Why Is There Anything At All?

Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives

By

Simon Michael Custer

Mansfield College

A Thesis Submitted to

The Faculty of Philosophy

University of Oxford

for the Degree of

Bachelor of Philosophy in Philosophy

Trinity 2022

Candidate Number: 1047795

Word count: 29,993

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments **3**

Abstract **4**

Epigraphs **5**

Introduction **6**

Chapter One: Investigating Some Deflationist Responses **9**

1.1 The Question is Intelligible Regardless of its Form 9

1.2 Hume's Deflationary Response 15
1.2.1 Refuting Hume's Response 19

1.3 A Contemporary Humean Response 24
1.3.1 A Rebuttal to the Humean-Inspired View 28

Chapter Two: Leibniz's Substantive Response to the Question **34**

2.1 Reconstructing Leibniz's Answer 34
2.1.1 Leibniz's Nominalism 36
2.1.2 Leibniz's Distinction between Efficient Causes and Sufficient Reasons 41
2.1.3 Explaining God's Necessary Existence 44

2.2 Assessing Leibniz's Answer 46
2.2.1 The Inexplicable Fact View 47
2.2.2 The Apophatic View 52
2.2.3 The Autonomous Fact View 54
2.2.4 Refuting these Views 57

2.3 Making Progress on the Question is Impossible 61

Chapter Three: Nietzsche's Response to the Question **65**

3.1 Nietzsche's Critical Genealogy 67
3.1.1 The Dogmatic Philosophical Tradition 70
3.1.2 The Nihilistic Origins of Dogmatism 74

3.2 Nietzsche's Vindicatory Genealogy 82
3.2.1 Embracing the Mystery with Love 87

Conclusion **91**

Bibliography **93**

Acknowledgments

I thank Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra for supervising this project, especially for his patience when I was behind schedule. In addition, his feedback on other work I submitted for the B.Phil. was a key source of encouragement in getting this thesis across the finish line. I thank Paul Lodge for his extensive feedback on Chapter Two and for his mentorship during the past two years. His willingness to blur the distinction between the philosophical and the personal, as well as his kindness and honesty, should be a model for every philosopher. Paul provided the initial inspiration for writing about Nietzsche and supplied the Kurt Vonnegut epigraph. I thank Jan Westerhoff for his feedback on Chapter One. Learning about Buddhist Philosophy from Jan has been such a pleasure, and I thank him for being so generous with his time. I received valuable feedback from Michael Della Rocca on Chapter Three, and I thank him for not just these particular comments but also for his continued support since I graduated from Yale. I thank my coursemate and dear friend, Seán O'Neill Mcpartlin, for educating me about Nietzsche in such a short period. I could not have written about Nietzsche in this thesis without his extremely helpful advice as well as his detailed feedback on the chapter's structure. I thank my coursemate and flatmate, Henry Straughan, for our memorable conversations on Leibniz which inspired me throughout my time working on this project. The thesis is immeasurably better than it otherwise would have been without the contributions of these people. Any errors that remain are entirely my own. I also wish to acknowledge the crucial role that members of the Oxford Psychedelic Society and the Oxford Buddhist Society have played in my spiritual growth during the past two years. I am so grateful to these societies for providing the space to become comfortable with who I am. Finally, I thank my family for their love and encouragement, without which this thesis and myself would not exist. And that would be a shame indeed.

Abstract

The question of why there is anything at all is perhaps the most mysterious question that human beings can ask. Chapter One argues that the question is legitimate regardless of the particular form it takes, and that certain Humean-inspired attempts to dismiss the question as a spurious one fail.

Chapter Two commends Leibniz for providing a substantial solution to the question of existence before critiquing this solution. In particular, Leibniz argues that all contingent things are grounded in a being, namely God, that necessarily exists. Moreover, Leibniz contends that God's necessary existence is not subject to further explanation. This latter contention is what makes Leibniz's answer unsuccessful, and its downfall entails that satisfactorily answering the question is impossible. The chapter concludes by claiming that, contra Parfit, making any progress towards a solution is impossible.

Chapter Three contains Nietzsche's reflections about the fact that the question of existence is unanswerable. In recognizing that existence will forever remain a mystery, Nietzsche inquires as to why we ask the question of existence in the first place. In providing a critical genealogy of the philosophical tradition in which the question has been raised, Nietzsche argues that the question has been asked due to the conviction that it would have been better if there had been nothing. Nietzsche then sketches out the possibility of a vindicatory genealogy that affirms that the question may be raised from a positive emotive outlook. The chapter concludes by claiming that asking the question from a place of love and gratitude for the totality of existence, which begins with loving oneself, is an approach that encourages us to contemplate the mystery of existence without becoming overwhelmed by its mysteriousness.

Who knows the secret? Who proclaimed it here,

Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang?

The gods themselves came later into being—

Who knows from whence this great creation sprang?

He from whom all this great creation came,

Whether His will created or was mute,

The Most High Seer that is in highest heaven,

He knows it, —or perchance even He knows not.

- Nāsadīya Sūkta (10:129 of the Rigveda)[1]

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

- Kurt Vonnegut[2]

[1] Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, 564.
[2] Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, sec. 81.

Introduction

The question of why there is anything at all is perhaps the most mysterious question that human beings can ask. Derek Parfit has called the question the most sublime of all philosophical questions.[3] Martin Heidegger famously termed the question "the fundamental question of metaphysics."[4] And Wittgenstein refers to the "astonishment" we feel when pondering why anything at all exists.[5] This thesis has been motivated by such astonishment. Throughout the thesis, I will assume that the question of why there is anything at all is identical to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, and I will refer to this question as the question of existence and the fundamental question interchangeably.

Writing this thesis has been a deeply personal endeavor. Nietzsche declares that great works of philosophy are in fact intellectual and spiritual autobiographies. He writes that he has:

> gradually come to realize what every great philosophy so far has been: a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir.[6]

In other words, every work of philosophy reflects the most deeply held unconscious convictions of its author. Nietzsche's claim holds true of this thesis. The thesis begins in Chapter One by insisting that we ought to meet the explanatory demand for existence. By refuting some of the most prominent deflationist accounts of the question of existence from David Hume and some contemporary authors, I underscore the claim that the question is a legitimate one. As a result, we cannot dismiss the question as a pseudo-question – which was a source of frustration when coming across deflationist accounts of the question. As Arthur Witherall put the point, the deflationists are often motivated by "desperation and fear" surrounding the astonishment that

[3] Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?," 220.
[4] Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, chap. 1.
[5] Waismann, Wittgenstein, and Schlick, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, 68.
[6] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 6.

there is something rather than nothing.[7] Though I do not make this point in the chapter, the first chapter was principally motivated by a desire to challenge the deflationists on the basis of this fear.

The thesis then examines Leibniz's attempt to satisfy the explanatory demand in Chapter Two. Leibniz's answer is a combination of necessitarian, theological and axiarchical responses, which Nicholas Rescher has argued exhausts all the candidates for substantive responses to the question.[8] The main virtue of focusing on Leibniz's substantive answer to the question is that in refuting it, I will have refuted every possible type of substantive answer. Since Leibniz's attempt does indeed fail, I conclude that the question has no substantive answer. Furthermore, I contend at the end of the chapter that, contra Parfit, making progress on the question is impossible.

The third chapter asks how we should react to the fact that the question of existence is unanswerable. In reflecting upon this fact, the author is compelled to confront the unconscious motivations for his desire to meet the explanatory demand. The chapter contains Nietzsche's diagnosis of what these motivations might be as well as Nietzsche's reflections on the merits of these motivations. In particular, Nietzsche argues that our practice of asking the question is motivated by the conviction that nothing would be better than something. Without realizing it, this conviction is what explains why I have been so gripped by the question, in one form or another, for as long as I can remember.

The result of Nietzsche's reflections on asking the question is that we should let go of the desire to fulfill the explanatory demand by eradicating this conviction from our minds and hearts. That said, the question still remains intelligible, and Nietzsche's reflections thus do not preclude

[7] Witherall, *The Problem of Existence*, 19.

[8] By substantive, I mean responses that attempt to fulfill the explanatory demand rather than rejecting it. This usage of "substantive" is different from Rescher's, who uses the term to refer to the theological response. I do not include Rescher's arational and mystificational responses in my schema above because they do not attempt to meet the explanatory demand. Rescher, *On Explaining Existence*, 16.

the question from being asked. I conclude that we can embrace the mystery of existence by asking the question from a place of love and gratitude for existence rather than a place of hatred for it.

Read chronologically, the thesis therefore reflects my own intellectual and spiritual journey when pondering the mystery of existence. When I began this project, my way of asking the question was akin to putting existence on trial. Though I was not aware of it, my nihilistic convictions compelled me to demand an explanation for why what I had thought was the best possible state of affairs – namely nothing – does not obtain. After having written the thesis, I have come to understand that there is an alternative way of asking the question. We can choose to see existence as a gift that we should cherish rather than as a burden that we must endure, and we can express our appreciation for this gift by asking the question in a way that embraces the mystery of existence.

Chapter One: Investigating Some Deflationist Responses

In this chapter, I first defend the claim that the question of existence has one distinct meaning even though it can be formulated in a variety of ways. I then reconstruct and refute both Hume's response to the question as well as a contemporary Humean-inspired account.

1.1 – The Question is Intelligible Regardless of its Form

What are we asking when we ask why there is something rather than nothing? Andrew Brenner has argued that there are "multiple equally adequate interpretations" of the question, since how we interpret the question depends on what ontology we accept.[9] For example, assuming Jonathan Schaffer's priority monism which posits the existence of one fundamental thing (i.e. something that is not grounded in anything else), Brenner contends the question may be reformulated as why is there anything fundamental rather than nothing.[10] Whereas on a view that asserts that there is nothing fundamental, Brenner rephrases the question to demand an explanation for why there are objects connected by grounding relations.[11] Though these two questions are distinct, both of them demand explanations for the fact of existence. But on views that posit that whatever exists necessarily exists,[12] Brenner argues that we should not interpret the question as demanding an explanation for how existence arises. Since whatever exists necessarily does so, Brenner states that "it is not at all surprising that something exists." He reasons that it is implausible to interpret the question as demanding an explanation for where existence comes from. If we accept such a necessitarian ontology, Brenner contends that the questions we are actually interested in answering have to do with the specific entities posited by such an ontology. In the case of David Lewis's modal realism, where all possible worlds

[9] Brenner, "What Do We Mean When We Ask 'Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?,'" 1314.
[10] Schaffer, "Monism: The Priority of the Whole."
[11] Brenner, "What Do We Mean When We Ask 'Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?,'" 1316.
[12] Brenner gives the example of configuration space realism, the view that what exists is a mathematical formalism that describes the behavior of the universe, as a necessitarian ontology.

necessarily exist,[13] Brenner would presumably formulate the question in terms of why these possible worlds exist. There are possible views in which the world necessarily exists but that any entities posited within that world would contingently exist. In keeping with the principle of charity, we should interpret Brenner as talking about contingently existing entities posited by a necessitarian ontology.

Confusion arises when multiple interpretations of the question are glossed over by the more general question of why there is something rather than nothing, since Brenner thinks this general question is underspecified and thus ill posed. In particular, Brenner claims that it is not obvious that the various interpretations of the question have anything in common with each other. He writes that "it's not even the case that they all ask a question about existence."[14] With respect to modal realism, for instance, Brenner would say that the question is not asking about the existence of the empty world, but rather the fact that our world is not empty. In response to the objection to someone who acknowledges that something or other exist, but is agnostic about the details of their ontology, Brenner claims that the question is ill posed because it does not pick out any statement more particular than 'something exists' and asks why it is true. In sum, Brenner requires that we adopt a specific ontology for the question of why there is something rather than nothing to be meaningful.

I see two problems with Brenner's view. The first problem is that it is unclear how specific an ontology must be for the question of why there is anything at all to be meaningful. That is, Brenner does not provide any criteria for the specificity an ontology must meet for the question to have meaning. What is it in virtue of which an ontology that acknowledges that something or other exists is less specific than, say, priority monism? Perhaps priority monism is

[13] Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*.
[14] Brenner, "What Do We Mean When We Ask 'Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?,'" 1319.

more specific than an ontology that merely declares that something exists because priority monism entails this latter view, whereas the fact that something exists does not entail priority monism. But in Brenner's view, it is still unclear how specific an ontology the ontology needs to be for the question to be meaningful.

Moreover, Brenner declares that for those who are agnostic about what something or other amounts to, the question of why there is something fails to refer to a particular proposition. It seems that a proposition being "particular", as opposed to "general," is Brenner's answer to how specific a proposition must be for it to count as meaningful. But why is the proposition that *there is something* not particular while the proposition that *there is something fundamental* is? The former proposition refers to the fact that something exists and the latter cites the existence of a metaphysical foundation. Merely declaring that *there is something fundamental* is 'particular' while claiming that *there is something* is not does not address the question of how specific a proposition must be for it to count as 'particular,' even if the former proposition is more specific than the latter. Moreover, at least on one interpretation of what 'particular' amounts to, these propositions are equally 'particular' insofar as both propositions have determinate meanings. It seems that any line Brenner wants to draw between ontologies that are too general and ontologies which are specific enough to render the question meaningful would be arbitrary. Though whatever ontology we accept will of course inform how the question is articulated, the question expresses puzzlement over existence in general. And existence in general may be referred to independently of whatever specific ontology we might endorse.

The second problem with Brenner's view is that he assumes that it is not reasonable to ask of necessitarian theories why existence arises. Recall that Brenner claims that we should not be surprised about the fact that there is existence if we think that whatever exists necessarily

exists. I find it difficult to understand this suggestion. The fact that a necessitarian theory is true seems to cry out for explanation. That is, the question of why it is the case that something necessarily exists seems legitimate. Even if something could not have failed to exist, it still seems reasonable to ask why this is true. If it turns out that there is no answer to this question, it is intelligible to demand an explanation for why some given necessitarian theory is true. This demand is intelligible because it is not logically necessary that necessitarian theories are true. The example Brenner provides of a necessitarian ontology – configuration space realism – is an instance of what Parfit calls a "non-logical necessity."[15] That is, the claim that configuration space realism is true can be denied without contradiction. The same is true of modal realism. Witherall puts the point nicely with respect to modal realism: "it is easy to turn their [Lewis's] *modus ponens* into a *modus tollens*: given that the theories of Lewis…lead to the impossibility of the empty world, we can use this as a reason for believing these theories to be mistaken."[16] Even if it is conceded that we should not be surprised at the universe's necessary existence after we endorse a specific ontology, it is entirely reasonable to question if non-logically necessary theories like configuration space realism or modal realism are true. Given that these theories can be denied without contradiction, it would be surprising if one of these theories turns out to be true. Moreover, it would be surprising if the universe necessarily had to exist. In other words, the claim that 'nothing exists' is logically impossible cannot serve as an explanation for the fact of existence. I therefore disagree with Parfit when he says "our search would end" if we discover that a necessitarian theory is true, since we can still ask why such a theory would be true.[17]

Even if it were not surprising that a non-logical necessitarian theory turned out to be true, there still could be an explanation for that theory. For example, consider a situation in which

[15] Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?," 234.
[16] Witherall, *The Problem of Existence*, 62.
[17] Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?," 234.

someone shows up to a scheduled 9:00 am meeting on-time. The fact that somebody attended the meeting on-time is not surprising, but there still is an explanation for why the person went to the meeting. Perhaps the person is responsible, set their alarm clock to ring at 7am, and there was no traffic on the commute to the meeting. Just as an explanation exists in this mundane case, an explanation for the fact of existence could also exist in a necessitarian theory. To rule out that an explanation exists in this case, as Brenner does, would be to make the false assumption that if something is not surprising, then there is no explanation of that thing.

Roy Sorensen gives an additional argument for why the necessitarian response to the question of existence is inadequate. Parfit seems to have in mind that discovering that necessitarianism is true answers the question: namely, that there is something because there must be something. This response is lacking, however, because as Sorensen puts it: "residual curiosity is possible even when the proposition [in question] is known to be a necessary truth."[18] Sorensen draws an analogy between a mathematical proof and a proof of necessitarianism. In both cases, Sorensen argues, our search for an answer does not end after discovering the proof. He writes:

> A *reductio ad absurdum* proof that $1 - 1/3 + 1/5 - 1/7 + \ldots$ converges to $\pi/4$ might persuade one that there is no alternative without illuminating how it could be true. For this brute style of proof does not explain how π wandered into the solution. (*Reductio ad absurdum* just shows a contradiction would follow if the conclusion were not true.) This raises the possibility that even a logical demonstration of the metaphysical necessity of 'Something exists' might still leave us asking why there is something rather than nothing (though there would no longer be the wonder about the accidentality of there being something).[19]

Just as it is intelligible to ask how π appears in this solution, it is equally as intelligible to ask why there is something rather than nothing even if it is necessary that there is something. If we take Parfit to mean that there are no further intelligible questions

[18] Sorensen, "Nothingness," sec. 5.
[19] Sorensen, sec. 5.

that can be raised after the discovery of necessitarianism, then Parfit is wrong when he says that "our search would end" upon finding out that necessitarianism is true.

Perhaps Brenner could object that a person who accepts one of these non-logically necessary ontologies may not be gripped by the question of why there is anything. I submit, however, that the demand for an explanation of existence is still intelligible. For example, one could ask of modal realism why the multiverse of possible worlds exists rather than just asking why the actual world is not an empty world. Though the latter question arises once one accepts modal realism, so does the former. And the former question is just to ask why there is anything at all, where anything is defined as the ontology posited by modal realism. That is, asking of modal realism why it is the case that every possible world exists is just to demand an explanation for why there is something or other, where in this case, the 'something or other' refers to every possible world. Thus the question of why there is something rather than nothing is not ill-posed.

To give another example, consider Peter van Inwagen's suggestion that what we are actually interested in when we ask the question is why there are any concrete beings. van Inwagen assumes that we would not be interested in explaining a world devoid of concrete beings but that does contain abstract objects like mathematical objects.[20] But since van Inwagen admits that abstract objects exist, there is still an intelligible demand asking for explanations of these abstract objects. If we lived in a world containing only abstract objects, we might very well ask – contra van Inwagen – why such abstract objects exist. And this is just another way of asking why there is anything at all, where our ontology tells us that all there is are abstract entities. Though how it is articulated may differ according to what theory of reality we accept, the explanatory demand remains the same independent of our ontology. As Brenner himself says,

[20] van Inwagen, "Why Is There Anything at All?," 95–96.

puzzlement about why configuration space realism is true "would be expressed, naturally enough, by the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?'"[21] Contra Brenner, questions about specific ontologies that are glossed over by the question of why there is anything do in fact have something in common. Namely, these questions demand an explanation for the fact of existence. And if all of these questions demand an explanation for the very same fact, it is difficult to see how these questions are different from one another.

