ABSTRACT. This paper raises some difficulties with the strategy suggested in Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* for explaining why there is something rather than nothing. I am concerned less with his adoption of an egalitarian, as opposed to inegalitarian, explanatory stance (the net effect of which is to detach for independent consideration the question, "Why is there something?") than with his use of a crucial assumption in reasoning from the egalitarian point of view. I argue that this assumption, that all possibilities exist, is fatally ambiguous, that the persuasiveness of Nozick's reasoning depends on at once assuming and blurring the difference between the predicates "does not exist" and "nonexists" and that the attempt to wed a *priori* reasoning and a *posteriori* (mystical) practice fails.

In the following I raise some difficulties with Robert Nozick's suggestion in *Philosophical Explanations* for explaining why there is something rather than nothing. This seems called for, if only because the ingenious and suggestive nature of Nozick's account tends to seduce even the critical reader. I hope to show that his suggested "explanation" faces serious and, perhaps, fatal flaws.

What, then, does an explanation look like when the something being explained is the extraordinary fact that there is something rather than nothing? Or more to the point, what does Nozick think such an explanation looks like? To get a rough idea of Nozick's strategy we need to focus first not on the explicandum but on the notion of explanation itself. For a central feature of his argument is the distinction between egalitarian and inegalitarian theories and only one of these will be found suitable for the task at hand, namely, explaining why there is anything at all. An inegalitarian theory will explain a state or fact in terms of its deviation from another state or fact that is taken to be the natural state of affairs. Thus, Aristotle explained motion as a deviation from the natural state of rest while Newton explained it as a deviation from rest or uniform rectilinear motion. In both cases it is assumed that something counts as a natural state and that explanation proceeds by specifying how the target state is produced by the action of certain forces on this natural or base state.
For inegalitarian theorists the standard form of question will be, for instance, "Why is there motion rather than rest?" So also the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" presupposes that the answer will be framed within an inegalitarian theory. Nothingness is the natural state, and somehow deviation from that state produced something. Theistic and neo-Heideggerian attempts notwithstanding, Nozick convincingly argues that inegalitarian explanations of why there is something are unlikely to succeed. Thus, he urges adoption of an egalitarian explanatory framework. For our purposes the main point to note here is that egalitarian explanations do not count any states or facts as privileged or natural. Thus, the original question can be replaced. Rather than "Why is there something rather than nothing?" we have now the non-contrastive "Why is there something?"

Armed with the notion of an egalitarian theory Nozick proceeds with what I shall call the second phase of his argument. This involves introduction of what he calls the fecundity assumption (FA) as the principal tool in his bag of egalitarian explanations:

1. All possibilities exist (FA)

2. That there is something is a possibility

therefore,

3. There is something.

So the explanation of why there is something is just that this is a possibility and all possibilities exist.

In discussing FA it will be helpful to introduce the following matrix $U$:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>$p_1$</th>
<th>$p_2$</th>
<th>$...$</th>
<th>$p_n$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$w_1$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$w_2$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w_k$</td>
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where $p_1, ..., p_n$ are possibilities and $w_1, ..., w_k$ are possible worlds. In terms of $U$ FA would appear to countenance the existence of each possible world, $w_1, ..., w_k$. This, in any case, is a formulation Nozick himself gives to the principle. So we have also

1/. All possible worlds exist (FA)

2/. That something exists is a possible world

therefore,
3'. There is something.

Several comments are in order at this point. For one thing there is a good deal of vagueness in the terms of argumentation. Rather than given a precise characterization of the notions of possibility and possible world, we are left pretty much to our own devices. Are we to understand possibilities as propositional or quasi-propositional sorts of things, as individuals, or as both? Likewise, do we construe possible worlds as complex proposition-like entities (states-of-affairs) or as super individuals consisting of various possible individuals? And must a possible world be a well-defined entity, perhaps a maximally specific state of affairs, that is, a fully determinate complex, W, such that, for any state of affairs p, W either contains or excludes p?

