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Why there is  
Something rather  
than Nothing

Bede Rundle

Why should there be anything at all? Why, in particular, should a material world exist? Bede Rundle advances clear, non-technical answers to these perplexing questions. If, as the theist maintains, God is a being who cannot but exist, his existence explains why there is something rather than nothing. However, this can also be explained on the basis of a weaker claim. Not that there is some particular being that has to be, but simply that there has to be something or other. Rundle proffers arguments for thinking that that is indeed how the question is to be put to rest.

Traditionally, the existence of the physical universe is held to depend on God, but the theist faces a major difficulty in making clear how a being outside space and time, as God is customarily conceived to be, could stand in an intelligible relation to the world, whether as its creator or as the author of events within it. Rundle argues that a creator of physical reality is not required, since there is no alternative to its existence. There has to be something, and a physical universe is the only real possibility. He supports this claim by eliminating rival contenders; he dismisses the supernatural, and argues that, while other forms of being, notably the abstract and the mental, are not reducible to the physical, they presuppose its existence. The question whether ultimate explanations can ever be given is forever in the background, and the book concludes with an investigation of this issue and of the possibility that the universe could have existed for an infinite time. Other topics discussed include causality, space, verifiability, essence, existence, necessity, spirit, fine tuning, and laws of Nature.

*Why there is Something rather than Nothing* offers an explanation of fundamental facts of existence in purely philosophical terms, without appeal either to theology or cosmology. It will provoke and intrigue anyone who wonders about these questions.

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# Why there is Something rather than Nothing



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*Bede Rundle*

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## Preface

The question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', has a strong claim to be philosophy's central, and most perplexing, question. As providing a possible starting point for a proof of the existence of God, its centrality is assured, and it has a capacity to set one's head spinning which few other philosophical problems can rival. The principal answers which it receives are of two kinds. First, as just indicated, we have the theist's response: the existence of anything at all can be explained only if we can suppose that there is a being, God, who exists of necessity and is the source of all being. Second, and ever more commonly, it is held that physics will provide the answer. Cosmological theories are being continually developed and refined to such a point that we can expect an eventual explanation of why our universe exists, and hence of the more general fact that something exists, to arise out of such a theory.

Both these responses are problematic. Our remarkable success in devising scientific explanations, in resolving what have initially appeared impenetrable mysteries, may make for a presumption that favours the naturalistic alternative, but there are many, scientists as well as non-scientists, who believe that we must look beyond science if we are to find a final explanation. The province of cosmology is nothing short of the whole universe, but it is difficult to see how enlightenment might be found *within* that province. One way or another, the existence of something seems always to be presupposed. On the other hand, if the origins of what is of concern to cosmology are not a question for cosmology itself, it is not clear that theology can fare any better, given the problems associated with the very concept of God. The universe does not appear to be self-explanatory, but it has yet to be made clear how a genuine explanation could be given by invoking a being outside space and time, as God is customarily conceived to be.

In the face of the difficulties presented by these two solutions, we may be drawn to a reluctant acceptance that the existence at which we marvel is just a matter of brute, inexplicable, fact. Reluctant, since as a response that disowns rather than offers the possibility of enlightenment, this is not a happy resting place. However, while it may be difficult to see where else to turn, there is a further possibility. Neither of the answers touched

upon gives what might be considered a typically philosophical solution, a solution which proceeds by showing that the troublesome questions rest on mistaken assumptions. A distinctive feature of philosophical questions lies in the way they transform under scrutiny, giving way, as the nature of the issue becomes clearer, to a series of sub-questions often not obviously related to the original query. This is one reason why, to the beginner in the subject, much philosophy is found baffling; to someone ignorant of the history of the problem, it is not evident why the issues being addressed are felt to be relevant, let alone important. This development often has, in addition, a deflationary aspect: the initial question is superseded by those that follow because it is revealed to harbour a misconception. If, for instance, the mind-body problem is conceived of as a problem of understanding how two kinds of 'stuff', the mental and the physical, can interact, it is not going to meet with an answer which does not fault the formulation. Likewise in the present instance: if there is something improper about assumptions behind our seemingly unanswerable questions, if what is perceived as an intractable problem is no more than a confusion, then a resolution may take the form of an exposition of the misconceptions, a rejection of the questions, and a consequent dispelling of our perplexity. This, I suggest, is what we meet with at crucial points in the enquiry that follows.

