

ON “WHY IS THERE SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?”

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THIS paper does not try to resolve the question mentioned in the title; instead, it will argue that Robert Nozick's and Nicholas Rescher's answers to the question are unsatisfactory as they stand, and that both Martin Heidegger's and David Lewis's dismissals of the issue can be countered by raising doubts about their respective theoretical frameworks which lead to these dismissals.

2. Since Rescher's treatment of our title question in his recent book *The Riddle of Existence* (1984) surpasses the rival accounts in clarity and lucidity, it deserves to be treated first. Building on his *A Theory of Possibility* (1975) Rescher reformulates the title question as “Why should it be that the actually existing world is one of the non-empty ones...?” (1984: 6), a question that I shall shorten to “Why is the actual world non-empty?” Rescher's answer can be presented in the form of the following argument:

P1: There must be one—and only one—actual world.

P2: In order to be actualizable, a possible world must be really possible.

P3: Really possible worlds are non-empty.

C: The actual world must be non-empty.

Rescher supports P1 with the idea that given an inventory of all jointly exclusive and exhaustive distinct possibilities “one or another of them *must* obtain in the ‘logical’ nature of things” (Rescher 1984: 24). P2 is backed by the Leibnizian distinction within the realm of possibility, i.e., the distinction between logical, metaphysical (real), and physical possibility. To be really possible, for Rescher, is to be compatible with so-called “protophysical laws of nature,” laws which “do not represent the behavioral dispositions of existents, but rather the *preconditions* to which something must conform if it is to become an existent at all. Such laws are not immanent in things but transcend their particular nature.

They are ‘laws of nature’ alright, but in the rather special way of being laws *for* nature—laws that set preconditions upon the realizability of possibilities” (*ibid.*, p. 27).

Rescher holds that these laws explain the existence of a non-empty world since they rule out the empty world from among the really possible ones. Rescher regards the field equations of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity (GTR) as the “most plausible candidates” for protophysical laws. He suspects that it could perhaps be shown “that the only ultimately viable solutions to those equations are existential solutions...The cosmic equations would be such as to constrain existence in nature: they admit of no empty states and only allow for nonvacuous solutions” (*ibid.*, p. 34).

3. In order to gain a critical perspective on Rescher's suggestion, let us first turn to his rendering of our title question as “Why is the actual world non-empty?” Although this reformulation is backed by P1, at least Rescher's forerunner in searching for an answer to our question, and the philosopher in whose spirit Rescher claims to proceed, that is, Leibniz, seems to have posed the question rather as “Why is any world actual?” In his opusculum “On the Radical Origin of Things,” Leibniz argues that it needs God to make any world actual (Leibniz 1697: 349). What makes the Leibnizian formulation attractive is that it does not force us to speak of nothingness as “the existence or actuality of an empty world.” This latter expression sounds awkward because it forces us to make an existential claim with respect to a world where in fact we do not want to make any.

Of course, Leibniz's question causes trouble, too. Not only are we, in accepting it, forced to find a way around Rescher's arguments in support of P1 but we are also obligated to explain how we can account for the possibility of there being no actual world. When

no world is actual, then the possibility of there being no world is actual. How can we account for this actuality? To be sure, Leibniz could give an answer to this question by placing unactualized possible worlds, or rather their representations, in God's intellect (1697: 349). But this way of dealing with the question not only leads to the further problem of how we can reconcile God's existence with nothingness, it also makes far too strong metaphysical and/or theological assumptions.

The reason why we might nevertheless want to employ Leibniz's rather than Rescher's question is not only the strangeness of the existential claim "There exists an empty world," but also the further observation that Rescher's formulation potentially leads us into begging the question by thinking of the empty world as being somehow *just one more* possible world, as being *just like any other* possible world. To underline the fact that this danger is no mere fiction, we need to turn to P2 and P3 of Rescher's argument.

Recall that Rescher centrally relies on his idea that the set of protolaws constrains the set of potentially actual worlds, and that the same set of protolaws excludes the empty world from this set. But this seems to be an argument by stipulation as long as Rescher does not present us with convincing support for at least the following three claims, all of which are presupposed rather than argued for in his treatise:

(CL 1) There is only one set of protolaws that defines the set of really possible worlds.

