Why Do Things Exist And Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

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Abstract

An age-old proposal that to be is to be a unity, or what I call a grouping, is updated and applied to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (WSRTN). I propose the straight-forward idea that a thing exists if it is a grouping which ties zero or more things together into a new unit whole and existent entity. A grouping is visually manifested as the surface, or boundary, of the thing. In regard to WSRTN, when we subtract away all existent entities, the resulting "nothing" is the entirety, the all. That "nothing is the complete definition of the situation. An entirety/all is a grouping, meaning that "nothing" is itself an existent entity. One objection might be that being a grouping is a property so how can it be there in "nothing"? The answer is that it is *only once* all known existent entities, including all properties and the mind visualizing this, are removed does this "nothing" gain the entirety/all grouping property. Therefore, the very lack of all existent entities is itself what allows this new property to be present and thereby to allow "nothing" to be an existent entity. This entirety/all grouping property is inherent, or intrinsic, to "nothing" and cannot be removed to get a more pure "nothing". While the ideas that "nothing" is a "something" that exists necessarily isn't new, the grouping, or any, mechanism for how this can be so is.

1 Introduction

The question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", herein abbreviated as the WSRTN question, is one of the oldest in philosophy and has been asked in various forms for millennia. The question was formalized by Leibniz (1714) in his "Principles of Nature and Grace Founded on Reason". Many solutions have been suggested over the years, and these have been extensively reviewed and categorized (Wippel, 2011; Leslie and Kuhn, 2013; Goldschmidt, 2013). Most solutions tend to fall into a few general and overlapping groups, such as the following:

> 1. The question can't be answered because existence is just a brute fact or the question is meaningless or beyond the capability of humans to answer.
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> 2. Existence is logically necessary, and the logic, but no physical explanation or cause is given. Included in this category are those solutions that state that "nothing" is not even a logical possibility.
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> 3. Existence may or may not be necessary, but a mechanism is given for why it is here. However, the mechanism requires the existence of another thing, which is itself unexplained.
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> 4. Existence is necessary because it is self-explaining or self-causing (*causa sui*) and therefore needs no outside entity to explain it. The reason for existence is inherent to it.

An example of the first category is that existence just is; it's a brute fact and can't be explained. This was most famously advocated by Russell (1948) and more recently by Carroll (2021). Grunbaum (2004) and Maitzen (2012) suggest the question is meaningless. And, Leslie and Kuhn (2013, pgs. 219 and 256) discuss, but don't necessarily advocate, the idea that the solution may be beyond the ability of humans to solve. Needless to say, telling someone

that something just is without explanation or that their question is unanswerable, meaningless or beyond their ability to answer will ensure that the person will continue asking it and looking for solutions. My belief is that all the answers in this category are the result of giving up too easily and that the question is answerable, as I hope to show below.

The second category contains those answers that say existence is logically required, but no causal mechanism for why this is so is given. One subset of these is that "nothing" is not possible. This has been advocated by Cid (2012), Bergson (1935) and Rundle (2004). These solutions are similar to the brute fact explanation, but they try to provide a logical reason why it's a brute fact. But, the lack of a causal mechanism for this brute factness is problematic.

Category three may be the largest. Many, but not all, of its solutions also suggest that existence is logically necessary; however, they provide a "physical" mechanism in the form of some other necessary, but unexplained, thing. Possibly, the largest subset includes those where the other thing is God. Examples include Anselm's ontological argument (Anselm 1077), the various cosmological arguments (reviewed in Craig 1980) and more recent contributions such as those from Rasmussen and Weaver (2018). Another spiritual, but not God-based, subset includes those where the other thing is the "creative potential" of Dao (Chai, 2019) that facilitates an interplay of nothingness and being. However, the precise nature of Dao is not well defined. Some examples of science-based explanations include that existence can be explained if one assumes the presence of the laws of nature (Lange 2013), mathematical structures (Tegmark 2008) or quantum fields (Krauss 2012). In the latter, Krauss discusses how "nothing" is unstable due to the presence of these quantum fields. A related point is that the laws of physics allow the positive energy of matter to be exactly cancelled out by the negative (attractive) energy of gravity, thus allowing a universe to be created from "nothing". But, the initial presence of the laws of physics and counteracting positive and negative energies is not explained. In a more philosophical vein, some have suggested that the answer can be found if you assume the presence of possible worlds (aka possibilities) (van Inwagen in van Inwagen and Lowe 1996), values (Leslie 2009), or possible worlds and values (Rescher 2006). Others have suggested that mind or consciousness is the source of existence (Goswami 1993). Finally, Smith (1999) discussed the ideas that closed causal loops or infinite causal chains may be a cause of existence. He suggests this is a self-causing mechanism, but I'm including this in category three because it requires the initial presence of a causal loop or causal chain.

To my mind, explaining the reason why anything exists by assuming the presence of another unexplained thing defeats the purpose of trying to answer the question in the first place. Additionally, assuming that the laws of physics, mathematics or possible worlds exist without the need for explanation is unfounded and is akin to a"faith"-like argument. It may be true, but no one can ever know. Finally, all of these are "somethings" and would not be present in "nothing".

The final category, that existence is necessary but self-explaining or self-caused is the category needing the least explanation and that makes the most sense. If we are ever to figure out why anything exists without assuming the presence of some other thing, a type of self-causing mechanism will be required. Nozick refers to this as self-subsumption (1981). The solution proposed here is in this category.