In light of these criticisms of Brenner's view, I claim that the question has one distinct meaning even if it can be formulated in a variety of ways. Namely, the question calls for an explanation for the fact of existence. This explanatory demand may be legitimately issued independent of the ontology we accept, with the sole exception of ontological nihilism.[22] If ontological nihilism is true, then nothing exists. Thus there is nothing that calls out for explanation. The explanatory demand would thus be vacuous on this view, since there is no ontology and thus no fact of existence demands to be explained. Therefore it does not seem coherent to make this explanatory demand when there is nothing to be explained. But the explanatory demand for the fact of existence is legitimate on any other ontology, since all other possible ontologies posit that something exists.

1.2 - Hume's Deflationary Response

Fulfilling this demand, however, raises the question of what sort of explanations we might find acceptable. We are most accustomed to providing causal explanations of facts. But a causal explanation, or an efficient causal explanation in Aristotelian terms, seems impossible to provide. In appealing to any given cause in the course of explaining the fact of existence, we would be appealing to something that exists. It is obvious that this explanatory circle cannot

[21] Brenner, "What Do We Mean When We Ask 'Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?,'" 1318.
[22] See Westerhoff, "An Argument for Ontological Nihilism."

serve as a satisfactory explanation of the fact of existence. Moreover, it is unclear how we could provide a non-circular causal explanation, since that would require appealing to something which does not exist. The task of providing a non-circular causal explanation of existence seems insurmountable.

There are several possible ways of responding to this problem. First, one could adopt a deflationist standpoint that contends that demanding a non-circular explanation of existence is unintelligible. Second, one could admit that this explanatory demand is intelligible, but answer it by providing a non-causal explanation. Both of these strategies, however, ask us to adopt unorthodox views of what counts as an adequate explanation. I will discuss the first response immediately below and the second response in Chapter Two.

One reaction many philosophers have had to this seemingly impossible task is to dismiss it as a pseudo-problem, usually by declaring that they are not gripped by the question.[23] According to this deflationist view, it is incoherent to demand a non-circular explanation for existence. We can make sense of this particular deflationist attitude toward the question of existence by observing that deflationists accept a Humean principle about explanation. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume argues that once one has explained each member of a succession of objects, one has explained everything there is to explain. He writes:

> In such a chain too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct counties into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty.[24]

[23] cf. Russell and Copleston, "God's Existence: A Debate," 54.
[24] Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 101.

This principle is now known as the Hume-Edwards Principle (HEP) due to Paul Edwards's revival of this argument in the 20th century.[25] In particular, the HEP states that if the existence of each member of a succession is explained, then there is nothing more that stands in need of explanation. Moreover, each member of a succession is ontologically dependent on some prior member of that succession. Therefore the question of how the succession comes into being is answered by providing explanations for each member of the succession.

One reason that Hume's interlocutor might think that it is possible to give a causal explanation of the succession of objects is because the mind misapplies the concept of causation outside of its proper domain. In particular, the concept of causation applies only to members of a succession. It does not follow from the fact that it seems intelligible to speak of the cause of the whole succession that this type of cause is indeed intelligible. Since the concept of causation does not apply to the fact of existence, speaking of the cause of a succession of objects is meaningless. Though it is perfectly intelligible to talk about the cause of my headache, it makes no sense on the Humean view to discuss the cause of the universe *from outside the universe*. The fact that talk of a cause of a succession seems intelligible at first is because we have misapplied the concept of causation beyond its ordinary usage such that the concept loses its meaning. Demanding an explanation for existence is thus unintelligible.

Hume's nominalism regarding individual entities is what drives his rejection of the explanatory demand. Thinking that there is some chain containing members of a succession of objects that exists over and above its members is a mistake. Only individual entities exist, there is no ontological chain that cries out for an explanation. As long as each individual entity has a causal explanation, we have explained everything there is to explain.

[25] Cain, "The Hume–Edwards Principle," 323.

On Hume's view, there are also no other possible types of explanations for individual entities besides causal ones. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume collapses the distinction between efficient causes and other types of explanations such as formal, material, and final causes. He writes that there is:

> no foundation for that distinction, which we sometimes make betwixt efficient causes, and causes *sine qua non*; or betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material, and exemplary, and final causes. … [W]herever [constant conjunction] is observ'd, the cause is efficient, and where it is not, there can never be a cause of any kind.[26]

Hume's denial of the distinction between efficient causes and other types of causes stems, according to Peter Kail, from his definitions of 'cause' as having to do with the regular succession of objects and our psychological reaction to that succession.[27] On a standard reading of Hume known in the literature as the "Old Hume,"[28] there is nothing over and above the concept of causation besides our insistence – due to our psychology – that some event *b* must follow from some cause *a*. As Kail puts it, the modal character of our inferences regarding the relata in the causal relation is all that causation consists in. There is no necessary connection between the causal relata themselves.[29] On this view, Hume is not agnostic about there being a necessary connection in nature that we cannot encounter. That is, he denies that there is such a connection altogether.[30] Since there is nothing more to the idea of causation than constant conjunction, it seems the best we can do when explaining something is to cite whatever precedes it in a succession – which would be its efficient cause. No other explanatory scheme exists that could make sense of the existence of objects in an alternative way.

---

[26] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Section 1.3.14.32.
[27] Kail, "Efficient Causation in Hume," 231.
[28] Millican, "Hume, Causal Realism, and Free Will." Kail terms it the "immodest reading."
[29] Kail, "Efficient Causation in Hume," 245.
[30] For an alternative view of Hume which maintains that Hume is agnostic about the existence of a necessary connection, see Look, "Grounding the Principle of Sufficient Reason: Leibnizian Rationalism and the Humean Challenge," 217.

Before examining how the HEP has been defended, it is worth pointing out that the HEP has been thought to hold regardless of whether the universe consists of an infinite number or a finite number of entities. Note that though Hume himself articulates the principle with respect to a finite list of 20 entities, he discusses an "eternal succession of objects" in the paragraph preceding the articulation of the HEP. It thus is plausible that Hume thinks the HEP applies to universes with either a finite or infinite number of existents. Contemporary proponents of applying the HEP to the fundamental question may contend that there exist only a finite number of entities. HEP supporters could, for example, subscribe to a contemporary view like existence monism which posits a finite number of existents (namely, exactly one).[31] Though Hume would have found it acceptable to refer to things outside his finite list of 20 to explain the existence of these 20 entities, this is not possible when we consider a finite list of all existents.

1.2.1 – Refuting Hume's Response

Assuming that the HEP is compatible with a finite list is permissible, I submit, only if one (a) accepts that ontological dependence is circular or (b) maintains that explanations are irreflexive. Consider a finite chain of three entities: A, B, and C. If the HEP holds true for this chain, each of these entities has an explanation. Presumably, A depends on B and B depends on C. But since there is no other entity besides A and B to explain C according to irreflexivity, C must depend on either A or B for its existence.[32] This is an example of circular ontological dependence. That is, C and either A or B are mutually dependent on one another. Of course, one could deny irreflexivity and claim that C explains itself. Though this move would avoid the circularity, it would run afoul of the extremely plausible view that nothing can explain itself. As

[31] Schaffer, "Monism," Section 2.1.
[32] This also assumes the transitivity of explanation endorsed by many grounding-theorists.

Robert Nozick points out, it is built into the nature of explanations that they are irreflexive.[33] Denying irreflexivity is thus not a good option for HEP advocates.

The other option is to endorse circular dependence. The idea of circular dependence, however, is an extremely controversial view in the literature on ontological dependence. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia entry on the subject, the dominant view of ontological dependence is that "*non-identical* states of affairs cannot be mutually explanatory."[34] In other words, ontological dependence cannot be circular on this widely accepted view. This is because explanation is considered to be non-circular. If, say, A and C are mutually co-dependent on each other, then it seems that A and C constitute a vicious explanatory circle. This explanatory circle is considered unacceptable, and as such it is a significant theoretical cost. As Alexander Pruss puts the point, "a circle of explanations cannot possibly give a complete explanation."[35] This is not to say that ontological dependence is in fact not symmetric, which would result in circular dependence structures. It is logically possible that symmetric dependence relations exist even if such relations are not explicable. In fact, some philosophers have argued that there are symmetric ontological dependence relations.[36,37] But these relations would remain inexplicable on any plausible view of explanation, since any plausible view would state that circular explanations are always unacceptable. Thus at this stage, I merely wish to point out that if the HEP is true, explaining finite sets violates a widely accepted constraint on ontological dependence and two necessary constraints on explanation. That said, this problem does not arise for sets with an infinite number of members. For there is always another unique member of the set available to explain any given member.

---

[33] Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 116.
[34] Tahko and Lowe, "Ontological Dependence," Section 3.
[35] Pruss, "The Hume-Edwards Principle and The Cosmological Argument," 154.
[36] See Westerhoff, *The Non-Existence of the Real World*.
[37] Also see Thompson, "Metaphysical Interdependence."

One objection to this argument is to reject the link between ontological dependence and metaphysical explanation. If explanation does not track dependence, then it might be plausible that dependence can be circular in some cases. The view that ontological dependence is circular is known in the literature as *metaphysical coherentism*. One putative example of this type of dependence is the poles of a magnet, where the magnet's north pole depends on its south pole and vice versa.[38] If metaphysical coherentism is true, then the defender of the HEP with respect to the fundamental question seems to evade the force of the above argument. Since circular dependence is permitted, there is no problem if the HEP entails that dependence is circular regarding a finite, complete list of all existents.

This objection does not succeed, however, because it ignores a key constraint on metaphysical explanation. In particular, this constraint is that metaphysical explanation cannot be circular, regardless of whether ontological dependence is circular. One might say that it is built into the nature of a metaphysical explanation that it is not circular, just as it is required of an explanation that it is not irreflexive. An explanation makes something comprehensible by relating it in terms of something other than what is being explained. If someone tells me that I am obligated to obey the law because not doing so is illegal, I am guilty of providing an unsatisfactory explanation of why I should obey the law. The explanation is not satisfying because it is circular. And if a putative explanation is circular, I submit that it is not an explanation at all. Moreover, it does not matter how many entities there are in an explanatory circle, even if there are an infinite number of entities in such a circle.[39] If an explanatory chain for some entity *E* contains *E* anywhere in the chain, the explanation is circular and must be ruled out. Michael Della Rocca argues, plausibly in my view, that that if the chain of explanation is

[38] Bliss, "Viciousness and Circles of Ground," 248.
[39] For a discussion of infinite grounding cycles, see Westerhoff, *The Non-Existence of the Real World*, 156.

very large and eventually does loop back on itself, then this would be "positively worse" than if the circular chain were smaller. For many more entities, perhaps even an infinite number, fail to be explained in a very large explanatory circle compared to smaller explanatory circles.[40]

Since the HEP applied to a universe with a finite number of existents entails that ontological dependence is circular, it follows that these circles of dependence would be inexplicable. The problem with inexplicable dependence circles for the proponents of the HEP is that the HEP would not be doing the job it was set out to do. Recall that what motivates the HEP is the need to satisfy an *explanatory* demand for the fact of existence. If dependence chains are inexplicable, then the HEP not only fails to provide us with an explanation for the fact of existence, but it also fails us to provide ordinary, efficient causal explanations of everyday objects like chairs and people. Since the HEP entails metaphysical coherentism if one thinks that there are a finite number of existents, and coherentism entails that dependence chains are inexplicable, then the HEP renders all facts about existents inexplicable – not just the fact that *there is something*. This position is clearly unacceptable, and it defeats the purpose of endorsing the HEP. Thus if we think that there are a finite number of existents, this would constitute a reason to reject the HEP as a solution to the question of existence. It follows that endorsing the HEP is a sensible way of answering the question only if the collection of all existents is infinite.[41]

Another possible way out for the defender of the HEP that subscribes to an ontology that posits a finite number of existents is to declare that there are other ways of providing explanations of entities than efficient causal ones. There could be axiarchical explanations. For

[40] Della Rocca, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, 107.

[41] Endorsing the HEP is also ostensibly sensible if one maintains that something could be its own cause. But self-causation is not permitted according to Hume's notion of efficient causation, which requires a cause distinct from an effect to bring about that effect.

example, John Leslie has argued that *E* could exist because it is good.[42] While this might be true, it would represent a significant departure from Hume's original position when he articulated the HEP. Recall that Hume does not distinguish between efficient causal explanations and other types of explanations. It follows that there is no such thing as an axiarchical explanation for Hume. If one were to allow for alternative types of explanations, however, then it would be possible to have a non-circular explanation of the fact of existence given a finite number of existents. But notice that permitting alternative types of explanations would turn the HEP into a non-deflationary response. That is, an axiarchical explanation would provide a substantive answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Since the proponents of HEP endorse that principle because they wish to endorse a deflationary response to the fundamental question, permitting alternative forms of explanation is not an option for them. Recall that the HEP is a formal way of articulating the deflationary response to the fundamental question. If the HEP is rendered non-deflationary, then this defeats the purpose of endorsing the principle in the first place. Thus the HEP remains a legitimate option only for those who hold that there are an infinite number of existents.

Before examining contemporary solutions that endorse the HEP, I would like to reconstruct and refute Pruss's argument that explanatory circles arise when the HEP is applied to ontologies with an infinite number of existents. Pruss asks us to consider the following possible world containing infinite sets:

> (*Chickens and eggs*) Consider a possible world in which there is an infinite sequence of chickens (of both sexes) and eggs, stretching infinitely far back in time. The chickens lay eggs, and the eggs hatch into chickens.[43]

[42] Leslie, "Existing Because Ethically Required," 126.
[43] Pruss, "The Hume-Edwards Principle and The Cosmological Argument," 154.

Since each chicken is explained by the egg from which it hatched, and each egg is explained by the chicken that laid it, it follows that each individual entity in the set has an explanation. Therefore, according to the HEP, we have a complete explanation of the infinite set of chickens and eggs. But here, Pruss argues, lurks a circular explanation hidden within plain sight. Let *C* be the infinite collection of all the chickens in the set, and let *E* be the collection of all the eggs in the set. Every element of *C* is explained by an element of *E*, and vice versa.[44] Pruss argues that this is an explanatory circle. He writes: "But an explanatory circle is not a satisfactory explanation of the whole phenomenon: to say that *E* explains *C* and *C* explains *E* does *not* explain the pair *C* and *E*."[45] This is because explanatory circles do not count as explanations on a reasonable theory of explanation. According to Pruss, then, the HEP generates circular explanations with respect to infinite sets as well as finite sets.

Pruss is incorrect in thinking that a circular explanation is present in *Chickens and eggs*. Since each element of *E* explaining a particular element in *C* is not itself explained by that very element in *C*, we have an infinite regress of explanation rather than an explanatory circle. The explanatory chain looks more like a zig-zag between elements of the two collections *E* and *C* rather than a circle. The objection that the HEP generates explanatory circles applied to infinite sets thus fails. One might think that an infinite regress of explanation is also unacceptable. In what follows, I examine a contemporary view according to which such infinite regresses are acceptable.

1.3 – A Contemporary Humean Response

The HEP has inspired the following contemporary response to the fundamental question. In a recent paper, Yannic Kappes and Benjamin Schnieder argue that the question of why there is

[44] For a view that denies the transitivity of grounding, see Rodriguez-Pereyra, "Grounding Is Not a Strict Order."
[45] Pruss, "The Hume-Edwards Principle and The Cosmological Argument," 154.

anything is shallow because it has a simple answer. They point out that the question 'why is there anything at all?' presupposes that there is something or other, an existential truth. In their words, "the question asks for a reason for an existential truth," namely the truth that there is something.[46] Kappes and Schnieder then assert that existential truths are made true by their instances. For example, assuming that some disjunctive existential proposition 'A or B' is true, it must be true because either A or B, or both of these disjuncts, are true. If existential truths are made true by their instances, Kappes and Schnieder reason, then the question of why there is anything has a straightforward answer. Namely, there is something rather than nothing (partly) because Obama exists, and the number 7 exists, among other things. That is to say, "[i]ndividual existential truths to the effect that this or that particular thing exists ground the general existential truth that something exists."[47] Again what motivates this claim is the "widely accepted standard in the contemporary debate about grounding" that existential statements are grounded in their instances. Thus the question of why there is anything at all has a simple answer, namely the conjunction asserting the existence of each particular existent.

Kappes and Schnieder add that this response to the question appeals to a version of the HEP. If the members of the set of every contingent thing exist, the existence of that set is thereby explained according to the HEP. And explaining the set of all contingent things is just to explain why there is something or other, since any reasonable ontology posits this set as what exists.

One key difference between Kappes's and Schnieder's version of the HEP and Hume's original formulation of the principle is that the former permits more types of explanations than merely efficient causal ones. In particular, Kappes's and Schnieder's HEP admits of formal and material causation. But teleological explanations are rejected on both these versions of the HEP.

[46] Kappes and Schnieder, "Anything at All – The Deepest and the Shallowest Question," 544.
[47] Kappes and Schnieder, 545.

In defending this version of the HEP, Kappes and Schnieder take issue with arguments to the contrary presented by Rescher. Rescher argues that the HEP is false by observing that the following claims are false:

> If the existence of each part of the car is explained, the existence of the vehicle-as-a-whole is thereby explained.
> If the existence of each composition in our symphony's evening program is explained, the existence of the program-as-a-whole is thereby explained.[48]

The idea is that cars and symphonies are something over and above the parts and compositions that constitute them, respectively. The HEP is false, Rescher reasons, because it applies only to unstructured collectives like a mathematical set rather than to structured collectives like cars and symphonies. It is not enough to explain the existence of each part of a vehicle if one wants to provide a complete explanation of the whole vehicle. One must also provide an explanation of how these parts are connected in the car. Likewise, it is not enough to explain the existence of each composition in a symphony. One must also explain the order in which these compositions are arranged to fully explain the program. Mathematical sets, however, have no form or structure. Since mathematical sets "are defined purely extensionally on the basis of their membership alone," structure does not play an explanatory role.[49] For instance, the singleton {Socrates} is fully explained by the existence of its sole member, Socrates. Assuming that the cosmos is a structured collective, it follows that the HEP will not be able to account for its structure.