The last question bears immediately on our interpretation of 3. Attached to 1 and 2, 3 would appear to show only that some possible state of affairs or, perhaps, some possible individual exists. But there is no reason to take this as showing that a possible world exists. For it seems clear that not every possibility, however construed, is a possible world. It would then turn out that 3 and 3' have rather different interpretations with the latter only unproblematically ranging over possible worlds. This is not irrelevant, since we are trying to explain, among other things, why this world exists.

I shall return in a moment to the 1'-1' distinction but first there is an additional feature of Nozick's view that deserves attention. This is the force we are to give "exists" in 1 and 1'. Some theorists, for example Plantinga and Stalnaker, agree that possible worlds exist but insist that they are abstract sorts of things. Only one of their number may obtain at any given time. So here the distinction between our actual and other possible, but non-actual, worlds comes down to the distinction between obtaining and not obtaining. Nozick, on the other hand, recognizes no such distinction (it would after all be inegalitarian!). By 1' he means that all possible worlds obtain. Thus 2' need not be taken as mentioning our actual world but only a possible world in which something exists. In terms of U it need only be a world w₁ in which at least one of p₁ . . . pₙ occurs. By FA any such world is itself always an actual world! So our actual world ceases to enjoy privileged status save in the parochial sense of mattering especially to those of us who happen to inhabit it. With Lewis, world actuality is a relative matter: Our world is actual relative to itself and other worlds are actual relative to themselves. On this view "actual" is treated as a indexical device for indicating a given possible world from within that world. Just as you and I use "actual" to indicate the possible world at which we occur, so Holmes may use the same device to refer to that possible world at which Watson and Moriarty occur. All such worlds are on a par in point of actuality. In short, Nozick is a full blown realist when it comes to possible worlds. Moreover, there is a possible world in which nothing occurs. (Thus it appears that Nozick, at this point at least, requires no specificity constraints at all on what counts as a possible world.) So FA provides something of an answer even to our original inegalitarian question. There is something rather than nothing because there is both something and nothing, for the latter is a possible world and so by FA an actual world as well.

It must, I think, be admitted that realism regarding possible worlds is, at least on the first glance, a bizarre doctrine. Unsurpris-
ingly, no direct argument is produced on its behalf. Rather it is to be embraced, if at all, as a condition of explaining, in an egalitarian fashion, why there is something. In general, there is nothing objectionable in this strategy so long as what is being explained is the sort of thing that calls for an explanation. But, in the case of why there is something: Whoever thought it needed explaining in the first place? or, alternatively, Whoever thought such a thing could be explained? Lewis, on the other hand, champions possible world realism as a way of explaining the language of modality. And this does seem to be the sort of thing we want to explain. A central feature of Lewis’ account is the doctrine of counterparts. Roughly the idea is that my assertion, for example, that I might have spent the morning reading Homer rather than lecturing on Aristotle is to be understood not as saying that at some possible world, appropriately similar to ours, I might have read Homer all morning long but rather that at some such possible world a counterpart of mine did so spend the morning. That world is just as actual for my counterpart as my world is for me. Since only my counterpart inhabits that world (I do not), realism does not entail that I am and am not spending the morning reading Homer. I do not intend here to assay the virtues and vices of counterpart theory8 but only to indicate some problems that arise when it is used, even implicitly, to back Nozick’s argument. To see this let us move to the next phase of the argument.

What I am calling the third phase of Nozick’s argument involves the status of FA itself. It is after all supposed to explain 3. There are, then, three alternatives to consider: (a) FA itself is explained by a further principle P and the chain of explanation continues indefinitely; (b) FA is an unexplained brute fact; (c) FA explains itself. By failing to stop the chain of explanation, (a) fails to explain. (b) stops the chain but has no explanatory power. So we are left with (c). (c) does not mean simply that FA is an obvious intuitive truth (it is not); nor does it mean that FA is rejected only on pain of self-contradiction. Rather, Nozick reads (c) so as to require that FA somehow be able to subsume itself in a deductive account. Quite literally, it is to explain itself. Roughly, the idea is that FA is expressible in terms of a quantified statement that displays how it can take itself as an instance. So we get something like the following:

1. All possibilities exist [FA]

2//. That all possibilities exist is itself a possibility

therefore,

3//. All possibilities exist.

