

Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

A philosophical exploration of existence, meaning, and the human search for understanding

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About This Essay

The question “*Why is there something rather than nothing?*” has fascinated philosophers for centuries. This essay explores competing attempts to understand existence — from Leibniz’s search for a necessary explanation, to Robert Nozick’s exploration of possibility and probability, to Martin Heidegger’s challenge of rethinking what it means to be.

Rather than seeking a definitive answer, this essay examines how the question itself reveals something about the human condition: our desire to understand our place within the world and the relationship between existence, meaning, and consciousness.

Through philosophical analysis and reflection, this work explores how the questions we ask about existence may ultimately reveal more about ourselves than about the origins of the universe.

Themes Explored

Existence & Meaning

What does it mean for something to exist, and why does this question matter to human beings?

The Limits of Explanation

Can reason and scientific frameworks fully explain the nature of existence?

Wonder & Human Curiosity

Why are we compelled to ask questions that may not have definitive answers?

Being-in-the-World

How might our understanding of existence change when we recognize ourselves as inseparable from the world we inhabit?

Original Essay

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Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

Why is there something rather than nothing?— This is the question, and presumably, not an arbitrary one. The question could be understood in a variety of ways: as a need for a scientific explanation that accounts for the basis of existence, as an invitation to share in an experience of awe at the world, or as a call to begin rethinking our understanding of “being” within the world. Of course, if understood as an expression of wonder or awe, the question has always been pondered by human beings. The question itself appears to contain a concealed power, as we are each touched once, or maybe even now and again, by its compelling nature without properly grasping what is happening to us. And yet, upon first glance, it remains unclear whether the question begs for a specific answer, or exactly whether an answer would make sense. *What is it that some are trying to express, and what exactly is the question asking?* American philosopher Robert Nozick aims to tame the question, to disarm the sense of confusion and wonder, by showing that the question *could be* understood and answered even if we cannot know the right answer at this point in time. In contrast, Australian philosopher Arthur Witherall argues that no answer has the power to diminish our sense of awe at the existence of the world. While Witherall’s critique of Nozick begins to reframe the ways in which we think about the world around us, his position does not fully succeed at grasping the depth of the issue at hand. The process of analyzing this question begins to indicate that the answers we seek regarding the purpose for all things reflect not what led to our creation, but the potential for a fundamental transformation in how we understand the relationship between human beings and the world.

The question was first posed in the form, “*why is there something rather than nothing?*”, by German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz as part of his argument for the existence of God (Leibniz, 1989, p. 5). Leibniz understood the question as calling for a causal explanation,

presupposing that there needed to be an answer for why there is “something” rather than “nothing”. Leibniz went so far as to state that a state of nothingness would have been “simpler and easier” (Leibniz, 1989, p. 4). In his eyes, the only account that made sense was in terms of a metaphysically necessary truth, one which does not need further explanation. The answer, for Leibniz, could only be found in the existence of God— a self-evident necessary being. He ultimately concluded that the existence of God provides the only possible reason as to why there is something rather than nothing (Leibniz, 1989, p. 5). And that, at the same time, and on the basis of ‘the principle of sufficient reason,’ also provides proof of the existence of God, since without positing the existence of God, there is no way to explain the existence of the world. Leibniz’s explanation for “why there is something rather than nothing” appears to be an essentialist explanation— in that a necessary being exists as long as that being carries “the reason for its existence within itself” (Leibniz, 1989, p. 5).

The question understood by Leibniz necessitated a causal explanation, a cause for why there is something rather than nothing. However, other philosophers have suggested non-causal explanations in an attempt to loosen the question’s grip over the philosophic community. For, it is possible to think that one cannot answer *any* question if one cannot answer “why is there something rather than nothing?” In other words, how can we know why something is (or should be) a certain way if we do not understand why there is anything at all? Within his book *Philosophical Explanations*, Nozick provides multiple proposals in an attempt to solve this seemingly impossible question, ranging from the idea of “self-subsumption” to “the nothingness force” (Nozick, 1981). While describing these proposals is beyond the scope of this paper, Nozick sketches many possible answers; not because he believes any of them with confidence, but rather to relieve our sense that answering the question is impossible (Nozick, 1981, pg. 116).