Why are we not allowed to assume that one subset of possible worlds is constrained by protolaws *a, b, c*, and that another distinct subset of possible worlds is constrained by protolaws *d, e, f*? Must we assume that the empty world is ruled out from actualization by any set of protolaws?

(CL 2) In order to be actual the empty world must be really possible.

Why are we not allowed to say that in order to be really possible, a world must *either* fall within the domain of really possible worlds—this being a constraint on non-empty worlds—*or* else be empty?

(CL 3) In order to be actual the empty world would have to be really possible *in the same way* as non-empty worlds have to be really possible in order to be candidates for actuality.

Rescher presupposes CL 3 because he tacitly equates possible worlds with possible natures. What makes this equation beg the question is his further notion that all possible *natures* are constrained by *GTR*. But what seems to be the crucial issue is not whether all *natures* are constrained, but whether an empty world, empty in a logical sense, can be called a nature at all. If the latter is denied, then the empty world might well be said to fall within the set of really possible worlds as defined by Rescher. We could then say that the empty world, precisely because it is no empty *nature*, is only vacuously constrained by protolaws; where there are no things, no states of affairs, no space and no time, that is, where there is no *nature*, constraints, whether physical or metaphysical, can hardly be violated.

4. For philosophers who reject the Rescherian notion of an empty world and who in addition reject the Leibnizian idea that no world needs to be actual, both Rescher's and Leibniz's reformulation of our title question must no doubt appear unintelligible. In fact, for them it is a logical necessity that something or other exists (at least when remaining committed to the possible worlds idiom). Proponents of this view will thus regard nothingness as a logical impossibility. Obviously, if they combine this double rejection with the notion of actuality as an indexical (an account first systematically developed and incorporated into modal metaphysics by David Lewis), they will have an even stronger reason to dismiss the question. Within Lewis's framework, one can ask neither the Leibnizian nor the Rescherian question since on his view every world is non-empty and actual "for itself" (as Hegel would have put it). Lewis thus has to take our title question as meaning "Why is this world actual and non-empty?," to which the answer can only be "Because all worlds are non-empty and actual for themselves, and because this world is actual, i.e., this worldly, for you."

Lewis's own formulation of the rebuttal is this: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"—'If there were nothing, you wouldn't be here to ask the question.' Ask a silly question, get a silly answer... (Lewis 1983: 23). Here Lewis does not make direct use of the idea that there is no empty world. Rather he seems to take the title question as "Why isn't the empty world actual (i.e., this worldly)?," his answer being basically that "Because then this world would not be this-worldly for you. The fact that *you* refer to

this world as *this-worldly* already presupposes that you *are* within this world, and that this world is thus not empty.”

5. But certainly, this answer sounds odd and “too good to be true.” In his recent book *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), Lewis admits once more—as he has already done in *Counterfactuals* (1973: 86)—that his modal realism “does disagree, to an extreme extent, with firm common sense opinion about what there is” (1986: 133): “When modal realism tells you—as it does—that there are uncountable infinities of donkeys and protons and puddles and stars, and of planets very much like Earth, and of cities very like Melbourne, and of people very like yourself,...small wonder if you are reluctant to believe it” (Lewis 1986: 133). Yet Lewis claims that believing all of this, despite our initial reluctance, is just the price we have to pay in order to enter the “philosophers’ paradise” (1986: 1) of modal realism.

From the standpoint of our title question, however, modal realism does not look very much like a paradise. In fact we might even argue, via *modus tollendo tollens*, that if all we can say—based on Lewis’s premisses—about our issue is “If there were nothing, you wouldn’t be here to ask the question,” then clearly there must be a flaw somewhere in these premisses. Put differently: What a strange kind of paradise for philosophers where their problems receive these kinds of answers! Obviously in cases where a theoretical framework reduces one of our questions to silliness, we have *prima facie* at least as much reason to be skeptical about the given theoretical framework as we have reason to accept the dismissal of our problem. Our decision as to which alternative we choose is of course dependent upon the weight we give to the respective question and to the success the theoretical framework has had in dealing with previous problems. Therefore all we can conclude with respect to Lewis’s modal realism is this: Those of us who feel that the title question is a genuine one and who do not have independent overwhelming grounds for being or remaining modal realists might draw (additional) support for being opposed to modal realism from its inability to save our title question.

