

*The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?*, edited by Tyron Goldschmidt. New York: Routledge, 2013. 295 pages. \$125 (hard-cover), \$98.77 (Kindle).

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This book contains fifteen original essays addressing issues relevant to the question, “why is there something rather than nothing?” (henceforth, “The Question”). As is appropriate for such a topic, the essays contain interesting and original reflections on a wide variety of subjects in metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science. Most of the essays are accessible to non-specialists, including advanced undergraduate students. Especially to be commended in this respect is Matthew Kotzen’s essay, “The Probabilistic Explanation of Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing” (chapter 13), which does an excellent job of introducing some highly technical issues in the theory of probability to a non-specialist audience. This book would be an excellent choice for graduate or advanced undergraduate seminars covering modality, explanation, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and/or the cosmological argument from contingency, if only it were not so prohibitively expensive. It is to be hoped that a less expensive paperback will become available soon.

Rather than attempting to address every issue that appears in this book, this review will focus primarily on those that bear on the cosmological argument from contingency. Modern formulations of The Question have their origin in Leibniz who argues that the Principle of Sufficient Reason requires the existence of a being (God) who stands outside the series of contingent things and makes that series actual. An answer to The Question along these general lines is defended by Timothy O’Connor (chapter 2). As O’Connor acknowledges at the outset (23), his project differs from traditional natural theological projects only in its commitment to epistemic humility. One of the forms O’Connor’s intellectual humility takes is his admission that theism is unable to provide any kind of detailed explanation of why the world is as it is. Nevertheless, O’Connor believes he can show that theism has a significant advantage over naturalism, for, given theism, we have at least some conception of how a full answer to The Question would have to go: it would appeal to God’s reasons, intentions, and so forth. On naturalism, we cannot see how The Question could possibly have an answer at all. Thus, despite the lack of a detailed explanation, theism has a major explanatory advantage over naturalism.

In the essay which follows, Graham Oppy disputes O’Connor’s claims. According to Oppy, theism has no explanatory advantage, for whatever the causal structure of a theistic world, a naturalistic world with that structure can just as easily be imagined. Thus, for instance, if we can start from

a necessary God bringing the universe into existence, we can just as easily start from a necessary Singularity bringing the universe into existence. Furthermore, if theism lacks an explanatory advantage, then it appears that naturalism is to be preferred, since naturalism is superior to theism in parsimony.

Oppy's key point is that positing God as one more "billiard ball" in the sequence of causes studied by science yields no explanatory advantage. Surely he is right about this. Insofar as O'Connor is considering God as a cause among causes, Oppy's critique is devastating.

This difficulty was, however, already recognized by classical theistic metaphysicians, and is precisely the point of the traditional distinction between primary and secondary causation: God is not a cause among causes, but rather stands outside the secondary causal sequence and makes that sequence, rather than another, actual. As has long been recognized, this is consistent with the sequence of secondary causes being either finite or infinite, for even if there was an infinite sequence, we could still ask, "why that sequence and not another?" and we could still answer, "because God so chose." (O'Connor makes this point on p. 26.)

The key challenge for the theist at this point is to render intelligible the notion of primary causation. If God's creation does not involve the sort of causal relation that obtains among (literal or metaphorical) billiard balls, then what is it? This is not the place to explore this question, but it is worth noting that, in recent years, analytic metaphysicians have come to recognize that there are a variety of metaphysical relations, apart from ordinary causation, that can figure in different sorts of explanations. These are what Karen Bennett calls "building relations": composition, constitution, realization, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Given a prior commitment to a plurality of such relations, it is perhaps not too great a cost for the theist to introduce one additional such relation, primary causation. The introduction of such a relation would provide the theist with an explanation of *why this contingent causal sequence obtains rather than another*.

Can the naturalist do the same? Two of the essays in *Puzzle* do advocate naturalistic, non-causal answers to The Question. In chapter 14, Marc Lange argues that there might be reasons within science for supposing that the existence of something rather than nothing is naturally (i.e., physically or nomologically) necessary, even if it is not metaphysically necessary, and that this would explain why there is something rather than nothing. In chapter 15, Stephen Maitzen argues that The Question can be answered by citing any one of the myriad facts which constitute the fact that something exists. Thus, he proposes, there is something rather than nothing because there are penguins.

If the theist really could explain something the naturalist could not, would theism then automatically be better than naturalism? There are at

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<sup>1</sup>Karen Bennett, "Construction Area (No Hard Hat Required)," *Philosophical Studies* 15 (2011), 79–104

least two reasons one might think not. First, perhaps not all legitimate explanatory demands can be met. Second, perhaps the explanatory demand embodied in The Question is somehow illegitimate.