He admits that all his proposals are strange, but he thinks this is to be expected: the question “cuts so deep” that “any approach that stands a chance of yielding an answer will look extremely weird” (Nozick, 1981, pg. 116). It is important to note that Nozick sees the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”, as closely aligned with the question, “Is it possible for everything to be explained?”, and that some of his answers to the former question are more direct answers to the latter (Nozick, 1981, pg. 116).

Before Nozick begins analyzing the fundamental question, he notes that to ask this question at all is to presume that “nothingness” is a natural state requiring no explanation while all deviations of “nothingness” are in need of an explanation (Nozick, 1981, pg. 121). Nozick suggests that this is a bold assumption, in that we should be aware that the ways we ask questions are inextricably tied to the answers we receive (Nozick, 1981, pg. 122). He emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the question itself, stating “Any factor introduced to explain why there is something will itself be part of the something to be explained, so it (or anything utilizing it) could not explain all of the something— it could not explain why there is anything at all” (Nozick, 1981, pg. 115). In other words, if we are to understand the question as reaching for a causal explanation, we may find ourselves lost in infinite regression without the presence of a self-evident necessary being. As I understand it, Nozick recognizes that the form of the question itself only makes sense against the background of a very specific network of assumptions— that nothingness requires no explanation, that all deviations from nothing need an explanation, and that concepts of “something” and “nothing” are realized and understood. However, despite these concerns, Nozick continues his attempt to diffuse the sense of confusion by applying a version of the principle of indifference from probability theory.

In attempting to provide a possible answer to the question, Nozick suggests that there may be something rather than nothing simply because there are more possible worlds where there is something than worlds where there is nothing (Nozick, 1981, pg. 127). Nozick claims that “nothing” is a natural state which exists, and asserts that it is a necessary truth that something must exist while a world of “nothing” or “nothing existing” is virtually impossible. The premise of the argument goes as follows: there are many ways for there to be something ($w_1, w_2, w_3 \dots$), but there is only one way for there to be nothing (w_0) (Nozick, 1981, pg. 127). The principle of indifference assigns equal probability to each alternative possibility, assuming that it is completely randomized (Nozick, 243). The chances, then, are very likely that there will be something because “there is something” holds every possibility except w_0 . This does not mean that the empty, “nothing” world is impossible, but that it has the lowest possible probability (Nozick, 1981, pg. 128). In this way, instead of Leibniz’s essentialist explanation, Nozick seems to suggest an equilibrium explanation, a type of explanation often appealed to in science.

By this method, Nozick attempts to apply empirical concepts to metaphysical questions. Nozick’s explanation is an egalitarian theory, one that holds that only some states need to be explained while others are treated as “natural” (Nozick, 1981, pg. 121). In order to pose the question in terms of conditional probability, Nozick claims to be able to assign probability based upon his *a priori* calculations i.e., that we understand “something” as denoting an infinite number of possibilities, instead of just one, such that we can conclude that it would have a far greater probability. Accordingly, Nozick also presupposes that “nothing” (in our ordinary language practices) is recognized and understood. Even if we accept that “something” could denote an infinite number of possibilities, the inherent nature of a state of “nothing” is troublesome on its own. If we take a state of nothing to mean an “everlasting void incapable of

change”, we have no evidence that such a state could exist. And if it did, we would be unable to perceive, and thus identify it. Even a vacuum, within the scientific community, is now believed to maintain a propensity to generate something via the laws of quantum mechanics (Choi, 2013). In this way, it seems that “nothing”, for all its simplicity, is nonetheless an entirely imaginary or conceptual state.

If then, a state of “nothing” can only be understood as an abstract, unattainable state, it seems virtually impossible to answer the question in the form first posed by Leibniz. Philosopher Peter van Inwagen highlights these contradictions, stating that whatever merit speculation of “nothing” may have in these arguments, it is of no use to one who wants to know about the probability for there to be *only* nothing (van Inwagen & Lowe, 1996, p. 108). Instead, these speculations are only relevant to a question of conditional probability: “*what is the probability of there being nothing created, given that there is an uncreated being capable of creation?*” (van Inwagen & Lowe, 1996, p. 108). Based on the same premises purported by Nozick, Inwagen also proposed that the statistical explanation could provide a plausible answer to the question of existence. However, upon reflection, Inwagen discusses feeling “unhappy” with his statistical proposal— claiming that it seems “too easy” (Rodriguez-Pereyra, 2018, p. 1). In this way, applying empirical science to the question of “why there is something rather than nothing?” does not seem to alleviate the sense of confusion but rather solidifies it.

