

# What Do We Mean When We Ask “Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?”

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*Abstract:* Let’s call the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” the Question. There’s no consensus, of course, regarding which proposed answer to the Question, if any, is correct, but occasionally there’s also controversy regarding the meaning of the Question itself. In this paper I argue that such controversy persists because there just *isn’t* one unique interpretation of the Question. Rather, the puzzlement expressed by the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” varies depending on the ontology implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the speaker. In this paper I do three things. First, I argue that other proposals according to which the Question has one uniquely adequate interpretation are false. Second, I give several examples of the way in which the meaning of the Question can vary depending on the ontology to which it is coupled. Third, I explore the implications of my thesis for the manner in which we should approach future attempts to answer the Question.

## 1 Introduction

Let’s call the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” the Question.<sup>1</sup> There’s no consensus, of course, regarding which proposed answer to the Question, if any, is correct, but occasionally there’s also controversy regarding the meaning of the Question itself. In this paper I argue that such controversy persists because there just *isn’t* one unique correct interpretation of the Question. Rather, we should endorse a contextualist approach toward the Question: the puzzlement expressed by the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” varies depending on the ontology (or disjunction

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<sup>1</sup>The Question has been receiving a lot of attention lately (at least in some contexts), with at least two recent anthologies on the subject (Kuhn, Leslie 2013; Goldschmidt 2013), and several best sellers (Mlodinow, Hawking 2010; Krauss 2012; Holt 2012).

of ontologies, although I will usually suppress this detail) implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the speaker. On reflection, this thesis shouldn't come as much of a surprise.<sup>2</sup> Why did we ever think that there was just one way to construe the Question? Why did we ever think philosophers have always been asking the *same* thing when they ask “why is there something rather than nothing?”<sup>3</sup>

I'm not the only one who's made something like this point. Tyrone Goldschmidt, for example, distinguishes between several different questions one might be asking with the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?”: Why are there any beings at all? Why are there any concrete beings? Why are there any contingent beings? And several more besides.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it's surprisingly difficult to find philosophers (or anyone else for that matter) who explicitly spell out what question they're asking when they ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” Usually, if the Question is asked, its meaning is taken to be obvious, even if, on closer examination, it's not clear that one precise question is actually being examined. Nicholas Rescher's recent book length discussion of the Question (Rescher 2013) suffers from this sort of ambiguity. Rescher's book does not contain anything like a detailed treatment of what exactly he takes the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” to mean, despite the fact that that sentence is purportedly the subject matter of his book. In

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<sup>2</sup>And yet, it often does. Several philosophers have, in reaction to this paper, told me that the “correct” interpretation of the Question – what the Question is “really” asking – is such-and-such. Needless to say, the fact that these philosophers have endorsed *conflicting* interpretations of the Question further supports my thesis.

<sup>3</sup>Of course, if, as I'm arguing in this paper, different philosophers are apt to offer different interpretations of the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” it might be a bit misleading to speak of them all as asking “*the* Question” (singular). But there shouldn't be any harm if we keep in mind that, when I speak of philosophers asking “the Question” I don't mean that they all interpret that question in the same manner.

<sup>4</sup>Strangely enough, however, Goldschmidt repudiates the suggestion that the Question might be interpreted to mean “why is there any being at all?”: “The question should ... not be construed as a question about why a possible world containing some being obtains rather than a world containing no beings at all. The notion of such a perfectly empty world is incoherent” (Goldschmidt 2013: 4). Clearly enough, even if Goldschmidt thinks the notion of a completely empty world is “incoherent” (and his arguments for this contention are, for what it's worth, not very compelling), many philosophers would disagree, and they might very well take the Question to mean something like “why does a possible world containing some being obtain, rather than a world containing no being at all?” *Even if* this is a bad question to ask, as Goldschmidt supposes it is, it might still be a question people ask. What's more, even if it is a necessary truth (as Goldschmidt maintains) that something or other exists, we might still wonder *why* it is the case that necessarily something or other exists. The latter question still might be an interesting question.

particular, each of the following distinct questions may have been the one which Rescher intended to address:

1. *“Why are there physical (contingent) existents at all?”* (Rescher 2013: 2)  
There’s a crucial ambiguity here, of course, since the question of why anything “physical” exists should clearly be distinguished from the question of why anything “contingent” exists.<sup>5</sup>

2. *Why are there things?* (2)

Notably, facts and states-of-affairs are alleged to lack a demand for the sort of explanation required for the existence of “things” (23, also pg.29 n.29). If “facts” or “states-of-affairs” are regarded as abstract objects, then Rescher may intend the Question only to encompass concreta, or perhaps concreta plus some limited class of abstract objects (Rescher isn’t explicit on this point). (I’m not sure, that is, whether Rescher intends “facts” or “states of affairs” to denote abstract objects. One point in favor of construing at least his use of the term “states of affairs” to denote abstracta is his later, in a somewhat different context, favorable citation of Plantinga’s (1974) characterization of possible worlds in terms of possible states of affairs (110, pg.120 n.23). Plantinga definitely thinks of states of affairs as abstract objects.)

3. *Why does “anything whatsoever” exist?* (5)

Rescher speaks of this question as having a “global, universalistic character” (5), and as concerning the “totality of existence” (7), which seems to imply absolutely unrestricted quantification.