Kappes and Schnieder counter Rescher's argument by distinguishing between structured and unstructured compounds. While symphonies and vehicles are structured compounds, they argue that mathematical sets and mereological sums are merely complex entities with no structure. While this is clearly true in the case of mathematical sets, it is less obvious in the case

[48] Rescher, *On Explaining Existence*, 9.
[49] Rescher, 10.

of mereological sums. Kappes and Schnieder defend the latter claim as follows: "Its [a mereological sum's] identity is determined solely by its parts, and its existence conditions do not impose any constraints on the arrangement of its parts."[50] In other words, mereological sums require nothing over and above the existence of their members to exist themselves. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, a "mereological sum of two elements is the whole that consists of both of them, regardless of their spatial or other distance."[51] It follows that there is a difference between the vehicle *qua* structured compound and the vehicle *qua* mereological sum. The former requires a specification of how its parts are arranged in space while the latter does not. Since spatial relations are irrelevant to defining a mereological sum, Kappes and Schnieder reason that such sums are analogous to sets insofar as they both depend on nothing over and above their elements to exist. The universe, contra Rescher, is thus not a structured compound but an unstructured mereological sum of all existents. As a result, the HEP is the suitable principle to invoke when demanding an explanation for the fact of existence.

Even if the universe is a structured compound, Kappes and Schnieder have another way of responding to Rescher. The question we want to answer is not "why is there a structured universe?" but rather "why is there anything at all?". And this latter question can be answered in a non-circular way according to the authors, even mentioning the universe in the answer. There is something rather than nothing because I exist, because this car exists, because England exists…and because the universe exists. If circularity means that some entity *B* is explained in terms of another entity *A*, and that A is explained in terms of B, then it seems that Kappes's and Schnieder's answer is not circular. The fact that England exists explains that something exists, but the fact that something exists does not explain that England exists. There is an explanatory

[50] Kappes and Schnieder, "Anything at All – The Deepest and the Shallowest Question," 548.
[51] Blackburn, "Mereological Sum."

asymmetry here, Kappes and Schnieder contend, that shows that we do not have a circular explanation. Though they concede that this answer is psychologically unsatisfying, Kappes and Schnieder argue that it is still correct.

Granting that there is in fact no circularity here, one still might argue that we must explain the existents which are cited in the answer to why there is anything at all in order to answer the fundamental question. Otherwise the question would remain partially but not fully explained. Though this is not an argument I wish to endorse, it seems to me to be a live option that needs to be addressed. We might be obligated, for example, to explain why England exists if we are to satisfactorily answer the fundamental question. We can do this as long as there are an infinite number of existents to which we can appeal in an explanation. As long as we can continue to appeal to more and more unique entities, an explanatory circle will not arise.

Kappes and Schnieder criticize the plausible constraint on an explanation to the fundamental question that it be "primal." For Kappes and Schnieder, a primal explanation is one that does not invoke "any entities whose existence is to be explained."[52] According to this view, it is not fair to insist on a primal explanation without further arguments which demonstrate that such an explanation is in order. Thus an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing may legitimately terminate with a statement like "because England exists," even though the existence of England is subject to further explanation. Thus an infinite explanation is not called for given the authors' criticism of primal explanations.

1.3.1 – A Rebuttal to the Humean-Inspired View

Both a "primal" (i.e. terminal) explanation and an explanatory regress of the fact of existence are problematic. If one denies that we are obligated to explain the particular existent (say, England) cited in an explanation of why there is anything at all, there is way in which

[52] Kappes and Schnieder, "Anything at All – The Deepest and the Shallowest Question," 554.

Kappes's and Schnieder's defense of the HEP is suspect. I submit that the fact that their answer to the question is unsatisfying demonstrates that their response is inadequate. Kappes and Schnieder endorse their ground-theoretic answer because it seems like the one of the few plausible ways to answer the question. But just because their response appears to be plausible does not mean that we should be forced to endorse it. The reason, I submit, that this response is unsatisfying is because – as in Hume's original formulation of the HEP – it does not provide us with any teleological explanations. A complete explanation of the fact of existence (i.e. a satisfying one) may require the provision of a final cause. Thus Kappes's and Schnieder's response does not furnish a complete explanation. Rather, they reason that since providing the efficient, formal, and material causes of phenomena is the best we can do, then we should conclude that doing so must be acceptable. This response appeals to the principle that the obligation to explain something implies that we have the ability to meet that obligation.

One way of challenging Kappes's and Schnieder's argument, then, is to call into question the principle that 'ought implies can' in the case of explanation. What if it is so much the worse for Kappes and Schnieder that all we can do is provide efficient, formal, or material causes of phenomena? Even if the explanation given by Kappes and Schnieder is the only potential explanation there is for the fact of existence, this does not entail that we must uphold this explanation. In other words, why do Kappes and Schnieder not admit that no complete explanation can be given for the fact of existence rather than endorsing their positive answer? Since the standing obligation to explain the fact of existence does not entail that this obligation can be satisfied, it is difficult to see how we can remain satisfied with Kappes's and Schnieder's response. Notice that this criticism does not depend on whether one thinks finite explanations with the HEP generate circular dependence. Assuming that Kappes's and Schnieder's contention

that there is no circularity is true, their argument still relies on the false assumption that 'ought implies can' with respect to explanation. Thus the interpretation of the authors' argument where a terminal explanation is endorsed does not provide an adequate response to the fact of existence.

If an infinite explanation of existence is in order, another way of challenging Kappes's and Schnieder's answer to the fundamental question is to assess whether an infinite regress of efficient causation is benign or vicious. If we think that we must explain the particular existent that is cited in an explanation of why there is something, then it seems that we must appeal to an infinite number of particular existents in an explanation for why there is something rather than nothing.

There are several reasons why one might find an infinite explanatory regress to be benign rather than vicious. Daniel Nolan has diagnosed the unacceptability of infinite regresses as having to do with the quantitative extravagance such regresses generate. That is, he claims that "people have a reluctance to embrace ontological commitment to infinite numbers of things, even if those things are all of the same type."[53] On Nolan's view, regress of the sort we find in Kappes's and Schnieder's argument are seen as vicious because accepting them commits us to a bloated ontology. Nolan's view explains why we take some regresses to be benign while considering others as vicious. For example, consider the truth regress which is widely considered to be benign: if some proposition *p* is true, then "*p* is true" is true, as is "'*p* is true' is true," and so on *ad infinitum*. Assuming the propositions in this regress are descriptions of the same fact, the truth regress is benign because it involves an ontological commitment to just one fact. On the other hand, regresses like the ones in Kappes and Schnieder are considered vicious since, according to Nolan, the infinities they posit are extravagant.

[53] Nolan, "What's Wrong With Infinite Regresses?," 533.

After providing his diagnosis of why some regress are vicious while others are benign, Nolan argues that such quantitative extravagance does not always count as enough of a theoretical cost to warrant rejecting the regress as vicious, especially when there are no rival theories that are more quantitatively parsimonious. Nolan writes: "whether a given theory with an infinite regress should be accepted may depend in part on whether a rival theory which is equally (or nearly equally) virtuous otherwise but with less quantitative extravagance is available."[54] If Kappes and Schnieder were to engage with rival theories and provide independent arguments for the inadequacy of those theories, they could follow Nolan by seeing the quantitative extravagance of their theory a theoretical cost worth paying. But this would have to consist of a detailed survey of rival theories, something not possible to do in just a single journal article.

Ricki Bliss offers an alternative view regarding the boundary between a benign and vicious regress. According to Bliss, whether a regress is benign or vicious depends on the explanatory role the regress is supposed to play. Bliss gives the following example of a regress of grounds that is benign on her account:

> If x is grounded in y and y in z, and all that we are seeking for is an explanation of how or why x exists (as the thing that it is), an explanation of how or why y exists, and so on *ad infinitum*, the regress is benign. Why? Because where z explains y and y explains x our *explanans* and *explanandum* are not of the same form. In order to explain facts about my existence, we can make recourse to the existence of—or facts of the existence of—my parents, my vital organs, etc. In order to explain these facts, we make recourse to further facts, and so on. At each stage, we have a satisfactory explanation of that for which we are seeking one.[55]

This regress is benign because all we are trying to explain is how each individual entity in the regress exists. In particular, we are not seeking an explanation of how anything in the chain

[54] Nolan, 537.
[55] Bliss, "Viciousness and The Structure of Reality," 414.

exists. We are merely focused on one entity at a time. As we move down the chain, each entity is satisfactorily explained because, as Bliss says, the *explanans* and *explanandum* are not identical.

A regress is vicious, however, when the regress is cited to explain why anything exists at all. Bliss writes: "For even at infinity, what the regress shows is that we have not explained where existence comes from. Even at infinity, we are still invoking things that exist in order to explain how anything exists at all."[56] Thus the regress becomes vicious when it is appealed to in order to explain why there is something rather than nothing. Even though the individual existence of y might explain the individual existence of x, what is left unexplained is where being comes from. This is because, in this case, *explanans* and *explanandum* both have the same form (i.e. they both exist or have being). Bliss does not articulate the point in this way, but an alternative way of conveying it is that an explanatory circle arises when the *explanans* and *explanandum* have the same form. This is like saying that things exist because things exist. This is – straightforwardly! – circular and thus not an legitimate explanation of being at all. Note that this criticism also applies to Hume's original version of the HEP. Even if efficient causes are the only sorts of explanations we can give, an infinite regress of efficient causation does not tell us anything about how existence arises.

It follows that Kappes's and Schnieder's explanatory regress is unacceptable on Bliss's account of viciousness. Since the regress in Kappes's and Schnieder's answer is designed to answer the question of why there is something rather than nothing, it is clearly vicious. On both Nolan's and Bliss's plausible accounts of viciousness, Kappes's and Schnieder's answer to the fundamental question of existence must be rejected. Therefore this contemporary defense of the HEP, as well as Hume's original formulation of the principle, each fail to adequately address the

[56] Bliss, 414.

explanatory demand for the fact of existence. In what follows I examine Leibniz's response to the question of existence which, unlike the HEP, provides a substantive answer to the question.

Chapter Two: Leibniz's Substantive Response to the Question

The logical space of substantive solutions to the question of existence has been divided by Rescher in the following way: there are necessitarian responses, theological responses, and axiarchical/nomological responses.[57] One virtue of focusing on Leibniz in this chapter is that Leibniz's answer to the question combines all three of these approaches. In addition, Leibniz was the first philosopher in the early modern period to explicitly articulate the question. I shall argue that the ways in which Leibniz's response falls short of meeting the explanatory demand for existence demonstrates the bankruptcy of all three of these types of responses. Therefore I conclude that the question of existence cannot be given a substantive answer. At the end of the chapter, I make the further claim that making progress towards a substantive response to the question is impossible.

2.1 - Reconstructing Leibniz's Answer

In an essay entitled *On the Ultimate Origination of Things* (1697), Leibniz provides a theistic answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. In doing so, Leibniz denies that an explanatory regress of efficient causation constitutes a satisfactory/complete explanation of the question.[58] He writes:

> Beyond the world, that is, beyond the collection of finite things, there is some One Being who rules…For the One Being who rules the universe not only rules the world, but also fashions or creates it; he is above the world, and so to speak, extramundane, and therefore he is the ultimate reason for things. For we cannot find in any of the individual things, or even in the entire collection and series of things, a sufficient reason for why they exist. Let us suppose that a book on the elements of geometry has always existed, one copy always made from another. It is obvious that although we can explain a present copy of the book from the previous book from which it was copied, this will never lead us to a complete explanation, no matter how many books back we go, since we can always wonder why there have always been such books, why these books were written, and why they were written in the way they were. What is true of these books is also true of

[57] *On Explaining Existence*, 16.
[58] cf. Principles of Nature and Grace sec. 8, Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 210.

> the different states of the world, for the state which follows is, in a sense, copied from the preceding state, though in accordance with certain laws of change. And so, however far back we might go into previous states, we will never find in those states a complete explanation [*ratio*] of why, indeed, there is any world at all, and why it is the way it is.[59]

Though there are infinite explanatory chains of efficient causes for the book, these explanations fail to address certain questions. Regardless of how many books back we go, it is always possible to raise the question of why there have always been such books and why they were written, as well as why they have the content that they do. A complete explanation would address all of these questions, whereas an efficient causal explanation addresses only the question of how each particular copy came into being. Note that it does not matter whether the chain of efficient causation is finite or infinite. It will never contain a sufficient reason for existence. Thus a chain of efficient causes cannot ever provide a complete explanation for the existence of the book.

Likewise, Leibniz argues that the existence of the world cannot be completely explained by appealing to previous states of the world. Given that the "laws of change" are deterministic, we can provide an efficient causal explanation of any given state of the world by appealing to the world-state preceding our given state. In drawing an analogy between the book on the elements of geometry and the state of the world, it follows that Leibniz thinks that these laws of change are deterministic. For indeterministic laws of change would violate Leibniz's cherished Principle of Sufficient Reason (hereafter: PSR), as the current world-state might lack a sufficient reason for existing. Assuming that a sufficient reason is deterministic for Leibniz, indeterministic laws of change create the possibility of a world-state obtaining without a sufficient reason. Thus the "laws of change" Leibniz discusses are deterministic, and previous states of the world serve as efficient causes of the current state of the world. But no matter how far back in time we go in exploring these previous world-states, we will never find complete answers to the questions of

[59] Leibniz, 149.

why the world exists and why the world is thus and so and not otherwise. If the laws of change were indeterministic, we would not even be able to explain the current state of the world by appealing to its previous states. But since the laws of change are deterministic, the best we can do is provide a list – which may be finite or infinite - of efficient causes for the current state of the world. The question of why the world exists at all is left unanswered by these efficient causal explanatory chains.

In addressing this question, Leibniz contends that the answer must be found beyond the collection or series of all existents. The PSR plays a crucial role in Leibniz's reasoning. Here is my reconstruction of Leibniz's argument that the question of why there is anything at all has an extramundane answer.

(1) Nothing exists without a sufficient reason.
(2) Something exists rather than nothing.
(3) The efficient causes of individual things, or the collection of all things, do not provide a sufficient reason for why things exist, where a sufficient reason would provide a complete explanation of their existence.
(4) Therefore the sufficient reason for the existence of all things is extramundane (i.e. it must be found outside of or above the collection of all things).

2.1.1 - Leibniz's Nominalism

One interpretive complication with this argument is squaring Leibniz's discussion of "the entire collection or series of things" with his nominalism about individual substances. That is, Leibniz believes that only concrete individual substances are real, as opposed to abstract entities like "collections," "aggregates," or "series of things." While these abstracta might be said to exist in a thin sense, they are representation-dependent. That is, abstract objects are not res, or real things. Benson Mates has persuasively argued for this point with the passage quoted below

as his primary piece of evidence.[60] Leibniz writes the following in an unpublished draft called *De accidentibus* (~1688):

> Up to now I see no other way of avoiding these difficulties than by considering abstracta not as real things [res] but as abbreviated ways of talking [compendia loquendi]—so that when I use the name heat it is not required that I should be making mention of some vague subject but rather that I should be saying that something is hot—and to that extent I am a nominalist, at least provisionally….There is no need to raise the issue whether there are various realities in a substance that are the fundaments of its various predicates (though, indeed, if it is raised, adjudication is difficult). It suffices to posit only substances as real things [res] and to assert truths about these. Geometricians, too, do not use definitions of abstracta but reduce them to concreta; thus Euclid does not use his own definition of ratio but rather that in which he states when two quantities are said to have the same, greater or lesser ratio.[61]

This passage is a definitive statement of Leibniz's nominalism concerning individual substances, and suggests that Leibniz's talk of a "series of things" in *The Ultimate Origination of Things* is consistent with his nominalism. According to Leibniz, discussion of "abstracta" like "heat" should not be taken as positing a real thing, but as shorthand for individual substances that are hot. Likewise, Leibniz's discussion of the "entire collection and series of things" should be taken as shorthand for referring to each individual substance based on this passage.

There are other passages where Leibniz articulates his nominalism with respect to substances. Leibniz writes in the *Monadology*: "Thus we see that each living body has a dominant entelechy, which in the animal is the soul; but the limbs of this living body are full of other living beings, plants, animals, each of which also has its entelechy, or its dominant soul."[62] Here, Leibniz claims that every living body is dominated by a single entelechy (i.e. a monad), and that the limbs of each body consists of other monads. Leibniz elaborates elsewhere that all that exists is an infinite continuum of monads. In a letter to Bierling in 1711, he writes, "Any

[60] Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 171.
[61] Leibniz, *Textes inédits*, 547.
[62] Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 222.

mass contains innumerable monads, for although any one organic body in nature has its corresponding [dominant] monad, it nevertheless contains in its parts other monads endowed in the same way with organic bodies subservient to the primary one; *and the whole of nature is nothing else*, for it is necessary that every aggregate result from simple substances as if from elements" (emphasis mine).[63] That is, each living body contains monads at every ontological level, and these monads are all that can be truly said to exist.

Since Leibniz is indeed a nominalist, the question arises of how might it make sense for him to talk about something above the collection of all things, where this collection is what stands in need of explanation. Since there is no collection that cries out for an explanation, it is not obvious how we should make sense of Leibniz's discussion of an extramundane explanation of the "entire collection and series of things."

Maria Rosa Antognazza's elucidation of Leibniz's syncategorematic/categorematic distinction explains how Leibniz's nominalism is consistent with his argument for an extramundane sufficient reason for the series of all things. In particular, the distinction suggests that Leibniz refers to the infinity of individual substances (i.e. monads) as a distribution rather than referring to the infinity of monads as a collective whole. Antognazza cites the following passage in his correspondence with Bartholomew Des Bosses where Leibniz explicitly makes the distinction:

> *There is a syncategorematic infinite* or passive power having parts, namely, the possibility of further progress by dividing, multiplying, subtracting, or adding. In addition, there is a *hypercategorematic infinite*, or potestative infinite, and active power having, as it were, parts eminently but not formally or actually. This infinite is God himself. But there is not a *categorematic infinite* or one actually having infinite parts formally.

[63] Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, VII:502.

