

John F. Wippel, ed.

The Ultimate Why Question: Why is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever?

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2011.

261 pages

US\$59.95 (hardcover ISBN 978-0-8132-1863-2)

Although the most common formulation of the Ultimate Why Question—‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’—is attributable to Leibniz, its origin lies in Parmenides’ denial of the very possibility of non-existence. If nothing can come from nothing and only being can come from being, is there any reason (other than the fact that something exists) for anything to exist? It is easy to see why British astrophysicist A. C. B. Lovell warned his fellow scientists to stay clear of the question as it raises problems that will ‘tear the individual’s mind asunder’.

Members of the Metaphysical Society of America decided to ignore Lovell’s warning and instead tore into one another’s minds, making the ‘Ultimate Why Question’ the theme of their 2006 meeting. The acts thereof are the substance of this book. Its publication is timely given the recent release of Lawrence Krauss’s *A Universe From Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Free Press 2012). Krauss maintains that the universe came from ‘nothing’ by natural processes, so there is no need for religious or philosophical explanation. ‘Nothingness’ is inherently unstable and thus constantly ‘creates’ something via the laws of quantum physics. Philosophers are disappointed to learn that Krauss’s ‘nothing’ is actually ‘something,’ for he claims that the interchangeability of mass and energy demonstrates that ‘empty space’ actually contains quite a lot of ‘stuff’. It’s just that the ‘stuff’ is detectible only by indirect measurement.

The contributors to Wippel’s book demand more. Physical explanations are insufficient. Accordingly, eight chapters are dedicated to the Ultimate Why Question as debated in the history of philosophy, and three to contemporary responses.

Plato’s response is that whatever has being partakes of *ousia*. Lloyd Gerson explains that this participatory scheme forces Platonists to account for multiplicity in the world by means of the Good. The self-evident multiplicity of intelligible forms testifies to the self-diffusion of the Good, which, in turn, is the only possible answer to the Ultimate Why Question. May Sim explores the compatibility of the Western notion of *ex nihilo* creation with Chinese philosophy, arguing that the latter has a different set of concerns. Zhuxi, for instance, taught that the ‘principle’ must be knowable and eternal, but not necessarily creative. Jon McGinnis examines the question through the eyes of Avicenna, whose proof for the existence of God, when combined with his proof for the world’s eternity, ultimately shows that if anything exists, God necessarily exists. Unlike Avicenna, Aquinas has God enter the picture at the end of metaphysics, not at the beginning. John Wippel explains that God, while not the subject of Aquinas’ metaphysics

proper, is ultimately the principle of what metaphysics is about—namely, being as being. Aquinas's answer to the Ultimate Question is that in God, who is not *causa sui*, essence and *actus essendi* are identical. It is therefore not possible for God not to exist.

Conversely, Descartes holds that God is indeed *causa sui*. Tad Schmaltz writes that Descartes ultimately posited the 'reason' for God's existence as the divine essence *qua* final cause, even though the human mind must conceive it as efficient cause. Daniel Dahlstrom explains that Heidegger blamed Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason for blinding us to the 'irreducible contingency, individuality, and inexhaustibility of being' (143). Leibniz's rationality, Dahlstrom argues, neither annuls the historicity of being nor reduces it to 'being created'. Holger Zaborowski compensates for a lack of attention to Schelling's answer to the Ultimate Why Question, showing that the latter's chief concern was to account for the 'why' of the world without undermining freedom as the ultimate principle. In Schelling's early writings, the absolute Ego, freedom itself, is the principle. He later modified his position, attributing absolute freedom to God rather than to the transcendental freedom of the Ego.

More familiar to philosophers is Hegel's critique of the appeal to a higher principle in answering the Ultimate Why Question rather than giving a comprehensive account. Edward Halper shows that Hegel recognized the dilemma of asserting a first cause completely unlike the things it causes insofar as such a cause is totally unknowable. He attempts to navigate the dichotomy between the ultimate cause as transcendent and comprehensive, proposing Spinoza and Aquinas as possible solutions. Halper concludes that 'we can say that the ultimate cause of our seeking ultimate causes is the fundamental mystery of the world, the world's not being self-sufficient' (188).

The first contemporary response, offered by Robert Neville, proposes an *ex nihilo* conception of creation as the only feasible ground for the harmonious relations between things. Arguing against process theology, Neville entertains a 'fullness-of-being' conception of God that, he claims, acknowledges that the world participates finitely in God's fullness of being, even though a difficulty arises in explaining how God creates determinate multiplicity. Nevertheless, for Neville, the divine creative act is itself the answer to the Ultimate Question. Brian Martine, opting for a pragmatic approach, begins with the premise that the Ultimate Question is meaningless if 'nothing' is taken to mean 'nothing at all'. The real question is 'why this course of action instead of some other?' From the ubiquity of ends Martine argues that Being only makes sense when drawn into relation with Becoming, so that an answer to the Ultimate Why Question must account for action and not merely remain at the level of theoretical ontology. Nicholas Rescher draws a distinction between purposes and values. Relying on the validity of axiological explanations, he argues that a value need not be actually valued to be a value. He admits that such philosophical 'optimism' proffers an extraordinary answer, but that is precisely what we should expect when faced with an extraordinary question.

For a collected volume, this book is extremely coherent. John Wippel weaves the connecting threads in a helpful Introduction. What emerges from the ensuing chapters is the incontrovertible importance of understanding what we mean by the Ultimate Why

Question. The exercise of clarifying the question often bears greater fruit than the answer itself. For this reason, more needs to be done to introduce the wider public to the difference between Krauss's scientific approach to the question and the metaphysical approaches represented in this volume. Hence it would be a worthwhile project to distill the contents of this book into a handbook for non-professionals.

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