6. Let us once more return to Lewis’s own rebuttal of our title query. In his argument, Lewis does not make use of his thesis that there is no empty world. Might we thus not modify his theory so that it allows for the possibility of the empty world? This is in fact

what Robert Nozick does in *Philosophical Explanations* (1981). What Nozick finds intriguing about this modified conception of modal realism is that it allows for an “egalitarian theory” with respect to our title question. Nozick feels that the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” is “inegalitarian” in that it implies that it is the existence of something (and not nothing) that stands in need of explanation. An egalitarian theory, instead, “will treat all possibilities on a par [and] one way to do this is to say that all possibilities are realized” (1981: 128). Nozick’s solution: the possibility of nothing is realized in one world, and the possibility of something is realized in all other worlds: “Why is there something rather than nothing? There isn’t. There’s both” (1981: 130).

7. I have two reservations about this “solution.” The first is but a variation of the often pronounced uneasiness with Lewis’s modal realism and the counterpart theory that comes with it. Assume Barney will have his test results by tomorrow. Fred asks: “Why will Barney get a B rather than an A tomorrow?” Robert answers: “You shouldn’t put it that way Fred. That is an inegalitarian question. Why will Barney get an A rather than a B tomorrow? He won’t. He’ll get both.”—Moral: Being egalitarian *and* a modal realist makes you give funny answers to serious questions.

My second reservation is that I share Lewis’s view that given his notion of possible worlds, we cannot make sense of an empty world. For Lewis a world is “a maximal mereological sum of spatio-temporally interrelated things” (1986: 73) and something that “by and large” is “concrete” (1986: 86). Nozick fails to give us an account of how he is prepared to modify Lewis’s notion of world so that it allows for an empty world. I doubt that this could be done without giving up other crucial ingredients of modal realism, such as the indexical interpretation of actuality.

8. However, the argument just presented is only one of three different lines of thought that Nozick presents in his inventive essay “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (1981: 115-164). Moreover, all three can be naturally related to Heidegger’s thought.

Nozick’s Lewis-style approach to his and our query can be related to Heidegger only *via negationis*. Heidegger rejects talk of worlds in the plural, claiming that this talk turns worlds into ob-

jects. The idea is that “‘world’ is something within which one can live (and one cannot live within an object)” (Kusch 1989:296). We might spell out this idea—as was once suggested to me by Calvin Normore—by saying that to conceive of worlds as concrete objects is to use the notion of “concrete object” in a highly unusual and obscure way. It certainly is part of our usual concept of concrete objects that we can *point* to them. But in the case of a world, e.g. our world, we can only “wave our arms about in a vague way” (Prior & Fine 1977: 92).

9. Another, in fact Nozick’s first way of dealing with our problem, is weakly related to Heidegger since—as Nozick observes himself—the way the idea is formulated at least *sounds* Heideggerian. The suggestion is that there is something rather than nothing because just like in the Beatles’ cartoon *The Yellow Submarine* where a vacuum cleaner first sucks up all other things and finally itself, “thereby producing with a pop a brightly colored variegated scene,” so also an initial “nothingness force” might have sucked up itself, “nothinged itself, thereby producing something” (1981: 123). Since I find this suggestion not only quite foreign to Heidegger but also rather obscure—if there already was the vacuum cleaner, or nothingness force, there already was something—let me move on straight away to Nozick’s third way.

10. Nozick’s third way of treating something and nothing (1981: 150-164) does not seem to be even intended to answer our title question. He queries whether the dichotomy “exist *versus* does not exist” is exhaustive, whether this dichotomy is grounded in a presupposition that makes it possible, and finally, whether we can conceive of an area falling outside of this opposition. Nozick ultimately refers to mystical experience in order to answer all three questions positively.

Instead of following him in doing so, and instead of criticizing him for doing so—this has already been done by Rescher (1984: 5)—let me rather turn to Heidegger and use Nozick’s query as a starting point for a brief summary of Heidegger’s position *vis-à-vis* “Why is there being (*Seiendes*) rather than nothing?” (1953: 1).