The above list is certainly not exhaustive but should give a general feeling for most of the existing answers to the WSRTN question. Despite all these, however, humans keep asking the question because, for many, none of those answers have been intellectually satisfying, mainly for the reasons listed above.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First is to update the old idea that to be is to be a grouping, or unity, and then to apply it to "nothing" to show that "nothing" is a grouping and thereby an existent entity. This will hopefully provide an intellectually satisfying answer to the WSRTN question because it leaves no "somethings" left unexplained. The goal is not an extensive discussion of what is meant by "nothing" or of the WSRTN question itself but is instead an attempt to actually answer the question; something too often overlooked in the philosophical literature. Second, in doing this, I hope to challenge the reader's presuppositions about the situation we usually consider to be "nothing" and remind them that the human definition of "nothing" as the lack of all "somethings" has no impact on "nothing" itself, a situation in which no humans are present. To accomplish these goals, Section 1 explores the idea that a thing exists if it's a grouping. Section 2 then applies the grouping idea to the situation we've previously called "nothing" and will, consequently, show that "nothing" is itself a grouping and, thus, a

“something”. Section 3 will cover possible objections and responses. Finally, a brief conclusion will summarize the paper.

Before beginning, some terminological notes are in order. I include quotes around “nothing” and “something” to denote the confusing, dual meanings of these words, as will be detailed in Section 2. When not in quotes, the word nothing will be meant as a quantifier and will not refer to the noun version of “nothing” (Priest, 2021) used in the WSRTN question. Finally, I will use the words “something”, "existent entity", "entity", “to be” and "thing" interchangeably to mean anything with even the most general being or "is"ness.

2 A Thing Exists If It Is a Grouping That Ties Stuff Together into a Unit Whole

Existence is often discussed in the philosophical literature in either dry, semantic terms such as "Is existence a first or second-order property", "Are there non-existent objects" and "Can there be a thing that has being but not existence?" (Moltmann 2020; Casati and Fujikawa 2023) or vague, ill-defined terms like "essence" and "tropes". Rarely do authors attempt to explain how or why it is, *physically*, that a thing exists. That is, what is the physical mechanism for why existent things exist? One notable exception is the age-old idea that a thing exists if it is a unity, or a one, as advocated by Aristotle, Leibniz and others. In this section, I will replace "unity" with "grouping", update and flesh out this idea and briefly review its history.

Thus, I put forward the straight-forward and simple hypothesis that a thing exists if it is a grouping (TEIIG) and that the presence of a grouping is the very essence of being in general (being *qua* being) for both concrete and abstract entities. A grouping by its nature creates a new unit whole and existent entity. The term "grouping" has a similar meaning to the more commonly used “unity”, or “one”, because, after all, what does a grouping into a new unit whole do if not create a unity, or a one? A grouping is usually thought of as tying together two or more things or some “stuff” (as in the mass noun stuff) into a new unit whole, or existent entity. This is not a hard and fast rule, though, as the empty set is a grouping containing no elements at all. I argue that what is grouped, how much is grouped, what causes the grouping and whether that cause is internal or external to the grouping do not matter. As long as a grouping is present, a new unit whole and existent entity is created that is a different existent entity than anything contained within considered on its own. The grouping is manifested as a surface, or boundary, that defines exactly what is contained within and that we can see and touch as the surface of the thing. The surface or boundary doesn't have some magical power to give existence to something. But, it is the visual and physical manifestation of the grouping. As I will show, TEIIG is not a novel idea and merely draws together various long extant hypotheses about existence. In sum, and channeling the “easy ontology” of Thomasson (2009), ontology doesn’t have to be as hard as philosophers often times make it out to be. As in science, simpler is often better. Thus, I argue that if a grouping that ties things together into a unit whole is present, a thing exists where and when that grouping is present.

Some examples of groupings that illustrate the broad applicability of TEIIG are 1.) the grouping together of paper and ink atoms to create a new unit whole called a book that's a different existent entity than the atoms considered individually; 2.) the grouping together of previously unrelated elements to create a set. We denote the grouping and its surface symbolically with curly braces; 3.) the grouping of no elements at all, or “nothing”, to create the empty set; 4.) the grouping together of some amount of “stuff” such as sand, to create a castle; and 5.) even the mental construct labeled “car” is a grouping together of the other concepts tires, chassis, steering wheel, use for transportation, etc. Here, instead of a surface, the grouping is better thought of as the top-level label "car" that the mind uses to name the construct that groups other concepts together into one. These examples illustrate that what is grouped (concrete or mental entities), how much is grouped (multiple items or no objects at all) what causes the grouping, and whether that cause is internal to the grouping (bonds between molecules in a book) or external (power of thought that creates the mental concepts of set and car) do not matter. As long as there is a grouping, a new unit whole and existent entity is created.

To further examine TEIIG, I use the example of a pile of dirt. TEIIG suggests that a pile of dirt exists because there is a grouping together of dirt molecules to create a new unit whole and existent entity called the “pile of dirt”. Others, though, have argued that it’s not the grouping together of components that causes something to exist;

instead, it's the stuff inside, such as the dirt molecules inside the pile, that cause the thing to exist. For instance, Goldstick (1979) writes:

> "There is no more basis for identifying a hole with its periphery than for doing the same with a bump. Rather, a hole and a bump are what are contained within those spatial bounds."

Evidence for TEIIG and against Goldstick's "stuff-inside argument includes the following.