> There is also an actual infinite in the sense of a distributive whole but not a collective one [per modum totius distributivi non collectivi]. Thus, something can be stated of all numbers, though not collectively. In this way it can be said that for every even number there is a corresponding odd number, and vice versa; but it is not therefore accurately said that there is an equal multitude of even and odd numbers.[64]

For the purposes of this section, I am concerned merely with Leibniz's distinction between the syncategorematic infinite and the categorematic infinite, and Leibniz's denial of the latter.[65] According to Leibniz, the syncategorematic infinite refers to the possibility of discovering new entities by mathematical operations. For example, consider any natural number *n*. For any *n*, we will always be able to find *n+1*. When defined in this way, the infinity of the natural numbers constitutes a distributive whole for Leibniz. But talking about the set of natural numbers *qua* collective is ruled out by his denial of the categorematic infinite. This type of infinity refers to collective wholes which have formal parts, such as the set of natural numbers, or the set of all even and odd numbers. These sets have an infinite number of elements, and these elements are formal parts of these infinite sets. Leibniz's nominalism rules out the existence of sets or collections like these. But on this analogy, individual numbers still exist, and we can talk about the infinity of, say, natural numbers as a distribution. Thus each individual natural number exists, since for any given number, we can always discover another number. But Leibniz's denial of the categorematic infinite entails that the set or collection of all natural numbers does not exist, since this would be an infinite set with formal parts. Therefore Leibniz's syncategorematic infinite allows him to talk about infinities without the ontological commitment to the existence of collective wholes.

Antognazza also contends that Leibniz's use of mathematical examples serves as a mathematical analogy. That is, Leibniz does not maintain that actual infinity – even if thought of

[64] Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, 52–53.
[65] I discuss the hypercategorematic infinite, which is attributed to God, in the conclusion to this chapter.

as a distribution – applies to mathematical entities.[66] Since mathematical entities are abstract, they are ruled out by Leibniz's nominalism. Thus Leibniz's discussion of even and odd numbers syncategorematically is an analogy to help his interlocutors grasp the idea. Of course, the only entities that can actually be talked about in the syncategorematic sense are those that actually exist, and these are individual monads.

With this clarification in place, it is clear that Leibniz's denial of the categorematic infinite dovetails nicely with his nominalism concerning individual substances. If categorematic infinities like infinite sets or collections were real things, the existence of such abstract objects would violate his nominalist thesis. The question that arises, then, is how to relate Leibniz's nominalism and his denial of the categorematic infinite to his argument for an extramundane explanation of the world in *The Ultimate Origination of Things*. I submit that we should understand Leibniz's discussion of the "collection or series of things" as a syncategorematic infinity, or an infinity referred to as a distribution. That is, for any given monad, we can always discover another monad.[67] What Leibniz's nominalism rules out is that we can talk coherently about the totality of monads as a whole that stands in need of explanation. Thus it is not the infinite collection of monads *qua* whole that cries out for explanation, but each individual monad that demands to be explained. Per his argument in *The Ultimate Origination*, the efficient causes of these monads do not completely explain their existence. Thus Leibniz posits an extramundane reason (i.e. the monad that is God) to serve as the sufficient reason for each monad. Each monad has a direct relationship of metaphysical dependence to God. Thus any given monad is explained by God, and the monads exhaust everything that exists. It follows that the existence of God explains why there is something rather than nothing because he serves as the ontological ground

[66] Antognazza, "The Hypercategorematic Infinite," 8.
[67] We might do this according to what differentiates these monads (i.e. how clear and distinct their perceptions are).

for any given monad, including himself.[68] Without positing a categorematic totality of monads, we know that God serves as the explanation of any given monad. This satisfies Leibniz's PSR, since everything that exists (i.e. each monad) has a sufficient reason for doing so. Consequently, Leibniz's discussion of the "series or collection of things" is consistent with his nominalism since he is talking about this series as a syncategorematic infinity rather than a categorematic infinity.

2.1.2 – Leibniz's Distinction between Efficient Causes and Sufficient Reasons

The second interpretative issue that arises with Leibniz's argument in *The Ultimate Origination* is discovering what Leibniz means by an efficient cause and how efficient causes relate to sufficient reasons. For Leibniz's argument to be valid, I submit that he requires that a sufficient reason might be something other than an efficient cause. If these two notions are identical, then it follows that God would be the efficient cause of himself. But this cannot be the case, since Leibniz's notion of efficient causation entails that an entity distinct from the effect brings that effect about.[69] Thus a sufficient reason is something different than an efficient cause for Leibniz. Though Mates contends that "with very few exceptions he [Leibniz] appears to use the terms 'reason' and 'cause' interchangeably," Mates neglects Leibniz's clear distinction between the two terms in the 1697 essay.[70] Leibniz writes: "For in eternal things, even if there is no cause, we must still understand there to be a reason."[71] Contra Mates, then, Leibniz's version of the PSR ranges over more than just efficient causes. From premise (3), it follows that the PSR guarantees that the sufficient reason for the existence of all things must be something other than

[68] I explore the issue of God's self-grounding in section 2.1.3.
[69] This notion of efficient causation is denied by Spinoza, who argues that God is his own efficient cause. See Spinoza, "Perfection, All-Inclusive, Self-Caused," 118. On Leibniz's view, it is something like God's formal cause that contains his sufficient reason for existing.
[70] Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, 158.
[71] Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 149. This passage is not one of the exceptions cited by Mates.

an efficient cause.[72] In the following paragraphs, I supply further evidence that Leibniz distinguishes between a sufficient reason and an efficient cause.

In an essay entitled *The elements of true piety*, written some twenty years before the essay discussed above, Leibniz responds to a potential objection that the PSR entails the non-existence of a first cause of the world. That is, the PSR would entail God's non-existence if God is alleged to be the first cause of everything. In responding to this objection, Leibniz contends that sufficient reasons for things that necessarily exist might lie within those things. That is, necessary things might explain themselves. He writes:

> But in truth, someone will say, if there is nothing without a reason then there will be no first cause and no ultimate end. We must answer that, indeed, there is nothing without a reason, but that does not mean that there is nothing without a cause. For a cause is the reason for a thing outside of the thing, or its reason of production, but it is possible that the reason for a thing is inside the thing itself. And this is the case for all those things which are necessary, like the truths of mathematics which contain their reason in themselves; likewise God, who alone is the actual reason for the existence of actual things.[73]

The objection Leibniz responds to in this passage runs like so. If the PSR is true, then each and every existent has an efficient cause. But if all individual things have an efficient cause, then there will be an infinite regress of efficient causes for any given thing. There will thus be no first cause of the world, for a first cause cannot itself have an efficient cause. Since God is alleged to be the first cause of the world, Leibniz's PSR entails atheism. In contemporary parlance, the PSR entails metaphysical infinitism, which is the view that there is at least one limitless chain of efficient causation. Thus this objection denies that the PSR is compatible with metaphysical foundationalism, which posits that there is at least one fundamental entity - which all other entities depend upon – that itself lacks an efficient cause.[74]

---

[72] Leibniz claims that God is the efficient cause of each monad in addition to being their sufficient reason.
[73] Leibniz, *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, 192.
[74] Oberle, "Metaphysical Foundationalism: Consensus and Controversy," 97–98.

Leibniz responds to this objection by distinguishing sharply between efficient causes and sufficient reasons, and claiming that there is a sufficient reason for God's existence even though his existence lacks an efficient cause. One the one hand, an efficient cause serves as an explanation for a thing by referring to something distinct from that thing. On the other hand, a reason for something (i.e. a requisite for its existence) sometimes lies inside the thing itself. Leibniz claims that necessary truths, such as mathematical truths, explain themselves. Thus he writes: "the truths of mathematics which contain their reason within themselves."[75] For example, Leibniz would say that we do not need to appeal to any notion beyond 58 and 67, and the operation of addition, to see that 58 + 67 = 125 necessarily. Because we do not need to appeal to outside concepts to explain how 58 + 67 = 125, this truth is self-explanatory on Leibniz's view. This truth is necessary because its contrary implies a contradiction: it cannot ever be the case that 125 does not equal 125. Another, perhaps clearer, example of a mathematical truth that is self-explanatory on Leibniz's view is that a triangle has three sides. There is no possible world in which a triangle does not have three sides; hence it is necessary. Moreover, the fact that some polygon has three sides is explained by that polygon being a triangle. That is, it is built into the nature of a triangle that it has three sides. Therefore the statement that a triangle has three sides is self-explanatory.

Like mathematical truths, the existence of God is also a necessary truth. Just as the fact that a triangle has three sides lacks an external cause that makes this fact true, God also lacks an external cause. Thus if God has a sufficient reason for existing, and the PSR guarantees that he does, it follows that God's existence is self-explanatory. For Leibniz, then, to ask why God exists is akin to asking why a triangle has three sides. It is built into the nature of God that he exists just as it is built into the nature of a triangle that it has three sides. Unlike the mathematical case,

[75] Leibniz, *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, 192.

however, it is difficult to see *how* God's existence is self-explanatory. In what follows, I reconstruct Leibniz's view of God's nature such that he explains himself.

2.1.3 – Explaining God's Necessary Existence

Leibniz claims that God is unique among existents (i.e. monads) insofar as part of his essence is to exist. Since every other existent is contingent, it does not belong to their essences to exist. But since God is necessary, it is built into his nature/essence that he exists. An alternative way of formulating this claim is to define God as the most perfect being. A perfection for Leibniz is any simple positive quality.[76] By simple, Leibniz means unanalyzable. Since existence itself is a simple positive quality, it is a perfection, and it follows that existence is built into God's nature.[77] Yet another way of understanding that God's existence belongs to his essence is to cash out existence as a requisite of God. In *De Summa Rerum*, Leibniz defines requisites in terms of intelligibility. He writes: "Those things are connected of which one cannot be understood without the other. Requisites are those which are connected with another, but not conversely."[78] G.H.R. Parkinson puts the point like so: "The requisites of A are those things without which A cannot be understood, but which can be understood without A."[79] In the case of God, one of God's requisites is to exist. For we cannot understand God without appealing to his existence, but we can independently understand the idea of existence.

This premise is crucial for mounting the ontological argument for God's existence. In this section, however, I will not address the soundness of this already much discussed argument. Rather, I merely wish to discover why Leibniz thinks that God's existence does not stand in need of further explanation. That is, I wish to evaluate whether Leibniz's theistic answer to the

[76] Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum*, 101.
[77] Parkinson, "Leibniz's 'De Summa Rerum': A Systematic Approach," 135.
[78] Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum*, 71.
[79] Parkinson, "Leibniz's 'De Summa Rerum': A Systematic Approach," 141.

question of existence is satisfactory, granting that the theistic conclusion follows. Elaborating on this premise in the ontological argument, Leibniz writes the following:

> An independent being is the same as a being from whose essence existence follows, namely a being to which existence is essential, or, which exists through its own essence. Again, a necessary being is the same as a being from whose essence existence follows. For a necessary being is one which necessarily exists, such that for it not to exist would imply a contradiction, and so would conflict with the concept or essence of this being. And so existence belongs to its concept or essence.[80]

If a necessary being did not exist, Leibniz contends that a contradiction would arise. Just as a triangle would not be a triangle if it did not have three sides, God would not be himself if he did not exist. God's non-existence thus violates Leibniz's cherished Principle of Contradiction (hereafter: PNC), which in Leibniz's terms, "asserts that of two contradictory propositions, one is true, the other false."[81] This is also consistent with Leibniz's contention that necessary truths are governed by the PNC, since the existence of God is a necessary truth for Leibniz. As I said previously, I will not be evaluating the soundness of the premise that it belongs to God's essence to exist. Granting that this premise is true, I now wish to consider whether it satisfactorily addresses the question of existence.

It seems that the analogy of God's necessary existence with mathematical truths is designed to get Leibniz's readers to stop being flustered by the question of why there is anything at all. God's necessary existence is posited as the explanation of the contingent world. Since we have found a necessary reason for the existence of all contingent existents, Leibniz argues that our search for the answer of the fundamental question has come to an end. But Leibniz has more to say about the nature of necessary existence than Parfit did in the previous chapter (i.e. if Parfit were a theist, he would say that God exists because God exists). For Leibniz, God exists because

[80] Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum*, 107.
[81] Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 147.

he is a perfect being, and existence is a perfection. This explanation of God's existence appeals to an internal feature of God rather than something external (i.e. an efficient cause). In this respect, God's sufficient reason for existing lies within the concept of himself and he has no efficient cause. One might think that this explanation sheds more light on the nature of necessary existence than Parfit's answer, according to which there are no further intelligible questions about necessary existence.

2.2 – Assessing Leibniz's Answer

It will be instructive to compare Leibniz's answer to Hume's in assessing Leibniz's view. We have observed that both Hume and Leibniz are nominalists inasmuch as they deny the existence of abstract objects such as sets, collections, or ontological dependence chains. But both philosophers have radically different attitudes towards the fundamental question. How might we explain the difference between these attitudes? On the one hand, Hume argues that the question does not make sense because the entity that stands in need of explanation - namely, a chain of causation - is an ontological fiction. That is, since there is no series of contingent entities, it does not make sense to ask how the series comes into being. For Hume, citing the efficient cause of each entity is sufficient for explaining each entity. Leibniz, on the other hand, contends that citing the efficient cause of contingent entities does not provide a complete explanation of these entities. Distinguishing between an efficient cause and a sufficient reason, Leibniz argues that the sufficient reason for each contingent entity is supplied by God, a necessary being. Moreover, the existence of a sufficient reason for each monad is guaranteed by the PSR. With respect to Leibniz's argument for an extramundane reason for the world's existence, then, we can see that Hume denies premise (3): namely, that a chain of efficient causation does not contain the sufficient reason for the existence of an individual substance. Since Hume does not distinguish

between sufficient reasons and efficient causes and subscribes to an 'ought implies can' principle with respect to explanation, citing the efficient causes of a contingent entity is the best we can do in explaining the existence of that entity. Moreover, because efficient causation is the only possible form of explanation for Hume, there is no sufficient reason for the existence of something rather than nothing. The fact of existence is thus brute on Hume's view.

Which response is more adequate, Hume's brute fact view or Leibniz's theistic view? While Hume - at least on the 'Old Hume' interpretation - accepts that there are brute facts, Leibniz denies that there are any brute facts. Leibniz thinks we are entitled to ask for a complete explanation of the fact of existence due to his commitment to the PSR. In his *Principles of Nature and Grace* (1714), he writes that "Assuming this principle [the PSR], the first question we have the right to ask will be, *why is there something rather than nothing?* For nothing is simpler and easier than something."[82] It strikes me that Leibniz is right to make this further demand for a complete explanation. Though Leibniz thinks that an explanation for why there is anything at all exists because of the PSR, I submit that we can still take Leibniz's explanatory demand seriously without committing to the full-blown PSR. All that is required to uptake Leibniz's explanatory demand is to ask for an explanation for why there are substances. But if such an explanation exists, it must come in the form of a sufficient reason rather than an efficient cause. This is because an efficient cause does not provide a complete explanation for why things exist. Taking up Leibniz's explanatory demand therefore requires us to distinguish between a sufficient reason and an efficient cause.

2.2.1 – The Inexplicable Fact View

Leibniz's attempt to fulfill the explanatory demand is not without its problems. Leibniz's contention that God's existence is self-explanatory seems questionable, not least because it is

[82] Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, 210.

unsatisfying. That is, the question of why God exists still seems pressing! One reason to reject this theistic solution is to deny that it counts as a genuine explanation of existence. Though God exists because he is a perfect being and existence is a perfection, the fact that existence is a perfection is inexplicable. Leibniz's answer to the question of existence would therefore terminate in an inexplicable fact. Perhaps the fact that existence is a perfection is supposed to be self-explanatory for Leibniz. But given that the explanatory relation is irreflexive (i.e. reflexive explanations are inexplicable),[83] if the fact that existence is a perfection is self-explanatory, this fact would remain inexplicable and thus must be rejected as a coherent explanation. But recall that the purpose of issuing the explanatory demand for existence was to render existence explicable. One might argue, therefore, that Leibniz's answer to the problem is inadequate.

Moreover, it seems that there are no exceptions to the irreflexivity of explanation such that nothing can ever explain itself. In everyday cases, for example, we accept that explanations are irreflexive. A child telling their mother that there are no cookies left in the cookie jar because the jar is empty would make any mother laugh. What explains the fact that the jar is empty is that the child ate all of the cookies inside it. If explanations are irreflexive in ordinary cases like this, why not think they are also irreflexive in the case of God? It seems unduly arbitrary to distinguish between everyday explanations and explanations of the divine.[84] For is it not the same concept of explanation employed in both kinds of cases? And if explanation is always irreflexive, then Leibniz's insistence that God's existence is self-explanatory violates this highly plausible constraint on explanation. Though Leibniz insists that there is a reason for why there is anything at all, this reason might not be of the right kind if we want our search for an answer to the problem of existence to end.

[83] Following Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 116.
[84] This arbitrariness also violates the PSR.

It will be helpful to cite Descartes on behalf of Leibniz in response to this objection. Descartes offers a principled reason to treat explanations differently in the case of God. In his *Objections and Replies*, Descartes writes:

> …the answer to the question why God exists should be given not in terms of an efficient cause in the strict sense, but simply in terms of the essence or formal cause of the thing. And precisely because in the case of God there is no distinction between existence and essence, the formal cause will be strongly analogous to an efficient cause, and hence can be called something close to an efficient cause.[85]

In other words, explanations work differently in the case of God because - unlike every other existent - there is no distinction between God's existence and his essence. It is therefore not appropriate to answer the question of why God exists with an efficient cause. A formal cause, rather than an efficient cause, contains the sufficient reason for God's existence. Moreover, a formal cause can play the same explanatory role that efficient causes do in the case of ordinary existents. God's necessary existence explains itself just as the existence of my parents explains my own existence. Though, strictly speaking, God is not the efficient cause of himself, his formal cause plays a similar role of that efficient causes do in other everyday cases. In this respect, something explains itself whenever that thing lacks an efficient cause. Importantly, this happens only in the case of God. Explanations can be reflexive, therefore, if and only if we are trying to explain God's existence.

The consequence of Descartes's argument, however, is that reflexive explanations are unsatisfactory when we treat them as we would everyday (i.e. efficient causal) explanations. That is to say – unlike in the case of existents which have irreflexive explanations - we should not expect a satisfactory answer that illustrates how something arises when given a reflexive explanation. If something explains itself, we do not obtain an explanatory story as to *how* that thing comes into being. Rather, self-explanation is merely a way of making the regress of

[85] Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 170.

explanations come to an end. The fact that the explanatory regress terminates might be interpreted as a consolation prize of sorts. If we cannot get a fully satisfactory explanation of how existence arises, we can at least see that the explanation provided by Leibniz and Descartes is finite. And this is supposed to be more satisfactory – and thus a better explanation – than the infinite explanatory regresses that we discussed earlier.