A number of questions arise in connection with this part of the argument but I shall mention only one by way of moving to the final and crucial phase. It concerns the ambiguation, evident in 1 and 1/, on whether FA ranges over possibilities or possible worlds only. If, on the one hand, it ranges over possible worlds, then how can FA subsume itself? It can hardly count as a possible world in its own right, for what would the possible world look like that is simply the set of all "first level" possible worlds? Certainly there is nothing it is like to inhabit such a super-world. By reason of containing all possible worlds, such a world is perforce an internally incoherent and self-contradictory affair. Notice that this problem does not arise for the fecundity assumption
applied to first level possible worlds because, as we shall shortly see, it must be assumed that these, i.e., $w_1 \ldots w_k$ of our matrix $U$, are mutually independent and non-interacting worlds.

On the other hand, if FA ranges over the particular possibilities that comprise the various possible worlds, then it may well be false. Begin with the fact that FA assumes that possible worlds exist independently of one another and that they enjoy no interaction with each other. The independence assumption, as I shall call this, is required by Nozick's realism regarding possible worlds. Otherwise the existence of $w_1$ would exclude the existence of $w_2$, for $w_1$ counteracts the existence of a possibility that $w_2$ eschews. Note, however, and this is the crucial point, that the independence assumption seems to exclude reading FA as a principle on possibilities as opposed to possible worlds. To see this, let $p_1$ be an eternal sentence about some individual, perhaps Ortcutt. By FA it is supposedly the case both that $p_1$ actually obtains (in $w_1$) and that $p_1$ actually does not obtain (in $w_2$). Ordinarily this would encourage one to conclude, intolerably, that Ortcutt both is and is not a constituent in the same state of affairs. Of course this is not ordinary going, but the point I wish to stress is that the independence assumption saves us from apparent contradiction only if $p_1$ in $w_1$ is a different possibility from $p_1$ in $w_2$. Unlike, say, the states of affairs of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Nozick must make his possibilities world-relative possibilities, presumably to be explicated in terms of Lewis-type counterpart theory. For here, strictly speaking, I am not identical with the professor who read Homer; he is simply my counterpart. But now, it seems to me, we have some reason for thinking that it is simply false that all possibilities exist, for not only does the possibility $p_1$ not exist in $w_2$ but also it is a different possibility from its analogues in the other relevant possible worlds. Thus, if it is true of me in this world that I am not reading Homer in bed, there is no possible world in which it is true of me that I am reading Homer in bed. So this is a possibility that never exists. Consequently, it may be that FA is read in terms of 1 on pain of falsity. Thus, on both 1 and 1', there are difficulties with the claim that FA subsumes itself.

So far Nozick has backed the candidate explanation of why there is something with a rather sizable "if," namely, the would-be self-subsuming principle FA. Let us suppose for the moment, waiving the argument of the above two paragraphs, that some version of FA is at least possible. Are we thereby justified in upgrading the explanation from mere candidate status? Hardly, for FA provides us with little more than a logical possibility. We have no reason to regard FA as true, indeed, we have no clear idea of what would provide support for its truth. This is no idle concern but one that bears on the very possibility of any such explanation. Typically, to give a philosophically pleasing explanation of p is actually to show how p is possible and this requires deriving p from principles that are true. So long as FA is a piece of pure a priori reasoning, the most we have done is possibly to have shown how there can be something. And this, Nozick is quite aware, falls short of an explanation. It is then unsurprising that the final phase of Nozick's argument is devoted to upgrading FA. The argument is ingenious but, I shall urge, ultimately flawed.