1. Of course, the stuff contained within is necessary for a thing to exist, but it's not sufficient. Without the grouping together of that stuff into a new unit whole called a hole or a bump that is visually seen as the surface, or periphery, of the hole or bump, the "stuff inside" is just a bunch of individual unrelated stuff. Goldstick's use of the phrase "what are contained within those *spatial bounds*" seems to say as much. The grouping, manifested as the surface or periphery, is "*those spatial bounds"* and it defines what is "*contained within"*. Without "those spatial bounds", there would be no hole or bump to talk about. That is, without the grouping, the air particles in the hole would be just a bunch of unrelated locations in the block of wood, not a hole, and the dirt molecules in a pile would be just a bunch of unrelated dirt molecules spread out over some land, not a pile. Once they're grouped together, a new unit whole called a hole or pile is created.
2. Suppose it is the stuff inside, the individual dirt molecules and the bonds between them, and not the grouping that gives existence to the pile. One might then ask: why does a dirt molecule exist? Stuff-inside would say it exists because of the atoms inside the molecule and the forces holding the atoms together. Then, why do the atoms and forces exist? To avoid an infinite regress into smaller and smaller atoms of gunk and in order to have anything exist at all, there must be some smallest thing that exists that has no smaller components contained within. An existent entity with no smaller components would seem to be just a surface with nothing inside. What else would it be? And, the surface leads us back to the grouping argument. While "infinite atoms of gunk" is possible, it's not parsimonious, and it lacks explanatory power as to why these atoms exist in the first place. Therefore, a grouping, manifested as a surface, seems superior to the limitless gunk argument.

3. Perhaps, it's the individual bonds between the dirt molecules inside the pile, and not the grouping that makes the pile exist? Fair point, but three counter-arguments are:

   A. It's not the bonds between dirt molecules considered individually that causes the pile to exist. It's the collection of all these bonds considered together and manifested as the surface that cause it to exist.

   B. A bond is itself a grouping of two or more atoms or molecules and the attractive forces between them. For example, atom A may interact with atom B via the electromagnetic force. Without atom A, there is no bond. Without atom B, there is no bond. Without the electromagnetic force, there is no bond. The grouping of all three is needed. One might say that it is the electromagnetic force that holds atoms A and B together, so what holds the grouping of A, B and the force together, à la Bradley's Regress? The answer is that it is A, B, and the force *themselves* that holds the grouping together. The electromagnetic properties of atoms A and B generate the force, and that force then holds A and B together.

   C. Bonds between molecules might explain why a thing of many components exists, but they don't explain why a thing that has no smaller components (i.e., a simple) exists. At this level, there are no smaller components to bond together. And, as explained above, a smallest entity with no smaller components is required to avoid an infinite regress into gunk while still allowing anything to exist at all.

4. Finally, try to imagine how a thing like a pile of dirt, or a book, could exist without an outermost edge or surface. Even if your eyesight is so good you can see anything that exists no matter how small, what

you're seeing is the surface of the thing. Is a thing really there, or even visualizable, if it has no surface? I don't think so. And, a surface is a manifestation of a grouping.

Still others, starting with Aristotle, argue that a pile of dirt molecules is a heap and not a true grouping, or unity. They say that without "form", a pile is just a bunch of un-unified dirt molecules that lack the cohesion needed to be a true grouping/unity. Instead, the pile is a lesser form of existence - a "mere" heap. To my mind, "form" sounds like a word, left over from a different time, for some combination of the bonds, bond angles and orientations of the components of a multi-component entity that make that entity what it is. So, is a pile of dirt that lacks an arbitrary number of bonds a grouping and existent entity or not? I argue it is for these reasons. The dirt molecules in a pile are not just unrelated dirt molecules spread out on some land. Some force has grouped them together. There's an entity there that we're talking about and that we've named "pile of dirt". This pile has a distinct surface that we can see. I can't walk unimpeded through a pile because it's only a lesser form of existent entity. Kind of sounds like a grouping. Now, is a grouping a unity? Also, yes. By definition, a grouping puts stuff together to form a unit whole called a "group". That's what groupings do. Thus, it seems arbitrary and unnecessary to say that a grouping lacking intermolecular bonds, but a grouping nonetheless, is not a true unity and existent entity. Taken together, the above arguments suggest that if a grouping is present, a unity is present, and a thing exists.

How does a grouping come about? While I argue that the cause of the grouping does not affect a thing's status as an existent entity, some possibilities include the following. First, an outside-the-mind grouping can occur if there is a collection of physical force(s) holding particles together, or fastening them (Markosian, 1998; Bird, 2023), that is stronger than any force(s) pushing those particles apart. The collection of these forces and the particles themselves causes the grouping to exist. For example, the chemical and mechanical bonds of the grouping called a car hold it together against the forces of rust and decay. A second mechanism is co-location of entities within a larger area with more or less of those entities. That is, a grouping of entities with property A exists if the density of these entities is x percent different than the density of entities with property A in the surrounding area. For instance, a cloud is a grouping of water droplets visible in a background of sky with a lower density of water droplets. The exact water droplet density differences needed to define the grouping and surface of the cloud (i.e., which droplets are included in the cloud) could be determined by the scientific community. A possible objection to the co-location mechanism is illustrated by the following. Suppose an astronaut looking through a telescope observes a North America covered in trees and realizes that their density decreases dramatically at the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. Does this mean that these trees form a single unit whole and existent entity? Probably not in the outside-the-mind realm, but they do in the astronaut's mind who is considering the "trees in North America" as a unit whole; as a thing. That is, grouping by co-location is a real mechanism, but *where* the grouping is present – inside the mind, outside the mind, or one in each place – can be debated. This is discussed further below. Finally, inside-the-mind groupings don't come about because of bonding or density differences but because of the power of thought. For example, the mental concept the mind labels "1+1=2" is formed when a child uses his or her power of thought to group together the sub-concepts of one object in location A, another object in location B, moving of the objects together to be in the same location, C, and calling this new set "two", and labeling this process with the labels of "addition" and "1+1=2". Taken together, the causes may differ, but as long as a grouping is present, a thing exists.