One might still think, however, that merely insisting that God's existence is self-explanatory without explaining *how* it is so is a bad argument. In fact, it seems that claiming that explanations are reflexive only in the case of God because God is unique amongst all the monads is circular. That is, Leibniz seems to assert that God's existence is self-explanatory because he is unique amongst all the monads, and that he is unique amongst all the monads because his existence is self-explanatory. This is a serious shortcoming of Leibniz's view.

Before further pressing these criticisms of Leibniz, I want to emphasize that God's self-explanatory nature does not mean that God's existence is a brute fact according to Leibniz and Descartes. A brute fact counts as brute insofar as there is no reason for it being true. On Leibniz's and Descartes's theistic account, however, God has a sufficient reason and/or a formal cause that makes it the case that he exists. In fact, it is Hume who carefully distinguishes between something which explains itself and something which exists for no reason at all. When Hume denies the universal causal principle (i.e. the principle that every thing has a cause), he points out that if something were to lack a cause, this does not entail that the thing is self-caused.[86] Hume writes:

> Every thing, it is said, must have a cause; for if any thing wanted a cause, it would produce ITSELF; that is, exist before it existed; which is impossible. But this reasoning is plainly unconclusive; because it supposes, that in our denial of a cause we still grant what we expressly deny, viz. that there must be a cause;

[86] Hume conflates causation and other types of explanations because he argues that causal explanations exhaust all possible forms of explanations. This detail can be ignored for our purposes in this paragraph.

> which therefore is taken to be the object itself; and that, no doubt, is an evident contradiction. But to say that any thing is produced, or to express myself more properly, comes into existence, without a cause, is not to affirm, that it is itself its own cause; but on the contrary in excluding all external causes, excludes a fortiori the thing itself, which is created. An object, that exists absolutely without any cause, certainly is not its own cause; and when you assert, that the one follows from the other, you suppose the very point in questions and take it for granted, that it is utterly impossible any thing can ever begin to exist without a cause, but that, upon the exclusion of one productive principle, we must still have recourse to another.[87]

In other words, assuming that something is self-caused when it lacks a cause is just to assume the very causal principle that Hume has called into question. Thus when Hume denies the principle that every thing has a cause, he is also denying that if something were to lack a cause, it would have to be self-caused. Thus for Hume, there is a difference between something existing for no reason and something explaining its own existence.

Though Leibniz disagrees with Hume regarding Hume's rejection of the universal causal principle, I submit that Leibniz accepts that there is a difference between a brute fact and a self-explanatory fact. Leibniz's commitment to the PSR rules out that there are brute facts. It follows that if God's existence is self-explanatory, Leibniz should not be interpreted as saying that God exists for no reason at all. That would be to deny the PSR and is thus not an option for rationalists such as Leibniz (and presumably Descartes as well). This is not to say, however, that reflexive explanations provide any more insight into the nature of what is being explained than if that thing lacked an explanation altogether. That is, a reflexive explanation does not tell us anything about how whatever is being explained comes into being. We have observed that these types of explanations merely terminate the explanatory chain, perhaps in an unsatisfactory manner. The upshot is that self-explanation might be explanatorily equivalent to something having no explanation, but that these two notions are not equivalent *simpliciter*.

[87] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Section 1.3.3.

2.2.2 – The Apophatic View

That said, Leibniz has an alternative way of showing that the explanation of the problem of existence ought to terminate with God that does not invoke a self-explanatory fact. As limited beings ourselves, we might wonder about how existence is one of God's perfections. Though we can fully grasp the concept of other necessary truths – like a triangle having three sides – it seems much more difficult if not impossible to fully grasp the nature of God. Another way of seeing why we cannot fully understand the essence of God is that necessary existence is not a predicate that can apply to more than one thing. Since there is no other entity like God, we have nothing to which we can compare God's essence. That is, God's essence is unintelligible because it has no comparative class. The upshot is that not only can we fail to conceive of God as not existing, but that we cannot really conceive of him as existing either. Putting the point in terms of Leibnizian requisites, we should say that necessary existence cannot be a requisite of God. Recall that requisites must be understood independently of what they are requisites for. Since necessary existence cannot be understood independently of God because it is unique to God, necessary existence is not intelligible and thus cannot be said to be a requisite of God. This is a way Leibniz could have explained why God's necessary existence is ultimately unintelligible. Thus we cannot understand exactly how God's essence is to exist like we can clearly understand that it is the essence of a triangle to have three sides. Therefore we can see that God exists necessarily without understanding exactly *how* his existence is necessary. And this is enough for Leibniz to declare that the explanatory demand for existence is completely fulfilled.

In the passage from the Letters to Des Bosses that I cited earlier, Leibniz further explains God's nature such that his existence is unintelligible. He writes:

> In addition, there is a *hypercategorematic infinite*, or potestative infinite, and active power having, as it were, parts eminently but not formally or actually. This infinite is God himself.[88]

Antognazza clarifies that by the hypercategorematic, Leibniz is talking about the being that is "*beyond* all *categoremata*, namely, that which is beyond any *determinate thing* falling under the Aristotelian categories and signified by categorematic terms."[89] If a proposition states a determinate thing about something that exists, then strictly speaking, there are no facts about the hypercategorematic infinite. Moreover, there is a good reason to believe the antecedent of this conditional. If propositions did not state determinate things about existents, it is unclear how they could be individuated. For what would we appeal to in order to distinguish one fact from another if not what they declare to be the case? It follows that propositions make determinate statements about existents, and that there are no facts about the hypercategorematic infinite because it is beyond categorization. This means that it is not even a fact to say that God exists, if saying that something exists is to categorize it as existing as opposed to not existing. This apophatic conception of God thus explains why Leibniz does not consider God's unintelligibility to be a fault of his solution to the problem of existence. On this interpretation of Leibniz, it is not correct to think that God's existence is a self-explanatory fact. Rather, God's existence is not factive. Call this the apophatic view. On this view, God's existence is ultimately mysterious and inexplicable.

This is all to say that Leibniz may admit that God's existence is unintelligible, but that this would not be a reason for Leibniz to reject God as a solution to the problem of existence. But we may disagree with Leibniz about this latter point if we think that answering the problem of existence requires an intelligible answer.

---

[88] Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, 52–53.
[89] Antognazza, "The Hypercategorematic Infinite," 16.

2.2.3 – The Autonomous Fact View

Before providing my final assessment of Leibniz's answer versus Hume's response to the problem of existence, it is worth discussing a distinction from the contemporary literature on metaphysical grounding to which Leibniz could have plausibly appealed, especially if one does not want to rely on the passage from 1706 in the Letters to Des Bosses. We might still think that Leibniz would want to say that God's existence is a fact, just as it is a fact that a triangle has three sides. We would have good reason to think this, I submit, because Leibniz discusses God's positive attributes at length. Namely, he talks about God's perfections, such as his omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience.[90] If these are all facts about God, then it seems there is another way we could revise Leibniz's argument according to which God's existence is a fact, albeit one that is not apt for explanation.

In a recent paper, Shamik Dasgupta develops a rationalist view in which the PSR is compatible with facts that are not apt for explanation.[91] In particular, Dasgupta's version of the PSR implies that (a) there are no brute facts and (b) that every explanatory chain has a terminus.[92] On Dasgupta's view, the PSR has to do with metaphysical or constitutive explanations, as opposed to teleological or causal explanations. This is, of course, connected to the notion of metaphysical grounding. Thus when Dasgupta claims that explanations terminate with autonomous facts - which he defines as those which are not apt for explanation – he means that such facts are not apt for being metaphysically grounded. Moreover, autonomous facts differ from brute facts, which are facts that are apt for metaphysical explanation but lack one. Autonomous facts, as Dasgupta uses the term, are also "not self-explanatory in any literal sense

[90] Principles of Nature and Grace, sec. 9, *Philosophical Essays*, 210.
[91] Bede Rundle also distinguishes between inexplicable facts and facts that are not apt for an explanation, and claims that the PSR is compatible with the latter type of facts. See *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*, 185.
[92] Dasgupta, "Metaphysical Rationalism," 391.

of the term."[93] Rather they are essentialist facts, or facts "for which this further question of why they obtain does not even arise in the first place."[94]

Dasgupta thinks that the notion of an autonomous fact is primitive, but provides some examples designed to illuminate the concept. He asks us to consider the fact that 1+2=3. If someone asked for a causal explanation of why this equation holds, merely saying that there is no causal story to tell is not an adequate reply.[95] An appropriate response would consist in saying that the notions of causation and abstract mathematical objects show that a causal explanation is inapplicable in this case. Thus the statement 1+2=3 is not apt for being causally explained. Dasgupta contends that autonomous facts are not apt for metaphysical explanation in the same way that 1+2=3 is not apt for a causal explanation. One example of an autonomous fact is that water is a substance composed of H_2O. If someone asks for a metaphysical explanation of this fact, Dasgupta replies that it is "hard to know what to say other than that is *just what water is*!"[96] It is hard to know how to answer this question substantively because the fact that water is H_2O is an autonomous fact.

Instead of claiming that God's existence is not factive, or that God's existence is self-explanatory, Leibniz could have argued that God's existence is an autonomous fact. Just as it is built into the essence of water to be composed of H_2O, it is built into the essence of God to exist. If water were not composed of H_2O, that substance would not count as water. The same is true of God's non-existence. Admittedly, though, we have an easier time understanding the essence of water compared to the essence of God. It seems that we have a clear handle on why something not composed of H_2O could not be water, whereas it seems reasonable to conceive of God as

[93] Dasgupta, 397.
[94] Dasgupta, 383.
[95] Dasgupta, 384.
[96] Dasgupta, 386.

something that may not exist. Otherwise what would explain why atheism is considered to be coherent view! Leibniz might have replied that what atheism rejects is not God as Leibniz uses the term, since it is impossible for God to be conceived of as not-existing. Moreover, our inability to conceive of God fits with the idea that necessary existence would not be a requisite of God due to its inapplicability to other monads. Recasting Leibniz as endorsing Dasgupta's notion of autonomous facts is thus compatible with Leibniz's denial of brute facts and his contention that the explanatory chain for existence terminates.

Why would amending Leibniz's argument in this way be advantageous? Attributing Dasgupta's view to Leibniz would allow Leibniz to avoid talk of self-explanation. We observed earlier that the notion of self-explanation makes Leibniz's view out to be viciously circular. Since God's existence is self-explanatory because he is unique, and he is unique inasmuch as his existence is self-explanatory, Leibniz's argument for God's necessary existence does not go through. Descartes's defense of the idea that explanations are reflexive only in God's case is of no help because it is subject to the same circularity objection outlined above. In addition, talk of self-explanation seems to impose the obligation to understand *how* God necessarily exists. Of course, Leibniz rejects *that* explanatory demand, and thinks it is enough to merely show that God's existence explains itself without further explaining how this is possible. Eliminating the idea that explanation is reflexive when talking about God, then, releases Leibniz from the perceived obligation to explain how God's existence is necessary.

Though there are reasons to reject the interpretation of Leibniz that claims that God's existence is an autonomous fact, the benefits of recasting his argument according to Dasgupta's view eliminates the circularity in Leibniz's argument. The best reason to reject the autonomous fact view as an accurate interpretation of Leibniz is that Leibniz seems to insist outright that

God's existence is self-explanatory. When Leibniz talks about necessary truths, for example, he claims that they "contain their reason in themselves."[97] Because God's existence is a necessary truth, God's sufficient reason for existing is contained within himself for Leibniz. This is a direct endorsement of the view that God's existence explains itself and that explanations can be reflexive in this case. But if we examine Dasgupta's view more closely, we notice that truths such as a triangle having three sides also count as autonomous facts. It is not too farfetched to claim that Leibniz would have been comfortable with the claim that that necessary truths – as he uses the term – are all autonomous facts. Just as it seems wrongheaded to ask why a triangle has three sides, it is equally nonsensical to ask why God exists on the autonomous fact view. This fits perfectly with what Leibniz wants to say about necessary truths: namely, that questions pertaining to why these truths obtain do not legitimately arise. Though Leibniz seems to explicitly endorse the self-explanation view, it is clear that he would have accepted this upshot of the autonomous fact view. And because the latter view eliminates the circularity in his argument for God's necessary existence, we should charitably recast Leibniz's argument as positing God's existence as an autonomous fact.

2.2.4 – Refuting these Views

I have distinguished between three ways of reading Leibniz's theistic answer to the fundamental question. The existence of God is either a self-explanatory fact, an autonomous fact, or it is not something factive altogether (i.e. the hypercategorematic). I have also distinguished self-explanatory facts from brute facts, which are the facts that Hume seems to endorse. Moreover, I have argued that the autonomous fact view is superior to the self-explanation view. In assessing Leibniz's theistic solution compared to the brute fact view, then, the task that

[97] Leibniz, *The Shorter Leibniz Texts*, 192.

remains is to adjudicate between the autonomous fact view, the apophatic view, and the brute fact view.

One major difference between Leibniz and Hume we have already discussed is that Leibniz takes the explanatory demand for existence seriously while Hume neglects this call for an explanation. And while this explanatory demand is motivated by Leibniz's acceptance of the PSR, Leibniz's nominalism regarding individual substances shrinks his ontology so that the question of why there is anything at all arises when we ask why there are substances. Therefore the explanatory demand for existence arises without a requirement to commit to the full-blown PSR on this view. At least to me, this is an initial point in Leibniz's favor. While Hume could consistently maintain that the fundamental question is real even if it lacks a substantive answer, Hume still outright ignores the explanatory demand altogether. If the brute fact view were to be Hume's substantive answer to the fundamental question, however, it could be evaluated alongside Leibniz's theistic view. In what follows, I will do exactly that.

Though Leibniz heeds the call for an explanation of existence, I submit that Leibniz's response – on either the apophatic or autonomous fact view - is no better than the brute fact view at meeting the explanatory demand. On the apophatic view, we have already seen how God's existence is still inexplicable even if it is not strictly speaking a fact. Since any talk of God's existence is unintelligible, God's existence is inexplicable and mysterious. The explanatory demand is clearly not fulfilled.

The autonomous fact view requires a lengthier explanation of its inadequacy. According to this view, God's existence is not apt for explanation. Just as a triangle having three sides is just what it is to be a triangle, Leibniz argues that existing, or having being, is what it is to be God. But unlike in the case of a triangle, we cannot grasp *how it is* that God necessarily exists.

While Leibniz thinks it is adequate enough to merely state that God's existence is not apt for explanation, I contend that Leibniz must show *how* God's existence is an autonomous fact for his response to successfully meet the explanatory demand. Leibniz is obligated to explain how God's existence is autonomous because the fact that God's existence is autonomous seems to stand in need of explanation but lacks one. That is, it is a brute fact that God's existence is an autonomous fact. If this is true, it would be inconsistent not only with Leibniz's original formulation of the PSR,[98] but also Dasgupta's modified version of the PSR. Since both of these versions of the PSR rule out brute facts, the brute fact that God's existence is autonomous cannot be permitted on Leibniz's view. If the fact that God's existence is autonomous is itself apt for explanation, then Leibniz is guilty of making inconsistent claims inasmuch as he would be committed to accepting a brute fact.

A potential objection to this line of reasoning is that the fact that God's existence is autonomous is itself an autonomous fact and not a brute one. If 'p is true' is an autonomous fact, it seems that the fact that "it is true that 'p is true'" is also autonomous. One might think that autonomous facts are transitive in this way. In the case of a triangle having three sides, this seems to be the case. Given the *fact that a triangle has three sides*, the fact that *the fact that a triangle has three sides* is true also does not seem apt for explanation. It is thus not a brute fact that a triangle having three sides is not apt for explanation. Rather, this further fact is autonomous. This is because the question of why a triangle has three sides simply does not arise. According to this line of thought, the fact that God's existence is autonomous for the same reason. The upshot is that it is not intelligible to ask why it is true that God necessarily exists.

[98] Leibniz's original formulation of the PSR does not distinguish between brute facts and autonomous facts. All facts have an explanation, and some facts are self-explanatory.

I disagree with this suggestion for the following reasons. Whereas in the case of a triangle an explanation is not needed to grasp that a triangle necessarily has three sides, we plainly do not understand why it is the case that God's essence is to exist. The mere fact that we can ask why this is true demonstrates that *the fact that God's essence is to exist* is a fact apt for explanation. In other words, the question of why God's essence is to exist is intelligible while the question of why a triangle has three sides is unintelligible. If the question of why God necessarily exists were unintelligible, it certainly would not have been wrestled with to such a great degree throughout the early modern period! Leibniz's strategy for answering the fundamental question has been to put the question of God's existence on a par with unintelligible questions. But it is clear that a question cannot be made unintelligible merely by analogizing it with unintelligible questions. Leibniz's insistence that it is the case that this analogy holds is not evidence that it does in fact hold. That is, declaring that the question asking why God's essence is to exist is akin to asking why a triangle has three sides does not shed any light on *how* this analogy holds. It is this 'how' that Leibniz falls short of addressing.

In a final effort to reject this train of thought, Leibniz could perhaps reply that God would know why it is the case that he exists necessarily. Even if we fall short of understanding how the analogy holds between the question of God's existence and the question of other necessary truths, we can be confident that it does hold due to the PSR. But this would be an admission that it is legitimate to ask why God necessarily exists – the very point that Leibniz has been so adamant to argue against! Since Leibniz fails to provide such an explanation for the intelligible question of why God necessarily exists, the fact that God's essence is to exist is brute. And brute facts are unacceptable for Leibniz because they do not fulfill the explanatory demand. I should also say that this argument against the autonomous fact reading of Leibniz should not be taken as

an argument against Dasgupta's view more generally. Rather, I have argued against employing the autonomous fact view to answer the question of existence.[99]

2.3 – Making Progress on the Question is Impossible

I have argued that God's existence is inexplicable on both the autonomous fact and apophatic interpretations of Leibniz. Thus Leibniz's theistic solution to the fundamental question does not make existence intelligible. There is a further question, however, as to whether it is possible to make progress in answering the question of existence by locating this inexplicability farther and farther back in a putative answer of the fundamental question. If so, Leibniz's answer – though inadequate – would be better than the brute fact view because the latter view lacks an explanatory chain altogether. In support of the view that progress is possible when it comes to the question of existence, Parfit has argued that where the inexplicability is situated in an answer to the question is of great importance. In arguing against Parfit, I maintain that the brute fact view and Leibniz's theistic view are equally inadequate in answering the fundamental question.