The main lines of our argument are straightforward. After expounding difficulties, largely familiar, in the theist's approach, we consider two possible answers to the question why there is something rather than nothing. There is, first, the relatively modest observation that there has to be something or other, and second, the more traditional claim that there is some particular being that has to be. The former recommends itself over the latter as being weaker, yet able to provide an answer to the initial question, and we offer reasons for thinking it correct. At this point we also bring to bear our deflationary considerations, arguing that the notion of beginning to be has no application to the universe, and hence that there is in this instance no coming into existence for which we have to find a cause. More generally, it is suggested that when talking about the universe we get into difficulties not altogether dissimilar from those encountered in talking about God. In either case, the concepts we invoke have a clear application within the universe, but they break down when extrapolated either to a supposedly transcendent being or to the universe itself. However, while it is seemingly inconceivable that there should have been

nothing at all, it is far from clear why there is what there is. Our response is to argue that if there is anything at all, there must be matter; nothing else has the kind of existential independence required. The domain of the immaterial offers us, principally, the abstract and the mental. We do not have to reject either category but, if neither enjoys an independent existence, matter remains unchallenged. But even if matter can be assured, we are still left wondering why the universe is, more specifically, as it is. It is at this point that most of the issues pass from philosophy to physics, but certain questions, such as those concerning the way in which explanations may come to an end and the possibility that the universe has existed for an infinite time, have sufficient philosophical content to fall within the scope of our investigation.

When the universe is our subject-matter, the number of topics clamouring for attention is daunting: God, causality, space, time, essence, existence, necessity, infinity, explanation, mind—practically all the concepts of interest to metaphysics. A theory of everything is not our business, but a philosophy of just about everything philosophy dreams of is needed, and the analyses that follow patently fail to meet that need. In some cases I am able to refer to elaborations I have given elsewhere, but my main concern is to present the key considerations in outline, to give an indication of what might be possible in areas where it is so easy to think that we have come to a dead end. And it is only what *might* be possible. I cannot claim that the arguments on key points—as with the central thesis that there has to be something—are compelling. It is, rather, that good reasons can be given in support of the position advocated, and that the case for that position gains further in credibility from the apparent lack of any remotely plausible alternative.

*Trinity College, Oxford*



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# Theology and Meaning

Our starting point is the theist's attempt to account for the existence of the universe. The supposition of a transcendent being provokes a range of problems, but we shall give greatest attention to those which relate to God's supposed action on, or in producing, the world—the key conception on which the theist's case turns. The issues are introduced in conjunction with the positivist's challenge to theism, a challenge which we find only partially successful. In general, it does not require subscription to a contentious account of what makes for meaningfulness to find good reason for attributing serious incoherence to the theist's position. In particular, it proves difficult to see how the crucial concept of explanation can have any application to the otherworldly.

## I.I MEANING AND VERIFICATION

The principal philosophical threat to theology in the twentieth century is commonly held to have come from logical positivism, with its refusal to allow that metaphysical claims, and those of theology in particular, are meaningful, let alone true. In sanctioning beliefs which purport to go beyond what experience can decide, metaphysics would appear to be at the heart of philosophy: what is there left of the subject if this heart is torn out? The positivists' rejection of metaphysics rested on the verification principle, which laid down that a proposition is meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. Linguistic forms deemed acceptable in terms of this principle include everyday propositions about the world along with the more sophisticated propositions of science, in so far as these can have their truth established by observation and experimentation; in addition, propositions of logic and mathematics are admissible, since they



can be recognized as true by pure reason. Claims about God, however, are not like descriptions of tables and chairs, nor even electrons; nor do they compare with theorems of pure mathematics. Having no place in either of these favoured categories, they are, for the positivist, to be dismissed as nonsense, forms of words having the appearance of meaningful utterances, but in reality being no better than strings of nonsense syllables. Theological pronouncements are seen to be casualties of this attack even before the question of truth can be raised in their regard. That is, if neither empirical verifiability nor purely logical support can be granted, there is nothing for us to consider even as a possibility. As failing on both counts, the pivotal proposition, 'God exists', does not bear enough sense even to be false.