Some corollaries of the TEIIG idea include the following. First, until after a grouping is complete and what is tied together as a unit whole is exactly defined, there is no grouping, and the thing does not exist. Only after the grouping is complete does the thing exist.

Second, groupings that differ in exactly what is grouped together are different existent entities. By extension, if what is grouped together to form an existent entity is even slightly changed, that entity disappears and a new one appears. This mereological essentialism approach (Chisholm 1973) suggests, for example, that a rock with 1 billion molecules ceases to exist if one molecule falls off, and a new existent entity with 999,999,999 molecules immediately springs into existence because what is grouped together has changed slightly. However, in normal life, humans instinctively use what I call "mereological everydayism" to collapse these multiple rocks into one and say it's the same rock.

What is grouped together in an existent entity includes the component parts, their arrangements, orientations and interactions (i.e., bonds and bond angles). After all, this is all contained within the grouping, and all are important parts of a thing's structure. This is illustrated by the famous lump of clay versus statue paradox, which asks if a lump

of clay is a different existent entity than the statue it is made into. Both contain exactly the same clay molecules, assuming none were removed or added. However, TEIIG suggests that the lump and statue are different existent entities because the orientations, bonds and bond angles of the clay molecules are changed during the processes of sculpting and firing, resulting in different groupings of what is contained within for the lump and statue. This idea isn't new. Fine (1999) pointed out that a sandwich depends not just on its components but on how they are organized, and Koslicki (2013) emphasized that a water molecule depends not only on the presence of one hydrogen and two oxygen atoms but on their configurations and chemical bonds. The components and their organization matter in inside-the-mind existent entities, too. For instance, if the sequence of the grouped concepts in the "1+1=2" example discussed above were changed to one object in location A, a set of two objects in location C, and moving these together to form the single object in location B, this would be a totally different construct than that labeled "1+1=2" and would instead be one labeled "1+2=1".

A third corollary is that a thing exists only where and when its grouping exists. In regard to "where", a grouping can be located either outside or inside the mind, or, for idealists, either in that part of the mind that depicts external things or in that part reserved for internal thoughts, respectively. For simplicity, I assume that there is a real world outside the mind. For example, a single cloud may exist outside the mind with its grouping and surface (i.e., which droplets are included in the cloud) defined by a scientific consensus on the water droplet density differences needed to be considered in the cloud, but many different mental images of that cloud may exist inside the mind depending on how one's imagination visualizes its grouping and surface at a particular moment. The outside-the-mind cloud and inside-the-mind cloud images are all different existent entities because their groupings exist in different locations. Even the multiple inside-the-mind cloud images exist in different locations in the brain's memory. This corollary offers a solution to The Problem of the Many, which is concerned with "the number of entities, if any, that exist in actual ordinary situations..." (Unger 1980). Another example of the where aspect of groupings is that the concept of the "number one" in Joe's head is a distinct existent entity than the concept of the "number one" in Jane's head because their groupings are in two different locations.

An example of the "when the grouping exists" aspect is that of the rock with 1 billion atoms, discussed above. Suppose this rock doesn't lose any atoms and exists on two consecutive days. Are the rocks on different days the same rock? TEIIG suggests that strictly speaking, they are not because their groupings exist at different times. This is similar to Sider's temporal stage view (2000) and Patrone's pixelism hypothesis (2020). Again though, in everyday life, humans instinctively use "mereological everydayism" to collapse the multiple rocks to a single rock analogously to how the human mind stitches together a series of individual still-motion pictures into one continuous movie.

The TEIIG hypothesis has two other important advantages. First, the where and when aspects suggest that a grouping is an ideal candidate for a thing's "primitive thisness" (Adams 1979; Diekemper 2015) and would suffice to distinguish two otherwise indiscernible iron spheres (Black 1952) because each is a different grouping. Second, TEIIG provides an answer to the Special Composition Question (van Inwagen, 1990), which asks what factors allow some objects (A, B and C) to come together and form another object (D). TEIIG suggests the restricted composition-style view that a new object D is formed only when there's a grouping of the A, B and C objects to form a new unit whole and only where the grouping is present. This may seem overly simplistic, but I argue that philosophers tend to make things overly

This idea that a thing exists if it's a grouping that creates a new unit whole has a long philosophical history. Over the centuries, a grouping has also been called "form", unity, one and bundle, but the idea is the same. In ancient times, Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* (Barnes 1984) suggested what is now called hylomorphism, or the idea that a unity of material components is needed for a thing to exist and that "form" is what unifies these components. While not exactly equivalent, "form" is similar to the idea of a grouping that ties together, or unifies, particular material components to cause a new thing to exist. Centuries later, Leibniz also suggested that being is unity. He highlights this via his use of emphasis in writing to Arnauld (1687):

> "...that what is not truly *one* being is not truly one *being* either"

Aitken and McDonough (2020) write about Leibniz:

> "His core idea seems to be simply that anything that enjoys real, true, fundamental being must also enjoy real, true, fundamental unity and vice versa."

More recently, Priest (2015) made the same point:

> "...it is clear that being and unity come to the same thing. If something is an object, it is one thing; and if it is one thing, it is certainly an object...To be is to be one. So the being of something is that in virtue of which it is one."