The proposal to upgrade FA is two-part. First, the structure of all possibilities is grounded and, second, the ground itself is somehow made epistemically accessible. Since we have seen that the indepen-
dence assumption may conflict with the existence of all possibilities, it might be prudent to construe the proposal in terms of grounding all those possibilities that occur in any one possible world countenanced by FA. In any case for purposes of my analysis we may keep matters simple and take as the possibilities in need of grounding \( p_1 \ldots p_n \) of our matrix \( U \).

The first move toward upgrading amounts to the assertion that any possibility must exist or nonexist (Nozick's idiom). Let us render this as

\[ 4. (p)(p \text{ is a possibility} \Rightarrow p \text{ exists } v \ p \text{ nonexists}). \]

There is something odd, at least initially, about 4. For FA, read as a principle on possibilities, appears to exclude what 4 wishes to leave open, namely, that a certain possibility not exist. One might avoid this apparent conflict by insisting that FA employs a relativized notion of existence: To say that a given possibility exists is just to say that it exists, obtains, or is actual relative to the possible world at which it occurs. 4, then, might be said to employ an absolute notion of existence. But the trouble with this is just what 4 is allowing when it allows that a given possibility might not exist? Given FA, as a principle of possibilities, 4 can hardly mean to allow that there is no possible world at which \( p \) exists. And if "\( p \) nonexists" is read "there is some possible world at which \( p \) nonexists," then "\( p \) exists" will read "there is some possible world at which \( p \) exists." But now 4 is arguably false, for, as we have seen, we now no longer mention one and the same possibility.

Probably the easiest way out of these difficulties is to read FA exclusively as a principle on possible worlds. Here there arises no similar conflict with 4 because 4 ranges over possibilities only. On this assumption, which, we have seen, arguably blocks FA's ability to subsume itself, FA uses a non-relativized notion of existence—at least to the extent that a possible world is not said to exist relative to a possible world. So grounding the structure of all possibilities only indirectly grounds the set of all possible worlds that FA countenances. The central idea is that one can ground the structure of all possibilities only by providing possibilities themselves with some sort of ontological status that is accessible to potential explainers. This constraint, so far abstractly formulated, has a parallel in ordinary cases of explanation. To explain, for example, how Ortcutt retrieved the kite from the oak tree demands more than a listing of possibilities—perhaps he rented a crane, flew in by helicopter, hired a trained squirrel, felled the tree. Rather, one of these, or some other possibility, must be determined to be the actual cause of retrieval. This means, of course, that the actual cause must, in principle, be available to an explanatory community. Events that, in principle, cannot be determined to have taken place cannot be summoned in explanation of events that have taken place.

In the case at hand, then, whatever grounds the structure of all possibilities will be fit to serve in explanation, only if it is available to explainers. Thus, whether the possibility in question exists or nonexists, it must somehow be so available. So it is essential that Nozick get into the account something like

\[ 5. (x)(x \text{ exists } v \ x \text{ nonexists presupposes } x \text{ the}) \]
At least two questions arise here: Is 5 true and would the truth of 5 itself ground the structure of all possibilities so as to complete the upgrading of FA? These questions, to be dealt with in turn, are, again, not idle, for 5 is fit to occur in an explanation of why there is something only if it is true. Consequently, Nozick expends considerable effort warming us to the proposal, indeed, he gives what may fairly be counted as an argument for 5.

The argument for 5 depends on analogizing the predicate pair "exists" - "nonexists" to pairs such as "colored" - "uncolored" and "loud" - "unloud." Because the latter pairs have a presupposition range, only what is a spatial or physical object or event can be colored or uncolored and only what is a sound or a sound source can be loud or unloud, they do not exhaust the domain of all objects. The number five, for example, lies outside the range of application for the predicate. So if the predicates "exists" and "nonexists" behave in like fashion, they also will apply exhaustively only within a given presupposition range. Nozick dubs this range of thing things. In short, if (a) there is no reason to regard "exists v nonexists" as universally applicable and if (b) there is an independent basis for asserting that something lies outside the presupposition range, then (c) what lies outside the range can provide the ground for the structure of all possibilities.