4. *Why do “things-in-general” exist?* (19)

This question is, given the context, clearly supposed to be distinct from the question “why do all of those particular things which exist exist?”, since the “world as a whole,” or “things-in-general,” is alleged to require explanatory resources beyond those explanatory resources required to explain why each particular thing exists.<sup>6</sup>

Rescher’s investigation of the Question, then, would benefit greatly from a preliminary examination of what question it is exactly which he intends to discuss.

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<sup>5</sup>To Rescher’s credit, it’s not entirely obvious whether he conflates these two questions, since it is *Leibniz* to whom he attributes an interest in the question “Why are there physical (contingent) existents at all?” Nevertheless, this is simply a segue into Rescher’s own discussion of the Question. He gives no indication that he doesn’t intend to follow Leibniz’s construal(s) of the Question.

<sup>6</sup>On this point see some of the literature on the “Hume-Edwards Principle,” usually discussed in the context of certain sorts of cosmological arguments for theism. See in particular Pruss 1998, 2006.

Another regrettable tendency in recent discussions of the Question is that, when the correct interpretation of the Question *is* in dispute, it's generally assumed that it has *one* uniquely adequate interpretation, and the point in dispute is what that uniquely correct interpretation of the Question *is*. One particularly notable recent example of this phenomenon is the dispute between Lawrence Krauss and David Albert initiated by the publication of Krauss's book *A Universe From Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Krauss 2012). Krauss more or less explicitly characterizes the Question as something like "why are there particles, rather than merely a quantum vacuum?"<sup>7</sup> Albert, in his review of Krauss's book, takes Krauss to task for giving an inaccurate interpretation of the Question. He writes, for example:

Relativistic-quantum-field-theoretical vacuum states – no less than giraffes or refrigerators or solar systems – are particular arrangements of *elementary physical stuff*. The true relativistic-quantum-field-theoretical equivalent to there not being any physical stuff at all isn't this or that particular arrangement of the fields – what it is . . . is the simple *absence* of the fields! The fact that some arrangements of fields happen to correspond to the existence of particles and some don't is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that some of the possible arrangements of my fingers happen to correspond to the existence of a fist and some don't (Albert 2012)

In other words, Krauss is offering an answer to the *wrong* question, not the question he's purportedly trying to answer ("why is there something rather than nothing?") Krauss, insofar as he contends that his interpretation of the Question is more or less what people have always had in mind when they've asked the Question, is certainly incorrect. Nevertheless, what I find interesting about the dispute between Krauss and Albert is that they *both* assume that there is one correct way to interpret the Question, and the point of contention between them is just *which* proposed interpretation of the Question is the correct one. I'll argue below that this assumption is incorrect.

For much of this paper I'll be concerned with showing that other proposals according to which the Question has a unique appropriate interpretation are inadequate: the interpretations in question are not the sort of questions

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<sup>7</sup>According to many physicists and philosophers of physics, the ontology of quantum field theory is one according to which particles are either reducible to, or in some sense emergent from, fields (see, for example, Halvorson and Clifton 2002).

some philosophers take themselves to be asking when they ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” The upshot of the discussion is mainly, as I mentioned earlier, that the manner in which the Question should be understood depends on the ontology with which the Question is coupled.

My project in this paper bears some interesting similarity to Grünbaum’s project in his “The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology” (Grünbaum 1989)<sup>8</sup> (Grünbaum defends a similar view in several other publications as well). According to Grünbaum, which demands for explanation we take seriously will depend, in some cases, on our scientific commitments. For example, in Aristotelian physics an external explanation is required for the non-vertical motion of any sublunar body. By contrast, in Newtonian physics such motion (if it is uniform) will not require an external cause or explanation. On the view I defend in this paper, the explanatory questions which one finds most pressing – and in particular those explanatory questions apt to be expressed by the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” which one finds most pressing – will depend on one’s ontological commitments. In *certain* respects, then, my project could be seen as a relative of Grünbaum’s project, or perhaps even an extension of that project.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Does The Question Have Just One Permissible Interpretation?

One proposed interpretation of the Question is this: when we ask the Question, we’re really asking why anything *concrete* exists, where “concrete” is to be contrasted with “abstract.” This is a popular construal of the Question (see, e.g., van Inwagen 1996, Lowe 1996, Baldwin 1996). Peter van Inwagen, for example, writes that

If the notion of an abstract object makes sense at all, it seems evident that if *everything* were an abstract object, if the *only* objects were abstract objects, there is an obvious and perfectly

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<sup>8</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

<sup>9</sup>Grünbaum also takes his thesis to have implications for the manner in which we assess certain sorts of cosmological arguments for theism, and in particular for what demands for explanation (cited by proponents of such arguments) we take seriously. The Question has often been discussed in the same breath as cosmological arguments for theism (see, e.g., Leibniz’s “On the Ultimate Origin of Things”). I am not sure, however, what implications the thesis of this paper has for any of the cosmological arguments for theism, and I’m not sure I want to endorse Grünbaum’s negative assessment of those arguments.

good sense in which there would be nothing at all, for there would be no physical things, no stuff, no events, no space, no time, no Cartesian egos, no God. . . .When people want to know why there is anything at all, they want to know why *that* bleak state of affairs does not obtain (van Inwagen 1996: 96)

Here's what's wrong with van Inwagen's suggestion, and in particular with his suggestion that "When people want to know why there is anything at all, they want to know why *that* bleak state of affairs [in which concreta do not exist] does not obtain."<sup>10</sup> There are various proposals according to which only abstracta exist. I'll describe several of these proposals. On all of them there would seem to be a perfectly clear sense in which we might ask "why is there something rather than nothing?"