Priest further suggests that a “gluon”, which is identical with each of the components that make up the unity, is what ties together components to form a unity. This seems to be another way of saying what was said above: that the collection of components and the forces and bonds holding them together are what allow a grouping to be present. The grouping of components, forces and bonds could therefore be thought of as “gluons” in Priest's terminology.

Petersen (2019) has proposed that things can come together to form a whole when they form a real pattern, where pattern is related to the idea of compressible data about the components of the whole. Bird (2023) has made a similar argument. To my ear, this is completely in line with the TEIIG hypothesis. What is a pattern, after all, if not a set of entities that are taken together to create a unit whole called a “pattern”?

In sum, TEIIG has a long philosophical history and explains how and why both concrete and abstract things exist. It suggests that whenever discussing an existent entity, it is important to define exactly what is grouped together and where and when the grouping exists. Additionally, that entities inside the mind are different entities than those outside the mind. In the next section, TEIIG is applied to “nothing” and the WSRTN question.

In sum, I argue that a thing exists if it is a grouping (TEIIG) and that the presence of a grouping is the very essence of being in general for both concrete and abstract entities. A grouping by its nature creates a new unit whole and existent entity. Some may call this overly simplistic. Any grouping is an existent entity? I suggest the answer is yes, in the location and time where that grouping is present. Why not? There’s a tendency in philosophy to make ontology far more complicated than it needs to be, but as in science, the simpler is often the better. In the next section, TEIIG is applied to “nothing” and the WSRTN question.

3 “Nothing” Is a Grouping: A Proposed Solution to the WSRTN Question

Before beginning, two important points are as follows. First, by "nothing", I mean absolute metaphysical "nothing”, including the absence of all concrete and abstract entities, and not a vacuum or any of the “nothing lites” others have sometimes used. In absolute “nothing” even the mind of the person thinking about this, *your mind*, is gone. I’ll further define this “nothing” below. Second is that it's very important to distinguish between the mind's conception of "nothing" and "nothing" itself, in which the mind of the reader, your mind, would not be there. These are two different things. The "nothing" in the WSRTN question is "nothing" itself and not the mind's conception of "nothing".

Now for the proposed solution. Gefter (2014) has suggested that the seeming insolubility of the WSRTN question may be due to a flawed assumption. I agree and propose that the flawed assumption is that “nothing” and "something" are opposites. Instead, I suggest "nothing" is an existent entity, or a “something” in disguise. How can this be? In regard to the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", two possible solutions are:

> A. “Something” has always been here.
>
> B. “Something” has not always been here.

Choice A is possible but doesn't explain anything; although, more will be said about it below. So, consider choice B. With B, if "something" has not always been here, then "nothing" must have been here before it. That is, there was "nothing" and now there is "something". A benefit of this solution is that if there is ever to be an answer to the WSRTN question in which no "somethings" are left unexplained, we need to consider the possibility of starting with "nothing" and ending up with "something" because common sense suggests that "nothing" needs no explanation. Therefore, let's go with choice B in which we start with "nothing" and end up with "something". Now, if this supposed "nothing" before the "something" were truly the lack of all existent entities, there would be no mechanism present to change this "nothing" into the "something" that is here now. But, because we can see that "something" is here now, the *only* possible way to start with "nothing" and end up with "something" is if the supposed "nothing" we were thinking of was not in fact the lack of all existent entities, or "nothing", but was instead a "something". This is logically required with choice B. An analogous way of saying this is with the idea that you start with a 0 (i.e., "nothing") and end up with a 1 (i.e., "something"). Because you can't change a 0 into a 1, the only way you can do this is if that 0 wasn't really a 0 but was actually a 1 in disguise, even though it looks like a 0 on the surface. That is, from our traditional way of thinking about "nothing", it just looks like "nothing". But, if we could think about "nothing" in a different way and see through its disguise, we could see that it isn't actually "nothing" but is really a "something". In other words, the situation we typically think of as "nothing" is itself an existent entity. Overall, this leads to the result that there is no such thing as absolute "nothing" and that "something" is necessary because even what we used to think of as "nothing" is a "something". Ironically, going with choice B leads back to choice A. If what we used to think of as "nothing" is actually a "something", this would always have been true, which means that this "something" would always have been here. But, at least now we have a clue as to why.

One might object and say that the words "was" and "now" in the phrase "there was nothing and now there is something" imply a temporal change from "nothing" to "something", but time would not exist until there was "something", so how can that be? This is a valid concern, but I suggest that the words "was" and "now" should not be thought of in a time sense. Instead, I propose that the words "nothing" and "something" are just two different ways people can think about the situation we've previously called "nothing", and the human mind erroneously views the switching between the different ways of thinking about this situation as a temporal change from "was" to "now" when in fact it's just switching between two ways of thinking about the same situation. Aquinas (1259-1265) made a similar point in *The Summa Contra Gentiles* when discussing how humans view the action of producing "something" from "nothing" as a motion or change. As Maryniarczyk (2016) describes Aquinas' thinking:

> "The act of creation thus conceived is something specific and incomparable with any other action. Only on account of the feebleness of our mode of cognition (secundum modum intelligendi tantum) this act can be described as a motion or change. Our reason conceives of the act of creation as something that first was not, and then appeared. In other words, explains Thomas, our reason conceives of creation as a motion or change since 'our intellect grasps one and the same thing as previously non-existent, and as afterwards existing.' "

This way of thinking avoids the temporal change problem and makes more plausible the idea that "nothing" and "something" are the same.

