

IS THE QUESTION “WHY IS THERE ANYTHING  
RATHER THAN NOTHING?” A MEANINGFUL QUESTION?

LORENZ B. PUNTEL

puntel@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

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ABSTRACT. The famous question “Why is there anything rather than nothing?” is generally attributed to Leibniz, although similar formulations can be found in the previous history of philosophy. This paper deals with a meta-question: Is this question a meaningful one? In order to clarify the meta-question the paper first shows how the question itself has been and is presently being understood, namely according to a very limited understanding. “Anything” has been and continues to be identified with a restricted dimension: in the past the ensemble of finite beings (Leibniz), in contemporary analytic philosophy as the domain of concrete beings. In all these cases “nothing” has the sense of relative nothing (*nihilum relativum*). In opposition to all those interpretations and treatments, this paper elaborates a radical version of Leibniz’s question, according to which “anything” is interpreted as Being (capital “B”!) as such and as a whole; correspondingly, “nothing” means absolute nothing (*nihilum absolutum*). As a result, the question is formulated thus: “Why is there Being at all rather than absolute nothing?” Subsequently, the paper works out three senses in which a why-question can be understood and answered: the primary or strong sense, according to which the explaining factor (the *explanans*) must be strictly distinct from the topic to be explained (the *explanandum*); the secondary or weak sense that allows for an identification of explaining factor and topic being explained; and a wider or connotative sense according to which the explaining factor is identified, not with the topic to be explained as such, but with the topic endowed with a special feature. The application of these three senses to Leibniz’s radically interpreted question yields the following results: The question “Why is there Being at all rather than absolute nothing,” according to the primary or strong sense, is not a meaningful question, because there is nothing whatsoever distinct from Being that could serve as an explaining factor. Understood in the secondary or weak sense, the question is meaningful, but only in a correspondingly secondary or weak sense. The paper shows that in this case the seeming tautology resulting from the identification of *explanans* and *explanandum* is not wholly devoid of explanatory force. Finally, understood according to the wider or connotative sense, Leibniz’s radically reinterpreted grand question is not only a meaningful one, it is in addition the philosophically most intelligible and interesting one. The paper demonstrates that the feature attributed to Being that constitutes the explaining factor is the feature necessity-of-Being. Evidence to support this thesis is provided by the presentation of a proof whose conclusion is elaborated upon.

## 0 Introduction

Surprisingly, Leibniz's famous question "*Pourquoy il y a plutôt quelque chose que rien? – Why Is There Anything Rather Than Nothing?*"<sup>1</sup> is being widely discussed today. Heidegger considered it the most fundamental question of metaphysics but, significantly, not of philosophy, according to his own understanding of philosophy and metaphysics. It comes as no surprise that there is no generally agreed upon answer to the question among philosophers. But it should be immediately added that philosophers dealing with the question have not as yet reached a consensus and they have not even come close to reaching a consensus on how exactly to understand the question, let alone to answer it.

My aim in this lecture is to ask and to clarify a meta-question: Is Leibniz's question a meaningful one? In order to answer this meta-question I must show how I shall understand the question. I shall deal primarily with what I shall call the most radical possible version or understanding of Leibniz's grand question. Concerning the question so interpreted (for the sake of brevity I call it simply: Leibniz's radical question) I shall show that there are *three possibilities* or three ways of answering it, according to three senses in which this radical why-question can be interpreted: When it is interpreted and treated according to the *primary or strong sense* of a why-question, Leibniz's radically reinterpreted grand why-question turns out *not to be a meaningful* one. According to the *secondary or weak sense* of a why-question, the radically reinterpreted grand why-question must be considered a meaningful one, to which only a correspondingly secondary or weak answer can be given. Finally, it is possible to attribute a third sense to the radically reinterpreted grand why-question; I shall call it the *wider (or connotative) sense*. This sense makes the grand why-question a meaningful question to which a meaningful answer can be given. This third possibility will turn out to be the philosophically most important sense in which Leibniz's grand why-question can be understood and treated; correspondingly, the answer to this question, so understood, emerges as the philosophically most intelligible answer.

The lecture is divided into four parts. Part 1 examines some of the most important senses in which Leibniz's question has been and is currently being understood and treated. Part 2 works out and explains the three senses just mentioned in which the radical version of Leibniz's grand question can be understood and answered. Part 3 elaborates the third sense or possibility in a more detailed way. In Part 4, two final remarks are formulated.

Before beginning the exposition I should formulate an important preliminary note. As is well known, there has been in the past and there is still in the present a tradition of denying that

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace, fondés en raison*, in: *Die philosophischen Schriften*. Edited by C. J. Gerhardt, Vol. 6 (Berlin 1885, reprinted 1965: Hildesheim: Olms), 598-606; see 602.

Leibniz's question makes any sense. This tradition is the expression of a kind of *a priori* anti-metaphysical attitude whose fundamental tenet says that every question that can and should be labeled as metaphysical is to be classified as being philosophically nonsensical, therefore also Leibniz's question. One of my main theses, namely the thesis that Leibniz's grand question, understood in the most radical possible sense, is not a meaningful one, has nothing to do with any such anti-metaphysical stance. My reason for stating this thesis is not derived from an anti-metaphysical stance; rather it is in the strongest sense a radical metaphysical one. In this lecture I shall not be dealing, not even marginally, with anti-metaphysical issues.

## 1 How to understand the question

[1] Leibniz's formulation is not the first to be found in the history of philosophy. Recent investigations have shown that in various epochs before Leibniz some authors had proposed at least partially similar formulations.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the 13th-century philosopher Siger of Brabant came closest to the Leibnizian formulation when he asked the following questions: *quare magis est aliquid in rerum natura quam nihil* [why is there something real in nature rather than nothing?] and *quare magis est in eis [in tota universitate entium] aliquid quam nihil* [why is something belonging to the totality of beings rather than nothing?]<sup>3</sup>

How did Leibniz understand his famous formulation? He had what I would call a restricted understanding of it, in opposition to the radical understanding I am proposing in this lecture. His restriction concerns the two terms 'anything (*quelque chose*)' and 'nothing (*rien*)'. Although Leibniz conceives of God as "something (*aliquid*)"<sup>4</sup>, he explicitly excludes God from the extension of "anything" in his question. "Anything" in the question designates only the entire dimension of contingent things or beings. The version of the question Leibniz addresses thus appears to be the following: Why did God create (the totality of) contingent beings [rather than choosing to create nothing]? The other term, 'nothing,' indicates more precisely what is meant by "is there anything": if God had chosen not to create, then no contingent beings would have being created and thus no contingent beings would be. "Nothing" in the question must therefore be understood in the *relative*, not in the *absolute* sense, as *nihilum relativum*, not as *nihilum absolutum*. Relative nothing is always the negation only of something determinate, of some contingent being or the totality of contingent beings, not of *Being simpliciter* (capital "B"), as

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<sup>2</sup> See the volume Daniel Schubbe/Jens Lemanski/ Rico Hauswald (eds.), *Warum ist überhaupt etwas und nicht vielmehr nichts? Wandel und Variationen einer Frage*. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> "*Deus est aliquid, nihilum non est aliquid*" (G. W. Leibniz, *Numeri Infiniti*, in: G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, April 1676, edited by the Preussischen [today: Deutschen] Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1923 ss.; vol. VI 3, p. 502, 19 s.).

will be explained later in the lecture. We can summarize Leibniz's understanding of his grand question by saying the following: the question is formulated within a theoretical framework wherein the idea of creation is absolutely central; God is presupposed as creator.