James Ladyman and Don Ross (2007), for starters, develop a form of scientific realism according to which science only justifies us in quantifying over *structures*. Ladyman and Ross call their view "ontic structural realism," and in conjunction with a robust naturalism their view naturally leads to the conclusion that abstract objects (relations or structures of some sort) are the only things over which we should quantify, since they are all that our fundamental physics tells us exist. Ontic structural realism should be distinguished from a more standard form of structural realism according to which science informs us of what structures are instantiated by the physical world. Ontic structural realism makes a stronger claim. Since science can only tell us what structures the physical world instantiates, we should *only* suppose that such structures exist.<sup>11</sup> So, for example, in a telling passage

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<sup>10</sup>An anonymous referee has suggested that it is uncharitable to interpret van Inwagen to be suggesting that his interpretation of the Question (more or less "why are there concrete objects rather than no concrete objects?") is the *only* correct interpretation of the Question. In correspondence, however, van Inwagen tells me that this is indeed his view. In his words: "I continue to believe that the proper formulation of the Question is, 'Why is there anything concrete? Why isn't everything abstract?' " He also explicitly rejects the thesis of this paper.

<sup>11</sup>Ontic structural realism is often described as a thesis regarding the *fundamental* constituents of the world, rather than the constituents simpliciter (one recent example is McKenzie 2014). On this interpretation, ontic structural realism is the thesis that the fundamental constituents of reality are structures of some sort, and physical objects (particles, fields, whatever) are grounded in, or supervene upon, that fundamental base. The arguments I make in this paper rely on a stronger interpretation of ontic structural realism, according to which structures are *all* that exist, and that physical objects should either be eliminated in favor of such structures, or they should be identified with such structures. Incidentally, this seems to me to be the most natural interpretation of the work I cite by Ladyman and Ross. But even if it isn't, that wouldn't affect the main arguments of this paper – I'm concerned less with exegesis than I am with the conceptual connections between the sort ontology we adopt and how we interpret the Question.

Ladyman and Ross tell us that

according to [ontic structural realism], if one were asked to present the ontology of the world according to, for example, [general relativity] one would present the apparatus of differential geometry and the field equations and then go on to explain the topology and other characteristics of the particular model (or more accurately equivalence class of diffeomorphic models) of these equations that is thought to describe the actual world. *There is nothing else to be said* (Ladyman, Ross 2007: 159; emphasis added)

In other words, if one were to describe the ontological commitments of general relativity, one would only describe *abstract objects* (the “apparatus of differential geometry,” equations, models). Ladyman and Ross go on to contend that the distinction between abstract and concrete objects is a dubious one (Ladyman, Ross 2007: 159-161), but their argument here relies entirely on the fact that, if ontic structural realism were correct, there wouldn’t be any concrete objects. For all Ladyman and Ross have said, there’s nothing wrong with the abstract/concrete distinction – Ladyman and Ross are just unwilling to quantify over concreta.

There are other proposed ontologies according to which only abstracta exist. Here are three examples. L. A. Paul has recently defended a “one category ontology,” according to which only properties and mereological fusions thereof exist (Paul 2012, 2013). Similarly, Dasgupta (2009) has recently defended a view of the world in which only abstracta exist, and Tegmark has recently argued that the universe is some sort of mathematical structure (see, e.g., Tegmark 2008, 2014).

Before I continue, I’d like to offer some clarification regarding my claim that the ontologies just described are all committed to the view that “only abstracta exist.” When I say that according to the several views just described “only abstracta exist” I do not mean to suggest that the advocates of these ontologies would all describe their ontologies as ones according to which “only abstracta exist.” For example, as we’ve seen, Ladyman and Ross think the concrete/abstract distinction is dubious, and Paul says that some property fusions are concrete objects (Paul 2012: 242). Nevertheless, it seems to me to be fair to describe the views mentioned above as ones according to which “only abstracta exist,” insofar as these ontologies only involve commitments to paradigmatically abstract objects – i.e., objects which most philosophers would classify as “abstract,” even in the absence of explicit and widely acknowledged criteria for distinguishing between those things which are “abstract” and those things which are “concrete.” Even if my characterization of one or more of these views as ones according to which “only

abstracta exist” is inaccurate, you should interpret me to be discussing the nearest relative of those views which *is* such that, according to that relative, only abstracta exist. After all, I’m less interested in exegesis here than I am in the *conceptual connections* between various ontologies and the manner in which we interpret the Question.<sup>12</sup>

Let’s assume that the ontologies I’ve been describing are ones according to which “only abstracta exist,” and that we all have a reasonably precise idea about what that means. If abstract objects exist contingently, then on any of the proposals just outlined according to which only abstracta exist one might still ask “why is there something rather than nothing?”, since it’s only contingently true that anything exists. As a matter of fact, however, many philosophers who believe in abstract objects believe that abstract objects exist necessarily. Even on this account of the modal status of abstract objects we still might ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” For example, a proponent of Paul’s “one category ontology” might still wonder why properties are related to one another in such a manner that they’ve given rise to, or at any rate *appear* to have given rise to, the physical world. Similar questions could be asked by proponents of the other ontologies mentioned above.