Parfit argues that it matters where the inexplicability figures into an explanation of existence, and contends that we can make progress on the question of existence by pushing the explicability further and further back in a putative explanation of existence. While Parfit equates inexplicability with that of a brute fact, it seems clear to me that his notion of bruteness could be expanded to encompass the autonomous fact and apophatic views, as these latter two views entail that existence is unintelligible. Parfit writes:

> According to the Brute Fact View, reality merely happens to be as it is. That, I have argued, may not be true, since there may be some Selector which explains, or partly explains, reality's being as it is. There may also be some higher Selector which explains there being this Selector. My suggestion is only that, at the end of any such explanatory chain, some highest Selector must merely happen to be the one that rules. That is a different view.

[99] This argument also goes through on Leibniz's self-explanation view that I rejected earlier. For self-explanation does not illuminate the nature of what is being explained any more than if the explanandum were a brute fact.

> This difference may seem small. No Selector could *explain* reality, we may believe, if it merely happened to rule. But this thought, though natural, is a mistake. If some explanation appeals to a brute fact, it does not explain that fact; but it may explain others…It makes a difference where the brute fact comes.[100]

What Parfit calls a Selector is a special feature that explains a possible way that reality might be. some way that reality might be obtains due to some special feature. In Parfit's view, views that posit one or more Selectors, which are themselves brute facts, make existence less inexplicable than the brute fact view makes it out to be. Since all explanations ultimately appeal to brute facts, Parfit reasons, providing any explanation of existence that terminates in a brute fact is better than providing no explanation at all.

While Parfit is correct in claiming that a view that posits one or more Selectors is strictly speaking a different view than the brute fact view, he wrongly assumes that a view with Selectors offers a better explanation of existence compared to a view that merely posits existence as a brute fact. This is because the task of making existence intelligible is a special case of explanation. In the case of everyday explanations, or even scientific explanations, explanations that terminate in brute facts are in fact better than the brute fact view. Explaining to my mother that there is no reason why the cookie jar is empty does not explain at all why the jar is empty. But if I had consumed all the cookies in the jar, and there was no further reason for my consumption, this would better explain the jar's being empty. In a similar respect to these everyday cases, Parfit argues that discovering that a Selector governed reality would constitute progress on the question of existence. One example of a Selector is what Parfit calls the Maximalist view, or the thesis that "it is a fundamental truth that being possible, and part of the fullest way that reality could be, is sufficient for being actual."[101] Though Parfit concedes that we

[100] Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?," 235–36.
[101] Parfit, 229.

could still ask why this truth obtains, he thinks that existence would be made more intelligible by such a discovery. But putative explanations of existence, I shall argue, are different from these everyday cases.

Unlike in the case of everyday explanations, it does not matter where the inexplicability comes in when we are concerned with explaining existence. By Parfit's own admission, Selectors explain other facts even if they merely happen to be true. For example, the Maximalist view explains that the world that we inhabit exists because it is possible that our world exists. But notice that the Maximalist view merely explains why the world is the way it is, and not that *something or other* exists more generally. That is, how things are is distinct from whether things exist. And the Maximalist view is a thesis about possible states of affairs, which are ways the world could be, rather than a view about whether things exist at all.[102] Though explaining why the world is thus and so and not otherwise would be extremely interesting and productive, it is not the same as explaining why anything at all exists. Therefore if the Maximalist view is deployed to answer the question of existence, then it will not succeed at that task. In fact, no progress on the question would be made at all if the Maximalist view were true. This is true of all Selectors. While Selectors may explain other facts - like why the world is thus and so – they do not explain why something exists in general. But existence is what we are trying to make intelligible. Thus pushing the inexplicability further and further back in an explanation of existence does nothing to render existence intelligible. Since Selectors are inadequate when it comes to answering the fundamental question, it seems that there is nothing to which we can appeal that could possibly explain why there is something rather than nothing. While the brute fact view and views that posit Selectors are different, each of these types of views offers no

[102] 'Nothing' is not a possible state of affairs on the Maximalist view. If 'nothing' were possible on the Maximalist view, then that view would entail ontological nihilism, which we know to be false.

insight on the question of why there is anything at all. The question is left untouched on either approach. Making progress on the question of existence is impossible.

Chapter Three: Nietzsche's Response to the Question

I have just argued that satisfactorily answering the question of existence is an insurmountable task, and furthermore that making progress on the question is impossible. Regardless of whether existence is a brute fact or a necessary truth, existence will always remain a mystery. How should we deal with that fact? This chapter is dedicated to answering this question in light of the impossibility of providing a satisfying answer to the question of why there is anything at all. In exploring how we should deal with the mystery of existence, I turn to the writings of Nietzsche. One virtue of Nietzsche's view is that he also denies that the question of existence can be satisfactorily answered. Though he denies that the explanatory demand can be adequately met for a different reason than the one I suggested in the previous chapter, his doctrine of life-affirmation offers a view about what to do in light of this fact.

On Nietzsche's approach, the first step in properly confronting the mystery of existence is to wonder why we are asking the question of existence in the first place. We might - naively according to Nietzsche - think that philosophers are concerned with discovering the truth of the matter for no other reason besides a pure desire for the truth. Nietzsche, however, argues that there are other factors motivating us to ask philosophical questions besides the desire for knowledge for its own sake. At the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he asks "*What* in us really wills the truth?"[103] We can refine Nietzsche's question by asking 'what drives us to ask the question of existence?' In reflecting upon why philosophers pose the fundamental question, Nietzsche provides a genealogical explanation of our practice of asking this question. In his *Truth and Truthfulness*, Bernard Williams defines a genealogy as "a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come

[103] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1.

about, or might be imagined to have come about."[104] In this case, the relevant cultural phenomenon is what Nietzsche terms "dogmatic philosophy."[105] The tendency to pose, be troubled by, and develop answers to the question of existence is part and parcel of this philosophical tradition. By providing a genealogical explanation of dogmatism, Nietzsche aims to expose the psychological needs which underpin our practice of demanding an explanation for existence.

There are two possible kinds of genealogical diagnoses that explain our practice of asking the question of existence. Williams distinguishes between these two types of answers, which are called vindicatory and critical genealogies.[106] On the one hand, an explanation may vindicate our practice of asking the question. After coming across an explanation for why we ask the question, one might have "the same respect [for the cultural phenomenon] as one did before one encountered the explanation," or perhaps even a greater respect for this practice.[107] On the other hand, an explanation for our practice of questioning might discredit this practice. This practice may be debunked by revealing that it stems from certain kinds of pernicious psychological traits. To the extent that the practice of questioning is subject to a critical genealogy,[108] then philosophers engaged with that practice are subject to these pernicious psychic pathologies. Attempting to meet the explanatory demand is thus a pseudo-cure that actually nourishes the psychological illness of the questioner. I will argue that, for Nietzsche, the ways in which philosophers have asked and continue to ask the question of existence are the products of being a

[104] Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, 20.
[105] *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface.
[106] Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, 36.
[107] Williams, 36.
[108] Following Srinivasan, "Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking", I use "critical" and "debunking" where Williams uses "shameful".

"sickly animal."[109] In this respect, philosophers concerned with the question of existence are suffering from a certain type of spiritual sickness. But I will also claim that there are other ways of engaging with the question of existence for which Nietzsche provides a vindicatory genealogy. At the end of the chapter, I develop one such way of asking the question of existence that is subject to a vindicatory genealogy – namely, that of expressing gratitude towards all of existence.

3.1 - Nietzsche's Critical Genealogy

Nietzsche's critical genealogy calls into question the value of asking the question of existence. We can dissect Nietzsche's debunking genealogical explanation of the practice of questioning into two further questions. Firstly, we should inquire into what is it that philosophers are actually doing when they ask - and attempt to answer - the question. Once we understand what philosophers are up to when they engage with the question, Nietzsche argues that we should investigate the origins of the practice of questioning. Nietzsche, as we shall see in section 3.1.2, will argue that these origins cast a dim light on the value of this practice. With respect to this first question, Nietzsche contends that philosophers tend to be unaware of what they are doing when they posit the question of existence. Nietzsche writes:

> I have kept a close eye on the philosophers and read between their lines for long enough to say to myself: the greatest part of conscious thought must still be attributed to instinctive activity, and this is even the case for philosophical thought…most of a philosopher's conscious thought is secretly directed and forced into determinate channels by the instincts.[110]

Nietzsche argues that instincts - or unconscious patterns of thought - underpin the practice of questioning, and that most philosophers are ignorant of these unconscious processes. In sum,

[109] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 28.
[110] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 3.

Nietzsche suggests that what motivates philosophers to engage with the question of existence is unconscious.

But Nietzsche's claim is much stronger than the mere psychological conjecture that what motivates philosophers to treat the question in the ways that they do is unconscious. Rather, Nietzsche contends that "disinterested"[111] ways of representing the world are impossible. That is to say that no philosophical thesis is the product of an inquiry completely detached from human desires and needs. It follows that disinterested methods of philosophical inquiry and disinterested ways of formulating and answering the question of existence are impossible. The impossibility of dispassionate inquiry is entailed by what Maudemarie Clark terms "perspectivism,"[112] which Nietzsche defends in the following oft-quoted passages:

> There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing"; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes; we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our objectivity, be.[113]

> No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.…In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. - "Perspectivism." It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm.[114]

Bernard Reginster defines perspectivism as "the view that any claim to knowledge is bound to the perspective formed by the contingent "interests" of the knower."[115] For Nietzsche, a perspective is a way of viewing reality that – as a matter of fact – is influenced by human

---

[111] Nietzsche, 207.
[112] Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 127.
[113] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 12.
[114] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 481.
[115] Reginster, "The Paradox of Perspectivism," 217.

concerns.[116] Nietzsche states that "our needs" determine our perspectives, which in turn are just various interpretations of the world. From the passages cited above, we observe that Nietzsche believes that disinterested ways of representing the world are impossible because all perspectives are shaped by human desires and needs.

Consequently, there are no absolute perspectives, or perspectives which are disinterested. The possibility of an absolute perspective would be akin to viewing the world from what Thomas Nagel calls "the view from nowhere."[117,118] Thus Nietzsche rejects the idea that there is anything like a God's eye point of view. Even if Nietzsche endorsed theism, God could not have an absolute perspective on Nietzsche's view. On this view, then, there is no neutral standard to which we can appeal that would distinguish between correct and incorrect perspectives.[119] Nietzsche makes this point explicitly:

> [T]hat the insect or bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that man does, and that the question of which of these perceptions of the world is more correct one is quite meaningless, for this would have to be decided previously in accordance with the criterion of the *correct perception*, which means, in accordance with a criterion which is *not available*.[120]

In other words, the question of which of any two given perspectives is more correct is meaningless because there is no objectively correct way of representing the world. All ways of representing the world are perspectival. With respect to the question of existence, it follows that there is no way of pursuing the question that is not informed by our desires and needs of which we are generally unaware.

---

[116] For a discussion of why Nietzsche thinks that perspectives are necessarily shaped by a living organism's concerns, see Gemes, "Life's Perspectives," pt. 2.
[117] Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.
[118] See Moore, *Points of View*, for an argument, contra Nietzsche, that absolute representations are possible.
[119] See Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 3, who argues that "some interpretations are better than others and that we can even know sometimes that this is the case" even if there is no fact about which interpretation is correct.
[120] Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*, 86.

Before discussing what is problematic for Nietzsche about the impossibility of dispassionate philosophical inquiry, it is worth clarifying an ambiguity in how perspectivism has been interpreted in the literature highlighted by Reginster. Reginster writes:

> Nearly all existing interpretations [of perspectivism] fall within one of two categories. On the one hand, this relativity to perspective is thought to underwrite a generalized *skepticism*: we are irretrievably locked up in a perspective which may distort our apprehension of reality. On the other hand, perspectivism is interpreted as *anti-essentialism*: there is no independent reality the apprehension of which our perspective might distort; accordingly, our judgments are less a matter of correspondence to objective reality than expression of subjective attitudes.[121]

We do not need to side with a particular interpretation of perspectivism for our purposes in this chapter. On both interpretations, perspectives are influenced by human interests and concerns. On the skeptical view, it is impossible to escape a perspective that might alter our grasp of reality according to our needs and desires. And on the anti-essentialist view, our perspectives are merely expressions of our needs and desires rather than distortions of a reality that exists independent of these perspectives. There is no perspective-independent reality on this view. Regardless of what interpretation of perspectivism we endorse, however, perspectives are always formed by human "interests." The upshot is that we have no choice but to occupy some perspective, which in turn is shaped by human desires, needs, and concerns. With respect to the question of existence, it follows that all ways of addressing the question are from the "interested" or partisan standpoint of the questioner.

3.1.1 – The Dogmatic Philosophical Tradition

We have observed that, for Nietzsche, it is impossible to untangle the practice of asking the question of existence from the human needs and desires that inform this practice. This

[121] Reginster, "The Paradox of Perspectivism," 217. The article also explores strategies, which I don't have space to discuss here, for resolving the question of how Nietzsche can consistently maintain perspectivism even though his view entails that it is no more correct than any other.

conclusion raises the following concern: what is wrong with asking the question from a partisan standpoint? Nietzsche contends that the standpoints from which the question has been historically raised are unacceptably dogmatic. In particular, he argues that this dogmatism consists in (a) putting too much emphasis on the value of truth and - perhaps more importantly for our purposes - (b) falsely believing that we can discover the answer to the question of existence. I will briefly comment on point (a) before turning to point (b). Nietzsche explains why he thinks philosophers have overvalued the truth in *Beyond Good and Evil*. He writes: "Granted, we will truth: *why not untruth instead?*"[122] Given perspectivism, there is no standard to which we can appeal that would demonstrate that truth is more valuable than untruth. Nietzsche also claims that truth-seeking should not be the most important goal of philosophy. He writes:

> I am still waiting for a philosophical *physician* in the exceptional sense of the term – someone who has set himself the task of pursuing the problem of the total health of a people, time, race, or of humanity – to summon the courage at last to push my suspicion to its limit and risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but rather something else – let us say health, future, growth, power, life….[123]

Nietzsche's vision of the "new philosopher"[124] is not one who is solely dedicated to uncovering the truth. Rather, this philosopher would be a doctor who is devoted to improving the "total health of a people." Health is thus a more important value to Nietzsche than truth.[125] It follows that a society that is healthy but shuns the truth is better in Nietzsche's view than a society obsessed with the truth and nothing else. By putting too much emphasis on ascertaining the truth to the detriment of our health, we become "the sick animal."[126]

---

[122] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1.
[123] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface, 2.
[124] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 43.
[125] For more on the notion of health in Nietzsche, see Gemes, "Life's Perspectives," 566.
[126] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 13.

Nietzsche also contends that "the prejudices of philosophers"[127] consists in the false belief that we are able to ascertain "absolute knowledge." Specifically, Nietzsche conjectures that philosophers incorrectly assume that they arrive at their conclusions via a mental faculty solely dedicated to discovering the truth.

> They [philosophers] all act as if they had discovered and arrived at their genuine convictions through the self-development of a cold, pure, divinely insouciant dialectic (in contrast to the mystics of every rank, who are more honest than the philosophers and also sillier – they talk about "inspiration" –): while what essentially happens is that they take a conjecture, a whim, an "inspiration" or, more typically, they take some fervent wish that they have sifted through and made properly abstract – and they defend it with rationalizations after the fact.[128]

In other words, conclusions drawn by philosophers are not typically the product of a disinterested, rational intellect devoted entirely to uncovering the truth. Instead, philosophers have theses they unconsciously wish to defend and construct arguments for such views after already believing that their views are correct – perhaps because they "fervently wish" that these views are in fact true. Therefore the role that arguments play in most philosophical reasoning is not to aid the questioner in discovering the truth. As Richard Schacht points out, the problem is that philosophers "are committed in advance to certain positions and views, which they profess to arrive at by disinterested inquiry."[129] But as we have seen, disinterested inquiry is ruled out by Nietzsche's perspectivism. In Nietzsche's words, "there is absolutely nothing impersonal about the philosopher."[130] Thus the dogmatic philosophers are dishonest with themselves and their readers when they pretend to engage in dispassionate inquiry.[131] Alexander Nehamas puts the point about the dishonesty of the dogmatists quite nicely. He writes: "Nietzsche wants to show

---

[127] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pt. 1.
[128] Nietzsche, 5.
[129] Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 24.
[130] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 6.
[131] See Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," The Problem of Socrates, 12, where he calls Socrates "the cleverest of all self-deceivers."

that interpretation, which is what genealogy also is, is essentially value laden and polemical, and that even dispassionate argument is a special case of such polemics. In particular, he wants to suggest that some particular instances of dispassionate argument are simply efforts to mask their own partial and partisan nature."[132] In other words, philosophers who advance arguments that masquerade as dispassionate are dishonest because these philosophers do not acknowledge the inexorably partisan nature of philosophical inquiry.

For Nietzsche, both the dogmatists' overestimation of the value of truth-seeking and their dishonesty inherent in giving arguments that appear to be dispassionate emerges from a false picture of human beings as ontologically superior to other animals. The idea is that since humans consider themselves to be a different kind of being compared to other animals, we must be capable of – and should highly value - discovering ultimate truths about reality. Nietzsche writes:

> *Pride in the spirit*. - The *pride* of mankind, which resists the theory of descent from the animals and establishes the great gulf between man and nature - this pride has its basis in *prejudice* as to what spirit is: and this prejudice is relatively *young*. During the great prehistoric age of mankind, spirit was presumed to exist everywhere and was not held in honour as a privilege of man. Because, on the contrary, the spiritual (together with all drives, wickedness, inclinations) had been rendered common property, and thus common, one was not ashamed to have descended from animals or trees (the *noble* races thought themselves honoured by such fables), and saw in the spirit that which unites us with nature, not that which sunders us from it. Thus one schooled oneself in *modesty* - and likewise in consequence of a *prejudice*.[133]

In this passage, Nietzsche contends that our overvaluation of truth and the dishonesty associated with the inflation of that value stem from the false view that there is "a great gulf between man and nature." In accepting this false view, we are guilty of harboring a prejudice with respect to our animal nature.[134] Thinking that our desire for knowledge is completely detached from our animal needs leads us to believe that we are what Williams terms "unencumbered

[132] Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 19.
[133] Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 31.
[134] cf. Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," 14.

intelligences."[135] That is, our prejudice against our animal nature inclines us to believe that our intellects are not limited by what kind of beings we are. Interestingly, Nietzsche also maintains that humankind has not always held this view. In "the great prehistoric age," Nietzsche claims that humans did not see themselves as separate from other animals and nature in general. The dogmatism of philosophers is thus a relatively new phenomenon in the history of humanity. This observation invites us to consider adopting a "modest" view, in line with perspectivism, that openly acknowledges the partisan constraints of philosophical inquiry.

