

Efforts to Explain all Existence

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The alleged problem in there existing something and not nothing

Might our cosmos have sprung into existence, for no reason whatever, in a Big Bang occurring some few thousand million years ago? Or might it have existed always, again for no reason? That anything could simply happen to exist is often considered preposterous. On this basis we may be urged to accept the reality of God. God, some maintain, can somehow resist the force of the child's question, 'Well, what created *him*?' so that any need to explain existence is not the kind of 'cab conveniently dismissed when we reach a pious destination' on which Schopenhauer threw scorn. My paper will consider, first, whether there is any *prima facie* case for supposing that existence as a whole stands in need of explanation, and second, what possibilities of explanation a short search reveals. May a little searching persuade us that the question which we are trying to answer is misconceived?

The protest that 'absolute nothingness' is a meaningless phrase

Pointing out that one prerequisite of a man's asking what he ought to find remarkable is the fact of there existing something (namely himself) and not nothing, some will object that such a fact should provoke no *Why?*'s. But in view of the good sense of asking, 'Why am I here to ask questions?', when a grenade has exploded at my feet, their reasoning is none too convincing. Still, one should perhaps examine a variant on it. Though there might be something to impress us in the existence of dragons rather than of bats, we should never (so the objection runs) be impressed by the sheer existence of something-or-other. We should never speak as if 'the natural thing' would be the existence of nothing. For, as Bergson expresses it,¹ 'the presupposition that *de jure* there should be nothing, so that we must explain why *de facto* there is something, is pure illusion. The idea of absolute nothingness has not one jot more meaning than that of a square circle.'

1 In part 2 of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.

If so, then G. H. von Wright was wrong to reject the theorem $(\exists x)(Fx \vee \sim Fx)$ on the grounds that any calculus of predicates based on it 'disagrees with the possibility that the universe may be empty'.¹ But was von Wright wrong? I think not.

Bergson might have a valid point were he stretching the idea of 'there existing something' until it covered the 'existence' of bare possibilities; for even if there had been no existents, existents would still have been possible, at least logically. I reject the view that logical possibility is a man-made affair, with its strange corollary that, had men never come to exist, then ants and bacteria and carbohydrates and dust would not have been logically possible. But the objection against asking, 'Why does there exist anything at all?', is typically more than an insistence on the eternal reality, or subsistence, or (perhaps at the cost of stretching a word rather far) *existence*, of something's-being-possible. Instead, many of the objectors make it plain that it is paradigmatic cases of existence—it is people or material objects or events or processes—which they view as absolutely necessary. See F. H. Bradley's *Principles of Logic*²: 'Nothing is not wholly negative; it is at least empty thought.' Consult also those who suggest, in seeming defiance of Darwin and of the threat of hydrogen bomb warfare, that the world must contain human beings because 'the term "to be" has no other meaning than "to be"-for-man'.³ However, I have two main grounds for dissatisfaction with such suggestions. (1) The first is that they conflict with arguments which appear to show that no necessity of existence could ever be demonstrated deductively. To fancy that such arguments apply only to daisies or deities, not to the mere existence of something-or-other, would be a failure to grasp that deductively provable necessities do no more than govern the structures which existent objects or existent characteristics can form. They are concerned only with various features which situations necessarily would or necessarily could possess *if* they contained existents which possessed certain other features. Therefore they cannot create any existents. (2) But suppose that this first ground for dissatisfaction is mistaken, as many intelligent people think—for even today you can believe God's necessary existence to be demonstrable deductively, and at the same time be intelligent. A second ground remains. It is that the existence

1 'On the Idea of Logical Truth', in his book *Logical Studies*.

2 Book 1, chapter 3.

3 W. A. Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology* chapter 1, following in the footsteps of M. Merleau-Ponty, Foreword to *Phenomenology of Perception*.

not just of something, but actually of *some thinking person or other*, or even of some *human* person, clearly is not a logically inevitable affair. No amount of abstract argument should be allowed to shake our confidence in this plain fact. Of course, *that nobody exists* could never be verifiably the case; it would be self-refuting when affirmed; but this only goes to show that not everything which might be the case could be verified or correctly affirmed. The words, 'There are no things', are themselves four things, four words. No genuinely intelligent computer could ask, 'Why is there nothing?'. But these truths are not so thrilling as to be sources of creative power.