Apropos of (b) Nozick boldly proposes that certain claims of the mystical tradition may fit the bill, namely, claims to the effect that there is something beyond existence and nonexistence. For those of us fond of desert landscapes it would be desirable to derail the argument before it enters such rich terrain. As it turns out, there is something suspicious about (a).

For one thing, it is completely unclear, to me at least, why all such predicate pairs must behave in like manner, in particular why they all must have predicate ranges in the manner of 5. This needs to be argued, if only because it appears to read "exists" as a first-order predicate and this, as is well known, is anything but a received truth. But notice, further, that the basis for accepting 5 was, in effect, that

i. \((x)(x \text{ exists } v \ x \text{ nonexists})\)

does not hold universally. The same, however, cannot be said of

ii. \((x)[x \text{ exists } v \neg(x \text{ exists})]\),

whose truth is a matter of logic. Nozick constantly blurs this distinction. Here I am exercising a principle of charity insofar as I see no difference between the two formulations. But if there is a distinction, then the analogue cases support conclusions about the restricted version only. When 4 is reformulated as

\[4'. \ (p)[p \text{ is a possibility } \Rightarrow p \text{ exists } v \neg(p \text{ exists})]\]

Nozick's upgrading argument cannot even get underway. So we need independent grounds for turning the argument on 4 rather than the more plausible 4' and it is hard to see what these would consist in.
On the other hand, if there is no distinction, then neither is there reason to find the predicate pair in question, "exists" - "nonexists," falling short of complete generality. Certainly, the analogue cases can by themselves do nothing to enhance the case for restriction. Indeed, as a special case of the law of excluded middle, "(x)(x is colored v -(x is colored))" also enjoys universal applicability. Of the number five, for instance, one can very well assert that it is not the case that it is colored. So, if there is no distinction, even accepting 5 provides no reason to grant that establishing b would go any distance towards grounding the structure of all possibilities. So far as I can tell Nozick simply assumes that "nonexists" is not the negate but the contrary or, in Aristotelian idiom, the privative of "exists." It is clear why this move is necessary. Just as something falls outside the predicate pair "loud" - "unloud," namely, whatever is not a sound or sound source, so also something may fall outside the predicate pair "exists" - "nonexists," namely, whatever is not a thing thing. And just as what sneaks through in the first case is neither loud nor unloud, in the second case it will be neither existing nor nonexisting. In short, it will be whatever is not a thing thing. So at least 5.

But even were the immediate objection waived and 5 accepted, our second question remains: Would the truth of 5 itself ground the structure of all possibilities? Here insuperable difficulties remain. 5 itself is nothing more than the result of a priori reasoning. So rather than grounding the structure of all possibilities (and so, we shall generously assume, nailing down the explanation of why there is something), 5 in effect simply sets a condition on any such grounding. For the notion of a presupposition range to make any sense at all, and it must if it is to play a role in explanation, we must be able to specify a boundary and this requires that we get outside the boundary. Only thus can we state what the boundary is and understand the presupposition range (so at least Nozick, 153). Perhaps this is true but it is certainly not an obvious truth. Surely I can imagine circumstances in which one couldn't "get outside" in the manner here required but where the notion of a presupposition range still applied. The objects of an all sound universe, for example, would still be either loud or unloud and those of an all color universe, colored or uncolored. So perhaps the most one can say is that our use of 5 in certain kinds of explanations requires that we get beyond the presupposition range for the objects in the domain of discourse. It is only so construed that 5 requires that we access or fix a point outside the th-presupposition range. It is here that mystical experience enters the account, at least that brand of mysticism that provides acquaintance with what is beyond existence and nonexistence (shades of Meinong's Aussersein?).

That this suggestion is doomed can be seen by considering the demands placed on such an experience, call it E:

6. E must acquaint a subject with a domain, D, that lies outside the th-presupposition range,

7. D must be such that it is in no further need of grounding,

8. 7 must be apparent to the subject simply in virtue of his undergoing E,
9. E must not be ineffable,

10. E must by itself guarantee that D actually grounds the presupposition range in accordance with the requirements of the a priori argument.