3.1.2 – The Nihilistic Origins of Dogmatism

We have seen that, for Nietzsche, what drives us to ask the question of existence is a dogmatic outlook that overvalues the truth and overestimates our ability to discover the truth. Though philosophical reasoning is unavoidably partisan, it does not follow that the conclusions reached by such reasoning are necessarily false.[136] We might still wonder, then, why Nietzsche thinks that the way in which the question has been raised throughout the history of philosophy indicates that the questioner is spiritually ill. That is, why is the obsession with finding the truth evidence of an affliction? Nietzsche's answer is that dogmatism is merely a symptom of a sinister spiritual predicament which he terms nihilism. In explaining the origins of dogmatism, Nietzsche reveals the pernicious psychic traits that underpin the emergence of the "prejudices of the philosophers."

Nietzsche contends that the dogmatic fixation with absolute truth emerges from an embittered mindset called nihilism that is hostile to life. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche attributes this resentful mentality to the wisest men throughout the history of philosophy. He

[135] Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline," 490.
[136] Nietzsche acknowledges this in *The Will to Power*, 487. He writes: "But that a belief, however necessary it may be for the preservation of a species, has nothing to do with truth, one knows from the fact that, e.g., we have to believe in time, space, and motion, without feeling compelled to grant them absolute reality."

writes: "The wisest men in every age have reached the same conclusion about life: *it's no good*. Always and everywhere, you hear the same sound from their mouths, - a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of exhaustion with life, full of resistance *to* life."[137] Nietzsche also provides an explicit definition of nihilism in *The Will to Power*. For Nietzsche, "[a] nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist."[138] Elaborating on this outlook, Nietzsche explains that "[a]ccording to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning…."[139] If there were suffering in the "world as it ought to be," it would certainly not be "in vain." The meaninglessness of our suffering is what motivates the nihilist to declare that we do not live in the world as it ought to be. Nihilism is thus an outlook that expresses regret for the fact that we are alive.

Nihilism has been interpreted in several ways in the secondary literature. Reginster helpfully distinguishes between two conceptions of nihilism present in Nietzsche's work. The first conception, which Reginster claims has been discussed the most in the literature, is the anguish that results from the recognition that "facts of a certain kind (moral, evaluative) do not exist."[140] On this view, nihilism does not merely amount to the theoretical claim that moral or evaluative facts "lack objective standing." It also refers to the disorientation one may feel once one realizes that morality is not factual.[141] Appropriately, Reginster terms this conception as nihilistic disorientation. The second conception, which Reginster calls nihilistic despair, is not concerned with Nietzsche's metaethical anti-realism. Nihilistic despair is instead an "ethical claim about the world," namely that it would be better for there to be nothing rather than

[137] Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," The Problem of Socrates, 1.
[138] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 585.
[139] Nietzsche, 585.
[140] Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 26.
[141] Reginster calls the assumption that "the legitimacy of our values depends upon their objective standing" *normative objectivism*, 26. A nihilist in the disoriented sense thus appeals to normative objectivism.

something.[142] On this view, nihilism results "from the conviction that our highest values cannot be realized."[143] Reginster explains that what makes despair nihilistic is the belief that "life in general is meaningless" – and not just the view that someone's life in particular is meaningless. According to this second conception, it would be better for there to be nothing rather than something because the world is "essentially inhospitable to the realization of values."[144] Consequently, no change in the particular circumstances of one's life, or any life for that matter, would eliminate this sense of despair. In what follows, I will chiefly be concerned with nihilistic despair rather than nihilistic disorientation in unpacking Nietzsche's critical genealogical inquiry into the practice of asking the question of existence. This is because nihilistic despair concerns the ethical claim that it would be better for nothing to exist, which - I shall argue - is the root cause of dogmatism on Nietzsche's view.

Why does Nietzsche maintain that the "wisest men in every age" are nihilists? Nietzsche contends that the nihilist seeks an explanation for existence in an attempt to make our suffering meaningful. Nietzsche introduces the concept of the "metaphysical need" that underpins the explanatory demand to make existence intelligible.[145] In particular, he contends that metaphysicians have long thought that the intelligibility of existence guarantees the intelligibility of suffering. In Nietzsche's words: "…they [metaphysicians throughout history] have hated the irrational, the arbitrary, the accidental (as the causes of immeasurable physical suffering). As a consequence, they negated this element in being-in-itself and conceived it as absolute "rationality" and "purposiveness."[146] The thought is that if being-in-itself were thoroughgoingly intelligible (in the sense of having a final cause), then we might be able to make sense of

[142] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 701. Nietzsche writes: "it would be better if the world did not exist."
[143] Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 28.
[144] Reginster, 28.
[145] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 571.
[146] Nietzsche, 576.

suffering. The "metaphysical need" Nietzsche discusses in *The Will to Power* is thus two-fold. Firstly, Nietzsche thinks that it engenders belief in the false claim that there is a satisfactory answer to the question of existence. Second, it represents the psychological impetus to discover the alleged rational nature of existence.

Nietzsche elaborates on both of these aspects of the metaphysical need. In the following passage, he conjectures that several preeminent conclusions in the history of metaphysics have been "inspired by suffering." He writes:

> *Psychology of metaphysics.* - This world is apparent: consequently there is a true world; - this world is conditional: consequently there is an unconditioned world; - this world is full of contradiction: consequently there is a world free of contradiction; - this world is a world of becoming: consequently there is a world of being: - all false conclusions (blind trust in reason: if *A* exists, then the opposite concept *B* must also exist). It is suffering that inspires these conclusions: fundamentally they are *desires* that such a world should exist; in the same way, to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for a world that makes one suffer: the *ressentiment* of metaphysicians against actuality is here creative.[147]

In this passage, Nietzsche argues that suffering – rather than disinterested reasoning – informs several (ostensibly) optimistic conclusions metaphysicians have drawn throughout the history of philosophy.[148] The true world, the unconditioned world, the world free of contradiction, and the world of being are optimistic because they are worlds in which suffering does not exist. For instance, the true world – as opposed to the apparent world - has been sought after by philosophers because it denies the ultimate reality of suffering. Suffering is merely an appearance. Philosophers have drawn these idealistic conclusions, Nietzsche contends, because of their nihilistic outlook that inculcates "hatred" for the world as it is; namely, a world that contains inexplicable suffering. Reginster terms this strategy of coping with suffering as "concealment by idealism," according to which "[s]uffering is no more than an illusion from

[147] Nietzsche, 579.
[148] cf. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 1:1.

which we can be liberated by proper enlightenment."[149] And according to dogmatic metaphysics, proper enlightenment consists in engaging in dispassionate inquiry, which we have seen is impossible for Nietzsche. Concealment by idealism is thus a bankrupt strategy.

On Nietzsche's view, philosophers in grip of the "metaphysical need" harbor a covert commitment to nihilist despair because the metaphysical need expresses vengeance towards reality. He writes:

> The history of philosophy is a secret raging against the preconditions of life, against the value feelings of life, against partisanship in favor of life. Philosophers have never hesitated to affirm a world provided it contradicted this world and furnished them with a pretext for speaking ill of this world. It has been hitherto the grand school of slander.[150]

In the same passage, Nietzsche characterizes the dogmatist obsession with truth-seeking as "a sort of revenge on reality."[151] The idea is that philosophers develop metaphysical systems in which our suffering is non-existent so that they can justify "speaking ill of this world."[152] In Schacht's words, "[t]he inability to endure things as they are, he holds, has led philosophers to develop interpretations of reality which are more satisfying to them."[153] The dogmatic tradition in which the question of existence arises is thus replete with vengeance for reality. Of course, this tradition rages against reality 'in secret,' because admitting that the tradition is partisan would violate the dogmatists' cherished belief that philosophical inquiry is dispassionate. Since the metaphysical need expresses a clandestine hatred towards reality, Nietzsche contends that those who are motivated to philosophize by that need accept the claim that it would be better if reality did not exist. On Nietzsche's view, then, asking the question of existence is just a furtive demand for an explanation of why reality does not conform to this ethical claim.

---

[149] Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 229.
[150] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 461.
[151] Nietzsche, 461.
[152] cf. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 1:17.
[153] Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 28.

Nietzsche contends that nihilistic despair constitutes spiritual decadence because it induces psychological weakness in those who lament existence.[154] In particular, this weakness is the inability to endure meaningless suffering. In this very telling passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche characterizes the "dark workshop" from which nihilism arises as brimming with the rancid odor of dishonesty and self-deception.

> Would anyone like to take a look into the secret of how *ideals are made* on earth? Who has the courage? - Very well! Here is a point we can see through into this dark workshop. But wait a moment or two, Mr. Rash and Curious: your eyes must first get used to this false iridescent light. -- All right! Now speak! What is going on down there? Say what you see, man of the most perilous kind of inquisitiveness - now I am the one who is listening. - "I see nothing, but I hear the more. There is a soft, wary, malignant muttering and whispering coming from all the corners and nooks. It seems to me one is lying; a saccharine sweetness clings to every sound. Weakness is being lied into something *meritorious,* no doubt of it - so it is just as you said"…But enough! enough! I can't take any more. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where *ideals are manufactured* - it seems to me it stinks of so many lies.[155]

Nietzsche sets up a dialogue with the fictional "Mr. Rash and Curious" to illustrate the maladies of the nihilists in despair. As Mr. Rash and Curious enters the "dark workshop where ideals are manufactured," he is overwhelmed by the putrid odor of lies. Nietzsche highlights the noxious nature of the room to emphasize that the liars are suffering from a disease. The cardinal cause of this disease is that "weakness is being lied into something meritorious." What is so sinister about the dogmatists' obsession with truth-seeking is that it seen as meritorious when in fact it is symptomatic of nihilistic despair. In other words, what is so putrid about the lies is that the liar is in the grip of the 'metaphysical need' to explain existence due to his inability to deal with suffering, and obfuscates the metaphysical systems he constructs as a result of that need as a

[154] As Reginster, 28, points out, people caught in the grip of nihilistic despair do not just lament their own existence, but existence in general.
[155] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I, 14.

praiseworthy search for the truth.[156] As Schacht puts it, the nihilist's "hostility towards life and the conditions of existence is both given a semblance of dignity and provided with an apparent justification."[157] But this self-deception amounts to weakness, since the nihilist is unable to deal with things as they are without subscribing to an ideology that rationalizes human suffering.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilistic despair as a spiritual illness connects with the central theme of Nietzsche's philosophy, which is how to respond to meaningless suffering. Philip Kain emphasizes that it is not merely suffering by itself that is at issue for Nietzsche. Rather, it is meaningless suffering that humans cannot handle.[158] A world in which suffering exists but is not senseless would be acceptable to most philosophers and ordinary people more generally on Nietzsche's view. Humans are spiritually ill – that is, they are "sick animals" - when they think their suffering is all for naught. He writes:

> He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, *"why* do I suffer?" … Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* repudiate suffering as such; he *desires* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse that layover mankind so far….[159]

If suffering has a purpose, Nietzsche thinks that humans will not just tolerate suffering when it comes, but even seek it out. The inability to deal with meaningless suffering thus creates the metaphysical need which underpins our practice of asking the question of existence. In inventing metaphysical systems which render suffering intelligible, we avoid confronting the fact of senseless pain.

---

[156] cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 10.
[157] Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 27.
[158] Kain, "Nietzsche, Truth, and the Horror of Existence," 41.
[159] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 28.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that this need to render our existence intelligible is partially what distinguishes us from other animals. He writes:

> Man has gradually become a fantastic animal that must fulfil one condition of existence more than any other animal: man *must* from time to time believe he knows *why* he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life – without faith in the *reason in life*![160]

Without at least thinking that we know why we exist, at least from time to time, Nietzsche argues that the human race "cannot thrive."[161] Nietzsche reiterates this point in a passage from the *Birth of Tragedy*, wherein Nietzsche endorses Schopenhauer's discussion of potential violations of the PSR.[162] This passage also sheds light on what Nietzsche might have meant by "thrive" in the passage cited above. Commenting on a passage where Schopenhauer discusses human beings' trust that their "suffering and misery"[163] has an explanation, Nietzsche writes:

> In the same passage Schopenhauer has described for us the enormous *horror* which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world because the principle of sufficient reason, in one or other of its modes, appears to sustain an exception.[164]

In other words, the belief that there are violations of the PSR – specifically the fact that there is no sufficient reason for human suffering - induces horror in most philosophers, and in most people, because they cannot cope with this fact. I use the word 'coping' in the sense Daniel Came does in his article on Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of existence; that is, enduring the suffering in our lives rather than evading it by succumbing to nihilistic belief-systems or

[160] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1.
[161] That said, Nietzsche is himself agnostic as to whether there is a reason for our existence. See *Human, All Too Human*, 1:9.
[162] See also Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 12, where Nietzsche claims that "becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing."
[163] Schopenhauer, "Fourth Book," 416.
[164] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1.

substance abuse.[165] Without convincing ourselves that we know why we exist, Nietzsche claims that life-negating nihilists will be seized by horror.

In sum, Nietzsche argues that we ask the question of existence because we cannot identify any reason for our suffering. The purpose of answering the question is to find peace, a certain kind of peace that enables us to be comfortable with the mystery of existence and the fact that we suffer. That is, we must satisfy the metaphysical need - which is the psychological impetus motivating us to issue the explanatory demand for existence. This psychological drive to explain, however, is bound up with a nihilistic perspective according to which asking the question of existence is vengeful. Asking the fundamental question indicates spiritual sickness because the dogmatic intellectual background out of which the question has been raised is (a) dishonest about its methodology and (b) expresses hatred towards the world. Specifically, our practice of asking the question emerges from the veiled conviction that it would be better if reality did not exist. The upshot is that asking the question of existence is akin to putting existence on trial. Nietzsche contends that this genealogical reflection on why we ask the question unmasks our ostensive intellectual curiosity as spiritual weakness. That is, we should not ask the question from the standpoint of nihilistic despair because the need to ask the question reflects our inability to endure reality as it is. Once we understand the psychological needs from which the question emerges, Nietzsche argues that we should abandon the nihilistic outlook that lies at the root of our practice of questioning existence.

3.2 – Nietzsche's Vindicatory Genealogy

Once we eradicate the nihilistic despair which generates the 'metaphysical need' underpinning the explanatory demand for existence, at first glance it seems like Nietzsche would

[165] Came, "The Aesthetic Justification of Existence," 56.

assume that his "new philosophers"[166] will no longer ask the question. There is some textual evidence that suggests this is the case. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes:

> It is the mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men, which blinds us and make us happy. At first the former are regarded with scorn, as though the two things could not possibly be accorded equal rights: they stand there so modest, simple, sober, so apparently discouraging, while the latter are so fair, splendid, intoxicating, perhaps even enrapturing. Yet that which has been attained by laborious struggle, the certain, enduring and thus of significance for any further development of knowledge is nonetheless the higher; to adhere to it is manly and demonstrates courage, simplicity, and abstemiousness.[167]

Nietzsche claims that we should value 'unpretentious truths' discovered by the scientific method rather than the 'errors' invented by metaphysicians. Doing so replaces nihilistic despair, which masquerades as "fair and splendid," with the positive values of "courage, simplicity, and abstemiousness." On this reading, Nietzsche suggests that we should not be concerned with the 'errors' associated with the "first and last of things,"[168] with the first of things being the question of existence. Consequently, being 'modest, simple, and sober' requires that we avoid concerning ourselves with the pretentious truths of metaphysics, principal examples of which include putative answers to the question. The upshot of this passage is that, at least at first glance, asking the question is incompatible with Nietzsche's sense of modesty.

This is not to say that disentangling the question from its nihilistic origins is impossible. I submit that, for Nietzsche, the question can be asked from a place of courage rather than a place of despair. Nietzsche himself insists that we explore the world and ponder the nature of reality. In fact, he declares his contempt for those who do not ask profound existential questions in *The Gay Science*. He writes:

---

[166] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 43.
[167] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 1:3.
[168] Nietzsche, pt. 1.

> But to stand in the midst of this *rerum concordia discors* [the discordant harmony of things] and the whole marvelous uncertainty and ambiguity of existence *without questioning*, without trembling with the craving and rapture of questioning, without at least hating the person who questions, perhaps even being faintly amused by him – that is what I feel to be *contemptible*….[169]

Nietzsche despises those who do not ask the question of existence,[170] which include both philosophers – specifically those who subscribe to "the philosophical objective outlook"[171] (i.e. dogmatism) and "the great majority"[172] of people influenced by the dogmatic tradition. One reason he might condemn those who do not question is that these people act dishonestly insofar as they neglect their existential situation. That is, not asking the question of existence amounts to not acknowledging the mysterious nature of reality. As Nietzsche proclaims in *Ecce Homo*: "this type of man that he [Zarathustra] conceives, conceives reality *as it* is, being strong enough to do so; this type is not estranged or removed from reality but is reality itself and exemplifies all that is terrible and questionable in *it* - *only in that way can man attain greatness.*"[173] What both of these quotations jointly show is that asking the question of existence can reflect strength rather than weakness.

Nietzsche also suggests that asking the question from a place of strength and creativity leads to happiness. He exclaims:

> No, life has not disappointed me. Rather, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year – ever since the day the great liberator overcame me: the thought that life could be an experiment for the knowledge-seeker – not a duty, not a disaster, not a deception! … '*Life as a means to knowledge*' – with this principle in one's heart one can not only live bravely but also *live gaily and laugh gaily*![174]

---

[169] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 2.
[170] As well as other profound existential questions.
[171] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 585.
[172] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 2.
[173] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Why I am a Destiny, 5.
[174] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 324.

