusion of the first phase does not follow. P<sub>2</sub> says: anything that *is* maximally perfect must exist. So, in order for P<sub>2</sub> to help to imply the first phase conclusion, namely, that a maximally perfect being exists, P<sub>2</sub> has to work in combination with a claim to the effect that something *is* maximally perfect. Yet P<sub>1</sub> now does not say that anything is maximally perfect. P<sub>1</sub> says only that a concept exists that has maximal perfection as a requirement for its application. P<sub>1</sub> does not imply that this requirement is met. Thus, when we understand the ‘of’ in P<sub>1</sub> in this way, Phase 1 of the argument goes wrong.

Understanding ‘of’ in P<sub>1</sub> the other way makes one large improvement. The conclusion of the first phase now follows. P<sub>1</sub> 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 P<sub>1</sub> implies that something *is* maximally perfect. Thus, since P<sub>2</sub> says that whatever is maximally perfect must exist, it follows that something maximally perfect does exist, just as the conclusion says.

Taking P<sub>1</sub> 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*. When we had P<sub>1</sub> saying *only* that much, though, we were back with the other interpretation and its problem. The argument needs P<sub>1</sub> to claim something beyond that. It needs P<sub>1</sub> 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 it applies? 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 Pr 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.

In our quest for a necessitarian answer to Q, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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

### *Second Ontological Argument*

*Premise1:* The essential nature of the maximally perfect being includes existing necessarily.

*Premise2:* If necessary existence is included in the essential nature that some being has, then the being exists necessarily.

*Conclusion:* The maximally perfect being exists necessarily.

One good thing about this version is that the second assumption, P<sub>2</sub>, is not seriously disputable. If a being has necessary existence in its nature, then that being has necessary existence—that's for sure.

Support for the new P<sub>1</sub> derives from some thinking about perfection that is familiar to us. The supporting idea is that when we reflect on what goes into 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 P<sub>1</sub>.

Trouble for our Second Ontological Argument is familiar too. The current P<sub>1</sub> 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, P<sub>1</sub> may be just claiming something about a requirement for a concept to apply. P<sub>1</sub> can be interpreted as saying that there is a concept that applies to 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 P<sub>2</sub> that way.

Familiar trouble arises. Now the needed logical link to the conclusion has been lost. The second premise, P<sub>2</sub>, makes a claim about ‘the essential nature that some being has’. So in order for P<sub>1</sub> to link with the claim made by P<sub>2</sub>, P<sub>1</sub> has to be about a being that *has* some nature. Yet as we now read P<sub>1</sub>, 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 P<sub>1</sub>, the reasoning fails to prove the existence of a necessary being. Let’s try something else.

### 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 in W\*. 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 about 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*? There would be no moose in  $W^*$ , but how exactly does that imply that there would exist in  $W^*$  an entity that is the substance 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?

### 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.

### 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 in order for us to exist and thus to be 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. The account gives a good answer, but it is an 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 observation 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 as 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.

### 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 a 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 surely 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 gives every appearance of being a possibility. There are countless similar ones. It is difficult to believe that the seeming existence of multiple possibilities is entirely misleading.

Let's try something else. 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 are 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 would reject all of these apparent possibilities. Such choices could explain only contingencies that would perfectly fulfill perfect purposes.

Since we recognize more possibilities than that, we have to keep looking for their explanation. On the other hand, 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 by asking QC. And wherever God does not exist, God is not there to make any choices that might explain contingent things.

### 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 actual.<sup>4</sup>

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

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 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 needs some defense.

That problem is not fundamental, because there is an equally satisfactory explanation of contingent things that 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 the feature of tending to exist. *What* has the feature? 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 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 any tendency-style explanation is that we have no reason to believe in any such tendency.

### 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 seemingly possible 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. In the end, it does seem that reality could have lacked all contingent things. Given this,  $W^*$  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 at least one 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.

Recall QM:

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

The current statistical sort of response answers QM as well as it answers QC. If there are no necessary beings, then  $W^*$  is the empty W. So then W is the one and only alternative reality with no contingent thing. And again, something contingent was all but inevitable.

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.

## 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 answer 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 can 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 READING

Three essays that are worthwhile as further readings are 'On Explaining Existence' by Nicholas Rescher, '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).