Instead of simply asserting that "nothing" can't be a "something" and refusing to continue, it's more useful to follow the above logic and try to figure out how "nothing" can be a "something". So, how can this be? The first step is to understand why any "normal" thing like a book exists and then see if this can be applied to "nothing". Thus, I'll use the idea from section 1 that a thing exists if it is a grouping that creates a unit whole and apply it to "nothing". Doing so, I first define "nothing" as the result of subtracting away all matter, energy, space/volume, time, concrete and abstract entities, locations, laws or constructs of physics/math/logic, possible worlds/possibilities/potentialities, counteracting forces, philosophical constructs (i.e., properties, universals, etc.), consciousness, any other existent entities, and minds, including the mind of the person trying to imagine this lack of all, *your mind.* When we subtract away all this stuff, we think the result is the lack of all existent entities, or "nothing". Stop for a second and try to imagine this "nothing" when your mind is also gone. *This is key to visualizing the argument because in "nothing", everything, including your mind, is gone. While this is, of course, impossible, one can try to visualize everything being gone to the extent possible and then extrapolate from there as to what the situation would be like when your mind isn't there.* Once everything, including the mind of the thinker, your mind, is gone, this "nothing" would, by its very nature, be the whole amount, or entirety, of the situation. "Nothing" completely defines the situation. The

inherent nature of “nothing” is that it's everything. It’s all. Is there anything else besides that "nothing"? No. It is "nothing", and this “nothing” is it, the all. A whole-amount/entirety/completely-defined-situation/all (henceforth, shortened to entirety/all) is a grouping, which means, by the definition given here, that the situation we previously considered to be "nothing" is itself an existent entity. This grouping, like other groupings, is manifested as a surface, but because there is "nothing", the surface is not a structure but is instead the entirety/all grouping itself. This argument implies that "nothing", by its very nature, defines itself as an existent entity and is therefore the beginning point in the chain of being able to define existent entities in terms of other existent entities.

One objection might be that a grouping is a property so how can it be there in "nothing"? The answer is that it is *only once* all known existent entities, including all properties and the mind visualizing this “nothing”, *your mind*, are removed does this “nothing” gain the new property of being the entirety/all grouping. In other words, the very lack of all existent entities is itself what allows this new property to be present and thereby to allow "nothing" to be an existent entity. This entirety/all grouping property is inherent, or intrinsic, to “nothing” and cannot be removed to get a more pure “nothing”. Said one last way: there is an inherent completely-defined/whole aspect of “nothing” because it is everything, the all.

In sum then, the answer to the WSRTN question is that "something" is necessary, or non-contingent, because even the situation we previously, and incorrectly, thought of as "nothing", is a "something. But, at least now we have a reason. It also means that “nothing” that lacks even the property of being a grouping is not possible. Furthermore, existence is self-explaining and self-causing (*causa sui)*. While these conclusions are not new, the grouping (or any) mechanism that allows "nothing" to be a "something" is, to the best of my knowledge.

If the above hypothesis is correct, then the existent entity that we previously, and incorrectly, called “nothing” would be the most fundamental building block of our existence. After all, if the starting point is “nothing”, there can be no other fundamental entity. Therefore, the universe we see around us must be derived from this one fundamental entity. In this sense, the entity previously called “nothing” would be the physical embodiment of the empty set, which is that construct that mathematicians use to construct all natural numbers. Given this, the current solution is fundamentalist in nature, and indicates that our existence is “well-founded” because “every non-fundamental fact is fully grounded by some fundamental fact(s)” (Brenner, 2021), with the sole fundamental fact being the existent entity previously called “nothing”.

While no others that I know of have presented the grouping mechanism described above, some have suggested the idea of starting with “nothing”; although, they provide no mechanism for how “nothing” can be a “something” that does not itself need an explanation. One example of this is Plotinus' concept of “the One”. As Gerson (2011) writes:

> "The self-causality of the One is also, remarkably, described as '[making] itself from nothing (oudenos).' "

How the One causes itself to form from nothing isn't clear. In the middle ages, Aquinas proposed "*productio ex nihilo"* or formation of the universe from "nothing" with God as the first and pure act (*actus primus et purus*) that caused this (Maryniarczyk 2016). This is somewhat reminiscent of the grouping hypothesis with the grouping property of "nothing" being the "act" that allows "nothing" to be a "something".

In a different vein, Hegel (1817) wrote that nothing and being were both the same and yet absolutely different and that their unity is “Becoming”, which then somehow collapses into determinate being (Hegel 1817; Houlgate 2022):

> “Nothing, if it be thus immediate and equal to itself, is also conversely the same as Being is. The truth of Being and of Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming...It is as correct however to say that Being and Nothing are altogether different, as to assert their unity. The one is *not* what the other is...."
>
> “In Becoming the Being which is one with Nothing, and the Nothing which is one with Being, are only vanishing factors; they are and they are not. Thus by its inherent contradiction Becoming collapses into the unity in which the two elements are absorbed. This result is accordingly Being Determinate (Being there and so).”

If I understand it correctly, “immediate” in the first line refers to something in and of itself, without any perceptions attached. While similar in tone to the ideas presented here, Hegel's language is ill-defined, obscure and almost mystical, and he presents no mechanism for how nothing in its “immediacy” and “equal to itself” is the same as being or how their unity leads to determinate being.

In more modern times, Nozick (1981) wrote:

> “Is it possible to imagine nothingness being a natural state which itself contains the force whereby something is produced?”