The upshot of all this is that, even on proposals according to which there are no concrete objects, the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” is just as relevant as ever. Accordingly, we should not understand the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” to mean “why are there concrete objects rather than no concrete objects?” – or at any rate we should not suppose that this is the *only* way in which the former question is or could be construed.

Here’s another popular interpretation of the Question: when we ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” we’re *really* asking “why does anything contingent exist?” But this interpretation of the question is quickly ruled out. As I’ve argued above, there are at least several proposals in metaphysics according to which nothing concrete exists. Even if the abstracta

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<sup>12</sup>You also might wonder whether there is any *single* conception of “abstracta” at play in all of the ontologies just cited – perhaps what one of these philosophers means by “abstract” is not what other philosophers mean. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for challenging me on this point.) I suspect this concern merely indicates how vague our distinction between concreta and abstracta can turn out to be on close inspection. But if our distinction between concrete and abstract is unclear, or admits of different disambiguations, that just gives us one more reason to reject van Inwagen’s proposed uniquely correct interpretation of the Question. Van Inwagen’s interpretation of the Question (the Question = “why are there concrete objects rather than no concrete objects?”) will, on this view, admit of multiple disambiguations, depending on one’s preferred construal of the abstract/concrete distinction.



that *do* exist according to these proposals exist necessarily (so that nothing contingent exists), we still might legitimately ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” What’s more, many philosophers find it mysterious that anything necessary should exist. Such philosophers might very well intend the Question to concern both contingently *and* necessarily existent things.

The previous proposals have been too narrow – that is, they’ve concerned particular domains of objects (concreta, contingent things), asking why objects of such-and-such a sort exist. Perhaps the correct interpretation of the Question is particularly broad. A natural suggestion is this: when we ask “why is there something rather than nothing” we’re asking why *anything* whatsoever exists. In other words, we’re asking why the *widest, most inclusive* domain of quantification is non-empty.

There are multiple concerns we might have at this point. For example, McDaniel (2013) tentatively suggests that, on this construal of the Question, the Question turns out to be surprisingly superficial and uninteresting. His idea is that it is incoherent to suppose that there could be nothing of any sort, in our most inclusive domain of quantification, since “Even if there were nothing else, the absence of everything else would exist and hence would be something” (McDaniel 2013: 277). Furthermore, “once we see why this might be the case, we also see that we shouldn’t be as interested as we once were in the question of why there is something rather than nothing. If *this* is the reason why there must be something, then the question was not a question truly worth pursuing” (McDaniel 2013: 278). I have two comments on McDaniel’s suggestion. First, an “absence” is not something we should ever consider quantifying over, even if it seems to function as a referring expression in our everyday discourse.<sup>13</sup> Second, if there *is* a possible world in which an “absence of everything else” exists, and there isn’t any empty possible world for this very reason, this wouldn’t make the Question trivial or uninteresting. On the contrary, this answer to the Question would be surprising, at the very least since it makes recourse to a surprising metaphysical thesis, namely that sometimes we should quantify over “absences.” For both of these reasons, I don’t think that McDaniel has shown us that the current interpretation of the Question is trivial or uninteresting.

A more pressing concern for the interpretation of the Question currently under consideration (“why is the *widest, most inclusive* domain of quantification non-empty?”) is that a number of philosophers don’t think that

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<sup>13</sup>For a view to the contrary, see Priest 2014: 56.

there *is* a widest domain of quantification.<sup>14</sup> If this view is correct, then we can't ask of the widest domain of quantification why it is non-empty, since there isn't a widest domain of quantification. Perhaps we can ask of some restricted domain of quantification why *it* is non-empty, but many of these sorts of questions will be easy enough to answer. Stephen Maitzen (2012, 2013) thinks these sorts of considerations should lead us to adopt a deflationist stance toward the Question. According to Maitzen, The Question is often ill posed, and ergo unanswerable, but under any circumstances in which it *is* well posed it will admit of fairly straightforward naturalistic answers. Here's an ill posed rendition of the Question: "why is there something [in our widest domain of quantification] rather than nothing?" It's ill posed, Maitzen contends, because it doesn't specify a genuine sortal that we're asking about. The Question, framed in this manner, is just "why do things exist?" But "things" is not a genuine sortal term, and any question asking, say, how many "things" I have in my hand fails to admit of any answer. If we want to turn the Question into something more sensible, we'll have to specify what sortal we're asking about. Instead of asking why "things" exist, for example, we might ask why tacos exist. But the question "why do tacos exist?" isn't particularly profound or difficult to answer. For example, If I go to a restaurant and order a taco, the person who prepares the taco could presumably tell me how the taco was made. So, we've got an explanation for why the taco exists. It turns out the Question, sensibly construed, is surprisingly easy to answer (so says Maitzen, anyway).