Nietzsche fully endorses the pursuit of knowledge as a worthy and noble endeavor if the pursuit is done with an 'experimental' temperament. Seeking knowledge out of a sense of 'duty,' which is what the experimental temperament is contrasted with in this passage, refers to the 'metaphysical need' to explain the world that arises out of nihilistic despair. When knowledge is sought after without this sense of duty, Nietzsche contends that life becomes "more desirable and mysterious." In effect, pursuing knowledge from a place of strength deepens the mystery expressed by the question of existence. Seeing life 'as a means to knowledge' in this respect not only reflects 'bravery' but also leads one to "live gaily and laugh gaily." That is, once the knowledge-seeker is free from the need to explain the world, the seeker can further appreciate – and perhaps even relish in – the mysterious nature of existence.

What might it mean to relish in the mystery of existence? Nietzsche characterizes this appreciation for life as the desire to explore different perspectives, which he colorfully illustrates in the following quotation. Nietzsche exclaims to philosophers:

> *Get on the ships!* – If one considers how an overall philosophical justification of one's way of living and thinking affects each individual – namely, like a sun, warming, blessing, impregnating, shining, especially for him; how it makes him independent of praise and blame, self-sufficient, rich, generous with happiness and good will; how it incessantly turns evil into good, brings all forces to bloom and ripen and keeps the petty, great weed of melancholy and moroseness from coming up at all – one exclaims longingly, in the end: Oh, how I wish that many such new suns would yet be created! Even the evil man, the unhappy man, and the exceptional man should have their philosophy, their good right, their sunshine! ...There is another world to discover – and more than one! On to the ships, you philosophers![175]

Once the felt sense of duty to explain existence is eliminated from the psyche, philosophers are free to create new perspectives. As Nietzsche's famously declares later in *The Gay Science*: "every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again;

[175] Nietzsche, 289.

maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'"[176] The eradication of nihilism from our hearts permits us to set sail and explore the 'open sea' of possible perspectives. Moreover, there are an infinite number of possible perspectives philosophers may create: "the world has once again become infinite to us: insofar as we cannot reject the possibility *that it includes infinite interpretations*."[177] Each of these perspectives with 'shine like a sun' in the absence of the nihilistic despair that motivates the need to render existence intelligible. As Nietzsche claims in a passage from the *Genealogy* we encountered previously, the more perspectives we have on reality, "the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our objectivity, be."[178] Though no perspective is any more correct than any other one, Nietzsche encourages the copious creation of perspectives as long as they are 'warming and blessing.' That is, as long as the creation of new perspectives is rooted in courage and strength rather than in the nihilistic conviction that it would be better if the world did not exist.

How might we eradicate nihilism from the psyche and explore the glistening 'open sea' of perspectives? Nietzsche contends that acknowledging the limitations of philosophical inquiry is required to rid ourselves of nihilism. Nietzsche proclaims: "All honor to the ascetic ideal *insofar as it is honest!*"[179] Nietzsche approves of the ascetic ideal, the term Nietzsche uses in the *Genealogy* for the ways in which the nihilistic value-system that underpins the dogmatic philosophical tradition operates,[180] as long as those who uphold this value-system heed the fact that our intellects are not "unencumbered." Once we admit that philosophical inquiry cannot be "disinterested," we realize that the question of existence is unanswerable. We should thus ask the question of existence without expecting to discover a definitive answer. As Nietzsche says in

[176] Nietzsche, 343.
[177] Nietzsche, 374.
[178] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 12.
[179] Nietzsche, III, 26.
[180] See Mulhall, *The Ascetic Ideal*, for further discussion.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra: "'This - is just *my* way: - where is yours?' Thus I answer those who asked of me 'the way'. For *the* way - does not exist!"[181] Insofar as we do not expect a definitive answer to the question, asking the question is not subject to the same critical genealogy Nietzsche gave when the question was motivated by the metaphysical need. By being honest with ourselves about the limits of metaphysics, we can let go of the need to answer the question.

Asking the question of existence is thus subject to a critical or vindicatory genealogy depending on the spirit in which the question is raised. On the one hand, the question is subject to a critical genealogy when asking the question is motivated by nihilistic convictions. On the other hand, when the question is asked from a place of strength – and thus without any nihilistic motivations – the need for the answer vanishes. Though the question remains intelligible, we no longer have any expectation that we will find *the answer*. We are thus free to explore different perspectives on the question without being attached to any particular answer these perspectives may propose.

3.2.1 – Embracing the Mystery with Love

I wish to close the chapter by offering an example of a perspective that is subject to a vindicatory genealogy. This perspective is one that expresses gratitude and love towards the whole of existence. Nietzsche sketches out what this perspective might look like in *Ecce Homo*: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it - all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary - but *love* it."[182] For Nietzsche, gratitude consists in wanting "nothing to be different" not just in the course of one's

[181] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pt. III, 11.2.
[182] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Why I am so Clever, 10.

life, but in "all eternity." This is because we cannot be grateful for our life in isolation from the totality of existence. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes:

> The first question is by no means whether we are content with ourselves, but whether we are content with anything at all. If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event - and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.[183]

We cannot be grateful for one moment – let alone our whole life - in isolation from the rest of existence because of the interconnectedness of 'all of eternity.'[184] In being grateful for one moment, Nietzsche contends that we are thus grateful for all of existence for making that moment possible. This claim is not just the normative claim that we ought to be grateful for the rest of existence if we affirm just one moment of our life. It is rather a claim about what we are in fact grateful towards. That is, we could not love one moment of existence without also loving every other moment that led to the moment that we consciously affirm.

In one sense, adopting this perspective of gratitude is easier than one might have expected, since all that is required to adopt this perspective is to affirm a "single moment" of one's life. But there is a difference between adopting some perspective and recognizing that we adopt that perspective. Admitting to ourselves that we are grateful towards "all eternity" – with all the horrendous suffering that it contains – is a herculean task. But this is what is required to overcome nihilistic despair. Nietzsche asks us to have patience with ourselves when trying to become at peace with the world as it is. Since being at peace with all of existence begins with being at peace with oneself, Nietzsche contends that the process of overcoming nihilism begins with self-love. Self-love, however, is not learned overnight. In Zarathustra's voice, he writes:

---

[183] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 1032.
[184] cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56.

> One must learn to love oneself - thus I teach - with a wholesome and healthy love: so that one can tolerate being with oneself and does not have to roam about…And verily, this is no commandment for today and tomorrow, to *learn* to love oneself. Rather, of all arts this is the most subtle, cunning, ultimate, and most patient.[185]

Nietzsche teaches us that loving oneself has the reward of ending the need to "roam about" – which, for our purposes, we take to refer to the search for a definitive answer to the question of existence. But self-love requires a tremendous amount of patience, since doing so requires consciously affirming all of existence. Achieving this goal is "no commandment for today and tomorrow," but rather must be learned throughout one's entire life. Nietzsche elaborates on this process in *The Gay Science*:

> *One must learn to love*. – This happens to us in music: first one must *learn to hear* a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate and delimit it as a life in itself; then one needs effort and good will to *stand* it despite its strangeness; patience with its appearance and expression, and kindheartedness about its oddity. Finally comes a moment when we are *used* to it; when we expect it; when we sense that we'd miss it if it were missing; and now it continues relentlessly to compel and enchant us until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers, who no longer want anything better from the world than it and it again. But this happens to us not only in music: it is in just this way that we have *learned to love* everything we now love. We are always rewarded in the end for our good will, our patience, our fair-mindedness and gentleness with what is strange, as it gradually casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty. That is *its thanks* for our hospitality. Even he who loves himself will have learned it this way - there is no other way. Love, too, must be learned.[186]

Learning to love is not a sudden phenomenon, just as learning to appreciate a piece of music does not happen hastily. One must first recognize the object of the love – either oneself or all of existence – for what it is and develop the courage to tolerate it "despite its strangeness." Falling in love with the mystery of existence thus requires that we come to terms with it. Once we are willing to tolerate the mystery of existence despite the fact that it is a mystery, there comes a moment when we become so enchanted with the world that we begin to see it anew. What was

[185] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pt. III, 11.2.
[186] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 334.

once strange and intolerable "gradually casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty." For this reason, affirming all of existence cannot happen overnight. It may take one's entire life to learn to love the mystery.

This task is so onerous that Nietzsche himself suggests that he fails at it most of the time. In the epigraph to *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche confesses that he is capable of being "grateful to my whole life" on "the perfect day," implying that he is not always grateful for his own life in every moment of his life.[187] In fact, Nietzsche predicts that it will take some time before most people are able to appreciate the insights his books have to offer. He writes: "it will be some time before my writings are 'readable' - something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a 'modern man': *rumination.*"[188] Becoming grateful for all of existence requires letting go of the need to explain the world, which sticks "human beings back among the animals."[189] Once we recognize that we share with other animals the inability to have disinterested perspectives, we can ruminate on existence without being overwhelmed by its mysteriousness. Sometimes we may even develop the courage to fall in love with it.

Nietzsche's perspectivism suggests that we are free to decide for ourselves how to react in light of the mysterious nature of existence. One answer that is subject to a vindicatory genealogy is to love oneself and the world such that the 'need' to answer the question vanishes in the presence of this love. In learning to love ourselves, we learn to embrace the mystery of existence by asking why there is anything at all.

[187] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Interleaf epigraph.
[188] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, 9.
[189] Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," 14.

Conclusion

The question of why there is something rather than nothing has both fascinated and haunted many of those who have pondered it. This thesis deals with both of these emotions surrounding the question through the process of philosophical reflection. Chapter One argues that the question is legitimate regardless of the form it takes and that certain Humean-inspired deflationist attempts to dismiss the question as a spurious one fail.

Chapter Two commends Leibniz for providing a substantial solution to the question of existence before critiquing this solution. In particular, Leibniz argues that all contingent things are grounded in God, whose necessarily existence is not apt for further explanation. Unfortunately, Leibniz's answer is not an adequate one, and its downfall entails that satisfactorily answering the question is impossible. The chapter concludes by contending that, contra Parfit, making any headway towards a solution is impossible.

Chapter Three contains Nietzsche's reflections about the fact that certain philosophical questions, including the question of existence, are unanswerable. In recognizing that existence will forever remain a mystery, Nietzsche inquires as to why we ask the question of existence in the first place. Nietzsche provides a critical genealogy of the dogmatic tradition in which the question has been historically raised, arguing that the question has been asked due to the conviction that it would have been better if nothing existed rather than something. Nietzsche then sketches out the possibility of a vindicatory genealogy that affirms the practice of asking the question. I conclude the chapter by providing an example of a way of asking the question that is subject to a vindicatory genealogy. Asking the question from a place of love and gratitude for the totality of existence, which begins with loving oneself, is an approach that encourages us to contemplate the mystery of existence without becoming overwhelmed by its mysteriousness.

Though it is not up to us to decide whether there is something rather than nothing, we can control how to react to the fact that, somehow, there is something. We can choose to see existence as a burden, according to which life is a toil. Or we can embrace existence as a gift by pondering the mystery inherent in every moment. I invite the readers of this thesis to consider each moment as a gift, and to see what changes adopting this perspective may bring about. And we can embark on this journey, I submit, by asking: why is there anything at all?

Bibliography

Antognazza, Maria Rosa. "The Hypercategorematic Infinite." *The Leibniz Review* 25 (2015): 5–30. https://doi.org/10.5840/leibniz2015252.

Blackburn, Simon. "Mereological Sum." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 2008. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001/acref-9780199541430-e-1997.

Bliss, Ricki. "Viciousness and Circles of Ground." *Metaphilosophy* 45, no. 2 (2014): 245–56. https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12072.

———. "Viciousness and The Structure of Reality." *Philosophical Studies* 166, no. 2 (2013): 399–418. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-012-0043-0.

Brenner, Andrew. "What Do We Mean When We Ask 'Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?'" *Erkenntnis* 81, no. 6 (December 1, 2016): 1305–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-015-9796-0.

Cain, James. "The Hume–Edwards Principle." *Rel. Stud* 31, no. 3 (1995): 323–28. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500023684.

Came, Daniel. "The Aesthetic Justification of Existence." In *A Companion to Nietzsche*, 39–57. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470751374.ch3.

Clark, Maudemarie. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Modern European Philosophy. Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Dasgupta, Shamik. "Metaphysical Rationalism." *Noûs* 50, no. 2 (2016): 379–418. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12082.

Della Rocca, Michael. *The Parmenidean Ascent*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Gemes, Ken. "Life's Perspectives." In *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, edited by Ken Gemes and John Richardson. Oxford University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199534647.013.0025.

Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. Second. Ebook Central. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford Philosophical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

———. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by J. M Bell. Penguin Classics. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Inwagen, Peter van. "Why Is There Anything at All?" *Supplementary Volume - Aristotelian Society* 70, no. 1 (1996): 95–120. https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/70.1.95.

Kail, P. J. E. "Efficient Causation in Hume." In *Efficient Causation*, edited by Tad M. Schmaltz, 231–57. Oxford University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199782185.003.0012.

Kain, Philip J. "Nietzsche, Truth, and the Horror of Existence." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2006): 41–58.

Kappes, Yannic, and Benjamin Schnieder. "Anything at All – The Deepest and the Shallowest Question." *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 123 (May 31, 2016): 543–64.

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675-1676*. Translated by G. H. R. Parkinson. The Yale Leibniz. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

———. *Die Philosophischen Schriften*. Edited by Carl Immanuel Gerhardt. Translated by Donald Rutherford. Vol. VII, 2010.

———. *Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1989.

———. *Textes inédits*. Edited by Gaston Grua. Philosophy of Leibniz. New York: Garland, 1985.

———. *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*. Translated by Brandon Look and Donald Rutherford. The Yale Leibniz. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

———. *The Shorter Leibniz Texts: A Collection of New Translations*. Translated by Lloyd Strickland. Continuum Impacts. London ; New York: Continuum, 2006.

———. *Theodicy: Essays on The Goodness of God, The Freedom of Man, and The Origin of Evil*. Edited by Austin Farrer. Translated by E. M Huggard. Theodicy. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1990.

Leslie, John. "Existing Because Ethically Required." In *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?*, edited by John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Lewis, David K. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Look, Brandon C. "Grounding the Principle of Sufficient Reason: Leibnizian Rationalism and the Humean Challenge." In *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, edited by Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith, 201–19. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9385-1_12.

Mates, Benson. *The Philosophy of Leibniz*. Oxford University Press, 1989. https://doi.org/10.1093/0195059468.001.0001.

Millican, Peter. "Hume, Causal Realism, and Free Will." In *Causation and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Keith Allen and Tom Stoneham. London, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010.

Moore, Adrian W. *Points of View*. 1st issued as paperback. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000.

Mulhall, Stephen. *The Ascetic Ideal*. Oxford University Press, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192896889.003.0001.

Müller, Friedrich Max. *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, so Far as It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans*. 2nd ed. 14 Henrietta Street, Covent Carden, London; and 20 South Frederick Street, Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1860.

Nagel, Thomas. *The View from Nowhere*. First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback. New York London: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge (Mass.) London: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812033.

———. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997.

———. *Ecce Homo*. Edited and translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. Nachdr. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

———. *Human, All Too Human*. Edited by R. J. Hollingdale. 2nd ed. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812057.

———. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Edited by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Nachdr. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

———. *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*. Translated by Daniel Breazeale. Nachdr. New York: Humanity Books, 2000.

———. "The Anti-Christ." In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

———. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

———. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———. *The Will to Power*. Edited by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

———. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*. Translated by Graham Parkes. Reissued. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.

———. "Twilight of the Idols." In *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Nolan, Daniel. "What's Wrong With Infinite Regresses?" *Metaphilosophy* 32, no. 5 (2001): 523–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00206.

Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Oberle, Thomas. "Metaphysical Foundationalism: Consensus and Controversy." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 97–110. https://doi.org/10.5406/21521123.59.1.07.

Parfit, Derek. "Why Anything? Why This?: A Two-Part Essay in The London Review of Books (22 January and 5 February 1998)." In *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything at All?*, edited by John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Parkinson, G. H. R. "Leibniz's 'De Summa Rerum': A Systematic Approach." *Studia Leibnitiana* 18 (1986): 132.

Pruss, Alexander. "The Hume-Edwards Principle and The Cosmological Argument." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no. 3 (1998): 149–65. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1003167813221.

Reginster, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006.

———. “The Paradox of Perspectivism.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 1 (2001): 217–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/2653601.

Rescher, Nicholas. *On Explaining Existence*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013.

Rundle, Bede. *Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing*. Oxford : Oxford ; New York: Clarendon ; Oxford University Press, 2004.

Russell, Bertrand, and F.C. Copleston. “God’s Existence: A Debate.” In *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?*, edited by John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche*. Reprinted. The Arguments of the Philosophers. London: Routledge, 1998.

Schaffer, Jonathan. “Monism.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/monism/.

———. “Monism: The Priority of the Whole.” *The Philosophical Review* 119, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 31–76. https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2009-025.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. “Fourth Book: The World as Will, Second Consideration. With the Achievement of Self-Knowledge, Affirmation and Negation of the Will to Life.” In *The World as Will and Representation*, edited by Alistair Welchman, Christopher Janaway, and Judith Norman, 1:297–440. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Schopenhauer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511780943.014.

Sorensen, Roy. “Nothingness.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/nothingness/.

Spinoza, Benedict. “Perfection, All-Inclusive, Self-Caused.” In *The Mystery of Existence: Why Is There Anything At All?*, edited by John Leslie and Robert Lawrence Kuhn. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Srinivasan, Amia. “Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119, no. 2 (2019): 127–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoz009.

Tahko, Tuomas E., and E. Jonathan Lowe. “Ontological Dependence.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/dependence-ontological/.

Thompson, Naomi. “Metaphysical Interdependence.” In *Reality Making*, edited by Mark Jago, 38–56. Oxford University Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198755722.003.0003.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat’s Cradle*. Random House Publishing Group, 2009.

Waismann, Friedrich, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Moritz Schlick. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations*. Edited by Brian McGuinness. Translated by Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1979.

Westerhoff, Jan. “An Argument for Ontological Nihilism.” *Inquiry*, June 17, 2021, 1–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1934268.

———. *The Non-Existence of the Real World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Williams, Bernard. “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline.” *Philosophy* 75, no. 4 (2000): 477–96. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100000632.

———. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton University Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825141.

Witherall, Arthur. *The Problem of Existence*. Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Philosophy. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.