Perhaps, the "force" Nozick mentions is the grouping aspect of “nothing” which explains why it's an existent entity? Even more recently, Priest (2021) and Zolghadr (2019) have come somewhere in the vicinity of the grouping idea. Priest writes:

> “Now, take any set of objects, X, and throw away its members, one at a time. When you have removed the last one, what remains is the set with no members, the empty set, ∅. So the fusion of its members is the fusion of no things. And that is exactly what **nothing** would seem to be. Hence, we may take **nothing** to be the fusion of the members of the empty set…nothing is the fusion of things in the empty set, and there are no things in the empty set. You can fuse no things together as many times as you like; you will never get anything!”

If I understand him correctly, though, he doesn’t think this fusion of no things that is **nothing** is itself a thing. Further, he provides no mechanism for how or why **nothing** actually is a fusion of no things. His is more of a logical argument only. In contrast, I propose that the situation previously, and incorrectly, called “nothing” is indeed a thing and I provide a plausible mechanism for how this can be. Priest further writes that "nothing" is the ground of all objects:

> "For if nothing were not something, there would be nothing for any object, g, to be distinct from; so g could not be an object, something."

However, this does not explain why object g is there in the first place and, thus, does not answer the WSRTN question. Finally, Bhattacharyya (2021) expanded on the mathematical concept of zero to conclude:

> “Finally, we argue that nonexistence may notionally constitute existence, and hence may be the fundamental.”

While his rationale is more mathematical, Bhattacharyya covers some of the same ideas presented here. In sum, despite this long history, the mechanism presented here of “nothing” being a grouping and therefore an existent entity seems to be unique.

4 “Nothing” Is a Grouping: Objections and Responses

Some possible objections and responses to the "nothing" is a grouping, and thus a "something", argument are as follows.

1. Objection: "Nothing" isn't "something" just by definition. Therefore, this argument is false.

Response:

A. The definition of "nothing" as the opposite of "something" is a human definition. Humans exist and are "somethings" and, therefore, we are stuck in our existent minds as having to define “nothing” as the lack of all “somethings”. But, neither humans nor our definition of "nothing" would be there in "nothing" itself. To insist that the human definition of "nothing" applies to "nothing" itself, a situation in which no humans are present and no humans can visualize, is both illogical and an unfounded assumption. Therefore, whether “nothing” itself is just nothing, or instead is the entirety/all grouping and, thus, a "something, is independent of our thinking and talking about it and of how we define it. And, because it is “nothing” itself, and not the mind's definition of “nothing”, that we're talking about in the WSRTN question, our human definition of "nothing" as not "something" has no relevance to whether or not the proposed solution is correct.

B. Our definition of "nothing" as the lack of all existent entities is not quite correct; it stops short. Once we think we've gotten rid of all existent entities, we've always stopped there and said that's the definition of "nothing". End of story. But, as the argument presented here suggests, it's only at that point, only once we've gotten rid of all existent entities, that the resulting situation gains the new property of being the entirety/all grouping. In other words, the very lack of all existent entities is itself what allows this new property of being the entirety/all grouping to appear. Because of this, "nothing" itself exists. It's only the "nothing" of our stopped-short definition of "nothing" that doesn’t exist.

2. Objection: By talking about "nothing", you're reifying it and mistaking your reification of "nothing" for "nothing" itself.

Response: Again, neither humans nor our talking about and defining of "nothing" would be there in "nothing" itself. Therefore, our talking about "nothing" has no effect on, and does not reify, "nothing" itself. Second, in order to even discuss the WSRTN question, we have to talk about "nothing" as a thing, but as just mentioned, this does not reify "nothing" itself.

3. Objection: You say that "nothing" has the property of being the entirety/all grouping. But, if it has that property, it's not "nothing.

Response: I argue that this entirety/all grouping feature of "nothing" *only* becomes present once all other known existents are removed. Furthermore, this grouping property is inherent to the situation we've always considered to be "nothing" and it cannot be removed to get a more pure "nothing".

4. Objection: A grouping usually groups individual components, but in “nothing”, there are no components. Is that really a grouping?

Response:

A. While it's usually true that groupings tie together one or more individual components, is this always the case? No. First, for instance, consider the empty set in mathematics. This is a grouping, or set, with no elements, or “nothing”, at all. Second, the philosophical concept of the simple is an object without parts. If these exist, they are groupings containing no components. Third, consider an electron. Physicists think electrons have no smaller parts. Unless, they’re made of continuous “electron stuff”, they are entities containing “nothing” inside. Finally, if we can group a plurality of component parts in order to form a larger grouping, or existent entity (e.g., many atoms are grouped to form a billiard ball), it seems reasonable to think that those components were also formed in the same way, via a grouping of even smaller things. To avoid an infinite regress into gunk, there must be some smallest thing, or grouping, with no further components inside - a simple. Said differently, we define things in terms of other things. Should there not be an initial "thing" that isn't defined in terms of anything else in order to start this chain. This initial thing in the chain of definitions is analogous to a grouping containing no components. It is the empty set of the definition process.

B. Perhaps, we usually think of groupings as tying together two or more things into a new unit whole because that's what we're used to from living in the world of things? But, humans aren’t there in

> "nothing", so we can't rule out by direct observation that the entirety/all grouping applies to "nothing", too. So, requiring that a grouping only applies to two or more things and not to "nothing", a place we've never been and can never go, seems unfounded.