It is thus clear that Leibniz did not ask his question in a radical sense. According to the systematic coordinates of his thinking, the radical question would have been formulated in the following terms: Why is there anything, including God himself, rather than nothing? There is no indication whatsoever in Leibniz's writings that he wanted to ask this question. He probably would have said that such an allegedly radical question is not a meaningful one because it doesn't make sense to ask why there is (a) God rather than nothing.

[2] Philosophers working in the *analytic tradition* have gradually come to handle the grand question, but their approach is completely inadequate. *A priori*, they restrict *anything* in the question only to beings or things (*entia*, *Seiende*) and often to concrete objects or even more narrowly to physical objects. I shall show this by commenting on some examples.

To my knowledge, the most recent and most radical case of such a restriction is an article by Stephen Maitzen with the clear and provocative title, "Stop Asking Why There's Anything."<sup>5</sup> The main argument put forward by this author is extremely simple: It relies on the concept *dummy sortal*, an expression introduced by David Wiggins. A genuine sortal possesses unambiguous individuating criteria. In contrast, "dummy sortals" are only placeholders for unspecified sortals or indeterminate or incomplete designations; sentences in which they occur have no truth-conditions and questions in which they are used have no answer-conditions. Concepts like "thing" or "object" are considered dummy sortals. Maitzen explicitly mentions also "being". Curiously, he argues in the following way. The question "How many things/beings are there?" is unanswerable, hence senseless, *therefore* the question "Why are there any things/beings?" is unanswerable, hence senseless. His thesis is currently the subject of intense discussion.

Despite the intense discussion, it isn't difficult to see the weakness of Maitzen's thesis. He falls prey of a confusion between colloquial or everyday language and philosophical-metaphysical language and explanation. In natural, colloquial language we say things like the following: "Things are going badly" or "There are many things I'd like to buy." In contrast, as philosophers we say, for instance, "Contingent beings are in need of explanation". In this last statement "contingent beings" is not a dummy sortal. "Beings" designates all items in the world or in reality that are not nothing; "contingent" designates a general feature of beings so understood. There is absolutely no need to count beings, i.e., to say how many beings there are in order to make genuine philosophical, i.e., general statements about them. The philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> *Erkenntnis* 77 (2012) 51-63.

statement “Contingent beings are in need of explanation” expresses a general feature of contingent beings that can more exactly be expressed using a quantified sentence: “For all  $x$ : If  $x$  is a contingent being, then  $x$  is in need of explanation.” If a philosopher accepted Maitzen’s argumentation, he would reduce philosophy to the level of colloquial language and colloquial sentences. To put it bluntly: philosophy would be devoid of its task and its content.

[3] An interesting and revelatory attempt to clarify Leibniz’s question within an analytic theoretical framework has been made by Peter van Inwagen.<sup>6</sup>

[i] The conspicuous title of his article *Why Is There Anything at All?* seems to indicate that he wanted to treat Leibniz’s famous question according to its most radical formulation and understanding. But that is not at all the case; on the contrary, van Inwagen understands “anything” as “being” and by “being” he means *concrete object*. He explicitly declares that he “will assume that at least some abstract objects – numbers, pure sets, ‘purely qualitative’ properties and relations, possibilities, possible worlds themselves – *exist* in all possible worlds”<sup>7</sup> and are, therefore, necessary objects; but they are not “beings” as specifications of “anything”. And he then concludes:

If the notion of an abstract object makes sense at all, it seems evident that if *everything* were an abstract object, if the only objects were abstract objects, there is an obvious and perfectly good sense in which *there would be nothing at all*, for there would be no physical things, no stuffs, no events, no space, no time, no Cartesian Egos, no God...<sup>8</sup>

In the same part of the article from which this quotation is taken, van Inwagen himself – of course, unintentionally – indicates the highly problematic character of this (i.e., of his) very strange conception. Trying to illustrate his conception he makes the supposition that if there were pure stuffs and pure events, it would be possible for there to be no beings – *and yet not nothing*. But he adds immediately: “In my view, however, pure stuffs and events are metaphysically impossible.”<sup>9</sup> Leaving “stuffs” aside, it seems to me that it is highly revelatory to simply deny that there are *events*. Of course, van Inwagen and others in Quine’s footsteps would simply try to reduce events to (physical) concrete objects. What this shows is the kind of ontology van Inwagen presupposes and defends. I consider this ontology highly problematic, but I cannot enter into that in this lecture. Here I should only add that van Inwagen’s entire conception relies on what I would like to call the fundamental theoretical framework of the analytic mainstream.

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<sup>6</sup> Peter van Inwagen, “Why Is There Anything at All”, in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (Supplement)* 70, 1996, 95-110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 95 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 96 (second emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., footnote 2.

Central for this theoretical framework is the admission that natural language, its structures, presuppositions, and implications, along with first-order predicate logic, provide the adequate basis for developing philosophical theories. I myself reject this theoretical framework.

It should be clear by now that the title of van Inwagen's paper, "Why is there anything at all?," is deeply misleading: His formulation means only this: "Why are there any concrete beings at all?," no more, no less. The question whether *there would be nothing at all* as understood and treated by van Inwagen presupposes only the *relative concept of nothing (nihil relativum)*, by no means the absolute concept of nothing (*nihil absolutum*). This misleading talk of "nothing" is reminiscent of Heidegger's likewise rhetorical and misleading talk of *Nichts*, as I shall show later in the lecture.

[ii] For the purpose of my lecture it is not necessary and not even meaningful to enter into details of van Inwagen's exposition of his proposal. Only some particularly pertinent points will be briefly touched on.

According to van Inwagen,

[I]t is by no means a trivial assertion that a demonstration of the impossibility of there being nothing [in van Inwagen's limited sense just explained, LBP] must take the form of a demonstration that there is a necessary being. [...] It is at any rate true that showing that there is a necessary being would do the trick: if there is a necessary being then it is impossible for there to be nothing [again: in van Inwagen's limited sense, LBP].<sup>10</sup>

Van Inwagen conceives of God as *a being*, the necessary being. He explicitly defends what Heidegger called and postmodern Christian authors call and criticize as *onto-theo-logy*. I myself also radically reject this onto-theo-logical view, but for completely different reasons. Van Inwagen seems to have no idea that Thomas Aquinas does not (at least not fundamentally) conceive of God as *a being, the highest, the first being (ens supremum, primum...)*, but as *esse per se subsistens*. In the present context it does not make sense to consider this topic. What is at stake here is van Inwagen's inner logic concerning his answer to the question "Why is there anything at all?." On the basis of his assumptions he is right in stating that "if there is a necessary being then it is impossible for there to be nothing"—but this only in the following sense: at least *one being*, namely the necessary being, would be (exist). Contrary to what van Inwagen states, it would not follow that there would also necessarily be *beings* (in the sense of finite beings, concrete beings in van Inwagen's sense). To state that on the basis of the admission that if there is a necessary being it would be impossible for there to be nothing—in the sense of: it would be impossible for there not to be beings—would be legitimate only if one tacitly accepted another premise, namely, that a necessary being necessarily produces (or creates) (other) beings. But this

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 96.

would be straightforwardly to deny the absolute freedom of the necessary being. Indeed, a necessary being means only this: it is a being that is and cannot not be (*non potest non esse*<sup>11</sup>); the expression “necessary being” says nothing about the inner constitution of this being. If one wants to rationally deny the freedom of the necessary being, one must introduce arguments.