We must not argue, in Berkeley's vein, that to try to imagine a universe without persons is to imagine yourself—a person—looking at its rocks and stars and dinosaurs, so that the non-existence of all people is unimaginable and therefore absurd. For this argument threatens to prove altogether too much. If successful, it would prove to me not just that some person must exist at all times, but even that I myself must be that person—on the reasoning that to imagine any universe without myself is to imagine myself as looking at it. Yet plainly there have been times when I did not exist.

The protest that no explanatory description can fit all things

Sometimes it is suggested that efforts to explain all existence commit a Fallacy of Excluded Opposites or Ionian Fallacy. Dismissing from reality everything which fails to fit some particular description, we are held to be imitating Thales who said that all was water; but if even air and earth are water, how does saying that air is water differ from maintaining that water is air, or that air is earth, or other such silliness? We could not explain all existence by suggesting, for instance, that it has *requiredness* of some odd sort, perhaps the *creative ethical requiredness* which is what theologians like Paul Tillich can seem to have in mind when they speak of the divine element in reality; for even such an explanatory description says nothing when attached to absolutely everything.¹

1 I discuss an explanation of all existence, on lines which might qualify as Tillichian, in 'The theory that the world exists because it should', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, October 1970, and develop aspects of it in later papers in the same journal, July 1972 and April 1976; also in *Studia Leibnitiana* iii (1971) 3, *Idealistic Studies* September 1973, and *Philosophy* (forthcoming), and in *The Challenge of Religion Today*, editor J. King-Farlow.

While this criticism's more careful sponsors avoid making nonsense of such sensible claims as that the universe is vast, they deny that every single thing in it can be vast, or watery, or for some reason ethically required. Calling everything 'red' is an admission that this word means nothing to you. How could you have learned its uses, if not by being shown the difference between red objects and others? I suggest, however, that it is wrong to cram all words into the same compartment as 'red' (or 'vast' or 'watery'). To which colourless objects do the critics point when teaching the meaning of 'colour'? Which things without mass, unextended things, things lacking position in space, help them to master the words 'mass', 'extension', 'spatial position'? Which describable affair to which their theory fails to apply helps them to understand their claim that it applies to all describable affairs? What miracle does the physicist indicate when showing what is meant by obedience to natural laws, or at what dragon can the zoologist point when saying that an iguana is no dragon?

The following Proof that God Exists has occurred to me. 'The description "Not God", like all meaningful descriptions, *cannot be applied to all things.*' Let us hope that nobody will be impressed by proofs like this.

Conflicting intuitions about any need to explain existence

There is however a second face to the coin whose first is that no existent can be necessary in a deductively provable way. If no deductively provable necessity can extend to cover existence, then just how could anyone demonstrate deductively that the world's existence must have an explanation?

It may be cried: 'Things couldn't exist without a reason! For how could they? Why should they?' But unfortunately this is as if to cry, 'But there couldn't be any reason for the existence of things-with-no-reason-for-their-existence!'; which, although true, may well fail to impress. Therefore it is interesting to see how those wielding the Principle of Sufficient Reason prepare their ground. To anyone who thinks of this Principle as demanding a reason why things exist, Spinoza may be an embarrassment. Holding that 'to absolutely everything a cause must be assigned, either for its existence or for its non-existence',¹ he uses this in a curious proof of God. 'A thing necessarily exists,' he says, 'if no cause be granted

1 *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 11.

which prevents this'; and, he goes on to explain, nothing either inside or outside God could act to oppose his existence. Here the assumption seems to be that 'the natural thing' would be for every possible object to exist. A sufficient reason for any existent is thus that there is no reason against it, rather than the other way round! And Leibniz's tactics can look equally unhelpful. 'Nothingness,' he tells us, 'is simpler and easier than something', this supplying a reason which would have ensured that there was nothing, had it not been overruled.¹ We may feel that 'simpler and easier' camouflages a question-begging Leibnizian assumption that 'the natural thing' would be an empty universe.