The theological response to A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, in which this position was vigorously advanced, was twofold. There was little by way of positive rehabilitation of traditional theism in the face of Ayer's onslaught. Some tried to argue that crucial theological propositions could be found to be true, even if this discovery had to wait until we were dead—'eschatological verification'—but most sought either to find fault with positivism, or to adjust the interpretation of theological propositions in such a way that these were no longer in the line of fire. The approach commonly followed by those who found fault was largely a matter of trying to demonstrate that the verification principle did not conform to its own demands: it was not based on experience, yet if it were in the category of the logical, it would, on Ayer's showing, 'simply record our determination to use words in a certain fashion' (1952: 84).

This analysis makes it appear that the only alternative to construing the principle as an empirical generalization is to take an arbitrary stand on a question of meaning. However, if we might equally say that the non-empirical alternative concerns logical connections between concepts of meaning, understanding, and verification, it would appear that this category is just the one where the principle, if warranted, could be expected to find its justification. Indeed, to suggest that the issue could be anything other than conceptual might well now strike us as extraordinary; as about what makes sense, it is pre-eminently a 'grammatical' matter, in Wittgenstein's extended sense of the term, according to which grammar encompasses rules of use quite generally, semantic as well as syntactic. Whether a particular use of language requires the possibility of verification is surely to be decided by ascertaining just what that use involves, and whether the relevant considerations vindicate a more general requirement of verifiability is a question to be pursued by extending this conceptual

enquiry. However, given that the alternative to the empirical was thought of in the disparaging terms indicated, it is understandable that those who wished to impale the verification principle on the logical/empirical dilemma considered themselves to be on firm ground. At all events, even if the ground is not as firm as it appeared, that does not help with the problem, as urgent as ever, of making sense of theological discourse.

Before elaborating this point, it is worth mentioning a stronger reason for querying the positivist's appeal to the verification principle. Consider the suggestion that the universe might suddenly double in size; a development which, it is said, would inevitably elude all observation and measurement, and which can accordingly be ruled out as meaningless by the principle. When there is something which remains constant, something relative to which other objects may be described as increasing in size, we can make sense of expansion, but take away any such fixed point and the concept ceases to have application. With expansion, as with motion generally, we are dealing with a *relational* notion, and when one term of the relation is denied us, the conditions requisite for applying the concept do not obtain. It is preferable to put it this way rather than say that the expansion would be undetectable; that comes too close to conceding that it makes sense to speak in these terms, as with Waismann's comment on the supposition: 'this remarkable change of our world could not be verified in any way, it would remain completely unnoticed by us' (1965: 326). But the crucial point is that there would be nothing *to* notice. What is lacking is definition, not observability. By contrast, the gravitational attraction which a marble exerts upon the earth is infinitesimal, but it is at least defined—unmeasurable, certainly, but not incalculable.

Just why the possibility of finding out about the putative expansion is denied us is made clear in this account, but if we conclude that the hypothesis is accordingly nonsensical or meaningless, this verdict has to be consistent with the consideration that it is only by reflecting on the meaning of the words that we come to appreciate that verification is ruled out. That need not be a problem. We commonly condemn as nonsense propositions that stand no chance of truth—"The Government can be counted upon not to raise taxes"—but in the positivist's mouth this condemnation is tantamount to the claim that what has been said is totally unintelligible, nothing better than mere gibberish, and that, surely, makes nonsense of the procedure whereby we come to our dismissal. 'The universe might double in size' makes enough sense for us to be able to argue that the ostensible possibility eludes verification. However, what we have may still

be classed as a failure of meaning, in that there is a lack of definition of key terms when applied in the context envisaged. That, plus forms of incoherence close to, or actually involving contradiction, is the pattern which, I suggest, is most often to be met with when theological propositions are found wanting.