But more importantly, as Witherall emphasizes, the statistical explanation avoids the essential nature of the question itself. It is not evident that we should treat the “issue” of why anything exists as if it were a statistical problem, or as a problem about the evolution of physical (or metaphysical) states (Witherall, 2001, p. 70). *Or, as a problem at all for that matter.* The entire notion of a process in this context should not be understood literally, for it makes no sense;

given the process would itself be something, and yet its function is to either result in something or nothing. If understood in a more metaphorical sense, as only the choice between something and nothing is random then we may ask why it should be considered random to begin with (Witherall, 2001, p. 72). From Leibniz's viewpoint, the choice is not random, because there is an automatic bias in favor of nothing. It is obvious that this view has inherent problems, because it is difficult to argue that we should assume that the easier option is more probable. Therefore, it seems that the only way to respond to the issue is to decide upon the nature of the process itself, which appears illogical. Even if we disregard the nature of the mechanism itself, we have no information at all about what it would look like to produce a "being" or "non-being". The rational conclusion appears to be that assigning probabilities to this question is nonsensical— for, we have no idea what we are talking about, or communicating about, when using language in this way. In any case, the egalitarian solution necessarily fails, as it relies upon assumptions about the operations of words (concepts, ideas) apart from the conditions under which they normally make sense for us. Therefore, while Witherall notes that Nozick's statistical proposal is "admirable", he ultimately argues that the account is not successful and does not "dispel the feeling that we confront an ultimate mystery in asking the question" (Witherall, 2001, p. 72).

However, it seems as though the question itself cuts deeper than simply inviting one to share in an experience of awe at the world. The question is not solely understood as a passive admiration for the mysteriousness of existence; it actively frames our relationship with the world around us. What is it, *exactly*, that we are trying to express when we ask, "why is there something rather than nothing?" It seems as though we are really asking "why is there *our specific existence* rather than nothing?" For, how would we know about the nature or qualities of what it means to be "something" other than in terms of our own reality? The only explanation

that seems to satisfy this inquiry would be answering the question of why *our specific universe* exists. In other words, in asking this question, we appear to be trying to account for our own existence, such that the possibilities of other worlds, or dimensions of perception, are irrelevant at best. While Nozick appears to be comparing the likelihood of possible “something worlds” to the one possibility of a “nothing world”, it seems impossible to even conceive of what it would mean for there to be “something” in other possible worlds as we are constricted by our own meanings of “something”. Everything we could potentially use to understand the concept of “something”, or even “nothing” for that matter, is only understood in the context of our reality as we know it.

However, some contemporary analytic philosophers would say that the talk of “possible worlds” is just a way of talking about counterfactual possibilities; and they’ll insist that *that* surely makes sense. In other words, we are not talking about different worlds where the same object or person exists in more than one possible world, but rather “nearby” worlds that describe a single individual or object and the alternative counterfactual situation that the world “might have been in”. Although, even if one tries to understand “possible worlds” as abstractions rooted in counterfactual talk, there is still the problem that counterfactual talk is context-dependent. In other words, there is a point to counterfactual talk. It occurs when someone modifies a factual prior event and then assesses the consequence of that change—such as imagining how an outcome could have been different if there had been a change in the turn of events. For example, imagine I say: “If only I hadn’t been speeding, my car wouldn’t have been wrecked”. I am not engaging in any type of metaphysical talk, some abstract theory with no basis in reality. I am taking a factual event that occurred in some particular context, and then making a change to imagine the potential of a different outcome. There appears to be a huge problem in that

philosophy tries to rely on the intelligence of counterfactual talk, which depends on it being carried out in some context. And yet, at the same time, philosophers claim to be thinking “objectively” or apart from any particular context. Oftentimes, when under attack, counterfactual possible-world theorists tend to retreat to the view that these “worlds” are merely abstractions or possibilities. However, they then continue to defy that rhetoric by ascribing to these “worlds” attributes that could not belong to abstractions, but only to concrete things.