7 by itself is a rather hefty requirement, demanding that E be self-explanatory and self-guaranteeing. 9 follows because the experience is supposed to help explain why there is something.

Now there are, I think, problems with supposing that any one experience could have all the properties indicated by 6 - 9. Perhaps there is no such beyond realm at all or perhaps adverbial mysticism is true and the mystic simply experiences the ordinary world in his extraordinary way. Why should one think that D is, in any relevant way, independent of the subject? Indeed, how could we know, as 6 and 7 demand, that the point E fixes does not lie within the so-called presupposition range itself? Surely the answer can't be that it seems to lie without. Or is this, finally, a case where what seems to be the case guarantees what is the case? But even granting 6 is of little help, for 6 - 9 together would not establish that D grounds the th-presupposition range and it is this that 10 requires. Indeed, why should we expect there to be any connection between a domain allegedly accessed in mystical experience (in any experience, for that matter) and a presupposition condition resulting from purely a priori reasoning? Moreover, even if some such experience could do the job, more is needed. It must be shown that it in fact does the job. And this is something that neither further a priori reasoning nor mystical experience can provide.

What, if any, moral is to be drawn from all this? Probably that we are condemned to reargue the past, in particular the validity of claims based on what seems to be the case. For this is just what the mystic's claims come to. Putting aside our difficulties with the a priori argument, it might also be ventured that attempts, of the sort we have examined, to wed a priori theory and a posteriori practice are unlikely to prove fruitful. In the immediate case the alliance is likely to be unholy anyway and is in danger of being pursued at the expense of both a priori reasoning and mystical experience.

ENDNOTES


2 This sounds easier than it is. Could, for example, one simply address the question "Why is there motion" without addressing some version of the question "Why is there not rest?" If not, then explanation of motion will have to include explanation of rest. And while the contrastive "rather than" may here give way to a non-contrastive "and," simple conjunction probably won't do justice to the logic of explanation for motion and rest.


In fairness, Nozick does consider restricting FA to possible worlds that exhibit a coherence and order commensurate with that of our world. This at least sounds something like a specificity or well-definedness condition. But the restriction is introduced not because the less orderly worlds are unfit, in their own right, to be possible worlds but because otherwise it would be completely arbitrary or accidental that from the vast array of possible worlds ours happens to be a world with a high degree of unity and coherence. One problem with this is its reinvocation of an inegalitarian explanatory framework, favoring coherent over random worlds. A second problem is that, even within the set of coherent and unified worlds countenanced by a restricted FA, it still remains arbitrary that of those our world happens to be one organized in the particular way it is organized. So I see no way to remove arbitrariness, short of producing a version of FA that is framed to apply to our world only. But this is no longer explanation.

Perhaps the air of paradox here can be dispelled by keeping in mind the locution "It is actually the case that nothing exists."

I would, however, like to draw attention to a puzzling feature of Lewis' support for realism (see especially 84-91). It is incontrovertible that we believe things could have been otherwise than they are and, Lewis notes, ordinary language permits paraphrasing this: There are ways things could have been besides the ways they actually are. The ways, in turn, are just possible worlds and "there are" is given quantificational force. Thus, in effect, our ordinary modal idioms are summoned in support of realism. What I find curious about this appeal to our ordinary modal intuitions is not that they need an account, even a highly technical account. Rather what is odd is that the account proposed runs square against what seems to me to be a deeply entrenched set of modal intuitions, primarily, the intuition that possibilities are possibilities for me or my world. It will, I submit, come as quite a surprise to a standard speaker to learn that it is not he, but his counter-part, who might have spent the morning reading Homer.

Note that if we try to relativize 4 to a given possible world, say $w_1$, then it cannot be used, as it must, to ground the structure of all possibilities. What lies outside the predicate range "exists at $w_1$ v nonexists at $w_1$" may just be a possibility existing at another world, say $w_2$. And surely this would not be sufficient for grounding the structure of all possibilities because it itself is an item in need of just such grounding.