Similar embarrassments may be in store when we consider how philosophers have reacted to whether existents need to be 'conserved'. Must any creative factor which produced them remain active if they are to survive time's passage? Or would the natural thing be for any existent to remain, its disappearance requiring Nihilistic Energy? The first option has eminent supporters, but so has the second. Now, may not Leibniz be right in remarking² that, were the world able to exist through millions of years without God's assistance, we should then have difficulty in showing why it could not have existed eternally without him? I am not suggesting that any question of why things exist could be answered by stating how long they have done so (and in particular by saying that they have done so for infinitely long, 'so that existence at each instant can be explained by existence at the preceding instant'). But Leibniz's point could instead be that it is unsure whether the question should be asked at all. When modern Westerners have a tendency to ask it, possibly this is only because they are heirs to centuries of Judaeo-Christian thought.

To the general run of Greek thinkers the mere existence of things was nothing remarkable. Only their changing patterns provoked inquisitiveness. Aristotle's complaint against 'those metaphysicians who generate the world from night' was not that reasonless existence cannot be accepted. Rather, it was that *existence coming after a void* cannot be accepted; 'for how could there be change if there were no actually existing cause?'³ Yet intuitions can conflict even over the justice of this complaint. A. Grünbaum is very willing to entertain the idea that our cosmos had at one

¹ *Principles of Nature and of Grace*, section 7.

² G. Grua, *G. W. Leibniz, Textes Inédits*, p. 315.

³ *Metaphysics*, 1071b.

time jumped into reality, without there being any divinity or other previously existent Cause for this. 'There is,' says he, 'absolutely no criterion for distinguishing those facts which the proponent of divine creation regards as part of the "natural order" from those to which he gratuitously attributes the status of being "outside" the "natural order"'.¹

This is Nature, people like Grünbaum seem to be thinking, *so what could be more natural?*

The appeal to experience

Yet could not experience guide us here? Does everyday life show us objects jumping into reality reasonlessly? Were Grünbaum suddenly to find himself with a second head, would he treat this as unsurprising?

Well, matters are not quite so simple as such sarcasm suggests. That our cosmos had suddenly exploded into existence might be shown by prolonged study of its workings; it might be proved that a Big Bang could not have resulted from an earlier contraction. Again, an explosion into existence could scarcely be expected to be much like the explosions of everyday life. Even if we granted that time could flow before there were events to flow in it,² so that we could ask why such and such an instant was the one at which the explosion occurred, 'is there' (in Hume's words³) 'any more difficulty in supposing the time to be fixed without a cause, than to suppose the existence to be determined in that manner?' Granted that there were no prior events to provide a cause, could experience still assure us that something not an event, some cause of a never yet experienced sort, must have been active?

Consider the Bondi-Gold continuous creation hypothesis. The universe is eternally expanding but further galaxies grow from new hydrogen atoms appearing in the widening vacuum. These atoms materialise at the rate of about one per half-gallon of space per hundred million years. Now, how could our everyday experience assure us that they do not? Or else that they do, and that their materialisation has a reason?

Anything which I say here can look utterly inconclusive. Yet I do find it hard to accept that the universe merely happens to exist.

1 P. 423 of a paper in *Philosophy of Science*, editors A. Danto and S. Morgenbesser.

2 In section VII of a paper on Time, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, April 1976, I argue that this possibility deserves serious consideration.

3 *Treatise*, book 1, part 3, section 3.

Though experience cannot establish beyond doubt that things never jump into being reasonlessly, it surely gives scientists some grounds to be suspicious of any Big Bang which did not just reverse an earlier contraction, or of any continuous appearance of new atoms which offended against the principle that the mass-energy content of the universe remains constant. To reduce their suspicion it would surely be helpful to have explanations of some sort—perhaps of a theological sort?—to fall back on, when physical explanations fail. True, it might be that a massive super-atom once simply happened to materialise, then bursting into thousands of millions of galaxies, or else that hydrogen simply happens to appear at a very very very slow rate. But these suggestions may strike a man as too much like the hypothesis that flies just do spring into existence in sealed rooms. Though others make no plain logical error, deductive or inductive, when they classify him as simple-minded, is it not possible to view them as rather too sophisticated, rather too easily bored? It is unclear that Leibniz merely begs the question when he writes of the 'simplicity and ease' of there existing nothing, for he could argue that in an absence of all things there would be nothing to explain. When a man demands to know why six-winged purple unicorns have never existed it is only natural to ask his reason for expecting them.