Van Inwagen further states:

In my judgment, there is no known argument that can plausibly be said to show that there is a necessary being, and there is therefore no known argument that can plausibly be said to show that it is impossible for there to be nothing [in van Inwagen’s sense, LBP].<sup>12</sup>

Instead, he proposes another sort of approach to the question he formulates as “Why is there anything at all?” His purpose is not to show that it is impossible for there to be nothing (in his sense, i.e., not to be any beings), but only to show that this is at any rate *improbable*, i.e., that the probability of there being nothing (in his sense of there not being any beings) is 0. To support this thesis van Inwagen presents an argument. For my purpose it is neither necessary nor worthwhile to examine it in detail. I shall only mention its premises and comment on a few pertinent points. The argument has four premises:

- (1) There are some beings;
- (2) If there is more than one possible world, there are infinitely many;
- (3) There is at most one possible world in which there are no beings;
- (4) For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.<sup>13</sup>

Especially premises (3) and (4) are highly problematic, as van Inwagen himself concedes. The concept of probability upon which premise (4) is based can hardly be considered intelligible and well-founded. It is interesting to note that for what premise (3) states analytic philosophers have introduced a strange and intolerably misleading term, namely *ontological* or *metaphysical nihilism*. This topic has been extensively discussed within analytic philosophy. The analytic metaphysician E. J. Lowe rejects this premise or thesis by arguing in the following way: (i) Some abstract objects, like natural numbers, exist necessarily; (ii) abstracts objects depend for their existence on there being concrete beings; (iii) therefore, it is necessary that there are concrete beings.<sup>14</sup> Concerning this topic I shall make three brief critical comments.

First: it is unacceptable to admit of so-called abstract objects like numbers, sets, mathematical structures, and the like as necessarily *existing* and then completely ignore them

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I q. 44 a. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Van Inwagen, “Why is there anything at all?”, 99.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. E. J. Lowe, “Metaphysical nihilism and the subtraction argument”, in: *Analysis* 62.1, January 2002, 62-73; see 65.

when speaking of possible worlds in an explicitly ontological context. If they exist, they are not nothing, they are kinds of beings. The urgent question that arises here is the following: Does it make any sense to conceive of possible worlds as empty worlds in the sense that they do not contain any concrete objects/beings, but contain abstract objects? Of course, it does make sense to conceive of worlds that do not contain for instance living beings or human beings and in general concrete beings. But that this is so is utterly irrelevant to any genuinely philosophical treatment of the grand question “Why is there anything at all?.”

Second: the analytic orthodoxy has it that “necessary” is understood (and defined) as “existing in all possible worlds”. There is a significant problem with this understanding or definition. The problem comes to light in the following way: If the hypothesis of a necessary being is taken seriously or at least is not excluded, the question arises as to how such a being is to be understood. Van Inwagen explicitly conceives of this necessary being as “a necessarily existent concrete object”<sup>15</sup> and this in turn as a concrete object that exists in all possible worlds. The problem this poses is the following: how should the status of every possible world in which a necessary being exists be conceived? Does this render every possible world a necessarily existing world? Are then all possible worlds necessarily existing worlds? It would be extremely hard to defend such a conception. What this shows can be put this way: If at least one possible world could or should be considered as being contingent, then the concept of a necessarily existent concrete being conceived of as a being that exists in all possible worlds fades away. The concept of necessity should be defined differently, namely, in strictly metaphysical terms: *x* is necessary if and only if it is and it cannot not be. This opens up completely new possibilities for treating Leibniz’s radically understood grand question and other metaphysical grand questions.

[iii] What about van Inwagen’s concept of the totality of possible worlds? How should one conceive of this totality? This question opens the way to one aspect of what I have called the most radical understanding of Leibniz’s grand question, but at this point I shall only comment on some sporadic statements on possible worlds to be found in van Inwagen’s paper.

Explaining how he intends to understand the concept of possible world that is relied upon by premises (2)-(4) of his argument, van Inwagen says that possible worlds are *maximal states*. The reader would immediately ask: maximal states of what? Van Inwagen’s answer is: of *Reality* (with capital “R”). This is at first sight a promising answer. But how does van Inwagen conceive of Reality? Answer: he has no conception whatsoever of Reality; according to him “Reality” is nothing more than “a fictitious object.” And he hastens to add: “Still, I find it a useful fiction for reasons that will transpire.”<sup>16</sup> The reasons he is alluding to are several forms of his usage of the

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<sup>15</sup> van Inwagen, “Why is there anything at all”, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 102, 110. van Inwagen remarks: “If a Tractarian ontology were correct – if there were the same fundamental concrete objects in every possible world – and if the fundamental objects had the same

term “Reality” in the arguments he propounds in order to substantiate the premises of the argument introduced above. Yet the role the term “Reality” plays in van Inwagen’s exposition completely undermines his claim that for him, Reality is “a fictitious object”. This can be easily shown.

Van Inwagen uses the term “Reality” in (at least) *three* different argumentative contexts. The *first* context is that of his general statement about the ontological status of possible worlds: they are conceived of, as has already been shown, as *maximal states of Reality*. This is, under certain conditions, an adequate characterization. But if by “Reality” one understands a “fictitious object,” the characterization becomes completely empty and, therefore, senseless. If “Reality” means the ultimate, the most fundamental ontological dimension of all, the statement makes sense. It is striking that van Inwagen does not introduce the term that from the beginning of philosophy has been used to designate this originary or primordial dimension: *Being* (with capital “B”).

The *second* context in which van Inwagen uses the term “Reality” is that of his lengthy attempt to explain and to countenance his premise (4); this reads as follows: “For any two possible worlds, the probability of their being actual is equal.” In order to demonstrate this he makes the following proposal: “[F]or any system of objects (that has maximal states) the maximal states of the system should be regarded as equally probable, provided that the system is isolated.”<sup>17</sup> From this he concludes that any two of the maximal states of the system are of equal probability. And then he states, explicitly, “‘Reality’ is an isolated system, and possible worlds are maximal states of Reality.”<sup>18</sup> To this one should immediately reply: If “Reality” were a “fictitious object,” the entire argumentation would be an empty play on words.

The *third* context wherein van Inwagen uses the term “Reality” is that of some speculations he develops in order to reject an objection to his premise (4). The objection relies on the concept of simplicity that allegedly provides us with reason to regard the empty world as more probable than any other possible world. In response to this objection, van Inwagen tries to explain what he calls “the feeling” underlying it in the following way:

[It] seems to depend on one’s smuggling into one’s thinking the assumption that there is something that is somehow outside the ‘Reality’ of which possible worlds are maximal states, something that

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mereological sum in every possible world, then Reality would not be a fictitious object: It would be the mereological sum of all the fundamental things, and a possible world would be any consistent and fully specific description of it.” But van Inwagen adds immediately: “But I am not willing to grant any of these things, and I therefore call Reality a fictitious object.” (Ibid. 102)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 106.

would be more likely to put Reality into the state *There being nothing*, or, it may be, something that determines that *There being nothing* is the ‘default setting’ on the control-board of Reality.<sup>19</sup>

van Inwagen then states, peremptorily, “But there could be no such thing, for nothing is outside Reality.”<sup>20</sup> This is a grandiose statement that articulates one of the deepest intuitions underlying the entire history of metaphysics. In a far superior technical terminology, instead of “Reality” one should say: “Being [capital ‘B’] *Esse/Sein...*” But concerning the context in which van Inwagen makes his statement, one must say that it amounts to an absurdity to articulate such a grand idea while taking “Reality” as a “fictitious object”.