Let's leave aside whether or not there *is* a widest domain of quantification, or whether or not "thing" is a "genuine" sortal term, of the sort we might employ in a question like "how many things are there?" It seems to me that even if there isn't a widest domain of quantification, and even if "thing" isn't a genuine sortal term, we'd still have one or more sensible construals of the Question. Presumably the contention that there isn't a widest domain of quantification is equivalent to, or at any rate closely associated with, the negation of the following claim:  $(\exists xs)(\forall ys)(ys \text{ are amongst } xs)$  (Spencer 2012: 67). Even if the latter claim is false, as opponents of absolutely unrestricted quantification maintain, we still might ask the following question: why is it the case that  $(\exists x)(x=x)$ ? *Maitzen* would, of course, reject that question as unintelligible, since it doesn't specify a "genuine" sortal under which the object over which we're quantifying is supposed to fall. But most other opponents of unrestricted quantification won't be able to make that move, and in any case, even if the question "why is it the case that  $(\exists x)(x=x)$ ?"

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<sup>14</sup>Two recent examples are Spencer 2012; Rayo 2013. See also the contributions in Rayo and Uzquiano 2006.

is out of bounds, we'd still be left with popular construals of the Question like "why does anything contingent exist?" and "why does anything concrete exist?" (in other words, we still might intend to ask such questions when we ask "why is there something rather than nothing?"). So, even if we suppose that there isn't a widest domain of quantification, or that questions regarding why "things" in general exist are illicit, this need not force us toward a deflationist position with respect to the Question. Where Maitzen goes wrong, I think, is in tacitly committing himself to the assumption which I've been arguing is false, namely that there's only one appropriate way to construe the Question, in this case as involving absolutely unrestricted quantification (or at any rate quantification over "things" in general).

A potential worry here is that those considerations which Maitzen thinks count against an interpretation of the Question as "why is there something [in our widest domain of quantification] rather than nothing?" will also count against interpretations of the Question such as "why does anything contingent exist?" and "why does anything concrete exist?"<sup>15</sup> It's worth mentioning, then, that I don't think Maitzen's attack on the former rendition of the Question is very compelling. As I mentioned above, Maitzen thinks that questions which ask why "things" exist are illegitimate. Maitzen thinks the alleged sortal "thing" is inadmissible because it's not obvious how we should count "things," since it's not obvious what to think about criteria of composition, persistence, and so forth. If I have a pen in my hand, for example, should we say I have one thing in my hand? What about the detachable pen cap, or the ink reservoir, or an arbitrary undetached part of the pen, or different temporal parts of the pen? How are we supposed to answer questions like that? But just because it's not *obvious* what we should think about such things, it doesn't follow that there isn't a fact of the matter here. For example, according to van Inwagen's answer to the special composition question (van Inwagen 1990), unless I'm holding an organism in my hand, or a mereological simple, I'm not holding anything in my hand (in fact, strictly speaking hands don't even exist). Now, perhaps Maitzen thinks van Inwagen's answer to the special composition question is incorrect, and I would agree. But van Inwagen's view is certainly *meaningful*. There isn't any sense in which it fails to count as a genuine answer to a genuine question (when does composition occur?) just because if it *were* correct we'd be able to count generic "things" and use "things" as a genuine sortal term. So, for all Maitzen has said, we've been given no reason to think the questions "why do things exist?" or "how many things are there?" aren't sensible or meaningful questions, and ergo no reason to think that the question "why

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<sup>15</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for challenging me here.

is there something rather than nothing?” isn’t meaningful.<sup>16</sup> What’s more, given Maitzen’s contention that questions regarding the nature of composition or persistence are unanswerable or somehow ill posed, it’s not obvious how he is justified in supposing that any particular sortal term has referents. For example, Maitzen says that the question “why are there penguins?” is perfectly sensible, and admits of a straightforward naturalistic answer. But why is Maitzen so sure that penguins exist, if we’re incapable of answering the special composition question? After all, there are proposed answers to the special composition question that entail that penguins don’t exist (mereological nihilism, for example).

### 3 How The Meaning Of The Question Varies With Our Ontology

If it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to give an adequate unique interpretation of the Question, perhaps this indicates that we shouldn’t be looking for *one* such permissible interpretation. Perhaps the Question has multiple equally adequate interpretations. My suggestion is that when we ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” we’re implicitly or explicitly coupling that question with an ontology (or disjunction of ontologies).

Let’s look at some examples to make this point more clear, examples which indicate how the meaning of the Question varies depending on the ontology (or disjunction of ontologies) to which it’s coupled. These examples are by no means intended to give an exhaustive taxonomy of the manners in which the meaning of the Question can vary when coupled with different ontologies. I also do not mean to suggest that each of the interpretations of the Question discussed below could only be taken seriously by proponents of the *specific* ontologies I mention. Some particular construal of the Question might be taken seriously by proponents of any of a *range* of ontologies, including ontologies I haven’t mentioned (this is why I say that the Question is generally coupled with an ontology or *disjunction* of ontologies).

#### *Example 1*

First, let’s suppose that our ontology consists entirely of simple, discrete, material particles, as well as (maybe) a number of composite objects composed of those simple particles. When we take this ontology for granted and ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” we might be asking why

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<sup>16</sup>For further defense of the claim that “how many things are there?” is a perfectly sensible question, see van Inwagen 2002.

it's the case that any of the individuals in our ontology exist. A philosopher might make this question more precise, something like “why is it the case that  $\exists x(x=x)$  rather than  $\neg\exists x(x=x)$ ?”