If at least a modicum of sense must be granted before questions of verification can be addressed, the lesson to be learned from a lack of verifiability will not be the positivist's, though that is not to say that there is nothing to learn from this failure. This topic is usefully pursued via a consideration of Wittgenstein's views on verifiability.

In his transitional period, Wittgenstein was firmly wedded to verificationism: 'The verification is not *one* token of the truth, it is *the* sense of the proposition' (1975: §166; cf. 1979a, *passim*); 'To show what sense a statement makes requires saying how it can be verified and what can be done with it' (1979b: 19). However, this uncompromising position eventually gave way to the weaker claim that an account of how a proposition is verified has the role only of a *contribution* to the grammar of that proposition. That is, our understanding of a proposition may be elucidated by explaining what findings, if any, would show it to be true, but questions of meaning are not exhausted by such considerations. In keeping with his contention that meaning is use, the emphasis shifts from condemning forms of words which the positivist would proscribe to asking how those words are going to be used. This stance is evident in the following passage from *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology I*:

366. We read in a story that someone had a dream and did not tell it to anyone. We don't ask how the author could learn it.—Don't we *understand* it, when Strachey makes surmises about what Queen Victoria may have seen in her mind's eye just before her death? Of course—but didn't people also *understand* the question how many souls there was room for on the point of a needle? That is to say: the question whether one understands this does not help us here; we must ask *what* we can do with such a sentence.—*That* we use the sentence is clear; *how* we use it is the question.

(1980: §366)

Granting understanding is granting meaning, but a positivist thesis could still lurk in the requirement that a use be specified. It is noticeable that Wittgenstein acknowledges a use or uses for much religious language, but it is precisely because these are invariably non-metaphysical that there is little comfort here for a traditional theist, who yearns for a use of assertoric

utterances which in some way extends the range of fact-stating language. Indeed, I should have thought that the essentials of the positivist's position could be secured if we could justify his refusal to allow this extension (cf. Ayer 1959: 16). And, if that is right, it would seem that the further characterization of metaphysical propositions as meaningless need be no part of his main purpose, but an unnecessary distraction. His concern is, after all, with 'cognitive' or 'factual' meaning, so he can afford to be generous in his use of 'meaningful', so long as the domain of the factual does not outstrip that of the verifiable. Compare Hume's closing remarks in the *Enquiry*, where he dismisses any forms of reasoning that fall outside the categories of 'abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number' and 'experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence' (1902: 165). This passage has been taken—by Ayer, for instance (1952: 31, 54)—to show Hume to be a precursor of positivism, but it is noteworthy that the offending forms are not dismissed as meaningless. None the less, given that they are thought by Hume to qualify as 'sophistry and illusion', there is little comfort here for the metaphysician.

The positivist has, then, a case against the theist if he can justifiably charge the latter with ascribing to his claims a use to which their metaphysical status does not entitle them; most notably, the kind of use proper to an empirical proposition. Here we may note that, while the contention that use is sufficient for meaning makes for a liberal position on what counts as meaningful, we do not find Wittgenstein offering us more than the empirical and the grammatical as defining the possible status of a given form of words. There are occasions when both are refused, as with avowals of present feelings or states of mind—'I'm fed up', 'I'm afraid'—but these exceptions are of no more help to the metaphysician than is the acknowledgement of performative utterances, such as 'Thank you' or 'Congratulations', as a species which escapes the true-false category. Far from regarding metaphysical propositions as a significant further category, Wittgenstein characterizes these as grammatical propositions masquerading as empirical—ostensible truths about the world which prove to be stipulations about the uses of words. Someone who says, 'A penny for your thoughts', clearly considers the question of what another is thinking to be empirical, suitably answered by an honest declaration from the person addressed. It is very much to the point to make the request, since although the response may be untruthful, in many circumstances there will be no reason not to take what is said at face value. A philosopher who holds that we can never tell what another is thinking appears to be saying that an

empirical possibility is being denied us, but it is likely to emerge that for him, unlike most of mankind, nothing could conceivably *count* as finding out the thoughts of another.