To suppose that, prior to Experiences Telling Us Otherwise, an absence of all existents should be viewed as a situation which would have had quite as much need for a cause or productive factor as, say, a universe of clocks, or one of cherubs and the air through which they flew, can seem to give experience more weight than it deserves. Mere sensations tell us little until supplemented by principles of interpretation which they cannot themselves provide and for which deductive certificates seem unavailable. Yes, we are guided by no mysteriously error-proof intuitions, no innate ideas known to be correct because they themselves say that they are. Yet we do for instance place our trust in inductive reasoning, taking the past (including past successes of inductive reasoning) as a guide to the future. Again, induction cannot operate without a prejudice favouring simple laws rather than the monstrously complex ones which would also fit past happenings. Now, a further not unreasonable prejudice might be one favouring continued attempts to explain the world, rather than sudden decisions to look on this or that as what just happens to be so.

The alleged impossibility of explaining existence

But it may be unfair to accuse the opposition of being extravagantly *blasé*. Its members often insist that they would give free rein to their inquisitive impulses, could they but see the slightest chance of satisfying them. It is only that, seeing none, they feel forced to treat these impulses as mere indications that we grow so used to answering questions that we are apt not to question that there always are answers. It just is obviously puerile to ask for a sufficient reason why there is something and not nothing! Are we not here faced with the metaphysician's tendency to generate queries so general that no sense can be attached to them? Must not any suggested answers rip words from the contexts which make them understandable? Any concept which we have of productive power must come from actual experience of it! Yet even were we to watch a deity at work, we could see only the constant fact that his creative commands were followed by the materialisation of the things commanded. We should have failed to find why the deity himself existed, nor could what we had seen give meaning to a speculation that he had in his own nature a sufficient reason for his existence. And besides, what is the search for such a reason but a perverse asking of questions *ad infinitum*? For if we are ever to stop, then why not when we reach the brute fact that a world exists?

It is pointless to reply to this tirade in general terms. What is needed is discussion of actual efforts to explain the existence of all things. And here I can do little more than hint at how such a discussion could run.

Recourse to infinitude

A first suggestion might be that the existence of a person named 'God', or else of the entire universe (perhaps including such a person, or perhaps itself somehow deserving the name 'God'), has an existence whose infinitude supplies its explanation.

Which is not easy to understand.

A preliminary problem is in seeing what sense 'infinitude' could bear here. For instance: Would God's infinitude imply that he was the only existent, so that you and I would be simply parts of God? Or would God be comparable instead to an infinitely extending sky, with you and I as ants struggling beneath it? Or is any comparison with infinite spatial extent too misleading to be

of any use? Is God's infinitude a matter, rather, of his having Pure Being, Infinite Simplicity, existence not limited by any attribute? And if so, what could that possibly mean? But even if we grappled successfully with all this, we should still be faced with a more basic difficulty. It is of seeing just why a thing's infinitude should be regarded as any ground whatever for its existence.

It is no use our arguing that, if a thing is infinite, then by definition of infinitude it exists at all times. For even granted that existing at all times is part of the concept of infinitude, this goes to show only that an infinite thing would exist at all times *if* it existed at all.

Again, even if something could have existence as its only attribute (a suggestion which I cannot claim to have understood), it is by no means clear that such a thing would have to be more than merely possible. For if existence is an attribute at all, then it is an attribute which you and I possess. But the fact that we possess it does not imply that we possess it necessarily. Now, would something's supposedly possessing it as *its only* attribute affect the case? We should still, I think, be confronted with a mere possibility, the possibility of there being something which had existence and nothing more. We could say: God, *if he existed*, would have no attributes other than existence.

An Ontological Argument's explanation of existence

Let us now look at the Ontological Argument in the most popular of its modern forms. God's existence, it is reasoned, is necessary existence. That is what is involved in perfection in a strong sense of the word, perfection such as truly deserves worship, and such perfection is a defining characteristic of God.