[iv] To complete the treatment of van Inwagen’s position one feels almost compelled to ask the question of why this author, who has written so much about ontology and metaphysics, simply reduces Leibniz’s grand question to the narrow limits of the dimension of concrete beings. To this question one can give a twofold answer. The *first answer* is explicitly formulated by van Inwagen himself. He says the following: “When people want to know why there is anything at all, they want to know why *that* bleak state of affairs does not obtain.”<sup>21</sup> The “bleak state of affairs” he is alluding to is described by him in the following terms: “... there would be no physical things, no stuffs, no events, no space, no time, no Cartesian Egos, no God...,” i.e., there would be no concrete beings (van Inwagen conceives even God – if he existed – as a “concrete being”<sup>22</sup>). Hence, according to van Inwagen “people” are the yardstick to be used for judging which questions are philosophically meaningful ones. Such a stance seems to me to be unacceptable. “People” is too undifferentiated a term (a “dummy sortal”) to be adequate for designating a determinate group of competent persons.

The second answer to the question raised about van Inwagen’s reduction of Leibniz’s question has already been given, at least partially, in this lecture. The explaining factor is the situation of contemporary analytic ontology/metaphysics. This ontology/metaphysics, as it stands (*ut jacet*), is simply incapable of treating the grand topic that van Inwagen called “Reality” and considered to be “a fictitious object”. Heidegger’s famous objection against occidental metaphysics, known under the famous expression “*Seinsvergessenheit*” (forgetfulness or oblivion of Being (capital ‘B’)), hits the mark in this case. Still one should say that as far as analytic procedures are concerned it is more than simply a forgetfulness or oblivion of Being; it is instead the incapability of thematizing the dimension of Being, at least at present. The reason for this lies in what I have called above the theoretical framework of the analytic mainstream.

## 2 Three senses in which the radical version of Leibniz’s

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 109.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 95.

## grand question can be understood and answered

[1] After having introduced some understandings and treatments of Leibniz's grand question, the next task is to examine the fundamental structure of why-questions. This is indispensable for getting clear about the real and the possible senses of Leibniz's question and for deciding whether it is a meaningful question or not.

There is a considerable variety of why-questions. Still, it is possible to attempt to indicate the most fundamental or the standard structure of why-questions. One who makes such an attempt is Bas van Fraassen.<sup>23</sup> According to this author a why-question is an ordered triple  $Q = \langle P_k, X, R \rangle$ , where  $P_k$  is the topic of the question,  $X$  is the contrast class  $\{P_1, P_2, \dots, P_k, \dots\}$ , and  $R$  is the relevant relation. But in this definition the central explaining factor is not even mentioned. It can be indicated by a question mark. The formalization of the adequate definition is then a quadruple:  $Q = \langle ?, P_k, X, R \rangle$ . The contrast class must be explicitly taken into account at least for most why-questions with concrete topics.

Leibniz's grand question can also be formalized as a quadruple:  $Q_L = \langle ?, B, Y, R \rangle$ , where  $?$  = the sought-after explaining factor,  $B$  = Being (the topic of the question), and  $Y$  = the contrast class  $\{B, N\}$ , where  $N$  = Nothing. The answer to Leibniz's question is given when the question mark is interpreted as the explaining factor  $E$ :  $Q_{L-A} = \langle E, B, Y, R \rangle$ . As is well known, using the specific tools of set theory one defines a relation as consisting of a set of ordered pairs. In this case we let the relation  $R$  be the unit set of ordered pairs:  $\{\langle E, \langle B, Y \rangle \rangle\}$ , i.e., the set that has  $\langle E, \langle B, Y \rangle \rangle$  as its only member. The explanation of  $B$  is expressed by saying: "because  $E$ ".

[2] We must now show how "B=Being" and "N = Nothing" are to be understood.

[2.1] Let us begin with "nothing". It was shown in Part 1 that one has to distinguish between absolute nothing (*nihilum absolutum*) and relative nothing (*nihilum relativum*). The term 'nothing' is used in a relative sense when it designates the result of the negation of something determinate in the sense of limited. An example that has been commented on in Part 1 is the concept of an empty world introduced by some analytic ontologists: they speak of an empty world as a world in which there is nothing, meaning by "nothing" that there are no concrete beings in this world. But they admit of abstract beings. This notwithstanding, they call this conception "ontological or metaphysical nihilism".

Another important example is Heidegger's use of the term 'nothing' (*Nichts*), especially in the first and second periods of his philosophical career. This case is very instructive because of the numerous and mostly nonsensical discussions that have been conducted about this topic since

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<sup>23</sup> Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.

Heidegger, in his 1929 inaugural lecture at Freiburg, treated it as a centerpiece of his thinking about metaphysics at that time. Here he made his famous statement, “*Das Nichts selbst nichtet* – The nothing *itself* nothings.”<sup>24</sup> Some translations read “The nothing itself nihilates/annihilates,” but this is wrong, because the verb “*nichten*” (which does not exist in normal German and was invented by Heidegger) is understood by him as a non-transitive verb, unlike the verb “annihilate,” which is transitive. In his lecture Heidegger distinguishes carefully between “*nichten*” and “*vernichten*” (= annihilate, destroy).

Heidegger introduces ways that lead him to arrive at what he calls “the nothing”. Two of these can be briefly reported in order to make clear what he understands by “the nothing”. The first is a phenomenological description of the existential state of anxiety (*Angst*). He states: “Anxiety reveals the nothing.”<sup>25</sup> And he explains: “In anxiety no kind of annihilation (*Vernichtung*) of all-that-is [the ensemble of beings as such] takes place.”<sup>26</sup> But then the question arises: what does “*das Nichts*” mean or express or articulate? To answer this question, a second way Heidegger introduces must be carefully taken into account. He refers to the relation of the scientific man to the world and describes it as follows:

That to which the relation to the world refers are beings themselves [*das Seiende selbst*] – and nothing besides. That from which every attitude takes its guidance are beings themselves – and nothing further. That with which the scientific confrontation in the irruption occurs are beings themselves – and beyond that nothing. But what is remarkable is that, precisely in the way scientific man secures to himself what is most properly his, he speaks, either explicitly or implicitly, of an Other. What should be examined are beings only, and besides that – nothing; beings alone, and further — nothing; solely beings, and beyond that – nothing. What about this nothing?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*. Gesamtausgabe, Band 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976) 114. The translations of the quoted passages from Heidegger’s inaugural lecture are partly based on the following translations: translation published by The Athenaeum Library of Philosophy (<http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/heidegger5a.htm/>); translation by Thomas Sheehan (*The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, I (2001)); translation by Miles Groth (<http://wagner.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/psychology/files/2013/01/Heidegger-What-Is-Metaphysics-Translation-GROTH.pdf>).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. The German original text reads: “*Worauf der Weltbezug geht, ist das Seiende selbst – und sonst nichts. Womit die forschende Auseinandersetzung im Einbruch geschieht, ist das Seiende selbst – und darüber hinaus nichts. Aber merkwürdig – gerade in dem, wie der wissenschaftliche Mensch sich seines Eigensten versichert, spricht er, ob ausdrücklich oder nicht, von einem Anderem. Erforscht werden soll nur das Seiende und sonst – nichts; das Seiende allein und weiter – nichts; das Seiende einzig und darüber hinaus – nichts. Wie steht es um dieses Nichts?*”

This last text makes clear the central point: Heidegger understands his “nothing(ness)” as a relative nothing (*nihilum relativum*), as the negation of the dimension only of (the) beings, more exactly of the dimension that is populated only by beings. But Heidegger takes a further step: he shows that nothing(ness) understood as the dimension that is *not* populated only by beings, *positively* conceived, is the dimension of the Being of beings (*Sein des Seienden*). “The nothing is not just the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their very emergence. In the Being of beings the nothing of the nothing occurs.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he characterizes this dimension as “the transcendence” and this as *Being as such*.