Heidegger indeed holds with Nozick that this question is based on a presupposition and thus the alternative “being *versus* nothing” is not exhaustive. To see what Heidegger considers the presupposition to be, note that he calls this question “the basic

question of metaphysics” (1953: 13) and that instead of answering it he proceeds to answer the “preliminary question” (*Vorfrage*), “*Wie steht es um das Sein?*” (1953: 25). Now metaphysics for Heidegger tacitly worked and works on the presupposition that Being means “presence” (*Anwesenheit*). That is to say, metaphysics is based on the model of the explicitly identified object, on the model of the object that is explicitly picked out and “made present” in perception, on the object that that is at the focus of perceptual attention. For metaphysics—roughly speaking—beings come one by one, or piece by piece, and not only can each one be isolated and turned into an object for the investigating subject, but even their total sum can be treated in the same manner. Even with this rough sketch, we can see why our title question is metaphysical: only a thinking based on the presupposition of Being as presence can talk about being (*Seiendes*), or beings, as a whole, and set this whole apart as one possibility from the possibility of nothing.

Now the early Heidegger thought that that he could pinpoint what this presupposition rules out: the Being (*Sein*) of the human being (*Dasein*), and the Being of “equipment” (*Zeug*). The mode of Being of both is such that to subsume them indifferently under the category of “being” (*Seiendes*) or “something,” i.e. to subsume them indifferently under “present(-to-hand)” something—a subsumption that the metaphysical basic question involves—is to commit something like a category mistake.

The later Heidegger seems to be more pessimistic as to the question whether we can do anything more than just hint—by poetic language—at what lies beyond the metaphysical presupposition. This pessimism is based on the view—already tacitly at work in the period of *Being and Time*—that Being as the transcendental condition of our language cannot be spoken about in anything but a tautological fashion. Being, language, and world are just one universal medium of meaning, and none of these can be spoken *about*: all we are able to do, is to speak *from within* them. To use an expression from *Being and Time* we might say that Being, language and world form one “closed whole” (1962: 103). We can only speak about things within the endless horizon of our world, a horizon opened up for us by our understanding of Being, while we can speak neither about language—Heidegger regards metalanguage as an

abuse of language—, nor about Being, nor about the world or being (*Seiendes*) as a whole. Even though Heidegger does not put it in so many words, we might conclude that the basic metaphysical question is to be dismissed: the whole world cannot even be hypothetically assumed to be non-existing or empty.

11. Heidegger's dismissal of our title question is certainly more difficult to counter than Lewis's, since Heidegger's rejection is based on an all-embracing theory of the whole western philosophical tradition. Needless to say, a criticism of this theory lies beyond the scope of this paper. I shall therefore confine myself to two suggestions.

First, Heidegger has not shown convincingly—perhaps he has not even wanted to claim—that subsuming *Dasein* and *Zeug* under the category of beings-in-general or something, always and inevitably involves a mistake or an inauthentic procedure. To be sure, when trying to clarify *Dasein's* and *Zeug's* mode of Being, we must not employ this subsumption. But may not *Dasein*, while being well aware of its primordial mode of Being, still, for the purpose of some inquiry, look upon itself (himself, herself, ourselves) as just one present-to-hand being among others? Yet if we allow for this possibility,

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then we must also allow *Dasein* to ask the basic metaphysical question.

Second, as I have shown elsewhere, Heidegger's conception of the closed whole, i.e. the one-world-one-language conception, has a number of uncomfortable consequences such as the ineffability of language-world relations, the denial of metalanguage and possible worlds, semantical Kantianism, (linguistic) relativism, and even a rather strong determinism (Kusch 1989: 148-228). At least those of us who believe that we have independent good reasons for rejecting these consequences also have some grounds for being more than just skeptical about the premisses from which such unhappy corollaries flow. Yet once these premisses stand in doubt, the shadow which they throw over our title question shrinks quickly.

12. To conclude, while Rescher and Nozick fail to provide a compelling answer to our title question, so do Lewis and Heidegger in trying to dismiss it. We are left with nothing but negative results. If I do not find this fact overly disturbing, it is perhaps because I believe that at least in philosophy the nothingness vacuum cleaner has some purpose: while it doesn't produce worlds, it still keeps a conceptually productive debate going. And that's more than nothing!

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