It appears as though the question itself, as understood as a calling for a broadly theoretical answer, makes no sense. Thus, the question has no answer of the envisioned sort. How can we form a meaningful answer to the question “why is there something rather than nothing” while utilizing words apart from the context in which they make sense to us, the roots of our lived experience? Our first encounter with the world is not theoretical; we are not spectators gazing out at the world stripped of definition, value, and subjective meaning. It is quite the opposite: I first comprehend the world practically as a world of things imbued with human significance. I am completely immersed in my world, not cut off from it in some sort of isolated “mind”. In other words, the world itself is part of the fundamental constitution of what it means to be human.

This idea is reflected within Heidegger’s book *Being and Time*, where he attempts to destroy our traditional philosophical vocabulary and replace it with something more representative of the lived experience. He does so by moving beyond this standard, dualistic picture between humans and the world, arguing that there lies a deeper unity which is encapsulated in his descriptive formula for the self: “Dasein is being-in-the-world” (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 2010). From my understanding, the basic idea is that, inherently, the human being is not a removed subject cut off from the realm of objects it wishes to understand. Rather, we are

beings who are *always* already within the world, a world from which we can never fully distinguish ourselves. In other words, I am completely connected and absorbed in the world, not within some isolated “mind” or what Heidegger calls “the cabinet of consciousness” (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 2010). Furthermore, for Heidegger, it is the fact itself, that we question what “being” is and find ourselves perplexed by it, that defines us as humans— the very asking of the question that constitutes the very “am” of the “I am” (Pathak, 1972, p. iii). Essentially, it *is* this understanding of the question, understanding that one is “being” and thus questioning it, that is the “being” itself. Hence, the term “Dasein” means the self *as* the there (*Da*) of being (*Sein*), the place where an understanding of being arises into being (Stapleton, 2009).

Then, it seems as though, echoing Heidegger, that to ask the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” misses the point entirely: we are the world experiencing itself. The very fabric of our experience to the world is one piece. The real issue, as Heidegger would suggest, is not that the question is unshakeable, or that we may not be able to find a suitable answer, but that the concept of “being” has been taken for granted within the standard philosophical tradition (Heidegger & Stambaugh, 2010). The idea of “being,” or our existence, is generally presupposed at once to be: the most universal concept, the concept indefinable in terms of other concepts, and a self-evident concept. Within the philosophic community, we often presuppose that everyone understands what “being” means; and yet we are unable to clearly define it, and, at the same time, posit that it is so apparent that there is no need for proof or explanation. From my understanding, there is value and importance in posing the question, not because it provides us with some definitive conclusion, but because it allows us to question what understanding has been lost with contemporary analytics tools— bringing us back to reflect on

the merit of Presocratic thought. The asking of the fundamental question, thus, lends us to begin rethinking our understanding of “being” within the world.

It seems as though, if the goal is to understand what it means “to be,” or “to exist,” we ought not to reflect on why we are here rather than not. The value of understanding “being” is not in our potential opposed state of “non-being,” *but in the right now*. We are human beings who are inextricably bound together within the complex web of (historical, social, etc.) practices that make up the world. We are “being,” in all its fullness and complexity. We are not “something” as opposed to “nothing.” Nothing(ness) is the truth of being— it is the empty space with limitless potential. As long as “nothing” is understood as being in opposition to “something,” as long as there is a division between being and non-being, between life and death— we will continue to be confused because we are resisting what makes us human. “Nothing” is not beyond our experience, just like the end of thought is not the end of life. It is not threatening, because it is not in opposition to the identity of self, but rather inextricably linked to who we are. You *are* nothing, because only nothingness *is*... There is no solution to this issue. There are no “right answers” to these questions, because we are dealing with different metaphysical outlooks on life. Therefore, all we can do as human beings is look at them, compare them, and meditate on their differences.

All in all, the question “why is there something rather than nothing” is better understood not as an external search for absolutes, where absolutes cannot be ultimately perceived or proven, but as a process of self-reflection. Through the very practice of asking this question, we begin to learn more about how we view ourselves in relation to the world around us. Perhaps, then, the question leans not towards a conclusive answer, but the asking of it can nevertheless be edifying, because beneath our deepest inquiries remains an attitude of wonder that things exist,

ourselves among them. Thus, the culmination of this thinking process does not seem to reflect the origins of our existence, but rather the possibility for a radical transformation in how we understand our relationship with the world around us.

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