*Example 2*

As I mentioned earlier, Paul has recently defended the thesis that the world is made up entirely of properties and mereological fusions thereof. If we're attracted to this view, as well as the view that properties exist necessarily, then it's easy to imagine an appropriate interpretation of the Question that goes something like this: “why is it the case that properties are fused in the way they are?” It might be simplest to suppose that properties wouldn't be fused in any manner, or at least that they wouldn't be fused in such a particular manner that they'd give rise to (the appearance of) a variegated, interesting, spatio-temporal world. We might be puzzled that they have, and that puzzlement would naturally be expressed by the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?”

*Example 3*

Or consider Timothy Williamson's ontology. Williamson thinks that everything that *can* exist *does* exist, and what's more everything exists necessarily (see, e.g., Williamson 1998, 2013). To take one example, consider my pet dog Toby. Williamson thinks that Toby exists in every possible world. In many of these worlds, however, Toby does not exist in space and time. In these worlds Toby isn't very interesting, since he only has formal properties (properties like “is self-identical”) and modal properties (properties like “is possibly someone's pet dog”). Now try to imagine a possible world in which nothing at all exists. Williamson would say that as a matter of fact there is no such world. A world in which we might initially think nothing exists is really just a world in which every possible thing has merely formal properties (like “is self identical”) and modal properties (for example, some of these things will have properties like “is possibly the largest taco on earth”). Let's call this world the “sort-of-empty world.” If Williamson's ontology is correct, then we might have a straightforward answer to the question “why is it the case that  $\exists x(x=x)$  rather than  $\neg\exists x(x=x)$ ?” (namely, because it is necessarily the case that things exist). However, I think we'd still be inclined to ask “why is there something rather than nothing?” When we ask that question we might really be asking “why isn't the actual world the sort-of-empty world?”

*Example 4*

Jonathan Schaffer (2009) urges us to reject the dominant “Quinean” conception of metaphysics, according to which metaphysics is concerned pri-

marily with what exists, and return to an “Aristotelian” conception of metaphysics, according to which we should be ontologically permissive (not at all hesitant to quantify over purported entities) and metaphysics is concerned primarily with ontological dependence (grounding) relations between those things that exist. Do numbers exist? Properties? Meanings? Schaffer contends that the answer to each of these questions is “yes of course!” It’s easy to answer the question of whether some purported entity exists. The interesting question is whether or not the entity is *fundamental* (Schaffer 2009: 347), where fundamentality is characterized in terms of grounding (something is fundamental iff it is not grounded in something else). As Schaffer puts it, “...there is no longer any harm in positing an abundant roster of existence, *provided it is grounded on a sparse basis*. (This is why the neo-Aristotelian can be so permissive about what exists. She need only be stingy when it comes to what is fundamental ...)” (Schaffer 2009: 353). Schaffer doesn’t address this topic, but one might wonder, if we’re going to be so ontologically permissive will we be puzzled by the Question? Will we be puzzled that “something exists rather than nothing”? Schaffer would probably interpret the Question in the following manner: we shouldn’t be surprised that derivative things exist (as long as they’re appropriately grounded in the fundamental constituents of reality), but we might be puzzled that anything *fundamental* exists. The Question then, should be taken to mean “why is there anything fundamental, rather than nothing?”

Of course, there’s the conceptual possibility that nothing fundamental exists, that everything is grounded in something else.<sup>17</sup> Someone might very well hold such a view, yet still think that the Question is perfectly appropriate, since we’d still be able to ask “why are there these objects connected by the grounding relation?”

#### *Example 5*

In the last several decades quantifier variance (Putnam 1987, 2004; Hirsch 2002, 2009), and ontological pluralism more generally (McDaniel 2009, Turner 2010), have received a great deal of attention among metaphysicians. Proponents of such views contend that our quantificational expressions (terms like “there is,” “exists,” “object,” etc.) don’t have one fixed meaning. Rather, there are multiple ways in which such expressions might be construed. To give an example favored by Putnam (see, e.g., Putnam 2004: Ch.2), the proponent of classical extensional mereology (call her the “Mereologist”) would think that, where we have two mereological simples  $s_1$  and  $s_2$ , we also have

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<sup>17</sup>Schaffer defends this possibility in Schaffer 2003, but he seems to have changed his mind about this by the time he wrote Schaffer 2010. For further discussion of this issue, of whether so-called “metaphysical foundationalism” is true, see Cameron 2008; Bliss 2013.

the fusion of those simples (so, we have at least three objects total). By contrast, the mereological nihilist will believe in the simples, but not the fusion. But when the Mereologist asserts, and the nihilist denies, the sentence “there exists a fusion of  $s_1$  and  $s_2$ ,” perhaps their disagreement is merely verbal. This might be the case if they each employ different quantifier meanings (indicated by subscripts attached to their quantificational expressions), so that the sentence “there exists<sub>1</sub> a fusion of  $s_1$  and  $s_2$ ” is in fact the sentence uttered by the Mereologist, while the sentence “it is not the case that there exists<sub>2</sub> a fusion of  $s_1$  and  $s_2$ ” is in fact the sentence uttered by the mereological nihilist. All of this suggests some natural ways in which a proponent of quantifier variance or pluralism might characterize the Question, namely as something like “why does anything<sub>1</sub> exist<sub>1</sub>?” or “why does anything<sub>2</sub> exist<sub>2</sub>,” or ... for any of the quantifier meanings he’s willing to employ.<sup>18</sup>