5. Objection: Why is “nothing” the presumed default situation?

Response: Leibniz himself (1714) regarded “nothing” as a default when he wrote:

> “After all, nothing is simpler and easier than something. Also, given that things have to exist, we must be able to give a reason why they have to exist as they are and not otherwise.”

Additionally, common sense suggests that a starting point of “nothing” needs no explanation. If “something” of any kind were the default, it would still need an explanation why it's there. As an analogy, if you buy a house and when you move in, some guy is there, you would ask “Why is this guy here instead of not here?”. You could assume that the default situation is that the house comes with this guy and not wonder why, but is that what you'd really do? No. You'd think that the default situation should be “no guy” and then try and figure out why he's there. Assuming “nothing” as the default is similar.

6. Objection: How can the entirety/all grouping that is the existent entity previously called "nothing" be the surface of a real, physical entity that composes our real, physical universe?

Response: Consider a “real physical” electron, one of the particles that composes our universe. What is an electron? What is inside it? What is its surface or grouping that defines it and makes it real and physical? No one knows. All we really know is that an electron is an existent entity. As such, it is no different than the existent entity that has been previously, and incorrectly, referred to as "nothing". An existent entity is an existent entity. Whether this entity is called an "electron" or the grouping that we previously, and incorrectly, called nothing" doesn't matter. They’re just arbitrary names for existent entities. Second, two existent entities that were previously called "nothing" and that are “looking at each other” would seem as real and physical to each other as two "real" electrons look to each other. It's all relative.

7. Objection: Why not go with one of the extant answers instead of this “nothing” is a grouping answer?

Response: As mentioned previously, all the other answers, while possible, have the problem of leaving "something" (either the stuff of the universe or the thing that caused the stuff of the universe) unexplained. This "something" is there without explanation, and the universe is made from it. Shut up and calculate as physicists might say. While possible, it is intellectually dissatisfying to always leave "something" unexplained. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, in order to ever get an intellectually satisfying answer, we need to start with "nothing" and end up with "something". However, we have historically ruled this out as non-sensical due to the *ex nihilo nihil fit* (out of nothing, nothing comes) principle. While this principle is sound, there is one method that starts with "nothing" and ends up with "something" that does not violate it: if that "nothing" is somehow actually a "something" in disguise. To ignore this possibility is to be forever bound by our human definitions and preconceptions and to never find an intellectually satisfying answer to the WSRTN question. Therefore, we have a choice: 1.) go with the extant solutions, always leave "something" unexplained, and ensure that we keep asking the WSRTN question forever, or 2.) challenge your preconceptions and consider the simple mechanism presented here that starts with "nothing" and provides a self-explaining reason inherent to “nothing” for why that "nothing" is a "something". I choose the latter.

Some might, however, say that claiming that "nothing" is actually a "something" has the same problem of leaving "something" unexplained. But does it? No, because 1.) it starts with "nothing", which seemingly needs no explanation, and 2.) it provides a mechanism, the entirety/all grouping mechanism, inherent to "nothing” for why that “nothing” is a “something”. The presence of a self-explaining mechanism inherent to “nothing” is key.

5 Conclusions

Overall, I propose the straight-forward and simple idea that a thing exists if it is a grouping that creates a unit whole. Being in its most general sense doesn't have to be any harder than that. In regard to the WSRTN question, once one subtracts away all known existent entities, including the mind, *your* mind, the resulting "nothing" is the entirety/all grouping and, thus, an existent entity, or a "something". It is the very lack of all existent entities that causes this new grouping property to be present and thereby allow "nothing" to be an existent entity. This entirety/all grouping is inherent to "nothing" and cannot be removed to get a more pure "nothing". Thus, it is impossible to have "nothing" lacking this entiretyness, and, therefore, "something" is necessary, or non-contingent. To the best of my knowledge, this is a novel solution to the WSRTN question. Its advantages are that it starts with "nothing", provides a self-explaining mechanism by which "nothing" is a "something" and leaves no "somethings" left unexplained.

What do we do with this, or any, solution, to the WSRTN question besides satisfy our curiosity? I suggest the following. Because it starts with "nothing", the existent entity previously, and incorrectly, called "nothing" would be the most fundamental of existent entities. After all, if we start with "nothing", there are no other entities. Because the universe is made of existent entities, this fundamental entity must be the foundational building block of our universe. In order to be physically existent, the fundamental entity must have certain other physical properties such as dimension and shape. These additional properties are all grounded in and supervene upon the entirety/all grouping property inherent to "nothing". These properties must then somehow cause the formation of all other existent entities in the universe. Therefore, by figuring out what these physical properties are, we can use them to develop a simple model of the universe. If this model matches observations and makes testable predictions that are also validated by observation, this is the scientific method and provides evidence for the solution. This metaphysics-to-physics approach, while difficult, could be of value in gaining a deeper understanding of the universe. Without evidence, humans will argue about the WSRTN question forever and never make actual progress.

Finally, while the solution presented here may sound strange, challenge your assumptions and be difficult to visualize, it is worth noting something Robert Nozick (1981) wrote in regard to the WSRTN question:

> "The question cuts so deep, however, that any approach that stands a chance of yielding an answer will look extremely weird. Someone who proposes a non-strange answer shows he didn't understand this question...we must be prepared to accept strangeness or apparent craziness in a theory that answers it."

In sum, the solution presented here offers a way forward in resolving the WSRTN question because it starts with "nothing" and presents a self-explaining mechanism intrinsic to "nothing" for why that "nothing" is a "something". Additionally, it may be possible to eventually experimentally test it, as described above. Overall, it is a legitimate, assumption-minimal and novel solution to the WSRTN question.

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