The first point of view is defended by Shieva Kleinschmidt in chapter 4. Kleinschmidt criticizes recent arguments for the conclusion that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is presupposed by our explanatory practices and argues instead that our practices are better explained by supposing that we take explanatory comprehensiveness to be a theoretical virtue like simplicity. If this is so then, even if theism has an advantage in explanatory comprehensiveness, we will have to ask whether this advantage might be counterbalanced by defects elsewhere.

The second point of view is defended, in different ways, by Jacob Ross (chapter 5) and Kris McDaniel (chapter 16). A presupposition of any “why” question is that there is some fact to be explained. Where there is no such fact, the question is ill-posed. On one interpretation of The Question Ross considers, the explanandum at issue is the conjunction of all true contingent propositions. Ross defends an account of propositions which requires that, for every conjunction, there exists a set of its conjuncts and argues that there is a proper class of true contingent propositions. Hence, if The Question is asking for an explanation of the conjunction of all contingent truths, it is ill-posed, for there is no such fact to be explained. According to McDaniel, The Question is highly ambiguous because there are many different modes of being and, for any of those modes of being, one might be taken to be asking why there are things that enjoy that particular mode of being. However, McDaniel argues, The Question presupposes that *possibly, there is nothing*, and there may be modes of being, such as what McDaniel calls the “possibilist” mode of being, to which modal concepts cannot be applied.

McDaniel’s theory of modes of being is most interesting and, certainly, if that theory is correct a major reorientation of our thinking about The Question will be required. However, it is far from clear that McDaniel is correct in holding that The Question presupposes that *possibly, there is nothing* and is ill-posed if that claim is false or ill-formed. After all, it makes perfectly good sense to ask why the Incompleteness Theorem is true, even if one knows that the Theorem is necessarily true.

Ross also considers a second interpretation of The Question, on which it is well-posed but can be answered without appeal to a necessary being. On this interpretation the explanandum is the claim that *some being exists*. If this is not to be a trivial question that can be answered, in Maitzen’s way, by citing the existence of penguins, this must be due to some general principle about explanation which would require that, in explaining why there are any *Fs* at all, we must appeal to some being which is not itself an *F*. However, it seems that this principle would entail the falsity of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and so end up undermining the argument from contingency. In order to explain why there are any beings at all, one

would have to appeal to a being which is not a being, which is a contradiction. As a result, that fact must lack an explanation.

Ross suggests a different moral: the defender of the Principle of Sufficient Reason must reject the existence of a kind or set containing all beings. Furthermore, Ross goes on to argue, the defender of the Principle of Sufficient Reason should reject the existence of a kind or set containing all contingent, concrete beings. As a result, the Principle of Sufficient Reason actually *precludes* the existence of an explanatory regress-stopper of the sort the argument from contingency envisions. For every kind or set of beings, there must be some further being outside to explain why there are any members of that set. This implies a proper class of beings and an infinite regress of explanatory relations.

In the essay following Ross's, Christopher Hughes argues that the general strategy followed by Ross cannot escape the argument from contingency. As Hughes sees it, arguments from contingency have two key premises: a *contingency-dependence principle* (which may or may not be derived from the Principle of Sufficient Reason), which states that every contingent thing or collection of contingent things must depend on something outside itself, and "the existence of some sort of 'sufficiently inclusive' being" (100–101), such as The World or the conjunction of all contingent true propositions or the kind or set of all contingent beings. According to Hughes, the second assumption—the one Ross challenges—can in fact be dispensed with by the device of *plural quantification*. Thus the sufficiently inclusive being premise would be unneeded if the contingency-dependence principle were formulated as follows:

If any being is contingent, or any beings are (all) contingent, then there is some being outside that being or outside (all) those beings, on which that being or at least one of those beings depends (102).

It is, however, unclear whether this makes any difference, for if one is inclined to deny the existence of a set of all contingent beings, one may equally well reject the (plural-quantified) claim:

There are some beings such that every contingent being is among them.

Perhaps this plural-quantified statement is more plausible than its set-theoretic or mereological relatives, but Hughes has not given an argument for that assessment.

Although I have focused here on issues relevant to the argument from contingency, this volume also contains interesting discussion of other important issues in metaphysics, including articles by David Eford and Tom Stoneham (chapter 9), John Heil (chapter 10), E. J. Lowe (chapter 11), and Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (chapter 12) on the metaphysical possibility of an empty world. Metaphysicians, philosophers of religion, and philosophers of science will all find much to interest them in this volume.