McDaniel (2013), who is a proponent of quantifier pluralism, discusses this idea – that is, roughly, the idea that for each quantifier (exist <sub>$n$</sub> ) (or, in his terminology, each “mode of being”) there might be a distinct and metaphysically interesting question regarding why the objects falling within the range of that quantifier exist <sub>$n$</sub> . McDaniel cautions, however, that there may not be, for each “mode of being,” a corresponding “deep question as to why there are things enjoying that mode rather than not” (McDaniel 2013: 283), insofar as some such questions may be ill formed (for details see McDaniel 2013: §4).

### *Example 6*

Some philosophers think that there are or could be things which don’t exist. Nozick, for example, discusses some speculations according to which there is or could be something “beyond” both existence and non-existence (see Nozick 1981: 150-164). Perhaps, Nozick speculates, the thing or things that are beyond existence and non-existence give rise to or explain those things which do exist. According to this proposal, the Question becomes something like “why does anything *exist*, when there might have only been that which is beyond existence and non-existence?”<sup>19</sup> Let’s say that the thing or things that are beyond existence and non-existence “aum” (they “aum,” that is, rather than exist). The Question couldn’t, on Nozick’s proposal, be interpreted to mean something like “why does that which is beyond existence and non-existence aum?”, since the latter question may prove to be illegitimate: “. . . there might be no room for the question of why what aums

<sup>18</sup>This point was suggested to me by Callie Phillips.

<sup>19</sup>“It is plausible that whatever every existent thing comes from, their source, falls outside the categories of existence and nonexistence. Moreover, we then avoid the question: why does *that* exist? It doesn’t *exist*” (Nozick 1981: 152).

does aum. Even so, there still would remain the question of how and why existence and nonexistence arise from what aums” (Nozick 1981: 157).

In a similar vein, if a Meinongian asked “why is there something rather than nothing?” it would be most natural to understand that question to mean something like “why does anything *exist*, when every thing might have been a non-existent object instead?”

### *Example 7*

One more example. Consider configuration space realism. Configuration space is a mathematical formalism that describes the evolution of the universe in accordance with relevant physical laws (e.g., Schrödinger’s equation). Now, it turns out that it is an open question in philosophy of physics whether we should take this mathematical formalism to represent the fundamental structure of reality. Configuration space realists, such as David Albert (1996), contend that, as Paul describes it,

qualitatively rich hunks of spacetime are not the physically fundamental constituents of the world. In particular, wave functions for particles are defined on the configuration space of the system, not on spacetime as we know it. . . . Instead of a many-particle world, on Albert’s interpretation, our world is a single particle that lives in a very high-dimensional configuration space. Ordinary objects are recovered at a less fundamental level by means of an account of how the world particle in its high-dimensional space plays a role in giving rise to the 3D features of our manifest image (Paul 2012: 234, 235)<sup>20</sup>

Now, there are at least two ways we might understand what’s going on here. One construal of configuration space realism goes like this: If physical reality is reducible to, or in some sense emergent from, configuration space, then either fundamentally (whatever exactly that means) or *tout court*, reality only consists of abstract objects. Many configuration space realists reject this characterization of their view. Cian Dorr, for example, says that if we’re going to let quantum mechanics seriously inform our ontology, “we need to supplement our ontology with some new category of fundamental concrete entities. And the most natural candidate for this role are *points of configuration space*, understood now not as mathematical abstractions but as concrete

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<sup>20</sup>Here’s how Albert puts it: “the space in which any realistic understanding of quantum mechanics is necessarily going to depict the history of the world as *playing itself out* . . . is *configuration-space*. And whatever impression we have to the contrary (whatever impression we have, say, of living in a three-dimensional space, or in a four-dimensional space-time) is somehow flatly illusory” (Albert 1996: 277).



particulars, as real and fundamental as the points of ordinary space” (Dorr ms: 3). That being said, the former interpretation of configuration space realism is certainly a coherent position to take, and if someone *did* take this view, then she’d have an ontology made up entirely of abstract objects.

So, let’s say that we’re configuration space realists of the sort who think 1. only configuration space exists, and 2. configuration space is abstract rather than concrete. What’s more, suppose we think configuration space exists necessarily (it is abstract, after all), although its characteristics vary from world to world. If we accept this sort of ontology we’ll still ask “why is there something rather than nothing?”, but we will not (or at least we should not) take this question to mean “why does anything exist?” The only thing we believe in is configuration space, and configuration space exists necessarily, so it’s not at all surprising that something exists. Nonetheless, we’ll wonder why configuration space takes on the values that it does, such that there are laws, fields, etc. (or at the very least there *appear* to be such things). We might be very surprised that configuration space took on the precise values that it did, to give rise to (or appear to give rise to) such an interesting, variegated world. To be more specific, the positions of  $n$  particles in a three dimensional space can be represented by the values of a  $3n$  dimensional configuration space. What’s important to note here is that the number of particles does not determine the number of dimensions in the configuration space. Rather, the number of dimensions in the configuration space determines the number of particles (Ney 2013: 37). Supposing that configuration space exists necessarily (though its properties vary from world to world) we’d presumably not be interested in the question “why does configuration space exist?” (that is, this wouldn’t be what we’re asking when we ask the Question). Rather, the Question would amount to something like this: “why isn’t it the case that  $n = 0$ ?” Such puzzlement would be expressed, naturally enough, by the question “why is there something rather than nothing?”