It should by now be clear what Heidegger understands by “nothing”: he understands “nothing” in a *relative* sense, relative to the ensemble of beings. He could have presented this idea in short and clear terms; instead, he developed a formidable rhetoric to articulate this very simple idea. This rhetoric has misled almost all interpreters. Consequently, without literally quoting Leibniz, Heidegger transforms the grand question by introducing the formulation, “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?”<sup>29</sup> This question he considered as the fundamental question of metaphysics, but not the central question of his own thinking. The reason is clear: according to Heidegger metaphysics deals only with beings, not with Being. *Being as such* is Heidegger’s central – and only – topic.

[2.2] In the present context “Being” will be explained only initially. A more detailed explanation will be given in Part 3 of the lecture. Here something must be said first about the grammatical forms of “B/being”. In this lecture, [lower-case] “being” is the English counterpart to the Latin term *ens* and the German term *Seiendes*; it has the plural form “beings.” [Capital-] “Being” is the counterpart to the Latin *esse* and the German *Sein*, both of which are substantive infinitives. [Capital-] Being, like the infinitive “to be,” has no plural form. It is important to emphasize that “Being,” although grammatically comparable to such terms as “running” and “thinking,” is an absolutely unique case, a or—more exactly—the most fundamental case of a philosophical-linguistic *singulare tantum*. From this one can and must derive the possibility and, so to speak, not only the permissibility, but also the necessity of making a paragrammatical philosophical usage of the term.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.115. The last sentence of this quotation is translated by Thomas Sheehan as follows: “The action of the nothing takes place in the very is-ness of what-is.” Sheehan translates “Sein” by “is-ness” and “Seiendes” by “what-is”. As a non-native speaker of English, I myself think that it is adequate to translate “Sein” by “Being (capital ‘B’)” and “Seiendes” by “being(s)”. A. White aims at developing a more refined language of being. He proposes to translate “Sein” by “be, being” and “Seiendes (*Seiende*)” by “be-er(s)” (A. White, *Toward a Philosophical Theory of Everything. Contributions to the Structural-Systematic Philosophy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, chapter 8; see esp. pp. 134–36).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.122.

[3] More about “Being” and “nothing” will be said in Part 3 of this lecture. But from what has been shown to this point some very important consequences for the main topic of this lecture can be drawn. First of all, what I call the most radical understanding of Leibniz’s grand question can now be further explained. This understanding is articulated when in Leibniz’s formulation “*Pourquoy il y a plutôt quelque chose que rien?* – Why is there anything rather than nothing?,” the words “*quelque chose*–anything” are replaced by “Being”: *Pourquoy il y a plutôt Être que rien?* – Why is there Being rather than nothing?”, where “Being” is taken according to its minimal content, namely as meaning, “not-nothing”. In this sense “Being” names the most fundamental dimension of all, the dimension that encompasses, comprehends, and comprises absolutely all kinds and forms of what there is, i.e., of “Being”: all beings, concrete and abstract, general and particular, possible and actual, etc. Every determination, kind, or form whatsoever presupposes this fundamental, minimal, negative determination articulated by “Being,” and this fundamental, minimal, negative determination doesn’t presuppose anything more fundamental. The most radical formulation and understanding of Leibniz’s grand question “Why is there Being rather than nothing?” understands “Being” in this way. As was already pointed out in Part 1, this is not to say that this understanding was Leibniz’s own understanding of his question.

At this point it is possible to state the main thesis propounded and defended in this lecture; it constitutes the answer to the question formulated in the lecture’s title. To this end, we have to take into consideration the main results of what has been presented so far. The question, as it was formulated by Leibniz, has been reformulated by replacing “anything” with “Being,” and what “Being” means here has been explained. The result was labeled the most fundamental or most radical version of Leibniz’s question. We now have to recall the formalized version of Leibniz’s question as radically understood, namely:  $Q_L = \langle ?, B, Y, R \rangle$ , and the formalized version of the answer to this question, namely:  $Q_{L-A} = \langle E, B, Y, R \rangle$ , where  $?$  = the sought-after explaining factor,  $B$  = Being, and  $Y$  = the contrast class  $\{B, N\}$ , with  $N$  = Nothing. The answer to Leibniz’s question is given when the question mark is interpreted as the explaining factor  $E$ :  $Q_{L-A} = \langle E, B, Y, R \rangle$ . On the basis of the above considerations we now can state that there are *three possible and suitable senses* in which the most radical version of Leibniz’s grand question can be understood and the corresponding answers can be formulated:

*First sense and first answer:* If the explaining factor  $E$  is *not identical to or identified with*  $B$ , the factor to be explained, that is, if it is required that the explaining factor  $E$  be strongly distinguished from the explanandum  $B$ , i.e., that  $E \neq B$ , then the why-question at stake is understood according to the *primary or strong sense* of a why-question. So understood, the why-question at stake *is not a meaningful question*. An answer doesn’t make sense.

*Second sense and second answer:* If it is assumed that the explaining factor E is *identical or to identified with* the factor to be explained B, that is, if it is possible to assume that  $E = B$ , then the why-question is understood according to the *secondary* or *weak sense* of a why-question. So understood, the why-question at stake is a meaningful why-question, but only in a secondary or weak sense and, correspondingly, the answer is a meaningful answer only in a secondary or weak sense.

*Third sense and third answer:* If it is assumed that the explaining factor E is not simply identical to or identified with the explanandum B, but rather to or with a qualified version of B, for instance a feature of B, say  $B_F$ , such that  $E \neq B$ , but  $E = B_F$ , then the why-question is understood according to a *wider sense* of a why-question. So understood, the why-question at stake is a meaningful one, but only in a wider, indirect, or connotative sense and, correspondingly, the answer is a meaningful answer only in a wider, indirect, or connotative sense.

[4] We must now explain each of the three possibilities or versions in detail.

[4.1] As for the *first* possibility or version, what it states is of the utmost importance. It has become customary in everyday life as well as in philosophy to ask why-questions indefinitely, for instance: Why A? Because B; Why B? Because C, and so on, *ad infinitum*. But this is a completely irrational and nonsensical procedure. The reason is that why-questions makes sense only within determinate theoretical frameworks. If the theoretical framework on which a why-question relies is not made clear or cannot be made clear, the question is pointless, it takes one nowhere. But I shall not delve deeper into this general issue here;<sup>30</sup> instead, I shall concentrate only on the specific problem this version of the why-question concerning Being as such poses. I shall assume that a why-question in its *primary or strong sense* presupposes that the sought-after or requisite explaining factor is something *distinct* from the phenomenon or the topic to be explained (the *explanandum*). Now, if one asks the why-question regarding Being as such, what could be the explaining factor? It would have to be a factor different or distinct from Being. But beyond, behind, away from, or other than Being as such there is literally *nothing*, because “Being” is the absolute *singulare tantum* whose fundamental minimal meaning is: *not-nothing*. Any difference/distinction from Being is nothing. Now, if Leibniz’s grand question is reformulated as “Why is there Being rather than nothing,” according to what I have called the primary and strong sense of the why-question, then *this* why-question is *meaningless*, because it cancels itself. There is no way whatsoever to escape this consequence. The clause “because of

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<sup>30</sup> On this topic see my criticism of Thomas Nagel’s objections to God as “last point” in my book *Being and God*, chapter 1, section 1.5 (pp. 57-64).

nothing” provides no explanatory answer to the question “Why is there Being rather than nothing?,” and in any other possible answer “because of *x*,” whatever takes the place of *x* must somehow *be*.

