

Why is there something rather than nothing?

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1 Introduction

Robert Lawrence Kuhn asks the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” nine times in his popular “Closer To Truth” video series. Many people answer the question, believers and atheists, with strong backgrounds in science or philosophy. The editor of this series asks himself whether the question is meaningful at all, and if so, with what constraints and in what sense is it meaningful? Consider that existence is neither an (informative) property of physical objects, nor a kind of activity or event. But the question of being suggests this, thereby trapping the philosopher in a linguistic trap.¹ However, Kuhn does not start out on this path, so he falls into all the traps.²

2 Tarski’s response

Leibniz, and others less clearly — perhaps earliest St. Thomas Aquinas — asked the question why is there something and not nothing? That is, why is it not true that there is nothing? Leibniz thought that this question was meaningful and required an answer.³ Leibniz did not yet have at his disposal a formal logic language capable of expressing the thought expressed in the question. This is because he did not have at his disposal a formal logical language capable of expressing that the words ‘something’ and ‘nothing’ are not similar words like ‘Peter’ or ‘cat’ in a logical point of view, but have a different logical role: these words are variables in logical analysis. The words ‘nothing’ and ‘something’ are not names of something, as Frege recognized, but

¹cf. Peter Van Inwagen: Meta-Ontology (1998) Erkenntnis 48: 233-250.

²Those answering the question are Ala Guth, Keith Ward, David Bentley Hart, Sean Carroll, Dean Rickless, Mario Livio, David Albert, Leonard Mlodinow, and in a longer video John Leslie, Peter van Inwagen, Bead Rundle, Quentin Smith, Richard Swinburne, Stephen Weinberg. <https://youtu.be/cfmewf2DoKU> Colin McGinn’s approach is the closest to what I have in mind. Imagine entering the room and seeing a fruit bowl in the middle of the table, full of nuts, figs and grapes. We are surprised, it was empty not long ago, where did the fruit come from? Stepping out into the garden, we see that someone has picked the figs and the plums, and the walnuts have been picked from the ground. With this we have found a possible answer, but only because there is something, there are beings, outside the fruit bowl. If there were nothing outside of it, the question would be unanswerable, what is more, meaningless.: <https://youtu.be/EC6nUEUTGbA>

³Bertrand Russell contended this in the popular BBC radio debate with Fredrick Copleston (1948): “I should say that the universe is just there, and that’s all.”

speculative philosophers have not understood it since.

The answer to the question, according to Leibniz, was that we exist, something exists, because God wanted to create the world. Leibniz must have been aware that his answer would place God outside the world, otherwise, it follows from the answer that God created everything, that God existed before anything existed, which is a clear contradiction, and therefore, a flawed answer, and, therefore, to be rejected. Yet, it would not be fair to take the dust off the great philosopher on this basis not because, in a sense, the case is inescapable. We are in the same situation. What is it about?

The point is that the thought, the question, and the questioner who asks the question why there are beings, must itself, the question itself, the language of the question as something that exists, be outside the scope of the question. With this in mind, the question can now be formulated in the language of modern formal logic and set theory. Let the set of things in the world — whatever they may be — be the set ‘ W ’. The question then is, why is set W not empty? The elements of the set W are all the things about which our philosophical theory, our logic, makes existential claims. To put it in the language of classical first-order logic, set W is nothing more than the domain of discourse of logic. The Leibniz question then sums up neatly:

why is it true that $\exists x.x = x$?

Leibniz’s question was answered by Tarski, and the answer is that in classical logic (there are other logics, e.g. free logic) the fundamental truths of logic and common sense cannot be fulfilled in an empty domain of discourse, that:

$$Fa \rightarrow \exists x.x = a \text{ or that } \forall x.Fx \vee \neg Fx$$

3 Conclusion

So, the implicit presupposition of meaningful speech is that the domain of discourse cannot be empty. The reason why there is something (less felicitously, misleadingly, the reason why there is an existent) is that otherwise everything is deducible, i.e., the denial of existence leads to meaninglessness. I know of no better answer to Leibniz’s question than Tarski’s.