Once again, there is a preliminary problem to be confronted. I am not convinced that power, as such, is any contribution towards being worthy of worship, not even when it is the power of existing necessarily. But perhaps I here place overmuch insistence on how worship comes to be deserved, rather than on how it differs from, say, love. Whereas worship, for me, would be a love mixed with great admiration, it may well be that a more religiously important sense of 'worship' implies awe and trembling in the presence of a power which is immense or even infinite. And no doubt necessary existence could be an impressive contribution to power, if necessary existence were possible.

But is it possible? Philosophers often argue that it involves a contradiction only slightly more veiled than that of an unmarried husband.

In fact, I suggest, contradiction would arise only if God's existence were thought of as logically necessary. This it could not be; for logical necessities are all of them too hypothetical, too firmly of the form that *if* there is an existent having certain characteristics *then* it has certain other characteristics, to bring anything into existence. But what if God's existence has a necessity which is other than logical, yet which manages to be quite as absolute as logical necessities are, a necessity independent of anything outside God? Philosophers would seem in no position to state that such necessities are impossible.

Does this then make God's existence provable? The temptation is to spell out the Ontological Argument as follows. (1) God's necessary existence is possible. (2) But the *mere possibility* of a *necessarily* existent thing is a contradiction. (3) Hence God's existence is necessary.

However, such reasoning fails. For when we say that God's necessary existence is possible, the possibility in question is epistemological possibility, like the possibility of winning tomorrow's steeplechase which we must grant to a horse when we do not actually know that he has broken his legs. We are saying that neither logical facts nor any other facts known to us rule out the possibility that God's existence is necessary. But this is very different from saying that the possibility is real in any sense which could generate the exciting conclusion that God exists.

An analogy drawn from Ethics may prove helpful at this point. I have argued elsewhere¹ that neither logic nor experience can refute the view that pain has great intrinsic value. But does it follow that I believe that in some possible worlds pain would in fact have such value? No; since I can well continue to suppose that this is not really a 'factual' or 'ontological' or 'metaphysical' possibility: in other words, that *the nature of pain*, rather than the logical behaviour of the word 'pain', makes pain evil rather than good.

The following emerges. Even if God's existence really is necessary, the Ontological Argument in the form described (and I know

1 In an article on the concept of intrinsic value, in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, July 1972.

of no other which makes it look persuasive) throws no light on this fact. For aught that the argument can show, it might be that the only existent whose nature involved necessary existence was an immensely powerful devil. Or, indeed, a very feeble one, saved from destruction by superior devils only by his strange attribute of existing necessarily.

An explanation in terms of creative ethical requiredness

Let me sketch my own approach to necessary existence, perhaps classifiable as a Tillichian one.¹ Its starting-point is this. In an absence of all thinking beings and other existents, what could there be which might act as a creative factor?

There would, I suggest, be many things worth the name of realities: realities concerned with possibilities. In particular it would be some kind of reality—it really would be the case—that a good universe, unlike a round square, might exist, and that there was a need for it to do so. Could such a need be creatively active, so perhaps deserving the name 'God' which Tillich and others in the Platonist or Neoplatonist tradition might wish to use here?

(1) Any question on these lines is absurd unless ethical needs are conceived appropriately. If, for instance, talk of such needs is viewed as equivalent to prescribing that people or deities are to act in given ways, then of course no ethical needs could be real if all people and deities were absent. The same applies if such talk is cashable 'deontologically' as describing duties. Yet prescriptivism and deontology can be thought wrong. And one main reason for this is just that they render it meaningless to suppose that, in an absence of all persons, it would be 'a good thing'—something needful in a way which, lacking an alternative adjective, I want to call ethical—that a universe containing persons should come to exist.

Imagine that scientific ingenuity annihilated all things normally labelled 'existents'. Would the resulting blankness be in no way unfortunate?