## 4 Conclusion

I hope to have made it clear, then, what I mean when I suggest that the meaning of the Question can vary with whatever ontology it’s implicitly or explicitly coupled with. We’re puzzled that “the world exists,” and the sentence “why is there something rather than nothing?” gives expression to that puzzlement. But the manner in which we are puzzled will vary depending on the ontology to which we’re committed (again, either implicitly or explicitly). Perhaps this is *one* reason the Question has seemed so intractable, because its meaning varies from context to context.

Could we say more about what each of these interpretations of the Question have in common? I've already suggested that each of these interpretations of the Question are, given the ontologies with which they are coupled, appropriately expressed by, or are apt to be expressed by, the sentence "why is there something rather than nothing?" But that doesn't tell us a whole lot. What is it in virtue of which these interpretations of the Question are such that they are each apt to be, when conjoined with their attendant ontologies, expressed by the sentence "why is there something rather than nothing?" In response I'd suggest that it's not actually obvious that all of these interpretations of the Question *do* have any one thing in common. In fact, it's not even the case that they all ask a question about *existence* – that is, a question of the form "why does *x*, or the *x*s, or some *x* (mass term), exist?"

Perhaps the relationship between each of these interpretations of the Question is one of family resemblance. Or perhaps they each share a characteristic *phenomenology*.<sup>21</sup> We aren't used to talking about questions being associated with particular sorts of phenomenal episodes, but what I mean to suggest is that each of these different interpretations of the Question seems to give rise to a particular sort of phenomenology – when the question is considered, or when it is uttered, or when it first comes to our attention. Or perhaps it is the phenomenology that leads us to formulate the question. The experience in question is difficult to characterize precisely, but it has something to do with awe, wonder, and surprise. A number of philosophers have, I think, hinted at the experience I'm referring to. For example, Wittgenstein admitted to having a distinct sort of phenomenology associated with the Question:<sup>22</sup>

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that the world should exist' (Wittgenstein 1965: 8)

...I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle (Wittgenstein 1965: 11)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>A point suggested to me by both Alex Rausch and Monica Solomon.

<sup>22</sup>In addition to the quotes here, see of course the famous *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.44: "Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is."

<sup>23</sup>Wittgenstein goes on to deny that the Question is meaningful. In this context, however, I'm more interested in noting the *phenomenology* Wittgenstein associated with the Question.

In a similar vein, Schopenhauer says the world's existence is "surprising, remarkable, problematical," the Question is "the unfathomable and ever-disquieting riddle," and notes a sense of "wonder" and "astonishment" associated with our considering the Question (Schopenhauer 1958: 170-171). William James writes that

One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness ... of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious! (James 1911: 39)

More recently, Rundle notes that the Question "has a capacity to set one's head spinning which few other philosophical problems can rival" (Rundle 2004: vii), a point which coheres with the suggestion that the act of considering the Question has a phenomenological aspect which is distinct from the experience we have when we consider most other philosophical questions.

So much for the phenomenology. Here's another issue: What about people who aren't committed to any particular ontology? Surely, there are people who are puzzled by the Question even though they are entirely agnostic with respect to which ontology to endorse. In response I'd say that there aren't any such people, and there couldn't be any such people. If someone was really *entirely* agnostic with respect to ontology, then the Question wouldn't even occur to her. There'd be nothing to be puzzled at if she hadn't yet come to the conclusion that anything exists. It would be as if she was asking "why is it the case that the following proposition is true?: something exists" even though she *doesn't endorse* the proposition "something exists." (Or more generally, she would be asking of some proposition related to ontology why that proposition is true, despite the fact that she doesn't think, of any such proposition, that it *is* true.) Still, we might wonder about those who are not *entirely* agnostic with respect to ontology (perhaps, sensibly enough, they think that *something or other* exists), but who are agnostic with respect to which more *specific* ontology they should endorse. Maybe they don't know if there are composite objects, for example, or they're not sure whether or not they should be configuration space realists. It may be the case that, for *some* such people, the question "why is there something rather than nothing?" is ill formed, that it fails to ask of any particular proposition why that proposition is true.

Progress can be made if we recognize those cases where an utterance of the Question is ill posed in this manner. But – and this is, I think, one of

the main points that should be taken from this paper – where the Question is not ill posed, further progress might be made toward answering that question by clarifying *which* interpretation of the Question we mean to consider. This task is far too infrequently carried out when the Question is discussed. Another benefit of distinguishing between various ways of interpreting the Question is, of course, that different interpretations of the Question will undoubtedly call for different sorts of answers. So, if we’re interested in *answering* the Question, we should decide which particular interpretation(s) of the Question we intend to answer.<sup>24</sup>

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