In order to make this point as accurate as possible *three* additional remarks will be added.

[i] In his article “Why Anything? Why This?,”<sup>31</sup> *Derek Parfit* addresses Leibniz’s grand question by relying on the concept of cosmic possibilities. In the present context Parfit’s conception cannot be examined in detail; only a special statement he makes will be considered because it is highly revelatory of the kind of questions, objections, and stances that are to be found in analytic writings on the topic of this lecture. Of all cosmic the possibilities Parfit considers, he treats especially one possibility he calls the Null Possibility, i.e., according to him, the possibility “in which nothing ever exists”,<sup>32</sup> of which he says that it would have needed the least explanation. He then responds to the following objection:

Some have claimed that, if there had never been anything, there wouldn’t have been anything to be explained. But that is not so. When we imagine how things would have been if nothing had ever existed, what we should imagine away are such things as living beings, stars, and atoms.

This is another example of a significantly restricted understanding of *nothing*. But it is interesting to see how Parfit conceives of this restriction. He doesn’t speak of abstract objects, as do van Inwagen, Lowe, and other authors. Instead, he says the following:

There would still have been various truths, such as the truth that there were no stars or atoms, or that 9 is divisible by 3. We can ask why these things would have been true. And such questions may have answers. Thus we can explain why, even if nothing had ever existed, 9 would still have been divisible by 3. There is no conceivable alternative. And we can explain why there would have been no such things as immaterial matter, or spherical cubes. Such things are logically impossible. But why would *nothing* have existed? Why would there have been no stars or atoms, no philosophers or bluebell woods?

We should not claim that, if nothing had ever existed, there would have been nothing to be explained. But we can claim something less. Of all the cosmic possibilities, the Null Possibility would have needed the least explanation.<sup>33</sup>

According to Parfit, if nothing (in his sense) had ever existed, there would still have been an explanation for this circumstance. This means that beyond or beside the dimension of Being there would have been (and therefore also: *there would be and there is*) a further dimension: the dimension of truths. But what are truths? If a truth is not – in one way or another – related to

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<sup>31</sup> *London Review of Books*, Vol 20, No. 2, 22 January 1998, 24-27, and Vol. 20, No. 3, 5 February 1998, 22-25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, section 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Being, it is simply an empty word. To state that “[Even if nothing had ever existed], there would still have been various truths, such as the truth that there were no stars or atoms, or that 9 is divisible by 3” doesn’t make sense, because it is a self-contradictory and therefore self-defeating and self-cancelling statement. Indeed, Parfit’s next statement, which he understands as a kind of foundation of the preceding statement, reads, “We can ask why these things would have been true”. But meaningful talk of “these things” presupposes that they *are*. Thus, he presupposes the *being* of what he has designated as *nothing*.

[ii] In this context it may be appropriate to say something about the usage of the term “nothing(ness)” in scientific (cosmological) works, especially in many that directly treat Leibniz’s question or indirectly address it. Particularly over the two last decades, several books on this topic have been published, sometimes with striking titles, for instance: *A Universe from Nothing – Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* by the physicist Lawrence M. Krauss<sup>34</sup>, *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story* by Jim Holt<sup>35</sup>, *The Grand Design* by Stephen W. Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow<sup>36</sup>, *The Universe in a Nutshell* by Stephen W. Hawking<sup>37</sup>, and others. With the exception of Jim Holt’s book, the other cited books contain an unfortunate confusion concerning the term “nothing”. One can say that this term is always employed in the sense of *relative*, not *absolute* nothing.

Two examples: The physicist L. M. Krauss writes: “By *nothing* [italics, LBP], I do not mean nothing, but rather *nothing* – in this case, the nothingness we normally call empty space.”<sup>38</sup> And he explains: “For the moment, I will assume space exists, with nothing at all in it, and that the laws of physics also exist.”<sup>39</sup> But then Krauss takes a step further by asking, what about space and time themselves, what about the laws of nature themselves? Where do they come from? Here he asserts: “[W]e have learned that space and time can themselves *spontaneously* appear. [...] [P]erhaps the laws themselves also arose *spontaneously*...”<sup>40</sup> His being forced to take recourse to the idea of *spontaneity* clearly amounts to the admission that his own theoretical framework has exhausted its explanatory resources. But Krauss is far from drawing from that the unavoidable consequence that one can summarize by asking, Isn’t it the case that one should change the theoretical framework in order to make sense of and to answer the question: Why is there anything rather than nothing?

In a partially similar vein, Stephen Hawking asks, “how can a whole universe be created from nothing?” And he answers:

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<sup>34</sup> London/New York/ Sidney/Toronto/New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> London: Profile Books, 2012

<sup>36</sup> New York: Bantam Books, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> New York: Bantam Books, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> L. M. Krauss, p.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. xiv-xv (my emphases) .

That is why there must be a law like gravity... Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing... *Spontaneous* creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.<sup>41</sup>

The natural force of *gravitation* is not nothing, therefore—according to Hawking!—it is or exists. Hawking’s question “why is there something rather than nothing” is thus a very limited question, because his concept of “something” does not include – and, correspondingly, his concept of “nothing” does not exclude – gravitation.

[iii] A last question must be addressed in the present context: If Leibniz’s question according to its radical version is not a meaningful question, does this mean that Being is simply a *factum brutum*? It can be shown that such an interpretation is wrong or, more exactly, not adequate. The widely used expression ‘*factum brutum*’ has a sense and especially many connotations that cannot be associated with the radical version of Leibniz’s question. It has especially the connotation that some kind of explanation can and should be meaningfully expected and rationally demanded, but that the expectation and the demand cannot – for whatever reasons – be satisfied; if this were the case with Being, Being would justifiably be considered a *factum brutum*. But to associate the qualification “*factum brutum*” with *Being* amounts to committing a serious mistake. The reason is, as was shown, that what one can and should say instead is: Being is (not a, but the) *factum originarium or primordiale simpliciter as the most fundamental and absolute singulare tantum*. No account or explanation of Being can draw on resources outside or beyond Being, because there are no such resources.

[4.2] According to the *second sense and second answer*, it is assumed that the explaining factor E is *identical or identified* with the factor to be explained B. This would be the *secondary or weak sense* of the why-question. To the question: “Why B (Being)?” the answer would be: “Because B (Being)”. Is such a sense (and answer) not a pure tautology, a purely vicious circle? It can be shown that this at first glance undoubtedly pure tautology in the current case is not devoid of all explanatory force. *Two considerations* may corroborate this affirmation.

*First*: there are some phenomena concerning which a similar tautology is used in such a way that the result clearly makes sense. For instance, Aristotle often declares: “[We assume] that of the sciences, also, that which is desirable *on its own account and for the sake of knowing* is

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Hawking & Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*. New York: Bantam Books, 2010, p. 180.

more of the nature of wisdom than that which is desirable on account of its results.”<sup>42</sup> Many why-questions can be addressed to theoretical knowledge (science, philosophy) and to such questions many different answers can and must be given. But the most fundamental question would be: Why theoretical knowledge (science, philosophy) *at all*? Aristotle’s answer is the only one that is adequate: for its (one’s) own sake, on its own account.

The same answer appears to be the only one that is adequate when we ask questions like: Why do human beings merit absolute respect? We can answer with Kant: Because human beings are rational and rational beings are ends in themselves. But a new question arises immediately: Why do human beings as ends in themselves merit absolute respect? Response: ... because to be an end in itself is to be an absolute value in itself.