(2) Ethical needs are helpfully classified as requirements. In causation we meet requirements which are satisfied by the actual coming into existence of various states of affairs. Somewhat analogously in ethics. The ethical requirement for a thing of a

1 See p. 183, fn. 1.

certain kind is satisfied when such a thing comes to exist. Now, this point of analogy evidently cannot guarantee that ethical requirements possess creative power. As far as the meanings of words are concerned, even the strongest of such requirements may have no power whatever. There is even a clear sense in which no ethical requirement, as such, could possibly be powerful, creatively or otherwise. And yet this is only the sense in which no bachelor *as such* can be a poet. There is nothing here to tell us that an ethical requirement could not be a creatively effective ethical requirement: a requirement able to bear responsibility for the existence of something. Or (which I think comes to much the same thing) there is nothing to tell us that a creative requirement could not have an ethical aspect which was essential to it, an aspect which enabled the requirement to carry weight even in the absence of all existents.

'Yet isn't this all a category-mistake, a punning on the word *requirement*? Can you seriously fancy that a thing's being needful, its being required in a strictly ethical fashion, could *itself* account for that thing's existence, without aid from, say, deities willing that the requirement should be satisfied?' (a) 'Category-mistake!' may beg the question. To argue that an ethical requirement is not a force, and therefore not a creatively effective force, invites the counter that on the theory now being considered some ethical requirements are indeed forces of a sort since they are creatively successful. (b) When orange is viewed as a fusion of red and yellow, has the red *itself* taken on a yellow tint? I ask this to bring out the point that abstractions can be as refined as we care to make them. *Ethical requiredness* may of course be isolated from that other abstraction, *creative requiredness*. Just as you can choose never to speak of 'the yellowishness of the red in orange', so you can resolve never to let 'the creative success of ethical requirements' pass your lips. You can resolve to speak of creative power as 'an other than strictly ethical element' even if there exists a reality of requirement which has ethical and creative aspects. For what you count as 'strictly ethical' will vary with just where you cut the cake of The Real in forming your abstractions. But why insist on everybody's cutting the cake where you do?

From an armchair, I detect no plain cause why the ethical requiredness of something *must be* spoken of as unable to be responsible for its existence, even when that something is as good, as immensely required, as (for instance) a divine person is often

judged to be. Nor does armchair reasoning reveal that the creative effectiveness of ethical requirements is improbable; for just how is one to estimate its 'a priori probability'? By contemplating the mechanism whereby ethical needs might act creatively, then guessing whether it is likely to perform adequately? Surely there would be no such mechanism: no exertions of Pure Will, no ghostly incantations, no intricate electrodynamic process. Any supremely strong ethical requirement for there to exist a divine person is enough to carry responsibility for his existence; or else it is not; and that is all there is to it. Every chain of explanations must come to an end somewhere. Compare how two visual after-images just are (or just are not) exactly similar in colour, through their very natures.

(3) Abandoning the armchair, do I not see that many ethical requirements are in fact powerless? Does not the world contain room for moral effort? Certainly; but this appears not to settle the issue. For theologians typically allow for murders and earthquakes by supposing that ethical requirements very often conflict with other, stronger ethical requirements which overrule them. It is not clear that there could be any complex world of life and freedom if crimes and natural disasters were to be made impossible. Nor is it clear that life and freedom would better be replaced by dreamlike consciousness.

One might even harbour doubts about whether the shortness and unsatisfactoriness of each individual life could be impressive evidence against the goodness of reality as a whole. Various ways of conceiving the separateness of what we call separate things, or of separate points in time, might reinforce these doubts.

(4) If an ethical requirement could be responsible for the existence of anything, then perhaps it would be for that of the world in its entirety. God, if we are to continue to speak of God, may then be identified as the world's creative ethical requiredness. This I take to be the position of Tillich, for whom God is not a person but the Power of Being which the world displays, a Power which is ethical through and through. But admittedly Tillich's method of expressing himself has led many to believe that by 'God' he meant nothing more earth-shaking than that we ought to take morality seriously.

Alternatively it might be God as an existing person, a person creatively responsible for every other existent, who owed his existence to his ethical requiredness.

It is nowhere near obvious that existence as a whole could have an explanation, but nor is the reverse quite as obvious as some of us like to think. On close analytical inspection the dark waters of philosophy can often be dismissed as hogwash. Yet it is as well to inspect them closely before dismissing them.

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