As another illustration, consider how views concerning time may be mistakenly advanced as competing metaphysical hypotheses. So, on one natural approach, time is treated as a dimension introduced to accommodate change. We can allow that the swimming pool is both deep and shallow at the same time, since it can be deep at one end, shallow at the other. Symmetrically, we can allow that the pool is both deep and shallow in the same place—at the same end—since it can be deep and shallow at different times. However, we might also have reconciled the latter ascriptions by thinking of the pool as comprising not only spatial, but also temporal ‘parts’, one of which involves being deep, the other being shallow. Which approach is correct? There is surely no call to dismiss the familiar way of speaking, but so long as the temporal parts view can be coherently formulated, it gives us a variant way of speaking to be assessed in terms of, say, its utility for some purpose. It may be a rival at this level, but we are talking about alternative grammars, systems of concepts, not alternative theories. That bodies have temporal parts is not a hypothesis, empirical or otherwise. The complaint of the person who rejects this conception is not that his prolonged searches have failed to find such parts, nor is their advocate triumphantly going to disclose something that had been overlooked in his searches; rather, for the one party there is nothing to be dignified with the term ‘part’ in this connection; for the other, the term can be said to enjoy a legitimate extension of its standard use. What might be called the metaphysical approach, however, regards the alternatives as substantive views about the world, at most one of which is correct—theories about the nature of time in a way that makes a comparison with physical theory appropriate.

Does our repudiation of this approach rest on the supposition of a well-defined distinction between conceptual and empirical issues, or between analytic and synthetic propositions? If so, is it not relying on a distinction that has been thoroughly discredited, most notably by W. V. Quine? For Quine, an analytic proposition is one that is immune to revision, that is held to be true come what may (1961). An ascription of analyticity is accordingly akin to a prediction, and an unsafe one at that: we cannot be sure that our proposition will not be revised at some future date. However, why should the future history of a given form of words, *P*, concern us? We may be so using *P* that nothing is allowed to count against it, or we may not.

There can be a damaging lack of clarity if we have not decided what standing our words are to have, but we are not required to take a decision which we and others must stand by for all time. That enduring stance is required only for an enduring ascription of analyticity; a current attribution of that status is not dependent on its future continuation. Likewise with respect to the distinction between the conceptual or grammatical and the empirical.

A relevant lack of clarity may infect theological claims, which have often been criticized on the grounds that they are advanced as, in effect, empirical propositions, but not treated as subject to the laws of evidence appropriate to such status. Thus, a model for a verificationist critique of such claims took shape in the parable of the garden in John Wisdom's article 'Gods'. Two people return to their long-neglected garden, finding both signs of neglect and apparent signs of a gardener's attention. One of them insists against the other that there has indeed been a gardener, but, in the absence of any sightings of him, retreats to the view that he is invisible to mortal eyes. Evidence that a gardener does come and evidence to the contrary continue to accumulate, but eventually the gardener hypothesis ceases to be experimental, there being no difference in the expectations of the one who accepts and the one who rejects it: "The one says "A gardener comes unseen and unheard. He is manifested only in his works with which we are all familiar", the other says "There is no gardener" ' (1944: 192).

This parable was used by Anthony Flew to illustrate his contention that theological propositions are liable to suffer 'death by a thousand qualifications'. The believer in God, like the believer in the gardener, will not accept anything as counting against his belief, but since there is nothing which this contradicts, nor is there anything which it affirms. His assertion of existence is not really an assertion at all (1955: 14–15). Wisdom presents the parallel as showing how an explanatory hypothesis, such as that of the existence of God, may start by being experimental and gradually become something quite different (1944: 191). Clearly, a hypothesis which aims to qualify as experimental invites criticism on verificationist grounds. However, it is not clear to what extent key theological propositions are so intended; nor, even, is it altogether clear what the logic is behind this style of criticism. Let us look further at this latter point.

Suppose that some unobservable entity is postulated as the cause of certain happenings. Although the conjectured cause is unobservable, it could be that the theory which postulates it is open to refutation, the cause being taken to bring about changes in certain specified conditions only.