To many people (also philosophers) this stance would probably appear to be a dogmatic and even irrational position. But a *second* consideration shows that there can be no question of this position being dogmatic or irrational. Indeed, on closer examination the apparently pure tautology reveals itself as the result of an implicitly performed highly complex explanatorily *holistic* consideration. This consideration can be described as a kind of theoretical going through the entire universe of discourse, or Being in its full richness, in search of an answer to the raised question, i.e., in search of an *explanans*; after no element of this immense dimension appears to be eligible as an *explanans*, the search so to speak returns to the initial point, i.e., to the *explanandum* itself, which in this way turns out to find in itself the searched-after sense or explanation.

This reading of the initial tautology can be adequately described by saying that the identification of *explanandum* and *explanans*, when adequately philosophically understood, can and must be interpreted as having a *self-explanatory character* in the following sense: the why-question is answered by explaining what the *explanandum* is or means or how it is to be understood.

Concerning the radical version of Leibniz’s grand question, one must say that the consideration consisting in theoretically going through the entire universe of discourse amounts to considering Being *as Being*, i.e., to explaining what Being means or how it must be understood.

[4.3] In many respects the most interesting possibility for understanding and answering Leibniz’s radically interpreted grand question is the *third possibility*: it relies on an assumed special feature of the explanandum, i.e., of B (= Being). So far, I myself can think of only one

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982a. 14-16 (emphasis added). Greek text: [ὑπολαμβάνομεν...] τῶν ἐπιστημῶν δὲ τὴν αὐτῆς ἔνεκεν καὶ τοῦ εἰδέναι χάριν αἰρετὴν οὖσαν μᾶλλον εἶναι σοφίαν ἢ τὴν τῶν ἀποβαινόντων ἔνεκεν.

special feature that can be considered the decisive factor in order to articulate a meaningful, intelligible, and convincing answer to the grand question. This is the feature *necessity* attributed to Being (= B<sub>N</sub>). If necessity cannot be denied to Being as such, then this validates the formidable statement: Being can be adequately thought only if it is attributed the fundamental feature of *necessity*.

This can be considered an answer to Leibniz's grand question. To be sure, one must pay attention to the fact that this feature is an answer to this question in a *wider sense*, i.e., a sense that takes into account different aspects connoted by the why-question. It should be noted, as has been already emphasized, that why-questions have a large semantic field, in that they must be understood as including different aspects. From a strictly philosophical point of view this third understanding and the corresponding answer is of utmost importance, especially due to the fact that it opens up the possibility of the development of a grand theory of Being as such and as a whole. A brief exposition of this third possibility is presented in Part 3 of this lecture.

### 3 The necessity of Being as the most adequate answer to Leibniz's radically reinterpreted grand question

Taken as such, the expression 'necessity of Being' leaves room for many and often serious misunderstandings; therefore, it must be carefully clarified. The most important point is to recognize and to strongly stick to the distinction between Being and being(s). "Necessity of Being" is not to be identified with anything like "a or the necessary being (*ens necessarium*)", which the classic Christian tradition always identified with God. Moreover, attributing the feature "necessity" to Being by no means implies that there are only necessary beings. It will be shown that one of the first steps to take when developing a theory of Being as such and as a whole is to present a cogent argument in support of the thesis that the all-encompassing primordial dimension of Being must be thought of as a *bi-dimensionality*, including the distinction between the necessary dimension of Being and the contingent dimension of Being.

The development of such a theory is a formidable and challenging task that cannot be carried out in this lecture. Instead, I will take the liberty to indicate that I have presented an elaborate conception on this matter in two books that have been translated into English.<sup>43</sup> In the final part of this lecture I shall first only briefly say something about the grand topic "theory of Being as such and as a whole" as it is seen or treated or ignored in contemporary philosophy, and second I shall summarily present only an argument to the conclusion that the all-encompassing

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<sup>43</sup> SB and BG.

primordial dimension of Being must be thought of as a *bi-dimensionality* as just briefly explained.<sup>44</sup>

[1] Over-simplifying matters, it can be said that concerning this grand theory there are mainly *two stances* in contemporary philosophy: The *first* is positive concerning the approach, but completely inefficient at elaborating any version of such a theory. This is the stance associated with Heidegger, who had the merit to have reawoken and renewed the grand question of Being. In my view this is one of the most significant philosophical accomplishments in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. But it should be immediately added that Heidegger's lifelong efforts to come to grips with this grand topic were – from a rigorous philosophical perspective – unsuccessful, to say the least.<sup>45</sup>

The other position or attitude as regards the dimension of Being is that of analytic philosophy. Analytic ontology as it is understood and done today cannot be designated a philosophy of Being; rather, it is a philosophy of beings or of *domains* of beings. It treats specific topics, but does not pose the question of Being as that question is understood in this lecture.

The universal primordial dimension of Being can in no way be considered to be a being, an object, or anything at all similar; it cannot also be understood as the totality of such entities, if “totality” is taken in a purely extensional sense. Neither predicate logic nor set theory aids in the explanation of this dimension. It suffices to introduce two reasons why this is so. First, both predicate logic and set theory presuppose an ontology of objects (substances) and properties/relations. (This is also true of contemporary mereology, which is not considered here.) No such ontology is tenable, as I have shown in the books mentioned above. But even if some such ontology were tenable, the primordial dimension of Being could not be included within it because that ontology would include only beings, and the primordial dimension of Being is not a being.

Second, analytic philosophy articulates the entire topic involving the universal domain with purely extensional concepts. According to the standard interpretation of predicate logic, predicates are sets; more precisely, one-place predicates designate properties, determined as the sets of things to which the predicates apply, whereas many-place predicates designate relations, determined as the sets of tuples of objects to which the predicates apply. Predicates (both one- and many-place) do not designate genuine entities; they have only extensions, in opposition to the “intensional” interpretation according to which the predicates designate attributes (i.e., properties and relations proper). But here serious philosophical questions arise. What *is* an extension? Purely mathematical or numeric determination does not answer the question of how the different

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<sup>44</sup> The following exposition draws largely upon my book *Being and God*, section 3.4.3.

<sup>45</sup> See chapter 2 of my book *Being and God*.

“objects” fit into the configurations called extensions. And absolute universality as such, interpreted purely by means of predicate logic as the most universal configuration, likewise remains wholly unthought and unarticulated.

[2] The argument for the bi-dimensionality of Being is an indirect proof based on the application of the modalities necessity, possibility, and contingency to the grand topic “Being”. Before exposing the argument/proof, I should note that it relies on some presuppositions that probably would not be accepted by many, let alone by all analytic philosophers. As is widely known, there has been and there is much dispute over the logical and philosophical status of modalities within analytic philosophy. A central point in this dispute concerns the relationship between modalities and metaphysical topics and theories. As it seems, a positive view is becoming dominant. Thus, one of the most renowned contemporary analytic philosophers, Timothy Williamson, has just published a formidable book on this topic with the telling title *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*.<sup>46</sup> The argument to be presented relies on a fundamentally metaphysical understanding of modalities. Furthermore, it should be noted that for the sake of brevity and better understanding the presentation will be entirely informal, using normal language. This is not without problems and ambiguities, especially involving logic, semantics, and ontology.

The goal of the proof to be presented is not the existence of God. In my view, the notion *God's existence* is fully confused and therefore one that philosophical theorization should avoid using. It would be premature at this point to ask any questions about God. Moreover, what “exists” could mean in conjunction with God is problematic at best. This shows that at least many of the discussions concerning the question “Does God exist?” are senseless.