If, the changes not being forthcoming, subsidiary hypotheses are introduced ad hoc, with nothing in their favour apart from their power to protect the theory from refutation, then we shall have a procedure which can be reckoned arbitrary, and which threatens to deprive the theory of content. In Wisdom's parable, retreat to the supposition that the gardener is invisible is a step in this direction, but if it were a demand of a physical theory that something it postulated could be known only by its effects, then this would not figure as an ad hoc hypothesis. On the contrary, it might be as absurd to speak of observability as it would be to speak of an atom as green and juicy. And that—a being known only through its effects—is how many would think of God.

Imagine we have a film of a gardener at work—turning over the soil, planting seeds, laying compost, watering plants, pruning trees, and so forth. Suppose now that we airbrush the gardener from our film, filling in the blanks where he had been with the background which he then occluded. What the gardener did would be left unchanged, and would constitute happenings crying out for explanation, an explanation which, it would seem, might conceivably deserve the description: postulating an invisible gardener. If we had to do with no more than the difference between the two possibilities just sketched, I imagine we should not feel that the hypothesis of such a gardener posed an impossible strain either on our comprehension or on our credulity. After all, if our invisible gardener can push a wheelbarrow, he could presumably make his presence felt by pushing us, when the evidence we should have of him would be comparable with what a blind person has of physical objects. Indeed, when the sense of touch is in question there need be no opposition between the notions of direct knowledge of an object and knowledge of it through its effects. One of the problems with the parable as recounted by Wisdom lies in the conflicting or partial character of the evidence, pointing as it does in opposed directions: there are signs of neglect but also signs of caring intervention. But the major difficulty with the theistic hypothesis is not that it postulates something that is not directly observable, but that what it postulates is at such a remove from the physical world, it is difficult to see how it might be said to bring about happenings within that domain. Compare poltergeist phenomena, where some have thought we have reason to acknowledge an invisible agent responsible for moving furniture about. There are clearly problems here, but the central consideration is that the strange phenomena surely direct us to look for an answer *within* the known world. Things, after all, are shifting about, so

we want something that can push, pull, lift, and otherwise do what it takes to affect an object's position in space.

When a being, if it exists at all, exists or acts at a particular location, then the supposition of its existence or action will generate expectations which may be fulfilled or disappointed, and if nothing is allowed to count against the supposition, it could be considered vacuous. Some propositions about God may have to meet this challenge, but it is not clear that Wisdom's gardener provides a relevant model for dealing with a proposition affirming God's existence, rather than with a hypothesis about an action or intervention on God's part at a particular time, since this proposition may be held to be true of necessity, true however our world may be. If that is its standing, then of course nothing will count against it, just as nothing will count for a proposition that is logically false. It is of interest that, in the article cited, Wisdom vacillates between talking of God and talking of gods. It would seem that it is on the latter, which present problems similar to those posed by poltergeists, fairies, and leprechauns, that his remarks have most bearing.

However, there is no lack of theological assertions which invite confrontation with evidence. Take the claim that God answers our prayers. If, in an attempt to support this claim, a believer draws attention to occasions when what was prayed for comes about, but ignores those cases where it does not, can we not accuse him of being selective with respect to the evidence? Or suppose that, taking no chances, he holds that God will assuredly answer our prayers, though not necessarily in a way we should expect or, indeed, even understand. Kai Nielsen cites a particularly egregious example, due to E. L. Fackenheim, of this way out: 'Good fortune reveals the hand of God; bad fortune, if it is not a matter of just punishment, teaches that God's ways are unintelligible, not that there are no ways of God' (Fackenheim 1964: 55; Nielsen 1982: 143). If there were occasions on which it was evident that God had answered our prayers, then occasions when he seemingly has not could be admitted. The difficulty lies in the total lack of assured instances; when we are let down, we have *only* a range of stratagems for seeking to minimize the damage to God's standing as one who answers prayers. Likewise with the attempt to reconcile God's goodness with the incalculable suffering that has been endured by human beings and animals over the ages. And it is not because the ways of God are mysterious that the clear cases are lacking. Given the opacity of the claim that God, an immaterial spirit, acts upon the material world, it is difficult to see how there could be cases which gave proof of his agency.



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