The core of the proof is the demonstration that not everything – not Being itself and as a whole, thus as including all beings – is simply contingent, and therefore that there is *necessary Being*. This demonstration relies on the following largely neutral formulation that is sufficient for present purposes: Being includes an absolutely necessary dimension as well as a contingent dimension. A second formulation, perhaps more easily misunderstood but also more helpful intuitively, is the following: the absolutely universal dimension of Being is two-dimensional.

Many people, including many philosophers and scientists, simply assume that everything is contingent, “everything” here meaning what in this lecture is termed Being as such and as a whole. The demonstration refutes this assumption by means of an indirect, *modus tollens* proof.

Before this argument is presented and explained in detail, one of its characteristics is noted. The proof articulates an extremely abstract and maximally universal state of affairs. In traditional terminology, the state of affairs argumentatively explained is a metaphysical one. No matter what terminology is used to describe it, however, what is important is that the argument

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<sup>46</sup> Oxford: University Press, 2013.

involves no presuppositions concerning any specific domain or concerning time and space or anything of the sort. Its focal point is an absolutely fundamental and comprehensive consequence of the thesis that everything is contingent; that consequence is the possibility of absolute nothingness.

[3] The proof is in *modus tollens*: If  $p$ , then  $q$ , but not  $q$ , therefore not  $p$ . It is as follows:

If everything—that is, Being as such and as a whole—were contingent, then absolute nothingness would be possible;

but absolute nothingness is impossible;

therefore, not everything is contingent.

Because contingency and necessity are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, it follows that there must be – in this lectures’s preferred formulation—a necessary dimension of Being. This conclusion is of course extremely abstract and general, but the account that follows shows that its explication leads to quite concrete results.

[i] The proof is now to be explained in detail. Its *first* premise is an implication. Although its truth might appear obvious, analysis of it is in order. If absolutely everything, Being as such and as a whole, were contingent, *then it could have been the case* that there were neither Being itself nor any beings. That might sound like a fantastically abstract fiction, but it is not. To the contrary, careful consideration of it reveals what is at the core of all of our thinking, talking, knowing, etc. Nevertheless, the all-is-contingent thesis is generally not understood as having the implication the proof’s first premise articulates. The usual understanding involves a notion of Being as a process without beginning or end, such that items in the process continually disappear but are simultaneously replaced by new items, so that Being is something like an immense, self-developing mass. This reveals the utter superficiality of the notion, which can in no way withstand strict philosophical analysis. The immense systematic power of the analytically available clause “it could have been the case” cannot be seen by those who have no more than this superficial understanding of the everything-is-contingent thesis.

This state of affairs can be articulated at all only via the introduction of the pseudo-concept *absolute nothingness*. Why, and in what sense, this is a pseudo-concept is explained below, in the consideration of the second premise. What is important at this point is to emphasize that the all-is-contingent thesis cannot avoid the implication articulated in the first premise. This is important because attempts to avoid it could be made, although formulations of the attempts would probably be diffuse at best. The gist of such attempts could be the following: it is indeed correct that the all-is-contingent thesis entails the possibility of everything’s not having been and of everything’s disappearing, but this “everything” must be correctly understood, as follows: indeed, every single thing (every being) is merely possible, thus need not have been and need not

continue to be, but if any one had not been or ceased to be then there would have been or would be some other thing (entity), because the endless process of Being must go on. The process of Being itself, as the self-developing mass, would thus not disappear.

The diffuse attempt just sketched cannot be made adequate because it leaves the process of Being itself wholly unclarified. Is that process *itself* contingent? If so, then it itself—the comprehensive process itself—need not have been and need not continue to be; there must be some alternative. The question is not whether the process *will* cease to be, but of whether it *could* cease to be—or instead it *cannot* cease to be. Only if it could cease to be is it contingent; otherwise, it is necessary.

The implication articulated in the first premise thus stands. To be noted is that it does not say that then absolute nothingness *would be* or *would exist*. Adding either of these phrase would make the premise obscure and problematic. The premise concerns only the modality *possibility*: absolute nothingness would be *possible*. This formulation is fully sufficient for the rejection of the all-is-contingent thesis, because if absolute nothingness is said even to be possible, contradiction ensues. Rejection of the all-is-contingent thesis also makes possible the avoidance of additional problems.

[ii] The heart of the argument is the second premise. It articulates the negation of the consequent of the first premise. Absolute nothingness is *not* possible. This is so for at least three reasons.

[a] *Absolute nothingness* is a non-concept; it is not thinkable because it is self-contradictory and is therefore a pseudoconcept. To think it at all, one would have to determine it, but one would thereby ascribe to it something or other that it excludes: one could determine it only by naming something or other, but that something or other would be a determinate way of Being—it would be something that *was*, in one way or another. One can only speak *about* absolute nothingness in a paradoxical manner, and the only reason to do so is to articulate its absurdity.

[b] The concept *possibility of absolute nothingness* is radically self-contradictory, because *possibility* is *possibility of Being*; it is contradictory to say that absolute nothingness could possibly *be*.

[c] The all-is-contingent thesis entails not only the *possibility of absolute nothingness*, but also the *additional* assumption that the dimension of Being, and with it all beings, could have somehow “emerged” from absolute nothingness. Moved by a kind of total theoretical helplessness, feeling caught in the narrowness of their theoretical framework, some authors point to some sort of spontaneous generation instead of speaking of absolute nothingness. But this is no serious thought, not even a genuine thought at all: it amounts to an abandonment of thinking. Indeed, the question would inevitably arise: how could or should this “emergence” of the

dimension of Being/beings out of absolute nothingness be conceived? One would have to admit of some kind of “transition” from absolute nothingness to the dimension of Being/beings. But such a “transition” is simply unthinkable, because Being is the total negation of nothingness; between Being and absolute nothingness there is only total negation, total exclusion, total incompatibility, no kind of “transition” however conceived, so there can be no sensible talk of any transition from the former to the latter.

Because the thesis that everything is contingent entails absurdities, it is not the case that everything is contingent, that is, there is necessary Being, which can be designated neutrally and generally, at this point, as the *necessary dimension of Being*. Q.E.D.

The result of the preceding proof can be expressed briefly as follows: the universal dimension of Being is, more precisely, two-dimensional, consisting of a necessary dimension and a contingent dimension. To be sure, this two-dimensionality must be correctly understood. The two dimensions do not have the same status; instead, because one of the dimensions is necessary, the other—the contingent—is subordinate to it.

## 4 Conclusion

To bring my reflexions and my exposition to a close, let me just *make two final remarks*. The *first* concerns the systematic importance of the third version of Leibniz’s radically understood grand question and the answer to it I have just sketched. The result of the argument presented is unquestionably extremely abstract and general. But it is a state of affairs that provides the starting point for a fascinating theoretical enterprise. Indeed, at this point a systematically far-reaching question arises immediately: how to conceive of the relationship between the absolutely necessary dimension of Being and the contingent dimension of Being? This is a solid basis for developing a substantial theory of Being as such and as a whole. One of the topics that can be systematically addressed on this basis is the grand topic “God”. It can be reasonably expected that starting from the reached result this topic and other grand topics can be adequately clarified .

The *second* remark briefly summarizes the importance of the third version of and third answer to Leibniz’s radical grand question. As was already emphasized, the third version and answer are the most fundamental and the most intelligible among the current versions of and answers to this question. The reason for this status lies in the fact that the third version understands the why-question in a wider sense, taking into account important connotations associated with it. One could paraphrase this wider sense of Leibniz’s radical question as follows: Is there any feature of Being that explains why there is Being rather than nothing? This lecture’s

answer has been: there is such a feature; it is the feature *necessity*. Evidence to support this thesis was provided by the presentation of an indirect modal proof.